Interreg

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Central Baltic Programme

Rural-UP

Implementation Guide for the Rural-UP Scaling-Up Programme

Contents

Introduction **2**
1. Open Call **3**
1.1. Key Dates and Stages 3
1.2. Communication Campaign 4
2. Selection Process **6**
2.1. Application 6
2.2. Selection Committee 8
2.3. Evaluation Process 8
2.4. Evaluation Guide for Assessors 13
3. Scaling-Up Process **14**
3.1. Roadmap for Companies 14
3.2. Scale-Up Criteria and Performance Indicators (KPIs) 15
3.3. Mentoring Support 16
3.4. Learning Activities 16
3.5. Joint Activities and International Exposure 16
3.6. Consultations with Experts 17
4. Programme Final **18**
4.1. Reports for Companies **20**
4.2. Closing Conference 20
Conclusion 20
Annexes **22**
Annex 1. Agreement Template **23**
Annex 2. Roadmap Template 23
Annex 3. Progress, Plans, Problems (PPP) Template for Mentoring Session 25
Annex 4. Mentor and Non-disclosure Agreement Template 28
Annex 5. Final Report Template for Enterprises 29
31

Introduction

The Rural-UP implementation guide has been developed as a practical companion to the Rural-UP methodology. While the methodology defines the objectives, structure, and rationale of the scaling-up programme, this guide provides the concrete steps, tools, and templates needed for its delivery. Together, the two documents ensure both strategic clarity and operational precision, enabling partners to support rural enterprises effectively across Latvia, Estonia, and Finland.

The main benefit of this guide lies in its practical orientation. It transforms the overarching framework into actionable instructions, making it easier for project partners, business support organisations, and mentors to implement the programme consistently across regions. By providing standardised processes, timelines, templates, and evaluation tools, this guide ensures consistency in programme delivery across all partner regions and strengthens transparency in the selection, mentoring, and reporting processes. It also increases efficiency, as partners can rely on ready-to-use formats rather than creating materials from scratch. At the same time, the guide supports scalability and replicability, enabling other organisations to adopt or adapt the Rural-UP model in different contexts beyond the project's lifetime.

This implementation guide is primarily intended for Rural-UP project partners, including regional development agencies, business support organisations, universities, and other actors involved in entrepreneurship promotion. It is also designed for mentors and trainers who will support participating companies, as well as policy-makers and business support stakeholders interested in replicating the model. At the same time, the guide holds value for incubators, accelerators, and other organisations that wish to adapt the Rural-UP approach to their own local ecosystems.

The implementation guide is structured to follow the full programme cycle, beginning with an introduction that outlines the context, benefits, and target audience of the guide. It then describes the open call, including procedures, timelines, the communication campaign, and the support available for applicants. The section on the selection process provides detailed criteria, committee roles, application forms, and evaluation scales. This is followed by guidance on the scaling-up process, which covers company roadmaps, scale-up criteria, key performance indicators (KPIs), mentoring support, learning activities, and opportunities for international exposure. Finally, the guide concludes with programme finalisation, detailing the requirements for company reports and the organisation of the Closing Conference, as well as the dissemination of results and lessons learned.

The Rural-UP scaling-up programme is co-funded by the Interreg Central Baltic Programme, part of the European Territorial Cooperation framework financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The Central Baltic Programme supports cross-border cooperation between Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Sweden, addressing shared economic, social, and environmental challenges. The programme is structured around seven objectives. Project Rural-UP is funded under Programme Objective 2 - "More new scaled-up companies", which focuses on enabling SMEs to grow beyond the start-up phase through innovation, investment, and market expansion. Under this objective, supported companies are expected to achieve tangible growth outcomes such as attracting investment, launching new products, entering new markets, or expanding their teams.

1. Open Call

The Open Call marks the starting point of the Rural-UP support programme, inviting ambitious rural SMEs from Latvia, Estonia, and Finland to join a cross-border growth journey. It provides a fair and coordinated opportunity for enterprises to access mentoring, innovation support, and resources needed to scale their business.

1.1. Key Dates and Stages

The Open Call is announced simultaneously in all three countries (Latvia, Estonia, Finland).

	Start date	**End Date**
Call for applicants (4 weeks)	20 January 2026, 14:00 (EET)*	16 February 2026 14:00 (EET)**

Stage	**Duration**	**Description**
Announcement and publication	1 day	The Open Call is officially published online and via other channels on the same day that project submission opens in three countries.
Informative Seminars in each country (Latvia - Vidzeme, Latgale; Estonia, Finland (included Q&A session)	1–2 weeks after announcement	One-day face-to-face seminars will be held in each region (Latvia – Vidzeme, Latgale; Estonia; Finland) in the native language. Each partner will organise one seminar, informing at least 15 companies in each region (60 companies in total).Informative seminars will explain the scope and goals of the Open Call, eligibility criteria, application requirements, and evaluation procedures. The seminars will also highlight scaling-up opportunities and programme rules.A question-and-answer session will be available throughout the meeting.

Consultations for applicants	The entire application period	Individual consultations on the application process will be provided in the native language, either in person, online, by phone, or via email.
Application submission period	4 weeks**	Applicants complete and submit their materials using online form, with submissions opening on the same day the Open Call is announced.
Application evaluation/ decision making	4-6 weeks	The submitted applications are reviewed and assessed, followed by the selection of participants based on the evaluation results.
Selection announcement and publication about results	5 working days after the decision	The results are published online and through official communication channels. All applicants are also notified individually via email.
Contracting	Until the start of the programme activities	Signing of contracts with selected applicants.

* Dates may be adjusted depending on the situation.
** The deadline for the Open Call may be extended by two weeks, if the number of submitted project applications is deemed insufficient.

