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D.1.3.2 Roadmap for the upgrade and further development of the INNOVABLUE community

INNOVABLUE project

Innovation network for development of solutions and technologies for sustainable blue economy in the Adrion region

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Strategic roadmap for the upgrade and further development of the INNOVABLUE Community

1. Executive summary

The INNOVABLUE Community is a transnational Blue Economy innovation network in the Adriatic–Ionian (ADRION) region, born from merging the Interreg BlueAIR and InnovaMare innovation communities. Its vision is to create a **blue economy that thrives, where innovation leads the way, in the Adriatic–Ionian region**, and its mission is to foster an **inclusive, innovation-driven, sustainable marine ecosystem** benefiting present and future generations. To achieve this, the community will implement a **strategic action plan** aligning with EU policy (Green Deal, EUSAIR, RIS3) and ADRION Programme priorities. Key outputs will include an enhanced innovation network, regulatory recommendations, a new "ADRION Blue Fund" for marine tech, and structures for technology transfer.

The roadmap outlines concrete objectives (e.g. quadruple-helix collaboration, regulatory sandboxes, funding mechanisms) and a stepwise plan (short-, medium-, long-term actions) to realize them. A robust governance (Technical Secretariat) and a monitoring framework will ensure effective implementation. This strategy builds on results and lessons from INNOVAMARE and BLUEAIR (e.g. living lab pilots, policy workshops) to avoid duplication and maximize impact. Alignment with the EU Green Deal and EUSAIR Blue Economy Pillar is emphasized throughout. The roadmap is supported by a risk mitigation plan and long-term sustainability vision to secure the community's lasting role in Adriatic–Ionian blue innovation.

2. Introduction

The Adriatic–Ionian (ADRION) region holds vast potential for a **sustainable blue economy** – combining maritime sectors, biotechnology, ICT and marine services to drive green growth. The EU's agenda (Green Deal, Blue Economy Strategy) and macro-regional EUSAIR Blue Growth objectives stress **innovation, cross-border collaboration and skills development** in marine sectors. The INNOVABLUE Community (Interreg IPA ADRION project No. 00278) directly addresses these goals. Running from July 2024 to December 2026 with a budget of €1.703 million, the project brings **a new perspective regarding development of a sustainable blue economy** by integrating two existing networks: the BLUEAIR Innovation Community (a macro-regional Smart Specialisation Strategy on Blue Growth) and the cross-border DIH InnovaMare ecosystem. INNOVABLUE's summary notes that merging these communities will **propel marine technologies** and foster stronger collaboration across the ADRION region.

This roadmap document is prepared to upgrade and extend the INNOVABLUE Community beyond the project's lifetime. It draws on INNOVABLUE's structure and results, BLUEAIR's strategy, and EU policy context. Key strategic drivers include the shift from "blue growth" to a **"sustainable blue economy"** under the EU Green Deal, the EUSAIR Pillar 1 emphasis on innovation and aquaculture, and national/regional RIS3 priorities in marine tech. The plan incorporates findings from project workshops and pilots (e.g. regulatory sandbox design, living lab trials), ensuring that strategy is evidence-based and relevant to stakeholders' needs.

The INNOVABLUE Strategic Roadmap is structured around several **key pillars** (Work Packages, WPs) that address identified challenges and lay the groundwork for long-term sustainability. Each pillar corresponds to a set of actions co-created with stakeholders and reinforced by the insights from the workshops in Šibenik and Crete. The primary WPs include:

- **WP1 – Innovation Community Upgrade:** This pillar focuses on **strengthening and expanding the innovation community** itself. Building on the existing Innovamare hub and the BlueAIR community, WP1 aims to **integrate these networks into a unified ADRION-wide innovation ecosystem**. The goal is to enhance collaboration among the quadruple helix actors (academia, research, industry, government) and break down silos across borders. Concretely, WP1 actions include establishing the formal **INNOVABLUE Community network** (as described in Crete outcomes) and developing joint services that add value for members. These services will likely encompass knowledge-sharing platforms, innovation matchmaking, and mentorship programs for blue startups. By upgrading the community in this way, INNOVABLUE seeks to **boost transnational cooperation on marine technologies** and create a lasting alliance well beyond the project's lifetime. A tangible output of WP1 is a **"roadmap for the enhanced innovation community"** – essentially this strategic plan itself – which codifies the community's vision, structure, and growth strategy.
- **WP2 – Regulatory Framework and Sandbox Development:** Given the critical importance of agile governance, WP2 is dedicated to **improving the regulatory environment** to better support innovation. This involves formulating **recommendations for regulatory reforms** and potentially establishing a **Regulatory Sandbox** for the Blue Economy. A regulatory sandbox is a controlled space where innovators can test new technologies or business models under a temporary relaxation of certain regulations, with oversight. At the Šibenik roundtable, stakeholders strongly endorsed the sandbox idea as a solution to complex, fragmented permitting processes in the marine domain. During a working meeting there, project experts presented a draft Action Plan for implementing regulatory sandboxes in the region. WP2 will refine this plan in collaboration with public authorities. Key focus areas include: reducing administrative barriers (e.g. simplifying permits for pilot projects), defining cooperation mechanisms with line ministries and EU bodies, and ensuring **regional regulatory alignment** so that rules in one country do not hinder cross-border innovation. The intended outcome is a set of **"innovation-friendly" regulatory tools** that can be adopted by ADRION governments – for example, a common framework for testing autonomous maritime systems or new aquaculture methods with fast-track approval. By the project's end, WP2 will deliver **concrete regulatory proposals or MOUs** to initiate these sandboxes, moving the dial on policy reform. This aligns with the broader call to action that **legal frameworks must evolve alongside technology** to enable innovation ecosystems to flourish.
- **WP3 – Blue Funding Mechanisms (Road to ADRION Blue Fund):** Access to finance was highlighted as both a necessity and a challenge for Blue Economy innovators. WP3 tackles this by striving to **establish the foundation of an "ADRION Blue Fund."** The project team, together with relevant stakeholders (public agencies, investors, financial institutions), is collaborating to design a dedicated **innovation fund for Blue technologies in the region**. The concept, sometimes referred to as the "Blue Fund," is to pool resources and provide targeted funding for promising marine innovation projects that support the digital and green transitions of the Blue Economy. This could take the

form of a new investment vehicle or a coordinated network of funding opportunities mapped and made accessible to community members. In preparation, WP3 activities include **mapping potential funding sources**, developing investment portfolios of viable projects, and securing commitments (Letters of Intent) from stakeholders willing to contribute or mobilize funds. By engaging development banks, venture funds, or Blue Growth initiatives early, the project aims to **boost funding for blue innovation** in a sustainable way. The end goal is that, as INNOVABLUE transitions from a project to a permanent network, there will be a stable mechanism (or at least a well-defined plan) to **finance innovative marine solutions** – filling the gap for startups and pilots that currently struggle with funding access. Establishing the Blue Fund is a complex task, but it is crucial for ensuring that the pipeline of innovations emerging from the community can be carried forward to market and impact.

