

# Semi-external project evaluation report

**W-Power - Empowering women entrepreneurs in sparsely  
populated communities -project**

**W-Power 2021**



**W-Power**

## Semi-external Project Evaluation Report

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### W-Power and ARCTISEN projects 2021



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## 1. Introduction

W-Power project (Empowering women entrepreneurs in sparsely populated communities) has supported women to stay in northern rural areas through creating collaboration in local and international levels. Through its activities, W-power has focused on boosting woman entrepreneurship in local and transnational levels, for instance, through peer-2-peer programme, gender-sensitive coaching and by sharing best practices in general.

This is an evaluation report for the W-Power project (9/2018-12/2021), funded by the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme 2014-2020 (Interreg-NPA). The evaluation has been made semi-externally as cross-evaluation by another NPA project ARCTISEN (Culturally Sensitive Tourism in the Arctic) and members of its project team Emily Höckert, Monika Lühje, Elsbeth Bembom, Randy Bruin, Outi Kugapi and Suvi Autio, during spring and summer 2021.

Evaluation process started with joint planning during autumn 2020. The schedule, key points and template for the evaluation report were decided jointly. The evaluation process followed the next steps:

- Collecting background data based on the project documentation
- W-Power partners conducting stakeholder interviews, including project beneficiaries and cooperation bodies. Focus on collecting experiences and impact of the project activities, stakeholder satisfaction and innovative working methods.
- Workshops for the W-Power project team, moderated by the evaluator project based on the findings of the background data collection
- Summarizing the data as report
- Discussing about the findings with the project manager and project team and clarifying unclear details
- Finalizing, editing and publishing the report and advised to the project steering group.

This report summarizes background, activities and outcomes of W-Power project. Moreover, it describes the positive results of effective project management and diverse forms of dissemination of the project results. The





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report shows the variety of innovative initiatives and good practices within W-Power project; for instance, online coaching, thematic weeks, Peer-2-Peer exchange and start-up business idea competition have provided well-needed support for women entrepreneurs across the project region.

The project activities enabled participants to develop their businesses, reach new clients, create new networks and increase their confidence and skills in general. While the Covid-19 pandemic, created unforeseen challenges for the project implementation, W-power project turned out to be a real success story. Importantly, the project was able to offer vital support and stress relief to the most vulnerable entrepreneurs struggling in the middle of pandemic.

## 2. Background for the project

### 2.1 Project partnership and geographical/sectoral dimension

W-Power has concentrated to sparsely populated Northern and Arctic communities and included both business and academic partners from Finland, Scotland, Sweden, Ireland, UK, Iceland and Canada. The project partnership has been versatile and covered most of the NPA regions although the Icelandic partner was forced to step out the project due to organisational changes. Project partners and associated partners are presented briefly in the following.

#### ***Lead partner: Karelia University of Applied Sciences Ltd (UAS), Finland***

Karelia UAS coordinated project planning, partnership, activities and the communication with NPA authorities and related EU projects. Karelia led the WPs M & T4, and contributed actively to the implementation of other WPs alongside with other partners. Karelia has strong experience in coordinating and acting international and national RDI projects and they bore the overall responsibility of the fruitful cooperation among the partnership and stakeholders, impressive outcome of the project activities and effective dissemination of results.

***Project partner 2: Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE), United Kingdom***

HIE is most committed to increasing the contribution of women to economic growth through developing leadership and entrepreneurship capability and addressing occupational segregation. HIE brought to project understanding and experience of investing in business leaders to increase their capability, ambition and appetite for growing their business. As WPT1 leader, HIE helped to identify ways in which business support provision across the project area can be enhanced to address barriers, which impact particularly on women entrepreneurs. This set the context within which transnational learning can be applied across the project area.

***Project partner 3: Innovation and Management Centre CLG T/A WestBIC (WestBIC), Ireland***

WestBIC has wide experience of participating and managing of EU funded projects that support entrepreneurs and SMEs in the private and community sectors. In W-Power project, WestBIC acted as work package leader for WP T3 (coaching), and implemented the other project activities across the Republic of Ireland. WestBIC utilized its membership of the EBN network to ensure awareness of current and emerging trends, and for access to expertise which might enhance the development objectives of clients.

***Project partner 4: Strukturm i Jokkmokk AB, Sweden***

Strukturm in Jokkmokk is a local, multi-stakeholder business support organization that helps new and existing companies to grow and develop. Jokkmokk as a municipality is one of the municipalities in Sweden with the highest proportion of both women and young people starting and running businesses. Moreover, special feature for Jokkmokk region is the presence of indigenous Sami people. Strukturm has run successful projects and activities directly aiming at supporting women

entrepreneurship and gender equality in business for ten years. In W-Power project, Strukturum lead the work package T2: Transnational learning of women entrepreneurs, and took part to the implementation of other project activities.

### ***Project partner 5: Innovation Center Iceland***

Innovation Centre Iceland (ICI) encourages innovation and promotes the advancement of new ideas in Icelandic economy by providing active participation and support to entrepreneurs and businesses. ICI offers courses and counselling on various business issues free of charge for entrepreneurs. ICI has developed online courses and knowledge transfer in order to be able to offer the same quality services regardless to geographic position. During the first periods of W-Power, ICI implemented project actions in Iceland and shared its expertise in innovation and capacity building. Due to organisational changes, ICI's participation in project activities was low toward the end of the project and the organisation was ceased 31.12.2020.

### ***Project partner 6: Joensuu Regional Development Company JOSEK Ltd, Finland***

JOSEK is a non-profit regional development company owned by seven municipalities established in 2001. JOSEK is responsible for regional business policy and development (development programs and projects), business counselling and marketing of the region. JOSEK's business consultants have a wide range of experience of entrepreneurship and business development from different fields of business. JOSEK implemented the W-Power project in North Karelia region in cooperation with Lead Partner Karelia UAS and associated partners. JOSEK worked especially in the implementation of WP T2 (Transnational learning of women entrepreneurs) and WP T3 (Gender-sensitive coaching concept for business advisors). Project partner 9 continued the work of Josek after a fusion in 2019.

