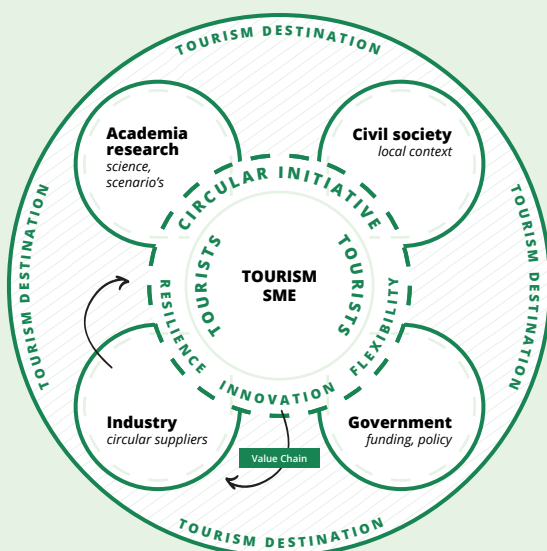


Collaboration structures for circular initiatives

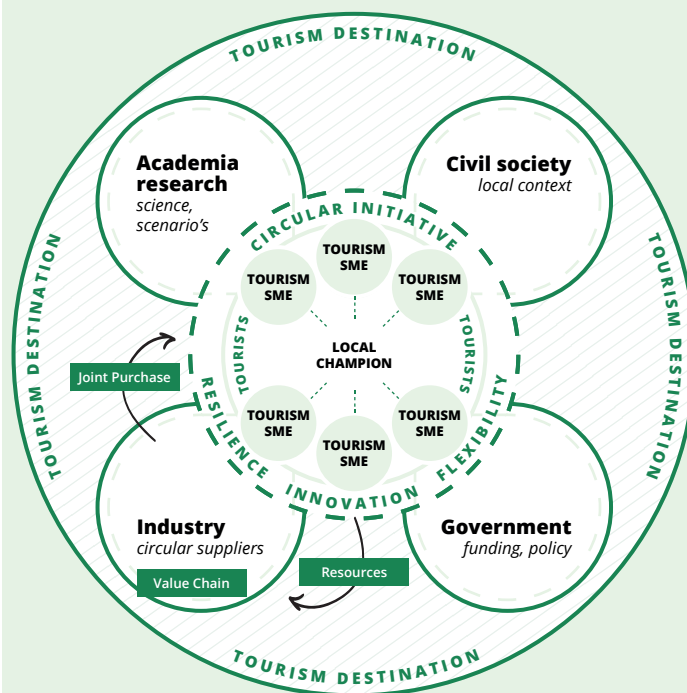
In the project FACET we learned that collaboration of small to medium enterprises, within a circular support group (CSG), is key to the success of circular innovations. One entrepreneur can have an idea, but if that is shared by a group of entrepreneurs, validated by scientific research, supported by local communities, funded by government within the appropriate policy framework and an industry that can provide the products and services to make it happen, they will create a success story, an example for the region!

Linkages for coordinated support groups

Individual Circular Support Group



Coordinated Circular Support Group



In the two models we present two scenario's for collaboration between the above mentioned stakeholders to support small to medium enterprises (SME's) in their development of circular initiatives.

The four stakeholder groups, academic research, civil society, government and industry, also known as the "quadruple helix" are represented in four blocks surrounding the circular initiative. The circular initiative is owned by the SME's, represented by the circle connecting with all four stakeholder groups. Within the circular initiative there is the individual SME (model 1) versus the coordinated network of SME's (model 2) initiated and guided by the local champion.

The local champion is the key networker that has often developed the circular idea and gathers a large enough group to achieve their goals and come to a scalable circular solution. Within industry, businesses that provide products and services to support the circular initiative need to apply the **9R strategy** for supplying circular products, **creating a circular value chain**.

The products used by the entrepreneurs should be feeding back into industry for **reuse, recycle or repurposing**. When the circular support group is coordinated between multiple SME's there is also the opportunity to **joint purchase** from industry giving economic and environmental benefits.

The example of implementing a regional sustainable food strategy

The “Brugs Foodlab”, is a circular support group that joined forces to develop, among other things, a sustainable food strategy for the city of Bruges, named “Brugge Smaakt”. Members saw the value of sharing ideas and forming new partnerships. So they decided to continue the support group with the purpose of implementing the Bruges food strategy in practice. Recently a concept note was created with a clear vision, mission, objectives, action plan and communication strategy.



Members together constitute the entire “quadruple helix”

- The city of Bruges was the local champion for the support group by giving businesses (Cudocoo and foodwin) the task to develop a sustainable food strategy for the city. The city funded the coordination and development of the group for two years. The financing model is described under the heading 'financing'.
- Civil society is represented by various non-profit organisations with a vision for sustainable food systems to increase their societal impact.
- Academic and research organisations, such as the Howest University of Applied Sciences, joined to have access to examples of sustainable food practices. Students for example can study these practices and learn from them, while the foodlab members have access to latest research findings on this topic.
- Multiple local entrepreneurs and businesses joined the group to strengthen their own commercial activities by establishing partnerships, exploring new business models and opportunities, and to strengthen their marketing and communication. For SMEs the short-term perspective tends to be more important: having hands-on collaborations. While for larger companies, the marketing perspective tends to be more important.



Financing

The city of Bruges decided in 2021 to provide the group with financing for two years to coordinate the group and think about a business model and strategy. Starting 2023 the following financing model will be implemented:

- 1/3d will be contributed by the city
- 1/3d will come from the members through a membership fee
- 1/3d will come from project funding (European and Flemish)

The (financial) independence from the city of Bruges was an important aspect for the members to retain the ability to be critical and less reliant on further policy evolutions. On the other hand, going from free to paid membership is a difficult step to take. Convincing factors include the direct return from project funding in case of participation, a yearly fair where they can benefit from visibility, marketing and communication benefits.

Success factors & challenges



Look at what already exists and build on that; try to valorise existing projects and actors that work towards the same goal. The Bruges Foodlab originated from existing actors that worked on sustainable food. Knowledge of the existing value chains and eco-systems is key.



The Bruges Foodlab was able to secure three big grants where about half of the network benefits from, while the other half does not. It is important to nurture a positive mindset of solidarity to keep the peace as not all organisations will always benefit equally.



Many of the members have joined out of idealism. However, to increase impact, it is important to have a commercial perspective. Joining these two perspectives is important and can only be done by focusing on the value of collaboration and stressing the similarities between actors, instead of the differences, as well as finding a common ground with shared goals.



Have a positive communication strategy. For example, instead of saying “we need to eat less meat for the environment” say “try a seaweed crocket, it's super tasty”.



Infographics illustrating impact which helps in reaching out to others and showing the value added for the stakeholders.

Things to consider while using this model, and further research

The model could consider the temporal and geographical dimensions of the circular support group actors. The role of actors from each dimension of the “quadruple helix” may vary according to the stages of a project (from idea generation to operational stage) since different inputs such as scientific expertise, finance or regulatory approval may be required at each stage. For instance, the role of government actors may be more pertinent in the early stages of a quadruple helix initiative where legitimation and regulatory approval is needed. Also the proximity and already established trust between SME's and the actors in the support group are important factors for successful collaboration. In addition, the criteria for evaluating the success of a quadruple helix should be evaluated. Besides the generation of innovation, inclusivity and contribution to social cohesion could be regarded as a criterion.

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