

Sustainable Futures Conference

Summary and Key Takeaways

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Table of Contents

Introduction 3

Keynote Presentations 5

Project Pitches, Showcases & Collaborative Sessions 7

Key Takeaways 11

Conclusions 15

Introduction

The **Sustainable Futures Conference**, held on 26 June 2025 in Brussels, brought together around 100 participants, including researchers, innovators, policymakers, industry representatives, and civil society actors, to explore collaborative solutions for Europe's green and just transition.



Co-organised by the Horizon Europe-funded projects **BlueRev**, **Engage4BIO**, **BlueBioClusters**, and **SKILLBILL**, the event highlighted the need for integrated, cross-sectoral approaches across the green and blue bioeconomy, renewable energy, and skills development.

While each project focuses on distinct themes, from blue bioeconomy and biotechnology to renewable energy skills and circular bio-based innovation, their shared experiences showed that complex challenges such as citizen engagement, regional sustainability, and resource security are best tackled through cross-sectoral collaboration and joint action.

The conference demonstrated how Horizon Europe projects can:

- Serve as catalysts for dialogue among businesses, policymakers, academia, and civil society.
- Foster local value creation and co-designed solutions to enhance societal impact and long-term acceptance.
- Empower underrepresented groups to actively participate in the green transition through bottom-up innovation.
- Raise public awareness to shape market development and consumer behaviour, governance, and sustainability pathways.

The event also sparked discussions about the need for multi-project collaborations, greater support for regional training ecosystems, and stronger ties between industry and academia to address skills gaps.



Keynote Presentations

The conference opened with a keynote by **Annalisa Corrado, Member of the European Parliament**, who emphasized the EU's growing commitment to renewable energy. Drawing on her background in engineering and energy policy, she highlighted the importance of cross-sector collaboration to advance Europe's green transition, with a focus on energy security and inclusive economic growth.



Natasa Mantziari from the European Commission's DG Research and Innovation outlined EU priorities in research and innovation, including the bioeconomy, clean energy, climate adaptation, and sustainable mobility. She stressed the need to align research with the green and digital transitions, mentioning upcoming initiatives such as the European Ocean Pact, the Water Resilience Strategy, and the updated Bioeconomy Strategy.



Maris Stulgis from DG Maritime Affairs and Fisheries highlighted the blue bioeconomy and the European Ocean Pact. He noted algae as a leading sector and emphasized the shift toward regenerative practices in ocean-based industries. The Pact envisions coastal communities as drivers of a regenerative blue economy, with initiatives supporting aquaculture, ecosystem restoration, and blue carbon business models—all supported by the revised Bioeconomy Strategy and other EU measures.



Project Pitches, Showcases & Collaborative Sessions

Following the keynote presentations, the spotlight shifted to the four co-organising Horizon Europe projects each working in different ways to support Europe's transition toward a sustainable, circular, and inclusive bioeconomy.

During the Project Pitch session, each initiative introduced its main goals and activities. From supporting blue startups and regional innovation (**BlueBioClusters**), to promoting social innovation, sustainable business and governance models in local blue value chains (**BlueRev**), strengthening regional bioeconomy value chains through training, awareness raising, and multi-stakeholder engagement (**Engage4BIO**), and addressing green skills and education gaps (**SKILLBILL**), the presentations showcased the diversity and complementarity of approaches implemented across Europe.





