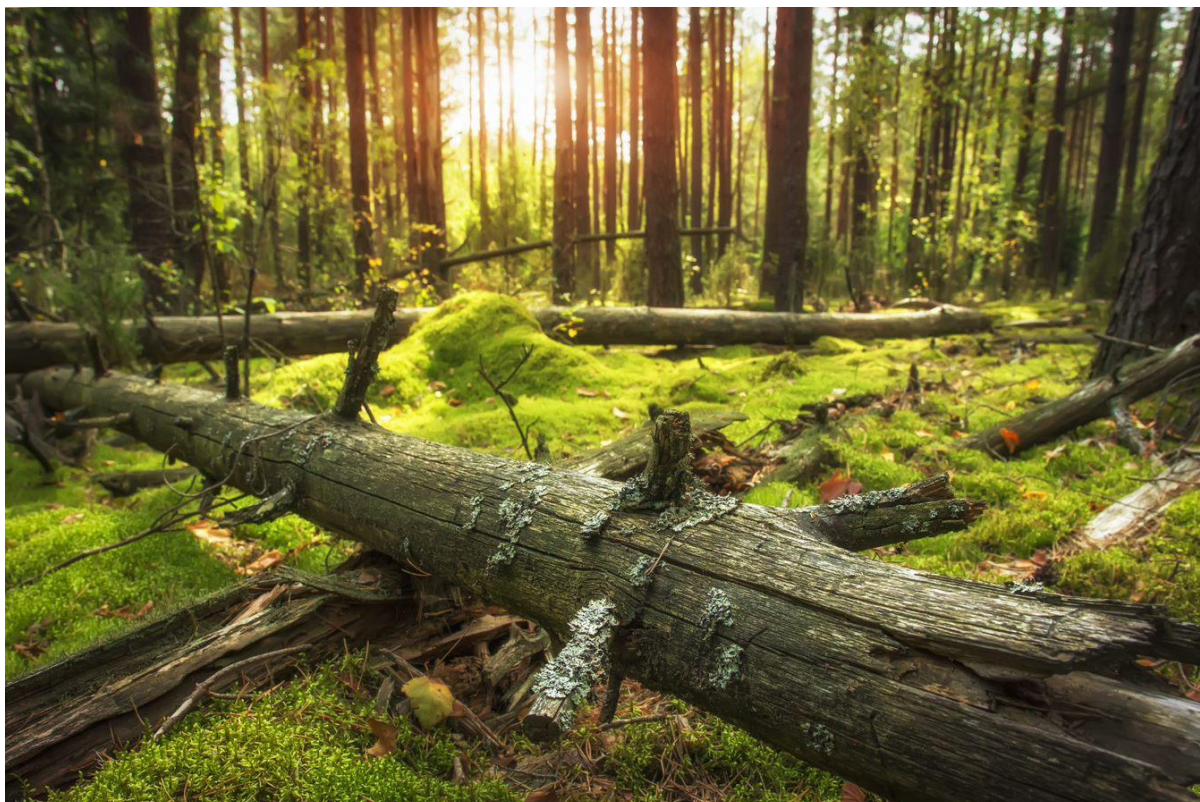


**Output 1.1 – Co-created evaluation solutions with actions for organizational uptake**  
**RCO116\_3.1 – Jointly developed solution 2**

*Learning Session on Regional Context: What does it look like in the three regions involved in the project ASTRIC from Sweden, Finland, and Ireland with focus on innovation ecosystems and our demography challenges and opportunities.*



**Report on the Learnings from the Workshops in WP1 in ASTRIC: Western Ireland, North Savo Finland, and Västerbotten Sweden**

**Introduction**

This report summarizes the key learnings from the recent workshops from the WP1 in the ASTRIC project, involving stakeholders from Western Ireland, North Savo in Finland, and Västerbotten in Sweden. The primary objective of the workshops was to understand the regional contexts of each partner with innovation ecosystem in focus and our demography, explore the roles of stakeholders, and analyze the strategy development lifecycles within each region. By engaging with partners and stakeholders through discussions and evidence analysis before these partner workshops, the workshops aimed to foster collaboration and share best practices to create a baseline. This initiative is a crucial part of the ASTRIC

project, which focuses on addressing regional innovation challenges. More information can be found at <https://www.interreg-npa.eu/projects/astric>

## Context of Each Partner Region

### Western Ireland

Western Ireland is characterized by its rich cultural heritage, natural resources, and a growing emphasis on innovation, particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, medical technology, and agri-food. The region faces challenges related to population retention, economic disparities, and infrastructure development. Key stakeholders include local government bodies, educational institutions, and industry representatives, all of whom play vital roles in shaping the region's economic landscape.

### North Savo, Finland

North Savo is a diverse region known for its strong emphasis on education, research, and innovation. The presence of universities and research institutions fosters a vibrant ecosystem for startups and established companies alike. North Savo's strategy development focuses on leveraging its strengths in technology, health sciences, and sustainable practices. Stakeholders in this region include educational institutions, government agencies, and private sector players, all collaborating to enhance regional development.

