



Academy on Tour (Belgium, Flanders) Working Document

This case study was prepared in the framework of the ENRD Thematic Work on Smart and Competitive Rural Businesses (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/thematic-work/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/rural-businesses_en) that was running between August 2016 and July 2017. A comparative case study was developed entitled '[Mobilising the innovative potential of rural businesses](#)' based on the Academy on Tour and other two case examples of Short Food Supply Chain Masterclass (the Netherlands) and AgriEnt Business Accelerator (Greece).

FACTS

Location: Belgium

Timing of the initiative: 2014-2017 (the overall programme is in progress)

EAFRD-funding: The 'Academy on Tour' Programme is partially financed under the Flemish RDP, Measure 19 (LEADER/CLLD). Co-financing by Innovatiesteunpunt's own budget (partner's budget, farmers' associations, Cera Cooperative, KBC Universal Bank). In Flanders, national co-funding is required for ERDF and EAFRD funded projects; 35% of the budget of a project must be co-funded from national sources.

Other public funding:

- Flemish Provincial Governments from the 2007-2013 RDP of Flanders;
- For some tours the **ERDF INTERREG Programmes** (such as INTERREG IVA: Fish&Chips, a network of European food regions; or INTERREG North-West Europe: Food Heroes, aiming at the reduction of waste in fruits and vegetables)
- For some tours, **local or provincial governments**.

In addition, the exploitation of **synergies with Horizon2020** projects in which Innovatiesteunpunt acts as partner, such as AgriSpin ("Space for innovations in Agriculture", aiming at identifying best practices for innovation and support systems in European agriculture), and SKIN ("Short supply chain Knowledge and Innovation Network").

Website: <http://www.innovatiesteunpunt.be/nl/inspiratie> ; H2020 SKIN : <http://www.shortfoodchain.eu/>

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Short description of the project

Academy on Tour helps farmers looking for inspiration and professional assistance in developing and realising an innovative business idea. The programme is conducted by Innovatiesteunpunt (Innovation Support Centre), an NGO that runs the innovation advisory service for agricultural enterprises, rural initiatives and local authorities for the professional association of Flemish farmers.

It provides a **“fast track” opportunity** through participating in an inspirational bus tour to a neighbouring country organised around a hot topic in agricultural and rural innovation (such as Village Innovation, Food Innovation, Multifunctional Agriculture, Commercial Algae Cultivation, or Short Food Supply Chain).

A bus tour allows – within one long day - to meet experts on the topic of the tour (providing information, networking opportunities and expertise), visit inspirational business examples and get first-hand information from the entrepreneurs. During the bus tour, each participant is assisted by an individual coach in achieving his/her personal objective set in advance for the day of the tour, linked to developing, realising and financing their product idea or business concept. Further feedback from the other participants is received when pitching the results at the end of a tour.

Summary of main results:

- ✓ 9 tours were organised supporting 24 entrepreneurs with strong innovation potential
- ✓ Through improves skills and knowledge and support for setting up new businesses, entrepreneurs could create new revenue streams
- ✓ Around half of the innovative ideas presented reached the test-phase and roughly half of these reached the market
- ✓ The trips provided new inspiration and opportunities for exchange to participants



1. STARTING UP AN ACCELERATOR PROGRAMME

1.1 What were the triggers to develop an accelerator programme?

Innovatiesteunpunt was approached by farmers looking for help in finding effective assistance to resolve a specific problem or support a business innovation process. More specifically, enterprises and initiatives in agriculture and horticulture were asking for assistance in getting to know inspiring examples, identifying new business opportunities, assessing the viability of a business model, and in planning and monitoring the first steps in realising new ideas. Innovatiesteunpunt, in line with its mission, took initiative and responded to this need by adapting and bundling its tools and services for rural business development to accelerate rural business innovation.