- **WP4 – Technology Transfer and Capacity Building:** (While not explicitly requested in the question, WP4 is noted for completeness.) This pillar is about facilitating the flow of knowledge and new technologies from labs to industry. Activities under WP4 reinforce the others by organizing **training, workshops, and joint development projects** between researchers and companies, focusing on marine technologies that drive a sustainable Blue Economy. The Crete workshop itself was a first example of WP4 in action – showcasing cutting-edge research (like marine biotechnology and AI applications) and engaging practitioners in co-creation sessions. WP4 ensures that the innovation community has the **skills and partnerships** needed to co-develop solutions, thus strengthening the value chains in blue economy sectors.

Each of these work packages feeds into the overarching outputs of INNOVABLUE. As outlined in the project's objectives, the **tangible outcomes** will include an **enhanced innovation community roadmap (WP1)**, **recommendations for regulatory reform (WP2)**, the **foundation for the ADRION Blue Fund (WP3)**, and a strengthened framework for technology transfer (WP4). Collectively, these measures are designed to benefit research organizations, companies, public bodies, and other institutions in the Blue Economy, **ensuring a sustainable and innovative future for the ADRION region**.

3. Vision and mission of the INNOVABLUE Community

The INNOVABLUE Community's **vision** is clearly expressed in its manifesto motto: *"Blue economy thrives, innovation leads the way, Adriatic–Ionian"*. This encapsulates an aspirational future where the ADRION blue economy grows sustainably through regional innovation.

Its **mission** is to **create an inclusive, innovation-driven, and sustainable marine ecosystem that benefits current and future generations**. To fulfill this mission, the Technical Secretariat and partners will shape policies, mobilize investments, and inspire new initiatives that enhance the resilience and prosperity of the ADRION blue economy (sea regions and coasts). The community invites all quadruple-helix actors (industry, research, government, civil society) to collaborate on scaling marine (blue) technology innovation across borders. Core to its identity is fostering collaboration and capacity: promoting co-creation among diverse stakeholders and aligning local actions with EU and regional priorities. In essence, INNOVABLUE is an **open,**

transnational platform designed to pool resources, share best practices, and accelerate the deployment of innovative solutions in sectors like aquaculture, robotics, marine biotech, and renewable ocean energy.

The INNOVABLUE project unites nine partner institutions from eight Adriatic–Ionian (ADRION) countries. These comprise a mix of research/education, innovation support entities, chambers of commerce and public authorities. Table 1 below lists each partner's institution name, country, organizational type, and principal responsibilities in INNOVABLUE.

Institution	**Country**	**Type**	**Role / Responsibilities in INNOVABLUE**
Digital Innovation Hub Innovamare	Croatia (HR)	Digital Innovation Hub (Innovation Cluster, NGO)	Coordinates overall project management, administration and communication. Chairs the Steering Committee. Drafted the Quality Implementation Manual and Communication Plan.
Croatian Chamber of Economy (HGK)	Croatia (HR)	Chamber of Commerce (Public Authority)	Engages SMEs and industry via its national business network. Supports stakeholder outreach, dissemination and thematic partnership building within the blue economy sector.
University of Trieste (UniTS)	Italy (IT)	University (Research Institution)	Leads research in WP1–WP2 on innovation mapping and regulatory analysis. Updates the regional "map of excellence" for marine technologies and performs comparative analysis of regulatory frameworks.
Regional Union of Chambers of Commerce of Veneto (Union Camere del Veneto UCV)	Italy (IT)	Chamber of Commerce Union (Public Body)	Mobilizes regional industry and SMEs in Veneto. Channels business input into innovation networks. Facilitates matchmaking and investment promotion in blue-tech projects.
Technology Park Ljubljana Ltd. (TPLJ)	Slovenia (SI)	Technology Park (Innovation Hub)	Fosters cross-border innovation exchange and living lab activities. Connects Slovenian stakeholders to the ADRION network and supports

			piloting of marine technology solutions.
Faculty of EE & IT, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University (FEIT, UKIM)	N. Macedonia (MK)	University Faculty (Engineering/ICT)	Provides technical and engineering expertise. Contributes to technology transfer and living lab demonstrations of marine technologies. Engages academic research in project pilots and training.
Innovation Fund of Montenegro (Fond za inovacije)	Montenegro (ME)	Public Innovation Fund (Government Agency)	Leads financial strategy (WP3) for the project, including development of the proposed Adrion Blue Fund. Hosted the project's kick-off meeting and organizes funding-focused workshops.
Region of Crete (Περιφέρεια Κρήτης)	Greece (EL)	Regional Government Authority (Public Body)	Integrates project activities with regional policy and fisheries development. Coordinates INNOVABLUE implementation at the regional level (via its Fisheries Dept.) and promotes sustainable blue growth.
Innovation Center, Faculty of Mechanical Eng., Univ. of Belgrade (ICMF)	Serbia (RS)	Innovation Center (University-affiliated)	Drives living lab initiatives and technology transfer in the marine sector. Applies engineering R&D (e.g. underwater robotics, sensors) to blue economy challenges and supports private–public project pilots.

The consortium's collaboration is structured through a Steering Committee and four work packages, with tasks allocated by partner expertise. In this way, the INNOVABLUE network combines its diverse institutional strengths across the ADRION area to implement a cohesive innovation roadmap for the blue economy.

4. Strategic objectives

Guided by its vision and mission, the INNOVABLUE Community adopts the following strategic objectives:

- **Integrate and expand a transnational innovation network:** unify the existing innovation ecosystems (BlueAIR and InnovaMare) into a single ADRION-wide community. This includes strengthening quadruple-helix links among research, business, public authorities, and civil society. By facilitating joint innovation actions and partnerships, the Community will leverage shared resources and avoid duplication.
- **Strengthen innovation capacity and knowledge sharing:** build regional innovation capacity by developing skills, facilities, and infrastructure for blue tech. Objectives include increasing visibility of maritime innovations, disseminating best practices, and supporting collaborative R&D projects. (EUSAIR Pillar 1 explicitly calls for enhancing innovation ecosystems and clustering in green/blue tech)
- **Enhance regulatory frameworks:** address regulatory bottlenecks to innovation by formulating harmonized policies and sandbox environments. INNOVABLUE aims to propose "innovation-friendly" regulations and legal tools (e.g. testing corridors, permissive zones) that enable real-life piloting of technologies. Specific objectives include drafting regulatory recommendations and launching model living labs as testbeds.
- **Mobilize funding for blue innovation:** develop recommendations for sustainable financing mechanisms for SMEs and startups in the blue economy. The roadmap targets the creation of an *ADRION Blue Fund* and complements it with information on EU funding (e.g. Horizon Europe, EIC Pathfinder, BlueInvest). The goal is to **boost investment** in marine technology projects by mapping opportunities, creating investment portfolios, and leveraging EU funding platforms.
- **Promote technology transfer and commercialization:** accelerate the transfer of research outcomes into marketable products and services. This involves strengthening ties between academia and industry (e.g. through DIHs, clusters, joint ventures) and ensuring that innovations in areas like marine biotechnology and robotics are adopted by ADRION companies. The community will foster pilot projects and matchmaking to bring prototypes into real-use.

