

Digital Co-Creation in Pandemic Conditions: Evaluation Survey

Final report

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Background: OSIRIS and the open and social innovation processes evaluated

The processes and experiences evaluated emanate from work undertaken in the INTERREG OSIRIS project, which from April 1st, 2016 to September 30th, 2020 focused on developing regional policy instruments through open and social innovation (OSI in short). The OSIRIS consortium had seven partners from six countries; mostly regional authorities (see table 1 below) with Region Västerbotten as lead partner. Åbo Akademi University participated as an associate partner with communication and evaluation responsibilities. OSIRIS is presented in more detail on the project website <https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/osiris/>

Within the frame of the project, six regional policy instruments, pertaining to the EU regional and structural policy programmes, were assessed and developed, and three pilot projects were implemented, involving five of the seven partners and putting the policy development to practice. Beside this, a number of other projects and initiatives were launched by the partners during and after the project period, based on the OSIRIS development work but not formally within the project.

The rationale for evaluation

The conclusion of the project coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in various degrees of lockdowns and restrictions on physical interaction, which meant that the concluding phase of the project in 2020 had to be conducted online. The pandemic had a large impact in the process of implementing OSI policies for regional development: Face to face interactions that are key for OSI while boosting the introduction of online solutions were limited, which fed a climate of strong uncertainty about the future and the role that OSI can have for regional development. This in turn strengthened the need of engaging citizens in regional development, considering new forms of remote-based collaborations.

In 2021, the opportunity was taken to extend the project with a period for sharing experiences and evaluating the progress during the pandemic— and in fact the first semester of the extension was mostly online as well. Co-creation and innovation processes online were not completely novel concepts, but the impact of the forced digital transformation was still large enough to warrant an evaluation. The reason is that many project actors expect at least part of the shift towards remote collaboration to become permanent due to the need to find ecologically and economically sustainable modes of working together. Thus, it was important to capture the experience of going online without a thorough planning process, as it is valuable in the planning and implementation of similar processes in the future.

The aim was not only to find out the experience of co-creation and open social innovation during the pandemic, but also to look forward and identify potential good practices as well as challenges to be faced when the work continues. Therefore, this report is focusing on lessons learned and recommendations just as much as on the experience.

The processes evaluated in this survey range from regional development strategy work in general and smart specialisation strategies through the OSIRIS pilots to activities launched to combat the effects of the pandemic on regional business and work. The levels of abstraction were varying, as were the measures and methods used in the processes, but working with regional stakeholders was a common denominator for them all.

Partner	Interv date	Participants	Process	Languages	Responses (survey sent)	Languages
Region Västerbotten Sweden	10.3	Lars Wallrup, Carina Eriksson, RV Emil Hägglund (sh)	eXpress Umeå, business incubator	Swedish	8 (11.3)	Swedish
Regional Council of Ostrobothnia Finland	11.3, 16.3	a) Irina Nori, Christine Bonn, Kimmo Riusala, RCO, Mathias Högbacka (sh) b) Johanna Dahl, RCO, Peter Hellström (sh)	a) The overall regional development plan (Landskapsstrategi) b) RIS3 Smart Specialisation Strategy	Swedish, Finnish	14 (11.3)	Swedish, Finnish
Province of Drenthe Netherlands	7.2	Gerard Meijers, Tineke Smegen, Marije Kattenvinkel, PoD, Jan van der Bij (sh) Ben van Os	Craft business project, Steenwijksmoer community centre	English	7 (11.3)	English
Municipality of Fundao Portugal	15.3	Ricardo Goncalves Micaela Gil, MF	URBACT IoTXChange, general project work	English	Presented in the IoTXchange report	English
Provincia autonoma di Trento Italy	9.2	Matteo Previdi, PAT Marco Cometto (sh)	Riparti Trentino: economic support program to companies	English	17 (11.3)	Italian
Region of Western Greece (CTI Diophantus) Greece	28.1	Maria Xyga, Chrysostomos Stylios, RWG, Dimitrios Tsolis (sh), Agapi Dima (sh), Catherine Christodouloupolou	The Boost Hackathon, Patras IQ	English	5 (11.3)	English

Table 1: Overview of the survey

Survey design and implementation

The evaluation survey was designed by Åbo Akademi University Experience Lab, one of the academic partners in the project, and working in the field of user experience and human centred design. The themes and tools were planned together with the members of the network in order to align the methods with evaluation customs in the respective countries, and build a common understanding of the topics we wanted to examine to ensure that the survey felt relevant for the partners and the results could be of some use.

The survey consisted of two parts: Interviews with the project partners through a semi-structured interview form, and a survey to their stakeholders through an e-questionnaire.

The interviews

The interviews were based on seven themes to be discussed freely with members of the project partners' staff that had been engaged in running the local action groups, as well as optionally some key stakeholder for each partner, in online video interviews planned to last for approximately an hour. The interview form was designed in English and translated into Swedish and Italian, and the interviews were conducted in English with the exception of Region Västerbotten (Swedish) and the Regional Council of Ostrobothnia (Swedish and Finnish). Interviews were conducted with 2-6 people from each project partner involved in the project; in all, seven interviews with 23 informants were

held. The informants had been asked to prepare for the interview by selecting a specific process to examine; the processes chosen varied from OSIRIS pilot actions via smart specialisation strategy development to Covid-related assistance operations. The interviews were recorded and qualitatively analysed.

The survey

The survey e-questionnaire was directed at stakeholders of each partner. It contained a set of questions with a choice of answers as well as fields for leaving comments, combined with sets of rating scales from two standard user experience questionnaires:

- The UEQ-S (*Schrepp, Martin; Hinderks, Andreas; Thomaschewski, Jörg (2017): Design and Evaluation of a Short Version of the User Experience Questionnaire (UEQ-S)*), consisting of eight pairs of words describing the users' experiences,
- and an abbreviation of Verleye's questionnaire for customer experience of co-creation (*Verleye, Katrien 2015: "The co-creation experience from the customer perspective: its measurement and determinants"*), with a rating of 13 statements about the experience on seven-graded scales.

