

Project INNOGROW – Action A3.4

*Study visits to transfer experiences on innovative production processes*

## Summary Report

## Introduction

The organisation of study visits provides valuable practical experience to participants (i.e. partners, key stakeholders and external experts), enhancing the exchange of experience process based on existing, successful cases studies. The INTERREG Europe programme encourages this type of exchange and suggests that the sharing knowledge and expertise should be an indispensable component of regional authorities' efforts in order to drive sustainable policy development.

A3.4 study visits are anticipated to foster capacity building in relation to investments and implementation of new technologies exploited by rural economy SMEs. Alongside the respective workshops organised by INNOGROW, study visits are one of the main catalysts to understand and come to terms with the policy change requirements that will allow SMEs to modernise their production processes.

In addition, study visits are an opportunity for regional level stakeholders, policy makers and experts to communicate, exchange ideas, discuss the regional issues and examine potential solutions for various social, economic, environmental or other challenges in relation to policy development. This type of experiences can therefore play a crucial role in policy making and the implementation of potential advancements and/or change. These discussions and hands-on experience can facilitate the involvement and possible contribution of key stakeholders in future action plans, and in the long-run after the project's completion.

During the Study visit (A3.4) were discussed the main outcomes form

- Activity A1.3, that is a comparative analysis report of selected policy measures promoting the adoption of innovation by rural economy SMEs in INNOGROW partners' regions. The report offers an overview of policies measures, and of supportive evidence, enablers, and impacts to allow partners to understand the policy dynamics and potential in their regions.
- Activity A1.4, that was based on a survey questionnaire, used to gather information on the factors the influence rural economy SMEs to adopt innovation within the INNOGROW Consortium regions (Greece, Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Latvia).

In particular, the action A1.4 underlined some policy-making priority areas to promote innovative production: Policy-makers should therefore focus on implementing policies that encourage the creation of jobs, which are directly related with the skills required for the introduction of advanced technologies in the workplace; higher qualifications and levels of education will be required with particular emphasis on ICT and interest-based skills. Development of such policies which will encourage the development of required skills is a therefore another focus point; policy makers should also focus on protection of the natural environment. Their high dependency on natural resources for their input in production, protection of the environment is therefore significant

factor to consider when developing an efficient policy or regulatory framework which will encourage the introduction of advanced innovation processes.

At the same time from the consulting Activities barriers, challenges and constraints that hinder innovation are identified (Policy makers should consider how to improve access to new financial resources and capital, since this factor plays a determining role in the way a business will grow and expand; external finance is made available; Effective policies should also aim to minimise business uncertainty and create a positive environment with political and economic stability. Business uncertainty can inhibit a small business's decision to invest in innovative technologies; Finally, due to their location, rural areas frequently lag behind in terms of non-financial resources such as infrastructure and transport links.)

## **Background and objective of the study visit**

Overall objective of the Study Visit was to allow the exchange of experiences and ideas to encourage the adoption of innovative production processes in rural SMEs located in the other regions partners of the project, as well as facilitate the definition of policy instruments and measures on the basis of the needs and requirements presented that are of interest also for other territories. The specific objectives of the Study Visit, that contributed to the definition of the final program, are the following:

1. Highlight the most relevant needs and challenges associated with rural SMEs that have already adopted innovative production processes and/or technologies.
2. Exploration of how such issues can be addressed through regional policies.
3. Provision of insights to regional authorities on the degree of impact that the modification of conventional business models through the adoption of innovative production processes can have on SMEs' productivity and competitiveness.
4. Collection and exchange of experiences from different regions regarding the investment and adoption of new technologies.
5. Networking between elected representatives of regional public administrations and members of stakeholders' groups, through informal networking moments.

The idea behind the organization of the study visit was to create a mutual opportunity for the exchange of experiences and thus a two-way beneficial process. Local actors and companies had the opportunity to meet international experts, who had the opportunity to exchange discuss ideas in a direct and efficient manner with local stakeholders. Moreover, regional authorities were invited to present the measures implemented to promote innovation of rural SMEs, with a direct benefit from the local stakeholders in terms of increased knowledge and participation. On the other hand, the Study Visit provided valuable practical experience to participants (i.e. partners, key stakeholders and external experts), enhancing the exchange of experience process based on local, successful cases studies that are of interest for the goals of INNOGROW project.