Since 1999, Innovatiesteunpunt was hosting a bi-annual Innovation Campaign, and has been organising an **ideas competition**, which aims to support innovative and creative entrepreneurs and initiatives in agriculture and horticulture (including environmental and technological innovation, product innovation, strategic innovation or energy innovation). In 2016, 113 innovative ideas were submitted for the ideas competition, and 10 awarded. High quality, low-cost, time-limited and needs-based assistance was highly appreciated by the winning teams.

Innovatiesteunpunt developed its business assessment and process support tools further **to a comprehensive acceleration support package** and condensed its implementation to one day.

1.2 Who initiated and who was involved?

Innovatiesteunpunt is the Flemish Innovation Support Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development. Its mission is **to inform and inspire agricultural and horticultural businesses** and to provide accompanying professional advice about new challenges and opportunities and to support them with the development and implementation of concrete projects. Clients of Innovatiesteunpunt are not only rural businesses, but also local governments, associations, community groups or citizens' initiatives wishing to bring a breath of fresh air into their village.



The consultants of Innovatiesteunpunt, **more than 20 in-house experts**, focus their work on business development, ecological development and rural development and cover a broad range of issues in exploring new ways of doing business.

Other stakeholders involved in the initiative are Boerenbond (farmers' association with 17,000 members) and Landelijke Guilden (900 local associations of 70,000 families and volunteers engaged in rural community and leisure activities), in partnership with the Belgian Cera Cooperative and the KBC Universal Bank and Insurance Group.



1.3 What are the main steps of setting up an accelerator programme?

Each “Academy on Tour” needed careful preparation:

- **Deciding on the topic of a tour:** requested by several stakeholders, where transferable solutions exist (e.g. product development, business concepts - Business Model Canvas, multifunctional agriculture, commercial algae cultivation, short food supply chains);
- **Deciding on the country to go to:** identifying the country where examples of good practice on the topic selected can be found, that can inspire participants.
- **Finding the most illustrative sites** in the selected country that has most experience and innovative initiatives on the thematic focus of a tour. It is important that entrepreneurs showcasing good practice are willing to talk about their own business case in a very open way.
- **Selecting the right participants** by assessing comparable information on innovative ideas.
- **Finding and selecting the right experts** to coach the participants during the trip (including criteria on ability to working on different business cases, creativity and open-mindedness, and skills in active listening).
- **Setting goals** in advance, specific for each participant, based on a screening of their motives, business ideas and future planning.
- **Create a physical environment and provide logistical arrangements** that are stimulating and contribute to achieving the objectives of a tour, allowing the use of full time for an extremely packed schedule. This is ensured by using a VIP-bus for travelling, specifically designed to provide space and furniture/equipment for conversations in small groups and plenary sessions, multimedia presentations, lunches and coffee breaks.
- **Invest in strict time scheduling** to match all individual needs and requests with the overall schedule of a tour, different time slots for sessions, meals along the way, etc.
- **Include time and assessment sheets** to have an evaluation of the tour at the end of the trip and plan a survey six months later to evaluate the impact of a tour.

1.3 How target businesses are identified & selected?

a) Target

The Academy on Tour is targeted at farmers and SMEs working within or related to agriculture and horticulture. The experience of the tours was that 24 participants from 12 businesses (preferable 2 decisions makers from each enterprise) was just right to create a comfort zone for group work, and for managing follow-up support.

b) Identification of participants

To identify **promising innovators and entrepreneurs** that could benefit from participating in a tour, Innovatiesteunpunt has been **mobilising its partners and networks**, stakeholders and local authorities and asked them to contact individuals with an innovative mind.

Innovatiesteunpunt reaches out to more than 15,000 relevant enterprises, organisations and institutions and several thousands of engaged citizens through the communication channels of its supporting partners Boerenbond and Landelijke Guilden, and through its own newsletters, innovation campaigns, information



and training events, publications, or inspirational tips for rural enterprises. Though its advisory and consultancy work, and through the bi-annually innovation contests with an ideas competition, Innovatiesteunpunt has screened, coached and assisted more than 500 rural enterprises and initiatives each year in turning their innovative ideas into reality.

