

Network

Peer to peer Methodology

Learning with, from and alongside each other

Peer-to-peer learning is a core methodology behind the RuralSE Network. It is based on a simple but powerful idea: social entrepreneurs learn best when they can reflect together with others who understand similar realities, challenges and ambitions.

Starting and developing a social enterprise is rarely a linear process. It involves uncertainty, local knowledge, values, practical decisions, relationships, funding challenges, community needs and social impact. For this reason, learning cannot only come from experts, manuals or formal training. It must also come from experience, dialogue and shared reflection.

The Peer-to-Peer Methodology creates a structured space where social entrepreneurs can learn from real cases, explore challenges, test ideas, ask better questions and strengthen their own capacity to act.

Why peer-to-peer learning matters

Many people who start social enterprises do so because they see a need in their community and want to create change. They may not begin with a full business plan, a formal organization or a complete understanding of social entrepreneurship. Often, they begin with an idea, a concern, a lived experience, a local challenge or a strong sense that something could be done differently.

This is one of the reasons peer-to-peer learning is so important. Social entrepreneurship is not only learned through theory, courses or expert advice. It is also learned through practice, relationships, trial and error, local knowledge and shared reflection. People learn by hearing how others have started, what they struggled with, what helped them move forward and what they would do differently today.

For new or emerging social entrepreneurs, meeting others can make the process feel less overwhelming. It can help them understand that they are not alone, that uncertainty is normal, and that many social enterprises have grown step by step rather than through a perfect plan from the beginning. For more established organizations, peer learning can open up new perspectives, create opportunities for collaboration and support continued development.

Peer-to-peer learning is especially valuable because it connects experience with action. When social entrepreneurs share real stories, practical choices and concrete dilemmas, learning becomes easier to understand and apply. A conversation with someone who has faced similar challenges can sometimes make an idea clearer, a decision easier or a next step more possible.

This is also why the RuralSE Network is more than a list of organizations. It is intended to be a space where social entrepreneurs can discover each other, learn from different models, exchange experience and build relationships across countries, sectors and thematic areas. The network makes visible the knowledge that already exists in communities, organizations and initiatives — and helps turn that knowledge into shared learning.

Peer-to-peer learning supports people to reflect before they act, understand their own context, ask better questions and explore possible ways forward. It can strengthen confidence, reduce isolation and build a stronger sense of belonging to a wider field of social entrepreneurship.

Why peer-to-peer learning matters:**From isolation to connection**

Peer learning helps social entrepreneurs see that others have faced similar questions, doubts and turning points.

From experience to knowledge

Real stories and practical examples become shared learning that others can understand and adapt.

From ideas to action

Reflective conversations can help people clarify their next step and move forward with greater confidence.

From individual work to collective development

The network helps turn separate initiatives into a wider field of knowledge, collaboration and social innovation.

A methodology rooted in equality

Peer-to-peer learning is built on the idea that every participant has something valuable to bring. Some may have many years of experience. Others may be at the very beginning of their journey. Some may have built an organization from the ground up, while others may be exploring whether their idea could become a social enterprise. In a peer-to-peer learning space, all these experiences matter.

This does not mean that everyone has the same knowledge. It means that everyone is respected as both a learner and a contributor. A person who is new to social entrepreneurship may bring fresh questions, lived experience or deep knowledge of a local community. An established social entrepreneur may bring practical experience, lessons learned and an understanding of what it takes to keep going over time. When these perspectives meet, the learning becomes richer.

Equality is important because social entrepreneurship is shaped by context. What works in one place may not work in another. A solution developed in a small rural village may need to be adapted before it can work in a city. A model developed in one country may need to be changed to fit another welfare system, funding structure or cultural context. Peer-to-peer learning therefore does not ask participants to copy each other. It helps them understand, translate and adapt ideas to their own reality.

This approach also challenges the traditional idea that knowledge only comes from experts. Expert knowledge can be valuable, but it is not the only form of knowledge needed to build a social enterprise. Practice knowledge, lived experience, community knowledge and relational knowledge are also essential. The Action Learning Set approach used in the MERSE work highlights the importance of relevance, tacit knowledge, reflection, social learning and systemic understanding when people work with real challenges.

A network based on equality can therefore become a democratic learning space. It allows people to meet across roles, countries and sectors, not only to present what they do, but to learn from each other. This strengthens the field of social entrepreneurship by recognizing that solutions are often created through cooperation, not isolation.

