

Interreg



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Central Baltic Programme

Rural-UP

Methodology for the Rural-UP Scaling-Up Programme



Contents

Introduction	2
1. Programme Context	3
1.1. Interreg Central Baltic Programme	3
1.2. The Project: Rural Enterprise Expansion Initiative (Rural-UP)	3
2. Selection Process	5
2.1. Selection process for companies	5
2.2. Selection Criteria	6
2.3. Selection Committee	6
2.4. Open Call Procedure	7
3. Scale-Up Criteria and Performance Indicators (KPIs)	9
3.1. Scale-Up Criteria	9
3.2. Performance Indicators (KPIs)	9
4. Support Instruments and Approaches	11
4.1. Mentoring Support	11
4.2. Learning Activities	12
4.3. Joint Activities and International Exposure	12
4.4. Closing Conference	13
Conclusion	14



Introduction

This methodology has been developed within the framework of the Rural-UP project to provide a structured and practical approach for supporting the scale-up of rural small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the food and beverage sector and related industries. It outlines the thematic areas covered by the programme – ranging from mentoring and training to internationalisation, investment readiness, innovation adoption, and sustainability – and explains how these elements are combined into a coherent support model.

The purpose of this methodology is twofold. First, it serves as a guiding framework for project partners in implementing the Rural-UP Scaling-Up Programme in Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. Second, it acts as a reference tool for other business support organisations seeking to replicate or adapt similar initiatives in the future. By consolidating knowledge, tools, and best practices, the methodology ensures consistency in programme delivery while also enabling its transferability beyond the project's lifetime.

The methodology provides clear structure and guidance for partners implementing the programme, while at the same time ensuring tangible benefits for participating enterprises. It helps partners deliver the programme consistently and effectively, and enables SMEs to receive targeted, needs-based support that leads to measurable growth and long-term competitiveness.

It is important to note that, within the project, two separate documents will be produced:

-  **The Methodology** – serving as the overarching framework that defines the programme's objectives, structure, selection criteria, and support instruments.
-  **The Implementation Guide** – serving as a practical, hands-on guide for executing the programme, including detailed instructions, templates, and operational recommendations.

While the methodology establishes what the programme is and why it is structured in a certain way, the implementation guide will focus on how to deliver it in practice.

This methodology is primarily intended for the Rural-UP project partners – regional development agencies, business support organisations, and educational institutions involved in entrepreneurship promotion. At the same time, it is designed to be useful for a broader audience, including other incubators, accelerators, and business support organisations that wish to adopt or adapt the scaling-up model in their own contexts.

Ultimately, the methodology aims to strengthen the capacity of rural business ecosystems by ensuring that enterprises receive high-quality, targeted support to unlock their growth potential and expand into new markets.

1. Programme Context

1.1. Interreg Central Baltic Programme

The Interreg Central Baltic Programme is part of the European Union's European Territorial Cooperation framework (Interreg) and is financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The Central Baltic programme as such has already a long history. The programme has been existing in its current form from 2007 and cooperation links in the region are well established and developed.

The programme supports cross-border cooperation between Finland (including Åland), Estonia, Latvia, and Sweden, addressing shared economic, environmental, and social challenges. In total there are 27 regions in the programme area (according to the European Union Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics by regional levels 3 classification (NUTS 3)). The Central Baltic Programme area covers very diverse regions: there are highly developed, well-connected, densely populated cities and, in turn, less developed peripheral (in terms of location and accessibility) areas, sparsely populated rural areas, as well as archipelago and island regions. Specifically, through the Rural-UP project, the partnership unites organisations from Latvia, Estonia, and Finland, concentrating on the regions of Vidzeme and Latgale in Latvia, South Estonia in Estonia, and Kymenlaakso in Finland.

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.

1.2. The Project: Rural Enterprise Expansion Initiative (Rural-UP)

The Rural-UP project is a joint initiative aimed at boosting the growth potential of micro and small enterprises (SMEs) operating in rural areas of Latvia (Vidzeme and Latgale), Estonia (South Estonia), and Finland (Kymenlaakso). It specifically targets the food and beverage production sector and its related fields, such as packaging and design, which are essential for rural economies but often lack access to structured support beyond the early start-up phase. The project reflects a strong commitment to strengthening rural entrepreneurship ecosystems and supporting the sustainable growth of businesses that play a crucial role in local communities.