1.2. Communication Campaign

To ensure that information about the Rural-UP Open Call effectively reaches rural SMEs in Latvia (Vidzeme and Latgale regions), Estonia, and Finland, a diverse and strategic mix of communication channels will be used. Each channel is carefully selected to maximize outreach, foster engagement, and ensure that all potential applicants are informed and supported throughout the application process. By combining direct, digital, and traditional methods, the communication campaign aims to raise awareness, encourage participation, and promote the Rural-UP programme's opportunities for business growth, innovation, and sustainable development.

Digital platforms:

- Interreg Central Baltic project website: it will provide full information about the Rural-UP Open Call, including application materials, selection criteria, FAQs, and contact details for national partners (https://centralbaltic.eu/project/rural-up/).
- Partners official websites: Latvia – VDA (https://developvalmiera.lv/), Latvia – LPR (www.lpr.gov.lv), Estonia – Tartu BAS (https://arinouandla.ee), Finland – Xamk (https://www.xamk.fi). Before the announcement, the main information about the upcoming Open Call will be published on all partner websites and social media channels one month in advance. During the Open Call period, the full announcement and key documents will be available on each partner's website, accompanied by active posting through partners' networks and direct communication with companies via email, social media, and newsletters.
- Social media: coordinated activity across LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram will promote the Open Call and share tips for applicants.

Traditional media:

- Press releases: the launch of the Open Call, deadline reminder – will be distributed to regional media to ensure high visibility.

Digital materials:

- Infographics: shareable visual materials will illustrate the main stages of the application process and highlight key programme benefits.

Direct communication:

- Emails and local newsletters: regular updates will be shared with SMEs, business support organizations, and other stakeholders across the three partner countries. These messages will highlight the Open Call timeline and eligibility criteria.
- Personalized outreach: direct engagement with SMEs through meetings, calls, and consultations will help identify and motivate suitable applicants.

Translation and regional content:

- Translation of Open Call documents: all essential materials – such as the call description, application guidelines, and promotional visuals – will be translated from English into Latvian, Estonian, and Finnish to ensure accessibility for all applicants.

2. Selection Process

2.1. Application

A transparent, fair, and well-structured selection process is essential to ensure that the Rural-UP programme reaches enterprises with the highest potential for growth and internationalisation. During the Open Call, applications are submitted through an electronic application form (in our case, a unified Google Form) prepared in English.

The selection process is designed not only to identify promising enterprises but also to encourage applicants to critically reflect on their ambitions, growth strategies, and readiness to engage in an international support programme.

Application form questions	
General information	
1.	Country/region represented: (select one option) a. Vidzeme, Latvia b. Latgale, Latvia c. South Estonia d. Kymenlaakso, Finland
2.	Company name (Questions 2.–9. short answer field)
3.	Registration number
4.	Registration date
5.	Legal address
6.	E-mail
7.	Contact person
8.	Phone number
9.	Main business sector
10.	Do you have sufficient English language skills to participate in international training and networking activities? Yes/No (select one)

Specific criteria	
11.	Please briefly describe your company (goals, products, previous activities, and results). (Max. 1000 characters)
12.	Please briefly describe your motivation to participate in the project and grow the business. (Max. 1000 characters)
13.	Please briefly describe your company's development and innovation plans (e.g., to develop new products/services, improve the business model, or expand to new markets). (Max. 1000 characters)
14.	Please describe how prepared your company is to attract new investments, strengthen the team, and expand beyond your current market. Explain in what ways this readiness is demonstrated – for example, through existing strategies, partnerships, or development plans supporting future growth. (Max. 1000 characters)
15.	Please briefly explain your readiness to engage in mentoring, training, networking, and international events. Which topics are most relevant for your company's development? (e.g., digital marketing and e-commerce, product and service development, export and internationalisation, packaging and branding, sustainable production and quality management, leadership, business management and finance, digitalisation and technology adoption). (Max. 1000 characters)
16.	Please add a link to the company website or social media (if available).
17.	Additional relevant information you would like to include in the application. (max. 1000 characters)

If necessary, during the application preparation phase, experts provide consultations to enterprises that have expressed interest in participating in the programme. Within the project partnership, designated persons oversee the application submission process. Once the call is closed, all applications are compiled and forwarded to the Selection Committee for evaluation.

2.2. Selection Committee

In parallel with the open call procedure and preparatory activities, the Selection Committee (SC) is formally established and its meeting date is agreed upon. The committee meeting is foreseen to take place online. Once the open call is closed, the SC begins its work.

1. Nomination of members

- Each partner organisation nominates one representative – a senior-level expert with proven experience in supporting start-ups and business development.
- The list of nominated members is confirmed prior to the launch of the open call.

2. Preparation phase

- Once the open call has closed, all eligible applications are compiled and shared with SC members.
- Members are given sufficient time to individually familiarise themselves with the applications before the joint meeting.
- Each SC member receives the evaluation criteria and scoring template to guide the discussions during the meeting.

3. Joint online meeting

- An online meeting of the SC is convened after the preparation period.
- During the meeting, members:
- Present their observations from the application review.
- Discuss applicants against the predefined criteria (motivation, innovation potential, readiness for growth, openness to international cooperation, and operational capacity).
- The committee collectively decides which companies will be admitted to the programme.

4. Optional second meeting (if required)

- If doubts remain about specific applicants, the SC may agree to convene a second meeting.
- Selected applicants are then invited to present their business and respond to questions.
- Final decisions on these applicants are taken during this second meeting, based on both the documentation and the presentations.

5. Final selection and transparency

- A final list of at least 30 selected companies is approved and documented in official minutes.
- If needed, feedback is provided to applicants upon request to ensure clarity and trust in the process.