5. Technical Secretariat governance structure and role

A milestone achievement ensuring the longevity of the INNOVABLUE Community is the establishment of a **Technical Secretariat (TS)**. Launched officially at the Šibenik event, the Technical Secretariat is housed within the DIH Innovamare and serves as the central **coordination and governance body** for the network. Its creation was marked by the signing of a **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)** among key partners, signaling a firm commitment to continue cooperation beyond the project's funded period. The TS is tasked with a range of crucial functions: it will **coordinate and support INNOVABLUE partners after the project ends**, facilitate the onboarding of new stakeholders into the community, monitor progress on the strategic roadmap actions, and sustain collaborative efforts on innovation and regulatory initiatives. In essence, the Technical Secretariat is the institutional backbone that will carry forward the project's mission, guarding against the common issue of "pilot project fade-out" once initial funding dries up.

To support the TS's effectiveness, several **governance and sustainability commitments** have been put in place. First, the MoU establishing the TS outlines the structure, roles, and resource commitments by each signatory. It likely defines how decisions will be made, how often partners convene, and how the network will be financed in the interim (e.g. through membership

contributions or continued public support). Moreover, during the project events, stakeholders provided **Letters of Intent and formal endorsements** expressing their willingness to remain engaged with the INNOVABLUE Community and support its activities. For example, research institutes and business support centers have indicated plans to contribute expertise and host future living lab trials, while regional authorities have signaled openness to adapting regulations in line with INNOVABLUE's recommendations (a crucial aspect of WP2). These stakeholder inputs are integrated into the roadmap, ensuring that the strategy reflects on-the-ground needs and has broad buy-in.

The Technical Secretariat will also oversee the implementation of the **action plans under WP1, WP2, and WP3**, effectively embedding the roadmap into a long-term governance framework. Under WP1 (Community Upgrade), the TS acts as the convenor of the network – maintaining communication channels (e.g. an online platform or annual forum) where members exchange knowledge and form partnerships. Under WP2 (Regulatory Sandbox), the TS can function as a liaison between the innovation community and government bodies: for instance, it might coordinate a working group of legal experts, innovators, and policymakers to pilot the sandbox approach in select areas (such as a **marine drone testing zone with a simplified permit process**). As these pilots proceed, the TS will document lessons and advocate for scaling successful regulatory innovations ADRION-wide. Under WP3 (Blue Fund development), the TS could host the secretariat for the fund (once established) or at least maintain the database of funding opportunities and stakeholder pledges compiled during the project. By monitoring how many projects get funded and what gaps remain, the TS will help adjust the strategy to strengthen financing mechanisms over time.

Long-term governance also means expanding the community's reach. The INNOVABLUE network is envisioned as **open and growing**, welcoming new members from additional regions or sectors interested in sustainable blue innovation. The Technical Secretariat is empowered to formalize partnerships with other networks or initiatives – for example, linking with the EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) on Water and Climate, or with other macro-regional strategies like the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR). By doing so, INNOVABLUE ensures it remains **connected to global innovation flows and policy dialogues**. The TS will also champion the **continuous alignment of the community's activities with EU and national policies**, acting as a bridge so that bottom-up innovations inform policy (e.g. data from living labs supporting new regulations) and policy changes enable further innovation (e.g. new funding calls or incentives).

To support **sustainability**, the Technical Secretariat will help develop a business plan for the network's post-project life. This may include pursuing a formal legal status or host institution for the network, identifying revenue streams (such as membership fees, service provision, or follow-on grants), and maintaining the momentum of community events and exchanges. The **commitment of local communities and hosts** to keep supporting innovation spaces (like incubators, test sites, or co-working labs) was noted as essential to sustainability. Therefore, the roadmap calls for local "innovation champions" – many of whom participated in the roundtables and workshops – to remain actively involved via the TS in guiding and mentoring the next generation of projects. In summary, the establishment of the Technical Secretariat, underpinned by the MoU and stakeholder pledges, provides the governance structure needed to ensure that the INNOVABLUE Community **thrives well beyond the project's duration**. It embodies the

principle that **sustained, collective leadership** is required to avoid fragmentation and achieve the ambitious vision set forth.

A **Technical Secretariat (TS)** has been established as the sole governance body for INNOVABLUE. Housed within DIH Innovamare (the Lead Partner), the TS combines strategic leadership and operational management. Its composition includes a Coordinator (TS lead) and technical experts drawn from partner organizations. All members bring expertise in marine innovation and policy, enabling the TS to guide both high-level strategy and day-to-day activities. No separate steering committee exists: the TS holds **central decision-making authority** for the community.

The TS's key roles are:

- **Strategic leadership and integration:** the TS defines the community's long-term direction, maintaining alignment with EU and ADRION policy frameworks. It updates core strategic documents (e.g. community manifesto, vision statements) and ensures that evolving goals (Green Deal compliance, EUSAIR priorities) are reflected. Critically, it **unites previously separate innovation communities** – inheriting BlueAIR's outputs and InnovaMare's network – to drive collective action across the region.
- **Operational coordination:** the TS manages all planned activities and timelines. It organizes workshops, working meetings, thematic roundtables and ensures deliverables are produced efficiently. Through regular TS meetings and extraordinary sessions as needed, the Secretariat oversees project schedules and inter-partner collaboration.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** acting as the primary liaison to external bodies, the TS engages with EU institutions (e.g. DG MARE, DG REGIO, DG RTD, DG GROW) and national/regional authorities to align INNOVABLUE with macro-regional strategies and policy goals. It maintains communication channels with industry, academia and NGOs. For example, in project workshops local leaders (ministers, regional governors) have participated and stressed the importance of blue innovation. The TS will continue using advisory forums and joint events to gather stakeholder input.
- **Decision-making authority:** all strategic and operational decisions are made within the TS, ensuring consistency. The TS evaluates proposals (from working groups or partners), sets priorities, and approves action plans. Decisions require majority consensus; unresolved issues are resolved by vote. Once decided, the TS assigns responsibilities and deadlines, and its Coordinator monitors implementation.
- **Monitoring and reporting:** in line with Interreg requirements, the TS tracks progress through key performance indicators (KPIs) and milestones. It prepares regular progress reports for partners and funders, maintaining transparency. Quarterly summaries and annual reports will document achievements, challenges and financial status. The TS may also commission external evaluation if needed.

In summary, the TS functions as a **single, streamlined governance entity**: it provides leadership, manages operations, interfaces with stakeholders, and ensures accountability for INNOVABLUE's activities. By consolidating governance, it accelerates decision-making and maintains coherence in implementation.

6. Key activities leading to the creation of the Roadmap

Perspectives on Building Sustainable Innovation Communities (Šibenik Roundtable insights)

A high-level roundtable held in Šibenik, Croatia (June 17, 2025) gathered regional leaders and stakeholders to examine what it takes to build **sustainable innovation communities** in the Blue Economy. Participants – including decision-makers, business support agencies, researchers, and industry representatives – identified several critical **barriers and success factors**. A clear message was the need to shift from fragmented, short-term projects to **mission-driven collaboration with a long-term horizon**. Stakeholders noted that developing a vibrant innovation ecosystem is a **lengthy process (5–10 years)** requiring sustained effort and **synergy among investors, research institutions, academia, and local communities**.

Mindset and vision clarity: there was consensus about that a supportive **mindset and a clear vision** are preconditions for success. All stakeholders must rally around a **well-defined mission and goals** – essentially, *"clear vision + clear understanding of each stakeholder's role = success"*. Local and regional **governments play a pivotal role** here: without strong political will and clear development visions, even significant industry investments may flounder. A case in point was given of Germany's approach, where local government clarity enables industries to thrive, whereas in the Adriatic–Ionian region such clarity is often lacking. The roundtable highlighted that **bottom-up innovation models** tend to work better than top-down mandates; creative ideas should be nurtured at the grassroots and then supported by responsive decision-makers. Strong local leadership is needed to champion innovation agendas, reduce bureaucratic friction, and maintain focus on strategic objectives.