***Project partner 7: Lapland University of Applied Sciences, Finland***

LUAS has strong cooperation with regional associations of Women Entrepreneurs (Lapland region) and has expertise in rural development, utilization of natural resources and development of indigenous livelihoods. LUAS has various networks in local, regional, national and international levels and has a long and wide experience from EU projects as coordinator and as participant. In W-Power project, LUAS developed women entrepreneurship in Lapland in co-operation with companies and various networks in the fields that are important to Northern Finland: natural products, green care, circular economy, forestry, reindeer herding. Moreover, LUAS was in charge of the communication work package, and implemented other work package activities as partner.

***Project partner 8: Pure Energy Centre (PEC), United Kingdom***

The Pure Energy Centre has been working in a sparsely populated regions and the organisation is mentoring others through schemes such as stem ambassador programmes and through presenting to schools, colleges and women's organisations. PEC has many years transnational experience having worked at EU and international level on various projects. Moreover, they have always emphasised the training and upskilling the female employees of PEC in their knowledge-based organisation.

***Project partner 9: Business Joensuu Ltd., Finland***

Business Joensuu Ltd. formed as a fusion of Joensuu Regional Development Company JOSEK Ltd (see above the partner 6 of W-Power project) and Joensuu Science Park Ltd. starting from 1st of January 2019, and fully replaced the activities of JOSEK Ltd.



## List of Associated partners

10. Bisnesleidit, a network of women entrepreneurs operating under the North Karelia Entrepreneurs which is a subdivision of the Federation of Finnish Enterprises
- 11: University of the Faroe Islands (Centre for Innovation), Faroe Islands
- 12: Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), United Kingdom
- 13: Green Care, Finland
- 14: Galway Mayo Institute of Technology – GMIT, Ireland
- 15: The Sámi Handicraft Foundation Sámi Duodji, Sweden
- 16: Scottish Islands Federation, United Kingdom
- 17: SPIRA Connect, Sweden
- 18: The Federation of Small Businesses, United Kingdom
- 19: The Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), Belgium
- 20: Women in Business New Brunswick (NB Association of CBDCs), Canada
- 21: The Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick (CCNB), Canada

## 2.2 Project aims & goals

W-Power has aimed for equal growth and increase in the contribution of women to regional economy in the project area. The idea has also been to increase capacity building of women entrepreneurs, improve gender-related business advisory services and encourage to self-employment in the project area.

Project's goal was to make a difference for rural businesses by providing transnational learning and capacity building possibilities, but also create new business concepts and support mechanisms. W-Power has focused on supporting the creation of new start-ups, helping to take the next step of maturity from start-up, and supporting the growing phase of existing SMEs. In addition, business advisory bodies, who are involved in the

project, have planned to gain new tools for gender-sensitive coaching and diversity management.

Different organisations joined the W-Power project consortium to boost woman entrepreneurship both on transnational and local level. This kind of support was not commonly offered prior to the project start due to a trend of gender neutrality in business advising in the project countries. The project partners found it, however, vital in order to enable women entrepreneurs to stay in rural regions in the Arctic. The project was seen as a new possibility to network and collaborate with others internationally and regionally, connect with role models and exchange knowledge. The project partners have been keen to learn from others, especially in terms of good practices and gender sensitivity.

### 2.3 Project rationale compared to NPA programme goals

W-Power project was aimed for the specific objective of NPA; 2.1. Improved support systems tailored for start-ups and existing SMEs in remote and sparsely populated areas. This objective is defined in the following way in the NPA programme manual (p. 19):

*"In the current economic climate, start-ups and existing SMEs face particular operational challenges, such as obtaining finance. In remote and sparsely populated areas these challenges are amplified by long distances to support systems, other start-ups and existing SMEs. In addition, as companies in the periphery, they face the challenges, such as a small local customer base, long distances to market, and generally, a poor business environment, which threaten the survival and growth of start-up and existing SMEs. Transnational cooperation can contribute to an improved entrepreneurial climate by facilitating the transfer and development of business support strategies and solutions to overcome the challenges faced by start-ups and existing SMEs in remote and peripheral regions. This is particularly valid for SMEs in non-traditional sectors, which could contribute to a more dynamic business sector."*

According to NPA's programme manual, the main idea of this specific objective is to create business support systems, which will remove barriers

and bottlenecks for SMEs and focus on realising the potential of 'place-based' development opportunities. NPA also encourages projects to focus on underrepresented groups, such as young women and promote entrepreneurship among them.

According to W-Power's project plan, partner regions suffer from challenging economic climate and sparse population, which leads to less jobs available in the public sector. This situation leads to entrepreneurship, but there are not necessarily tools for future entrepreneurs to start the business, neither self-confidence nor entrepreneurial mindset. Therefore, W-Power has sought to increase the contribution of women to the economy with help of project activities and by supporting the creation of new start-ups, make difference for rural business and find new business concepts and support mechanisms. Methods for this have included peer-networking and mentoring, platform for innovations and experimenting, and support for the business development by improving the skills of advisory bodies. This all has been in line with the programme goals for this specific NPA objective 2.1. as it can be seen as a strong business support system for start-ups and SMEs which removes barriers and encourages to use place-based opportunities.

Moreover, there is a strong argument for transnational cooperation as all project partner regions suffer from similar challenges caused by peripherality. The cooperation has been sought through close collaboration between partners from NPA area, who learn from each other, create new tools and innovate together. This is in line with the requirements from NPA; that is, knowledge transfer, innovation, development of transboundary products and learning.

Project has aimed to guarantee that the development work done in the project will last after the project lifetime and therefore will result in long-lasting outputs. This kind of longevity of project results can be located in the very core of NPA's requirement for the implemented projects.

