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INNOGROW
Interreg Europe

POLICY BRIEF 6

INNOVATION SUPPORT CENTRES &
RURAL SMES

Summary

The provision of business support services (in the form of advisory and technical assistance) is considered a key enabler for sustainable SMEs development, allowing companies to increase their competitiveness and capacity to access new markets. The mission of the 1st Interregional INNOGROW workshop on 'Innovation support centres', hosted by FLA in Lecco, Italy, was to exchange ideas and experiences on the establishment of innovation support centres and to draw inspiration from successful business support schemes.

Why innovation support centres?

Rural innovation can be defined as the process of introducing/implementing new ideas, products and methods to deliver added value to regional markets, governments and society. Innovation may comprise new technologies, processes, products, markets, services, behaviours, and networks; while it can be R&D-based but also driven from within firms and communities (e.g. open innovation).

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Business incubation is a process that contributes to the successful development/operation of fledgling SMEs by offering an array of targeted resources and services (such as mentoring, networking and skill transfer). Business incubation/support may be operational, addressing an enterprise's day-to-day operations, or strategic, addressing medium and long-term objectives related to the market access or competitiveness of a company.

Business Support Centres (BSCs) cover a wide range of non-financial services including:

- the delivery of training and human resource development services
- support for technology and product development
- the development of business linkages
- policy and advocacy support
- marketing assistance (e.g. production of marketing and promotional materials)
- the provision of infrastructure and market access services (e.g. access to expensive equipment)
- the provision of practical information on market opportunities and national legislation

What does a BSC-for-innovation do?

Business innovation support services focus mainly on co-operation, sharing of knowledge and intermediating advisory methods, including the provision of indirect support to SMEs in the form of business tailored services (e.g. innovation management, capacity building, IPR management, participation in tenders), networking and collaborative actions (e.g. innovative collaborative networks). In a nutshell, Business Innovation Centres (BICs) provide the following services and functions to SMEs:

- Dissemination/sharing of research findings and innovation knowledge.
- Delivery of training to enhance SMEs' capability to manage technology and innovation.
- Encouraging the participation in research projects and facilitating access to funding through European and national programmes.
- Enhancing the research and innovation capacities of SMEs by helping to create synergies with other research actors; fostering technological cooperation.
- Provision of practical information on market/tender opportunities and national legislation.
- Consulting on business planning, including the drafting of operational plans for all business activities including research, sales, marketing, and human resources.
- Fostering internationalisation, enabling SMEs to access new markets and extend their customer base.



Exemplary Innovation Support Centres



INNOVA BIC (Italy)

INNOVA BIC (www.innovabic.it) was founded in 1994. It is a public-private business support organisation, aimed to promote sustainable economic growth and employment for rural areas in the Province of Messina.

INNOVA's mission is to strengthen the region's innovation potential, intensify intra- and inter-regional linkages that include the region's innovative stakeholders, and accompany - through service provision - regional innovative actors' ideas and innovative concepts along their commercialisation process up to successful market entry and beyond. The organisation works closely with a diverse range of entities, such as academic institutes, research institutes, partner companies and start-ups, to create synergies for eco-innovation in rural specific activities such as agriculture and tourism.

INNOVA BIC offers a wide range of innovation management services, such as training and coaching, feasibility study preparation, contact mediation to financing providers, project management and event organisation to raise awareness on innovation related activities and new technologies. The centre supports also the regional administration in the creation and management of innovative projects as well as strategic planning of innovation activities, focused on the agricultural and tourism sector. Furthermore, INNOVA BIC communicates new tender possibilities, builds linkages among SMEs and participates itself in European projects (e.g. H2Lab, OPEN), targeting to foster regional innovation.

Over the past 22 years, INNOVA BIC has built up an impressive track record of innovation services delivery, making a tangible contribution to regional economy by: a) providing non-financial support to more than 200 companies (incl. innovation management, new product development, access to new markets, introduction of new technologies in production, and new business models), b) mobilising investments of about €300 million towards sustainable modes of production, and c) providing more than 15,000 hours of training in innovative technologies to rural SMEs. Finally, INNOVA BIC is a member of the European BIC Network (EBN), which is an EU-supported network of over 250 European Business Innovation Centres (BICs) that are involved in the selection and support of innovative enterprises with high growth potential.



BIC Plzen (Czech Republic)

Business Innovation Centre Plzen (<http://en.bic.cz/>) was established by the City of Plzen (Pilsen) in 1992 to support the development of business innovation in the region. The centre acts in the framework of the international networks supporting business and innovation and works in partnership with numerous organisations at regional, national and international level.

BIC Plzen supports the quality and intensity of the innovation and technology transfer to the economic practice in the Plzen region, with emphasis on new or enhanced technologies that could be applied in agriculture and industry (largest economic sectors in region); fostering regional development. Activities and services of the centre are provided for start-ups as well as for existing businesses with innovation and technological potential.

BIC Plzen's services are aimed primarily at SMEs and include, for example, support for the establishment of new innovative companies; help with seeking and obtaining funding for development projects; support for introducing innovations in companies and finding suitable partners for development, production and commercial collaborations. More precisely, BIC Plzen's activities are focused on the following areas:



- Preparation of business plans for SMEs, start-up companies and development projects, including external assessment of business plans' feasibility.
- Support for the involvement of innovative companies and research organisations in European R&D projects (e.g. Horizon 2020, EUREKA).
- Mediating communications between companies and academia and promoting commercialisation of R&D results.
- Identification of suitable funding sources for new technology acquisitions or intellectual property protection.
- Access to finance through preferential loans for investment in technology and premises, arranged by the Czech–Moravian Guarantee and Development Bank
- Provision of business innovation premises and protection of intellectual and industrial property.
- Promoting international business co-operation, seeking to identify partners for commercial and production collaborations in the EU countries

Recommendations

1. National Governments should intensify their efforts in consolidating Innovation Support Centres, with a particular emphasis on rural SMEs growth via the adoption of sustainable and innovative technologies. To this end, national governments should commit to securing funding for such supportive associations and facilitate the alignment of various groups of stakeholders in forming 'bottom-up' synergies.
2. National/regional plans and strategies are crucial milestones when the aim is to set up innovation support centres. Inclusion of such networks as aims within broader developmental strategies helps supporting and justifying their course, while it ensures that the mission of these centres is aligned with broader commitments and visions of growth.
3. Regional and innovation management authorities should carefully plan the nature of these centres in relation to possible locations in which they could be of most use.
4. The main funding for Innovation Support Centres should be consistent with the financial needs of such centres to deploy long-term support programs. Hence, funding should be sustained and suitable for addressing common problems and obstacles to innovation uptake. What is more, funding should ideally be stemming from diversified sources and thereby permit and foster interdependencies between stakeholders.
5. Innovation Support Centres should be funded in a way that links with other similar projects should be prerequisites and further encouraged.
6. Because Innovation Support Centres are meant, among others, to bridge the gap between commercialization and research, they should be designed in such way as to attract managerial staff with proven expertise and good understanding of both the commercial and the research sector.