Regional assessments and consultations with incubators, universities, and planning agencies have revealed several persistent challenges. These include limited access to international mentorship and business networks, insufficient sector-specific training (such as food technology and sustainable packaging), and a lack of follow-up support after the initial start-up phase. Moreover, existing support programmes in the partner regions tend to focus on technology-driven or creative industries, leaving

food and beverage enterprises under-served. For many rural SMEs, this means that once the early incubation stage ends, there is little structured assistance to help them expand into new markets, attract investors, or adopt modern digital tools.

Another critical gap identified is the absence of targeted scale-up programmes that combine internationalisation, investment readiness, and innovation adoption. While rural SMEs often demonstrate creativity and strong ties to local traditions, they frequently lack the resources and strategic know-how needed to compete in broader national or international markets. This situation highlights the need for a comprehensive programme tailored to their specific characteristics and challenges.

The Rural-UP Scaling-Up Programme directly addresses these gaps by offering a comprehensive package of mentoring, capacity-building, and cross-border learning opportunities. Developed collaboratively by partners with expertise in business development, education, and regional economic planning, the programme provides participating enterprises with practical tools to improve their competitiveness and innovation performance. Each company selected for the programme co-creates an individual growth roadmap, which includes clear objectives and measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Through this process, enterprises receive targeted support to help them enter new markets, attract investment, strengthen management capacity, and professionalise their operations.

The support package combines several interlinked components. Mentoring ensures that each enterprise is paired with experienced advisors who can provide strategic guidance. Learning activities focus on practical skills, including digital marketing, export strategies, sustainable product development, and financial management. Cross-border exchange visits expose entrepreneurs to best practices in partner countries and allow them to build international networks. In addition, the programme places strong emphasis on sustainability and innovation, encouraging companies to integrate resource-efficient practices and develop new products with higher added value.

By the end of the programme, at least 20 rural enterprises are expected to have successfully scaled up, contributing to the economic vitality of the Central Baltic region. These enterprises will demonstrate tangible results such as entering new export markets, launching innovative products, or attracting private investment. More broadly, their growth will generate spill-over effects in local economies by creating jobs, strengthening supply chains, and showcasing the potential of rural entrepreneurship.

In the long term, the Rural-UP project also aims to create a guideline-based role model for business support organisations, enabling replication and sustainability of the programme's impact beyond its lifetime. By documenting methods, tools, and lessons learned, the project will ensure that other incubators, accelerators, and development agencies can adopt the model in different regions and sectors. This will contribute not only to the competitiveness of rural SMEs but also to the cohesion and resilience of the Central Baltic economy as a whole. Ultimately, Rural-UP seeks to bridge the gap between local potential and international opportunities, empowering rural enterprises to grow, innovate, and thrive in a competitive global environment.

2. Selection Process

A transparent, fair, and well-structured selection process is crucial for ensuring that the Rural-UP programme reaches the enterprises with the highest potential for growth and internationalisation. The methodology defines clear steps, roles, and responsibilities in order to guarantee consistency across partner regions while maintaining flexibility to account for sector-specific circumstances. The selection process is designed not only to identify promising enterprises but also to motivate applicants to critically reflect on their ambitions, growth strategies, and readiness to engage in an international support programme.

2.1. Selection Process for Companies

The Rural-UP programme applies an open and competitive selection process to identify rural SMEs with strong growth potential in the food and beverage sector and related industries, such as packaging and design. Applications are submitted through a coordinated open call, which is simultaneously launched in Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. To ensure equal access, all information and application materials are available in English as well as national languages, thus enabling inclusive participation from enterprises of different backgrounds.

Once applications are received, they are reviewed by a joint Selection Committee composed of senior-level experts nominated by each partner organisation. The committee members bring extensive experience in entrepreneurship support, incubation, and acceleration, with particular expertise in food production, processing, packaging innovation, and international business development. This ensures that the evaluation process takes into account both general business growth aspects and the specific needs of food and beverage enterprises.

Evaluation is conducted according to unified criteria defined in the methodology, with a focus on the applicant's motivation, innovation potential, readiness for growth, and openness to international cooperation. Additional dimensions, such as team capacity, market awareness, and compliance with sectoral standards, are also considered to ensure that the selected enterprises are not only ambitious but also realistic in their growth aspirations.

Where necessary, the Selection Committee invites external experts to provide insights on highly specialised topics, such as food safety regulations, digitalisation, or sustainability practices. This expert input ensures that companies with innovative but complex business models receive a fair and well-informed assessment.