2.3. Evaluation Process

Initially, applications are evaluated based on the general criteria. General criteria must receive positive answers for the applicant to be eligible to participate in the programme. If clarification is needed, it is possible to contact the applicant individually. However, if not all answers are positive, the applicant will not proceed in the selection process.

Applicants who meet the general criteria are evaluated according to specific criteria. A 0–3 point scale is used.

General criteria - answer positive/negative (to participate in the programme, all answers must be positive)		
1. The enterprise operates in the food and beverage production sector or a related sector (e.g., packaging, design).		
2. The enterprise is registered and operates in one of the partner regions (Vidzeme and Latgale in Latvia, South Estonia or Kymenlaakso in Finland).		
3. The enterprise was established no more than 5 years ago (or up to 7 years in justified cases) with significant growth potential.		
4. The enterprise's personnel have sufficient language skills to participate in international activities.		
Specific criteria (0–3 point scale)		
5. Clear and strong motivation to participate in the project and grow the business.		
3 – Fully meets the criteria	The applicant provides a clear, compelling, and well-structured explanation of why they want to join the project and how it aligns with their growth strategy. The motivation is supported by specific goals, such as scaling internationally, entering new markets, or adopting innovative practices. The response demonstrates strong commitment and urgency to leverage the program for tangible business growth. Evidence may include concrete KPIs, internal alignment, and resource allocation.	Example: “We aim to expand to three new markets within two years, and this program offers the mentorship and network we need to achieve that.”

2 – Largely meets the criteria	The applicant shows a generally clear motivation to participate and grow the business, but the explanation lacks depth or concrete evidence. While the intent is relevant, the link to the project's objectives is not fully convincing or lacks measurable goals. Minor improvements in clarity and specificity would make the motivation stronger. Some resources or timelines may be indicated but are not comprehensive	Example: "We want to grow and believe this program can help us improve our processes."
1 – Partly meets the criteria	The applicant provides a vague or generic motivation with limited connection to the project's objectives. The response lacks detail, measurable goals, or a clear understanding of how the program will support their growth. Significant improvements are needed to demonstrate real commitment. No evidence of planning, prioritization, or resourcing is provided.	Example: "We think this could be useful for our company."
0 – Does not meet the criteria	No motivation is provided, or the response is irrelevant to the question. There is no indication of interest in participating or growing the business. The answer may be blank, off-topic, or contradict the aims of the program.	Example: Blank response or unrelated statement.
6. Development and innovation potential – plans to develop new products/ services, improve the business model, or expand to new markets.		
3 – Fully meets the criteria	The applicant presents strong, realistic, and well-defined plans for innovation (new products/services), business model improvements, or entry into new markets. Plans include timelines, milestones, resource needs, and risk considerations, and they are aligned with market insights or customer validation. The expected impact on growth, competitiveness, or efficiency is clearly articulated and measurable. Evidence of feasibility (e.g., prototypes, pilots, partnerships) is provided.	Example: "We plan to launch an AI-driven logistics platform in Q3 next year, supported by a dedicated R&D team."

2 – Largely meets the criteria	The applicant outlines relevant and promising innovation plans but with gaps in detail such as execution steps, resourcing, or impact metrics. The direction is sound, yet feasibility and timelines are not fully substantiated. Further clarification on validation, risks, or go-to-market would strengthen the case. Some preliminary activities may exist but are incomplete.	Example: "We want to improve our product and explore new markets, but the timeline is not yet defined."
1 – Partly meets the criteria	Innovation is expressed only as intent, without concrete plans, milestones, or resources. No credible evidence of feasibility or market need is presented. The proposal lacks structure and actionable steps, making outcomes uncertain. Statements remain high-level and speculative.	Example: "We want to innovate somehow in the future."
0 – Does not meet the criteria	No innovation plans are presented or the applicant explicitly indicates no intention to innovate or expand. There is no reference to new products/services, business model evolution, or market entry. The status quo is maintained without consideration of competitiveness or growth	Example: "We will continue as before."
7. Willingness and readiness to attract investments, expand the team, or establish a presence beyond the home market.		
3 – Fully meets the criteria	The applicant demonstrates strong readiness and commitment to raise investments, grow the team, and/or expand internationally. Concrete steps are in place (e.g., pitch deck, investor pipeline, target roles, international partners), and timelines are specified. Past experience or early traction (e.g., investor meetings, term sheets, pilot markets) supports credibility. Risk management and capital allocation are thoughtfully addressed.	Example: "We have a pitch deck ready and are in talks with two VCs; our goal is to open an office in Germany next year."
2 – Largely meets the criteria	There is clear willingness and some degree of readiness, but the plans are underdeveloped or lack supporting details. Key elements (e.g., investment amount, hiring plan, market choice) are not fully defined. Further preparation (documentation, timelines, partners) is needed to proceed with confidence.	Example: "We are considering raising funds in the future and exploring international markets."

1 – Partly meets the criteria	The applicant expresses limited willingness or provides vague, non-committal statements. No concrete steps, materials, or timelines are presented. Readiness appears low and contingent on external factors without a plan to address them.	Example: “Maybe we’ll look for investors someday.”
0 – Does not meet the criteria	No willingness or readiness is demonstrated for investment, team growth, or international expansion. The applicant explicitly rejects these options or shows a purely local, static strategy. No intent to build capabilities or seek external support is evident	Example: “We are not interested in external funding.”
8. Openness to collaboration and learning – readiness to engage in mentoring, training, networking, and international events.		
3 – Fully meets the criteria	The applicant shows a strong commitment to collaboration and learning, with clear examples of past or planned engagement in mentoring, training, networking, and international activities. They demonstrate a proactive attitude (e.g., scheduling, targets, resource allocation) and readiness to both contribute and learn. Benefits to the organization (knowledge transfer, partnerships, visibility) are articulated and connected to objectives. Evidence includes participation records, memberships, or confirmed event plans.	Example: “We actively participate in industry events and mentoring programs and plan to attend two international conferences this year.”
2 – Largely meets the criteria	There is general openness to collaboration and learning, but the response lacks specific examples, commitments, or timelines. Intent is positive yet not anchored in concrete actions or measurable outcomes. Clarifying priorities, formats, and expected results would make the plan more credible.	Example: “We are open to networking and training opportunities.”
1 – Partly meets the criteria	Interest in collaboration or learning is minimal or hesitant, and statements remain vague. No meaningful track record or forward plan is provided. Engagement appears opportunistic and unlikely to be sustained without external prompting.	Example: “We might join some activities if time allows.
0 – Does not meet the criteria	No openness to collaboration or learning is demonstrated. The applicant prefers to work independently and does not intend to participate in mentoring, training, or networking. No value is placed on shared learning or external engagement.	Example: “We prefer to work independently.”

