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Project Description

European project Innocastle introduces a landscape-based approach to heritage

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Abstract

The Innocastle project was developed within the framework of the Interreg Europe programme, which aims to support local and regional governments in Europe to develop and deliver better policy. The project takes place between June 2018 and November 2022. This article presents the issues addressed by the project, the project approach to improving policy instruments and the results until now.

Keywords

heritage, Interreg Europe, landscape, policy, rural heritage

Description of the project

Mostly located in rural and remote areas, historic castles, manors and estates have the potential to stimulate rural and regional development and innovation, and become drivers for job creation, better education, improving life quality and reducing social inequalities. However, at the moment, many rural estates across Europe face challenges endangering their future such as a lack of function, of sustainable business models and of community involvement. In order to activate their potential, new types of governance and support by the public sector are needed.

Innocastle is an Interreg Europe funded project running from mid-2018 to the end of 2022. It is a partnership of four European regions: the National Institute of Heritage in Romania, the Province of Gelderland in the Netherlands, Ghent University of Applied Sciences and Arts – KASK in Belgium and the Provincial Government of Badajoz in Spain. The National Trust from the United Kingdom acts as a knowledge partner throughout the process, supporting all partners with their widely known expertise.

The main objective of the project is to improve four policy instruments affecting rural estates in the partner regions. Many of the existing heritage policies addressed fail to provide comprehensive support to built heritage, often resulting in expensive restorations with no long term function or maintenance plans, fragmented approaches that are not connected to the surrounding areas, or an exclusive focus on tourism development. To address these issues, the project proposed four specific objectives:

- **Governance and partnerships:** to demonstrate the importance of partnerships in the sustainable revitalisation and future-proofing of heritage sites. Specifically, to increase collaboration between all levels of governance (local, regional, national, European), between expert fields (heritage, tourism, leisure, landscape, nature) and between sectors (public, private, research and society) in all the partner regions.
- **Finance and investments:** to generate know-how on meaningful, integrated and durable heritage transformation and sustainable business models.
- **Promotion and visibility:** to develop know-how for local and regional actors to better promote and facilitate rural estates through storytelling and product development.

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- **Dissemination and continuation:** to open a European-wide discussion about the current and future role of rural estates, as an important testimony of a shared European identity.

The baseline survey

Within the Innocastle project, the baseline survey is an interdisciplinary exploration of the rural estates as well as the policies, actors and regional contexts that influence these sites in the four partner regions. The study takes a forward-looking approach to rural estates by identifying the current and exploring the future potential of these sites and the context influencing them. As such it forms a basis for improving policies in the four regions to better support the preservation, transformation and exploitation of this heritage towards the future.

Within the study a rural estate is defined as a historical, multifunctional, rural or peri-urban entity composed of different parts which was historically managed as a unity and incorporated living quarters for the landlord. The baseline survey identified five common characteristics of rural estates in all partner regions: their relationship with the landscape, their multifunctional nature, their relationship with different spatial and time scales, their key role in the development of rural Europe, and their ability to combine local and global views.

The methodology combines the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. These data are grouped along four strands (context, rural estates, policy instruments and stakeholders) which together ensure a holistic understanding of the potential of rural estates and support the development of regional action plans.

The survey tries to understand the regional context influencing rural estates (for example the history and geography of the region as well as its economic and demographic context), the condition of the rural estates within the different regions (the number of estates in the region, the level of heritage protection, their geographical positioning and relationship with the regional landscape, their history and current role in the culture of the region, level of usage and functions, etc.), the specific policy instruments influencing the rural estates, mainly looking into the principal funding mechanisms (analysing the stakeholders involved in the development of policy and financial instruments, their strengths and weaknesses, etc.) and how the different stakeholders interact. Furthermore, every region describes a few learning cases – rural estates in each region and their relationship in relation to the addressed policy instruments, in order to better understand the impact and limitations of existing policies.



Figure 1. Innocastle study visit to Wales in May 2019. Powis Castle and Garden, Welshpool.