### Västerbotten, Sweden

Västerbotten is notable for its vast natural resources, including forestry and mining, which significantly contribute to its economy. The region has a strong focus on innovation in life sciences and digitalization, supported by institutions like Umeå University. However, Västerbotten faces challenges related to population aging and the need for sustainable development. Stakeholders include local governments, industry leaders, and research organizations, all working together to address these challenges.



## Key Insights into Regional Innovation Context

### Stakeholder Engagement

Effective stakeholder engagement is crucial for the success of regional innovation strategies. Each region has identified key stakeholders who play significant roles in their respective innovation ecosystems. These include:

- **Local Governments:** Responsible for policymaking and funding initiatives that support regional development.
- **Educational Institutions:** Provide research, training, and innovation support, fostering a skilled workforce.
- **Industry Representatives:** Offer insights into market needs and trends, driving collaboration between academia and business.
- **Research Organizations:** Conduct studies and provide data that inform policy and strategy development.

### Collaborative Approaches

The workshop participants emphasized the importance of collaboration among stakeholders, to get them all to talk to each other. By sharing knowledge and resources, regions can enhance their innovation capabilities. For instance, quarterly meetings initiated during the pandemic in Västerbotten, allowed stakeholders to discuss pressing issues and explore collaborative opportunities. This approach has proven effective in breaking down silos and fostering a culture of cooperation and Västerbotten has kept these meetings also after the pandemic.

## Strategy Development Lifecycles

### Understanding Regional Contexts

Each region has developed its strategy development lifecycle, which reflects its unique context and challenges. Key elements include:

- **Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses:** Regions must evaluate their existing capabilities and identify areas for improvement.
- **Setting Clear Objectives:** Defining specific goals helps guide the strategic planning process.
- **Engagement with Stakeholders:** Involving stakeholders at every stage ensures that strategies are relevant and actionable.
- **Implementation and Evaluation:** Regular monitoring and evaluation of strategies allow for adjustments and improvements over time.

### Different Approaches to Strategy Development

The workshops highlighted that the regions had a lot in common but may adopt different approaches to strategy development based on some specific needs. For example:

- **Western Ireland:** Focuses on leveraging its strengths in pharmaceuticals and medical technology while addressing challenges in population retention.
- **North Savo:** Emphasizes education and research as drivers of innovation, with a strong focus on sustainable practices.
- **Västerbotten:** Aims to balance its natural resource-based economy so the region not only foster the idea to be the supplier only on natural resources, but also the need for innovation in life sciences and digitalization/creative industry that needs the University and a lot of research also but are knowledge based economy drivers.

## Sharing Best Practices

### Learning from Each Other

One of the primary goals of the workshops was to facilitate the sharing of best practices among the regions. Participants discussed successful initiatives and strategies that could be adapted to their own contexts. For example:

- **Digital Transformation:** All regions recognized the importance of digitalization in enhancing their innovation ecosystems. Sharing experiences related to digital tools and platforms can help streamline processes and improve stakeholder engagement.

- **Focus on Youth Engagement:** Strategies to attract and retain young talent were discussed, with an emphasis on creating vibrant communities that appeal to younger demographics. Also the need to address childcare as an opportunity for the demography in position to start a family, since having children is a natural part of life and welcomed in our regions.

### Identifying Common Challenges

The workshops also provided an opportunity to identify common challenges faced by the regions. These include:

- **Population Retention:** All regions are grappling with issues related to population aging and the outmigration of young people.
- **Resource Allocation:** Ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to support innovation and development is a shared concern.
- **Collaboration Across Borders:** The need for cross-regional collaboration was emphasized, with participants recognizing that no single region can address all challenges independently.

### Commitment to Green and Just Transition

The regions share strong similarities as well as complementary differences, particularly in their commitment to achieving a green and just transition. It is essential to map the green and just transition needs and activities of each region, especially for key actors like policymakers and Higher Education and Research Institutions (HERIs). This mapping helps prioritize the most impactful and feasible needs to respond to and the correlating activities.

The workshops involving Western Ireland, North Savo, and Västerbotten has provided valuable insights into the contexts, stakeholder roles, and strategy development lifecycles of each region. By fostering collaboration and sharing best practices, the regions can enhance their innovation ecosystems and address common challenges.

Moving forward, it is essential for the regions to continue engaging with stakeholders, leveraging their strengths, and adapting their strategies to meet evolving needs. The commitment to collaboration and knowledge sharing will be crucial in building resilient and innovative communities that can thrive in an increasingly competitive global landscape.

### Recommendations

1. **Enhance Stakeholder Engagement:** Continue to foster collaboration among stakeholders through regular meetings and workshops.
2. **Focus on Youth Retention:** Develop strategies to attract and retain young talent in all regions.

3. **Leverage Digital Tools:** Invest in digital platforms that facilitate communication and collaboration among stakeholders.
4. **Share Best Practices:** Establish a framework for ongoing knowledge sharing among the regions to promote continuous learning and improvement.
5. **Monitor and Evaluate Strategies:** Implement regular assessments of regional strategies to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

By implementing these recommendations, Western Ireland, North Savo, and Västerbotten can strengthen their innovation ecosystems and work towards a more sustainable and prosperous future.