Points are summed, and the enterprises with the highest scores are admitted to the programme. If the total score is equal, the Committee decides by voting which enterprises to admit, based on discussions regarding the information provided in the application. If necessary, the Committee may invite an applicant to an online meeting/interview to make the final decision. In such a case, a date for a second Committee meeting is scheduled. Based on the information provided during the second Committee meeting, the Committee makes its decision. The Committee consists of 4 members (one from each partner organisation), and a positive decision requires 3 votes.

An Excel file is used for the evaluation results and shared with the Committee members. The Excel file is created based on the evaluation criteria and the scoring scale.

In the evaluation process, 30 enterprises are selected to participate in the scale-up programme. The regional distribution is as follows: 12 from Latvia (6 from Vidzeme and 6 from Latgale), 9 from Finland, and 9 from Estonia. Based on this distribution, enterprises are compared in the evaluation process according to their country/region of representation. After the selection, agreements (Annex 1) are signed with the chosen companies for their participation in the programme, and experts start working on developing individual roadmaps for each enterprise.

2.4. Evaluation Guide for Assessors

This section provides recommendations for assessors on how to apply the evaluation scale described in section 3.3.

1. Read each applicant's response carefully for every criterion and match the evidence to the corresponding descriptors.
2. Check for clarity, specificity, and credibility: Are there measurable goals, timelines, resources, and supporting evidence?
3. If a response falls between two levels, assign the lower score unless strong, documented justification supports the higher one.
4. Record a brief justification for each score (e.g., "Clear goals but limited evidence of feasibility → 2 points").
5. Ensure consistency across applications by applying the same thresholds and reference examples when making judgments.
6. When in doubt, request clarifications or additional documentation, provided that the process allows it.

3. Scaling-Up Process

This chapter provides an overview of the 12-month Scaling-Up support programme implemented within the Rural-UP project. It describes the key stages, activities, and outcomes of the process through which participating rural enterprises will receive targeted mentoring, training, and international exposure to enhance their growth potential.

3.1. Roadmap for Companies

As a roadmap for companies in the Rural-UP scaling-up programme, the A3 Managing to Learn — Detailed A3 Template will be adapted and applied (Annex 2). The A3 approach offers a structured, visual, and collaborative framework for problem-solving and continuous improvement. Within the Rural-UP programme, this method is applied to help participating companies clearly define their key growth challenges, analyze their root causes, and develop actionable, results-oriented plans. By guiding SMEs through a logical sequence - from identifying the problem to implementing and reviewing solutions - the A3 process ensures that scaling efforts are focused, data-driven, and aligned with each company's unique context. This method also promotes ownership, learning, and continuous improvement, making it ideal for supporting rural enterprises in achieving sustainable growth.

Step 1: Background

- Purpose: companies begin by identifying a key challenge or opportunity related to scaling up.
- Focus: this could be market entry, product development, investment readiness, or team expansion.
- Context: companies describe why this issue matters for their growth and how it aligns with their strategic goals.

Step 2: Current Conditions

- Assessment: companies analyze their current situation using data, observations, and feedback.
- Tools: SWOT analysis, customer feedback, performance metrics.
- Goal: understand the baseline and define the gap between current performance and desired outcomes.

Step 3: Goal

- Definition: set a clear, measurable goal that addresses the identified challenge.
- Examples: "Enter two new markets within 6 months" or "Increase production capacity by 30%".
- Criteria: goals should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).

Step 4: Analysis

- Root cause investigation: with mentor support, companies explore why the gap exists.
- Methods: 5 Whys, Fishbone diagrams, Pareto analysis, etc
- Outcome: identify the underlying causes that need to be addressed to achieve the goal.

Step 5: Recommendations

- Solution design: based on the analysis, companies propose actions to close the gap.
- Options: multiple alternatives are considered and compared.
- Selection: the most feasible and impactful solution is chosen, with mentor input.

Step 6: Plan

- Action plan: develop a detailed implementation roadmap.
- Includes: tasks, responsibilities, timelines, resources, and success indicators.
- Format: often visualized using a Gantt chart or timeline.
- Support: mentors help refine the plan and ensure alignment with programme resources.

Step 7: Follow-Up

- Monitoring: companies track progress and adjust as needed.
- PDCA Cycle: Plan–Do–Check–Act is used to ensure continuous improvement.
- Sharing: lessons learned are documented and shared during the Closing Conference and final reporting.

3.2. Scale-Up Criteria and Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) provide concrete and measurable targets for each enterprise, reflecting its progress towards the scale-up criteria. While criteria define what is considered growth, KPIs define how it will be measured.

The support process begins with a baseline assessment, during which each enterprise, together with a mentor or project expert, evaluates its current stage of development and identifies key challenges. Based on this assessment, an individual growth roadmap is developed, outlining the enterprise's strategic objectives and defining 2-3 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) directly linked to its scale-up goals. By the end of the programme, each enterprise is expected to have achieved at least one of these KPIs, thereby demonstrating concrete and measurable growth results.