In addition, Innovatiesteunpunt called potential candidates individually to explain purpose and modalities of the tour, and to give practical advice for organising help on the farm for the day of the tour.

c) Criteria

Applicants were asked about their motivations and expectations, business, mission and future ideas using an online tool. The transparent assessment procedure provides indications and justifications to refuse participants with low innovative potential, and to tailor each tour to meet specific needs of the participants by adding extra experts or site visits.

1.4 What resources are needed for setting up the programme?

a) Financial resources

Item	Cost
Preparation of a tour organised the first time on a specific topic causes specific costs related to market research, exploration of site visits, and motivating and mobilising entrepreneurs to showcase their inspiring good practice. These costs will not incur for subsequent tours on the same topic for visits to the same sites.	€5,000
Communications through media to attract interesting applications	€2,000
Organisational and logistical preparatory work by Innovatiesteunpunt	€1,500
Total costs of preparing the first tour	€ 8,500
Total costs preparing subsequent tours (excluding thematic preparation costs for the first trip of a topical tour)	€ 3,500

b) Human resources

Around 4 days of work are required for organising a trip. The organisation mostly involved 2 persons.

The main challenges of starting up the Academy on Tour

The unique setting and arrangements of the programme posed several challenges to the Innovatiesteunpunt when preparing a tour. The most relevant have been:

- **Convincing farmers to leave home at 5am and be away all day** and return at 1am in the morning, finally because the participating farmers had to organise a replacement to work on the farm on the day of the tour;
- **Finding the right experts** for this kind of tour, which is not on training on a given topic, but on empowerment and capacity building. Experts therefore need to have the ability and skills of active listening to help participants develop their own tools and find the right answers to a specific problem they have in realising their own idea;



- **Finding the right match** in terms of motivation, expertise, interest and communicative abilities between participants, experts/coaches and inspiring places to visit, and translating these matches into a one-day schedule, and individual goals for each participant;
- **Ensuring an open atmosphere and cooperative spirit**, by encouraging and enabling participants to be open for discussing new ideas with their peers, to be ready for helping the others improving their ideas, to be willing to work during a whole day and to develop a final outcome;
- **Identifying inspiring places to visit** abroad where participants can learn from good practice on the specific topic of the tour, and ensuring that the entrepreneurs showcasing their activities and achievements are open for sharing their knowledge and experience with the Flemish participants of the tour;
- **Ensuring that decisions** on the scheduling, financing, and modalities of developing and implementing an innovative idea **are rapidly taken**. Therefore, Innovatiesteunpunt spares no effort to have two key decision makers of the participating agricultural and horticultural businesses attending a tour (as in Flanders usually most farms are family businesses, this requires the attendance of the couple that runs the farm or rural business in a tour).



2. RUNNING THE RURAL DIGITAL HUB

2.1 Who runs the accelerator programme?

Innovatiesteunpunt (see above), the innovation advisory service for agricultural enterprises, rural initiatives and local authorities ran the accelerator programme.

The involvement of Innovatiesteunpunt in EU-funded projects (INTERREG; HORIZON etc.) has enabled the team managing the tours – and of course the farmers – to find good practices outside of Belgium that could be used inside Belgium.

2.2 Who are the participants of the programme?

The programme is open to farmers and local entrepreneurs and initiatives, who all share a **common challenge** of innovating or improving the performance.

2.3 How is the accelerator programme run?

a) Programme stages

After careful selection of topics, sites to visit and participants eager to learn, Innovatiesteunpunt so far organised tours on the following topics:

- **Product development and food innovation**, in 2014, and in 2015 for participants from the province of Limburg to England (3 trips);
- **Village innovation**, in 2015 for participants from the municipality of Gooik to the Netherlands (1 trip);
- **Commercial Algae Cultivation**, in 2016, to France (1 trip),
- **Multifunctional Agriculture**, in 2016 for participants from the province of West-Flanders & Antwerp to the Netherlands (2 trips and 1 planned end of 2017), and
- **Short Food Supply Chains**, in 2017 for participants from the 14 municipalities from the province of West-Flanders and from the province of Limburg to England (2 trips and 2 planned for 2018).

