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Innovation Camp – Encouraging new approaches in rural Finland

Finnish National Rural Network



Source: Finnish National Rural Network



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Executive summary

In 2012 the Mainland Finland Rural Development Programme focused on innovation to encourage the development of new ideas, products and services and also different ways of working in rural areas. As a response to this the Finnish NSU, working with a range of partners, developed and delivered an Innovation Camp bringing together specialists and entrepreneurs to develop innovative solutions to the threats and opportunities apparent in Finnish rural areas.

An open call was put out for innovative ideas suited to a rural context with a total of forty-seven different concepts received. Eight of these were selected to be explored further at the Innovation Camp. Over three days, the Camp brought together eight teams of six experts to develop one of these ideas each and then compete to create the best, new innovative product or service. At the end of the process each team delivered their sales pitch to a jury who rewarded the most promising innovations.

The next stage of the project is to organise regional Innovation Camps. Ten areas with different special local development themes expressed a desire to host a Camp with five being selected. During 2013 regional Innovation Camps will be organised in these areas supported both financially and with expert help from the NSU.

The Innovation Camp was hugely successful identifying forty-seven new ideas for rural innovation and raising awareness of the potential of rural areas as a location for innovative product and service development. Networking enabled the Innovation Camp to achieve its accomplishments with a range of new actors taking part and contributions received from across the country.



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Background

The Finnish NSU focuses on a different challenge associated with the Mainland Finland Rural Development Programme in rural areas every year – in 2012 the focus was on innovation. It was hoped this theme would encourage rural practitioners to develop new ideas, products and services and also explore new ways of working that developed effective responses to some of the modern challenges faced in rural areas.

One of the aims during the year of the theme was to draw attention to those innovative ideas which harnessed opportunities unique to rural areas in a new and novel fashion, reminding people that ‘There is Room for the Future in the Countryside’. It was recognised that new solutions were required to deal with contemporary challenges such as climate change, bioenergy, new technologies and population trends. These changes also provide new opportunities in rural areas to innovate and change. New kinds of rural businesses and industries may fulfil some of the needs and demands arising from today’s changing rural context.

The Finnish NSU, working with a range of partners, explored several mechanisms which could act as a catalyst for innovation, deciding on the development and delivery of an Innovation Camp. This Camp brought together specialists and entrepreneurs in a three day ‘melting pot’ of innovation to brainstorm and develop innovative responses to the threats and opportunities apparent in Finnish rural areas.

This Case Study was developed with the support of the Finnish NSU, documentation they provided and information collected from the Internet.

Participants of networking

Partners involved with developing and delivering the Innovation Camp included the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners, ProAgria Advisory Centre and the Municipality of Kaustinen who hosted the Camp. Networking also occurred between all the Camp participants both during and after the initiative.

Objectives

The Innovation Camp was established as part of the 2012 theme year of the Mainland Finland Rural Development Programme. The aims of the rural Innovation Camp were to encourage teams of people to respond to the changing rural context through the development of innovation. Specifically the Innovation Camp sought to:

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- develop a rural 'innovation environment' which would increase and improve co-operation between experts and develop a new method of working,
- showcase the strengths of the countryside for enabling new innovation,
- develop new rural innovations in product development and service provision,
- raise awareness of the opportunities provided by the Rural Development Programme to develop new innovations,
- be a learning process to build a model for regional innovation camps.

The process and main activities

During spring 2012 The Finnish NSU put out an open call for rural innovation ideas, encouraging individuals, businesses and groups to put forward an outline of their most innovative new concepts, which were particularly suited to rural areas. This process identified a total of forty-seven different ideas that could be developed further, with eight of these then selected to be explored at the Innovation Camp.

The first Finnish Rural Innovation Camp was organised in June 2012 in the small municipality of Kaustinen. Each of the eight ideas was developed in a small team, which included six experts - from researchers and designers to entrepreneurs. These versatile teams then competed against each other to develop their idea into the most effective project. Over three days and nights the ideas were developed into new products or services, which made ingenious use of opportunities found in rural areas. During the process the teams were also helped by different kinds of external support, which they could call upon as and when needed.

The eight ideas developed further were:

Field Apprentice: Developing currently unused fields for shared community food growing. Fields currently not in use are utilised for the production of vegetables for communities. This is an excellent opportunity especially in the countryside near the cities. Urban and rural residents with growing skills work together in their community, to grow and harvest food, which they consume at home. This would enable local people who do not own land to develop small scale, local, organic food production.

Rideshare: Rideshare makes rural transport available to all. This service allows rural residents to easily identify people who provide or need car journeys over a certain distance, exchange details and share journeys together. The aim is to increase the number of rural areas with access to transport opportunities, as well as significantly reduce carbon emissions per passenger.

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Green roofs: Green roofs involves the development of green roofs for buildings. This service provides businesses and housing associations with green roof design, construction and life-cycle maintenance - also supporting the development of the sector and its related products. The benefits of green roofs are multi-faceted including climate change adaptation and mitigation, improved air quality, comfort and the creation of diverse living environments. The demand of green roofs is biggest in cities, providing an excellent opportunity for rural businesses to export their rural know-how to urban areas.