The questionnaire was designed to be filled out in 15 minutes. It was designed in English, and translated to Swedish (Västerbotten, Ostrobothnia), Finnish (Ostrobothnia) and Italian (Trento). The partners were asked to choose a number of stakeholders to fill out the questionnaire, and to remind them about the process in an introductory e-mail with a link to the survey. The questionnaire answers were translated into English and aggregated.

The data was collected and stored on Åbo Akademi University servers, and anonymised for integrity purposes. The interview informants gave their consent to participate and to store the data through a written form or by oral consent at the start of the interviews. The identities of the questionnaire informants were not collected by ÅAU.

The survey coincided in time with two similar evaluation processes: The same survey was used for the *URBACT IoTXchange* network, where Åbo Akademi as well as Fundao were partners together with six other cities/municipalities working on the development of smart, digitally supported services for the residents. The interviews were based on a design from a regional development project in Ostrobothnia, *Digitala innovationsprocesser på distans*, which was based on thematic interviews with people in charge of innovation and co-creation processes.

Results of the survey: Overview

The results in detail are presented on pages 6 and onward in this document; the most important findings are summarised in this section. On the most general level, the contents can be expressed in a few short statements:

- There was a sense of accomplishment: "We are tired but happy – we did it!". A digital leap, that almost everyone managed to take.
- The feelings of success ranged from the ability to continue at all to overcoming obstacles and challenges of digital and hybrid work – and to insights of results that exceeded the original expectations

- Hybrid is here to stay. There are pros and cons with both physical and online, and the right mix can give you the best of both worlds. However, successful results require thinking and resources.
- Good planning, clear instructions, open communication and facilitation all take some effort, but are essential for keeping everyone on board.
- Going online or hybrid requires rethinking of work in general – the “new normal” needs an open mindset from everyone involved, and there are still lessons to be learned for both individuals and organisations.

In general terms, the project teams represented the process leaders and the stakeholders the participants – but the distinction isn’t watertight, and some individuals may in fact have held both roles. It is interesting to notice, that the experiences of both groups mirror each other to quite a large extent; if anything, the stakeholders expressed more positive views than the project team members. This may reflect that those responsible for organising the processes had understood the amount of preparations and the need for extra work input and resources required for running an online process - and even more so a hybrid process. Another detail worth noting is that both groups, but perhaps especially the stakeholders, often commented on working online, working from home and distance work in general just as much as on the co-creative or innovative parts of work. The field is evolving and the concepts are interdependent at least to some degree.

Results: The stakeholders

The stakeholders rated their experience quite positively, as illustrated by these statements (Question 31, p13 below): Choose your reaction to the following statements regarding the co-creation process – where 1 = disagree completely, 2 = disagree mostly, 3 = disagree to a certain extent, 4 = don’t agree or disagree, 5 = agree to a certain extent, 6 = agree mostly, 7 = agree completely:

• It was a nice experience	5,81
• It enabled me to come up with new ideas	5,47
• I gained new knowledge/expertise	5,68
• The interaction was pleasant	5,74
• I could make others aware of my knowledge and ideas	5,63

The same sentiments are expressed when the stakeholders were asked to consider the process in more general terms:

• Did you understand the aim of the process?	Yes: 57	No: 0
• In your opinion, were the digital tools easy to use?	Yes: 57	No: 0
• Did the working process feel successful?	Yes: 54	No: 3
• Did you feel engaged during the process?	Yes: 55	No: 2
• Did your group achieve the result you aimed for?	Yes: 52	No: 5

Even allowing for some politeness towards the surveyor, or perhaps a wish to please the project partner who asked them to evaluate the work they’d been engaged in, the degree of positive answers is overwhelming. We suggest this may stem from a combination of feelings of personal achievement - a digital leap – and of being part of the successful creation of participatory regional development processes in the face of the pandemic. In fairness, the positive figures are balanced by a number of reservations, as evident by some answers in the comment fields (see pp.9-12 below); a simple yes-no scale doesn’t capture very much detail. Obviously the social interaction side of work was largely missing, and difficult or dysfunctional tools created frustration. Perhaps the most

pressing concern was that some people dropped out from the processes because they couldn't or wouldn't work online.

The general experience of working during the pandemic gained a slightly more mixed response:

Positive: 34 Negative: 6 Changed over time: 24

The majority of change was towards the positive – again, perhaps a reflection of successful digital leaps. The final question to the stakeholders concerned whether they would recommend participating in a similar co-creation process to others:

Yes: 55 No: 2

The responses of the stakeholders are presented in more detail in the result section below.

Results: The project teams

Members of the teams of each project partner were interviewed in free-flowing discussions based on covering six themes. They turned out to be overlapping to some extent but covered the main aspects of the experience:

- Experiences of working online
- Background, aims, participants
- Running the process
- Tools and methods
- Participation and creativity
- Results

During the interviews, leadership emerged as a specific theme that was perceived as important, and that permeated the process from the beginning to the end. In general, the project teams focused on similar topics and reasoning as the stakeholders – but with more emphasis on the organisation and the long processes than on individuals or single meetings. The responses are presented in greater detail on pp.14-23 below, but the main points are as follows:

Experiences of working online

Overall, the project teams mirrored the positive response of the stakeholders, but in slightly more measured tones. One explanation lies in the awareness of the extra effort in running online and parallel processes, that was laid upon the project teams overnight. Consequently, the experience of work during the pandemic was described by one respondent as "thrill and horror".

Processes, backgrounds, aims, participants

As mentioned before, the processes we evaluated were different in character; thus, in some cases the process was simply moved online, whereas in other cases a new operation was built from scratch. Common denominators were that there was a core of activities designed and led by the regional authority, that were developed and implemented through more or less continuous work with a number of stakeholders – from organisations and businesses to single citizens in various functions. Moving online meant a wider outreach, greater numbers, but a weaker connection to single participants.