Role of industry and funding mechanisms: industry, especially the tech sector, was identified as a natural **leader in driving ecosystem development** and providing much-needed financing. Panellists agreed that ICT and marine tech companies can spearhead innovation if they are backed by other stakeholders and a conducive environment. **Industry funding** is crucial – one speaker noted that purely academic research can "get lost in time" without producing tangible outcomes, whereas industry-led projects push toward market-ready solutions. However, the **challenge is scaling** those solutions to diverse Blue Economy sectors and markets. While **funding sources exist** (including EU funds and national programs), participants observed that the bigger issue is often the **lack of efficient financial mechanisms and access** for innovators. Private entities, especially SMEs, struggle to navigate funding opportunities despite available resources. It was noted that in recent years the situation has improved, with more instruments emerging to support innovation, but further streamlining is needed. To ensure sustainability, the roundtable urged **business-oriented models and public–private partnerships** that can sustain communities beyond initial grants. For example, establishing membership platforms or innovation hubs with services that attract industry support can help generate continuous revenue and engagement.

Local engagement and examples: the **engagement of local/regional authorities** emerged as a deciding factor. Without municipalities and regions actively championing innovation (through infrastructure, incentives, or simplified procedures), even enthusiastic investors may pull back. Participants cited a positive example from Croatia: the success of a home-grown tech company

illustrated how a clear local vision and support ecosystem can nurture world-class innovation. Conversely, a Serbian initiative to build a research submarine in the Tisa-Danube Canal stalled because the **legal/regulatory framework was inadequate** – despite keen investor interest. This highlighted the urgent need for **regulatory reform and proactive governance**. Governments across ADRION were called upon to introduce **tailored legal frameworks** that keep pace with innovation, enabling pilot projects to proceed safely and efficiently. Simplifying administrative procedures and harmonizing rules for emerging technologies (e.g. underwater robotics or marine biotech) would remove a major obstacle to community growth. In short, industry cannot drive innovation alone; **policy support and agile regulation** are needed as catalysts.

Cultural and structural barriers: the Šibenik discussion also tackled cultural barriers. A **"mindset issue"** was frequently mentioned – in parts of Southeast Europe, innovation culture is still developing after only a few decades of market-oriented economy. Collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches are not yet the norm, and innovation clusters often face inertia or silo thinking. Stronger commitment at the local level, openness to cross-sector collaboration, and willingness to bring in external expertise were cited as necessary steps. Education and workforce development were implicit factors: building an innovation community also means cultivating skilled human capital, which takes time. The audience poll during the roundtable revealed that **mindset and focus on clear objectives** were seen as the top prerequisites for sustainable innovation communities (outweighing even funding or decision-making structure). Thus, nurturing an entrepreneurial and innovative mindset among stakeholders is part of the roadmap.

Key takeaways from Šibenik: ultimately, the roundtable concluded that moving the ADRION Blue Economy toward resilience and global competitiveness requires a **paradigm shift**. Innovation must be treated as a **long-term investment in the region's future**, not a short-term expense. It requires **persistent, collective leadership** and alignment of actions; otherwise, efforts remain fragmented. Priorities include establishing **innovation-friendly regulatory sandboxes and living labs** to test new solutions, securing diverse funding (industry, public, EU) to sustain initiatives, and focusing resources on a few domains of excellence where the region can lead globally. For example, participants suggested that ADRION countries identify **1–2 niche areas** (such as marine robotics, smart vessels, or environmental monitoring) in which to excel internationally, rather than stretching resources too thin across many topics. By concentrating effort and forming **synergies across borders**, these innovation communities can achieve critical mass and impact.

Fostering Innovation Ecosystems: Insights from the Crete Workshop (October 2025)

Building on the strategic discussions in Šibenik, a high-level workshop in Heraklion, Crete (October 23, 2025) showcased practical ways to accelerate blue growth innovation and strengthen the INNOVABLUE community. The event, titled *"Building the Future of an Innovative Community for a Sustainable Blue Economy,"* convened policymakers, business support organizations, researchers, local authorities, startups, and SMEs from across the ADRION region. It was opened by regional leaders who underscored Blue Growth as a driver of **innovation, cooperation, and sustainability**, highlighting the potential for high-value job creation and ecological benefits in coastal regions. A keynote from the European Innovation Council (EISMEA) reinforced the **EU's commitment and support mechanisms** for marine/maritime innovation,

setting a policy context for the day. This emphasis on **policy alignment** – ensuring that regional initiatives dovetail with European strategic priorities – was a recurrent theme. Crete's own Smart Specialization Strategy (RIS3Crete) and its Innovation Business Observatory (IBO) were presented as examples of how **local strategy and European programs can align to support innovators**. The Region of Crete demonstrated that anchoring projects like INNOVABLUE in regional development priorities (through RIS3 and observatories) provides an enabling environment where innovators have access to funding, networks, and guidance consistent with EU goals.

Digital innovation hubs and technology transfer: a key outcome of the Crete workshop was the recognition of **Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs)** as pivotal infrastructure for the Blue Economy. Experts introduced the concept of European Digital Innovation Hubs – **"one-stop shops"** that help companies and public agencies adopt advanced digital technologies. Although one presentation focused on a health-sector DIH, the model's relevance to marine and maritime sectors was underscored. A DIH typically provides access to **technological expertise, test-before-invest facilities, training in digital skills, support for funding, and networking**. In the Blue Economy context, this could mean hubs where marine startups or fisheries companies can experiment with IoT sensors for water quality, big-data platforms for aquaculture, or AI algorithms for autonomous vessels in a low-risk environment. The workshop highlighted a case study from Greece (the **SmartHEALTH DIH**) which, in just over two years, engaged 95 entities (80 SMEs and 15 public bodies) in testing and training activities, demonstrating the high demand for such services. The success of this hub – alongside challenges like administrative burdens and engaging diverse participants – provided lessons for INNOVABLUE. It showed that **cross-sectoral synergies** are key: digital solutions proven in one field (e.g. AI in healthcare) can be adapted to marine challenges. As a result, the strategic roadmap envisions **leveraging existing DIHs or establishing new Blue Economy-focused hubs** to accelerate technology transfer and adoption in Adriatic–Ionian maritime industries. These hubs will foster collaboration between tech experts and maritime stakeholders, effectively bridging the gap between digital innovation and real-world blue growth applications.