KPIs are selected individually but may include, among others, the following examples to guide enterprises in defining their own targets:

Financial KPIs:
- revenue growth and/or profit margin increase.

Market KPIs:
- 1 new export market entered and/or 1 new distribution contracts signed, and/or product sold in foreign markets.

Innovation KPIs:
- existing product/service improved or new one developed, made available on the market.

Investment KPIs:
- secured any type of investment or additional funding (e.g., grants).

Digitalisation KPIs:
- adoption of new e-commerce solutions not previously in use, or improvement of an existing e-service solution.

Sustainability KPIs:
- implementation of a sustainable solution (e.g., packaging, raw materials, green production process saving resources).

Collaboration KPIs:
- new suppliers engaged – for example, through cooperation with other programme participants or as a result of programme activities.

Team Expansion KPIs:
- new team member hired (full-time, part-time, or key freelance role).

Visibility KPIs:
- improved company visibility and recognition.

3.3. Mentoring Support

Mentoring is an important part of the programme. Each company will be assigned a lead mentor with the option to involve additional mentors selected from an international pool of experienced professionals with a proven track record in business development from the Mentor database. The mentor's role is not limited to providing advice – they serve as a long-term sparring partner, guiding the enterprise through the implementation of its growth roadmap and ensuring accountability for progress.

Mentoring is delivered in a structured format, with 5 mentoring sessions (2h) for the company. To ensure an international approach and perspective, each company is required to use at least one session of mentoring provided by a mentor from another country. Importantly, the mentor is responsible for helping the enterprise translate its growth objectives into actionable steps, such as identifying new markets, refining product strategies, or improving management processes.

Progress towards KPI achievement is monitored continuously throughout the programme. Enterprises meet regularly with their mentors, either online or in person, to review progress, discuss challenges, and adjust their growth roadmap if needed. In addition to these meetings, each company submits interim reports that provide updates on activities and partial results, as well as a final report at the end of the programme summarising all achievements. Enterprises may be asked to provide supporting evidence – such as contracts, photos, market data, or communication records – to validate reported progress. Such evidence will only be requested if necessary and will be stored in the project database with access strictly limited to authorised project staff. All data will be handled in line with confidentiality requirements and used solely for monitoring purposes.

During each mentoring session, the mentor fills out a Plans, Problems, Progress (PPP) template (Annex 3), which serves as a meeting protocol and supports structured follow-up. Also, the confidentiality agreement with the mentors involved will be signed to ensure non-disclosure of information (Annex 4).

3.4. Learning Activities

Learning activities within the Rural-UP scalling-up programme will be designed to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and strategic capacity of participating companies. The webinars will complement the individual mentoring process and serve as a shared learning space where SMEs can explore key business development topics, exchange experiences, and learn from international experts.

In addition to individual mentoring, every participating company will be required to attend at least three webinars focused on topics most relevant to its specific development goals. The selection of themes will be based on a careful review of each company's roadmap to ensure that the learning content directly supports its growth objectives. Webinars will be delivered by experts from different countries, offering diverse perspectives, best practices, and practical insights applicable to rural business contexts. The estimated duration of each webinar will be 2 hours.

Potential learning topics:

- **Digital marketing and e-commerce:**
this topic will focus on building online visibility, developing effective digital marketing strategies, using social media and online platforms to reach target customers, and establishing or improving e-commerce channels. Companies will learn how to increase sales, manage customer engagement, and use analytics to measure performance.
- **Product and service development:**
participants will explore methods for designing or refining products and services that meet customer needs and market trends. The sessions will cover prototyping, testing, value proposition design, and incorporating user feedback to support innovation and competitiveness.
- **Export and internationalization:**
this topic will help companies understand how to enter new markets, adapt products and branding for international audiences, and comply with export regulations. It will also include practical guidance on identifying distributors, trade partners, and participation in international fairs.
- **Packaging and branding:**
companies will learn how to create distinctive, sustainable, and appealing product packaging that reflects brand values and attracts customers. The topic will also cover storytelling, visual identity, and strategies to strengthen brand recognition in domestic and foreign markets.
- **Sustainable production and quality management:**
this module will address resource efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainability principles in production. Participants will learn about quality standards, certifications, and circular economy approaches that improve competitiveness and environmental responsibility.
- **Leadership, business management, and finance:**
focused on strengthening managerial capacity, this topic will cover leadership skills, financial planning, budgeting, and decision-making for growth. It will support business leaders in building strong teams, managing change, and ensuring long-term financial sustainability.
- **Digitalisation and technology adoption:**
companies will gain insights into practical digital tools and technologies that improve efficiency and competitiveness. This includes automation, digital collaboration platforms, and data-driven decision-making to support digital transformation.

3.5. Joint Activities and International Exposure

To enhance learning, cooperation, and international competitiveness, the Rural-UP scalling-up programme includes a set of joint activities that will connect rural SMEs across Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. These activities combine experience exchange visits and participation in international event, offering companies direct exposure to new markets, business environments, and innovation ecosystems.

Three international exchange visits.

Three experience exchange visits for companies will be organised - one in Estonia, one in Finland, and one in Latvia. These visits will take place throughout the programme period, approximately every three to four months, and will bring together participating companies from all partner countries. Each visit will last two days and will be conducted in English to facilitate cross-border communication and learning. The purpose of these visits is to inspire, connect, and share practical experience among rural SMEs. Each event will combine thematic bootcamp sessions and benchmarking visits, providing a balance between structured discussions, hands-on learning, and informal networking.