### 3. Project activities & outcomes

#### 3.1 Project management and internal communication

The project management and internal communication were organised in a professional manner and have been proceeding as planned. Monthly meetings between all project partners were an excellent way to keep the project partners informed of what is going on in the project and to discuss and plan activities together. It is also a good practice to offer the associated partners an opportunity to participate in the Steering Group meetings. It is an excellent way to increase their inclusion in the project and may empower them – although in W-Power the associated partners have mainly a tactical role; they are not the main beneficiaries of the project.

There have been some changes in project partnerships during the project due to various reasons, but they have not caused any major problems on the whole project level. The major changes have been the joining of Canadians in the project after its start and the quitting of the Icelanders in the middle of the project due to organisational changes. The Canadians have been an asset for the project whereas the role of Iceland was rather small in the project plan in the first place. Work in Iceland will continue in the new cluster [project ETRAC](#) that has just started.

All project partners have not been very good at reporting regardless of Lead Partner's instructions, as has been the case also in the ARCTISEN project. The reporting procedure is quite complicated and time-consuming – could NPA somehow make it easier without losing the information needed for controlling the projects?

W-Power was quite quick in reacting to the pandemic and adapting its project activities to the changing circumstances, which enabled it to support its primary target group in the new situation. One can therefore say that it has been effective and successful in its crisis management.

#### 3.2 Project work packages

Project implementation was divided to four work packages. First, *improvement of regional business environment*, second, *transnational*

*learning, third, gender-sensitive coaching concept and fourth, innovation platform for new pre-start-ups.* Evaluation of each work package – including the main outputs, project activities and deliverables – are presented in the following.

## **WORK PACKAGE 1: Improvement of regional business environment**

Regional forums for empowering women entrepreneurship have been established as a result of WPT1 work. The aim is that the forums will continue the improvement of regional business environments after the project lifetime. Forum design has followed quadruple helix structure; that is, in addition to SMEs and business advisory bodies, representatives of administration, education & research, and civil society have been engaged to the forums. Best practises, development areas and lessons learnt have been mapped up during the project implementation. Moreover, this work package has resulted in four open access publications that explore and map the possibilities and challenges for women entrepreneurs in the Arctic.

During the last phase of the project, the partners are searching for solutions that can guarantee the continuation of the forums after the project. Although this will most likely not be possible in every project country and region, it can be seen as a sufficient outcome that the forums will continue to take place in most of them.

### *Activities and deliverables*

During the first phase of the project, all the W-power partners created Regional Action Plans, completed a baseline overview and summary of the literature on regional challenges/barriers to female entrepreneurship and current levels of female entrepreneurship across the European regions. Partners' regional action plans were kept updated throughout the project, and stakeholder engagement sessions were monitored online according to the plans. Stakeholder engagement and regional action planning were continued during the project lifetime, as well as the project after-life planning.

For WPT1, the baseline study report was finished and published on the website as planned. HIE also produced an infographic based on the baseline data gathered and mapping work undertaken by all partners in



Period 1. The infographic was later updated based on feedback from partners (D.T1.3.4).

W-power partners developed also a piloted survey tool that could be used with local, regional and national business support organizations operating within the project regions to understand the nature of existing business support for female entrepreneurs in each region. The final survey tool was then shared with partners to undertake interviews with business support organizations in their area.

Partners connected extensively with female entrepreneurs across the partner regions on a one-to-one and small group basis, informing them of the project and explaining how they can get involved. In addition, partners participated in and organized meetings with female entrepreneurs. Project partners organised regional stakeholder workshops (D.T1.1.2) and regional information-sharing events (D.T1.3.3), though the Covid crisis transferred the events to take place mostly online.

Most of the WPT1 activities were completed already in period 2 according to the original plan.

## **WORK PACKAGE 2: Transnational learning**

This work package aimed at producing a model for transnational learning and capacity building of women entrepreneurs, based on regional and sectoral strengths.

The elements of the transnational learning programme included upskilling both in regional and multicultural teams, networking across sectoral borders and interregional peer-to-peer mentoring scheme for women entrepreneurs. Through piloting and co-creation, W-Power partners created a model and guidelines for the transnational learning programme.

The results of the work package were disseminated through different kinds of publications that offer instructions for peer-to-peer Networking Programme. E.g. a webinar series enabled different stakeholders to enhance their communications skills and the recordings of webinars, such as, [\*Imposter Syndrome\*](#) and [\*Pricing-How to Do It Right\*](#) enable the continuation of transnational learning after the project ends.

### *Activities and deliverables*

Strukturum coordinated the creation of the pre-survey for capacity building needs, background work for the upskilling programme set-up and the preliminary steps for the peer-to-peer mentoring programme. Partners contributed to the activities and a "master group", which consisted of one representative from each project partner and met on regular on-line meetings, was set-up for such hands-on work.

The pre-survey of the training needs was constructed (ca. 200 answers from 7 regions) and based on the findings, the upskilling programme was set-up both regionally and transnationally. Strukturum continued to coordinate the implementation of the pre-survey for capacity building needs and the set-up of both the upskilling programme and the peer-to-peer mentoring programme. During the third reporting period, the upskilling programme set-up was finalized and regional upskilling events took place in each region. Criteria and process for the P2P mentoring scheme were created jointly in the partnership and transnational visits for P2P mentoring pairs were planned.

W-Power kick-off week took place in Rovaniemi, Lapland (Finland) in November 2018. The week included the official project team meeting, steering group meeting, transnational stakeholder workshop, benchmark activities and the official launch seminar organized jointly with the ARCTISEN-NPA project. Woman entrepreneurs and other stakeholders involved were happy for the outcome and support they received from the kick-off week.