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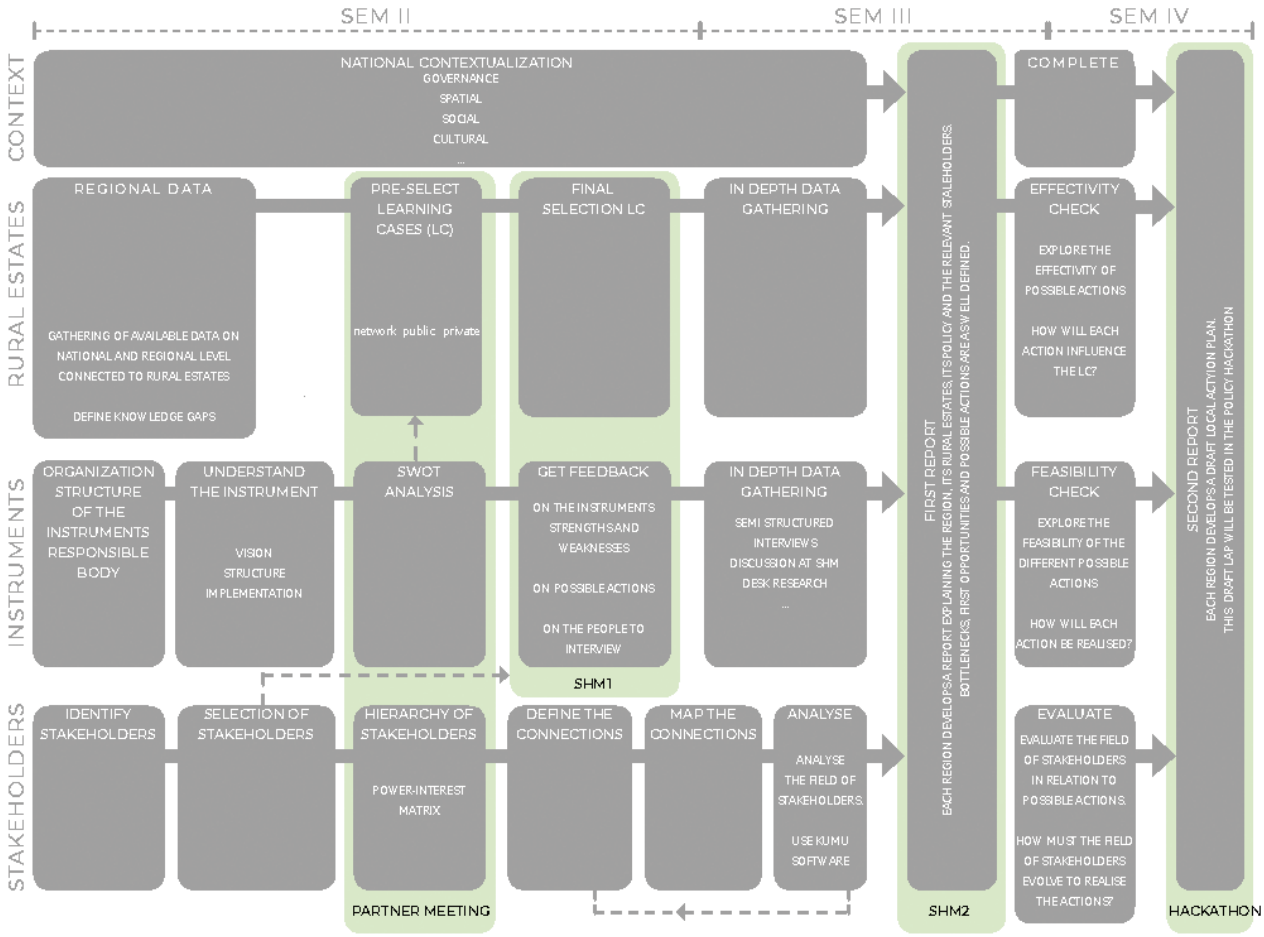


Figure 2. Methodology map of the baseline survey. The green frames refer to various meetings throughout phase 1 of the project.

While this methodology is structured around these four strands, understanding their cohesion is crucial. Transversal moments within the process as well as the study visits further ensure a holistic view towards the various topics.

The data collected in the baseline survey reveals huge differences regarding rural estates in the four participating regions and their targeted policy instruments. For example, in Center Region of Romania and in Badajoz, sites can sometimes obtain close to 100% of the funding needed for a restoration, but in practice some of the restored sites remain without a function or a maintenance plan post restoration. On the other hand, in Gelderland and West Flanders it is more common for sites to receive between 40%–80% of the funding for restoration. Statistically, the sites in West Flanders and Gelderland are more than 90% in use.