The work process

The process designs ranged from various hybrid models to all-online work; in some cases, the process could begin in a physical mode before the pandemic struck, while some other processes could go hybrid at later stages of the pandemic when the restrictions were eased. In general terms, the

project teams were satisfied with how the processes rolled out. There was usually a chance to design and tweak activities according to need, and the most important restrictions on setups were legal ones as well as pressing timetables.

In general, the processes went well, even though especially large ones held certain challenges. Digital tools led to a clearer schedule, easier documentation and communication, and online meetings also meant that people could choose to participate through speaking or writing – different individuals have different preferences. The role of facilitation stood out – good facilitation could activate passive participants, whereas a bad facilitator could ruin the process. It was also easier to keep meetings short online.

Tools and OSI methods

A variety of tools were used – from communication to co-working and file sharing; Teams, Zoom Google meet, Facebook live for meetings, e-mail between sessions, Howspace, Miro, Slido for collaboration and creation, Menti for voting, Basecamp, MS Office and Google tools for co-writing and sharing documents.

Within the confines of legal restrictions there was a freedom to choose methods and push the envelope on working practices. The tools worked fairly well, even though using them in this way was new. More general and cross-cutting enabling tools were called for, as there were many boundaries between different organisations.

Methodwise, OSI online worked surprisingly well – but with a distinction between co-creation and co-action; the latter, which is about implementation, is much easier to move online because it's more instrumental and operational, whereas the creative process is more tricky. Interaction doesn't occur by itself - it needs design. The tools are important, but the leadership even more so.

Overall, the project teams weren't very specific on methods, which may reflect that considerations of method came second to actually keeping the process going.

Participation and creativity

Everyone was on board, more or less. The online made it possible to participate in different ways, according to preference – and the tools meant that you could also express your opinion between meetings. However, the methods to check whether everyone that were present online actually participated sometimes felt inadequate.

One main conclusion is that there was a shift – both physical and virtual meetings can be inclusive and/or divisive, but those included/excluded are different groups. Physical meetings are better for building shared understanding and a vision, but if you're just collecting opinions meetings online work just as well. The hybrid format requires training, and the same goes for virtual collaboration and moving things online.

A feeling of flow requires the right circumstances and focus – given those, physical or digital doesn't matter that much. There were no tangible differences in outcomes between virtual and physical processes. The advantages of digital environments may outweigh the disadvantages, but motivational issues such as encouraging people work better in a live setting.

Results and lessons learned

By and large, the goals that had been set were reached, but the processes were more difficult than anticipated. The results are viable, convincing, timely and realistic; the work went quite far, but there was a realisation that it could have gone still further. The online processes require more resources and preparation.

A general conclusion was that things can be done if you're determined. The hybrid form was hard to comprehend at first, but now there's a confidence in knowing how to plan and carry out hybrid events.. The possibility to reach out wider – with a better economy – was an important result. The importance of preparations and facilitation throughout the process, of clear messages and a simple structure for the process stand out. Going back to leadership, patience and empathy emerge as keywords.

The state of work right now – and in the future?

In general, the partners work in some kind of hybrid mode. The presence at the office is back in the picture, but some procedures and/or some individuals are more in remote mode than before. This goes especially for activities that previously meant extra travel or other arrangements.

Going online requires rethinking of work – and of organisations; the premises for place-based work as well as the longitudinal aspects chance. It will take flexibility and the belief that it's going to work, that it can be done. On a personal level, an open mind to new ways of working is needed – tools as well as mindset. The aim is to advance from experimenting towards more knowledge-based work, building on data and experience of others. Attention must be given to work spirit, team spirit, the mental and physical wellbeing of workers.

Hybrid solutions are needed for different contexts, as the future will be mixed. Clarifying the aims of the processes is important, and should be followed by investments in infrastructure. Preparations are vital for good virtual results, and fewer physical meetings mean that they can and should be better focused on the elements of the processes that are most dependent on physical presence.

New guidelines for hybrid work are expected in many countries, probably giving more room and encouragement for distance solutions than before. Ideally, there would be a development vision for hybrid and online processes, building on trust and room for choice – but without a conscious effort to develop the theme there is a risk of slipping back to status quo, if the will to rethink and rebuild is lacking.

Opportunities and challenges

As a quick reference to the main findings for further implementation, shortlists of observations have been compiled regarding the opportunities identified from the experience as well as challenges that have to be faced when moving forward. The list extracted from the interview answers isn't exclusive, and the singular statements are not ranked or weighted; therefore, they should be regarded as a starting point rather than a conclusive result.

Opportunities summarised:

- Always keep thinking “yes, we can” – the mindset to see opportunities
- Online permits broader participation – both locally and worldwide
- Online meetings are cheaper and save time
- Uncertainty fosters creativity
- Going online can help make priorities
- “Craftsmen make webshops”: The digital transformation can create new mindsets
- Online requires more clear and concise processes – which make for better communication
- Benchmarking the experiences and best practices of the last two years offers plenty of learning opportunities
- A combination of physical and online, with the right tools and methods, cater for a broad participation of people with different preferences (talking/writing/drawing etcetera)
- Online provides the opportunity to redefine the concept of a region – geographical, type of activity, ambitions etc
- Online provides an opportunity to engage larger groups and/or different groups in different stages of a development process

Challenges summarised:

- Some people resist change
- Policies and governance may be looking to return to old status quo
- The choice of right mode of meetings and methods for every task – physical meetings for ideation, co-creation, online for routine work
- Timetables and scheduling circumstances are different
- The diffusion of the process in participating organisations
- Overthought, overambitious and non-user friendly tools can kill creativity and motivation

Results: e-Questionnaire to Stakeholders

In all, 57 answers from stakeholders were collected in the six participating cities. As the number of invitations sent out varied between 10 and 30, the answering rate is between 30% and 40%, which must be considered fair. The volume of answers is big enough to warrant some general conclusions, as well as to pinpoint possible user experience related challenges, but it doesn't allow for very much individual case analysis for any of the partners. However, there are some general trends that apply for all or most, as well as some indications of differences.

