

Preparatory Action on  
Smart Rural Areas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



Policy Analysis – Task 4.2: Assess options for future  
actions

Case study: Innovation Camp methodology,  
Finland

Case study report

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## 1 Summary

**The Innovation Camp is a method for capacity building and co-developing smart solutions:**

- Very practical, but intensive way of developing new ideas into concrete innovations;
- Strengthens the local ‘innovation environment’: can change the processes, create new linkages between people, NGOs, entrepreneurs and decision-makers in the area, and boost good energy;
- Good tool to attract new actors and attention to rural development: people who usually do not participate;
- Good way to receive publicity for rural areas and the possibilities the Rural Development Programme (RDP) offers: media likes concrete processes and results;
- Can be used as a tool in Smart Village development processes: Innovation Camps work best when there is a clear ownership of problems and solutions created during the camp;
- The method works well at the village level.

## 2 Background of the Innovation Camp methodology

### 2.1 Context of the intervention

The Finnish Rural Network Support Unit decided to test regional Innovation Camps as tools for developing rural areas during 2013 and 2014. A total of five Innovation Camps were carried out in 2013 to find new innovations. A leaflet was produced in 2014, based on data collected during the Camps, an online survey and a set of interviews in the spring of 2014.

In 2021, the village of Vuolijoki won Finland’s Smartest Village competition and was awarded an Innovation Camp. This report analyses the methodology itself, including elements from the 2021 Vuolijoki Camp. There are existing reports on the Innovation Camp method in a regional and smart specialisation context. Here, however, we analyse the Camp methodology from a village perspective in the framework of the EU Smart Village working definition.

**Table 1: Overview of the intervention**

<b>Name</b>	(Vuolijoki) Innovation Camp
<b>Level of implementation</b>	Local
<b>Period</b>	4-5 November 2021
<b>Policy context/source of funding</b>	Local development methodology/tool – Funding by the National Rural Network Support Unit
<b>Amount of funding (EUR)</b>	25 000 €



## 2.2 Objectives

The main goal of the Camps is to produce and highlight new innovations, according to regional and local development strategies, and also to improve and create new models for cooperation among regional experts, developers and entrepreneurs. In addition, Innovation Camps are used to outline the strengths of rural areas in fostering innovations, marketing the potential of Rural Development Programmes in developing innovations and introducing a holistic learning process refining the concept of Innovation Camp.

## 2.3 Understanding of the ‘Smart Villages’ concept

Vuolijoki is definitely seen as a Smart Village, as understood by the Finnish Rural Network Unit and the Ministry of Agriculture. The working definition of the European Commission (below) serves as basis in the ‘smart’ thinking in Finland. In the 2023-2027 programming period, becoming a Smart Village implies the participation of at least two partners with innovative and added-value thinking.

*‘Smart Villages are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social and/or environmental conditions, in particular by mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart Villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and the implementation of Smart Village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources’.*

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en)

# 3 Implementation of the intervention

## 3.1 Spatial context of implementation

The Innovation Camp in Vuolijoki 2021 was realised at the village level. The methodology itself is transferable to different contexts and development needs. In the concept, one or more themes can be selected. In the case of the Vuolijoki Innovation Camp, four themes were selected: new forms of entrepreneurship, new forms of living, village identity of children and young people, and biogas.

**Table 2: Basic information on the spatial context**

<b>Name of locality/region</b>	Vuolijoki village
<b>Surface area (km<sup>2</sup>)</b>	900 km <sup>2</sup> (former small municipality covering 10 villages)
<b>Number of inhabitants, population density</b>	2 100 inhabitants. Low-density area.
<b>Three main strengths</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Community spirit: a strong community spirit, combined with the feeling of belonging together increases motivation and willingness to reach objectives.</li> <li>2 Networking: networking and well-planned partnerships are important at village-level development.</li> </ol>



	3 Forward-looking: having a common vision and goals for the future motivates action.
<b>Three main challenges</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Finding skilled workforce to local enterprises is not easy.</li> <li>2 There is a certain imbalance in the age structure of Vuolijoki.</li> <li>3 The remote location creates challenges, e.g. in accessibility and mobility.</li> </ol>

### 3.2 Target groups/beneficiaries

The main target group depends on the selected theme or territory. The broad scope of participants – rising from the methodology itself and ranging from professionals, officials to local actors and villagers – ensures a broad dissemination and increased capacity of the theme. In the Case of Vuolijoki, the community and the villagers were the main target group. Four leading themes were selected, based on the village needs. Community and village developers all around Finland were invited and joined the Innovation Camp.