#### Key Insights into Innovation Ecosystems and Demographic Trends

Discussions during the workshop highlighted the need for integrating innovation ecosystems with demographic strategies. The following key insights emerged:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Effective participation from all stakeholders, including government, industry, and academia, is crucial for the implementation of successful regional innovation strategies. Each region identified key players responsible for policymaking, workforce training, and research to strengthen their innovation capacities and address demographic shifts.
- **Collaborative Approaches:** Ongoing collaboration emerged as a common theme. For instance, Västerbotten's commitment to quarterly meetings has facilitated ongoing dialogue among stakeholders, fostering a culture of cooperation. Such collaboration is necessary to address demographic challenges collectively and implement necessary changes within each innovation ecosystem.

#### Understanding Regional Demography and Innovation Strategies

Participants learned that each region has developed specific strategies that reflect its demographic realities and innovation needs:

1. **Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses:** Regions must conduct comprehensive assessments to identify their strengths and improvement areas, leveraging these insights for strategic planning.
2. **Setting Clear Objectives:** Establishing specific regional objectives can guide innovative efforts and respond proactively to demographic trends.

3. Implementing Collaborative Strategies: Regions must engage stakeholders at every level to develop relevant strategies, ensuring that all voices are heard and that solutions are actionable.

4. Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation: Ongoing assessments of strategies and outcomes will allow regions to adapt their approaches based on demographic changes and innovation performance.

The focus on integrating demographics into innovation strategies was evident. Regions like Western Ireland are capitalizing on their pharmaceutical and tech sectors to engage younger demographics, while North Savo is leveraging its educational institutions to foster a skilled workforce. Meanwhile, Västerbotten's balance of resource innovation with demographic sustainability highlights a comprehensive approach.

### **Shared Challenges and Opportunities**

The joint workshop also revealed common challenges faced by the regions regarding demographics:

- Population Retention: All three regions experience issues related to aging populations and the migration of youth, which directly impact their economic viability.
- Resource Allocation: Each region is aware of the need for effective resource distribution to support both innovation and demographic initiatives.
- Collaboration Across Borders: Participants recognized the importance of cross-regional collaboration, emphasizing that joint efforts can result in more effective solutions to shared challenges.

The commitment to a green and just transition in all regions underscores the importance of sustainable practices in their respective innovation strategies, ensuring demographic challenges are met with sustainable growth approaches.

### **Conclusions**

The joint workshop learnings established a profound understanding of the contexts, stakeholders, and strategies related to innovation ecosystems and demographic challenges in Western Ireland, North Savo, and Västerbotten. This foundational knowledge is instrumental as we move into the next phase of the ASTRIC project, focusing on developing

measurement frameworks for KPIs. These KPIs will provide essential metrics to evaluate innovation capacities and deepen insights into demographic trends.

### Recommendations

1. Enhance Stakeholder Engagement: Foster continued collaboration through workshops and meetings to share insights and strategies among stakeholders.
2. Focus on Youth Retention: Develop targeted initiatives that attract and retain young talent in response to demographic trends.
3. Leverage Digital Tools: Invest in digital platforms to enhance stakeholder communication and coordination across all levels.
4. Share Best Practices: Create frameworks for ongoing knowledge sharing among regions to adapt successful initiatives.
5. Develop and Monitor KPIs: Implement structured approaches for defining, measuring, and evaluating KPIs to effectively assess innovation capacities and demographic resilience.

### Final Thoughts

By integrating insights from both innovation ecosystems and demographic workshops, Western Ireland, North Savo, and Västerbotten can create a comprehensive “super ecosystem” that leverages each region's strengths. Through the collaborative focus on KPI measurement and cooperative problem-solving, these regions will enhance their innovation capabilities while tackling pressing demographic challenges.

The establishment of baseline knowledge is crucial for the successful measurement of regional innovation capacity. As the project advances, having this foundational understanding will enable stakeholders to benchmark progress against established metrics effectively. Moreover, these metrics will facilitate rapid identification of areas requiring targeted support or intervention, allowing for adaptive strategies that can evolve alongside changing demographic landscapes. With these tools in place, the ASTRIC project can accelerate efforts to strengthen regional innovation capacities, fostering vibrant communities that can thrive amid contemporary challenges.

The discussions during the workshop highlighted the importance of not only focusing on specific areas of strength but also fostering a broader range of ideas and innovations. As Västerbotten noted, while it is essential to excel in certain fields, the region must also be open to collaboration and learning from others. The analogy of successful NHL hockey players from small communities in Sweden, Finland and Canada illustrates that even regions with limited populations can produce significant talent and innovation when they foster the right environment.

In conclusion, the collaborative efforts of Western Ireland, North Savo, and Västerbotten can lead to the creation of a "super ecosystem" that leverages the strengths of each region. By working together, these regions can enhance their innovation capabilities and ensure a sustainable future for their communities.