A methodology rooted in equality:

Everyone contributes

In this methodology, participants are not divided into “experts” and “receivers of help”. Each person is both a learner and a contributor. This creates a more open and democratic learning space, where lived experience, practice knowledge, professional insight and community knowledge are all recognised as valuable.

Context matters

Social entrepreneurship is shaped by place, people, culture, welfare systems, funding structures and local needs. A solution that works in one community may need to be adapted before it works somewhere else. Peer-to-peer learning supports participants in translating ideas into their own reality, rather than copying models directly.

Local ownership

When people are supported to reflect on their own context, they are more likely to develop solutions that feel relevant, realistic and sustainable. This strengthens local ownership and helps social enterprises grow from the needs, resources and relationships that already exist in the community.

Knowledge beyond expertise

Expert knowledge can be useful, but it is not the only kind of knowledge needed to develop social enterprises. Practice knowledge, lived experience, relational knowledge and community knowledge are also essential. Peer-to-peer learning makes space for these forms of knowledge to be shared, valued and developed.

From advice-giving to reflective learning

When someone presents a challenge, it can be tempting to respond quickly with advice: “You should do this,” or “This is what worked for us.” Advice can be useful, but it can also close down reflection too early. It may lead people to copy a solution before they have fully understood their own situation.

Peer-to-peer learning uses a different approach. Instead of rushing towards answers, participants are encouraged to listen carefully, ask open questions and help each other think more clearly. The aim is not to take over someone else’s challenge, but to support them in understanding it better.

This is particularly important for social entrepreneurs, because their challenges are often complex. They may involve people, values, funding, partnerships, power, trust, local politics, service gaps or social needs. In these situations, there is rarely one simple answer. A good question can sometimes be more helpful than a quick solution.

A reflective peer-learning process may explore what is really happening, who is affected, what assumptions are being made, what resources already exist, what relationships need to be strengthened and what small step could be tested next. This kind of dialogue helps social entrepreneurs make decisions that are more grounded in their own values, context and purpose.

The Action Learning Set material used in MERSE places strong emphasis on listening, non-directive approaches and powerful questions. It describes listening as something that requires attention, openness and awareness of our own assumptions. It also presents a non-directive approach where the role of the group is not to instruct or control, but to support self-directed reflection through observation, summary and questions. Powerful questions are described as questions that open up thinking, challenge assumptions and create space for more constructive reflection.

This makes peer-to-peer learning different from ordinary networking. It is not only about meeting people or exchanging contact information. It is about creating conversations that help people understand their work more deeply, learn from others and take meaningful action.

For the RuralSE website, this methodology gives the network a clear purpose: to make social enterprises visible, but also to support learning, reflection and collaboration between them. The goal is that people who visit the network can find inspiration, recognize shared challenges, connect with others and feel more confident in developing their own social enterprise.

From advice-giving to reflective learning:

Listening before responding

Peer-to-peer learning starts with careful listening. Before offering ideas or perspectives, participants try to understand the situation, the context and what is at stake. This helps the conversation move beyond assumptions and quick conclusions.

Better questions, better thinking

The purpose is not to give the fastest answer, but to ask questions that open up new thinking. Good questions can help people see their situation more clearly, challenge assumptions and discover possibilities they had not considered before.

Reflection before action

Social entrepreneurs often work with complex challenges where there is no single correct solution. Reflection helps them understand what matters most, who should be involved, what resources are available and what small next step could be tested.

Advice as an invitation, not an instruction

Experience from others can be valuable, but it should not be presented as a fixed answer. In peer-to-peer learning, advice is offered carefully and respectfully, as something the other person can consider, adapt or reject based on their own context.

Strengthening judgement

The goal is to help social entrepreneurs strengthen their own judgement and decision-making. Instead of becoming dependent on external answers, participants become more

Key principles

Equality

Everyone has something to learn, and everyone has something to contribute. Peer learning works best when participants meet each other as equals, regardless of organizational size, country, role or level of experience.

Reflection before advice

Participants are encouraged to understand their own context, assumptions and needs before giving or receiving advice. Reflection creates better decisions and more sustainable action.

Experience-based learning

The method is grounded in real cases, real challenges and real decisions. Participants work with practical situations from their own organizations, communities and fields of work.

Safe learning space

Peer-to-peer learning requires trust. Participants should be able to explore ideas, uncertainties, failures and challenges without judgement. A safe space allows honest learning and meaningful exchange.

