



# Leadership training programme implementation

## Executive synthesis

The MERSE Facilitator Programme was developed to strengthen the capacity of organisations supporting rural social entrepreneurship across the Northern Periphery and Arctic region. The programme aimed not only to introduce facilitation tools but also to support practitioners in developing a deeper understanding of how learning processes, group dynamics and reflective dialogue can support social enterprises and community initiatives. The evaluation indicates that the programme has contributed to increased confidence and strengthened facilitation capacity among participants. Participants report that they feel more secure when planning and leading workshops, supporting group processes and creating learning environments where participants themselves contribute to developing solutions. A key finding is a shift in how participants understand their professional role. Rather than primarily acting as advisors delivering knowledge, many describe a transition towards facilitating dialogue, reflection and collective problem solving. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of social entrepreneurship, where solutions often emerge collaboratively.

The evaluation is based on both structured training feedback and documented facilitation activities carried out by participants across five countries. The material includes reported activities involving approximately 23 organisations and around 270 individuals, based on facilitator documentation from autumn 2025.

## Methodology and data sources

This evaluation builds on a combination of qualitative and semi-structured data collected throughout the MERSE Facilitator Programme. Data has been gathered from Training evaluations (2024–2026). Feedback was collected following the in-person training “Facilitation for Transformation” (October 2024) and follow-up facilitator development sessions, including the final meeting in Galway (February 2026). These evaluations included both rating-based responses and open-ended reflections focusing on learning outcomes, confidence and application. Facilitator feedback and testimonials (October–November 2025)

A structured collection of facilitator reports was conducted during autumn 2025. A total of 12 facilitators contributed documented examples of how they applied facilitation methods in practice. These reports include descriptions of workshops and meetings, objectives, outcomes and reflections on tools, methods and learning. Standardised reporting template All facilitators used a shared template to document their activities, ensuring a consistent structure across countries and contexts. The template captured: date and location of activities, number of participants and organisations, (when applicable), facilitation tools and methods used and participant`s reflections on outcomes, learning and improvement. The evaluation is therefore based on a combination of self-reported reflections and documented facilitation activities.

### **Scope and implementation of facilitation activities**

The collected material shows that facilitation methods have been applied across a range of contexts and countries, including Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland and Ireland. Reported activities include workshops, meetings and facilitated processes related to vocational education and youth engagement, community dialogue and local development, social entrepreneurship awareness and training and organisational and leadership development. Across the submitted facilitator reports, the activities reached approximately 23 organisations and around 270 individuals across reported activities. These figures should be understood as indicative, based on facilitator-reported data, but they nevertheless demonstrate that the programme has already been applied in a broad set of real-life contexts.

### **Findings from facilitator feedback and testimonials**

The facilitator feedback and testimonials confirm and deepen the findings from the training evaluations, showing how the methods have been applied in practice across different contexts. Overall, the material indicates that participants have strengthened both their confidence and their ability to structure and facilitate group processes. Many facilitators describe a shift from a more informal way of leading meetings towards a more intentional and structured facilitation approach. They emphasise that the programme has helped them better understand how to design workshops, guide discussions and create meaningful learning processes.

Participants also highlight the practical usefulness of specific tools and methods. These have been applied in a variety of settings, including education, community dialogue, social enterprise development and organisational processes. Across these contexts, facilitators report increased engagement among participants and more productive discussions. A recurring observation is that facilitation methods contributed to greater clarity and progress in group processes. Participants in facilitated workshops were more actively involved and more likely to articulate ideas, define next steps and move forward in their work. At the same time, the feedback shows that facilitation is a competence that requires continued practice. Several facilitators note that while they have gained new tools and insights, they still need more experience to feel fully confident in different situations.

*“I understand the methods better now, but I still need more practice to feel fully comfortable using them.”*

There are also reflections on practical constraints. Some facilitators describe challenges in applying the methods fully due to time limitations or organisational habits. In environments where traditional meeting formats dominate, introducing more participatory approaches can require both time and adaptation. Despite these challenges, the overall picture is consistent. The programme has not only provided tools but also influenced how participants understand their role. Many describe a shift from providing answers towards supporting processes where participants themselves develop solutions.

