

TRAINING FOR RURAL ENTREPRENEURS: STRATEGY, CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND DIGITALISATION

April 2024

**re:GREEN - Green and Digital Skills for Rural
Entrepreneurs**

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1. Introduction

Why was this training package developed?

Learning opportunities are a composite part of multiple transitions going on in the EU: Digital Transition, Green Transition, Sustainability Transition, and other transformations currently taking place across Europe. Accordingly, Rural Entrepreneurs (RE) are adult lifelong learners with greater needs and fewer opportunities (Fernandes & Kerneis, 2020). They are the target group under the Erasmus+ KA220 adult education Green and Digital Skills for Rural Entrepreneurs (re:GREEN) project (November 2022 - May 2024), which is co-funded by the Erasmus+ program.

This training package has been developed as a response towards the needs of (prospective) rural entrepreneurs in Germany, Lithuania, and Sweden. Prior to the creation of the training programme, a preparation phase has been conducted in order to better identify the needs, interests and challenges of the mentioned group.

The report on the results of this preparation phase – which you can consult [here](#) – demonstrated a need to bolster the competences of (prospective) rural entrepreneurs in the fields of business management, as well as green and digital skills. For this reason, 6 training modules have been developed by the re:GREEN partners: two of them focusing on business strategy, two focusing on circular economy practices, and two dedicated to applying digital skills in communications and marketing.

What is this training program for?

The focus on an introduction to the circular economy and to circular economy business models makes the material of unique importance to the European context under the European Green Deal (2019). The relevance of the material is further complemented by the introduction of needed skills for entrepreneurs in rural areas, namely business strategies and digital marketing skills. The combination of these themes makes up for a cohesive training that holds a strong potential to ensure that businesses located beyond the big cities will also be integrated into the circular and digital transition, regardless of their geographical location.

Who is the re:GREEN training program for?

The training program has been designed targeting rural entrepreneurs and prospective rural entrepreneurs (i.e., those who would like to become rural entrepreneurs) as learners. It caters to a broad range of learners, namely those who can self-regulate and engage in self-paced learning, as well as those who need facilitation and/or instruction to follow the program.

The re:GREEN Training Package has been developed for more experienced learners to be able to follow the re:GREEN Training Program by themselves; meanwhile less experienced learners should be aided by training facilitators.

Thus, the modules can be used for autonomous learning or implemented by adult education specialists, such as coaches, educators, trainers, facilitators, and other adult education experts who work with rural entrepreneurs.

Digital Skills

New and advanced digital skills were highlighted in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions as an inseparable part of the “[L]ong-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040” (European Commission, 2021).

Entrepreneurial Skills

The re:GREEN project responds to further calls by the EU institutions and communities to provide opportunities to develop Entrepreneurial Skills as part of the “key actions towards a digital, green and resilient Europe” (Lilischkis et al., 2021). Moreover, the “development of the entrepreneurial capacity of European citizens and organisations has been one of the key policy objectives for the EU and Member States for many years and is one of the eight Key Competences for Lifelong learning” (European Commission, n.d. a). Identifying opportunities for RE business strategy, creativity, critical thinking, taking initiative in definition and search of strategic partners and customer base are several entrepreneurial competence skills which the re:GREEN Training Program helps advance. Finally, proactively “learning to learn” is a transversal skill set you will practice if you embark on the re:GREEN journey through its learning materials.

Green Skills

Though rural entrepreneurship is often associated with either agricultural or tourism activities, the complex realities of global and local business and entrepreneurship ecosystems signals the opposite. Recently, the European Commission (2024) highlighted the importance of retail SMEs operating in and for the rural communities. It is just one example of the complex realities of rural areas that REs have to operate their businesses in. Thus, the re:GREEN Training Package is aimed at equipping current and prospective REs with green skills necessary to improve their business venturing experience and effectively navigate the ongoing Green and Sustainability Transitions.

Furthermore, the re:GREEN training package operates within a political framework which is characterised by the emergence of the European Green Deal (2019), under which the most recent Circular Economy Action Plan of 2020 represents a key part. The Action Plan announces measures to quicken the transition towards a circular economy, which is “in line with EU’s 2050 climate neutrality goal under the Green Deal” ([European Commission, n.d. b](#)).