Powerful questions

Good peer learning is driven by open and reflective questions. The aim is not to provide quick answers, but to support deeper thinking, new perspectives and practical next steps.

Collective intelligence

The group knows more together than any single person alone. When different experiences, sectors and countries meet, new insight can emerge.

Local relevance and adaptation

Social entrepreneurship is shaped by local context. Peer-to-peer learning helps participants adapt ideas, tools and models to their own community, rather than copying solutions directly.

How the method works in practice

Peer-to-peer learning can be used in many ways: online meetings, local learning groups, international exchange sessions, workshops, mentoring circles or thematic network gatherings.

A simple peer-to-peer session may follow this structure:

1. Bring a real challenge

One participant or organization presents a real issue, opportunity or question they are currently working with.

2. Listen deeply

The group listens carefully before responding. The aim is to understand the situation, not to interrupt with immediate solutions.

3. Clarify the issue

Participants may ask clarifying questions to better understand the context, people involved, barriers, opportunities and values at stake.

4. Ask reflective questions

The group offers open questions that help the issue holder see the situation from new angles.

5. Explore possible next steps

The issue holder reflects on what has become clearer and what actions may now be possible.

6. Capture learning

The group reflects on what they have learned from the case, both individually and collectively.

Peer-to-peer learning and the RuralSE Network

The RuralSE website is created to support people and organizations who want to start, develop or strengthen social entrepreneurship in their own communities. For some visitors, this may mean learning what social entrepreneurship is for the first time. For others, it may mean finding practical tools, inspiration, examples or connections that can help them take the next step.

The Network section plays an important role in this. It makes social enterprises, community initiatives and mission-driven organizations more visible across countries, regions and thematic areas. By presenting organizations in a structured and accessible way, the network helps visitors discover who is already working with similar challenges, target groups or community needs.

The Peer-to-Peer Methodology provides the learning framework for this network. It explains why the network is not only a list of organizations, but a space for connection,

learning and shared development. When social entrepreneurs become visible to each other, they also become possible learning partners, collaborators and sources of practical knowledge.

Through the RuralSE Network, social entrepreneurs can discover others working with similar challenges, connect across countries and thematic areas, exchange practical experience and learn from different models of social enterprise. They can also explore possible collaboration, strengthen cross-sector partnerships and contribute to a growing international knowledge base.

This means that the network can function as more than a directory. It can become a learning infrastructure for social entrepreneurship — a place where people can find inspiration, recognise shared challenges, build relationships and strengthen their understanding of how social enterprises can create social value in different contexts.

Discovering others

Many social entrepreneurs work with similar questions without knowing about each other. The network makes it easier to discover organizations working in related fields, whether the focus is mental health, inclusion, local development, sustainability, food support, work inclusion, care or other areas of social value.

Learning from real examples

Each organization in the network represents practical experience. By exploring these examples, visitors can see how social enterprises work in different places, how they respond to local needs and how they create social value through different models and approaches.

Building relationships

The network creates opportunities for social entrepreneurs to connect with peers, partners, professional communities, municipalities, researchers and other stakeholders. These relationships can become the starting point for new ideas, projects, study visits, partnerships or informal peer support.

Strengthening the field

When social enterprises become more visible to each other, their experiences can contribute to a stronger and more knowledgeable field. The network helps make practice-based knowledge more accessible and supports the development of social entrepreneurship as a shared international learning community.

Why this matters for social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship often begins when someone sees an unmet need and decides to act. It may start with personal experience, a local challenge, a gap in services, a social injustice or a belief that a community can be strengthened in new ways. Many social entrepreneurs begin with commitment and lived knowledge before they have formal structures, funding or a complete plan.

This makes social entrepreneurship both powerful and demanding. People may need to develop an organization, build partnerships, understand social value, find resources, communicate their mission and create trust — often at the same time. Acting alone can be difficult, especially when the path forward is unclear.

Peer-to-peer learning helps turn individual experience into shared knowledge. It allows social entrepreneurs to hear how others have started, what they have struggled with, what helped them move forward and what they learned along the way. This can make the process feel more realistic, less isolating and more possible.

This is valuable for both rural and urban social entrepreneurs. Rural contexts may face challenges related to distance, small populations, limited services, fewer formal support structures or the need to mobilize local resources. Urban contexts may face other challenges related to complexity, fragmentation, inequality, competition or scale. Across these differences, peer learning creates bridges between people, places and practices.