Background

1 Which country are you from?		N=57
Sweden		9
The Netherlands		7
Greece		5
Portugal		4
Finland		14
Italy		18
2 How old are you?		
18-24		1
25-34		12
35-44		14
45-54		16
55-64		12
65-		2
3 What gender are you?		
Woman		28
Man		28
Non-binary		-
Prefer not to say		1
4 What is your role in the OSIRIS project?		
Member of project partner's staff		16
Stakeholder in regional innovation		27
Other		14

Questions about how you experienced the co-creation process in the project

6	How have you been working during the co-creation process? Think of the whole process and all its parts.	Together with other people On my own In the office/workplace At home At events outside work or home	38 14 41 35 8
7	Comments to question 6 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depending on the instructions from the Municipality / Government, either worked from home or part-time in the municipal office. Due to the pandemic sometimes remote working from home, but most of the time at the office Originally the project intended to mix physical and online meetings, events and initiatives, covid steered it towards working solely online. At the start there were physical meetings, after the lockdown, things were done online. I have mainly participated remotely in strategy work groups and visioning. At these events, there have been discussions together and individual views have also been given. 	

8	Did the group meet physically?	Yes No	20 37
9	Did the group meet online?	Yes No	55 2
10	Did you understand what the aim of the process was?	Yes No	57 0
11	Comments to question 10 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partly, some aspects were unclear. There was a shared goal that was agreed upon in the time that we could still meet physically. Some 40 people embraced the targets we chose for the project. The goal was to prepare a provincial strategy in such a way that it would combine the goals of different organisations and actors and thus be in line with the wider whole. One can ask whether the process was more rewarding for the researchers than for the participants The objective was clear, to effectively and efficiently manage the applications for grants that companies 	
12	What work methods were used?	Discussion Co-creating with visual digital tools (e.g. shared boards/tables) Co-writing (e.g. shared documents) Individual assignments (e.g. creating documents on your own)	49 42 34 21
13	Comments to question 12 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We tapped into other organisations' sites and created new sites and digital routes to promote as well as connect businesses. We created a digital guild/network. We prepared writings on the digital platform in advance and then during the remote event, you could comment on them and supplement them if necessary, as well as add new ideas. I think this method worked well! Been a good combination of all the options in question 12. Varied activities required varied ways of working and adapting to the situation of the pandemic. In the working method used, however, the use of shared documents prevailed that I personally had never used before 	
14	What digital tools were used?	Teams Zoom Google Meet Google Drive + accessories Skype Messenger Howspace Facetime Miro Discord e-mail	
15	In your opinion, were the digital tools easy to use?	Yes No	57 0
16	Comments to question 15 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes, as long as there were no problems with internet connections Both yes and no, some were more complicated than others after a little practice it was ok to use The program was easy to use and made it possible to work remotely With minimal knowledge in the IT field, yes Having already been using the Google suite for some time, working with these tools has been very easy; for other colleagues less. 	

17	Do you think that the digital tools used added value to the process?	Yes No	54 3
18	Did the work feel successful?	Yes No	54 3
19	Comments to question 18 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of engagement and unclear goal It was not entirely a success because there was a reduction of participants in the calls for online meetings or the absence of those present (often camera off). The goal of the project was accomplished and even exceeded. because we were able to give the project a new direction. It felt like a success because it was possible to continue actions. It also turned out to be able to speed up some parts. Not everything was a success. Many things have also fallen silent. The process progressed faster and took less time than usual Although not "the best of both worlds", at least good things from both previous ways of working and new digital. It was more effective than if we had met physically, we came to results faster. The digital tools gave everyone a perhaps better chance to get their thoughts and opinions. It would make sense to combine physical encounters with such in the future. It was a clear transition from the previous habits, but after a while it seemed to be the new normal I believe that the use of digital platforms has positively influenced decision-making processes and the M.O. With regard to the RipartiTrentino and RipresaTrentino sites, the work carried out was successful as all the economic measures concerned were put into production as expected. The set objectives have been achieved 	
20	Did you learn new things in the process?	Yes No	52 5
21	What were your most important learnings? (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to set clear goals for all participants and processes and outcomes Improvement of the use of Zoom and social media features Not all meetings have to be in person, working from home is a good alternative to the office (even for short periods of time) Some meetings need not be conducted physically, meeting online works just as well. Some, though, are better conducted 'live'. Several new ways of digital communication. The enhanced use of websites. It is not always necessary to meet in person. Especially when you have only practical issues to do. Strategic discussions and inspirational talks are better in live events. When you can't meet in person, there are more ways to communicate, but you have to make sure everybody will participate in the new ways of communication. online process guidance. Chairing and hosting an online meeting is really a different profession than hosting a physical meeting. Clarity and structured process are extra important when not seeing IRL No direct new lessons, but confirmed previous experience and own knowledge that well-led exercises with accurate schedules and different paces with combined individual and group tasks usually work well. Management of communication between people online and productive. I believe that online meetings have significantly increased the efficiency of the work teams 	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listening to people, whether they are colleagues or users, always gives value to the project. The governance of a project, and how it is exercised, is fundamental, even if not centered on a single person. Trust in one's collaborators and in others improves team spirit. use of digital platforms compared to the use of paper 	
22	Did you feel engaged in the work process?	Yes No	55 2
23	Comments to question 22 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The digital platform gave me the opportunity to think about proposals independently and at the same time they could be discussed. We also received good advance material and clear instructions. I felt like I was part of the same team! Yes, part of the process of producing text and thoughts. But not so much in summary or interpretation. Sometimes when I read the materials afterwards, I really had to remember if we discussed this, if the group as a whole was of the same opinion, and who brought them together. It was easier to participate in the remote event and work was more efficient. The face-to-face events provided inspiration and new insights as the conversation flowed freely. I was committed and felt that everyone had a say. It's a total waste of time if you do not get involved. More info on why this is done and what the practical benefit of the result is expected to be would be good. 	
24	Did the group achieve the result that you aimed for?	Yes No	52 5
25	Comments to question 24 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It only took a little delay in the intended, in everyone adapting to this new digital way of working collaboratively. In individual terms, yes, it was quite productive. Yes, in the end the results were achieved. But there was some delay. There were activities that could only be done in person and they were not possible for months and months. Only to a certain extent. During the start of corona, we realised that we really had to do some things differently. We have started to focus on online developments much more than planned. The craftsmen involved often did not have their own website and webshop. I think that the direction was already pretty much the same for the different actors, but the joint ideation served as a confirmation that we have a common direction and, I hope, it also made the future strategy work easier! I actually do not know, because maybe it was not quite clear what we are creating? 	
26	Did you feel that you could contribute to the result?	Yes No	55 2
27	Comments to question 26 (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thanks to the platforms and digital tools available, it did not affect the desired result, only at the beginning was the adaptation time. Helping the participants along, contributing ideas, finding and creating common ground. I was active in the discussions and felt that my ideas resonated. I think that was the case with all the participants. 	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I thought so, but I'm not sure anymore. Enough, however, because the discussions were lively. 						
28	What was your general experience of work during the pandemic?	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Positive</td> <td>34</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Negative</td> <td>6</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Changed over time</td> <td>24</td> </tr> </table>	Positive	34	Negative	6	Changed over time	24
Positive	34							
Negative	6							
Changed over time	24							
29	Can you explain why? (selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At first, it was really difficult to adapt to home-working and distancing, but later on, after familiarising myself with all the available digital tools, virtual or hybrid events and meetings became easier and now they are a viable and sometimes preferable option for me. I wasn't used to work entirely remotely so I thought that the one thing missing from my side was the physical collaboration with the whole team. At first the feeling was: we'll manage, with or without covid, the energy stayed positive. Later some of the volunteers got less motivated. But in the end it was okay. The focus with online is much more on the content of the work. It was possible to switch quickly, to do a lot of work and to have a nice lunch with my family in between. I have experienced most working days as one big party. I live in a rural area, where it's a long way everywhere. The possibility of remote work has brought flexibility to the reconciliation of work and family and thereby improved the quality of life. Very positive. I have experienced an increase in both personal and community productivity. I enjoy the company of people and community, but work during a pandemic is efficient. Because despite the pandemic, the work continued It took its time to make everything work remotely, but now it feels unusual to (partially) return to "old" ways of working. Slight dullness towards the end. A little sense of isolation. A mix of digi / IRL is perfect My work is based on physical encounters with people. It could be partially offset by digital tools. Meeting new people and getting to know them is significantly limited if you are not allowed to be seen physically. Change is difficult - now we were forced to change, question, learn and even use that knowledge. Huge access in the future. From the beginning, everything was upsetting, but we humans learn to handle and adjust. in the beginning it was unusual to work only online but we learned quickly Change is always "difficult", but it has de facto created insight into new, better hybrid ways of working, as if we further develop it partly technically, but above all how mindset working life has, we can make considerable digital progress. if we do this correctly, we streamline the way of working in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way. The ways of working during the pandemic showed the possibility of doing things differently. Now, after the pandemic, this experience is maintained anyway, obviously not as strictly as it was necessary in the pandemic, but for example to allow you to participate / listen in the phases of the co-creation project 						