In this context, the emphasis on the Circular Economy and resource efficient business models is highlighted. Indeed, reducing the impact of the private sector on people and the environment is a goal towards which the EU has been striving to achieve. Among others, this is evidenced by the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) which entered into force in January 2023 bringing more modern and stronger “rules concerning the social and environmental information that companies have to report” ([European Commission, n.d. c](#)). As a consequence, enterprises that embrace more circular and resource efficient business models are not only acting towards more sustainable practices, but they are also setting the basis for reducing their operational as well as transition costs, which are rapidly increasing in the current political framework in the EU.

2. Backstage

This is all thanks to re:GREEN

"Green and Digital Skills for Rural Entrepreneurs" (re:GREEN) is a small-scale partnership project co-funded by the Erasmus Plus programme of the European Union. It gathers partners from Germany (Tomorrow Together), Sweden (Swideas) and Lithuania (LiSVA).

The project aims to support prospective and current rural entrepreneurs in strengthening their businesses and ideas by transferring knowledge related to circular and resource efficient business models as well as to digitalization. Hence, re:GREEN aims to equip rural entrepreneurs with knowledge and skills to create and adapt sustainable, circular economy (CE) based business practices paving the way to a greener future.

The project was conducted between November 2022 and April 2024. Initial stages included:

1. Preliminary Preparation for the training content: this included the conduction of surveys to assess and identify practices that enhance the appeal and attractiveness of rural products and services, the investigation of inspiring business models, and the conduction of focus groups/interviews to identify needs (digital skills) in rural areas. Through this, the partnership identified 6 **business models** in the field of agribusiness, green practices and/or traditional knowledge and practices that act as inspiring case studies. A visual representation that includes the information found regarding the role of entrepreneurship in rural areas was also developed.
2. Structure of the training: in this stage, the partners developed the methodology, design and structure of the training and the training modules, considering the future digital format of the modules and making use of non-formal education online methods.
3. Brainstorming for collaborative creation and selection of the training topics: During this activity, the partners met in Vilnius, Lithuania, to build the final selection of creative and functional training topics through different in-person sessions.

Based on the experience and information collected in these stages, as well as in preliminary research and in their cumulative experience, the partners were able to develop 6 training modules. The modules are accompanied by the case studies which are composed by the **6 business models** previously collected and by a **virtual tour video of a community cafe in Lithuania**. The video was developed as a tool to showcase a real-life example of a sustainable social enterprise and inspire entrepreneurs to take a more sustainable approach in their activities. Regardless of the inspirational video protagonists operating their business in a city the example of Circular Economy practices, evolving triple impact business model and the community-focused business strategies, are featured as detailed learning video accompanied by thought-provoking exercises throughout the re:GREEN Training Programme.

The 6 modules are presented in this training package, which also elaborates on how they can be used in training scenarios.

Developers of the Training Program

Three organisations from Germany (Tomorrow Together e.V.), Lithuania (Lithuanian Social Business Association - LiSVA) and Sweden (SwIdeas AB) came together to develop re:GREEN and are also the authors of the modules within this training package:

Lithuanian Social Business Association (LiSVA in Lithuanian) is a national umbrella organisation uniting social enterprises and other social economy organisations in Lithuania. It was established in 2018 to create an environment favourable for, increase the awareness of social business and promote the implementation of international best practices. This is pursued through advocacy, capacity building and ecosystem development activities. LiSVA supports social enterprises and is a key player in shaping the social entrepreneurship ecosystem in Lithuania.

Tomorrow Together e.V. (TT) is a non-governmental organisation based in Bonn, Germany. The organisation is formed by a group of people of diverse backgrounds and expertise who work together to make a positive impact on society. Their core activities include -but not limited to- bring about social change through non-formal education, training, youth exchanges, sport and developing their own projects.

SwIdeas AB is a Swedish enterprise with a social mission that focuses on environmental and social sustainability. SwIdeas reworks the dynamics by offering needs-based, innovative and creative solutions in education and research. Furthermore, SwIdeas has large experience in the creation of learning materials, project development and project management, especially within the Erasmus Plus Programme. Besides, SwIdeas has previously worked within the field of Circular Economy and Entrepreneurship, and their expertise in the mentioned areas has been very relevant for re:GREEN.