The first project Thematic Seminar week (WPT1) took place in Argyll, Scotland, in June 2019. Training topics for the transnational upskilling sessions in Scotland were digital marketing and personal branding. The total amount of women entrepreneurs engaged in the Transnational learning program for women entrepreneurs during the thematic seminar week was 28. The second project Thematic Seminar week (WPT2) took place in Jokkmokk, Sweden, in November 2019. The total amount of women entrepreneurs engaged in the Transnational learning program for women entrepreneurs during the thematic seminar week was 26. One of the participants in this thematic week expressed:

*It never dawned on me at the time just how much of a privilege it was, and is, to be a part of this project honestly. I am at the stage of my career where opportunities like this don't happen much and often, I go to events where I feel like it was somewhat a waste of time. However, with W-Power and especially the Swedish Thematic week this was not the case. The setup of it was brilliant as it allowed us, the female entrepreneurs, to explore our ideas ourselves through physically visiting different businesses and cultures, sharing knowledge in different fields and seeing firsthand the role different cultures play in people's lives and businesses.*

The third thematic seminar week was supposed to take place in Ireland in May 2020. The organizers of this thematic week had proceeded with detailed plans, when the Covid-19 pandemic changed everything. As a result, this thematic week became 'W-Power Irish Thematic Online Seminar Week', organised between 23rd- 25th March 2021.

During the first half of the project, entrepreneurs gathered for physical, transnational activities, which enabled transnational meetings. Especially training workshops were experienced as very fruitful. An entrepreneur from Canada stated:

*The training workshops allowed me to evaluate my idea more in-depth, helped give me an understanding of a more global approach to business, awareness about the different aspects of a business and helped fill up my puzzle and complete my vision.*

However, Covid-19 hindered the entrepreneurs from travelling and this way caused unforeseen challenges to this work package. In addition to the thematic week in Ireland, more or less all face-to-face activities planned for periods 4, 5 and 6 were cancelled or postponed. Due to the global pandemic, transnational learning activities were implemented online in virtual settings. For instance, Regional upskilling events (D.T2.1.3) took place in each region, mostly online, and especially targeted to the recovery of woman entrepreneurs from the crisis.

The fourth thematic week in Joensuu, originally planned for November 2020, was finally organized as a 3-day hybrid meeting, building on the learned lessons from the thematic online seminar in Ireland in March 2021.

The final W-Power seminar took place as a hybrid event. There were around 30 participants from Finland and Sweden who joined the seminar in-person in Joensuu, Finland, and around 100 participants who followed the streaming of the event. The final seminar included a range of inspiring speakers, panel discussions and workshops and the recordings of these events will be accessible online to wider audience. There were also training sessions for delegates to find new collaboration and networking opportunities via Tavata-platform. Nevertheless, as the prolonged pandemic lockdown has indicated, many people are getting worn out by online networking and are longing face-to-face encounters. To address this issue, AP Bisnesleidit organised a cocktail and networking event for the local entrepreneurs present in the venue in Joensuu.

### **WORK PACKAGE 3: Gender-sensitive coaching concept**

Gender-sensitive coaching concept, which includes both a model and tools, was created to help business advisory bodies to encounter existing and potential women entrepreneurs in their business services. Coaching concept includes aspects of diversity management and can thus help the business advisors to better support different demographic groups (young women, housewives, immigrants, Indigenous women). Women in project regions have also been encouraged to utilise the model and tools in their existing businesses or when setting up new businesses. The model and tools have been tested in Scotland and Finland.

Moreover, several different publications have been published to disseminate knowledge about the concept and 'Gender Sensitivity Train the Trainer Webinar' was organised online in 27 May 2020. Some of the profound findings regarding gender and entrepreneurship, particularly in Finland, have been animated in "[Facts about female entrepreneurship](#)".

#### *Activities and deliverables*

The main input for this work package took place in the periods 4-6. During the first period of the project, the activities were focused on finding good

practices across the project regions (including Canada) for gender-sensitive business advisory platform. The planning process for the peer-2-peer learning and the concept for coaching were initiated in the second period. WP Leader refined the methodology for Gender Sensitive Coaching and presented/reviewed the concept and approach in the project meeting in Jokkmokk (November 2019). D.T3.1.1. Inventory of good practices were finalized during the third period, based on the data collection in period 2. First draft of the concept note for the gender-sensitive coaching concept was presented.

The activities such as benchmark (D.T3.1.2), regional pilots (D.T3.2.3) and Gender-sensitive coaching concept (D.T3.2.4) were carried out in the following periods, albeit the implementation ran a bit behind schedule. Especially the 'Train the trainer session' (D.T3.2.2) was postponed from autumn 2019 to the Thematic seminar in Ireland in May 2020 (which was then postponed due covid-19). However, the detailed plans for a Thematic Seminar in Ireland in May 2020 had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. Hence, the 'Train the trainer session' took place online on 27th May 2020 with more than 70 registered participants. While many W-Power activities were implemented online, the peer-to-peer mentoring program was hit hard as Covid-19 stopped all travelling. The earlier delay in implementation of the activities were quite well eliminated, though the main activity a thematic week had to be postponed.

The gender-sensitive coaching concept has been presented in the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform good practice database – and has received positive visibility in general.

Despite the revision and updating of the coaching concept – and great visualization of the material – it seems that the model and the tools could have been even more practical. This work can be continued in the future by writing down explicit instructions from the previous pilots organised within W-Power project.

#### **WORK PACKAGE 4: Innovation platform for new pre-start-ups**

The work package 4 (WPT 4) of the W-Power project concentrated specifically on the encouragement of self-employment in sparsely populated communities. The purpose was to increase innovation potential



and entrepreneurial mind-set of skilled women to start a new business or, alternatively, develop existing women-led companies. The project aimed to create low-threshold concepts and a platform designed especially for women-led pre-start-ups, innovations and new business ideas and thus pave the way for considering entrepreneurship as a career option and stay in the sparsely populated regions.

[Innovation platform for new pre-start-ups](#) was created and piloted during the project. Best regional practises were refined to a joint model, which enables new innovations with high business potential. Platform consists of clearly defined structure, design and code of conduct, which makes it easily transferable to different frameworks. The platform helps to rise the interest of skilful women of all ages to start their own business in sparsely populated communities.

Until today, the participating SMEs have mostly been existing companies with a development idea, not start-ups. The business idea competition has been very popular and the winners have succeeded in developing their businesses with support of the funding they have won in the competition although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected some of them.