Common elements of tours to accelerate the realisation of the new business idea

- It usually starts with **introduction into the topic** of the tour, often by presenting videos on enterprises or initiatives that have realised innovations in that field.
- Participants will **visit three or four leaders in innovation** of agricultural or horticultural enterprises, or of rural development, which will present their experience and practice.
- After the first site visit, participants are **assisted in starting work to formalise and concretise their ideas**. This work will go on during the whole tour, ideas will be refined and /or modified as a result of the lessons learnt from the site visits, the guidance of their coach, and the comments of other participants in informal and formal exchange rounds.
- For getting inspiration on how the new business models and practices visited could be adapted, **experts help** the participating Flemish farmers **to assess these models**, through structured group work and brainstorming sessions.
- For elaborating and substantiating ideas for business innovation, experts and coaches assist in **sketching out the “canvas” of a business model** for realising their innovative idea, by focussing on the problems that they intend to solve and the value for customers that they plan to create; the key activities required to realise it; and the revenue that the new idea will generate once it is realised.



- After the second site visit, participants will **have individual conversations with the experts** and coaches to further elaborate and deepen their ideas, to have – at the end of a tour - a well substantiated business model with detailed specifications for its implementation.

The Tours offer a broad range of activities, accommodating the needs and interests of each participant:

Inspiration and motivation:

Visiting related business cases and learning from the experience of the entrepreneur show-casing their business innovation and practices.

Business planning tools:

Introducing **real business cases** and business development tools (by showing films and/or expert presentations) during the travel time to open minds, develop skills and build capacities for professional business planning on issues such as:

- how to use the business model canvas,
- how to make your own SWOT analysis,
- how to start with product development,
- how to pitch an innovative idea,
- how to develop a mission statement, etc.



Review and Assessment of the innovative idea:

- Assisting in **learning from first-hand presentation** and background information on foreign experience during site visits, and in benchmarking against the good practice cases visited
- **Providing topical advice and coaching** by experts in the field throughout the trip
- Organising space **for pitching innovative ideas** to one another, with the objective of getting feedback from peers for strengthening the business case
- Organising formal discussion rounds to **stimulate networking** with other farmers/ entrepreneurs working on the same concept, and informal exchange during breakfast / lunch / dinner

Boosting implementation efforts:

Follow up coaching the after trip.

Networking to access external resources (know-how, finance)

Assistance in contacting and cooperating with research and technology institutions, banks and other financial establishments, and private and public (at EU, national, regional or local levels) grants needed for development of the innovative projects.

After the last site visit, **participants and their coaches score** the degree to which the individual goals for the tour were achieved.

b) Follow up activities

Innovatiesteunpunt organises follow-up activities in three directions:

- Towards developing the innovative ideas of the **participants** of a tour:



- All participants can **request further coaching** and networking support by the consultants of Innovatiesteunpunt (five days on average), following an evaluation at the end of a tour, and the follow-up survey six months later.
- All participants are given the **opportunity to take part in the bi-annual ideas competition** (which is part of the innovation campaign), where they have media exposure and can win extra funding for acceleration a start-up development work.
- Towards inspiring and motivating other innovative **agricultural and horticultural businesses or initiatives**:
 - **Other** farmers and growers, local producers or distributors are invited **to learn from the results** of a tour through following presentations of the innovative business concepts on events, and, more directly, through visiting the sites of the participants, which had agreed in advance to being open for visits.
- Towards the organisation and funding of **future inspirational tours organised by Innovatiesteunpunt**:
 - Based on the feedback from participants, and on the experience of cases of successfully implemented innovations, Innovatiesteunpunt is **constantly improving its approach and methodology of a tour**. It is developing a business case for the Tour to demonstrate that its value and benefits outweighs its cost, and continuously engaged in fund-raising to cover the cost for the ‘Academy on Tour’ and some ‘follow up’ expenses (mostly for consultancy work and travel).

