

Digi2Market

A project supported by the NPA INTERREG programme

Project evaluation Report

Produced by

Zero Carbon Design 2 Sustain

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Terms of Reference

Deliverable C.3.1 of the project specifies the project evaluation report.

The project evaluation report will include all the major project lessons, including what works and does not work and how green business models may be affected by immersive technologies and their applications from small enterprises in remote regions. The report will form part of the final report of the project and be a source document for promotion of project lessons, highlighting good practices and potential pitfalls.

Methods and techniques

The principle method involved is that of evaluation against objectives and indicators, which demands the application of the following techniques.

- Identification of all essential points of project fulfilment
- Quantification of outputs and inputs, encompassing financial and non financial ones.
- Liaison and collecting information and documents from partners
- Semi structured interviews
- Analysis

Outline of project

The Digi2Market project has developed innovative immersive digital technology tools for SMEs, because immersive technologies are a vehicle through which storytelling based marketing solutions are increasingly effective. It has been supported through priority two objective two of the programme: greater market reach beyond local markets for SMEs in remote and sparsely populated areas.

Digi2market has undertaken to create a B2B Collaborative Digital Platform (Digital City) with the functions:

- Host Immersive technologies (Augmented & Virtual Reality) Toolkits, adapted for SMEs
- Host Marketing and Sales Toolkits adapted for SMEs
- A platform for small SMEs to collaborate and achieve synergies of scale (and/or product offering) to enter new markets
- Provide Interactive collaboration facilities for Digital Hubs, Business Parks, SMEs and Knowledge Providers
- Provide Knowledge Centre on Green Standards for SME adoption
- Provide a Research and Marketing Platform for SMEs.

The project also had a sector focus and aimed to develop clustering among the enterprises. It has a quantitative target to involve and assist a number of enterprises.

In line with NPA priorities the project has addressed three challenges in peripheral regions: isolation of enterprises & small markets, communication difficulties and lack of economic diversity.

In addition to management and communication work packages, the project has operated through four other work packages:

- Creating digital tools and assets
- Involvement of enterprises and development of stories

- Working with and following enterprises
- Digital City.

Of the six partners in the project, two are located in Ireland, two in Northern Ireland and one each in Finland and Iceland.

Principal outputs

Digi2Market has the following principal outputs.

Output T4.1.1 - Digital City

All enterprises will have access to the resources of the Digital City including its tools, knowledge nexus and hyperlinks. Enterprises will be able to network to one another through the site. Those involved with immersive technology products will be able to get advice on updating them and developing others. It will include:

§ Training courses run to be accessed on the site for other learners

§ Ability to join and find people; for enterprises and organisations from the regions and elsewhere to participate

§ Tools and sources of skills; digital tools will be examined and signposted by hyperlink

§ Examples of VR/AR, initially as examples for promotion to the target markets; later examples of VR/AR developed and in use by enterprises will be showcased on the website, hyperlinked to their websites.

§ Helpline - Knowledge Nexus, which will be delivered in blog style, but always moderated and answered by partnership experts.

Output T1.1.1 – Support to enterprises

50 enterprises are to be assisted in expanding their marketing beyond their localities by a number of means, focusing on the use of immersive technologies. Altogether 100 enterprises are to be made aware of these possibilities for expanding their markets.

This will develop a suite of Benchmarks and Indicators for the project that will be used to assess progress during the project

Three clusters are to be set up focussing on sustainability issues.

Output T3.1.1 - SME Marketing Toolbox

The Marketing Assessment Toolbox will have several Digital tools to support SMEs to improve their marketing activities.

Evaluation of outputs

Digital City Website

The website is still being updated (review 21/6/22) with latest post 16/6/22.

It has the following characteristics.

Posts	28 overall; 11 in 2022, with latest on 16/6/2022
Media	Many images and two documents: Digital Marketing Toolkit and Green Business Model

– Framework. Both pdf. There are no videos.

Networks	125 published contacts
Events	2 events on Automated Marketing and Event on Agriculture, agri-food and exporting, both during project time.
Companies	49 entries plus three drafts. These include project partners.
Resources	15 published and two drafts. The topics covered include; <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Digi2Market CONFERENCE: delivering marketing and green business solutions• Designing for AR, critical concepts• Free marketing tools to help grow your business• 7 easy ways to publish a 360 photo or a video• Examples of Green Business Models in Iceland and Finland• Develop sustainability by adjusting your business model• Ecolabelling is an easy way to communicate environment-related facts to consumers• Life cycle analysis identifies impact points• Eco-design helps in creating more environmentally friendly products• Product-based approach to reduce the environmental burden• Introduction to Green Business Model Framework• 9 Steps to the Environmental Review of your Company• Implementing an immersive technology solution for your business• 4 ways to use VR in experience marketing• Immersive Technologies Explained
Case studies	23 published case studies and two drafts. The case studies include review of the enterprises and the use of immersive technologies. They enable a promotion of the enterprises.