However, the survey also showed that a lot of the desired data are not standardized or are incomplete. Therefore, the document cannot be read as a fully comprehensive comparison between the partner regions. Furthermore, rural estates in, for instance, the Netherlands are of a different size, architecture and nature than their Romanian counterparts. Nevertheless, we see similar historic processes of estate building, creation and use, with the same present-day challenges such as climate change and COVID-19.

The baseline survey has been coordinated and drafted by one of the Innocastle partners: the School of Arts – KASK of HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts, with regional input from all the partners, and has been launched on 24 September 2020. It is available online through www.interregeurope.eu/innocastle.

Academic and societal impact

Innocastle's baseline survey serves as a point of reference for the four regional project partners which will improve their policy instruments impacting rural estates through various measures starting with 2021. At the same time, it presents a starting point for further research, policy development and practice. The baseline survey identified five common characteristics of rural estates in all partner regions: their relationship with the landscape, their multifunctional nature, their relationship with different spatial and time scales, their key role in the development of rural Europe, and their ability to combine local and global views. International debates between owners, governments and other stakeholders through study visits, thematic seminars and other meetings organised as part of Innocastle have led to a more profound and shared definition of rural estates. Within Innocastle, rural

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estates are understood as *"historical, multifunctional, rural or peri-urban entities composed of different parts which were managed as a unity and which historically incorporated living quarters for the landlord."* The process of arriving to this definition is described within the document and can be useful for both academia, policy makers and practitioners working on the development of European rural estates and their regions in general.

Towards a landscape-based approach

The Innocastle project identified that in all partners countries rural estates originated from a direct relationship with the landscape. This relationship was one of power and manifested itself in different ways through space and time: from protection to control and production to aesthetical enjoyment. Thus we deal with layered landscapes, revealing traces of various time periods and functions: from protection to control and production to aesthetical enjoyment. Still, rural estates are a combination of beauty and utility. By researching country and manor houses in relation to their surrounding aesthetic and economic landscapes, we view these places as ensembles, which are characterised by a certain spatial and functional coherency.

The Innocastle partnership was inspired by this landscape-based approach in some regions and would like to promote it in different European countries. Regarding policy making, this also means that in addition to financing individual estates, subsidies might be better aimed at regions comprising clusters of estates. Besides contributing to the preservation, transformation and exploitation of rural estates, this also helps them face regional challenges such as climate change or economic difficulties. Moreover, as many rural estates are often located in remote areas, this approach has the potential to stimulate rural and regional development and innovations. This all requires a shift in financing, and in policies towards the preservation, transformation and exploitation of rural estates in general: from individual estates to a landscape or region based strategy.

Towards improved policies and practices

Based on discussions during different study visits, peer reviews, thematic seminars and stakeholder meetings, the Innocastle baseline survey suggests thirteen policy recommendations for this type of heritage, all of which are relevant not only in the partner regions but all over Europe. For example, on-site experiment is proposed as a strategy for policy development, with 'Living labs' as an interesting method. The 'European Network of Living Labs' describes them as user-centred and open innovation ecosystems. Based on a co-creation approach, Living Labs integrate research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings.

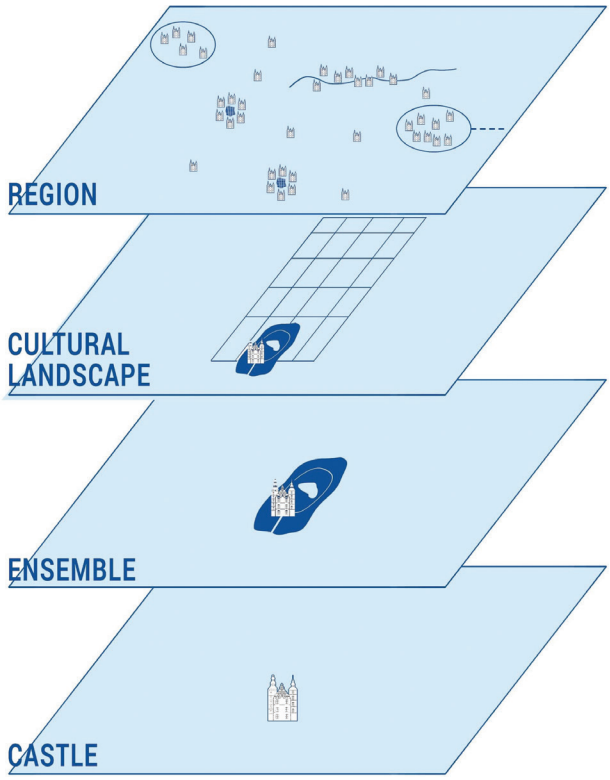


Figure 3. The four primary spatial levels in considering a landscape approach.