### 3.3 Activities implemented, methodology and/or key features of the intervention

The aim of a 48-hour regional Innovation Camp is to create **new ideas** to develop rural areas, as well as to challenge and develop the people, economy and networks of rural areas. Every Innovation Camp is implemented based on the **bottom-up needs** of the selected territory/village and with a strong connection to practical problem solving and a true need of its environment. That was also the case in Vuolijoki. The main goal of the Camp is to create **realisable ideas**. The cooperation and first steps required to make the idea happen should be agreed during the Camp. New cooperation parties and resources are sought immediately after the Camp. In many cases, it is best to invite local entrepreneurs to implement the ideas in practice.

It is possible to address selected **themes** in small groups during the Camp. It makes teamwork a lot easier, if the themes are specifically defined. Therefore, it is essential to draw what are the expected results of the theme, what are the likely solutions, and most importantly – what are the issues not to be discussed in the theme. **A leading theme** may be selected for further development.

**Selecting participants** is of great importance and therefore invitations should be sent well in advance. The selection process should emphasise **heterogeneity, innovativeness** and courage. It is important to include young, future key actors to the planning process, for example through cooperation with universities or schools. To develop the themes further, the Camp needs **substance** knowledge players, but also **out-of-the-box thinkers and fearless inventors**. An optimal group composition includes young and more experienced, men and women, researchers and developers, enthusiasts and constructive critics, doers and thinkers. Many of the issues in the Innovation Camps seek long-term impacts, and therefore people who are dealing with the issues in the future should be in the discussions.

Division of responsibilities for **communication and dissemination** of results to the widest possible public improves both the orderliness of communication and the impacts of the Camp. The marketing and promotion of an Innovation Camp should begin early enough to make both participants and the public aware of the upcoming event. Pre-camp communication attracts and also commits people to take part in and follow the Camp. Efforts should be put into attracting **the media** to the guest event that takes place on



the third day of the Camp. Usually the invited guests are local mayors, officials of local municipalities, funding agents and the local media.

To be successful, the camp requires a great deal of **Camp spirit**. The Camp facilities enable participants to break loose from roles and traditional attitudes and perspectives on issues. A free and creative state of mind may be supported with inspiring accomodation and meals. In addition, it is important that the groups have equal premises and facilities. Stimulating study visits and a relaxing evening social programme support team building and throwing ideas around, and also give participants a chance to have a short break from intensive working.

In addition to outside experts, all the Camps have **a jury**. The role and tasks of the jury should be communicated to judge members and Camp participants. The main task for the jury is to assess the groups' ways of working. The jury may also pick a winner if they are appointed to that task, or at least give special mentions to some of the groups. The evaluation criteria have to be clearly communicated to participants in advance. The main task of the jury is to spar with the Camp teams through its feedback. Its task is to inspire, give constructive feedback and evaluate the idea. The jury helps the teams to develop the ideas into innovations, commercialised products or business concepts. Also, implementation or next steps are a considerable part of the evaluation.

The Camp consists of **three phases** and is carried out over the course of three days. Participants work in four or five thematic groups of six to eight people.

**DAY 1. Team Spirit and Brainstorming.** Start by lunch. Getting to know each other, teambuilding to create team spirit. Brainstorming (producing dozens of ideas around the given theme) and outlining great challenges and possibilities.

**DAY 2. Choosing and Testing.** Choosing the idea to be further developed in the morning. Testing and conceptualising the idea (e.g. sales pitch, business model canvas) for the rest of the day. External sparring partners asking difficult questions. The second day is magical. At the end of the day, groups make a play (theatre, dance, singing) about the journey they have gone through during the camp. Creative plays describe both the frustration and pleasure of pursuing and developing the idea.

**DAY 3. Final Concept.** Finalising the concept of the idea, presenting it to others, board of judges, invited guests and media. Final lunch.

Different roles are attributed in an Innovation Camp process. The village defines the needs and the themes to be developed, invites guests and media and takes care of the practical arrangements of the Camp. It may be supported in the work by other local or territorial actors, such as LEADER groups, municipalities or stronger NGOs. It is important to hire a professional facilitator to facilitate the process and lead the work. In Finland, the NSU has supported and assisted the organisers throughout the Innovation Camps. The Support Unit has e.g. helped with assessing and evaluating the work and by providing basic funding.

**The method is by nature highly participative and related to the concepts of Smart Village and smart specialisation.** In Finland, village plans are a common feature. The Innovation Camp boosts implementation of the local plans. For additional information and more extensive analysis on territorial and regional aspects of Innovation Camps, see: [3e201fe6-ff13-429d-8105-a09140eb1dd7 \(europa.eu\)](https://europea.eu/3e201fe6-ff13-429d-8105-a09140eb1dd7)

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## 4 Impact of the intervention in terms of key features of the Smart Village approach

Impact assessment of a methodology is interrelated with how the methodology is implemented with the resources connected to it in a certain context. The LEADER methodology has behind it an implementing structure and available financing. The Innovation Camp belongs to the family of **multi-actor development methods** that can be used or adapted to any level of development, governance or administration. As a general remark, the impact of methodologies, and in the case of an Innovation Camp, depends on the will and commitment of those interested in reaching the objective. The Innovation Camp responding to a specific challenge is to be considered as **a supportive tool** meant to bring **added value** to the development need. It may be **used in planning strategies as well**. The impact depends also on the full implementation of the method, including follow-up. Innovation Camps contribute well to Smart Village principles.