The website has fulfilled its specified roles, which are set out below:

Training courses run to be accessed on the site for other learners

Tools and sources of skills; digital tools will be examined and signposted by hyperlink

Covered in Media and Resources

Ability to join and find people; for enterprises and organisations from the regions and elsewhere to participate

Covered in Networks

Examples of VR/AR, initially as examples for promotion to the target markets; later examples of VR/AR developed and in use by enterprises will be showcased on the website, hyperlinked to their

Covered in Case Studies

websites.

Helpline - Knowledge Nexus, which will be delivered in blog style, but always moderated and answered by partnership experts. Covered in posts, although use does not appear to have been extensive.

Support to enterprises ¹

Altogether, 151 enterprises have been involved in awareness raising events or been contacted directly by the partners and shown positive response. 50 enterprises have developed their marketing by improved storytelling, green business model and immersive technology. 39 have adopted an immersive technology approach. Others have improved their capacity through consultancy and training, which has resulted in developed new products or versions of more traditional digital approaches (video and websites). An additional 37 have been through training programmes to enable them to implement the above approaches.

Three clusters have been established in agri-food, forestry and sustainable golf courses.

SME marketing toolbox

Digital Marketing Toolkit and Green Business Model – Framework have both been produced and are available on the Digital City website.

Evaluation of process

The evaluation of the process examines the principal steps involved in the project. This enables a reflection on the nature of the target market, difficulties encountered and lessons learned.

How enterprises were recruited to the project

All partners used a variety of methods, which included their own networks, those of related bodies, such as local authorities, social media, website and direct contact by e mail and phone. The most effective means were through their own networks and those of related organisations. Workshops had a mixed response depending on area. In Ireland a workshop attracted 50 companies overall, whereas a conference in Iceland brought in few beyond those already identified. In two cases, there were parallel or complementary projects, which enabled a wider search and the channelling of enterprises into the appropriate project. It was essential to have information to send to the enterprises on them contacting the partner.

Changes of response during the project

There was a drop off of involvement during the project as the services delivered became more intensive and so demanding time of the enterprises. For example in Iceland, 11 were initially recruited, eight followed through several steps, but only five completed them all. Similarly in Ireland, the numbers dropped from 50 recruited to 35 engaged in story telling and 24 completed the process. In Northern Ireland the figures were 13 completing from an initial interest of 22. In Finland, there were 15 enterprises gaining from collaborative work on IT out of 38 being made aware of potential.

Lock down

Lock down regulations had a major affect on this activity. It was difficult to shoot films during the lock down. Tourism companies wanted to shoot during the summer: there were not many windows. Enterprises could not come to meetings. Fortunately many had been contacted before lockdown, but this still inhibited communication; made it more difficult to outline the benefits of project outcomes. However partners and enterprises learned to ZOOM calls, which all became adept at.

¹ The text here awaits the final report from Údarás.

Enterprises' needs and expectations

In almost all cases enterprises were looking for expanded markets; they were often struggling with on line marketing during COVID, shifting goods through the net. In border areas covered by ICBAN most companies were micro business of one or two people, who needed to learn to do things themselves. Companies were concerned with improving marketing and day to day operations. In one case an Art gallery rejected the technology as too gimmicky, but some enterprises wanted too complex immersive technology.

Enterprise understanding of immersive technologies

With the exception of Karelia, where some companies had seen competitors do it and had ideas on virtual tours and packaging there was a low a low understanding of immersive technologies. In North West Iceland, enterprises did not know what it was. In Ireland, very few had experience of immersive technologies. One company had bought a 360° camera out of 60 contacted. In Northern Ireland several businesses were not ready; they thought of it as a bit gimmicky.

Even in Karelia, where there were enterprises eager to learn, there was a low level of understanding. However, overall most were happy making further steps, e.g. new web page and some were more engaging. In Ireland, some enterprises, which had an early interest were looking for reliable information, but were overwhelmed with what found on line. Others that were further along in gaining information were looking for explicit guidance.