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lockdown phase had a particular impact on people, especially those who did not have the technological means or the skills to work remotely. After an initial adjustment phase, improvements have been seen because working in this way has become the norm; unfortunately some were more excluded than others, also based on the ability of managers to manage the activities of their staff remotely. Despite the difficulties of the period, it was possible to offer an effective and efficient service even from a <i>distance</i>.
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Rating of the co-creation process from your viewpoint:

30 What was your experience of the process?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
obstructive	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	supportive	5,47
complicated	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	easy	4,84
inefficient	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	efficient	5,40
clear	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	confusing	2,79
boring	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	exciting	4,72
not interesting	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	interesting	5,25
conventional	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	inventive	5,61
usual	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	leading edge	5,26

31 In a similar manner, choose your reaction to the following statements regarding the co-creation process – where 1 = disagree completely, 2 = disagree mostly, 3 = disagree to a certain extent, 4 = don't agree or disagree, 5 = agree to a certain extent, 6 = agree mostly, 7 = agree completely.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It was a nice experience	5,81					X	
It allowed me to keep up with new ideas and innovations	5,63					X	
It enabled me to come up with new ideas	5,47				X		
I could test my capabilities	5,21				X		
I gained a sense of accomplishment	5,26				X		
I gained new knowledge/expertise	5,68				X		
I met others with whom I share similar interests	5,60				X		
The interaction was pleasant	5,74				X		
I could make others aware of my knowledge and ideas	5,63				X		
I made a good impression on other people	5,39				X		
I had control over the quality	5,07				X		
I had an impact on the degree to which my preferences were met	5,04				X		
The risk of failure was limited	4,95				X		

32 Based on your experience of this process, would you recommend others to participate in similar co-creation processes?

Yes 55 No 2

Results: Interviews with project partners' teams:

The results are presented below following the sequence of questions in the interviews – allowing for the rather free-flowing discussion in at least some of the interviews, where themes sometimes merged with each other. The answers below are not presented as straight citations; rather, as a distillate of the main messages conveyed in the discussions.

Introduction

- Where do you work? What do you work with?
- What tasks do you have?
- Did your working conditions change during the pandemic?
 - How did you experience the change?

The respondents worked for regional or municipal authorities responsible for development strategies and their implementation and documentation, as well as for organisations or companies that supported the authorities in this work. The individual tasks ranged from strategic or project management to leading or implementing specific processes.

The working conditions changed almost overnight in early 2020 – but the path onwards varied from long periods of online/distance work to hybrid models – with individual time shared between the office and home, and with teams divided between the office and homes.

In some cases, new operations such as support programs for businesses and organisations suffering from the pandemic were set up, while others were occupied with maintaining the ordinary activities. The exceptional conditions sometimes allowed for setting hierarchies and rules aside to accomplish things. Field work obviously suffered, and overall the local and regional processes suffered more than the national or international collaborations, since the latter already had a large online/hybrid component.

