

Archipelago Business Development: Final Evaluation Overview



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Archipelago Business Development/Work Package 3
Deliverable 3.6.2. Evaluation reports and future development suggestions to all
participants – overview as input to knowledge database

Archipelago Business Development: Final Evaluation

“This project has certainly given me a lot, both hope and faith for the future.”

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The EU Interreg Central Baltic-financed project named Archipelago Business Development (ABD) started in the fall 2016 and ended in September 2019. The project aimed at knowledge sharing and creation, business model and partnership development across borders, as well as new start-up business formation and support in the archipelago regions of Southwest Finland, Åland Islands and Stockholm. The goal was to recruit 60 companies, develop 10 new business models among existing companies and support five new start-up companies. This report will summarize key activities that have been realized during the entire project period and evaluate the overall performance. The aim is to offer insights and lessons learned from the different activities in order to provide general future development suggestions for different stakeholders.

The project was led by Novia University of Applied Sciences (Novia UAS, Turku, Finland). The other project partners were Åbo Akademi University (ÅAU, Turku, Finland), Södertörns Högskola (SH, Stockholm, Sweden) and Drivhuset Norden (Drivhuset, Stockholm, Göteborg & Örebro, Sweden). Each partner had the main responsibility for different work packages (WPs). This report is part of WP3, which was led by ÅAU. However, cross-border collaboration has been at the very core of all project activities and the insights presented here are based on extensive work done by all four partner organizations.

All project activities have been evaluated by the participating entrepreneurs. A midterm evaluation survey was conducted in the summer of 2018, and a final evaluation survey and some complementary interviews with archipelago entrepreneurs were conducted in May 2019. These constitute the basis for this report. In addition, evaluations and lessons learned from the

project partner perspective are based on discussions held throughout the entire project period, particularly during the final stage of the project.

1. Project background

The background to the project was an identified need to support and develop the local business life in the archipelago regions of Turku, Åland Islands and Stockholm. These areas face many similar challenges, such as insufficient and impractical transportation and logistics, an ageing demographic, risk of depopulation, short seasons and radically altering preconditions between on and off season. However, at the same time, these regions also embrace a lot of undeveloped potential for expansion and growth in many areas. To tackle these challenges and support local entrepreneurs in developing their businesses and creating new business models and start-up initiatives, all four project partners have worked together to offer a variety of activities and events to entrepreneurs, as well as other key stakeholders.

Existing start-up expertise, together with business coaching techniques and the LOOPA-business development methodology¹, formed the basis for educating and supporting archipelago-based entrepreneurs, business-counselling services and other important stakeholders. Students have actively been involved through co-coaching companies, internships, hackathons, course projects and thesis-work. The project has organized cross-border seminars to stimulate networking, knowledge-sharing and business development throughout the entire project period. A digital platform has been developed and digital tools have been used to support cooperation in partnerships, business activities, sales channels and recruitment pools.

2. Challenge inventory and company recruitment

A challenge inventory was executed at the very beginning of the ABD project, aiming at recruiting and interviewing at least 60 entrepreneurs and companies and, thereby, gaining a deeper understanding for their day to day business operations, their challenges and potential opportunities for development. ÅAU was in charge of recruiting 30 companies in the archipelago regions of Southwest Finland and Åland, and SH was in charge of recruiting 30 companies in the Stockholm archipelago region. 60 businesses within four key categories were recruited and interviewed; *building and living*, *cleantech and energy technology*, *creative businesses*, and *traditional businesses*.

¹ The LOOPA business development methodology has been developed by Drivhuset. You can read more about LOOPA for example here <http://drivhuset.se/starta-driva/utbildning>. Within the ABD project, LOOPA was also turned into a digital course to offer better possibilities for continued development after the program and the ABD project period ended. For more information on the digital course Loopa Archipelago Business Development, visit <https://archipelagobusiness.nu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Loopa-Digital.pdf>

Overall, very similar challenges could be identified among all the participating companies, regardless of business category and archipelago region. Common challenges identified among all participants were, for example:

- Fragmented public administration, unfavorable changes in the regulatory framework and variations in commitment towards the archipelago among politicians
- Geographic conditions and infrastructure; inconsistent goods and passenger transportation
- Demographic conditions; ageing population and upcoming generational shifts
- Insufficient ICT and digital competences and skills among entrepreneurs

Among the Swedish entrepreneurs, concerns related to adapting to a sustainable way of conducting business was expressed, as well as difficulties with housing and living arrangements for employees and others. Finnish entrepreneurs emphasized issues related to recruitment of skilled employees, and financial issues related to successfully running businesses that are very dependent on seasonal changes.