### *Activities and deliverables*

During the first and second period, the partners were seeking good practices for innovation platforms for bringing together new start-ups and designed the first pilot. This enabled them to create well-functioning models for organising competitions. The regional innovation workshops were postponed to 2020, as the workshops were planned to function as gateways to the second regional innovation platform pilot.

The first pilot round included the call of the new business ideas, online pitching event and contract formulation with the selected business ideas. Several master group meetings enabled the other project partners engagement to the process. Totally, 24 business ideas were reached, of which 15 were selected based on the applications to the pitching contest. Pitching took place online, while the jury (project partners) was sitting in the Jokkmokk alongside the Thematic Seminar. Five business ideas were selected (1 from Finland, 1 from Sweden, 1 from Shetland, 2 from

Scotland) and 2000 € were allocated for each business idea based on the report and contracts.

During this period, also feedback was collected for the second piloting round. One of the participants, who has worked as an entrepreneur and in HR tasks for 20 year, underlined the concrete support from one of the pitching coaching days:

*I still use a video made during coaching, which was filmed from my own sales pitch. I received feedback immediately from other participants on the sales pitch I made. I can go back to the recording whenever I need and practice my skills.*

Another participant described:

*The business idea competition was clearly targeted at women entrepreneurs and there is a need for such a thing. I hope that the business idea competition will be re-organised, as women want to innovate and take their own business ideas forward alongside their own work. They really need this opportunity in my opinion as the business idea competition targeted at women will better bring out great ideas from sole entrepreneurs and small businesses.*

One of the participants shared her positive experiences as following:

*This was both an exciting and demanding experience; even though I did not win I am so proud of myself for pushing myself out of my comfort zone and giving this a try! Thank you, Jana, for your friendly face at every pitch session; it made a difference for me.*

The first pilot round winners provided feedback through bilateral interviews. Their satisfaction and ideas enhanced motivation among those who planned and organised the second pilot round. The calls in 4 regions (North Karelia, Lapland, Sweden and Canada) were opened at the end of August 2020. The innovation workshops took place in the project regions either online or on-site, some of them were postponed to period 5.

Although one innovation workshop was planned to be implemented in each region during the project lifetime, partners in Ireland, Scotland, Shetland

or Iceland were not able to pilot the innovation platform in their region during pilot round 2. Reasons for that included lack of budget, changes in organisation or putting efforts into other activities. Nevertheless, the piloting regions are motivated to continue organising the innovation platforms. Third pilot round of start-up competitions was organised in Autumn 2021 both in Finland and in Canada.

Despite some of the challenges in this work package (pilots only in some regions, all the winners were not able to continue their work), it can be seen as a real success. The third W-Power podcast season of four episodes "[The Success Stories from W-Power -project](#)", features women entrepreneurs from Finland, Sweden, Shetland and Scotland. In the episode two, entrepreneurs from Finnish Lapland and Northern Karelia who benefited greatly from these pilot rounds are being interviewed. Experiences from the W-Power pilot rounds indicate that especially education institutes are great organisers for this kind of business idea competitions.

It is clear that the model created here can be used and developed further in the future (Deliverable: How to organize a business idea competition? [Modelling the W-Power Innovation Platform for New Pre-Start-Ups / W-Power Innovation Platform.mp4](#)).

### 3.3 Inclusion of the partners and stakeholders

In the beginning of the project the project implementation teams were built up in each project region, the associated partners were engaged with the activities, as well as the regional stakeholders (woman entrepreneurs, business support organizations, other interest groups). Partners and other stakeholders have expressed their gratitude to the ways in which W-Power has managed to include a wide range of actors via digital events. As one of the participants from Sweden described:

*Digital meetings made the program available for a broader audience from all over the region. This have brought us together and made us stronger as a whole region.*

All project partners succeeded to involve plenty of woman entrepreneurs in the project activities and the project exceeded its target group reach in

SMEs already in period 2 (ca. 180 vs. 60 goal SMEs). After the third reporting period the number of involved entrepreneurs were up to 384, and at the end of period 4, all together 434 women entrepreneurs had joined the project activities. In addition to involving several times more women entrepreneurs than planned, W-Power exceeded its target group reach in most of its other target groups as well. At the same time, there were some associated partners and other stakeholders who could have been included more in implementing project activities and disseminating project outputs. For instance, the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) could have provided a great channel at earlier stage.

Generally speaking, the project has succeeded in inclusion of its partners and stakeholders very well and there is a clear need for this kind of project in the partner regions.

### **3.4 Schedule and cost-efficiency**

W-Power has followed its project schedule and budget in an impressive manner, despite the global challenges caused by Covid-pandemic. At the end of the project W-power partners were proud and satisfied for being able to deliver approximately 90 % of its activities and deliverables according to the original time plan. During the first reporting periods, W-Power focused on WPC, WPM, WPT1 and WPT2. During this time, W-power team dedicated time for planning and collecting knowledge the forthcoming activities in WPT3 and WPT4, such as the peer-2-peer learning process, gender-sensitive business advisory and innovation platforms. The importance of WPT3 and WPT4 activities grew in the coming periods. Some of the changes in the project plan are listed in the following.

There was a slightly slow start with setting-up the regional project teams, because the project funding decision came just before the summer holidays and the project was about to start already first of September. Besides this delay, a great majority of the activities were finalised on time. Only WPT3 began later than planned, and some of the activities were postponed for logical reasons.

During the second half of the project, Covid-19 pandemic caused difficulties in implementing the project as planned and some slowdown in using the budget, especially the travel and external expertise. In this situation, most

of the effort were put on WPs M, C, T2 and T4 and approximately 50 000 € of the travelling budget were allocated to other activities. This money was used, for instance, for the Slack-network in Scotland, vouchers for the development and testing among the awarded business ideas in WPT4 and developing the digital elements of the final seminar. The project was prolonged due to Covid-pandemic, which meant that some of the activities were postponed toward the end of the project. The last months of the project were used for disseminating results, organising the final seminar and compiling reports. Moreover, one more coaching was organised in Scotland (WPT3) and third pilot round of innovative competition (WPT4) was started in the Finnish Lapland.