Remote working gave room for focusing on specific tasks, leading to greater efficiency, and saving time and reducing the need to travel were mentioned as upsides. The social interaction, both within specific processes and spontaneously between colleagues and people in general was a challenge, and creativity suffered. Organising one's work day was a challenge – from time management to ergonomics, and of course depending on conditions and infrastructure.

Moving processes online enabled a wider outreach, in principle lowering the threshold to participate, but it was harder to establish who really attended the meetings even though they were present online. Eventually meetings became more efficient, as both organisers and participants learned.

The overall experience was both positive and negative – “thrill and horror”; at the outset it was quite heavy – a feeling of something new, like war, and some people found it hard to cope with it, but eventually most people and organisations found ways to go forward. The forced digital transformation helped take on new tools and ways of working, that wouldn't have been possible just a few years ago.

Background and goals

- Can you describe the innovation or development process that you worked with during the pandemic
- The goal of the process?

- Which participants were involved?
- Where were they from?
- Did you know the participants from before? Did they know each other?
- How were the participants in the process chosen?

The innovation processes we evaluated ranged from overarching work like smart specialisation and long-view development strategies to the implementation of OSIRIS pilot projects and other development projects that emanated from the OSI policy work within OSIRIS.

The goals ranged from more or less pro forma updates of strategies and validating propositions phrased by the authority to developing new, specific action plans and creating new ideas and businesses and supporting them, and in some cases to create a mechanism for the application and distribution of economic aid to actors suffering from the pandemic. In the latter case, the speed of the process was a specific goal.

Common denominators were that there was a core of activities designed and led by the regional authority, that were developed and implemented through more or less continuous work with a number of stakeholders – from organisations and businesses to single citizens in various functions. Generally speaking, there was a core of participants that knew each other from previous collaborations as stakeholders in regional development, but the online process opened up for a broader participation.

Most participants acted on mandates of their organisations. Depending on the process, there were also participants who engaged out of their own will, through open recruitment, either as individuals or representing some stakeholder.

The work process

- What did the whole process look like? Was it only online or hybrid, that is, did you also meet physically at some point?
- How did you communicate between your meetings?
- What worked well in the work process?
 - Why?
- What didn't work so well?
 - Why?
 - Was it possible to adjust the process if something didn't work?
- Were you able to control the work process yourself or was it given from the outside?
- What did you think about this way of working?

The process designs ranged from various hybrid models to all-online work; in some cases, the process could begin in a physical mode before the pandemic struck, while some other processes could go hybrid at later stages of the pandemic when the restrictions were eased.

Communication between meetings took place mostly via e-mail and through work on shared platforms and documents to prepare for meetings or implement decisions made. In some cases, individual participants were reached by phone, while individuals and groups in other cases were free to choose the mode of communication if a need arose. There were also processes which didn't entail any communication between the group meetings. Communication evolved on a trial and error-basis as well – new channels were established where some problem arose with existing ones.

In general terms, the project teams were satisfied with how the processes rolled out. There was most often a chance to design and tweak activities according to need, and the most important restrictions on setups were legal ones as well as pressing timetables. In some cases, a process that was repeated could be improved based on experiences and feedback.

What worked well?

The processes in general, even though especially large ones held certain challenges. Digital tools led to a clearer schedule, easier documentation and communication, and online meetings also meant that people could choose to participate through speaking or writing – different individuals have different preferences.

The role of facilitation stood out – good facilitation could activate passive participants, whereas a bad facilitator can ruin the process. A good facilitator steers the discussion right – and a digital environment makes it easier to stay on track. It was also easier to keep meetings short online.

The online option is now taken for granted, even though we can meet in person now. The pandemic also led to parallel processes – more work, more money needed to run them, but a wider acceptance of distance participation was gained. And the distancing rules led to a digital leap – some people who hadn't worked online before found new possibilities by learning the tools and methods together.

Companies and organisations got their aid quickly. It was a good opportunity to boost the digital transformation. The public sector also managed to be attentive, rally to the task and be open to feedback.

What didn't work so well?

The most common complaints concerned the tools: Using Teams in general. Facilitation of conversations without cameras on. Attempts to use Miro when neither the participants nor the facilitator really knew the tool. Usability issues, access rights, switching between platforms are examples of the negatives. Timing the process was a challenge, especially when communication with the stakeholders didn't work.

In general, there were people whose digital skills weren't good enough, and motivation may have dropped due to lack of facilitation as well as on external grounds (the pandemic conditions in general). Local meetings were a challenge since the participants were so used to meeting in person for talks – and study visits and suchlike had to be rethought. The low knowledge levels in public administration were exposed – there is a lot of data, but little idea how to extract information, to spell out the needs.

General reflections

Looking at the new way of working in general, rethinking things is of course good in the long run – but a disruption in the moment. There was a great degree of freedom in setting up processes and choosing tools according to need, because the need was urgent, but it's important to keep that momentum as things settle.

The digital means a different inclusion and divide – some people come on board, others fall off. For the meta-work – the regional OSI – the physical meeting place has been a cornerstone; through meetings of minds and ideas in confined spaces, as well as through coincidence and chance, new

ideas and insights have been achieved – that is harder in a digital context, which is more structured and instrumental.

The understanding of the full impact on the regional ecosystem is an ongoing process, but there has been learning along the way and procedures have improved.

Tools and OSI methods

- What digital tools were used?
- What OSI methods were used?
- Did you get to choose them yourself?
- What worked well?
 - Why?
- What didn't work so well?
 - Why?
- Did the tools respond to your and the group's needs?
 - If yes - describe what worked. If not, why not?

Tools:

Teams, Zoom Google meet, Facebook live for meetings, e-mail between sessions.

Howspace, Miro, Slido for collaboration and creation, Menti for voting

Basecamp, MS Office and Google tools for co-writing and sharing documents

Excel was tested for timeline creation, but failed. No good solution was found for presenting overviews visually. The tools have evolved nicely, but the time to learn all their functions has been scarce.

