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To revive investments and growth, the European Union supports people, ideas and visions across Europe

The European Union is all about opportunities that deliver real benefits and make a difference at the local level. The promotion of growth, employment and well-being across Europe is one of its main priorities. By investing in people’s ideas and visions, the EU is removing obstacles and creating favourable conditions for development and modernisation across the continent. In support of the pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit of Europeans, the EU opens doors and empowers people to pursue their own innovative projects.

Europeans have already come up with original ideas for better education, modernised healthcare and greener transport infrastructure, to cite but a few examples, and the EU has provided the means to get tailored projects off the ground. Where valuable projects struggle to win investment due to the reluctance of investors to take risks, the EU steps in by backing loans or providing funding for projects that have the potential to succeed.

When the Marche Region decided to launch a microcredit programme to help local businesses to create their own venture, the EU supported the initiative. Between 2006 and 2015, more than 1,300 companies were founded and 3,300 new jobs created. The bulk of the funds went to new businesses, where young and female entrepreneurs were often in a leading role.

EU funding does not only offer people financial support for their projects. Project beneficiaries can also access hands-on coaching and expertise to ensure their projects provide real added value for the people and communities around them. Results are visible thanks to knowledge-sharing and research facilities, energy efficient buildings or smart mobility solutions, which, in turn, lead to a more sustainable future for Europe’s cities and regions.

Whether it’s by helping local entrepreneurs to build a bio-economy infrastructure, providing funds to preserve an inestimably precious archaeological site, which attracts millions of tourists every year, or improving school or hospital facilities, EU funding gives a boost to projects that make a difference on a local level. Only some of these stories feature in this brochure. But look around in your community and you will see that behind European investments there is a wealth of people’s stories to discover.
An industrial model to boost growth and protect the environment

Bioeconomy is a central topic on the EU agenda, and its development requires a rethinking of production techniques with a view to increasing efficiency and economic sustainability, and lowering environmental impact. To meet the rising demand for products made using sustainable methods, the EU-funded First2Run project was launched in 2015 to produce bioplastics, cosmetics, biolubricants and bioherbicides from renewable sources. It has created new value chains by using cheap raw materials, such as cardoon, with a low environmental impact, and by involving local farmers.

The need to protect the environment is a constraint on growth and the EU has long been committed to strengthening the circular economy and developing a sustainable industrial model. One of the biggest challenges in this regard is transforming production techniques as part of moves towards sustainability and growth of the bioeconomy. It is in this context that the First2Run project was set up. Funded by the Bio-Based Industries Joint Undertaking, a public-private partnership between the EU and a Consortium of Bioindustries, it is developing a model for the processing of bio-based products from renewable sources. Its centrepiece is a bio-refinery at Porto Torres in Sardinia.

The aim is to demonstrate the technical, economic and environmental efficiency of an innovative facility producing sustainable chemical products from oils extracted from crops grown in arid or marginal areas.

“The bio-refinery is a concept that revolutionises the economic and environmental framework since it allows the use of raw materials that aren’t in competition with foodstuffs, within a cascade-like production cycle in which the scraps of previous processing activities are gradually used up”, explains Catia Bastioli, chief executive of Novamont, the company coordinating First2Run. “In this way, significant economic and environmental benefits can be obtained, including the production of energy at the end of a material’s life cycle”.

First2Run benefits from non-refundable EU financing worth €17 million to be used for promoting the bioeconomy, one of the central topics on the EU’s agenda within the scope of its Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The project runs for four years (2015-19) and aims at getting local farmers to grow cardoon as a raw material, of which all of the components (seeds, biomass and roots) are used to produce bioplastics, cosmetics, biolubricants and bioherbicides, as well as proteins for supplementing animal fodder.

According to experts, bio-based industries can increase the competitiveness of EU countries by encouraging reindustrialisation. The expected result of this is the creation of new value chains through the establishment of links between different sectors, leading to sustainable economic growth and development, and higher levels of well-being for Europeans.

“We are very proud of this result because the circular economy and the bioeconomy, if they are placed within a systemic development model, represent an exceptional opportunity for economic and employment growth in Italy and Europe”, says Catia Bastioli, adding that “backing renewable raw materials with a view to territorial regeneration means focusing on the specific characteristics of territories based on an integrated and multi-sector approach, thus guaranteeing production that is good for the environment and respectful of ecosystems".
Supporting local entrepreneurship through micro-credit

Backed by funding from the EU and Banca Marche, the Loan of Honour supports business creation in Italy’s Marche region. It grants micro-credit without requesting guarantees and provides free technical assistance and training to tackle unemployment. Over three editions between 2006 and 2015, the Loan of Honour financed 1,355 businesses and created 3,300 jobs, thus making a tangible contribution to the region’s economic recovery.