How understanding changed during the project

There was a change of understanding largely focused on business to customer relations. Walking through the video was an extremely good learning experience. This was bound up with the development of the story. It could also be linked to the Green Business Model and organisational change. Enterprises learned to overcome obstacles linked to capacity of Internet to market services abroad, especially tourism. There was a problem as the technology needs 5G speeds, which are not available everywhere. ICBAN reported that the project gave the owners of micro-businesses the confidence to do things. The experience also stimulate the need for basic digital technology. Additionally there were business results in the project timeline: one Northern Ireland firm is now making more rapeseed sales to UAE. There were also some transfers of expertise among the partners and the firms. One innovation was putting the QR code on beer mats, which got attention and was transferred from Ireland to Iceland. Some enterprises are now passing the message of 360° journey on line. In Karelia, where enterprises learned with students, they have moved to a different level and can now make specifications to professionals

Sector focus

There was an original focus on agriculture, maritime, food and tourism. There was a difficulty in achieving the marine aspect. There were also some regional differences. In Iceland, SSNV focused on the agri food and tourism sectors; in the West of Ireland, the focus was agriculture, forestry, food and tourism. In Northern Ireland, the larger projects were in agri food and small projects in hospitality. Karelia involved mainly the food industry, with some supporting IT companies. The lock down made it difficult to involve the marine sector and it was difficult to recruit start ups. There was little interaction with sector organisations outside the West of Ireland, where tourism bodies were contacted in the early stages to get insights on market needs.

Three clusters are now functioning. The final cluster of sustainable golf courses was put together and functioning in this period. The Agri-food and Forestry clusters continue to function.

Reporting

All the partners have submitted their reports on NPA ems site in order. At this stage (June 2022) all period 5 and three period 6 reports have been certified. Financial reporting there seems in order. However, there are inconsistencies among the partners in other aspects of the reporting. This has led to an under-reporting of SMEs for the Output, "100 SMEs made more aware of opportunities. 50 SMEs with immersive technology - storytelling product. 5 to 10 ASMEs clustered in thematic stories." Under this heading 124 enterprises are reported, although at the time of writing the final report from Údarás is awaited. There are nonetheless contradictions in the narratives of several of the partners. Údarás notes 39 attendees at workshops Building Your Brand and Online Trading in period 4 and 10 scripts prepared for IT in period 5. In period 6, WestBIC ran a series on export marketing, which 17 enterprises attended. In period 5, Ulster University held a number of regional workshops to raise awareness and knowledge of the impact and value immersive technologies bring to business. SSNV has published four case studies of SMEs adopting IT in period 6 and ran a workshop with 64 participants in period 5. None of these are recorded under the above output heading. The project has met the targets specified, but they are not reported on ems at this time.

The benefits of international cooperation

All partners stated benefits of international cooperation. For Karlia UAS, the most important benefits were learning about NPA (it was their first experience), similar challenges in other regions in terms of population sparseness, but also cultural differences. For the University of Ulster and SSNV, it was seeing what people are doing in other regions. SSNV also learned how to deliver these products.

The organisations benefited in themselves. ICBAN learned about project aid in taking support to businesses. WestBIC are now up to speed on immersive technologies and interaction with Karelia UAS has been very useful especially in the area of green business modelling. Ulster University learned how to work with SMEs and RDAs. SSNV learned a lot on promotion, PR, working with companies 360° cameras and in practices of business support. Údarás gained technical expertise and understanding of different business approaches; this was particularly relevant to understanding the marketing needs of enterprises.

The gain in expertise is being passed on to enterprises. ICBAN has further interaction with eight member councils and range of SMEs. For WestBIC, they can see what enterprises do in other countries, and enable contact with experts and into international markets.

Main benefits to organisations

The partners summed up the principal benefits to their organisations.

Údarás: learning about lack of marketing expertise in companies. They need more support, which has resulted in developing support structures. Green business model; theory and application, getting structures in place to eliminate carbon.

ICBAN: the results of networking and transfer of learning from partner to partner cascaded to businesses and there was transfer among enterprises. The website enables business networking.

Karelia UAS: the speed of development has gone on rapidly; early adopters are spreading the message. Participation is growing with international projects.

SSNV: Understanding PR, how companies grow from participation, learning how to adapt technology to new situations.

Ulster University: innovation in broad sense.

WestBIC: Understanding the start ups can reach larger markets and that there are more opportunities to reach the markets. WestBIC can help internationally focussed start ups.

Main difficulties in implementation

There were difficulties in recruitment, managing expectations, working with contractors and demarcation of responsibilities.

The financial costs of implementing the technology made it difficult to overcome the reservation of entrepreneurs before seeing the benefits. Managing the expectations of SMEs was a problem in view of their level of knowledge and often involved them in changing their minds. In one region this presented a problem in working with a production company, who expected clearer communication of needs and requirements from the enterprises. There was also a technical problem in developing AR tools that work on Facebook

Management around COVID created logistical issues in deploying the technology. Lock down regulations could change week to week. Distances, especially covering the West of Ireland presented a need for more cameras to meet the short periods available in different locations. Recording is a 48 minute process, which needed a lot of company time. The project did request and receive an extension to cover the delays, which lockdowns imposed.