The challenge inventory was an integral part of planning and designing relevant and useful subsequent activities and methods for tackling the identified challenges. Based on the inventory, recommendations were given for each participating company and entrepreneur as to who should participate in what project activities. Two separate reports were compiled by the end of the challenge inventory processes, one for the Finnish businesses and one for the Swedish businesses. In the spring of 2019, an anonymized summary report on the main findings from the Finnish challenge inventory was compiled and published.² Similarly, a working paper was published in the spring of 2019 based on the Swedish challenge inventory process and findings.³

Lessons learned

While there were some differences in schedule and focus in the Finnish and Swedish challenge inventory processes, the very core of the challenge inventory activity remained true to the initial project plan, and in the end the achieved results largely match the set goals. However, we can conclude that the companies recruited for the challenge inventory were not necessarily the same ones we worked and collaborated with by the end of the project. While many of the challenge inventory companies have remained actively involved in different activities throughout the entire project period, many have also “dropped out” over the past few years, due to lack of time or interest to continue with what the project could offer. However, new businesses also regularly joined the project and by the end of the project period a total of 185 companies had been involved in the project in one way or another; about three times more than the original goal of 60 businesses.

²The challenge inventory summary can be found at https://archipelagobusiness.nu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ChallengeInventory_Finland.pdf

³ The working paper is available via the digital portal, and at <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1317060/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

Overall, the participating businesses and entrepreneurs have been satisfied with the offered activities and events. Still, it became very clear that we as “outsiders” cannot push for change and business development, unless there is a pull and a real interest to develop one’s business together with other actors.

3. Key business development activities

The central objective for the ABD project was to create new business models in the rural archipelago regions within three areas: new business models, new partnerships and new business opportunities (start-ups). According to the project plan, business development would be supported by three main activities: matchmaking seminars, business accelerator programs and mobile business clinics. Furthermore, student projects also constituted an important activity. Along the way, some additional activities, for example benchmarking trips, were developed and have also served as important initiatives for promoting collaboration and business development. All activities have embraced different approaches and methods for supporting business model development, start-up initiatives, and partnership formation. The key business development activities are briefly presented and evaluated below.

3.1. Matchmaking seminars

One key activity for inspiring and promoting business development as well as promoting and encouraging collaboration and partnership formation, has been annually arranged matchmaking seminars, attracting a large and diverse group of participants. In total, three main matchmaking seminars were arranged; in Turku April 2017, in Mariehamn October 2018 and in Stockholm April 2019. Parallel to the seminar in Mariehamn in 2018, the Archipelago Hack (an intensive innovation camp) was arranged, where cross-border and cross-disciplinary student teams worked together to find innovative solutions for challenges in the archipelago related to sustainable business, digital opportunities, creating new seasons and promoting local produce in an innovative way. The students and the entrepreneurs had several opportunities to meet each other to mingle, discuss, inspire and become inspired.

Lessons learned

All matchmaking seminars have been well received by the participants and have gotten very positive feedback. The seminars have provided the participants many new ideas, inspiration, new contacts and a widened network and new perspectives on business and entrepreneurship in the archipelago regions. The matchmaking seminars have played an important part in actually developing new concrete collaborations and partnerships, as well as new business development ideas and business models. This has been a very good way of bringing a large group of people together to discuss and reflect upon interesting and relevant topics and shared

challenges and opportunities, to inspire and develop new ideas and to offer a platform for encouraging collaboration. The presence of students at the matchmaking seminars have been very rewarding, it has given the entrepreneurs an opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of younger people as consumers and potential customers, at the same time as they have gotten new perspectives and insights on their own businesses.