During the first day, participants will take part in a thematic bootcamp focused on shared challenges such as distribution channels, digital solutions, sustainability, packaging, and logistics. Group discussions will be organised at rotating tables, encouraging peer-to-peer exchange and collaboration between companies from different regions. The day will also include local company visits and production site tours to illustrate practical approaches to scaling and innovation. The evening will conclude with an informal networking session in local style, allowing participants to build personal and professional connections. The second day will be dedicated to benchmarking activities, including visits to successful growth companies, innovation environments, or technology centres in the host region. These visits will highlight best practices and regional strengths, giving participants the opportunity to learn directly from entrepreneurs - exploring what strategies worked, what challenges they faced, and what lessons can be transferred to their own businesses.

Overall, the experience exchange visits will provide participants with new international contacts, practical ideas for business development and sustainability, and a deeper understanding of regional ecosystems and market dynamics. Together, these visits will strengthen cooperation between rural enterprises across the Baltic Sea region and support their readiness for international growth.

At least one international event to be attended by every company.

Each participating company will have the opportunity to attend at least one international event – such as an exhibition, business fair, or innovation conference – in another European Union country. This activity aims to strengthen companies international visibility, provide direct market feedback, and create valuable cross-border business connections. A list of recommended events will be compiled by the programme partners. Based on their business profile, interests, and strategic goals, companies will be able to select the event that best aligns with their development priorities. By attending an international event, participating SMEs will gain first-hand experience in engaging with global markets, positioning their products and services internationally, and building networks essential for sustainable growth beyond their national borders

3.6. Consultations with Experts

Participating companies will have access to specialised experts for individual consultations throughout the Programme. These consultations are designed to provide targeted support in addressing company-specific challenges and ensuring progress toward the key performance indicators (KPIs) defined in each company's roadmap. Expert consultations will be available on-demand, allowing companies to seek advice when specific needs arise — whether related to business strategy, product development, marketing, financial planning, sustainability, or digitalisation.

Each expert session will focus on practical problem-solving and tailored guidance to help companies translate the knowledge gained through the programme into concrete actions. This personalised approach ensures that every company receives focused, relevant, and timely support that complements the broader training activities, helping them overcome obstacles, accelerate growth, and achieve measurable results.

Experts working with the enterprises will complete the Interreg Central Baltic Programme project output and result indicators template as well as the State Aid template, providing detailed information about the supported companies and their achieved results.

4. Programme Final

By the end of the Rural-UP programme, at least 20 rural enterprises — including 8 from Latvia, 6 from South Estonia, and 6 from Kymenlaakso, Finland — operating in the food and beverage production and related sectors, are expected to have successfully scaled up.

4.1. Reports for Companies

At the end of the programme, each enterprise is required to submit a final progress report (Annex 5), prepared in line with the objectives set in its individual growth roadmap. The report provides a detailed description of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) achieved and demonstrates the concrete results of the enterprise's scale-up journey. To ensure transparency and accountability, the report must be supported by appropriate documentation, such as financial indicators, contracts, records of cooperation with partners, market data, or other verifiable evidence (documents are submitted as necessary (based on the KPIs), with data confidentiality ensured). This approach guarantees that reported outcomes are not only documented but also validated, thereby creating a clear link between the support provided by the programme and the tangible growth achieved by the enterprises.

4.2. Closing Conference

The Closing Conference will be organised in Latvia as the flagship event of the Rural-UP programme in the last period of the project. To ensure inclusivity, all programme participants will be strongly encouraged to attend in person. At the same time, an online participation option will be provided, enabling enterprises, mentors, and stakeholders from Estonia and Finland – as well as other interested parties – to join remotely.

The programme of the Closing Conference will combine plenary sessions, panel discussions, company pitches, thematic roundtables, and informal networking spaces. The event will be designed to be highly interactive and inspiring, showcasing the achievements of participating SMEs while positioning Rural-UP as a catalyst for broader change in rural entrepreneurship.

Key themes and activities

1. Celebration of achievements – selected SMEs will present their success stories, highlighting milestones such as new product launches, entry into export markets, or secured investments.

2. Good practices from each country – inspiring case studies from Latvia, Estonia, and Finland will be showcased, reflecting diverse experiences across the partner regions.

3. Sharing lessons learned – participants, mentors, and partners will exchange insights on what worked well and the challenges encountered. This reflection will result in concrete recommendations for improving future business support programmes.

4. Knowledge dissemination – the methodology, tools, and results of the Rural-UP programme will be presented to a wider audience, including business support organisations, policy-makers, and potential investors, ensuring replicability across other regions and sectors.

5. Networking and ecosystem building – matchmaking sessions and thematic networking opportunities will connect SMEs with potential partners, investors, industry associations, and public authorities.

6. Visibility and outreach – media, regional development institutions, and European-level stakeholders will be engaged to amplify the impact of the conference. Communication outputs (videos, brochures, digital stories) will be produced to ensure the event's impact extends beyond its duration.

The conference will also serve as a knowledge transfer platform. Lessons learned, tools developed, and the guidance-based role model presented will be made available for integration into future incubation and acceleration programmes, ensuring that the added value of Rural-UP continues beyond the formal project end.

Conclusion

The Rural-UP Implementation Guide serves as both a roadmap and a commitment to building a stronger, more innovative, and sustainable rural business environment across the Central Baltic region. By following the principles and tools outlined in this guide, project partners, mentors, and participating SMEs can work together in a structured and transparent way to unlock growth potential, strengthen competitiveness, and foster collaboration beyond borders.

Through joint learning, mentoring, and cross-border cooperation, Rural-UP demonstrates how targeted support and shared methodologies can empower rural enterprises to grow confidently, adopt innovation, and access new markets. The programme not only focuses on tangible business results but also promotes a mindset of continuous learning, resilience, and adaptability — key elements for long-term success.