Small firms play a crucial role in the economic and social growth of communities. But it’s often extremely complicated for people to get hold of the resources needed to start a business. This difficulty is the main obstacle to the development of a strong entrepreneurial base at local level.

In Italy, the Marche region was one of the areas hardest hit by the economic and financial crisis. In 2006, the EU decided to intervene by funding the Loan of Honour programme, which is intended to make it easier to grant micro-credit to young entrepreneurs.

Above all, as Marche Region project manager Antonio Secchi explains, the Loan of Honour was set up for the purpose of “facilitating access to credit for people who have difficulty sourcing funds from traditional banking channels (especially young people), and supporting good ideas by providing training tools and specialist help”.

Thanks to the EU’s European Social Fund – which helps people learn new skills and find better jobs – and Banca Marche, between 2006 and 2015 funding was granted to 1,355 businesses, resulting in the creation of 3,300 jobs. Half of the funds made available (about €38 million in total) were allocated to young people under 35 years of age, while 66% of the loans were given to women. Loans up to a maximum amount of €25,000 (or €50,000 depending on the number of partners in the applicant company) were granted for 6-year periods, eliminating application processing charges, as well as taxes and duties which beneficiaries would usually have to pay.

The importance of the Loan of Honour is underlined by the stories of the entrepreneurs who have benefited from it. “The desire that motivated us was the possibility of having an independent and satisfying job. The ambition was to create a specialised store: a veterinary parapharmacy (a shop selling non-medicinal health-related products). Today, our company is our dream come true,” explain Valentina Fanini and Sonia Ciarrocchi, owners of AdPets.

“In addition to the financial support, it was important to me to have a network of contacts (technicians, specialists, consultants) to whom I could submit my business plan,” says Fabiola Ruggiero, owner of Cose di Tè tea shop, adding that the Loan of Honour gave credence to my business idea. It wasn’t just financing, but rather a way of saying ‘I believe in you’.

“Ultimately, the Loan of Honour was an important path towards the kind of entrepreneurship that we really wanted, being aware of the crucial role that institutions play in providing support to people. What’s more, the Loan of Honour has been a significant project for the Marche region because it began at a time of economic stability, endured the toughest years of the economic crisis, and has consolidated itself during the current period of persistent difficulty, managing to provide answers and opportunities in an extremely fragile system,” Secchi points out.
A launch pad for hi-tech firms in Emilia-Romagna

Industrial research, experimental development and technology transfer – these are some of the main aspects of an EU-funded project to promote 10 Technopoles in Italy’s Emilia-Romagna region. The investment has led to the signing of more than 3,000 contracts between businesses and workshops, turning the region into one of the EU’s main innovation hubs.

In an age of globalisation and wide diffusion of innovation, scientific research and effective technological equipment have taken on a crucial role for businesses and industry. Proof of this is the success achieved by a programme aimed at the creation of Technopoles – centres of hi-tech research and development – in the Emilia-Romagna region. Between 2007 and 2013, the project put in place a reorganisation process for industrial research and technology transfer activities.

Made possible by €112 million funding from the European Regional Development Fund’s Operational Programme for Emilia-Romagna, the initiative has resulted in the creation of 10 Technopoles located over 20 sites throughout the region. Their purpose is to organise activities and services for industrial research, experimental development, technology transfer, and training, and orientation, as well as offering assistance to innovative start-ups and businesses. Created in collaboration with universities, research centres and local organisations, the Technopoles have been recognised by the European Commission as the best example of the use of European Structural Funds in the period 2007-13. The project results are tangible, with more than 3,000 research contracts having been signed between businesses and workshops, for a total value of €201 million.

“The investment of European funds in the Technopoles network represents the heart of the regional innovation ecosystem. The assets that led Emilia-Romagna to drive the growth at national level are based on the Technopoles network: research, companies, training and qualified employment are the fundamentals of a economic development” said Palma Costi, Counsellor for Productive Activities of the Emilia-Romagna region.

Thanks to this project, Emilia-Romagna’s network of Technopoles is today on its way to becoming an industrial innovation hub and a launch pad for companies on international markets.

Domestic assistance in Piedmont

Domestic assistance is a sector that can be problematic: recipients of assistance are often left with untrained people, while many assistants find it difficult to integrate and get employed legally. To overcome these obstacles, Italy’s Piedmont Region, together with the EU, has developed a programme that incorporates equal opportunity policies, work and professional training, benefiting more than 26,000 people.