## The Study visit context: the City and the Mincio Park

Mincio Park is located in the eastern part of Lombardy and stretches from the regional confines in the north to the river Po in the south, embracing the valley of the River Mincio. The Province of Mantua lies in the south-eastern part of the Region of Lombardy, wedged in between Veneto and Emilia Romagna. The territory is varied and extends from the hills, to the terraced plains, from the area of meandering riverbeds to the complex of lakes of Mantua, with the exceptional wetlands of the Mincio valleys and the lowland forests of the Bosco Fontana.



The Province of Mantova is located in the middle of the Po valley, on the east-southern side of the Lombardy Region. The region is crossed by several rivers, and hosts a number of natural reserves and protected natural areas.

Mantova's landscape is primarily agricultural, but connected to a spread advanced industrialization and more recently target of a fast-growing tourist activities. In terms of local GDP, the industrial sector accounts for more than 30%, agriculture for 6% and services (including tourism) for the rest.

The Mantova city and the surrounding region/district is a relevant example of a "SMEs" ecosystems where innovation, creative/cultural and tourism enterprises/economies are strongly interconnected with rural /natural landscapes values and food productions/transformation economies (with a large range of local products certified/international recognised).

The Mantova context was selected in relation to the coexistence of several innovation/competitiveness aspects of interest. It is possible to find several successful cases of innovative SMEs in the field of: multifunctional agriculture and livestock farming, cooperative and social agriculture, food processing industries integrated with tourism and cultural enterprises, manufacturing supporting the high-tech agriculture. The diffuse and sustainable tourism economies in urban, rural and natural areas thanks to Natural reserves and protected area (Natura 2000 sites), Outstanding cultural heritage (UNESCO).

It is also possible to underline strong partnerships between different stakeholders acting in Mantova: universities, non-profit Foundations and Parks authorities and a variety of active social and environmental organizations.

In particular, since last 20 years in the Mantova context it is possible to highlight a large alliance (institutions, public and private foundations, private enterprises, public and private educational and research actors, NGOs but also citizens groups) supporting a crosscutting forces for renovation of the city and the rural surrounding that was able promote innovative SMEs (creative, cultural, rural, technologies...) growth and acting in synergy (technological / business innovation & environmental and cultural values valorisation in a strategic vision to improve the local economy (all sectors) competitiveness. In this terms the networking and partnerships among different actors and sectors emerges as central (positive) factor of success.

## The study visit structure

The study visit agenda included workshops and best practices exchange and/or moment dedicated to the debate/networking and two sessions of visit on the field.