Finally, based on the inter-regional exchange, each Innocastle partner has created a Local Action Plan proposing modifications of policy instruments regarding rural estates in their own region. For example, one of the actions proposed by the lead partner in Romania targets the wider implementation of a social-cost benefit analysis to better understand the regional impact of investing in rural estates. The Romanian partner will test in the next 1.5 years what kind of data can be collected in this regard and evaluate the social, economic and environmental impact of heritage investments. If the pilot will be successful, it will become a standardized procedure to evaluate monuments funded through the National Restoration Plan of Historic Monuments. In Spain, the partner will initiate a tax harmonization process at regional and local level in order to agree on a tax framework able to clarify the actual lack of alignment on heritage assets definition and categorization. In Belgium, the Flanders Heritage Agency has decided to develop a heritage master plan for rural estates which continues on the cross-sectoral and holistic approach of Innocastle. By continuing this approach the agency aims to collectively develop answers for the many identified challenges. In the Netherlands, partners are focusing on developing new regional tourism offers, as well as on addressing the impact of climate change in regions with many historic estates and parks.

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Partners have also identified a variety of innovative good practices in each of the regions which are transferable to other European regions as well. One of them is social prescribing, a pilot from the UK testing how prescribing visits to heritage sites could improve people's mental health and well-being through volunteering, participating in restoration or simply walking outdoors around beautiful estates. Through the good practices and policy recommendations, Innocastle hopes to open a European-wide discussion about the current and future role of rural estates in our society, as an important testimony of our shared European identity. The differences between European rural estates should be seen as a unique learning opportunity to create suitable policies that ensure a bright future for rural estates in Europe.

Innocastle aims to improve policy instruments for the preservation, transformation and exploitation of heritage castles, manors and estates. The project is financed by Interreg Europe, with a total budget of € 1,120,335.00 (85% ERDF, 15% co-financing). Disclaimer: this article reflects the authors' views; the programme authorities are not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Suggested further reading:

The Innocastle Baseline survey

Reports of the study visits to Romania, United Kingdom (Wales), Spain (Badajoz), The Netherlands (Gelderland) and Belgium (Flanders).

Innocastle website – www.interregeurope.eu/innocastle

Local Action Plans for Romania, Flanders, Badajoz and Gelderland.

Suggested academic publications

1. Carpentier, F., R. Hollewijn, J. de Jong and M. Plieger (2013). Behoud historische buitenplaatsen in Limburg: een vergelijkend onderzoek tussen Nederland, Vlaanderen en Duitsland. s.l.
2. De Roo, N., C. Rogolle and A. Verhoeve (2010). Een beleidsstrategie voor de ontwikkeling van kastelen en kasteeldomeinen: Onderzoeksproject op basis van ruimtelijke afwegingsvraagstukken in de Brugse regio. Brugge, west-vlaamse intercommunale.
3. Heyde, S., H. Libbrecht, J. Verbeken, P. Van den Bremt and L. Stubbe (2015). Kasteeldomeinen: historische tuinen en parken in de zuidelijke Westhoek, 1795–2015. Tielt, Lannoo.
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5. Storms-Smeets, E. (ed.). Erfgoedensembles in Zuid-Limburg. Leegstand en herbestemming van molens, boerderijen, kastelen en buitenplaatsen (in opdracht van Provincie Limburg, 2019).
6. Storms-Smeets, E. 'From elite to public landscapes. The case of the Klarenbeek estate in Arnhem, 1880–1950', in: *Virtus, Journal of Nobility Studies*, 23 (2016)
7. Storms-Smeets, E. and Th. Reesink. Visie Gelders Arcadië. Een bovengemeentelijk perspectief op de landgoederenzone van de Veluwezoom (in opdracht van gemeenten Arnhem, Renkum, Rheden, Rozendaal en Wageningen, 2016)

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