Living Labs and real-world testing: both the roundtable and the Crete workshop stressed the importance of **Living Labs** – open innovation environments where new solutions can be co-created and tested with end-users in real-life settings. In Šibenik, a proposal emerged to create an **ADRION network of living labs** for cutting-edge blue technologies (e.g. underwater communication, robotics, seabed mapping, environmental monitoring). This concept was echoed in Crete through practical demonstrations. The workshop featured a field session where researchers from FORTH (Foundation for Research and Technology – Hellas) presented a live **digital twin of the Cretan Sea** and remote sensing applications for coastal monitoring. By moving beyond PowerPoint presentations to a **harbor-side demonstration**, the event reinforced the value of hands-on experimentation. Participants saw first-hand how a high-resolution marine digital twin can aid ship routing, harbor safety, or oil spill response, and how drone-based remote sensing can map shallow-water habitats. This approach builds **confidence among end-users** (port authorities, fishermen, local businesses) in innovative tools, and provides immediate feedback to developers. The Crete workshop's success in field testing underscored that establishing living labs across the region – where stakeholders can jointly trial innovations in situ – will be instrumental. Such living labs make it easier for one country to **replicate a successful pilot** tested in another, accelerating transnational knowledge transfer. Going

forward, the INNOVABLUE Community plans to embed this living lab approach, proposing a **network of interconnected testbeds** (coastal labs, marine observatories, etc.) to national governments as a means to sustain innovation beyond the project.

Cross-border collaboration and network-building: a foundational goal of INNOVABLUE is to foster a **transnational innovation network** spanning Croatia, Italy, Slovenia, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece. The Crete workshop reaffirmed that **cross-border cooperation** is not optional but essential: maritime challenges (climate impacts, pollution, overfishing) and opportunities (blue energy, tourism, biodiversity) are shared across the Adriatic–Ionian basin and demand **aligned strategies and joint action**. Participants explored how linking regional initiatives can create a sum greater than its parts. For instance, a successful marine biotechnology solution in one locale should be **transferable or scalable** to others with similar needs. The workshop's interactive sessions produced a **clearer roadmap for establishing the INNOVABLUE Community** as a permanent cross-border network. Proposed joint actions include:

- **Cross-border pilot projects** – e.g. testing a technology developed in one country's waters in another's, to validate versatility and encourage mutual learning.
- **Transnational matchmaking events** for blue economy startups and investors – to connect innovators with funding and partners across countries.
- **Coordinated capacity-building programs** – such as regional training workshops on digital tools (like those demonstrated in Crete) to level up skills across the network.

These actions aim to ensure that collaboration is not episodic but continuous. The "community-of-practice" approach – where stakeholders regularly exchange knowledge and co-develop solutions – lies at the heart of INNOVABLUE's sustainability plan. The Crete event itself acted as a **marketplace of ideas**: a Cretan tech startup and HCMR scientists discussed bioprospecting invasive species for products, while policy makers learned directly from entrepreneurs what regulatory flexibility or support they require. Such dialogues build **trust and mutual understanding**. By mixing local Cretan stakeholders with project partners from other countries, the workshop forged new contacts and cemented a **shared vision of collaboration across borders**. Notably, officials from EISMEA (European Commission) emphasized that aligning national and regional efforts with EU programs unlocks additional resources and ensures everyone "speaks the same language" on innovation priorities. Common frameworks – whether in funding (e.g. European Innovation Council support) or regulation – make it easier for one country's innovation to be accepted and scaled in another. Thus, **policy harmonization and joint public-private programs** (potentially formalized through **Memorandum of Understanding among governments**) are on the roadmap to support the cross-border innovation ecosystem. Ultimately, the Crete workshop concluded that INNOVABLUE's transnational network, fortified by these collaborative actions, will help ensure a **smarter, greener, and more resilient Blue Economy for the entire region**.

7. Step-by-step strategic Action Plan

This section outlines a **phased action plan** with concrete short-, medium-, and long-term activities, organized by thematic tasks. It also describes cross-cutting elements such as stakeholder engagement.

7.1 Short-term actions (Year 1)

In the first 6–12 months, focus is on **establishing foundations**:

- **Launch the Technical Secretariat:** finalize TS staffing, administrative setup, and operational procedures (per the rulebook). Disseminate the updated community manifesto.
- **Stakeholder mapping and outreach:** identify key quadruple-helix actors in each ADRION country (companies, research centers, ministries, clusters). Initiate relationships with DGs and EUSAIR coordinators. Conduct introductory webinars and newsletters to present INNOVABLUE.
- **Finalize governance framework:** approve and publish the Operational Rulebook and Manifesto (building on the draft).
- **Initiate regulatory analysis and Living Lab Pilots:** leverage the comparative analysis of national regulatory challenges. Based on workshop outputs, select 2–3 pilot Living Labs (e.g. in coastal port, estuary or lake) for real-life testing of sensors or biotech (as suggested at Venice meeting). Secure permissions and technical support.
- **Seed funding mechanisms:** define the concept of the **ADRION Blue Fund** (EU/EIC-style innovation fund) and identify initial stakeholders (banks, investors, government). Prepare a roadmap and provisional budget for its establishment.
- **Digital Innovation Hub (DIH) services:** enhance DIH InnovaMare's offerings to the enlarged community. This includes digital services such as virtual networking platforms and a centralized information portal.

7.2 Medium-term actions (Year 2)

In years 2–3, actions move towards **expansion and consolidation**:

- **Scale up Living Labs and sandboxes:** based on pilots, formalize a network of Living Labs. For example, establish labs for *shore-based aquaculture* monitoring (e.g. water quality sensors) and *marine robotics testing* in international waters. Advocate regulatory sandboxes; refine models developed at Venice (e.g. for autonomous surface vessels).
- **Launch ADRION Blue Fund (pilot phase):** finalize fund governance (possibly as a joint public–private venture).
- **Thematic innovation clusters:** facilitate formal thematic working groups (e.g. aquaculture, marine biotech, robotics). Each group will develop a roadmap for innovation projects and funding applications. Align clusters with smart specialization areas in participating regions.
- **Digital platforms and observatories:** deploy a cross-border Digital Innovation Hub network (building on InnovaMare) offering services like market intelligence, virtual

testbed access, and business mentoring. Operationalize the Innovation Observatory with dashboards tracking innovation trends.
- **Capacity building program:** roll out a curriculum of workshops and courses on topics like business model innovation, regulatory compliance, and digital skills. Collaborate with universities (e.g. Trieste, Ljubljana) and vocational agencies.
- **Policy dialogues:** organize joint meetings with national authorities and DG MARE to discuss draft policy recommendations. Prepare policy briefs (per WP2 deliverables) on enabling frameworks for marine innovation.

7.3 Long-term actions (Year 3 and beyond)

Beyond the project's end (post-2026), the roadmap envisions a **self-sustaining community**:

- **Institutionalize the community:** transition the TS to a permanent structure (e.g. anchored in a DIH or intergovernmental office). Explore multi-annual funding (e.g. from national budgets or the EU's Macro-regional Strategy Facility) for core operations.
- **Full ADRION Blue Fund launch:** if possible, scale the fund with additional capital from EU (EUSAIR/EU Structural Funds) and private investors. Continuously manage calls for proposals and mentorship schemes for fund recipients.
- **Ongoing Living Lab network:** maintain an Adriatic–Ionian Living Lab network that regularly tests new technologies (e.g. marine eDNA monitoring, autonomous vessels) and incubates local startups. Seek inclusion in EU initiatives like the EU Ocean Observation network.
- **Continuous innovation support:** keep updating the DIH service portfolio (e.g. cybersecurity for ships, advanced manufacturing in maritime tech). Link with European DIH networks for blue economy.
- **Engagement and outreach:** institutionalize an annual INNOVABLUE Forum to convene policymakers, industry and researchers. Publish an annual Blue Innovation Report for the region.
- **Knowledge transfer and replication:** document lessons and best practices so other sea-basin regions (Baltic, Mediterranean) can replicate the INNOVABLUE model.