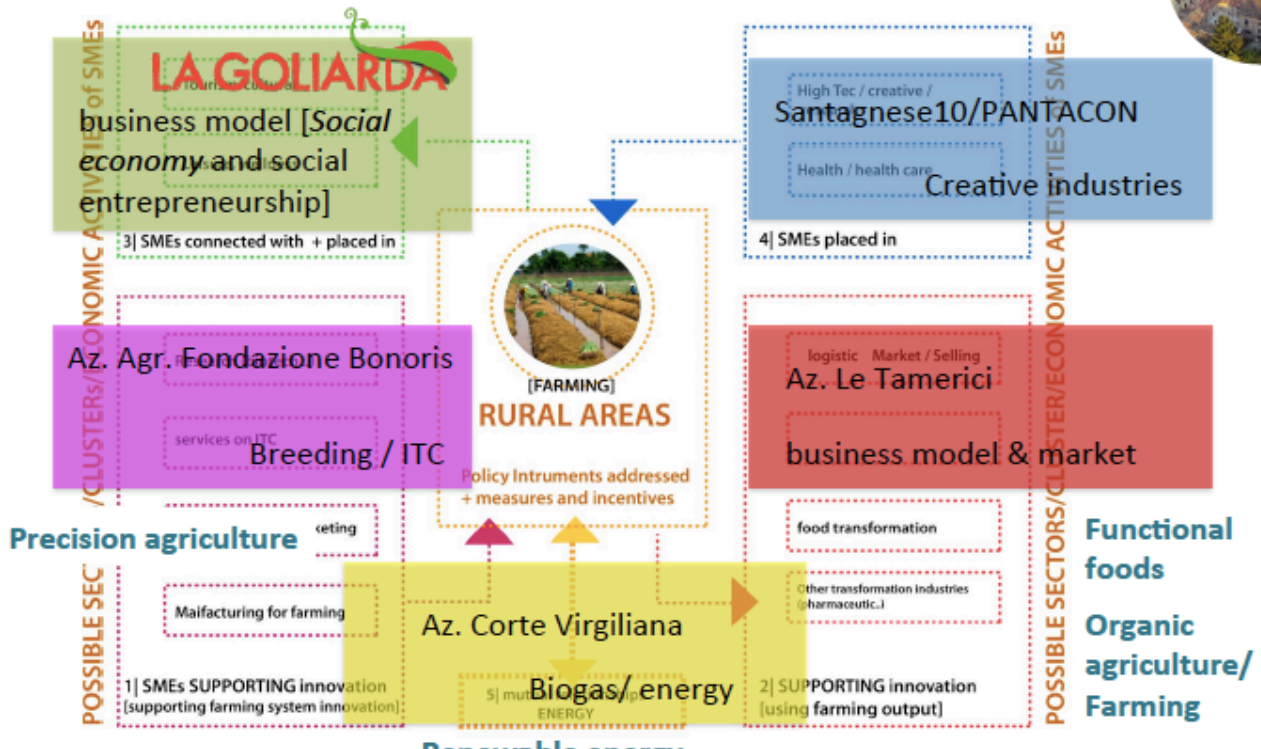
Workshops Sustainable development of the rural territory and innovation for rural SME's (22nd February 2018 – morning

WELCOME ADDRESS: Federico Bucci, Prorector Politecnico di Milano - Polo di Mantova; Stefano Della Torre, Director of the Department of Architecture, Built environment and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano; Elena Mussinelli, Responsible of the Research Unit "Governance and design for the enhancement of culturale heritage", Politecnico di Milano; Antonio Ballarin Denti, President of the Scientific Committee of Lombardy Foundation for the Environment; Maurizio Pellizzer, President of the Mincio Park, Mantova

First session: INNOVATIONS TO IMPROVE OF RURAL SME's AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RURAL TERRITORY: Angela Colucci (Lombardia Foundation for the Environment): Study visit to promote the exchange of successful experiences on innovative production processes; Marco Zanini (Chamber of commerce Mantova): Business model of the successful SMEs in Mantua; Gabriele Busti (Lombardy Region, DG Economic Development): Regional policies and measures to promote competitiveness for rural SMEs; Chiara Agosti (Politecnico di Milano): Project, environment and sociality Mantua a welcoming territory; Dino Vincenzi (Bonoris Foundation): The role and activity of the Bonoris Foundation in the territory of Mincio Park

Second session: PRESENTATION OF SUCCESFUL EXPERIENCE OF PRODUCTION PROCESS: Franco Meuzzi, Az. Agr. Merlesca: Innovative agri-food products to adapt to legislative constraints; Corrado Benatti, Coop. Alkemica: Promotion of scientific knowledge and sustainable tourism; Alessandra Bergamini, Consorzio vini mantovani: Promotion of the quality through territory values.

The figure shows the relationships between the good practices selected and the main rural economies activities and their synergies (extract from Angela Colucci presentation of 22th of February)



### Program of the on-site visit to rural SMEs - (22nd February 2018 – afternoon)

**Azienda Agricola Corte Comino:** The agricultural farm Corte Comino cultivates permanent pastures for the breeding of cows and the production of Grana Padano DOP. The company is renowned for having adopted a full automatized milking system able to monitor in any time the quality parameters of milk.

**Agriturismo Corte Virgiliana:** The farm holiday Corte Virgiliana combines the production of milk for Grana Padano DOP with the renting of rooms in a charming house of Gonzaga period. The company has adopted an internal biogas system for the production of energy, with the aim of decreasing air pollutants.