As the programme concludes, its outcomes, lessons, and success stories will continue to inspire future initiatives and contribute to policy development in regional and international contexts. The Rural-UP approach provides a replicable model for scaling up rural enterprises, ensuring that the impact of this effort extends well beyond the duration of the project and strengthens the foundation for sustainable rural growth in years to come.

Annexes

Annex 1. Agreement Template

AGREEMENT ON PARTICIPATION IN THE PROJECT

Contracting Parties

Project Participant
[Name of the Participant]
[Address]
[Business ID]
Hereinafter referred to as the "Participant"

Project Implementer
[Project partner name]
[Registration number]
[Adress]
Responsible person: [Name]
[Email]
[Phone]
Hereinafter referred to as the "Implementer"

1. Purpose of the agreement

1.1.The Participant agrees to cooperate with the [Project partner name] in implementing the Rural-UP project, funded by the Interreg Central Baltic Programme. Project duration: 1 May 2025 – 30 April 2027.

2. Project schedule and validity

2.1. The project will run from 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2027 and the scale-up programme from 1 May 2026 to 30 April 2027.
2.2. This Agreement enters into force upon signature by both parties and remains valid until:

2.2.1. he project and the scale-up programme has been completed,
2.2.2. all obligations arising from this Agreement have been fulfilled,
2.2.3. and the final report has been approved.

2.3 Provisions concerning confidentiality, liability, rights of use, and dispute resolution will remain in force after termination.
2.4. If the funding authority extends the project period, this Agreement will automatically remain valid for the extended duration.

3. Obligations of the parties:

3.1. The Implementer undertakes to:

3.1.1. Carry out the project in accordance with the approved project plan and any officially approved modifications.
3.1.2. Comply with all conditions specified in the funding decision.

3.2. The Participant undertakes to:

3.2.1. Take part in the project's training and development activities in line with its individual growth or development plan.

4. Confidentiality

4.1. Confidential information refers to all data or materials marked as confidential or otherwise designated as such, including trade, technical, commercial, or financial secrets.

4.2. The receiving party agrees to:

4.2.1. Keep all confidential information strictly confidential and not disclose it to third parties without prior written consent.

4.2.2. Use such information solely to fulfill obligations under this Agreement.

4.2.3.Prevent access to confidential information by unauthorized persons.

4.3. Confidentiality does not apply to information that:

21

4.3.1. is already public or becomes public without breach of this Agreement,

4.3.2. was lawfully possessed before disclosure,

4.3.3. was independently developed by the receiving party, or

4.3.4. must be disclosed by law, court order, or official regulation.

4.4. Participation in the project is not considered confidential. The Implementer may publish the names of participating organizations in project materials, reports, and on websites.

4.5. Confidentiality obligations remain valid for five **(5) years** after the project ends or is terminated.

5. Rights

5.1. Each party retains ownership and intellectual property rights to results created by them, unless otherwise required by the project's funding conditions.

6. Liability and Limitation of Liability

6.1. Neither party shall be liable for indirect damages.

6.2. For direct damages, the Implementer's liability is limited to the amount of the Participant's financial contribution under this Agreement.

7. Personal Data

7.1. Both parties shall comply with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 679/2016) and the Local Data Protection Act in each partner country.

7.2. No personal data shall be disclosed or made available without a separate written agreement, except for necessary contact information required for project implementation.

8. Dispute Resolution

8.1. Any disputes arising from this Agreement will first be settled through negotiation.

8.2. If no agreement is reached, disputes will be resolved in the District Court as the first instance.

8.3. Disputes relating to intellectual property rights shall be resolved in the Market Court.

9. Distribution

9.1. This Agreement is signed electronically. Both parties confirm that the signatories are duly authorized to represent their respective organizations.

10. Signatures

[Electronic signature fields for both parties]

Annex 2. Roadmap Template

ROADMAP

COMPANY NAME:
DATE:

1.	BACKGROUND
1.1.	**What is the key challenge or opportunity your company is addressing in order to scale-up?** *Focus: this could be market entry, product development, investment readiness, or team expansion.* *Context: companies describe why this issue matters for their growth and how it aligns with their strategic goals.*
2.	**CURRENT CONDITIONS**
2.2.	**Analyze your current situation using data, observations, and feedback.** *Tools: SWOT analysis, customer feedback, performance metrics.* *Goal: understand the baseline and define the gap between current performance and desired outcomes.*
Strengths: Weaknesses: Opportunities: Threats:	

3.	GOAL
3.1.	**Set a clear, measurable goal that addresses the identified challenge.** *Examples*: • *Financial KPIs: revenue growth and/or profit margin increase.* • *Market KPIs: 1 new export market entered and/or 1 new distribution contracts signed, and/or product sold in foreign markets.* • *Innovation KPIs: existing product/service improved or new one developed, made available on the market.* • *Investment KPIs: secured any type of investment or additional funding (e.g., grants).* • *Digitalisation KPIs: adoption of new e-commerce solutions not previously in use, or improvement of an existing e-service solution.* • *Sustainability KPIs: implementation of a sustainable solution (e.g., packaging, raw materials, green production process saving resources).* • *Team & Collaboration KPIs: New suppliers engaged – for example, through cooperation with other programme participants or as a result of programme activities.* • *Visibility KPIs: improved company visibility and recognition.* Criteria: goals should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).

4.	ANALYSIS
4.1.	**Identify the underlying causes that need to be addressed to achieve the goal.** *Root cause investigation: with mentor support, companies explore why the gap exists.* *Methods: 5 Whys, Fishbone diagrams, Pareto analysis, etc*

5.	RECOMMENDATIONS
5.1.	**Based on the analysis, propose actions to close the gap.** *Options: multiple alternatives are considered and compared.* *Selection: the most feasible and impactful solution is chosen, with mentor input.*

6.	PLAN
6.1.	**Develop a detailed implementation roadmap with tasks, responsibilities, timelines, resources, and success indicators (could be gantt chart or timeline).** *Support: mentors help refine the plan and ensure alignment with programme resources.*

No.	Task	Responsibilities	Timeline	Resources	Success indicators
1.					
2.					
3.					