3. How to navigate this training program package

The content of the training package can be used in its entirety or adapted to the needs of specific learning groups. The training is framed for an online setting but can also be adapted to in-person or hybrid contexts.

The best way to navigate the training package is to do so from the needs of the rural entrepreneurs. Each of the training package's three sections presented below is independent from the other two. Hence, one can choose to conduct all three sections, or to deliver only one or two of them. Activities can be used individually or combined among themselves to provide a comprehensive learning opportunity for rural entrepreneurs and those interested in the circular economy throughout Europe.

To decide which of the sections or activities to deliver, it is recommended to first conduct a needs analysis with the rural entrepreneurs and learners who will be trained. This will allow the identification of the skills that a specific group of learners needs the most.

After conducting the needs analysis, a decision must be taken to choose the modules and activities that better fit the learners' needs and interests.

The training package contains six modules divided in three sections, each of them containing two modules, as follows:

BLOCK 1. ENTREPRENEURIAL BUSINESS STRATEGY

- Module 1. Rural Entrepreneurship Business Strategy and Operations.
- Module 2. Strategic Partnerships and Clients.

BLOCK 2. CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRACTICES FOR RURAL BUSINESSES

- Module 3. Circular Economy (CE) practices & Circular business models.
- Module 4. Step-by-step: rethink your business model & incorporate CE practices.

BLOCK 3. DIGITALISATION OF RURAL BUSINESSES AND DIGITAL SKILLS

- Module 5. Sustainable Digital Marketing
- Module 6. External Digital Communication and Greenwashing.

These modules are supported by additional content. For instance, Module 2 is supported by a collection of [funding opportunities](#) in the partner countries, and Module 3 is supported by a [video tour of a community café in Lithuania](#), as well as by a collection of [Business Models](#).

Bear in mind that, although the sections are independent, the modules within each section are correlated. For this reason, it is highly recommended to conduct both modules from the chosen blocks/sections.

The instructions for the delivery of each module can be found within the next pages.

4. How to use digital tools through the training

Following the needs identified in the first stages of the re:GREEN project, the Training Package focuses on the development of digital skills and competences in connection with key strategic business areas. The goal is to improve the availability of learning opportunities that promote the strengthening of the ability of REs to scale up through targeted digital strategy and outreach. In particular, this is emphasised in the training process that goes through:

- Business analysis and identification of strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities.
- Dematerialisation of business models, which oftentimes incorporates the idea of resorting to software rather than hardware, or digitalisation rather than a more resource intensive production.
- Sustainable digital marketing and Greenwashing, which are essential aspects of diversifying, broadening, and reaching the right audience for products.

Furthermore, the re:GREEN Training Package incorporates the development of digital skills and competences through an organic manner. It does so by promoting digital education and resorting to a series of digital tools that both improve the learning experience through a non-formal educational approach and requires that the learner utilises innovative digital tools in an engaging manner. This furthers not only the learner's educational experience, but also improves their ability to communicate and engage in online settings.

Besides this, Module 6 includes an activity where learners can use a digital editing tool (Canva) to develop posts and visual aids for their marketing campaigns. The platform Canva is a user-friendly and simple online editing tool that supports different enterprises to build their marketing campaigns and communicate with customers. Through the re:GREEN material, learners will be introduced to [videos](#) provided by Canva through which they will be able to improve their digital editing skills, which are essential to build a successful and attractive digital marketing strategy.

It is important to note that the full re:GREEN Training experience is highly useful for considerations regarding digital marketing strategies and to guide learners through the identification of digital skills to be improved in specific tools and platforms. That is because through the first modules, learners will identify their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their circular attributes, which can all be used to improve their marketing strategy and their outreach. Finally, on the last Block, learners will discover more about what to consider for their digital marketing strategies while working on visually attractive posts to kick-start their digital initiatives.

Examples of the digital tools utilised in the re:GREEN Training Programme as described in the re:GREEN Training Package are included and the skills they help develop are detailed in the following table.

During the piloting (testing) stage of the re:GREEN Training Package, learners had a chance to learn first-hand how to utilise each of these tools.

Table 1. re:GREEN Training Programme digital tools and skills.