A variety of tools were used – from communication to co-working and file sharing; within the confines of legal restrictions we were free to choose, and tried to push the envelope. The tools worked fairly well, even though using them in this way was new to us. A challenge was that we were restricted by economy to the free versions (for instance time limits)

One big minus with online tools is the lack of eye contact and other traits of physical meetings. On the other hand, connecting bigger groups and lowering the threshold to participate was easier online – but social interaction is harder. Solutions with avatars were tested - which didn't work with everyone, but are the default in the game development community, on Discord. It's an example of a group more at home in the virtual world than in physical meetings.

There is a need of a more transversal enabling tool, as there were many walls between different organisations. Sometimes the walls were technical or security-related, but there was also "gatekeeping" earlier than for instance confidentiality would require. On the other hand, cyber security issues and the lack of knowledge among both stakeholders and organisations came to the fore as people had to adapt quickly.

Methods:

OSI online works surprisingly well – but there is a certain difference between co-creation and co-action as phenomena; the latter, which is about implementation, is much easier to move online

because it's more instrumental and operational, whereas the creative process is more difficult to build. Interaction doesn't occur by itself, it must be designed for. The tools are important, but title leadership even more so.

Online meetings are hard to dynamise and require more preparation and facilitation activities. The tools mostly worked to need, but we had overestimated the digital competencies of especially older customers.

Participation and creativity

- If you think about what you described above - do you feel that all participants became involved in the process?
 - If not - why?
- Did you feel that the way you worked gave room for creativity and "flow"?
 - If so, what was it that did it? If not - why not?
- Were the participants allowed to influence the working method and process?

Everyone was on board, more or less. The online made it possible to participate in different ways, according to preference – and the tools meant that people could also express their opinions between meetings. There was time to prepare, for both organisers and participants, and the responsibility lay with both groups.

One main conclusion is that there was a shift – both physical and virtual meetings can be inclusive and/or divisive, but those included and excluded are different groups in the two instances. Thus, a combination of modes and tools is the best way forward. The fact that participation was good met one important aim – to get new sectors and actors involved in planning. Even more opinions would have been welcome – more critical mass, and a possibility to diversify along interest lines.

The discussion is different online than for instance in small groups in a room. Physical meetings are better for building shared understanding and a vision, but if the aim is just to collect opinions working online works just as well. The hybrid format requires training, as well as virtual collaboration and how to move things online.

As the process was dependent on creative solutions and experimentation, and hierarchies were at least temporarily removed, this state as well as the new inclusion lines point at the potential social consequences of digital transformation.

Creativity and flow:

Achieving flow requires the right circumstances and focus – given those, physical or digital doesn't matter that much. Also, the process requires time for working between meetings – it was easy to fill the day with meetings but at some point priorities became necessary, and people started learning to control their workload. For creativity, physical meetings are better – the discussion is more direct and effective, and it's hard to keep people's focus online. On the other hand, uncertainty in conditions seems to foster creativity.

There were no tangible differences in outcomes between virtual and physical processes. The advantages of digital environments may outweigh the disadvantages. Maybe psychological issues such as encouragement work better in a live setting. But the teams did bond also virtually; victories were celebrated and offering encouragement also seemed to work well.

The long-run creativity stands to gain from a hybrid design, where physical meetings at the right moments are augmented by working online in between, sometimes for longer periods. Here also the wider reach of the virtual comes in.

The participants could influence, at least in principle, and some of their suggestions were taken up, but mostly they dealt with the subject matter rather than the co-creation. But the ideation took place online! People could influence the choice of tools in principle – but there were very few contacts. The issues that someone brought up were resolved. Mostly, the choices of the host organisation decided. As a result, people who were engaged in many activities had to cope with a lot of different tools – which is confusing, takes time and causes stress.

Result

- When you think about the process you described - did you reach the goals that had been set?
- Were you satisfied with the results yourself?
 - If yes - describe! If not, why not?
- What lessons did you learn from the process?
- Do you think that all participants understood and agreed with the goals that had been set and achieved?
 - If not - why not?

Reaching the goals:

By and large, the goals that had been set were reached, in spite of but sometimes even due to the special circumstances. Some observations from the project teams:

- Ultimately, we reached the goals, but the process was more difficult than we had anticipated. The process requires more resources and preparation.
- Formally, the required plans were drawn, there was discussion and engagement. The single ideas were highlighted and validated.
- We came quite far, but also realised we could have gone still further. The results are viable, convincing, timely and realistic.
- The goals were reached or are on the way, but delayed.
- The evaluation results were overwhelmingly positive at first – now, when we can go hybrid, less exalted but still positive. People have understood the circumstances – but they expect a reaction when it's possible. Also, it was harder to set any clear goals when the premises shifted overnight – in a way we made it up as we went along.
- The project was a success due to the creativity of the participants, like new contacts and connections. Also the group stayed with the project, no big dropout rate

The lessons learned:

A general conclusion was that things can be done if you're determined. In the face of pressing need, many obstacles can be overcome through focusing on obtaining results.

The hybrid mode was hard to comprehend at first, but with a little more experience, there's confidence of the ability to organise successful hybrid events.

The importance of preparations and facilitation throughout the process, of clear messages and a simple structure stand out. In a physical setting it's easier to read people. Going back to leadership,

patience and empathy emerge as keywords. The middle management have the biggest challenge, as the filters for good and bad evolve.

The possibility to reach out wider, especially given the lower cost, was an important result. The organisational collaboration – an open co-creation system without worries for competencies or hierarchies, and the direct dialogue with users led to a more efficient process.

The internal communication within the public administration evolved – the silos of tasks and hierarchies were at least temporarily lifted; before, there were often similar/parallel activities in two branches of the public sector that had no connection even though the aims and measures were similar. Thus, some organisational constraints turned out to be moot, and the value of civic duty and attention to users came to the fore: “not the right thing formally, but the right thing to do given the circumstances”

Generally speaking, a lot was learned about collaboration.

Did people understand and agree?

Not everyone were on board from the start, but as the processes went on, an increasing number did. The process didn't always entail participation from beginning to end; in some cases people came and went, which had an impact on their understanding. Also, in some cases there were several aims, and they were revised along the way, which meant that not everyone knew or agreed with everything. As for the long-term processes, it's hard to draw the finishing line - “the painting is ready when you finish painting”.