### 3.5 Reactivity to Covid-19

Compared to the ARCTISEN project, W-POWER was able to react to the pandemic quicker than many other actors. The first crisis meeting between the project partners was arranged already in March 2020, where the participants decided to allocate the project funds for supporting women entrepreneurs during these difficult times. Already existing online platforms and networks enabled W-Power to organise online training, coaching and webinars with experienced speakers. For instance, Innovation workshops in Autumn 2020, provided important support for many women entrepreneurs and gave a spark for organising similar events in the future.

W-Power team did impressive job in adjusting their project activities and budget to the pandemic. Stakeholder interviews indicate that the project was able to give the women entrepreneurs well-needed first-hand support in the middle of the crisis. Many of the entrepreneurs emphasised that peer support during the crisis was exactly the thing, they needed to avoid panicking. As one of the stakeholders put it:

*This past year has been like no other and just knowing there are other people who are facing similar challenges and being able to take time and talk to them has been great. Not only for me as a business woman, but as myself too.*

In a similar vein, a person working in IT and business coaching sector described the situation as following:



*During the first lockdown everybody felt very cut-off so the W-Power platform was really important for members to connect with and support one another. You could really see the engagement of the members rise initially as they needed that additional support and then settle back down.*

Nevertheless, Covid-19 has hindered transnational learning among women in that the entrepreneurs have not been able to travel, meet face to face and participate in P2P exchange. These kinds of face-to-face meetings on the first half of the project indicated the need and fruitfulness of coming physically together, and the participants have been very dissatisfied with not having been able to travel - as has been also the case in the ARCTISEN project. Entrepreneurs had been looking forward to business travelling and networking abroad, which is a rare opportunity for most of the female, self-employed persons.

At the same time, the pandemic has created and encouraged new ways of virtual networking, bringing together women across the Arctic into online meetings. Many W-Power activities were planned to take place online since the beginning, which made it easier to adjust to the global pandemic. It is possible that the virtual events have enabled more people in remote areas to join the project and create new contacts with other women entrepreneurs and to slow down to develop their businesses. As one of the participants described:

*Due the pandemic I have taken time to participate all kind of workshops and webinar and it has given me a lot! I have developed my business plan and I write now more precisely my projects. I have learnt about pitching and I feel much more self-confident and professional to present my business.*

Moreover, the online approach in thematic week reached all together 109 participants, which would not have taken place without Covid. Moreover, although many had a pre-assumption that 'no-one wants set-up a business during Covid', W-Power received successfully 34 applications to the business idea competition, which indicated hope for the future. All this demonstrates reactivity and resilience from W-power partners and can be seen as a positive outcome of Covid-19.

## 4. Dissemination

### 4.1 Communication channels and open materials

Different means of communication are discussed here according to the project objectives.

#### 1. Capacity building of women entrepreneurs

As mentioned before, covid-19 has either led to cancellation or postponing of some activities (such as physical benchmarks) but in terms of the project's first objective – capacity building of female entrepreneurs – it did not have a major impact on the expected outcomes. Communication activities were mainly planned online, and several physical meetings, such as benchmarks, occurred smoothly in a digital format. Features of capacity building, such as network expansion and thus engagement by women in the project, are highly achieved in terms of reaching target groups (434 SMEs – 618 SMEs in total, and 1150 general public). In addition, there is a high effectiveness of capacity building through communication activities such as the newsletter, webpage, social media posts and mouth-to-mouth communication.

#### 2. Improvement of gender-related business advisory service

Through online coaching, such as a training of trainers' event for gender-sensitive business coaching in period 4, great advance has been reached for this communication objective. Coaching tools for 'practicing' a gender-sensitive business have been uploaded to the public website of the project. However, there is no full reach of the objective and implementation of the WPT3 (....) is still ongoing. Also, online P2P participation from entrepreneurs has been challenging, but business advisory bodies have participated in the project's benchmark activities and are willing to contribute to implementation of project activities.

#### 3. Encouragement for self-employment in sparsely populated communities

The challenge of online P2P participation from entrepreneurs is a recurring theme and some participants have given up the process. However, a lot of existing and potential female entrepreneurs have taken part in the W-Power project and thus familiarised themselves with the pros and cons of

entrepreneurship in the rural Northern communities. The first two innovation platform pilots have been successfully implemented and two feedback rounds for this platform have shown positive results.

Also, woman entrepreneurship has been promoted in several stakeholder events.

## **Communication visuals**

The W-Power project achieved to communicate via a variety of social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram, which are all accessible via one of the first established communication tools: their webpage. These communication tools are informative, and clearly-written and/ or visualized, for example the Infographic of the challenges for female entrepreneurs in the Northern Periphery and Arctic. Aside from visuals, the project has uploaded interviews in a podcast format with six different female entrepreneurs in Northern and Arctic communities. Moreover, more than 130 people have received the monthly newsletter by W-Power.

## **Social media channels**

The W-Power project had used multiple social media channels to 1) disseminate project outcomes and information, 2) promote project activities and events and 3) to engage stakeholders and the project's target group. Publications, seminars, workshops, competitions, newsletters and events were marketed through social media channels, such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Facebook has been the project's main channel to disseminate knowledge and communicate with stakeholders, as this platform allowed followers to share W-Power's content, which is not possible on Instagram and therefore it was used less. They also started and managed a private group on LinkedIn with nearly 200 members. To reach new members, the group was mostly promoted through posts on Facebook. Especially after covid-19 and due to cancelled physical activities, the project partners put more efforts into activating the engagements of the group. The majority of the shared content was published in English, as W-Power is a transnational project, but project partners were also encouraged to share national content. Finnish is the second most used

language, which highlighted Finnish events, stories and activities more than other project countries.