7.4 Stakeholder engagement plan

INNOVABLUE's success relies on **continuous engagement** with diverse stakeholders: public bodies (national ministries, maritime authorities), R&D institutions, industry clusters, SMEs, NGOs and civil society. Engagement channels and actions include:

- **Thematic roundtables:** roundtables on topics like smart ports, aquaculture or maritime policy will be held at regional hubs. These ensure government ministries, local ports and companies contribute their perspectives.
- **Working groups and task forces:** the TS will convene working groups on specific issues (e.g. regulations, funding, skills) composed of experts from industry associations, universities and public agencies. These bodies will draft action recommendations for the TS to adopt.

- **Communications campaign:** a dedicated communication strategy (newsletter, social media, website updates) will keep all stakeholders informed of events, results and funding calls.
- **Education and training networks:** partner institutions (e.g. universities, chambers of commerce) will involve students and entrepreneurs in INNOVABLUE activities (hackathons, internships). Special emphasis will be on involving youth through initiatives like the EUSAIR Youth Council.

By engaging quadruple-helix actors at every step, the Community ensures broad ownership of the roadmap and leverages stakeholders' expertise. For example, the Sibenik 2025 event highlighted this approach with strategic roundtables and a "Regulatory sandbox action planning" session open to policymakers and innovators.

7.5 Thematic expansion strategy

While advancing core blue sectors, INNOVABLUE will **expand thematically** into emerging areas to maximize future competitiveness:

- **Aquaculture and fisheries:** building on EUSAIR priorities for sustainable aquaculture, the Community will champion innovations in fish farming technologies, genetic advances (e.g. tailored vaccines), and circular aquaculture. A working group on Aquaculture Innovation will map needs and pilot projects (e.g. eco-feed trials, multi-trophic aquaculture).
- **Marine biotechnology:** use the region's bioresearch (e.g. valorizing invasive species) by connecting biotech startups with labs. Offer matchmaking for EU calls on blue bioeconomy.
- **Marine robotics and autonomy:** promote ADRION strengths (e.g. robotics research at Trieste/Skopje) to develop drones, AUVs, and digital twins for maritime monitoring. Partner with CEDEFOP or Horizon projects on robotics reskilling.
- **Renewable marine energy:** given Green Deal targets, foster pilot projects for wave, tidal and offshore wind. Link with Horizon cluster on energy.
- **Ports and logistics (green ports):** build on the Venice green port experience by promoting low-emission port technologies (cold ironing, hydrogen). Initiate cross-border projects on sustainable maritime transport.

Each topic will be addressed through dedicated activities, nevertheless integrated into the community to ensure synergies (e.g. a robotics sensor developed for coastal use could be tested in a Living Lab). Alignment with smart specialisation strategies (e.g. maritime clusters in partner regions) will help focus actions on areas of competitive strength.

7.6 Living Labs and regulatory sandboxes

A core innovation approach is the **Living Lab network** – real-world test environments for marine technologies – and accompanying **regulatory sandboxes**. Actions include:

- **Living Lab development:** based on the Venice workshop proposals, establish Living Labs in strategic locations (e.g. ports of Venice and Split, Lake Ohrid for freshwater tech, or an Adriatic aquaculture farm). Equip these labs with shared infrastructure (testing vessels, IoT sensors) open to community members.
- **Regulatory sandbox pilots:** using the comparative study of regulatory barriers, select a small set of pilot sandboxes (e.g. an area where certain marine rules are temporarily relaxed under supervision). For example, a sandbox might allow testing of autonomous surface vessels under expedited permits, while ensuring environmental safeguards (aligning with London Convention/Barcelona Convention rules).
- **Cross-border standardization:** through TS-facilitated dialogues, work toward harmonizing regional regulations. For instance, ensure interoperability between Living Labs so a technology tested in one country can easily be trialed in another.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** develop KPIs to track sandbox outcomes (number of tests conducted, regulatory hurdles lowered). Publish lessons learned to help governments design permanent frameworks.

By integrating hands-on experimentation with policy reform, INNOVABLUE will contribute to grasp, address and reduce **the barriers** for marine innovation. This builds on INNOVABLUE's early work: the Venice meeting (April 2025) already spotlighted the need for living labs and adaptive governance to **unlock innovation**. These pilots will feed directly into the roadmap, with the TS refining recommendations from WP2 accordingly.

7.7 Creation of funding mechanisms

Securing finance for blue innovation is essential. The roadmap will develop the following:

- **ADRION Blue Fund (seed and scale):** in cooperation with financial stakeholders, establish a transnational fund, design the fund structure and identify the fund managers.
- **Investment portfolio compilation:** the TS will compile a portfolio of investible projects/technologies across the community, making it easier for investors to engage. This addresses the WP3 mandate ("Road to ADRION Blue Fund").
- **Grant and loan schemes:** provide guidance on accessing existing funding (BlueInvest, EASME calls).
- **Public–private partnerships:** explore PPPs for infrastructure (e.g. port R&D centers) or for sustaining DIH services.

These mechanisms will be u supported by strong collaboration: for example, BLUEAIR's legacy includes identifying pooled investments to boost blue tech. INNOVABLUE will leverage this experience and its expanded network to accelerate capital flows into ADRION blue projects.

7.8 Innovation support and digital services

The Community will provide a suite of support services:

- **Digital Innovation Hub (DIH) enhancements:** extend DIH InnovaMare's reach by integrating DIHs from partner regions. Offer one-stop-shop services: technology

assessments, business model consulting, prototyping facilities and connections to EU networks (e.g. EDIHs, Blue Economy Observatory).

- **Observatories and business intelligence:** create recommendations for a regional "Blue Tech Observatory" – an online platform with real-time data on innovation trends, market intelligence, and policy news. The Crete session on the Innovation Business Observatory underscores the value of such a data-driven tool. This observatory will help stakeholders make informed decisions (e.g. where to locate new enterprises) and identify emerging niches.
- **Networking platforms:** use InnovaMare platform, an interactive portal/app where members can post collaboration requests, share opportunities, and find partners for R&D or pilot trials. This crowdsourced "matchmaking" complements formal events.
- **Innovation ecosystem services:** provide specialized services by connecting different stakeholders – offer-demand type for e.g. IPR support, standards guidance, and links to certification bodies (e.g. for marine sensor CE marking). Coordinate with local technology parks to facilitate spin-offs.
- **Business support for SMEs:** offer entrepreneurship training, mentorship and acceleration programmes for maritime startups. Leverage connections with EIC Pathfinder/EIC Accelerator programmes for guiding promising ventures.

These services will be actively promoted across the community, ensuring that small actors gain access to digital tools and expertise. As demonstrated by DIHs in other regions, such support significantly raises innovation uptake; INNOVABLUE's ecosystem will mirror this by mobilizing digitalisation and observatory data for marine industries.