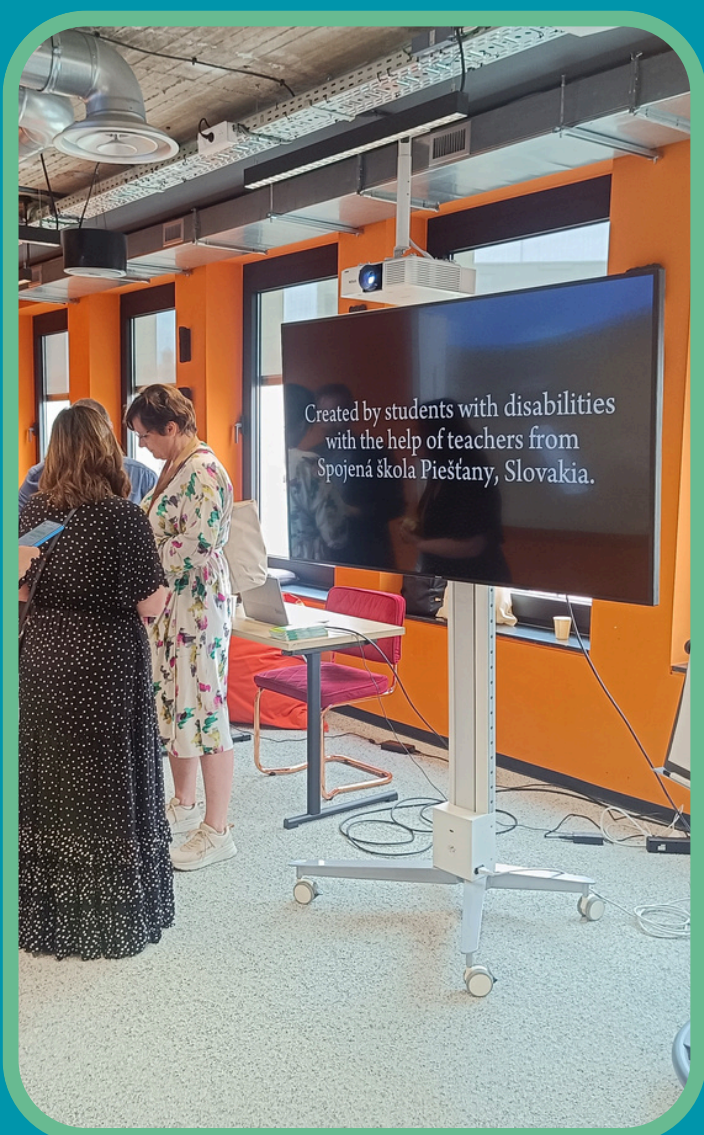
Afterwards participants explored hands-on examples of project outcomes at dedicated project booths. All booths shared tangible results, allowing participants to see how policy, research, and entrepreneurship are converging on the ground.

At the **BlueBioClusters** booth, visitors could taste seaweed-based and other innovative products while also learning about key tools like the BlueBioMatch platform and the Value Chain Tool.

At the **BlueRev** booth, participants learned about the Sicilian living lab, where UNIPA supported the valorisation of an undervalued fish to reduce pressure on more commonly caught species—an example of sustainable fishing and circular innovation.

At the **Engage4Bio** booth, several creative examples of how art can be used to promote the bioeconomy were showcased; these included visual installations, illustrations, and multimedia works designed to make bio-based concepts more accessible and engaging for the public. The use of artistic expression helped bridge the gap between science and society, encouraging reflection on sustainability, circularity, and the role of innovation in everyday life.

At the **SKILLBILL** booth, visitors had the chance to explore project's innovative educational tools, including a live demonstration of its virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) training software. Attendees also had the opportunity to engage directly with representatives from the Specialisation School and VET Programme, gaining insights into their structure; impact and scientific outcomes, such as participant videos from the Green Contest



The day moved into deeper dialogue during the Thematic Panel on stakeholder engagement. **Speakers from each project reflected on how meaningful involvement is essential for creating solutions that are both innovative and widely accepted.** Co-creation, open dialogue, and locally adapted approaches emerged as recurring themes.



The conversations continued in the **World Café session**, where participants joined rotating discussions hosted by each project. Topics included:

- **Innovation & Education for a Circular Bioeconomy (Engage4BIO),**
- **Workforce Development & Skills in Renewable Energy (SKILLBILL),**
- **Sustainable business, governance and social innovation to boost Regional bioeconomy (BlueRev),**
- **Value Chain Innovation & Ecosystem Services (BlueBioClusters).**

These sessions enabled deeper conversations, peer learning, and new connections—particularly around challenges such as upscaling, stakeholder engagement, and aligning innovation with regional needs.



The event wrapped up with a **Closing Panel** titled “Insights for Sustainable Futures”. Project representatives reflected on key takeaways, noting that Horizon Europe projects act as platforms for systemic collaboration. They emphasized the importance of cross-sector dialogue, place-based solutions, and continued engagement to ensure that the momentum built during the event leads to long-term partnerships and impact.

Key Takeaways

Drawing from the experiences shared during the day, the following recommendations are proposed to support the development and design of sustainability-oriented initiatives at both the EU and national levels :



Promote Synergistic and Multi-Project Approaches

- Encourage funding schemes that connect complementary projects across bioeconomy sectors (blue, green, circular) and renewable energy.
- Facilitate cross-project learning and reuse of tools and strategies to improve efficiency and coherence.
- Strengthen cooperation across fragmented value chains by aligning efforts and creating better visibility of interdependencies.
- Support platforms that enable long-term matchmaking, peer learning, and resource sharing even after projects conclude (e.g., BlueBioMatch).