The biggest challenge in arranging these matchmaking seminars related to marketing and practical arrangements. While the set goals more or less have been reached every time, the planning processes have required a lot of work and determination. Still, there really is a clear need and a great demand for this kind of regular cross-border matchmaking seminars among the archipelago entrepreneurs and other stakeholders.

3.2. Business Accelerator Programs

Another main activity was the Business Accelerator programs, the first one offered in Finland in years 2017-2018 and the second one in Sweden in the spring of 2019. The accelerator programs were designed based on Drivhuset's LOOPA business development methodology, embracing a series of workshops where entrepreneurs got together to discuss and share experiences and to learn more about new tools and methods for business development within areas like (re)designing business models, channels for selling and marketing, targeting of new customer groups, and exploring new modes of cooperation and partnerships. The program was originally planned to support mainly new start-ups in developing their business models but proved very useful also for more experienced entrepreneurs. What made the accelerator programs truly unique was the long-term focus and the continuity in regularly meeting other entrepreneurs facing similar challenges and interests.

Lessons learned

Both accelerator programs have gotten very positive feedback from the participating entrepreneurs and, overall, these activities have proven very effective in getting people to meet and collaborate, in inspiring new business ideas and opportunities, as well as learning, sharing and discussing new useful methods for business development. The LOOPA-method seems to be the biggest revelation for most participating entrepreneurs.

Main challenges related to agreeing on the schedule for the workshops and, again, to marketing and recruiting entrepreneurs to the programs. However, while "only" about 20 entrepreneurs took part of the programs (about 10 in Finland and 10 in Sweden), the marketing of the accelerator, especially in the Stockholm archipelago region led to increased interest also for other project activities, like the matchmaking seminars.

3.3. Mobile Business Clinics

Regularly throughout the project period, ABD has offered Mobile Business Clinics (called Theme days among the Finnish project partners) to entrepreneurs in the Archipelago regions. Each clinic or theme day has been focused on one specific topic, offering the participants opportunities to learn, test and embrace new and useful tools, methods and insights related to the highlighted topic. The clinics have covered a wide array of different topics, for example:

- Destination development
- Sensory business development for artisans and local food producers
- Marketing, branding and Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Balance sheets, taxation and pricing strategies
- Sales and customer service
- Service design
- Recruitment

The set-up was often a full day of activities, with lectures or introductions in the morning regarding the specific topic, and individual counselling in the afternoon around the same topic. Many entrepreneurs participated actively in several clinics, which gave them many opportunities to meet new entrepreneurs with similar struggles and interests as well as new potential partners. All project partners have been involved in designing and realizing different types of business clinics in connection to their own areas of expertise.

Lessons learned

The mobile business clinics have also gotten mostly positive feedback from the participating entrepreneurs. They have appreciated the opportunities to meet other archipelago-based businesses, to share experiences, to learn new things and to get hands on help in their own business development endeavours. As the clinics have been designed to each cover a specific topic or area, each entrepreneur has been able to sign up for and participate in those clinics tailored to and relevant for their own challenges and needs. The clinics have been the inspiration for many new collaborations, new business models and personal and entrepreneurial growth and development.

The fact that the clinics were in fact mobile, in the sense that they were arranged at many different locations in order to offer all entrepreneurs some activity close by their own business location, was highly appreciated as challenges with logistics and long transportation times are common in the archipelago regions. Arranging clinics “on location” is something we would recommend for anybody interested in arranging similar activities.

3.4. One-on-one consultations

Throughout the entire project period, experienced experts on entrepreneurship and the specific challenges and opportunities in the archipelago area have also been helping entrepreneurs through one-on-one consultation sessions. In total, more than 100 consultations have been made. Again, the idea was to visit the entrepreneurs and businesses and to have the consultation sessions at their own locations to 1) be able to really experience and get to know the reality and preconditions of each entrepreneur and their business, and 2) not having the entrepreneur “closing down” any daily business operations for the sake of having to travel to any other location. The consultation sessions have concerned everything from strategic business planning to more personal challenges related to being an entrepreneur in the archipelago. Most visits and consultation sessions have been followed up afterwards via phone, additional meetings, discussions during seminars, or often also chatting online (for example on Facebook). A key part of the consultation activities has also concerned mapping out potential partners and collaboration opportunities, and recommending participation in other project activities like seminars, business clinics or student projects.