Enterprises that are selected to participate in the programme are those that demonstrate the strongest ambition and capacity to scale. Selection goes beyond checking eligibility – it seeks to identify entrepreneurs who are ready to engage in an intensive international programme, commit resources to growth, and actively participate in mentoring, training, and networking activities. This process guarantees that the final group of enterprises aligns with the overarching objectives of Rural-UP: to foster the development of competitive, innovative, and internationally oriented rural SMEs.

2.2. Selection Criteria

In order to ensure a fair, transparent, and consistent evaluation process, the Rural-UP methodology defines a clear set of selection criteria that all applicants must meet. These criteria provide the foundation for assessing the eligibility, motivation, and growth potential of enterprises applying to the programme. They are divided into three main categories: general criteria, specific criteria related to growth potential, and practical aspects of implementation capacity.

It is important to note that while the methodology presents the overarching principles, a detailed assessment plan, scoring matrix, and evaluation guidelines will be described separately in the Implementation Guide. This will ensure that the process is both standardised across partner regions and flexible enough to account for the specific circumstances of each applicant.

General criteria:

- The enterprise operates in the food and beverage production sector or a related sector (e.g., packaging, design).
- The enterprise is registered and operates in one of the partner regions (Vidzeme or Latgale in Latvia, South Estonia or Kymenlaakso in Finland).
- The enterprise was established no more than 5 years ago (or up to 7 years in justified cases) with significant growth potential.
- The enterprise's personnel have sufficient language skills to participate in international activities.

Specific criteria (growth potential assessment):

- Clear and strong motivation to participate in the project and grow the business (to be demonstrated in the application).
- Development and innovation potential – plans to develop new products/services, improve the business model, or expand to new markets.
- Willingness and readiness to attract investments, expand the team, or establish a presence beyond the home market.
- Openness to collaboration and learning – readiness to engage in mentoring, training, networking, and international events.

2.3. Selection Committee

A joint Selection Committee (SC) will be established to ensure a harmonised and transparent evaluation process across all partner regions. The SC will consist of senior-level experts nominated by each partner organisation, all of whom have proven experience in supporting start-ups and implementing business incubation or acceleration programmes – particularly within the food, beverage, and related sectors.

The SC is responsible for evaluating applications submitted through the open call according to the unified criteria defined in the methodology and in the implementation guide.

The main focus of the evaluation will be on applicants' motivation, innovation potential, readiness for growth, and openness to international cooperation. In addition, the committee will consider the operational capacity of enterprises to ensure they can realistically implement their growth ambitions.

Where necessary, the SC may invite external sector-specific experts to provide additional insights, especially in cases involving highly specialised technological innovations, regulatory compliance, or sustainability issues. This ensures that all applications, regardless of complexity, are assessed fairly and accurately.

The SC will carefully review all submitted documentation and may organise interviews or pitch sessions if additional clarification is needed. By applying a joint and unified scoring system, the committee guarantees equal treatment of applicants and consistent decision-making across countries.

As a result of the evaluation, at least 30 companies will be selected to participate in the Rural-UP Scaling-Up Programme. For each selected enterprise, the SC and assigned mentors will jointly develop an individual growth roadmap, which identifies the company's baseline situation, defines clear scale-up goals, and sets 2-3 measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Each company will formalise its commitment to the programme by signing a participation agreement and engaging fully in the mentoring, training, networking, and international activities offered.

2.4. Open Call Procedure

To ensure a transparent and harmonised selection process, the Rural-UP support programme launches a joint open call across Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. This coordinated approach reaches the widest possible audience in each region, provides consistent support to applicants, and ensures fair evaluation based on shared criteria. The open call is announced simultaneously in all three countries and remains open for a sufficient period (4-6 weeks) to allow enterprises adequate time to prepare their applications. The duration of the call and exact deadlines are determined by project partners in line with programme planning and are more explained in the Implementation Guide.

To encourage companies to join the programme, the benefits will be highlighted during the Open Call. Benefits for companies attending this programme include access to expert mentoring and tailored business growth support, opportunities to develop innovative products and services, networking with SMEs and investors across regions, guidance for export and market expansion, and improved readiness to attract investments and scale sustainably.