By connecting social entrepreneurs across contexts, the RuralSE Network helps people see that their challenges are often part of wider patterns. It also makes it possible to learn from solutions that have been tested elsewhere, while still adapting them to local realities.

From isolated experience to shared knowledge

Many people learn by trying, adjusting and trying again. Peer-to-peer learning helps make this experience visible to others. What one organization has learned through practice may become valuable knowledge for someone else at an earlier stage.

From uncertainty to confidence

Starting or developing a social enterprise can feel uncertain. Meeting others who have faced similar questions can help people feel less alone and more confident in their own direction.

From local challenges to wider learning

Although social challenges are often local, learning can be shared across places. A solution from one community may inspire new thinking in another, even when it needs to be adapted.

From separate initiatives to a stronger movement

When social entrepreneurs connect, they become part of something larger than their own organization. Peer learning helps build a wider movement of people and initiatives working for inclusion, sustainability and social change.

What participants can gain

Taking part in peer-to-peer learning can support social entrepreneurs at different stages. For someone at the beginning, it can provide inspiration, language, examples and confidence. For a more established organization, it can offer new perspectives, collaboration opportunities and space for reflection on further development.

Participants may strengthen their confidence in their own role and direction. They may become clearer about their values, their social mission and the type of impact they want to create. They may also develop a stronger ability to reflect on challenges before acting, which can lead to more thoughtful and sustainable decisions.

Peer-to-peer learning also supports practical problem-solving. By exploring real cases and experiences, participants can understand different enterprise models, ways of working, partnership strategies and approaches to social value. They can learn not only from success stories, but also from uncertainty, mistakes and adaptations.

Another important gain is belonging. Social entrepreneurship can sometimes feel like lonely work, particularly for people who are building something new or working outside established systems. Being connected to peers can create a sense of being part of a wider field and a wider movement for social change.

Confidence and direction

Participants can become more confident in their own role, values and next steps. Hearing from others can make the journey of social entrepreneurship feel more understandable and achievable.

Practical insight

Peer learning gives access to real examples of how social enterprises develop services, build partnerships, respond to community needs and create social value.

Stronger reflection

Participants can strengthen their ability to pause, ask better questions and understand their own context before making decisions or taking action.

Wider perspectives

Learning across countries, sectors and thematic areas can help participants see their own work in new ways and discover possibilities they may not have considered before.

Collaboration opportunities

The network can make it easier to find potential partners, peers, mentors, project collaborators and organizations with shared interests or complementary experience.

Sense of belonging

Being part of a peer network can reduce isolation and strengthen the feeling of belonging to a wider movement of social entrepreneurs working for change.

A culture of shared learning

The RuralSE Network invites social entrepreneurs to take part in a culture of shared learning. This means being willing to both share knowledge and receive knowledge. It

means recognizing that everyone has something to contribute, and that valuable learning often comes from practice, reflection and honest dialogue.

Social innovation does not grow only from individual ideas. It also grows through relationships, trust, curiosity, questions and collaboration. When people meet across organizations, countries and sectors, they can challenge each other's thinking, share practical experiences and create new possibilities together.

Peer-to-peer learning is therefore not an additional activity besides the network. It is one of the reasons the network exists. The network creates visibility, but the methodology gives that visibility a deeper purpose: to support connection, reflection, collaboration and shared development.

A culture of shared learning also helps strengthen the field of social entrepreneurship. When experiences are shared, they do not remain inside one organization only. They can become part of a wider knowledge base that supports others, inspires new initiatives and contributes to more informed practice.

By connecting social entrepreneurs across communities, countries and sectors, RuralSE aims to support a stronger, more visible and more knowledgeable field of social entrepreneurship.

Giving and receiving knowledge

A strong learning network depends on reciprocity. Participants are invited to share their own experiences while also being open to learning from others.

Making practice visible

Much of the knowledge in social entrepreneurship is developed through everyday work. The network helps make this practice knowledge more visible and available to others.

Building trust across differences

The network brings together organizations from different countries, communities and fields of work. Peer-to-peer learning provides a framework for meeting across these differences with openness, respect and curiosity.

Supporting long-term development

Social enterprises need more than inspiration. They need relationships, reflection, learning and support over time. A culture of shared learning can help organizations continue developing.

Strengthening social entrepreneurship as a field

When social entrepreneurs learn from each other, the whole field becomes stronger. Knowledge is no longer held only by individual organizations rather becomes part of a shared international learning community.