Lessons learned

This activity, which really was tailored and adapted according to each participating entrepreneur’s specific situation and challenges, was highly appreciated. The individual consultation sessions has led to many new initiatives, ideas and business models. The participating entrepreneurs have especially highlighted the importance of getting to talk to people and experts who really knows their daily struggles but at the same time can see and evaluate their businesses from an outsider's point of view. Furthermore, this really was an efficient way of spreading information about the project’s other activities.

Main challenges with this activity related to internal information sharing. The experts really got to know all the businesses they visited and consulted, still, there was no system in place for how this information could be shared with other project partners who also met and worked with the same businesses and entrepreneurs. Another issue was the fact that the experts felt they didn’t always have enough expertise in all areas that the entrepreneurs would need. For example, having a team of experts travelling together to meet with the entrepreneurs could have provided access to a more extensive range of different areas of expertise. Also it could be concluded, again, that support cannot be pushed at people if there is not a pull for it or if suggested measures are not taken.

3.5. Benchmarking travels

An activity that has focused on getting people together to experience and see new places and find new inspiration has been the benchmarking trips that were offered to all archipelago-based entrepreneurs and companies. In March 2019 a benchmarking trip was arranged to Saariselkä

in Lapland (Finland). The aim of the trip was to offer the participants a unique opportunity to experience “the backstage” of several successful local businesses and collaborative partnerships in this region. In April 2019, a similar benchmarking trip was arranged to Utö (Sweden). The aim was to get to know innovative and interesting businesses and experiences on the Utö island.

Lessons learned

Stepping into the shoes of the customer or visitor and looking at one’s own business can be difficult, however experiencing other services and businesses as an outsider can greatly help also to gain a new perspective on one’s own business offerings and operations. Therefore, this kind of benchmarking activities have proved very rewarding. The benchmarking trips resulted in inspiration for developing existing and new seasons in the archipelago regions. The participants highlighted especially the insights they have gained concerning new collaboration opportunities, new ways of packaging different services and products and different pricing strategies. Furthermore, having a large group of entrepreneurs gathered at the same place for a longer period of time, provided many golden opportunities to encourage and inspire new ideas and collaborations and even plan and initiate new business development projects. Still, arranging these kinds of trips requires quite a lot of time and effort from the project personnel, as well as a quite big budget.

3.6. Student projects

Throughout the project period, students have been actively involved in many of the above-mentioned activities, for example, as facilitators or discussion partners at seminars and business clinics. However, the project has also realized more than 200 different student projects at Novia UAS, ÅAU and SH. These projects have varied in terms of focal area, scope and way of execution, but they have all been designed around real challenges and problems that archipelago businesses regularly face. Most projects have involved students from different backgrounds and different disciplines coming together to come up with creative and innovative solutions for what is experienced by entrepreneurs as quite mundane or difficult challenges. The projects have provided the entrepreneurs with new ideas and inspiration for developing their businesses, in some cases, even new contacts and tangible materials like marketing guidelines, social media recommendations or new concepts for pilot testing.

One of the biggest student-centered activities was the Archipelago Hack (AH) hackathon arranged in October 2018 in Mariehamn (parallel to the ABF seminar). AH saw a total of 35 students from Finland, Åland and Sweden working together in cross-border and cross-disciplinary teams solving four major challenges that many archipelago entrepreneurs face. At the end of the process, all teams pitched their ideas in front of the ABF participants and a jury with experienced business minded people from the region chose a winner. The winning idea, creating a social media photo competition for engaging multiple entrepreneurs to share and

highlight our exclusive archipelago during the off season, was realized in relation to the ABF seminar held in Stockholm in April 2019.

Lessons learned

Due to major differences in scope and design, it is not that easy to evaluate these activities. Still, for the most part, the entrepreneurs have been happy with the outcome of the student projects they have been involved in. While some found this type of collaboration very helpful and rewarding, leading up to new concrete business ideas och models, others were a bit less enthusiastic in relation to input gained in terms of business development ideas. Some entrepreneurs felt they had mostly gotten their own initial ideas confirmed by the students, but not much more than that. While some were happy with this, others had expected more. Before initiating student projects, the level of expectation would need to be carefully discussed and agreed upon so that everybody knows what to expect and what it expected of them; this concerns students as well as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the potential implementation of the project results also needs to be discussed in advance to make clear how useful ideas and results will be used and who would be in charge of implementing these.