A comprehensive, multi-channel communication campaign reaches potential applicants through partner websites, social media, email newsletters, local media, and regional business networks. All promotional and informational materials are provided in English, Latvian, Estonian and Finnish. 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. The campaign also highlights role model stories from similar enterprises, thereby inspiring potential applicants and showcasing realistic growth opportunities.

To further support participation, each partner organises an information seminar in its implementation region. These seminars present the programme in detail, including eligibility requirements, participant benefits, and step-by-step guidance for completing the application process. In addition, project partners provide hands-on consultations – both online and in person – throughout the application period.

Enterprises are required to submit their applications electronically, in line with the programme requirements (in our case, a single unified Google Form will be used). A standardised set of application materials guarantees a consistent applicant experience across all partner regions. These materials include detailed guidelines and an application form. The application form covers the following sections: company information, a motivation and growth plan, a business and innovation description.

All eligible applications are reviewed by the joint Selection Committee. The Committee follows defined evaluation criteria, scoring matrix, and guidelines set out in the methodology to ensure a harmonised approach across countries. The evaluation process focuses on motivation, innovation potential, readiness for growth, and internationalisation capacity.

In order to secure balanced representation, the distribution of selected companies reflects the programme's regional coverage – Vidzeme and Latgale in Latvia, South Estonia in Estonia, and Kymenlaakso in Finland. This helps ensure that the final group of participants represents the diversity of rural enterprise ecosystems in the Central Baltic area.

Following the assessment, at least 30 enterprises are selected to participate in the programme. Each selected company signs a formal participation agreement and, together with expert mentors, co-develops a customised growth roadmap. This roadmap includes a baseline assessment of the company's status and defines scale-up goals and key performance indicators (KPIs). Participating enterprises commit to fully engaging in the programme's mentoring, training, networking, and international activities, and are required to submit a final progress report at the end of the 12-month programme.

Finally, the results of the open call, including the list of selected enterprises, are publicly announced on partner websites and communication channels. This reinforces the transparency of the process and provides visibility for the enterprises selected to take part in the programme.

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

The Rural-UP Scaling-Up Process is designed as a structured 12-month programme that guides rural SMEs through a growth journey supported by mentoring, learning activities, joint events, and digital tools. The process ensures that participating enterprises receive targeted support tailored to their specific needs and are able to achieve measurable results.

At the beginning of the programme, each selected enterprise conducts a baseline assessment together with mentors or experts. This forms the foundation for an individual growth roadmap, which defines scale-up criteria and sets 2-3 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The roadmap provides both direction and accountability, ensuring that the 12-month journey is focused, realistic, and results-driven.

3.1. Scale-Up Criteria

Scale-up criteria define the main dimensions of growth that enterprises in the Rural-UP programme are expected to achieve during the 12-month scaling-up process. They ensure that progress is not only measurable but also aligned with the broader objectives of competitiveness, innovation, and internationalisation.

The programme will focus on several scale-up opportunities, including:



securing investments



establishing a presence outside the home market



developing and validating a business model



developing a new product or service



expanding the core team

3.2. 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.

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.

Recognising that business environments are dynamic, the programme allows for flexibility in the way KPIs are managed. If a company's strategy changes, or if external circumstances such as market disruptions, economic shifts, or unforeseen challenges arise, the set KPIs can be revised to ensure continued relevance. Any adjustments are made through mutual agreement between the enterprise and the project team, ensuring that targets remain realistic, achievable, and aligned with the company's growth trajectory. This flexible approach helps enterprises stay focused on meaningful outcomes even in changing conditions.

Project partners play an active role in supporting the monitoring and evaluation process. They provide enterprises with practical tools such as templates and guidelines, as well as regular consultations to ensure consistency in reporting and progress tracking. Beyond individual company support, partners consolidate KPI data from all participating enterprises. This aggregated information is then used to assess the overall impact of the programme, both at the regional level and in the wider cross-border context, ensuring that the Rural-UP initiative contributes meaningfully to the development of rural business ecosystems.

4. Support Instruments and Approaches

Each participating company receives a personalised and diversified support package designed to foster growth, internationalisation, and long-term strategic development. The programme recognises that rural SMEs often operate under resource constraints and face sector-specific challenges. Therefore, the support instruments are structured in a way that combines individualised mentoring with collective learning and international exposure.

All support measures are closely aligned with each enterprise's individual growth roadmap, which outlines its needs, challenges, and development goals. This ensures that the assistance provided is not generic, but rather targeted and tailored to the growth potential of each company. In addition, the programme applies a flexible delivery model, making it possible to adapt the content, frequency, and intensity of support activities to different company profiles and levels of maturity.

