



# ***MERSE Leadership Programme for Rural Social Enterprise Facilitators***

Within MERSE, a dedicated Leadership Programme has been developed to strengthen facilitation and leadership capacity among social entrepreneurs operating in rural contexts. The programme responds to a recognised need for individuals who can lead learning processes, support peer-to-peer exchange and facilitate collective reflection around complex societal and entrepreneurial challenges in rural communities.

The programme is delivered by Social Enterprise Academy and is grounded in their long established learning methodology, adapted to the specific context of rural social entrepreneurship within the MERSE partnership.

## **Purpose and strategic intent**

The Leadership Programme has a dual and interlinked purpose:

- 1.** It aims to equip participating social entrepreneurs with practical facilitation skills that they can apply independently within their own social enterprises. Strengthened facilitation competence supports organisational development, stakeholder engagement, collaborative problem solving and long term resilience within the enterprises themselves.
- 2.** It aims to build a distributed facilitation resource for the MERSE partnership and its associated ecosystems. After the project period, facilitators are expected to be taken forward and utilised by partner organisations in their respective countries, contributing to learning activities, peer processes and ecosystem development related to rural social entrepreneurship.

In addition, the programme deliberately invests in building a transnational facilitator network. Maintaining relationships between facilitators across countries is seen as a key long term value, supporting continued peer learning, reducing professional isolation and enabling knowledge exchange across rural contexts. This network is further supported through MERSE's emerging digital platform, which facilitators actively test and help shape during the project.

*Voicing  
The rural  
norm*



**MERSE**



## The programme revolves around four core areas:



## Target group

The target group for the programme consists of social entrepreneurs active in rural areas who already engage with groups, communities or collaborative processes as part of their everyday work. Participants are practitioners rather than trainers, and the programme is designed for individuals who are expected to facilitate learning, not to provide expert advice or consultancy. Participants were recruited by MERSE partners in five countries, with at least two facilitators per country. Recruitment approaches varied depending on national context and existing networks, including open calls and direct outreach. All participants share experience of rural social entrepreneurship and the potential to act as facilitators for peers, associations or local networks.

## Programme structure

The Leadership Programme is structured as a blended learning journey combining in-person training, online follow up, practice in real life contexts and peer reflection.

## Core in-person training – Galway, October 2024

The core of the programme was delivered as an intensive in-person training week in Galway in October 2024, facilitated by Social Enterprise Academy International. The programme content is documented in the Developing my Facilitation Skills – Resources and Reflections workbook, which functions as both a learning journal and a practical reference tool.

### *The in-person programme focused on three interconnected components:*

#### 1. Foundations of facilitation and learning methodology

Participants were introduced to key concepts underpinning facilitation for learning, including the facilitation–training spectrum, experiential learning and inclusive facilitation practice. Central to this was the application of Kolb’s Learning Cycle, supporting participants to design and facilitate sessions that move from experience, through reflection and sense making, to action and experimentation.

#### 2. Developing facilitation skills and reflective practice

The programme placed strong emphasis on practical facilitation skills such as active and empathetic listening, exploratory and reflective questioning, creating psychological safety and working with diverse learning styles. Participants explored how to create a “high safety, high challenge” learning environment and how to gather and respond to feedback from learners. Developing as reflective practitioners was a recurring theme throughout the programme.



### **3. Leadership in rural communities**

One full day focused on leadership development in rural contexts. Participants observed and reflected on a peer learning based leadership programme delivered by the Academy, using it as a live example of how facilitation can support leadership development in communities. This session also provided space for participants to reflect on their own leadership strengths and how these can be applied within projects, enterprises and rural ecosystems.

The final in person day focused on facilitation practice. Participants planned and delivered short peer learning sessions using tools from the programme, received structured peer feedback and reflected on their development as facilitators supporting rural communities.

### **Online follow-up and applied practice**

Following the Galway training, the programme continued through online sessions facilitated by the Social Enterprise Academy. These sessions were designed to support participants in applying their facilitation skills in real life contexts and to provide space for peer reflection and guidance.

During this phase, participants were encouraged to keep facilitation practice simple and closely integrated into their everyday work. Rather than organising large-scale events, facilitators were expected to facilitate at least one short peer-learning session, typically 1–2 hours, within an existing group, association or network where they already had access. This could include colleagues, entrepreneurs, association members or other peers.

The focus of these sessions was not content delivery but facilitating peer-to-peer learning around a topic relevant to the group's needs, for example storytelling for sales, addressing shared challenges or exploring societal needs linked to entrepreneurship. Partners were expected to support facilitators in identifying suitable groups and contexts and, where relevant, assist with practical arrangements.

Workshop notes and discussions during this phase clarified that facilitators were not expected to act as on-demand advisors for local communities. Instead, their role is to create structured spaces for peer learning, supported by partners where appropriate.

### **Learning methodology and tools**

The programme is built around four core methodological principles developed by the Social Enterprise Academy: learning with and from peers, experiential and reflective practice, responsiveness to context and practice, and learning in a safe and supportive environment.

A wide range of facilitation tools are introduced and practiced, including small-group dialogue formats, triads, paired discussions, observation exercises, reflective journals and simple visual or written tools to support collective reflection. The emphasis is on adaptability and choosing tools that fit the group, context and purpose rather than applying a fixed framework.



## Digital platform and co-creation

Facilitators are given access to a dedicated online learning environment hosting programme materials and resources. In parallel, they are actively involved in testing and providing feedback on MERSE's digital platform, [www.RuralSE.eu](http://www.RuralSE.eu), which is being developed as a shared space for learning, reflection and network continuity. They are also given the task to test and evaluate the measurement and communication of social value tool developed within MERSE.

Through this role, facilitators contribute as co-creators, helping to shape a platform that can support facilitation practice, peer exchange and ecosystem development beyond the project period.

## Programme closure and Post-MERSE orientation

The Leadership Programme concludes with a final on site gathering in February 2026. This meeting brings facilitators together to consolidate learning, reflect on facilitation practice since the initial training and online follow up, and strengthen relationships within the facilitator network. The closing meeting also serves as a transition point towards Post-MERSE use. Partners and facilitators reflect jointly on how facilitation capacity will be carried forward, both within partner organisations and through facilitators' independent work in their own social enterprises. In total there will have been six on line sessions and two on site for facilitators network when the MERSE Project is finished.

## Strategic learning and innovation

Throughout the programme, important strategic learning has emerged regarding the introduction of facilitation roles within a complex, transnational rural development project. Questions around expectations, mandate and integration surfaced during implementation. Rather than representing methodological shortcomings, these insights are understood as strategic innovation. The programme has functioned as a live learning environment, generating knowledge about how facilitation capacity, peer leadership and distributed roles can be built sustainably across countries and rural contexts.