The hackathon format was highly appreciated by the participating students and raised a lot of interest also among the entrepreneurs. Further exploring and developing the Archipelago hack concept could be of interest, integrating for example opportunities for investments for the winning team(s) in order to fully benefit from and implement innovative ideas and solutions that this kind of intensive innovation process can generate. Because, again, we can draw the same conclusion that it is not enough to ideate and present suggestions and ideas to the entrepreneurs if they lack the ability, resources or willingness to carry out these suggested improvements.

4. The digital database: Skärgårdsföretagarportalen

Södertörns Högskola was responsible for WP2, which included creating digital tools as well as a digital database, gathering useful information regarding the archipelago to serve different stakeholders like companies, municipalities, business organisations and universities. The development of the platform started at the very beginning of the project period and the end result, Skärgårdsföretagarportalen available at <https://archipelagobusiness.nu/>, was launched at the Archipelago Business Forum seminar in Mariefhamn in October 2018. Since its launch, the platform has been tested by project personnel, students at the partner universities and other stakeholders. The design, structure and functions of the platform has continuously been tweaked and altered according to feedback from the test rounds.

Lessons learned

The database, especially its functionality, focus and key target group, has been a recurring topic for discussion throughout the project period. While many issues have been quickly resolved, some were harder to deal with due to, for example, limitations related to the company designing and providing the platform and a limited budget. A thorough documentation on the earlier development stages and progress of the database would have helped in avoiding continuously recurring discussions among the project team related to functionality, target group etc.

5. Overall project evaluation & conclusions

As can be concluded by the overview of activities and evaluations in this report thus far, as well as from the brief overview of achieved results in Table 1 (below), the project has reached or exceeded the goals stated in the project plan for participating businesses and entrepreneurs, for developing new business models and supporting the creation of new start-up initiatives. Overall, the project has been very well received by the vast majority of the participating entrepreneurs and a wide range of different stakeholders in the archipelago regions who have taken part in various project activities, such as municipalities, other projects, entrepreneurs' associations and others.

The project activities were designed to support business development, and according to the majority of the participating entrepreneurs the activities were experienced as useful and helpful in developing their business operations and opened up opportunities for new business ideas and business model formation.

Results 2016-2019

185	Archipelago entrepreneurs
220	Participants in cross-border matchmaking events
200+	Student projects
22	New business models
12	New start-ups

Table 1. Brief overview of project results⁴

Furthermore, the participating entrepreneurs feel they have been able to develop and broaden their knowledge in business orientedness and business development tools and methods. Many entrepreneurs have highly appreciated the support the project has provided in terms of growing more confident as entrepreneurs and getting to talk to experts about everyday struggles related

⁴ For more information on the project and achieved result, see for example the short video available at https://api.kultura.nordu.net/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/311/uiiconf_id/23450572/entry_id/0_ku3dxnmx/embed/dynamic?fbclid=IwAR1kQ3Q-LvKJbwy1ZEABJ-EqfXkMfNgXRwVt_-kolMSOloDe7Bryim2vvs

to the archipelago as well as the small enterprise contexts. Many feel they have in fact become more secure in their role as an entrepreneur, and that the project has been able to provide inspiration as well as energy for developing their companies and business models. The project has also successfully managed to encourage new collaborations and partnership formations⁵. These collaborative efforts primarily concern partners across municipalities and islands, across different industries and across different fields of operations.

However, one issue that still remains somewhat unresolved is the formation of cross-border collaborations and partnerships, in the sense of collaborating across national borders. While the matchmaking seminars provided many opportunities to meet entrepreneurs from the different archipelago regions, no concrete cross-border partnerships have been established (at least to our knowledge). This might be due to the actual physical and/or experienced mental differences that might seem overwhelming. However, it is important to remember that all the other new collaboration initiatives (though not across national borders) already illustrate several steps “in the right direction”. For many entrepreneurs, this means a completely new way of thinking about their own business operations and opportunities, and more extended cross-border collaborations might not be a feasible alternative in the development process for these businesses right now. However, one thing is clear, encouraging collaboration on all levels is important. Cross-regional and cross-border seminars and activities that enable entrepreneurs from different regions and countries to meet are needed.