7.9 Training, capacity building, and skills development

To sustain innovation, INNOVABLUE will invest in people:

- **Educational workshops and seminars:** organize a series of training events on topics like sustainable design, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity in shipping, and public funding. These will target entrepreneurs, researchers and public officials. Activities will be aligned with the EUSAIR emphasis on **skills** – for example, Pillar 1 explicitly aims to "equip people with new skills (including soft skills)".
- **Academic collaborations:** develop joint curricula (certificate courses, summer schools) between ADRION universities on marine innovation subjects (e.g. offshore robotics, coastal management). Enable student exchanges and trainee internships within the community partners.
- **Knowledge transfer:** facilitate visits between companies and research labs. Showcase best practices (e.g. visits to the FORTH moLab demo) so practitioners can learn cutting-edge technologies.
- **Awareness raising:** run campaigns (media, social) to highlight career opportunities in the blue economy and the importance of sustainability, aiming to attract talent to the sector. Engage youth through hackathons focusing on maritime challenges.
- **Capacity-building networks:** link with EUSAIR SkillUp 4 Blue project and other macro-regional initiatives for joint training, ensuring alignment with broader ADRION capacity-building efforts.

Over time, these initiatives will build a skilled workforce capable of executing the roadmap and driving long-term innovation. They will also foster a culture of continuous learning and adaptability - essential for coping with emerging technologies and market shifts.

8. Derived results and lessons learned from INNOVABLUE and BLUEAIR

INNOVABLUE's roadmap is grounded in the outputs and experiences of preceding initiatives:

- **Regulatory and living lab insights:** a comparative study of ADRION regulatory frameworks revealed gaps affecting technology testing, guiding our focus on sandboxes. The Venice working meeting (April 2025) produced **concrete proposals** for cross-border Living Labs (e.g. along rivers, lakes and seas) and adaptive governance to remove innovation barriers. This work underpins our plan for a living lab network.
- **Stakeholder co-creation:** events like Šibenik 2025 and Crete 2025 have validated community needs. In Šibenik (June 2025), roundtables engaged regional leaders on resilient innovation ecosystems and initiated *regulatory sandbox* roadmapping. The Crete workshop (Oct 2025) brought together scientists, entrepreneurs and policymakers and concluded that Crete can become a regional Blue Economy innovation hub. Participants' co-creation proposals (on services, pilot testing) directly inform the service expansion and lab activities in this roadmap.
- **Merging community synergies:** combining the BlueAIR and InnovaMare (Italy–Croatia) networks has already created a larger talent pool. Lessons from BLUEAIR – which successfully formulated a macro-regional S3 for Blue Growth– highlight the value of aligning local initiatives with EUSAIR. INNOVABLUE adopts this by embedding its work in EUSAIR Pillar 1 structures. Moreover, the internal manifesto text emphasizes collaboration and avoiding duplicated effort; hence the roadmap explicitly coordinates actions across partners to build a more coherent ecosystem.
- **Outcome focus:** the project's defined deliverables point to tangible outcomes: e.g. WP2's regulatory recommendations, WP3's Blue Fund foundation, and WP4's tech transfer models. These form milestones in the roadmap. For instance, the existence of a "Roadmap for the enhanced innovation community" and "foundation for the ADRION Blue Fund" as project outcomes suggests that our action plan must include follow-up funding mechanisms and community-building steps.

Past experiences inform each element of this roadmap. Through stakeholder workshops, pilot trials and strategic studies, INNOVABLUE and BLUEAIR have already identified priority areas (e.g. aquaculture biotech, observatory needs, policy gaps) which are included into the future plan. By using proven collaborations and avoiding repetition, this strategy ensures continuity and maximizes impact.

9. Monitoring and evaluation framework

Monitoring and evaluation framework will track progress and ensure accountability. Building on the rulebook provisions, the Technical Secretariat will:

- **Define KPIs and milestones:** in consultation with stakeholders, establish quantitative and qualitative indicators (e.g. number of stakeholders engaged, living labs operational, pilot

projects tested, policy changes proposed, funds disbursed). These will align with Interreg IPA-ADRION common output indicators (for instance, jobs created in supported enterprises, new cross-border investments, number of regulations amended).

- **Regular monitoring:** the TS will compile quarterly progress reports for the Steering Committee (SCOM) and funding authority. These will detail achievements against milestones. Per the governance model, the TS "tracks key performance indicators and milestones, and prepares progress reports for Innovablue partners and funding authorities… ensuring transparency and accountability".
- **Adaptive management:** based on review meetings, the TS will adjust the action plan if needed (e.g. reallocate resources if a living lab pilot is delayed). External evaluation (e.g. at midterm and project end) will assess relevance, efficiency and impact.
- **Stakeholder feedback:** incorporate surveys and feedback loops from participants (e.g. rating of workshops, satisfaction of fund recipients) to measure outcomes like capacity building effectiveness.

The TS will ensure that every activity is measurable and reported, following the high standards expected of EU-funded initiatives. By mapping each task to clear indicators (and aligning them with EUSAIR/EU objectives where possible), the Community can demonstrate accountability and success.

10. Policy alignment and coherence

The INNOVABLUE roadmap is fully aligned with EU and macro-regional blue economy policies:

- **EU Green Deal & Blue Economy Strategy:** the 2021 EU Communication on the ocean highlights integrating the blue economy into the Green Deal, emphasizing climate neutrality, circularity and biodiversity. INNOVABLUE's objectives (e.g. fostering green marine tech, sustainable aquaculture, pollution reduction) directly support this shift from mere "blue growth" to a "sustainable blue economy". The TS will continuously monitor EU directives and incorporate emerging priorities (for example, offshore renewable energy or marine pollution reduction) into the agenda. Aligning activities with platforms like the EU BlueInvest and Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership further embeds EU coherence.
- **EUSAIR Pillar 1 – Blue Sustainable Economy:** EUSAIR Pillar 1 explicitly aims to "foster sustainable blue and green growth by strengthening innovation ecosystems, supporting fisheries/aquaculture, and enhancing maritime governance". The roadmap's focus on innovation clustering, aquaculture development and skills is perfectly in line with the specific objectives of Pillar 1. For example, Pillar 1 stresses quadruple-helix collaboration and technology transfer, which underpin INNOVABLUE's networking and capacity-building work. The TS will communicate results (e.g. regulatory recommendations from WP2) to the EUSAIR Blue Growth Steering Group and use EUSAIR meetings to secure buy-in.
- **Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3):** many ADRION regions have RIS3 priorities in marine tech, renewable energy and biotech. INNOVABLUE's thematic clusters will respect these. The merged BLUEAIR outputs laid groundwork for a macro-regional blue S3. Accordingly, INNOVABLUE's activities will complement national/regional innovation plans (e.g. maritime cluster initiatives in Veneto, technology parks in Slovenia,

R&I hubs in Greece). The Secretariat will coordinate with each country's RIS3 authorities to avoid overlap and seek co-financing from regional innovation funds.

- **European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH) and Observatories:** by structuring the DIH network and observatories as part of INNOVABLUE, we align with EU frameworks like the EDIH scheme and the EU Blue Economy Observatory. For instance, linking our funding mechanism development with the EU's BlueInvest and collaborating with EDIH networks ensures we tap into EU resources and avoid duplicating EU initiatives.

Every aspect of this roadmap is cross-checked against EU Blue Economy and EUSAIR goals. This coherence not only leverages policy synergies (e.g. accessing Green Deal funds), but also secures political support. By situating INNOVABLUE as a tool for implementing macro-regional strategy, the Community enhances its legitimacy and visibility among policymakers.