Domestic assistant Nicoleta Mihordea loves her job, but sometimes finds it difficult to integrate with a new family. “I try to create a feeling of empathy both for the person needing help and their family members, “ she explains. “It would be wonderful if the same was done for us assistants.”

From the other side, Silvana Sandrone’s mother needs assistance. “When someone lies in bed day and night, with no contact with the outside world, she needs someone she can trust to help her. But finding such a person is not easy, “ says Silvana.

To meet the needs of Nicoleta, Silvana and thousands of other people, the Piedmont Region developed an integrated programme for the domestic assistance sector with €1.86 million from the European Social Fund, an EU fund for increasing job opportunities. A network of public and private structures was set up to balance supply and demand between families and assistants. A certification system was also introduced to attest assistants’ skills. Financial incentives encouraged families to draw up legal employment contracts for assistants.

As Nicoleta says, thanks to the initiative “the family was able to give me regular work from the start. I am extremely happy because this gives me all the rights to which workers are entitled. “Maria, whom I met thanks to this project, is exactly what I was looking for. I needed a reliable and professional person, and I found her”, adds Nicoleta.

Between 2007 and 2013, the project involved more than 26,000 people, both EU and non-EU nationals. “We believe that we have built an effective model that we hope can be replicated in other contexts,” explains Piedmont Region head of culture Paola Casagrande.

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Securing Pompeii’s archaeological treasures

Pompeii is one of the world’s most famous archaeological sites. In addition to its tremendous artistic and cultural value, the ancient city is a precious tourism resource. Following the collapse of some of its buildings, Italy and the EU launched a project to make the site safer and preserve an archaeological wonder for humanity. This has led to an increase in visitors, benefiting the local economy.

The work was focused on securing the site in order to allow the many thousands of people who visit it each year to continue to fully enjoy its wonders. The first stage was completed in December 2015 and the final stage is due to be finished in 2018.

However, the initiative is intended as something more than just a major renovation. Its wider aim is to promote the growth of the Campania region, where Pompeii is located, and the results are clear. Since the end of the project, annual visitor numbers have increased from 122,000 to 250,000.

The aim of turning the museum into a more attractive place to visit that makes a full contribution to cultural and economic growth appears to have been achieved. The project has improved the services, and increased revenue and socio-cultural development.

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High-quality healthcare with economic benefits

Sicily’s Mediterranean Institute for Transplants and Advanced Specialised Therapies (ISMETT) is the first hospital in Italy built exclusively for transplants and end-stage vital organ failure care. It is recognised as a medical reference point across Europe, as well as being a regional economic driver. Grants from the Region of Sicily and the EU have enhanced the quality of the services ISMETT offers.

The Mediterranean Institute for Transplants and Advanced Specialised Therapies (ISMETT), located in Sicily, is a perfect example of how the healthcare sector can become an economic driving force, rather than a recipient of public spending.

In addition to being a human right, high-quality healthcare is an opportunity for research, innovation and, as a consequence, local social and economic development.

The Institute is the first hospital in Italy designed exclusively for transplants and care of end-stage vital organ failure. In Sicily, it is not just a provider of clinical services, but also an important engine for the regional economy. Thanks to the significant amounts of business it generates, ISMETT has created almost 1,800 jobs. This is why it has benefited from extensive investment, including through a project for the Sicilian public health service which was funded by the EU to the tune of €10.8 million.

In 2007 and 2015, patient areas and services were expanded, and Italy’s first hybrid operating room was built. The features of the elements normally found in a technologically advanced operating room, along with sophisticated radiological imaging equipment. The area for sterilising medical implements has also undergone complete renovation. All of this has been done with the aim of improving the quality of care, the safety of patients and the accuracy of diagnoses.

“Here in Palermo we have a healthcare centre that attracts patients from all over Europe. Now, additional technological innovation will contribute to increasing the level of efficiency and response vis-à-vis the patients. Surgery will be safer and more controlled, yet at the same time ‘less invasive’,” explains Rosario Crocetta, President of the Sicily Region (2012-2017).

A network to mitigate the impact of natural disasters

In a country at risk of geological disasters like Italy, providing companies with risk assessment and prevention tools should be a priority. Derris funded by the EU’s LIFE+ environmental programme, deals with this by strengthening links between insurers, public administration and small and medium-sized companies. Italy is a country at high risk of hydrogeological events such as landslides and floods. The damage caused by these events often has serious economic repercussions for the affected areas. It can hit small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) particularly hard, as they lack suitable tools to assess and manage risks and disasters. According to some estimates, about 1.6 million businesses in Italy are exposed to flood risk, and the value of the damage caused by extreme weather events between 2013 and 2015 amounted to approximately €8 billion.