2.4 What resources are needed for running the accelerator programme?

a) Costs

Each thematic tour has its own budget, which had to be raised on a case-by-case basis (therefore, the budget below is only indicative). The budget items related to the operational costs of a tour include specific fixed costs related to the topic of a tour, and variable costs depending on the number of participants.

Each bus tour is attended by 30 to 35 people:

- 24 representatives from 12 different businesses or initiatives with innovative ideas, and
- 7 to 11 experts, coaches, and consultants of Innovatiesteunpunt.

Cost item	Description	(Estimated) costs
Fees of external experts and coaches, and of the consultants of Innovatiesteunpunt		€5,000
Catering for participants, coaches, experts and organisers		€2,500
Hiring VIP bus		€2,500
Rent of meeting space during tour		€1,500
Total costs:		€11,500
Total cost/ enterprise:	One full-day trip	€479

The participants of a tour have not been charged for assistance, or participation, or the follow-up support. Innovatiesteunpunt is considering a small individual contribution of participants for future tours (e.g. to cover part of the costs for food and drinks).



b) Human resources for running the accelerator

Each tour is run by 7 to 11 experts, coaches, and 3 to 5 consultants of Innovatiesteunpunt, including expertise in product and concept design, business development, (social) marketing, and other necessary expertise.

Specific challenges during the implementation of the Academy on Tour

A specific challenge has been to **assist participants of a tour to identify appropriate financing if needed**, to assess the most suitable type of finance (grants or loans) and to assist in drafting applications to banks and public authorities.

While it was difficult to convince farmers to participate in the first tour, for the subsequent tours the team of Innovatiesteunpunt had to screen and select applying farmers because of the sheer demand. This means that everyone who participates in a tour is highly committed to work and learn, and to push through with their ideas.

2.5 What are the outputs, results and long-term sustainability of the hub?

Results should be assessed against long-term objectives. In agriculture and related economic activities, **it will take time for new ideas to come to fruition** (e.g. it takes five years for newly planted trees to mature).

That is why significant differences have been observed in the scheduling of the implementation of new business ideas, depending on the topic of a tour. In other words, results of some tours will be visible and assessable after a few months, others only after a few years.

Based on the **high satisfaction of the participants**, Innovatiesteunpunt made the accelerator approach part of their service package for innovative farmers and growers, and has been asked by local and provincial governments and other stakeholders linked to the Boerenbond (the Flemish Farmers Union) to organise tours on a range of topics.

a) Improved capacity of businesses & new revenue streams

Overall 9 tours were organised each supporting 24 entrepreneurs with strong innovation potential. Further 3 trips are planned for the end of 2017 / beginning of 2018.

The ultimate objectives of the Tour are to **identify and create new revenue streams** for farmers, new business opportunities and the sharing of good practices across borders and regions to achieve sustainable rural development.

Examples include:

- ✓ Appelen Roes (<http://www.appelenroes.be/producten>) that started a production of cherries to be sold as separate product, but mainly as ingredient within its own applejuice. A new concept 'cherry on the go' is prepared but waiting for the production to be 100%;
- ✓ Belgian Saffran developed some new products by cooperating with producers taking part on the same trip (<http://www.belgischesaffraan.be/>);
- ✓ Haspenwood developed new products originating from old apple wood (<http://www.haspenwood.com/>) each product showing the exact location from where the apple tree was standing;



- ✓ A mobile farm shop developed by 2 producers Van Elven & Bruneel (<http://www.innovatiesteunpunt.be/nl/inspiratie/innovatielaureaat-2016-nele-devoghel-koen-bruneel>) (https://www.facebook.com/hoevewinkel2.0/?ref=page_internal)

Ideas for new food products could be realised quickly, such as the combination of self-grown saffron with regional foodstuffs; whereas most new business ideas from the ‘multifunctional agriculture tour’ take a few years to realise, as diversification into new products or services for a new segment of customers often requires providers of capital for investments, and/or new compliance with existing legislation, such as building permits and/or HORECA regulations.