Digital Tool (linked)	Purpose	Digital Skills ¹
Mentimeter	Participant engagement	Critical and Problem-solving skills; reflexivity and empathy.
Google Meet, Teams & Zoom	Online meetings	Communication skills: video conferencing.
Canva & Social Media	Design and outreach through audio and visual mediums	Communication skills: email etiquette, social media communication, and video conferencing.
Miro	Collaborative learning	
Canva whiteboard	Collaborative learning	
Google Classroom	e-learning & b-learning	
Canvanizer.com	Digital business model canvas for venturing	Data literacy: ability to understand, interpret, and use data.
All of the above	Constant perfection of Basic digital skills & Software literacy	Basic digital skills & Software literacy: using a computer, browsing the internet, using email, and managing online accounts; word processing, spreadsheets, and presentation software.

To learn more about each of them, visit their website!

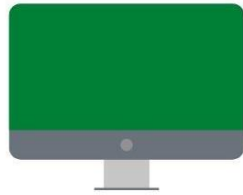
¹ https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/deap-recommendation-provision-digital-skills-180423-1_en.pdf

5. Training Content

The re:GREEN Training Package is a collection of three blocks containing two modules each. Respective blocks focus on 1. *Business Strategy, Clients & Partnerships*, 2. *Circular Economy Practices for Rural Businesses*, and 3. *Practising Digital Communication & Marketing for Sustainability*. Throughout all blocks, learners will be introduced to key entrepreneurial, strategic, green, and digital skills while constantly working with digital interactive tools. The result is a comprehensive learning opportunity that places the learner at the centre of the learning process through a non-formal educational approach. This transfers not only the skills promoted throughout the content, but also strengthens digital skills through a passive process which is promoted by the training's methodology.

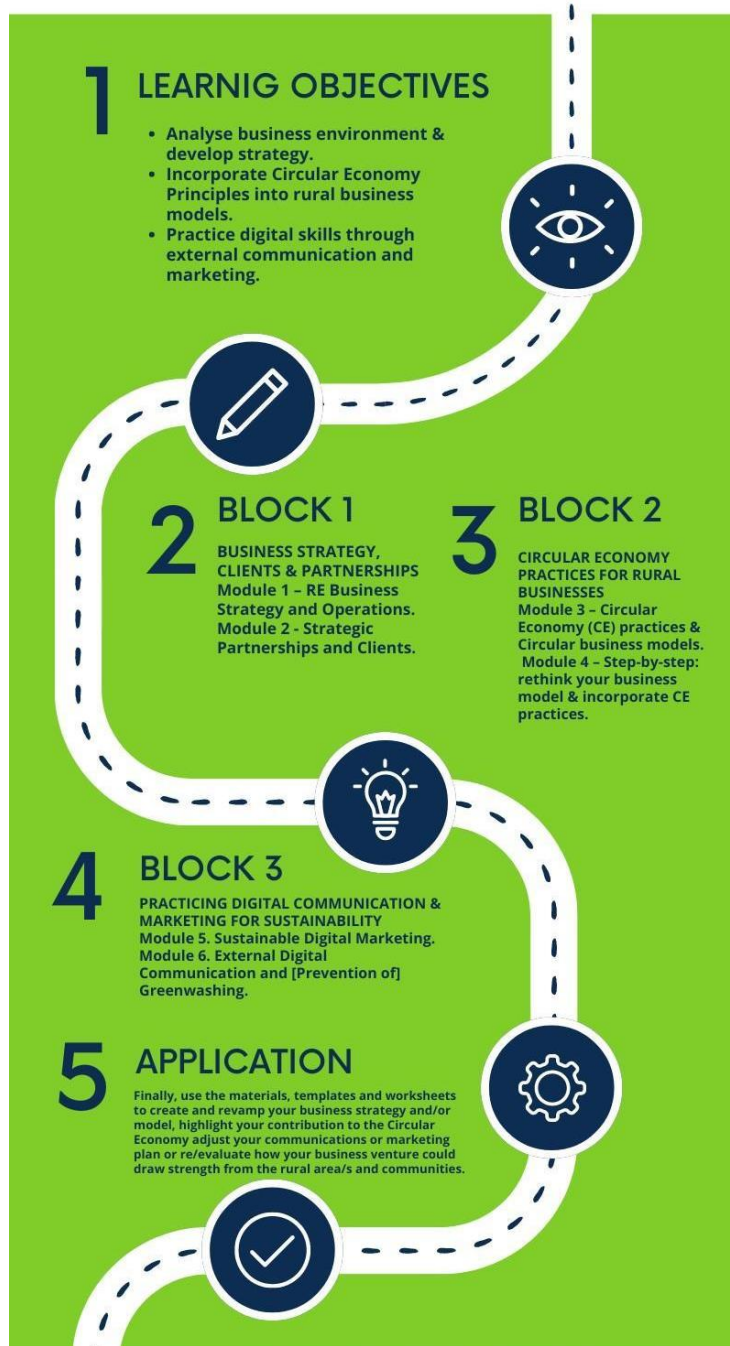
The Training Package therefore takes learners through a road where they will first learn general business strategies skills, setting the base for entrepreneurs to define a strong or improved business plan and strategy which are essential for success. This is followed by green skills within circularity and the circular economy applied to business models. The goal here is to introduce circular principles, and then to guide learners through activities that will help them identify aspects of their businesses that can be improved in terms of circularity. As a result, it is expected that learners will comprehend how to take their businesses to the next level in terms of reducing their impact on the environment and maximising opportunities to reduce waste and optimise production. Finally, they will reach the point of focusing on improving their digital outreach, touching upon essential skills in today's environment, such as sustainable digital marketing and how to best communicate with customers online. All modules include templates for action plans which not only lead to self-reflection, but also provide opportunities for the learner to think of practical ways to continue integrating what they learned into their businesses.