**Cascina La Goliarda:** The La Goliarda farmstead is partner of project Tre Stelle (Three Stars) that aims at facilitating the reintroduction of people with psychiatric disorder in the job market. Located close to the Natural Reserve Valli del Mincio, La Goliarda is both an hostel and a restaurant.

### Program of the on-site visit to rural SMEs - (23rd February 2018 – morning)

**Santagnese10 - Officina Creativa:** Hub Santagnese10 is a public space of the Municipality of Mantua that is managed by PANTACON, one of the most important network of cultural enterprises in Lombardy. Santagnese 10 works as a hub of cultural enterprises and offers space for coworking as well as rooms for cultural events and training courses.



*officina*  
**SANTAGNESE<sup>10</sup>**  
*creativa*

**CREATIVE  
LAB**



**COWORKING  
CREATIVE LAB**

  
**pantacon**  
impresa sociale per la cultura



**MANTOVA HUB  
MANTOVASCIENZA**

**CULTURAL INDUSTRIES**



Le Tamerici: Core business of Le Tamerici is the production of preserves using traditional methods and local products. It integrates a strong focus on innovation and technology into the production of traditional products, serving also at the same time as hub for event dedicated to the promotion of the culture of food. All its products have received international standards for quality (ISO 22000, IFS and BRC).



## Stakeholders involved in the Study Visit organisation

For the organization of the Study Visit, the cooperation of relevant stakeholders of the territory was essential, in order to get a better knowledge of the whole territory, its socioeconomic dynamics and the main characteristics. FLA exploited its networks of contacts with stakeholders and university in the territory of the Lombardy region, to involve in the organization of this event the three institutions that are most interested in the topics of the project:

- **Mincio Park:** for its statutory goals, the Park implement actions to protect the environments and promote the sustainable development of the territory in cooperation with the local stakeholders (that comprehends SMEs and other economical actors). Its activities comprehend: the promotion of positive and synergic interactions between the agricultural sector and the environment; the promotion of a food brand to identify local product with quality and sustainability requirements; the realization of infrastructures, signage and other services to promote sustainable tourism.
- **Politecnico di Milano:** the Polytechnic of Milan carries out high quality didactical and research activities in the city of Mantua, and is listed as one of the main stakeholders in Lombardy for INNOGROW project as well. The activities of the university focus on the development of the city through the valorization of the Cultural Heritage, also in coordination with UNESCO's office present in the city. Moreover, it cooperates with the Chamber of Commerce of Mantua and the local districts for food, wine and cultural goods.
- **Bonoris Foundation:** the foundations allocates every year huge resources to SMEs and associations for social activities. In the years, it has acquired real estate properties in the area of the Park that has renowned and transformed in innovative companies for the sustainable development of the territory. On its properties, there are agricultural companies that have adopted sustainable techniques in order to respect the environment, while, at the same time, improving competitiveness and innovation.

## Key discussion points

The main discussion points of the study visit were introduced during the workshop in the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> February and then presented and explored in the second part of the event during the on-field visit in the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> and in the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> February to have an hands-on opportunity to study and transfer the best practices of the territory of Mantova. Discussion dealt with three main topics that resulted to be of primary interest for the development of the territory of Mantova and the growth of local rural SMEs, as well as according to the general objectives listed in section 2. Guest Speakers of the Workshop and Companies visited were thus chosen among a broad number of available possibilities as the ones with the closer interest in the topics of the Study Visit. Below please find a summary of the main elements discussed during the Study Visit and the speaker/the companies involved to present each point:

- Case studies of rural SMEs that successfully introduced innovations and/or competitive business models and the impact on companies' productivity and the environmental and social value for the territory. At the workshop were presented three main cases of rural SMEs that introduced changes in the way they operate to respond to a particular need and improve competitiveness. The Mantua Wine Consortium, with a focus on the relation between landscape and agricultural production, Cooperativa Alkemica, that presented their activities to promote scientific knowledge, environmental protection and awareness of the local territory, Agricultural Farm Merlesca, that adapted its production process to comply with normative requirements and improve competitiveness.
- Involvement of relevant stakeholders for a synergic development of the rural territory that takes into account environmental and social aspects. This topic was chosen due to the great role of local stakeholders for the sustainable development of the territory. Mincio Park presented its role in promote the local agriculture while safeguarding environmental resources, whereas Politecnico di Milano brought its experience in leading projects for the promotion of cultural and environmental heritage. Prof. Daniele Fanzini spoke on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce to introduce the business model rural SMEs.
- Policy framework to promote rural SMEs' innovation and competitiveness. The role of the Regional Authority is crucial to promote innovation and competitiveness of rural SMEs. This is the case also of Lombardy Region, where the Managing Authority of ROP ERDF allocated hundreds of million euros to this purpose. Indeed, Axis 3 of the policy Instrument of Lombardy Region is focused on the competitiveness of SMEs. Dr. Gabriele Busti, of the DG Economic Development presented the measures that are of interest for the local companies in order to inform project partners and their stakeholders about the legislative framework of Lombardy Region.