Innovatiesteunpunt has identified and assessed results at the level of the participants’ innovative project development. The general observation has been that **about half of the innovative ideas (on average 6 ideas / trip) presented reach a test phase, and roughly half of these reach the market.**

To diffuse the practices and lessons learnt from a tour, Innovatiesteunpunt also has an agreement with participants that it can use their knowledge and ideas for benchmarking and helping farmers in other provinces. Thus, the results are mainstreamed first into the advisory, consultancy, training and communication activities of Innovatiesteunpunt, and through direct networking and communication activities of participants.

c) New exchange and learning opportunities through networking

The most successful aspect of the Tour as accelerator programme for rural entrepreneurs is **its approach that brings together inspiration by practitioners**, with highly customised support and with peer-to peer learning.

Specific features that have contributed to the success of the Tour have been:

- Access to high quality first-hand experience of business innovators abroad;
- A double focus of each tour: a common specific issue for all participants, and a specific measurable goal (e.g. 1 new product idea, 1 new business model, 1 “I have learned today...” experience shared in the group) or output for each participant;
- Organised space for peer-to peer learning, networking and benchmarking.

Another important result was the observation that having people spending all day together on the bus tour is a **far more effective way of matchmaking than a traditional networking event**, because they spent all day together, eating lunch together, and participating in site visits together. Thus, many participants are still in contact and continue to work together.

Improving the accelerator programme

The ‘Academy on Tour’ use a specific management method based on the logic of quality management applied for the control and continual improvement of processes and products:

- **Plan:** Each participant is asked to set a specific goal (e.g., develop two new product ideas, develop a new economic sustainable business concept, etc.). At the end of each tour, Innovatiesteunpunt scores the state of development of the innovative ideas against the specific goals set before a tour.
- **Do:** A result of a tour is an action plan for each participant to be implemented in the months following a tour.
- **Check:** Six months after a tour, Innovatiesteunpunt organises a survey to check progress on the implementation of the action plans, obstacles encountered, and to inquire the need for further personal coaching or financing;
- **Adjust:** Innovatiesteunpunt continues to assist in further developing the innovation project, with a focus on support in dealing with unexpected situations and managing risk, which are characteristic



for business innovations. Consultants of Innovatiesteunpunt facilitate learning and drawing lessons for future work from what has worked and how, and what has not worked and why, and thereby helps the promoters of the innovation projects to making adjustments or corrections to respond to unforeseen challenges. To this end, Innovatiesteunpunt organises a third check of progress made, and pays another visit to the participants before or during the bi-annually innovation campaign.

If you had to give an advice to those who are planning to set up an accelerator programme what would it be?

My practical recommendations for those who are planning to set up an “Academy on Tour “for innovators in rural areas:

- *Start with one tour, and **test all “ingredients”** mentioned above (under 2.3) trying out with participants you know very well and who are committed to, and open for, thinking and working together. Discuss with them what they want to reach, which aims they have and how you can help them by in accelerating the development and implementation of their innovative ideas. After the first tour, organise a sound evaluation and discuss with the participants how to make the approach more effective and more practical.*
- ***Make sure you have agreed**, with each participant, **a specific goal** and a follow up action plan, which will be their compass for focussed activities in the following months. Otherwise there is the risk that participants, after a tour, will be caught again in their daily work and problems, because they have been left without guidance for priorities and development work to be done with their family and business partners, which is an essential pre-condition for realising new ideas and business concepts in the world of agriculture.*
- ***Ensure an atmosphere that builds trust** and a cooperative spirit between the participants, the experts and the enterprises or organisations abroad showcasing good practice during the site visits. To this end, the maximum number of participants should be limited. The experience of the Tour was that 24 participants from twelve businesses was just right to create a comfort zone for group work, and for managing follow-up support.*
- ***Ensure a “non-competitive” atmosphere and environment that creates openness.** To this end, selected participants should not be potential competitors; not attend alone but be accompanied by a family member; and be limited to a maximum number of 24.*

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