Annex 3. Progress, Plans, Problems (PPP) Template for Mentoring Session

PROGRESS – PLANS – PROBLEMS

Team meeting memo

Date, time (h)	
Duration:	
Location:	
Participants:	
Filled by:	

PROGRESS
What has the team done? List/describe shortly major accomplishments, finished items, and closed tasks for the period ending.
PROBLEMS
Any problems the team is facing? List/describe items you can't finish and/or require mentor input/additional team members/additional funding, etc. Quite often, problems need help from someone else, not just you. The reasons can be waiting behind other team members, external factors, or just unexpected happenings.

Annex 4. Mentor and Non-disclosure Agreement Template

MENTORING AND NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

Agreement No.: **[Insert number]**
Date: **[Insert date]**

This Agreement is entered into between:

Client: **[Company name]**, registry code **[insert]**, address **[insert]**, represented by [insert] (hereinafter referred to as the Client),

and

Mentor: **[Company name]**, registry code **[insert],** address **[insert]**, represented by **[insert]**, personal identification code **[insert]** (hereinafter referred to as the Mentor).

The parties agree to the following terms:

1. Principles of cooperation:

1.1. The Mentor is aware of the objectives of the Rural-UP project (hereinafter referred to as the Project), the role, responsibilities, and obligations of the Mentor, and has agreed to participate in the Project.

1.2. The Mentor shall personally fulfill the obligations arising from this Agreement and shall not transfer them to third parties.

1.3. During the Project, the Mentor will be assigned to one or more Companies, determined after the initial contact event between Mentors and Companies. The Mentor shall cooperate with the assigned Company in accordance with the goals set by the Project and the Company.

1.4. The parties shall engage in motivated cooperation based on mutual benefit (excluding direct material gain), guided by good faith, fair business practices, reasonableness, humanity, honesty, and the best skills, knowledge, and abilities.

1.5. The parties shall refrain from any harmful behavior, including but not limited to the disclosure or dissemination of confidential information about each other or the Companies involved in the Project.

2. Mentor's responsibilities:

2.1. The Mentor's tasks within the Project include:

2.1.1. Participation in Project team meetings and discussions to exchange information and experiences;
2.1.2. Participation in Project workshops and supporting the Company in completing tasks;
2.1.3. Attendance at Project events including the opening and closing sessions;
2.1.4. Guiding the Company outside of workshops, assisting in process optimization and decision-making;
2.1.5. Keeping track of working hours and confirming them with the Company and Consortium at the end of the program;
2.1.6. Providing feedback on the program and collaboration with the Company.

3. Intellectual property and confidentiality:

3.1. The Mentor shall not violate third-party rights and shall comply with copyright laws when using protected works.

3.2. By signing this Agreement, the Mentor transfers the proprietary rights of works created during the Project to the Company. The Company may use such works freely, including publishing, distributing, modifying, and reproducing them without territorial restrictions, prior consent, or additional compensation.

3.3. The Mentor shall keep confidential all information obtained during the performance of this Agreement, including business secrets and copyrighted information of the Client, the Consortium, and participating Companies.

3.4. The confidentiality obligation remains in force during the validity of the Agreement and for 5 years after its termination, regardless of the reason for termination.

4. Confidentiality breach and penalties:

4.1. In case of breach of confidentiality, the Mentor shall pay a contractual penalty of up to €15,000 upon the Client's request.

5. Contact persons and communication:

5.1. The Client's contact person for matters related to this Agreement is **[insert name] (email: [insert], phone: [insert])**. The Client shall notify the Mentor immediately of any changes.

5.2. The Mentor's contact person is **[insert name] (email: [insert],** phone: [insert]). The Mentor shall notify the Client immediately of any changes.

5.3. Notices shall be delivered via email or in writing by postal mail.

6. Validity, amendments, and termination:

6.1. This Agreement enters into force upon signature by both parties.

6.2. The Agreement remains valid until the completion of cooperation and fulfillment of Project objectives. It ends upon completion of the tasks listed in Section 2 and acceptance of the final report by the Consortium, or by written termination notice under the conditions set forth herein.

6.3. Amendments to the Agreement must be made in writing and signed by both parties as an annex.

6.4. The Mentor may terminate the Agreement only if the Consortium or Company significantly breaches the Agreement and fails to remedy the breach within the deadline specified in a written warning.

6.5. If the Mentor unilaterally terminates or suspends cooperation without cause and without notifying the Consortium, the Consortium may withhold payment.

6.6. The Consortium may unilaterally terminate the Agreement without notice if the Mentor ceases participation or causes dissatisfaction through breach or inactivity.

6.7. If participation in the Project is hindered, the Mentor must immediately inform the Consortium.

6.8. The Company may request a new Mentor due to changing needs or other valid reasons. The Consortium will assess the work done and compensate accordingly.

7. Dispute resolution:

7.1. Any disagreements or disputes shall be resolved primarily through negotiations.

Client:
Mentor:

Annex 5. Final Report Template for Enterprises

FINAL REPORT

COMPANY NAME
DATE:

1.	BASELINE SITUATION
What was the company's situation at the start of the support programme? Which KPIs were defined?	
2.	**PROJECT ACTIVITIES**
Please describe which project activities you participated in.	
3.	**ARCHIEVED SCALE-UP STATUS**
Please describe the achieved scale-up status. Which of the defined KPIs have been achieved?	