## **Main conclusions, outcomes and findings**

1\_ Synergies among rural SMEs sectors: the Mantua study visit demonstrated the relevance of activation of synergic alliances among rural SMEs sectors. The SMEs operating on the tourism sector (Corte Virgiliana, Goliarda and Tamerici) are strongly connected with local food production SMEs and food (local production and certificated food processing) creating innovative touristic facilities and attractions based on natural/rural landscape, local food, unique location and experiences. The creative and innovative industries are both connected with cultural sector (in Mantua a growing sector since last century) but also supporting initiatives involving rural/natural landscape and rural/agricultural cultural values and resources (Santagnese10)

2\_ Environmental innovation and performance connected to the rural production (Agriturismo Corte Virgiliana) is also another factor of innovation and able to improve the competitiveness of rural SMEs

3\_ Digitalisation and international market. The Tamerici practice demonstrated the relevance in reorganising the marketing: the traditional and high quality food (high quality and certificated products and high quality in processing) produced is sold to an international market (international on-line shop). The international (and national) on-line shop is also integrated by the valorisation of the high quality of the product through the organisation of workshop and training of haute cuisine.

## Policy recommendations

Points emerging from the Study visit debate and comparison are:

- 1\_ include in regional polices (Measures for competitiveness of SMEs) some criteria in order to orient existing measures towards rural SMEs
- 2\_ training and sharing activities/Networking
- 3\_ promote crosscutting polices able to support the alliance among rural SMEs (crucial for the rural context)
- 4\_ Promote polices for the multi-stakeholders partnership activation in rural contexts
- 5\_ Promote polices to strengthen the diffusion of Environmental innovation and performance connected to the rural production
- 6\_ Promote polices to strengthen Digitalisation and international market.

## Results from evaluation questionnaires

At the end of the Study Visit, an evaluation questionnaire was distributed among participants to evaluate the event in terms of the discussion topics, as well as the relevance and applicability of the case studies presented. Moreover, the questionnaire investigated also the proper organization of the Study Visit, in order to provide useful information for the preparation of next interregional events.

Questionnaires were structured as follow:

- A first introductory part that characterizes the organization of the interviewed;
- A central part that evaluates the organization of the Study Visit, the quality of discussion and the potential applicability of topics presented in other regions and territorial context;
- A final part where interviewed had the possibility to leave comments and propose suggestions.

In the table below are reported the aggregated results obtained from the questionnaires with the corresponding questions.

Question 1: How would you rate the study visit's overall organization?				
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
0%	5%	33%	40%	22%
Question 2: Do you think that the time allocated to each discussion/topic was sufficient?				
Extremely limited time	Insufficient time	Marginally sufficient time	Sufficient time	Abundant time
0%	0%	17%	58%	25%
Question 3: How would you rate the quality of the presented topics?				
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
0%	0%	33%	62%	5%
Question 4: How would you rate the quality of discussion during the Study Visit?				
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
0%	0%	33%	62%	5%
Question 5: How relevant to your organization's operations were the proposed innovations proposed?				
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
0%	5%	38%	38%	16%
Question 6: How would you rate the quality of discussion during the Study Visit?				
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
0%	5%	38%	57%	0%
Question 7: Do you agree that the Study Visit will lead to the implementation of innovative production processes?				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
5%	11%	29%	40%	15%
Question 8: Overall, has the Study Visit been interesting and productive?				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
0%	0%	17%	58%	25%