The impacts will be described both at a general level and through the Vuolijoki Village experience.

### 4.1 General impact

From the Camp experiences Finland had in 2013 and 2014, the NRN found that the Innovation Camps have both **short- and long-term effects**, of which the most visible are the **new initiatives, projects and business**. Improved cooperation among individuals, regional organisations, and local communities is one of the long-lasting effects a Camp might produce. Organising a Camp on local issues deepened and **improved cooperation** regionally. According to the organisers, the Camps helped to strengthen the will and perception that it pays off to join forces and do things together instead of acting alone. Rural development benefits from new actors and ideas were developed jointly.

#### For the selected village (territory):

**Social impact:** The concept itself brings motivation and raises **the village spirit**. The feeling of doing together to reach the objective with your community actives, supported by peers, experts, researchers, and theme specialists, brings a lot of social capital. You want also to show to others your commitment. Results often correlate with the well-being of the interested and **the motivation** to reach the set target.

**Capacity impact:** As much as it is a development process, it is a **learning process** for all the stakeholders. Not only the beneficiary, but all participants learn about the discussed themes, participatory processes and potential benefits of cross-fertilising development and actions. Participants bring home the knowledge, giving **a multiplier effect** to a single event.

**Thematic impact:** The selected theme is being analysed and developed from different perspectives, which leads to new approaches and creative partnerships.

**Economic impact:** The impact can be direct through new projects, businesses or jobs. The large voluntary effort brings also economic added value.

**Strategic impact:** The Innovation Camp can be organised *ex-tempore* or pop-up based on a single challenge, but if we look for longer-term impacts it works best when it supports a clear strategy or plan.

**Potential benefits:** A positive circle creates long-term benefits for the beneficiary.



#### 4.2 Interplay of social and technological innovation (digitalisation)

The Innovation Camp is a social innovation as such. The method is open to include digital intelligent solutions where appropriate. Face-to-face meetings in a rural ‘Smart’ Village context are almost a prerequisite for all to understand the local conditions and state of play. Preparatory actions may be organised online. This would enable efficient working during the Camp when the groups have had a chance to unload the first set of expectations, suspicions, and ideas. Social media use could be further analysed.

#### 4.3 Other aspects of relevance

To reach its potential, the method should be implemented in full. Villages do not have enough resources or capacities in general. Nor do they have finances to pay expensive expertise or consultancy. Villages already tackle the challenges with ‘light actions’, e.g. inviting experts and administration to village houses.

### 5 Lessons learned from the intervention

A need or a challenge is the trigger. The motivation and the commitment to reach the set objective is the main success factor, the lack of it the main obstacle or bottleneck. Villages can not use the full potential of the methodology without external expertise and resources.

#### 5.1 Success factors and bottlenecks

Table 3: Main success factors of the intervention

Success factors	Short explanation
Commitment	The villages willing to organise an Innovation Camp are by definition committed to reach set targets. The commitment is best reached through an inclusive philosophy. The role of leading persons, village elders or similar is important.
Motivation	Inclusiveness and result-orientated spirit increases motivation. The Innovation Camp method is very motivating for the village wanting to show its dynamism and getting outside supporters. For the participants, showing peer village spirit while learning themselves from the process is also motivating by nature.
Reachable targets	The Innovation Camp is organised around selected themes which have realistic chances to succeed.
Supportive environment	A relaxed and motivated Camp-style environment with a facilitator, combined with a heterogeneous selection of peers, students, developers and expertise, creates a cross-fertilised supportive environment for new and innovative solutions.
Positive impacts	The methodology brings visible and clear impacts for the local actors (these are explained above in section 4.1). The innovation potential is big.



Understandable and transferable methodology	The method is clear, participative, social and transferable to different contexts as such or adapted to different realities.
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**Table 4: Main bottlenecks of the intervention**

Bottlenecks	Short explanation
Resourcing	The methodology cannot be implemented in full, unless enough human and financial resources are dedicated to the process. Adapted lighter innovation processes are possible (need based).
Capacities	Villages must be certain that they have the capacities and available know-how to secure the process and the follow-up.
Lack of real will and commitment	Broad enough acceptance must be behind the undertaken actions, even though a core team would implement them.