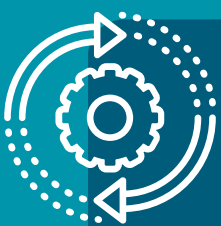
Support Local Capacity-Building

- Provide financial and institutional resources to empower local and regional authorities to adopt innovative governance models.
- Align local actions with EU strategies (e.g., European Green Deal, Farm to Fork, Circular Economy Action Plan) by connecting regional actors to policy dialogues and frameworks.
- Enable municipalities and regional authorities to lead continuity efforts after project lifecycles end by providing them with appropriate governance tools and long-term support.



Strengthen Stakeholder Engagement for Co-Creation

- Provide structured platforms and incentives for multi-stakeholder collaboration, ensuring inclusivity and open dialogue.
- Involve SMEs in co-creative processes to enable the creation of viable, long-term business models.
- Include regional and local governments to support continuity through local governance frameworks.
- Support projects that act as idea catalysts—enabling diverse actors (especially those who don't usually participate) to collaborate and shape solutions that are locally grounded and socially acceptable.
- Tailor engagement formats—e.g. satellite meetings, lighthouse experts, or small group formats—to increase participation and facilitate mutual understanding.
- Use clear, inclusive communication to empower citizens, especially marginalized groups, to influence governance and market trends.



Foster the Role of Art and Culture in the Green Transition

- Recognize and support artistic and cultural interventions as powerful tools to raise awareness, foster inclusion, and inspire creative thinking in the context of sustainability.
- Highlight the value of culture and creativity in shaping place-based solutions and supporting community resilience.



Ensure Long-Term Sustainability of Project Tools

- Require Horizon Europe projects to integrate a business model for the maintenance and evolution of digital tools and resources.
- Identify potential future tool owners (e.g., SMEs, public bodies, NGOs) early in the project to facilitate post-project ownership and scaling.
- Explore mechanisms to incorporate project-developed tools into EU-level platforms (e.g., Commission repositories) to ensure longevity and accessibility.
- Promote early planning for post-project exploitation and ownership—whether public or private—to avoid tool obsolescence.
- Combine tools with success stories and study visits to enhance uptake and relevance across regions.
- Consider unifying tools across projects and value chains to support broader usability and reduce duplication.



Harmonize EU-wide Educational Standards and Procedures

- Streamline cross-border recognition of academic degrees and training certificates to reduce delays in education and mobility.
- Develop common EU frameworks for course content structures to speed up mutual recognition and harmonization.
- Promote the use of AI and digital tools to broaden access to learning, especially for remote students, including:
 1. Subsidies for digital equipment
 2. Incentives for developing AI-enhanced educational materials
 3. Dedicated support for online course design and dissemination
- Reduce administrative burdens on diploma recognition and course alignment to enhance academic and professional mobility across Member States.



Address Skills Gaps through Regional Training Ecosystems

- Support the creation of tailored training paths jointly developed by companies, universities, and local actors that reflect territorial needs.
- Invest in Vocational Education and Training (VET) aligned with both market and regional sustainability goals.
- Offer specialized training for public bodies to help decision-makers understand and apply innovative solutions.
- Encourage universities and research centres to co-create training and digital tools that meet practical needs in local innovation ecosystems.
- Recognize the importance of local governance in supporting skilled individuals to stay or return to their regions.
- Address gender gaps in the renewable energy sector by fostering inclusive environments and targeted communication strategies to attract and retain women in STEM and sustainability fields.

Conclusions

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can amplify the transformative potential of local sustainability initiatives and ensure their alignment with Europe's broader strategic ambitions for a greener, more inclusive, and competitive future.

Many of the challenges addressed are rooted in common objectives, such as resource efficiency, energy autonomy, and resilience. While the thematic focus may vary, the barriers, needs, and potential solutions are often shared.

The conference demonstrated that interdisciplinary cooperation, local ownership, and strategic integration of tools, knowledge, and governance models are essential to address the interconnected challenges of our time. Horizon Europe projects are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for this change—bringing people together, building bridges across sectors, and supporting systemic transformation from the ground up