In the case of the border area of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, there were three partners working in close proximity, which needed coordination and demarcation to avoid duplication.

Use of Resources

The project has completed its tasks using the resources originally specified in the project contract. It has not spent its travel budget because of the travel restrictions of lockdown. The human resources have had to be redeployed to far more distance working both locally and internationally.

Prospects for the future

The partners were asked to reflect on experiences during the project, which may indicate future activities.

How the technology developed over the period

Although there are indications that the price of the technology is reducing significantly and becoming more affordable (prices are dropping from €10k to €2.5k), there will continue to be financial pressures on companies, which are a major hindrance in adoption. There have been big steps in Virtual Reality head sets in the period 2019-2021.

Furthermore there are problems with platforms,. Facebook is changing protocols and some things developed will not be supported. This is a problem for small enterprises. A problem is high end costs with a limited lifespan. A step change on Facebook may be expected, but its nature is to be discerned.

The supplier market is developing rapidly. In this project, some partners had to take post graduates and train them up. However there are now emerging a number of private companies to provide the bespoke packages to enterprises. Overall more resources coming on stream and material is increasingly available and it has become easier to learn to use immersive technology. This is a continuous development, which will change the market; there will be demand for high end products and a lower entry level.

Changing attitudes

The lockdown produced a step change in attitudes to digital technologies. Some things are now commonplace, which were leading edge three years ago. Early adopters are spreading the message of immersive technology. Others are far more receptive to it.

Coping with challenges of the NPA

Some of the specified challenges were taken as normal by the partners. The dispersion of population is what they all lived with. On the others, the project had some positive aspects.

Peripherality and distance from market

All partners and participant enterprises share the feeling of overcoming this. The project has deployed distance spanning technology. Unique experiences can be conveyed by immersive technology and give easier access to the global market. Karelia UAS indicated that language was a big step for the Finns, which was not mentioned by other participants.

Small scale

While Ulster University felt rapid prototyping brings all things together and can make a contribution in this area, Karelia UAS did not think was necessarily the case.

Conclusion

Digi2Market has achieved its specified outcomes within the resources specified. It must therefore be regarded as a successful project.

It faced the major hindrance of lockdowns resulting from the COVID 19 pandemic for most of its duration. These necessitated a reworking of its programme of delivery, but no major change in work packages or deliverables. However, there was a need for a project extension.

Given long periods of lockdown the partnership established good distance working relationships and progressed through the work packages to reach the output targets. However, use of the ems was not consistent and this led to considerable under-reporting of the number of enterprises made aware of the benefits of immersive technology for marketing and actually developing applications. This under-reporting may be more than 50%.

Although largely a hindrance, the lockdowns did focus the minds of entrepreneurs on on-line solutions to their business problems. The delivery of immersive and other digital technologies has probably been accelerated by this experience. Nevertheless, the project was constrained in delivery on site by lockdown regulations, involving logistical problems and crowded time periods for filming.

There are reports of business benefits within the project period. Additionally, all the partners indicate gaining expertise from other partners. Notable among these are technical skills in immersive technologies, application of green business models and understanding of the marketing needs of enterprises.

Digital technologies are increasing their reach and importance in all aspects of life. Their potential as distance overcoming technologies have enormous potential for NPA. This project has thus fulfilled its aims and provided a demonstration that can be built on.

Annex Evaluation Questions

The questions set out below enable the qualitative aspects of the project to be presented and also enable an evaluation of the project (along with quantitative aspects). Some of the questions may have no clear answer.

How were enterprises recruited to the project? (looking for a variety of methods)

What approach was most effective?

Did the responses of enterprises change over the project period?

How did lock down regulations affect this activity?

What were the benefits that enterprises were looking for when they approached the project about immersive technologies?

What were the most common?

Could these be achieved during the project period?

What was the range of understanding of immersive technologies among enterprises?

Has this understanding changed during the project period?

Was the project able to maintain its sector focus?

What were the factors that led to a change / maintenance of the focus

Did you interact with sector organisations?

How was the interaction managed/

What were the benefits of international cooperation ?

Were these manifest for enterprises in your region?

Has your organisation changed as a result of the experience?

What was learned in overcoming the obstacles noted by NPA?

These are: Peripherality

 Distance from market

 Small scale

 Dispersion

How has the technology developed over the period?

Will it become more affordable or useable?

Is there a new generation, which will need support for early adoption

What was the biggest benefit for your organisation or region?

What was the greatest difficulty in implementation?