**Vuolijoki Camp participant:** *“The motivation and spirit of doing rose among all participants. We were a bit afraid of how others would look at our village, but it turned out that participants appreciated the genuineness and the local realities of Vuolijoki. One can’t understand the local situation sitting behind a desk or a hotel meeting room.*

*The working relations with the city became easier after the process, probably due to the positive image created by the great visibility in the media of the Smart Village competition victory and the big Innovation Camp event. Our school was saved. Decision makers may sit more often in our development meetings. The dynamism of the village became stronger and all selected themes are today developed further. Thematic evenings with invited experts are organised.*

*The follow-up lies in the hands of the villagers. Capacity building, know-how and support may be needed to fulfill the objectives. Otherwise the spirit of doing could lose in strength. We are in the happy position of having an association and people capable of applying for funding for development and innovation purposes.”*



Figure 1: Participants at the Vuolijoki Innovation Camp

## 5.2 Transferability

The Innovation Camp multi-actor method to create innovations and solutions is transferable to different thematic or geographical contexts and levels (local, regional, national, and EU). It also suits to strategic and programme planning work. It may need to be slightly adapted to the theme and the context.

### 5.2.1 Key principles transferable to other thematic contexts

The Innovation Camp methodology is transferable to any thematic or territorial context. The method could be used when developing e.g. community climate actions at local, regional or national level. According to the **Practical Handbook for Regional authorities** ([111 \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eip/111/)), Innovation Camps may be used by:

1. policy-makers to mobilise self-organising capacities of cities and regions in order to address local societal challenges;
2. business/entrepreneurs to match/join interests, capacities and forces locally in order to compete innovatively in a globalised market;
3. academia to identify locally meaningful research and innovation capacities to be developed in the long run in cooperation with business and government, while working with and for the local society;
4. civil society to empower citizens to gain ownership and conceive innovative solutions to societal issues of their concern.

[v2] megjegyzést írt: To me, this is a picture, not a figure, but as you wish...



### 5.2.2 Spatial transferability

The **Innovation Camp handbook** ([3e201fe6-ff13-429d-8105-a09140eb1dd7 \(europa.eu\)](https://europe.europa.eu/en/innovation-camp-handbook) p. 102) analyses the method being used in a series of connected innovation processes at regional level. Several situations are possible, all of them valuable:

- In one region. Camps dealing with different aspects of a key, but complex challenge, or different issues in the same regional innovation ecosystem.
- In different regions. Different regions dealing with similar issues, or with issues in the same sector. This was the case at Bratislava (Danube macro-regional cooperation), Thessaloniki (Resilience) and Brussels (interregional cooperation on Energy).
- Collaborative innovation at regional level.

The handbook also mentions macro-regions, micro-regions and urban contexts for smart specialisation.

## 6 Conclusions

### 6.1 Scope of the intervention for supporting the Smart Village approach

If implemented in full, the methodology supports the process towards and/or strengthens the level of smartness, as defined above in section 2.3. Digital technologies may be suggested as solutions by the Camp community.

### 6.2 Implications for further development of the ‘Smart Village’ concept

The Innovation Camp methodology can either support the pathway of a village to become innovative, boost existing activities or create new activities, potentially including new digital technologies. There is a big diversity between villages which may need to be taken into account if an Innovation Camp is planned or if another approach would be more appropriate. The ‘Smart Village’ concept defines well partnership and innovative thinking. Innovation Camps have often longer-term impacts on the village. Long-term thinking could be an additional element in the concept.

### 6.3 Other aspects

A result that is quite visible from the Innovation Camps is that villages often need continuous variable level of support to reach set objectives and ensure follow-up.

## 7 References

- Innovation Camp handbook: [3e201fe6-ff13-429d-8105-a09140eb1dd7 \(europa.eu\)](https://europe.europa.eu/en/innovation-camp-handbook)
- PDF leaflet on Innovation Camps by the Finnish Rural Network Support Unit: [harvesting-regional-innovation-camps-2014.pdf \(maaseutu.fi\)](https://maaseutu.fi/en/innovation-camps-2014.pdf)
- Practical handbook for Regional Authorities – Innovation Camps [111 \(europa.eu\)](https://europe.europa.eu/en/innovation-camp-handbook)
- Innovation Camp with students: [Innovation Camp | IDEA Tools \(idea-camp.eu\)](https://idea-camp.eu/), [Business Innovation Camp: collaborative tool for business development | University of Turku \(utu.fi\)](https://utu.fi/en/business-innovation-camp-collaborative-tool-for-business-development/)



- Interview of two Finnish NRN Support Unit officials
- Interview of a villager in Vuolijoki

## 8 ANNEX : Methodological approach of the case study

### 8.1 Desk research

- Web handbooks, Innovation Camp websites involving universities and businesses
- PDF Leaflet by the Finnish Rural Network Support Unit

### 8.2 Expert interviews

- Two Finnish Rural Network Support Unit officials
- Village active in Vuolijoki