

Consultation on the Bioeconomy Action Plan

SUBMISSION OF SECAD PARTNERSHIP CLG

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As a local development company, SECAD works with a range of different clients and stakeholders operating in the bioeconomy sector including community and voluntary groups, businesses (including private companies and social enterprises), farmers and the corporate sector. Our answers to the below questions seek to reflect this on-the-ground participation in the continuing efforts to build a vibrant, sustainable bioeconomy in the south, east and west Cork regions.

9. What key issues should the Communities Pillar deal with?

The key issues dealt with under the Communities Pillar should include:

- developing knowledge;
- building and supporting networks;
- investment in training, infrastructure and operations.

10. Are local and regional policies ensuring the consideration of bioeconomy opportunities are in scope, and are coordinated approaches on such services in place at regional assembly and local authority level?

Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Southern Region, prepared by the Southern Regional Assembly, sets out a strong approach to the bioeconomy, stating its objective to “facilitate the development of the rural economy through supporting a sustainable and economically efficient agricultural and food sector, together with the bioeconomy” (The Southern Regional Assembly, 2020). The Cork County Development Plan 2022-2028 also recognises the need to diversify the rural economy and identifies the bioeconomy sector as “offering particular opportunities” to create jobs and build resilience (Cork County Council, 2022).

Local, community led networks are already being established, such as the [West Cork Doughnut Economy Network](#) which is part of the international Doughnut Economy Action Lab (DEAL); and [Cycle Sense Skibbereen](#) which is a Social Enterprise and a member of the Circular Economy Academy.

However, clear guidelines and mechanisms for networks and training are required to action these various plans and strategies.

For collaboration and cross-sectoral frameworks to succeed, there needs to be a paid resource in place to co-ordinate this. Stakeholder engagement and network facilitation is critical to ensuring momentum is maintained. New, progressive methods for stakeholder engagement range from dedicated bioeconomy councils (Devaney, Henchion and Regan, 2017) to round table discussions (Lewandowski, 2015).

Two Nordic examples of successful bioeconomy networks are: 1) GreenLab, Denmark a bio/circular economy cluster comprised of businesses managing renewable resources for food, energy and bioproducts, who form the basic common infrastructure and 2) The Iceland Ocean Cluster, where collaboration between companies in the cluster is seen as the main reason for success in improved use of the whole value chain for fish. Both clusters focus on dialogue and collaboration between all levels by involving public authorities, nearby universities and local communities. These cases show the importance of the regional and local levels in creating new institutional structures for cooperation between firms and public authorities that pave the way for successful bioeconomy networks. Such clusters allow for a reduction in waste and the replacement of fossil fuels, while also creating significant amounts of local jobs and reducing climate emissions (Refsgaard *et al.*, 2021). The Bioeconomy Action Plan can learn from these Nordic experiences by ensuring that national, regional and local policy instruments both encourage effective institutional structures and ensure that the economic benefits of the bioeconomy are shared fairly.

The planning, feasibility, establishment and on-going operations of community-led projects need to be supported as these costs are currently hugely prohibitive. Whilst there may be funding available for bioeconomy projects under initiatives such as LEADER, these programmes often fail to consider the long term operational or running costs and the support that is necessary to ensure the viability of a project in during its start-up phase. This lack of

funding coherence reflects a Europe-wide issue that has led the International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics to stress the importance of “a more coherent, integrated and strategic policy approach” to stimulate the bioeconomy in Europe (McCormick and Kautto, 2013). It is hoped that the Bioeconomy Action Plan will provide community-led projects with a clear roadmap to financial viability.

There is also an opportunity in Ireland to work with the highly respected Local Development Sector, which includes some of the most sophisticated and effective social economy platforms in Europe, to animate and deliver the development, capacity building and networking opportunities that should be delivered in the roll-out of the bio-economy supports for business and communities across the Island of Ireland.

15. Can the regional skills and regional enterprise approaches better support bioeconomy development?

Regional and local education around the bioeconomy is a key element that must be addressed by the Bioeconomy Action Plan, particularly in relation to communities. There exists great potential for rural communities to participate in the bioeconomy, but there is currently little guidance, communication or education around the concept, and there are no co-ordinated services or supports coming from the regional or local authority levels at this time. This has resulted in relatively few people within these communities being knowledgeable or educated in the sector.

Studies have highlighted findings that, in recent years, university courses on the bioeconomy have proliferated but that there is a need for considerably more practical bioeconomy education approaches, especially vocational ones, that support the development of relevant skills across a variety of economic sectors (Ciriminna *et al.*, 2022; Paris *et al.*, 2023). Any future regional skills and education approaches should take this into account, whilst also striving to be innovative, interdisciplinary, holistic and open to advancements.

One suggested solution to the challenge of ensuring the participation of under-represented rural students relies on informal STEM education. Informal STEM learning includes museums, libraries, nature centers and community-based organizations, which provide learning opportunities for a future workforce (Hakovirta and Lucia, 2019).

The establishment of local and regional support networks under the Bioeconomy Action Plan would also be a key step in promoting both knowledge sharing and the building of new connections relationships across different sectors. It is also essential to recognise the potential of Local Development Companies around the country to aid in such knowledge sharing and network building.

References

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