Furthermore, another issue that didn't go according to plan, was the recruitment portal which was supposed to be included as part of the digital portal. This recruitment portal was planned to be used by companies in the archipelago searching for employees and people looking for work in the area. However, quite early on in the project, we realized that there are already several portals for this purpose, as well as numerous actors already providing very similar services. Moreover, all partner universities also already offered some kind of online recruitment services. Thus, instead of trying to reinvent the wheel and developing yet another portal, links to existing portals were added to the database. Instead, as recruitment still remains a real challenge for many archipelago-based businesses, a series of other activities were initiated by the project to tackle this specific challenge. For example, so-called recruitment fairs were arranged annually at Novia UAS, bringing together archipelago businesses, students and other interested people looking for work in the archipelago region. Also, during the project period, a collaborative business forum for ÅAU och Novia UAS, NÅA Business Center (<https://www.teamnaa.fi/>), was formed. NÅA Business Center aims at connecting students with companies looking for help in different areas, thus, serving as a forum for promoting and realizing university-industry collaboration but also serving as a forum for recruitment (primarily trainees or summer employees). In Sweden, Drivhuset initiated a Facebook community around recruitment in the archipelago region in the spring of 2019 (<https://www.facebook.com/skargardsjobb>).

⁵ For more information on the partnership program and some results see the separate report available at Skärgårdsföretagarportalen, <https://archipelagobusiness.nu/>

6. Future development suggestions

Many suggestions for future projects and/or business development initiatives have already been mentioned. Furthermore, all project related activities have included elements of “next step(s)” and other types of future development discussions and suggestions for all the participating entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Here is a brief final overview of future development suggestions for different stakeholders:

Archipelago entrepreneurs and SMEs

- Collaboration and cooperation is key to development in rural areas such as the archipelago region(s). Collaborations are needed on many different levels; between different entrepreneurs and businesses, between businesses and universities, across municipalities and islands, across different industries and, also, across national borders. However, you do not need to (or can't even) do everything at once. The first step towards increased collaboration could be to find out more about and contact neighbouring businesses and entrepreneurs. Another step could be to take the time to attend different events where you meet new people and potential partners.
- Often business development (or any kind of development) requires a certain degree of personal growth and development and increased knowledge in new and unexpected areas. Take every opportunity to learn new things and gain new perspectives. Benchmarking activities like visiting other services or businesses or similar regions can be very helpful.
- While many archipelago entrepreneurs feel isolated and lonely, it's important to remember that this is not always the case. There is help and support to be gained - but you need to be proactive and ask for it. It's important to remember that you don't need to do everything on your own and that you don't need to know everything yourself.

Other stakeholders (municipalities, business associations, support organizations, policy makers, etc.)

- There is a recognized need in the archipelago regions for different types of activities that support business and/or destination development. The events and activities offered by the ABD project have been effective in inspiring business development, encouraging personal development among archipelago-based entrepreneurs and promoting partnership formation on different levels. A continuation of similar activities and initiatives is needed.
- Especially arranging and developing cross-border activities are needed. For example, the ABF matchmaking seminar concept and the Archipelago Hack hackathon format would be worth exploring and developing further.

Future projects and development initiatives

- Often when initiating new projects or development initiatives, each time the project personnel tends to start “from scratch”. This project aimed at creating a digital information and database to collect and communicate achieved project results and insights gained throughout the project period. The database, Skärgårdsföretagarportalen (<https://archipelagobusiness.nu/>), also provides a collection of relevant reports and publications for the archipelago entrepreneurs, students, different stakeholders and future projects. The database will be maintained and updated by SH after the ABD project period has ended.

This report was created as part of the Archipelago Business Development project (WP3/ Deliverable 3.6.2.). A more extensive Final Evaluation-report was also created (Deliverable 3.6.1.), but as it includes sensitive information about participating businesses and developed business models it is not available for public display.

For more information on the project or the final evaluation report, please contact:

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