Besides these marketing purposes, the W-Power team had also launched a “Covid-19 success stories” campaign to increase engagement and community building during the difficult times of the pandemic. Moreover, W-Power Slack group in Argyll (comprising members of the group) launched a project during March 2021 to showcase businesses in the area through 10 short video clips based around this year’s International Women’s Day theme about overcoming challenges. These videos were distributed through social media. These two initiatives are a great example of how the project managed to be adaptable to changing circumstances and to find new ways to involve the stakeholders to the project. The ARCTISEN project could have learned from this initiative to support local tourism entrepreneurs in the Arctic who were also experiencing the harsh consequences of the pandemic on their businesses.

As W-Power decided to adopt Facebook as their main social media platform so stakeholders can share their content, the project partners also used this function themselves extensively. For instance, many posts from the Facebook page ‘Women in business NB’ was shared on W-Power’s Facebook, which included inspirational content, information and events. However, during some periods the number of Women in Business NB content is so extensive, that the content produced by W-Power themselves is at risk of receiving less attention and engagement. However, whether it has been their own content, or sharing from others, the project partners have maintained a very active, diverse and informative Facebook page aiming to inspire and engage the target group and other stakeholders.

## 4.2 Engagement of stakeholders to dissemination

W-Power has produced a great variety of reports, videos, podcasts and other kind of material that support women entrepreneurship in rural areas. For instance, the W-Power final seminar presented two inspiring videos of women entrepreneurs living in peripheral, Northern areas. These high-quality videos can be found here: [From Ashes to Rise](#) and [From Periphery to Global Markets](#).

Project stakeholders engaged in disseminating project results in different ways and especially organisation partners – with already existing networks – took an active role in sharing information about publications and forthcoming events. For instance, 'Luotsi' employment services in Joensuu, Finland, distributed W-Power information and announcements through its web-pages (See: [luotsijoensuu.fi](http://luotsijoensuu.fi)). As many stakeholders were interested in W-Power's focus on women entrepreneurship, they helped to create positive visibility for the project and its activities.

W-Power used its regional newsletters to share information about the forthcoming activities. At the same time, the international newsletter focused on summarizing the results from already completed activities.

Many NPA-projects face difficulties in finding a good geographical balance when disseminating information in social media. It is common that the lead partner, and/or the partner responsible for WPC, takes an active role in disseminating project information, while others remain more passive. This was somewhat the case also in W-Power, despite different kinds of initiatives that were aimed at activating project partners and associated partners. It merits to mention that WBNB and CCNB in Canada took an active role in sharing good practices about Canadian women entrepreneurship and capacity building, mentoring and coaching of entrepreneurs and disseminated the W-POWER project results in its networks.

### 4.3 Media coverage

The W-Power podcast had been a successful way to share ideas and results born within the project. The first two seasons of the podcast focused on the stories of business women from across the Arctic, and hear from them about growing and running businesses in the remote regions of northern Europe. The series featured women who have been supported by W-Power and overcome the challenges posed by their remote geography to set up thriving small businesses. The season 3 presented the outputs of the W-Power project, [the W-Power podcasts can be listened here.](#)

W-Power has also been present in a radio program in Finland and in different kinds of regional newspapers in Finnish Lapland and Scotland. Moreover, W-Power was present in other stakeholders' newsletters. At the

final stages of the W-Power project, the partners focused on reaching out to media and were present, for instance in the regional TV news (starts from 2:56 <https://areena.yle.fi/1-50627327>).

## 5. Impact & best practices

The variety of innovative initiatives within one project is the strengths of W-Power project. Representative of a business support organization stated:

*The number of ongoing events which are free and accessible to female entrepreneurs is fantastic – I work with a variety of clients who have benefited from the different events which have more of an international focus than other events they would normally attend.*

W-power has boosted woman entrepreneurship in local and transnational levels, for instance, through peer-2-peer programme, gender-sensitive coaching and by sharing best practices in general. Through a wide range of activities, such as pilots and training, the project partners have been able to support entrepreneurs with diverse kinds of needs. Fruitful face-to-face visits were luckily realised in the first half of the project and continued then through inspiring online activities.

One of the coaches listed the positive impacts of the project as following:

*The women are growing in confidence and understand that many of the issues that they face are not unique to them. Seeing their business through the eyes of other has also provided encouragement and new perspectives. Furthermore, the women have built a network which will last beyond the programme.*

### 5.1 Good practices and innovative working methods

W-Power project included a great variety of good practices and innovative working methods that enabled stakeholders to create new networks and to develop their businesses and skills in general. The original project plan laid emphasis on peer support, which turned out to be fundamental during the Covid-19 crisis.



- W-Power **Thematic Weeks** represent an innovative and effective working method. This method is based on the idea of gathering together to do things that are difficult/impossible to do online. Instead of only sitting in meeting rooms, thematic weeks provide possibilities for networking, benchmarking and innovations in general. During a thematic week, participants can join those activities that they find relevant. Thematic weeks are more environmentally friendly ways of gathering than flying somewhere only for day or two. Kick-off and face-to-face meetings in the beginning of the project, brought the stakeholders closer together, which enhanced the team spirit throughout the project.
- A "**master group**", which consisted of one representative from each project partner who met in regular on-line meetings, was found to be an effective way to coordinate and implement the hands-on work.
- **P2P exchange:** This is an innovative working method that enable international and regional exchange between entrepreneurs. The international component of P2P exchange was highly appreciated by the women entrepreneurs. In this way, W-Power was seen as a pioneer project; that is, a project ahead of time. As one of the participants from Jokkmokk, Sweden described:
  - *P2P program gave me a possibility to test different ideas in an artistic way together with same-minded! //..// Peer to peer program gave me also two ideas for the Innovation platform. If I haven't participated P2P-program I unlikely had applied for the Innovation competition.*
  - Another entrepreneur from Finnish Lapland stated:
    - *P2P online mentoring is very useful and easy to share thoughts and ideas. Me and my partner have been very active with P2P.*

The planned P-2-P activities were hit hard by the pandemic. However, this is an approach that can be used in the future when entrepreneurs are able to travel to meet each other. Despite the challenges, P2P is already used in Brunswick, Canada, as a well-functioning mentoring program, with its own online platform:

[International Peer-to-Peer Exchange - Women in Business NB | Femmes en affaires NB \(wbnb-fanb.ca\).](#)

- **Start-up business idea competition** has given many women a boost and confidence to bring business ideas in action. The entire process of participating to the innovation competition and training pilot helped the participants in planning their future business. Moreover, business idea competition jury members were excited and active throughout the process. Series of coaching was organised for the business idea competition finalists, and there would have been interest for several events like this.