The following page contains an illustration which provides a visualisation of the re:GREEN Training Program's Learning Path. It is of use for both self-paced and self-regulated learners, as well as for the instructors or facilitators who use the re:GREEN Training Package in their endeavour of reskilling or upskilling where current or prospective Rural Entrepreneurs are learners.



LEARNING PATH

re:GREEN



N.B. The training program has been designed targeting current and prospective rural entrepreneurs as learners. Program applies to self-regulated and self-paced learning, as well as facilitated and/or instruction-based learning.

BLOCK 1 – BUSINESS STRATEGY, CLIENTS & PARTNERSHIPS

Module 1 – Business Strategy and Operations

This module has a full duration of 3 hours. Topic of the module: conceptual and digital tools for (i) performing macro, meso and micro situation analysis of a rural entrepreneurial venture business; (ii) setting the strategic direction; (iii) drawing up a canvas of their business model.

After completing this module, the learners will be able to:

- Develop strategy and plan operations for rural enterprises integrating CE practices and applying digital skills.
- Apply strategic analysis and planning tools SWOT and PESTEL separately or together, as the need may be.
- Use sustainable business model canvas for connecting business strategy with business operations.

Module 2 – Strategic Partnerships & Clients

This module has a full duration of 3 hours. Topic of the module: propelling business strategy and business model through the development of strategic partnerships and customer segmentation; how to meet your customer's needs and leverage strategic partnerships.

After completing this module, the learners will be able to:

- Identify clients' needs and detect possible ways of meeting those needs through client segmentation. Develop a "client persona" profile.
- Make their venture-specific strategic partner map. Develop a "strategic partner" profile.

BLOCK 2 – CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRACTICES FOR RURAL BUSINESSES

Module 3 – Circular Economy (CE) Practices & Circular Business Models

This module has a full duration of 3-3,5 hours and provides an introduction to the circular economy practices, also known as the "9Rs", and to how these are connected to Circular Business Models. It provides two case studies which are inspirational for the incorporation of circular approaches in rural businesses and provides resources for learners to see how circular practices can be easily integrated into their businesses.

After completing this module, the learners will be able to:

- Identify diverse circular economy practices that are relevant to rural businesses.
- Recognize different circular business models that enhance the environmental footprint of rural businesses.
- Explain how to apply diverse circular economy practices that reduce the negative impact of rural businesses on the environment and boost positive impact.

Module 4 – Step-by-step for Rethinking Business Model & Incorporating CE Practices.

This module first includes a quick activity to review the information from Module 3. This is followed by a list of green, circular, and simple practices that rural businesses can incorporate into their business models and operations to improve their environmental impact in little and easy steps. The module provides an opportunity for learners to assess their own business models

and evaluate how circular they are, reflecting upon each of their business areas and considering possible solutions.