Against this background, Derris was set up in 2015. It is aimed at building bridges between the worlds of insurance, public administration and business so as to provide SMEs with the means of evaluating and reducing risks. Foremost amongst these are a self-assessment tool for businesses and innovative public-private partnership models. The benefits are clear, as being prepared for natural disasters has a positive impact on the entire community.

“The aim of Derris is to distribute tools and skills for risk assessment and definition and disaster recovery plans for areas most at risk, extending the scope to cover Italy’s entire productive structure and its people. All this is done by developing partnerships through which technical knowledge is made available to the public administration for the drafting of regional prevention policies and encouraging a risk culture capable of reducing damage in the event of natural disasters”, said Maria Parmigiani, head of the Unipol Group sustainability office.

The Unipol Group heads up the project, which received an initial investment of €1.3 million. Of this, €700,000 was provided by the EU under the LIFE+ programme.

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Keeping students from dropping out of school

It’s not enough for an education system to just provide good teaching, it also needs to make sure that students get the right support throughout their time at school. Italy’s Puglia region has embraced this vision with its EU-funded Diritti a scuola project, which provides educational, psychological and motivational assistance for students aged 6-15 who are facing problems.

Developed by the Puglia regional authorities with EU support, the Diritti a scuola (Tackling school drop-out rates) project aims to tackle early school leaving and help youngsters to get a valuable and complete education. The project provides educational, psychological and motivational assistance to students between the ages of 6 and 15 who are experiencing difficulties. Backed by €75 million from the European Social Fund – an EU fund aimed at improving people’s job prospects – the initiative has so far helped more than 50,000 students and 10,000 families. This contributed to a fall in Puglia’s school drop-out rate, from 30.3% in 2003 to 19.9% in 2013.

Aside from the encouraging numbers, the project’s success is confirmed by the people who have experienced it at first hand. “Diritti a scuola has underpinned the development of a new learning experience. Students did not attend traditional classes; instead, they were involved in active lessons in which they played the leading role,” says Felicia Positò, headteacher of Istituto Tommaso Fiore in Bari. “The team of teachers helped students improve their communication skills, thus encouraging an extremely positive learning environment.” Since 2009, Diritti a scuola has, in particular, improved the study of foreign languages and science in primary schools and the teaching of Italian language and mathematics in secondary schools. Moreover, the project has made possible the provision of tangible assistance and intercultural mediation for both students from less well-off backgrounds and those from different countries. All of this work resulted in Diritti a scuola receiving a RegioStars Award from the European Commission in 2015. These are awards given to EU-financed regional projects with the potential to attract and inspire other regions.

Environmental sustainability requires a significant commitment from all economic sectors, including healthcare. In Italy, the challenge has been taken up by the Ca’ Foncello hospital in Treviso, where, thanks to support from the Veneto Region and the EU, existing buildings are to be refurbished and new facilities built. This will help the hospital increase energy efficiency, lower carbon dioxide emissions and achieve a high level of eco-sustainability by 2024.

By 2024, Italy’s health service, and in particular the city of Treviso, will have a hospital that is a point of reference for both medical care and energy use. Thanks to a public-private partnership infrastructure project aimed at improving health services, Treviso’s Ca’ Foncello complex will become a healthcare hub with a strong focus on eco-sustainability. It will boast five hectares of green space and footpaths, as well as infrastructure to cut energy consumption and emissions, and reuse waste water.

Existing buildings will be refurbished, while new ones will be built. Both new and refurbished buildings will meet the latest structural regulations for safety and earthquake resistance.

The hospital will get an additional 1,000 beds, of which 600 will be in a modern, hi-tech building and 400 in a new medium- and intensive-care area, as well as 200 outpatient rooms. Research and logistical centres will also be established.

“In our opinion, Treviso will become a model that will be replicated in the Veneto region – a new concept of hospital with a park and excellent public services, and one that is well integrated into the city,” said Veneto Region President Luca Zaia, explaining that the project will “start with the headquarters for the 118 emergency number and then give the city a modern and advanced hospital complex. It will be the hospital of the future”.

The overall cost of the project is estimated at more than €250 million, which is partly funded by the European Investment Bank (EIB). Through the European Fund for Strategic Investments – an EU initiative to mobilise investment for strategically important projects – the EIB will provide approximately €70 million for the design, construction and operation of the hospital. Research and logistical centres will also be established.

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WHERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION

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