Also, some participants understood in principle – we could communicate the premises, and they could understand and agree – but in practice the motivation to participate online was harder to achieve. On the other hand, some people couldn't cope with the adjustments, regardless of the context. That may have been due also to personal reasons – the heavy toll of the pandemic.

Final conclusions and looking forward

The evaluation was of course focused on the experiences of the past two years, but the last two headings of the interview form – ingredients in a good development process and digital innovation processes after the pandemic – were forward-looking, and the answers of the project team members reflect that perspective. As they also mirror the opinions of the stakeholders, they make a good starting point for conclusions and laying down markers for the next steps.

Ingredients In a good development process online

- Think about the process that you have described - what would you say is the reason why it was successful?
- What are your **three best pieces of advice** for those who want to work creatively together in an online development process?
- Do you have any horror stories of when it worked really badly?
- What was it that made it so bad?

The ingredients in a good development process online were collected into a set of advice, which reflect the whole scale and width of the experience. These advice, along with input from the stakeholders as well as interviews with innovation process leaders in Ostrobothnia in a separate project, also form the backbone of the checklist that's been compiled to support process leaders and participants in designing hybrid and online innovation processes, implementing them and following up the results.

Three best pieces of advice (aggregate result from all project partners)

- Prepare for anything and be flexible, adapt
- Accept that things flow differently online, accept imperfections
- Plan carefully – be clear about objectives
- Be patient, listen, interact, respect
- Trust the process
- Don't be scared
- Look at the task from the participants' perspective – walk in the other man's shoes
- Use people's differences as a strength
- Try to align everyone's picture of the task
- Be prepared to change things if the feedback says so
- Try to create a safe space – an invitation to participate
- Trust people and involve them
- Make sure there is a framework and display the logic – not just the aims but the means too
- Reverse engineering – build the process according to the aims
- Constant communication on any issues, clear instructions – lead the process
- Be aware of time limitations
- Make sure to use the best possible connection and setup
- Choose the right tools for the right occasion – tools according to needs
- Manage the tools right – don't overuse or confuse
- Keep the cameras on
- Use a variety of methods

- Create dynamics in the meetings – small groups, presentations, chats etcetera
- Keep the meetings interactive from the start
- Landings, introductions – impulses to kick off
- Discussions work in small groups, presentations with
- Make it exciting
- Use an external facilitator if you can't or won't do it yourself
- Keep a positive attitude – there can be joy in working
- Make sure to meet physically at some point if you can
- Go hybrid – mix with physical meetings
- Accommodate for communication in other ways than words
- Say no if you don't have the time to participate properly
- Participants also need to prepare
- Training on online tools and remote work
- Make sure you know both tools and methods

Horror stories

The respondents seem to have escaped work in the pandemic without any lasting damage; reported horror stories were mostly about failing connections and tools, participants who disappeared or forgot they were online – perhaps reflecting the fact that the true drama lay elsewhere.

One concern that needs to be highlighted is the risk of digital fatigue that may occur if the workloads and sequence of the day isn't kept in check, especially if different processes use different tools. Another source of failure was bad or missing facilitation, with confusion, aimlessness, frustration and a rising drop-off rate as results.

Digital innovation processes after the pandemic

- How are you working right now?
 - Has your organisation drawn up guidelines?
- Do you have a model for working with development and innovation online in the future?
 - Tools, spaces?
- What does it require of your organisation and you?
- What does it require of your collaboration partners?
- Is there anything else you want to say?

The going online requires rethinking of work – and of organisations; the premises for place-based work as well as the longitudinal aspects change. What is a region?

It will take flexibility, the belief that it's going to work, that it can be done. On a personal level, an open mind to new ways of working is needed – tools as well as mindset. The aim is for more knowledge-based work rather than experiments – building on data and experience of others. Attention must be given to work spirit, team spirit, the mental and physical wellbeing of workers.

Hybrid solutions are needed for different contexts, as the future will be mixed. There's also need to invest in the infrastructure for hybrid and virtual development, but that depends on clarifying the aims of the processes. Preparations are vital for good virtual results – and fewer physical meetings mean that they could be better.

New guidelines are expected – probably giving more room and encouragement for distance work than before. Finally, development visions must be built for the topic, building on trust and room for choice.

Final remarks

As a kind of forward-looking conclusion, three of the statements from page 4 above can be used as a starting point:

- Hybrid is here to stay. There are pros and cons with both physical and online, and the right mix can give you the best of both worlds. However, successful results require thinking and resources.
- Good planning, clear instructions, open communication and facilitation all take some effort, but are essential for keeping everyone on board.
- Going online or hybrid requires rethinking of work in general – the "new normal" needs an open mindset from everyone involved, and there are still lessons to be learned for both individuals and organisations.

The sense of accomplishment that was expressed may offer some momentum, but capitalising on it requires further, conscious action and investments to keep it up.

A few other aspects of development in general also merit a mention when looking forward in this specific context:

- As the digital transformation advances at a rapid pace, new developments in fields such as the collection, processing and utilisation of data, solutions built on artificial intelligence and different kinds of visualisation technologies need to be monitored. Indeed, what we read into the concept of hybrid today may need to be reassessed in a very near future.
- Aspects of sustainability and inclusivity are crucial for societal development – and their consequences in specific contexts may not be obvious through yesterday's lenses. This is a field that should also be kept on the radar.
- And for any open social innovation process, making sure that the stakeholders are on board is an important starting point as well as a point of reference to check back to, making sure that new ideas and developments are spread in both directions – that there is a dialogue of development.

As an aid for planning and implementing hybrid and online processes, a manual with checklists before, during and after the processes has been compiled. It is based on the results of this evaluation and a similar process in the URBACT IoTXchange project, as well as a set of interviews with innovation process leaders in a regional development project, Digitala innovationsprocesser på distans, internal workshops at Experience Lab focused on user centered design, and an inventory of online sources on the topic. The manual is available online at Experience Lab's website (see contact details below).

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