4.1. 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.

Where specialised expertise is required, sector-specific experts are brought in. For example, food technologists can advise on product innovation and compliance with food safety regulations, while packaging specialists can support sustainable design solutions. This tailored expert input ensures that SMEs receive targeted assistance in overcoming challenges that can be decisive for their competitiveness.

All mentors are expected to work in English, which also prepares companies for international contexts. However, where appropriate, additional language support may be offered in national languages to facilitate clarity and effective knowledge transfer.

4.2. Learning Activities

In addition to individual mentoring, each company is required to attend at least three webinars on topics most relevant to its needs. After carefully reviewing each company's roadmap, specific topics and lecturers will be selected.

- **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.**

4.3. Joint Activities and International Exposure

To strengthen cross-border collaboration and international learning, the programme includes joint activities open to all selected enterprises. These are crucial in helping companies build networks, exchange knowledge, and benchmark themselves against best practices.

The activities include:

Experience exchange visits in each partner country. During these visits, companies will meet successful enterprises, stakeholders, and sector organisations, gaining first-hand insights into scaling strategies.

Participation in international events such as trade fairs, EU business days, or sector-specific exhibitions. These events will be carefully selected to match the growth objectives of participating SMEs and provide direct opportunities for market entry and networking.

4.4. Closing Conference

The joint activities culminate in a closing conference, which serves as the flagship event of the Rural-UP programme. The conference brings together all participating enterprises, project partners, mentors, external stakeholders, and representatives from regional, national, and international business ecosystems. Its role extends far beyond a formal closing – it is designed as a multi-dimensional platform for reflection, knowledge-sharing, visibility, and networking.

► Celebration of achievements

The conference will provide an opportunity to recognise the progress and accomplishments of participating SMEs. Selected enterprises will be invited to present their success stories, highlighting the milestones achieved during the programme such as new products launched, export markets entered, or investments secured.

► Knowledge dissemination

The conference will showcase the methodology and results of the Rural-UP programme to a wider audience, including other business support organisations, policy-makers, and potential investors. This contributes to the replicability of the programme by spreading its approaches and tools across regions and sectors.

► Visibility and outreach

By engaging media, regional development institutions, and European-level stakeholders, the conference will amplify the visibility of participating SMEs and reinforce the importance of supporting rural enterprises. Communication outputs (videos, brochures, digital stories) prepared for the conference will ensure that its impact continues after the event.

The format of the closing conference is designed to be interactive and inspiring, combining plenary sessions, panel discussions, company pitches, and informal networking spaces. It positions Rural-UP not only as a project that supports individual enterprises but as a catalyst for broader change in the rural entrepreneurship ecosystem.

► Sharing lessons learned

The event will function as a reflective platform where participants, mentors, and partners exchange insights about what has worked well and what challenges were encountered. This exchange will not only strengthen mutual learning within the project but also generate practical recommendations for improving future business support programmes.

► Networking and ecosystem building

The conference will create direct networking opportunities for SMEs with potential partners, investors, industry associations, and public authorities. Matchmaking sessions or thematic roundtables will be organised to facilitate meaningful connections, helping enterprises explore collaboration opportunities beyond the programme's lifetime.

Conclusion

The Rural-UP methodology provides a comprehensive and structured framework for supporting the scale-up of rural SMEs in the food and beverage sector and related industries. It defines the key principles, objectives, and instruments of the programme, ensuring that support is consistent, transparent, and tailored to the real needs of enterprises. By combining mentoring, capacity-building, international exposure, and digital support, the methodology creates the foundation for sustainable growth and competitiveness of rural enterprises across Latvia, Estonia, and Finland.

Importantly, this document serves as the strategic framework, while the practical aspects of programme implementation are described in a complementary document – the Implementation Guide. The Guide translates the methodology into actionable steps and provides detailed instructions for execution. It includes all necessary templates, sample forms, and operational tools that project partners and participating enterprises will use during the programme.

Together, the Methodology and the Implementation Guide ensure both a clear vision and a practical roadmap for supporting rural enterprises. While the methodology sets out the “what” and the “why”, the Implementation Guide provides the “how” and “when” – enabling project partners and other organisations to effectively apply, replicate, and scale the Rural-UP approach in different regions and contexts.