It merits mentioning that also immigrants joined the business idea competition and for instance, two African students were inspired to add Northern impacts to the African style of fabric design. Despite Covid-19, surprisingly many entrepreneurs participated in the start-up competition. The competition can be seen as the silver-lining of the pandemic and there is great interest among project partners to follow-up the business idea competition winners' work in the future. At the same time, some entrepreneurs experienced that relationship building and sharing were valuable as such, and could have been done without the competition part.

- **Various forms of communication** improved the group cohesion and allowed project partners to help each other beyond planned sessions. Moreover, more informal ways of communicating appeared across the project area. For instance, the online coffee breaks in Scotland and breakfast meetings in Jokkmokk were seen as a nice and effective way to get information of different subjects. Shetland women entrepreneurs, who participated in Realise-coaching, found WhatsApp as a good platform for follow up discussions and information sharing in between sessions.
- **This evaluation report** is also an example of a good practice, which enabled reflection about the strengths and weaknesses of the project and discussion of the remaining activities.

## 5.2 Success stories and stakeholder satisfaction

- An artist, writer and business woman living and working in Scotland summarized her experience in W-power project in the following way:  
*The support I've received through the W-Power network can be directly linked to my taking my business to the next level. Had it not been for the encouragement of members of the group telling me that what I was producing was of value and that I should charge for it rather than give it away free, I would never have taken this step. It was a huge mental shift for me to do this; it was terrifying, but good!*

- **P2P programme** has been found extremely valuable for the entrepreneurs lacking international connections. As Megan Burns from Scoop Digital in Scotland put it [the Panel Discussion on the Peer-to-Peer Networking Programme](#):  
*Being a sole entrepreneur, it is important that you speak to other people /../ It was a really big draw to have these international connections and to be able to learn about business elsewhere. It is about having those connections and to speak openly with someone you have never met.*

P2P programme has enabled entrepreneurs to share their knowledge, experiences, resources, information, concerns and challenges and to seek new solutions for their business problems. Some of the P2P pairs continue with their great collaboration although they have not been able to meet physically. Eva Gunnare from Essence of Lapland in Jokkmokk in Sweden states, 'It is so important to look beyond your own little bubble'. In her [video testimonial](#), she describes her relation with another entrepreneur, Marianne in Canada, as follows:

*We have really inspired each other, and we have the same strong feeling about the plants and the same connection with nature. It has been so much fun and you get so much energy from having these chats together.*

These meetings have been found so fruitful and important that Eva and Marianne, among others, have planned to continue their meetings after the project comes officially to its end.

- The project has successfully shared the woman entrepreneurs' voices through inspiring podcasts and other communication activities. W-Power podcast includes various success stories that have received boost from the W-Power project. There is also a wish to continue with the LinkedIN community platform for sharing experiences.
- Canadian associated partners have been very active in participating in the project implementation and sharing good practices to the European partners (with their own budget). A practical problem for arranging the joint meetings is the time difference, but a compromise has been found (meetings take place usually between 2 and 4 pm Finnish time, thus starting at 8 am New Brunswick time).
- The project has also given creditability in the classroom and added value to the students through cases.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

Since the beginning of the project activities encouragement for self-employment were included in all W-POWER activities and communications and the project has thrived to meet its goals. The stakeholder engagement and enthusiasm has been impressive during the project and different online activities have helped to reduce the feelings of loneliness of women entrepreneurs working in remote areas. As one partner expressed, many entrepreneurs "Found a home in W-Power network". At the same time, a big project consortium can sometimes be slow to fulfil the entrepreneurs' eager wishes to join the activities.

Successful project implementation was built on a common understanding among the project consortium, flexibility and professionally coordinated work. Supportive and open team spirit among the W-Power partners remained great throughout the project, although not meeting face-to-face during the pandemic. Monthly online meetings, regular emailing and in addition some "social coffee breaks" on Teams kept the team spirit high. Simultaneously, the experiences from the project have shown how very independent work by partners or WP leaders can lead to situations where other partners are not receiving all the needed information. Moreover,

partners' participation in social media seems to be a challenge for several NPA projects. This has been the case also with W-Power. WP leaders tried to encourage the "sleeping" partners more active by helping and lowering the threshold, the activity and quality of the disseminated materials has varied greatly among partners. Hence, the experiences from W-Power indicate that there is a need to create more explicit plans for social media communication and to guide the partners to follow the visual guidelines created for the project and requested by NPA.

Despite – and also due – the global pandemic, the W-power project has been a success story. New networks, increasing confidence and skills have helped the entrepreneurs to develop their businesses and reach new clients. The project reached its' project specific objectives: 1. capacity building for women entrepreneurs, 2. improvement of gender-related business advisory services and 3. encouragement for self-employment in sparsely populated communities, to a large degree. In addition, the project was able to offer vital support and stress relief to the most vulnerable entrepreneurs struggling in the middle of pandemic. Indeed, experiences from pandemic demonstrated that it is possible to create strong links between entrepreneurs online and this way to reduce the challenges of remoteness in running one's business.

In one participant's words:

*I think W-Power was an absolutely great initiative, and so many of the members have gained so much confidence through it.*

Or as another entrepreneur expressed:

*The concept of the project is great and I love the idea of such partner's supporting. I would wish to extend the project or to be part of something similar in the future.*

There is clearly a great need for these kinds of projects that deliver concrete results to enhance entrepreneurs' skills and confidence, and increase entrepreneurship and self-employment in rural areas.

**WONDERFUL JOB W-POWER – YOU ROCK!**