After completing this module, the learners will be able to:

- Examine ways to incorporate circular economy practices to their rural business(es).
- Implement a strategy to make their business model(s) more circular and greener.

BLOCK 3 – PRACTISING DIGITAL COMMUNICATION & MARKETING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Module 5 – Sustainable Digital Marketing

Through this module the overview of diverse sustainable digital marketing platforms that are relevant to rural businesses and require understanding their unique challenges are provided. Assessment of sustainable digital tools in reaching target customers efficiently through case studies and practical exercises can be set as examples of sustainable digital practices. Tailor made content promoting rural products, emphasising business aims and community impact, strategies for engaging with customers and addressing inquiries across platforms can be also covered.

After completing this module, the learners will be able to...

- Recognise diverse digital marketing platforms that are relevant to rural businesses.
- Identify sustainability of using digital marketing tools to reach the customers.
- Promote rural products & services on diverse platforms.
- Communicate about rural business' aim and impact.

Module 6 – External Digital Communication and Greenwashing

Understanding of fundamental concepts in digital communication and audience mapping, recognizing components of compelling storytelling within digital contexts, crafting a basic action plan for establishing a digital communication strategy, and identifying instances of greenwashing communication tactics are the main objectives of this module. Practical exercises and case studies to develop practical skills in navigating digital landscapes ethically and effectively, enabling to communicate with impact while discerning deceptive practices in sustainability communication to recognize and avoid green washing.

By the end of this activity, learners will be able to:

- Recognize elements of effective storytelling in digital communication
- Undertake audience mapping for digital communication.
- Outline a simple action plan for setting a digital communication scheme.
- Recognize a case of “Greenwashing” communication strategy.

Note: Prior to delving into the content of Block 3, it is recommended that learners take some time to go through these [videos](#) to better understand how to utilise Canva for to boost their digital outreach. Learners are also encouraged to test their skills by trying out possible designs and checking different templates available on the platform.

6. Final notes

This Training Package was developed with the goal of contributing to the availability of high-quality learning opportunities for adults within the green and digital transitions. It is a unique opportunity for learners to develop their digital skills in an organic manner while improving their skills within circular aspects as well as their business strategy and entrepreneurship competences. The training further includes activities that emphasise rural businesses, thus being suited to entrepreneurs located outside of urban areas. It therefore offers current and prospective entrepreneurs a chance to harness their scalability potential through the incorporation of more strategic, digital, and circular capabilities.

That said, the re:GREEN Consortium invites you to make this Training Package your own! You are free to use the resources in the best way that fits your learning needs and interests, those of your classroom and learners, or the goals of your business support organisation. You can mix and match, use activities individually, or go through the whole learning experience. It was all made for you!

In case of doubts, or if you would like to connect with the re:GREEN Consortium who developed the content, do not hesitate to contact one of the partners.

LiSVA: info@lisva.org

Swideas: info@swideas.se

TomorrowTogether: info@ttogether.org

Accessing the “reGREEN Training Package”

You may find the full re:GREEN Training Package here: <https://lisva.org/regreen/> For your convenience it has been divided into two documents: lead document (the one you are reading now) and full set of instructions and materials.

Make sure to scroll down until you find the text and direction in English.

PROJEKTO REZULTATAI / PROJECT RESULTS



Mokymų programos rengimo ataskaita /
Report on preparation of training program



re:GREEN mokymų apibūdinimas /
re:GREEN training package presentation



re:GREEN mokymų medžiaga /
re:GREEN training modules

Happy Learning!

Additional & Supporting Materials

Report on the Preliminary Preparation for the Training Content:
https://www.swideas.se/s/reGREEN_A1_Preparation-for-the-training-content-iz-final.pdf

[Video of a Community Café in Lithuania](#) “Miesto laboratorija” is meant to be shown as best practice “*This video will be used as a tool for the training modules to showcase a real-life example of a sustainable social enterprise and inspire entrepreneurs to take a more sustainable approach in their activities.*”

The [re:GREEN Business Models Collection](#) is to be used, first, as a basis for assessing learners' own business models and, second, to promote CE and resource efficient business models among Rural Entrepreneurs.

Material on [funding opportunities for Rural Entrepreneurs](#) in Germany, Lithuania and Sweden is additional resource for REs.

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