*“I don’t feel that I need to have all the answers anymore – my role is to help others find them.”*

Taken together, the facilitator feedback shows that the programme has achieved early practical application across multiple contexts, while also initiating a longer-term learning process where facilitation skills continue to develop over time.

## **Evaluation and reflections**

The MERSE Facilitator Programme combined theoretical input, practical exercises and reflective dialogue. This approach appears to have supported participants in developing both practical facilitation skills and a deeper understanding of how learning processes function in group settings. Participants describe how the programme helped them move beyond individual tools and instead understand how facilitation methods are structured and applied. Several emphasised that this increased their confidence when planning workshops and supporting group processes. The evaluation builds both on training feedback and on documented facilitation activities carried out in real-life settings across the five countries. This strengthens the credibility of the findings, as participants have had the opportunity to test and apply their learning in practice. A recurring theme is the importance of reflection. Participants highlight that the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences, together with others, helped them translate learning into their own professional context. Participants also report increased confidence in applying facilitation skills and describe how they have already begun integrating these methods into their daily work.

## **Cross-cutting analysis**

When analysing the different data sources together, several patterns emerge:

**Shift in professional role** Participants increasingly describe their role as facilitators rather than advisors. This reflects a move from providing answers towards enabling groups to explore solutions collectively.

**Stronger connection between theory and practice** Participants highlights that understanding the underlying logic of facilitation methods helped them apply these methods more effectively.

**Peer learning as a key driver** The programme created opportunities for participants to learn from each other across countries and contexts, which appears to have strengthened both learning outcomes and professional networks.

**Early signs of organisational change** Participants report changes in how meetings and workshops are conducted, with more focus on dialogue, participation and reflection.

Facilitator reports illustrate how these changes are already taking place in practice. Methods from the programme have been applied in a variety of settings, including educational contexts, community processes and organisational development activities.

### **Key learning points for future programmes**

The evaluation highlights several lessons for future facilitator programmes. A balance between theory, reflection and practice is essential. Participants appreciated conceptual frameworks but also emphasised the importance of applying facilitation methods in real-life situations. Peer learning and exchange between practitioners from different regions proved highly valuable and should remain a central component.

Participants also expressed a need for more opportunities to practise facilitation, follow-up sessions after training and stronger links to real-life cases (to be addressed by partners in this project for instance. No one sees this as an opportunity to “sell” and market their new skills on a broader market yet). Understood that this is a pilot and as such, it must have in perspective that more results can be found further down the road in the future.

### **Policy relevance and regional development**

Although the facilitation leadership programme focuses on individual learning, its implications extend beyond the participants themselves. Facilitation skills are particularly relevant in the context of social entrepreneurship in rural contexts, where collaboration between stakeholders and inhabitants is often required. Facilitators can support dialogue between communities, organisations and public actors and help groups navigate complex challenges. The evaluation indicates that facilitation capacity can generate multiplier effects, as trained facilitators apply their skills across multiple organisations and initiatives.

### **Long-term impact potential**

The most significant impacts of the programme are likely to emerge over time. Facilitation capacity is particularly important in rural regions, where collaboration is often necessary to address local challenges. Facilitators can support communities in identifying needs, developing ideas and building partnerships.

The documented activities suggest that facilitation methods are already being applied in diverse contexts, indicating that the programme has begun to generate practical impact.

### **Limitations of the evaluation**

The evaluation is based on a relatively small number of respondents and primarily relies on self-reported data. The figures presented should therefore be understood as indicative rather than exact. In addition, the evaluation is conducted relatively early, meaning that long-term impacts are not yet fully visible.

### **Concluding reflections**

The MERSE Facilitator Programme demonstrates how targeted capacity building can have meaningful effects when focused on practitioners working close to communities and social enterprises. Participants have developed both practical facilitation skills and a deeper understanding of how to support collaborative learning processes. Many also describe a shift in how they see their professional role. The combination of training, reflection and practical application appears to have been effective. The programme has already led to facilitation

activities across multiple countries and contexts, and early indications suggest that these approaches are being integrated into ongoing work. Over time, the programme may contribute to strengthening facilitation capacity within the social entrepreneurship ecosystem and support more collaborative and resilient forms of regional development.