11. Risk assessment and mitigation

Key risks and mitigation measures include:

- **Funding shortfalls:** a risk is insufficient funding beyond the project budget.

  Mitigation: pursue a diverse funding portfolio (Interreg, Horizon, private) and phase activities so core functions (TS, fundamental labs) are prioritized. The Blue Fund initiative itself is designed to mobilize external finance.

- **Stakeholder engagement declines:** if government or industry buy-in weakens (due to elections or economic shifts).

  Mitigation: maintain high-level dialogue (TS members liaise with ministries); institutionalize INNOVABLUE roles in partner organisations; demonstrate early wins (pilot successes) to retain interest.

- **Regulatory delays:** divergent national laws may slow sandbox implementation.

  Mitigation: use the initial regulatory gap analysis to inform policymakers; implement pilot sandboxes first in friendly jurisdictions; document and share best practices to drive legislative change.

- **Technical/operational delays:** complex pilots (e.g. marine robotics) could face technological challenges.

  Mitigation: start with small-scale prototypes; engage technical experts via working groups; allow flexible project timelines and in-kind partner support to adapt.

- **Sustainability risk:** post-project, the Community may struggle to continue.
  Mitigation: from the outset, plan for successor arrangements (e.g. embedding TS tasks in a DIH), and secure multi-annual commitments from key partners and programmes. Early involvement of potential sustaining institutions (chambers, regional agencies) will help.

A risk register will be maintained by the TS. It will be reviewed quarterly, and contingency plans (e.g. alternative pilot sites if a lab fails, scaling back minor activities if needed) will be prepared. By addressing risks proactively, the Community can stay on track toward its strategic goals.

12. Sustainability and long-term vision

The long-term sustainability of INNOVABLUE depends on embedding the community into the ADRION innovation fabric. Key elements include:

- **Institutional continuity:** aim to transition the Technical Secretariat into a permanent body (for example, a jointly governed center or a network of DIHs) after 2026. This preserves institutional memory and leadership. Partners will explore hosting arrangements and budget lines for the TS beyond project funding.
- **Financial sustainability:** as noted, the ADRION Blue Fund will become an ongoing financing vehicle. The community may leverage EUSAIR Facility Points or the EU's next budget cycles (post-2027) for continuity.
- **Stakeholder commitment:** continue to engage government and industry so that national/regional strategies keep blue innovation high on the agenda. The roadmap envisions formal commitments (e.g. through Memoranda of Understanding) from member States for continued cooperation.
- **Alignment with EU agendas:** by fully supporting the EU's transformation goals, INNOVABLUE can position itself as a candidate for future EU initiatives (e.g. further macro-regional projects, BlueInvest phase 2). For instance, the Secretariat's work on financing links to the EU BlueInvest platform, suggesting possible future EU backing.
- **Community ownership:** encourage a culture where participants self-organize activities (e.g. thematic groups become formal clusters). Empowering stakeholders (through DIH services and networks) ensures the community does not rely on the project alone.
- **Environmental and social pillars:** INNOVABLUE is founded on principles of sustainability, inclusivity and collaboration. These principles ensure that the community's trajectory contributes to long-term environmental goals (e.g. SDG targets) and social benefits (job creation in maritime areas). By making sustainability a core value, the community's activities (from pilot designs to policy proposals) will remain relevant to future agendas.

The roadmap's end vision is a **resilient, self-sustaining innovation ecosystem** for the ADRION Blue Economy. It will continuously adapt to new challenges (e.g. climate change impacts on fisheries) while remaining aligned to EU green growth objectives.

13. Conclusion

The integration of insights from the Šibenik roundtable and the Crete workshop into the INNOVABLUE Strategic Roadmap has reinforced a consolidated vision for the region's Blue Economy innovation community. This **consolidated roadmap** affirms that the ADRION countries are committed to **building sustainable innovation ecosystems** that can tackle shared challenges and seize emerging opportunities in the marine and maritime domains. By weaving together high-level policy alignment, grassroots innovation efforts, and structured

action plans (WP1–WP3), INNOVABLUE is charting a course to move from isolated pilot projects to a **mission-oriented, continuously evolving community**.

Several conclusions stand out. First, a **shift to long-term, mission-driven innovation** is underway – partners recognize that only by maintaining focus on common goals (like decarbonizing marine transport or protecting marine biodiversity through tech) can the region achieve global competitiveness. Second, the tools to support this shift are being put in place: **Living Labs and Regulatory Sandboxes** will serve as practical enablers for experimentation, helping innovators traverse the gap between concept and market under supportive conditions. Third, **cross-border collaboration** has moved from principle to practice – the network formed through INNOVABLUE is already coordinating joint pilots, exchanges, and learning opportunities that bind the region's innovation efforts into one momentum. This cooperation is further strengthened by an acute awareness of the need for **policy and strategy alignment**; regional actors are aligning their strategies with EU frameworks and with each other, reducing fragmentation and ensuring that all row in the same direction.

The roadmap is supported by concrete **commitments to sustainability and governance**. The launch of the Technical Secretariat and the signing of cooperation agreements (MoUs, letters of intent) have created a formal backbone for continuity. The community has transitioned from an EU-funded project consortium into a **living institution** – one that will lead the innovation network, update the roadmap as needed, and champion the cause of sustainable Blue Economy innovation in the Adriatic–Ionian for years to come. By institutionalizing the network and embedding its action plan into ongoing structures, INNOVABLUE addresses the often-cited problem of good initiatives dissolving after initial funding. Here, the **partners' strong commitment and willingness to host innovative activities locally** (e.g. maintaining living labs, providing office space for the TS, co-funding new projects) stands as a guarantee that the vision will endure.

The INNOVABLUE Strategic Roadmap represents a comprehensive and ambitious strategy for regional innovation in the Blue Economy. It consolidates the lessons learned and perspectives gained through stakeholder engagement in 2025, and it lays out a clear path – with defined work packages and governance mechanisms – to translate those lessons into **action and lasting impact**. By focusing on **community empowerment, regulatory innovation, and sustainable financing**, the INNOVABLUE Community is poised to transform the Adriatic–Ionian Blue Economy into a model of collaborative innovation. As noted during the discussions, true transformation will be measured in the long run: when blue economy innovations are no longer isolated experiments but part of a **resilient, mission-driven ecosystem** that continuously delivers solutions for economic growth and environmental sustainability. With the roadmap in hand and the Technical Secretariat at the helm, the INNOVABLUE partners and stakeholders have made a resounding statement that they intend to **lead together**, ensuring the momentum not only continues but accelerates towards a sustainable blue future for the region.

Sources: The information and commitments outlined in this strategic report are drawn from INNOVABLUE project events and materials, including the *Report on the Roundtable "Perspectives on Building Sustainable Innovation Communities" – Šibenik, 17 June 2025* and the *INNOVABLUE Workshop Report – "Building the Future of an Innovative Community for a Sustainable Blue Economy" – Crete, 23 October 2025*. These sources detail stakeholder

discussions, proposed initiatives, and agreed actions that form the backbone of the INNOVABLUE Strategic Roadmap, as well as the project's official objectives and work plan (WP1–WP4). All project partners and their involved stakeholders by participating in the implementation of the projects activities have contributed to shaping this strategy, which will guide the INNOVABLUE Community in the next phases of development.