The new greenhouse: Greenhouses consume large amounts of energy and the sector is in financial difficulty due to these rising costs. This new innovative greenhouse utilises natural light more efficiently and therefore is more energy-efficient. It is ideally suited for the conditions in Finland and will reduce the cost of greenhouse production to family farms.

Small towns HUB park: All major cities have developed their own innovation and technology centres, although these have not always been successful. This project would tap in to innovation in rural areas developing bespoke innovation 'hub' formats, developing small town technology centres or HUB parks.

AirBnb peer learning: 'The Finnish Teacher' project shares the uncompromising knowledge and excellence of rural Finns. Set in old rural country houses or farm tourism sites residential courses are established where rural people teach a range of subjects such as urban food growing or fly fishing to tourists and visitors. This combines the promotion of local tourism, rural innovation and Finnish know-how to share rural skills.

Group Energy Repairs: Half of Finland's energy consumption is caused by industry. A large part of these are small and medium-sized businesses who could easily improve their usage. This service targets SMEs that operate in industrial areas around Finland. Companies providing the service include energy auditors, designers and fitters. This creates a new green economy that can be captured by rural businesses, especially those involved in bio-energy production.

Organic Portal: This is a service that combines the production and consumption needs of the existing organic sector and develops a forum for consumers to enjoy the food and its producers. Current losses are reduced and small farmers can increase their production to meet the increase in demand as interest in the sector grows. This may then also create opportunities for the development of new short supply chains.

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The camp then culminated with each team delivering a sales pitch for their concept to the jury, a little like Dragons Den, who rewarded the most promising ideas. Since the camp finished the winners have continued working together on their ideas with the on-going support of the Innovation Camp partners.

The next phase of the initiative is to organise regional Innovation Camps. The process and results from the pilot Innovation Camp have been disseminated to support rural developers at a regional level. During spring 2013 the Finnish NSU made a further open call to rural actors in order to find areas and subjects where the Innovation Camp model could be utilised further. Ten areas with different special local development themes were enrolled, with five of them being selected. During 2013 regional Innovation Camps will be organised in these areas supported both financially and with expert help from the NSU. The regional innovation camps will be delivered in very different parts of Finland - from Lapland to Southern Finland and from the Baltic Sea to the Russian border. The themes of the camps are ecological products and services, accessing Russian markets, developing high speed fibre broad band connections, organic food, new methods for rural development, rural well-being and well-being services.

The Innovation Camp initiative was instigated, developed and delivered with the Finnish NSU as the lead partner. It gathered all the major actors together to plan and implement the Innovation Camp and coordinated the process including the hiring of an external service provider to put the Camp into practice. Planning and monitoring of the implementation of the Camp was carried out by the Committee, which consisted of representatives of the project partners.

Resources

The partners provided both funding and their expertise to implement the Innovation Camp making the initiative a real joint effort. The Camp was supported by Committee, which planned and monitored the practical arrangements and provided expert help at different stages of the process. In total the Innovation Camp cost €86,000 to plan and deliver.

The 'added value' of networking

The Innovation Camp was primarily established to identify innovative concepts that could be developed into feasible projects that harnessed aspects of the rural context to deliver new products or services. The process of developing the Camp resulted in forty-seven new ideas for rural innovation being launched. Other benefits included:

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- The publicity received by the Camp promoted the potential of rural areas as a source of and catalyst for new innovation.
- Via the Camp, development efforts carried out in rural Finland by Finnish businesses received widespread coverage in national, regional and local media.
- A new model for developing rural innovation was launched.
- This new Innovation Camp model has now been disseminated at a regional level.

The success of the Innovation Camp has been reliant on successful networking at many levels. It was vital that all project partners were prepared to support the pilot of a new model of project development in rural areas. All partners felt more able to take that risk as networking had enabled them to build trust and understanding with each other. The process of developing the innovative ideas was based on the ability of the new team members to network, build trust and create a new product or service together. The Innovation Camp is an example of what can be achieved through robust and effective networking.

Networking was supported throughout the process of developing and delivering the Innovation Camp. Through partners and participants working successfully together the Innovation Camp was highly successful, enabled by the partners' strong commitment throughout the entire process. Networking enabled the Camp to achieve its accomplishments and this networking resulted in a range of added value benefits:

- New actors took part in the process - urban actors met rural actors, and new ideas were discovered resulting in the expansion of the existing 'rural' network.
- The Camp was inclusive, attracting entries from all demographics and all parts of the country.
- The expertise of the partners was used efficiently.
- Benchmarking through ENRD was enabled: the initial idea was received from the National Rural Network of Sweden.

Future challenges

The next challenge for this process is the successful development and delivery of further Innovation Camps at a regional level. The model developed through this initiative is eminently replicable and the networks and expertise developed nationally can be effectively transferred to regional partners. It is hoped that this will result in the development of a large number of further innovative approaches to the development of rural areas.

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Once delivered regionally there is also much opportunity to transfer this approach to other rural areas across Member States. It may even be possible for Innovation Camps to be considered at a very local level and incorporated as part of the process of developing a Local Development Strategy – both as a networking tool, to raise awareness of the LDS process and to identify indicative projects that the LAG may want to include in their strategy.

Networking has been the key to the success of this initiative and ensuring that this process is appropriately undertaken when the Innovation Camp methodology is transferred to other regions will remain a challenge. The experience gained in Finland will hopefully support successful delivery of Innovation Camps in other areas.

Further information

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