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Social Innovation in East Iceland:

“Fish Factory Creative Centre” in Stöðvarfjörður

A case study report from the ESPON project:
BRIDGES – Territories with geographical specificities



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1 The BRIDGES project

In late 2017 the project BRIDGES – Territories with geographical specificities was granted support from the ESPON program (European Territorial Observatory Network). The final report was delivered to ESPON in April 2019 (<https://www.espon.eu/geographical-specificities>).

The BRIDGES focuses on regions with specific territorial features who have received increasing attention in recent years, most notably in article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The main purpose of this project is to address the opportunities and challenges of specific types of territories implies that these territories need to be considered in context rather than 'singled out'. These types of territories constitute the main focus for this project: sparsely populated regions; mountain regions; Islands, including island-states and coastal areas. A central question is: "How can place-based, smart and integrated approaches support the challenges encountered by territories with geographic specificities"?

In the project there are 15 different case study areas in Europe working with different tasks as examples of territories with geographical specificities: 1. Specificity of innovation processes 2. Perspectives and strategies for sustainable tourism 3. Accessibility and transport 4. Social innovation in the provision of SGI 5. Social development 6. Social and economic patterns 7. Residential economy as a component of development strategies 8. Physical environment, natural resources and Energy 9. Biodiversity conservation and sustainable development 10. Energy provision and production 11. Climate change.

In this paper we present one of the case studies on one of the topics (**4. Social innovation in the provision of SGI**), which also is a case report in the project: Social Innovation in East Iceland.

2 Introduction

The case study is about a creative centre in arts and diverse other activities founded in 2011 in the small village of Stöðvarfjörður where the people had some years before experienced a heavy shock in the economic life due to the closure of a fish factory with a great loss of jobs. The aim of the social innovation project was

The population of eastern Iceland is around 10,500 and is divided between a number of small towns and rural areas. The number of municipalities is eight, there is not regional government in Iceland; just the state and municipalities. Basic industries are traditionally fishing and agriculture but jobs have declined in both industries due to rationalization and quotas. Fishing quotas are transferable and can thus be “sold away” from local fishing communities, which then lose access to the fishing resource, leading to job losses. As a result of out-migration, younger people and females have been underrepresented in the region. Reykjavík and neighbouring municipalities in the south-western part of the country have been growing rapidly during the past decades and is traditionally the main destination for migrants from other regions. An important part of the regional development in Eastern Iceland was the construction of the hydroelectric project Kárahnjúkar. It is the largest hydro power plant in the country. The hydroelectric station is located in the eastern part of the central highland which is uninhabited but important for tourism during the summer. Vatnajökull national park covers a large part of the eastern highland. The hydro power project consisted of large dams, reservoirs, diversion of rivers, water tunnels, and a powerhouse. Most of the electricity is used for the Alcoa Fjarðaál aluminium plant which was built during the same period 2003-2008. It is the biggest aluminium plant in the country and this large undertaking was an important change for the region, it created many new jobs and changed the economic structure of the region (Jóhannesson et al., 2010). Alcoa Fjarðaál is located near the town Reyðarfjörður which has around 1,200 inhabitants and has doubled in size since the megaproject started. Reyðarfjörður is part of the municipality Fjarðabyggð and so is Stöðvarfjörður where our case of Social Innovation takes place.

3.1.1 The village of Stöðvarfjörður

Stöðvarfjörður is a small village located 44 km from Reyðarfjörður and thus can be considered to be within a commuting distance from the largest workplace in the region which is the aluminium plant. Stöðvarfjörður is a small fishing village. The former fish factory in Stöðvarfjörður, once the centre of blooming industry, was closed down in 2005. That was an economic catastrophe for this small community. As many as thirty two people lost their jobs, a large loss for a community of only about 200 inhabitants. The bank and post office closed as well. The health care

centre is still operative but with reduced opening hours but the elementary school is still operative. Today there are 184 people living in the village of Stöðvarfjörður. The population had decreased from 343 in 1990 to 276 in 2002 when the municipality of Stöðvarfjarðarhreppur amalgamated with a much larger coastal neighbour, Fjarðarbyggð (3,065 inhabitants at that time). Therefore, Stöðvarfjörður is one of the kind of remote and small villages in the Municipality of Fjarðabyggð, which today has 4,700 inhabitants. Road linkages with closest and most important villages/towns in Fjarðabyggð and the region can be seen on the following figure:

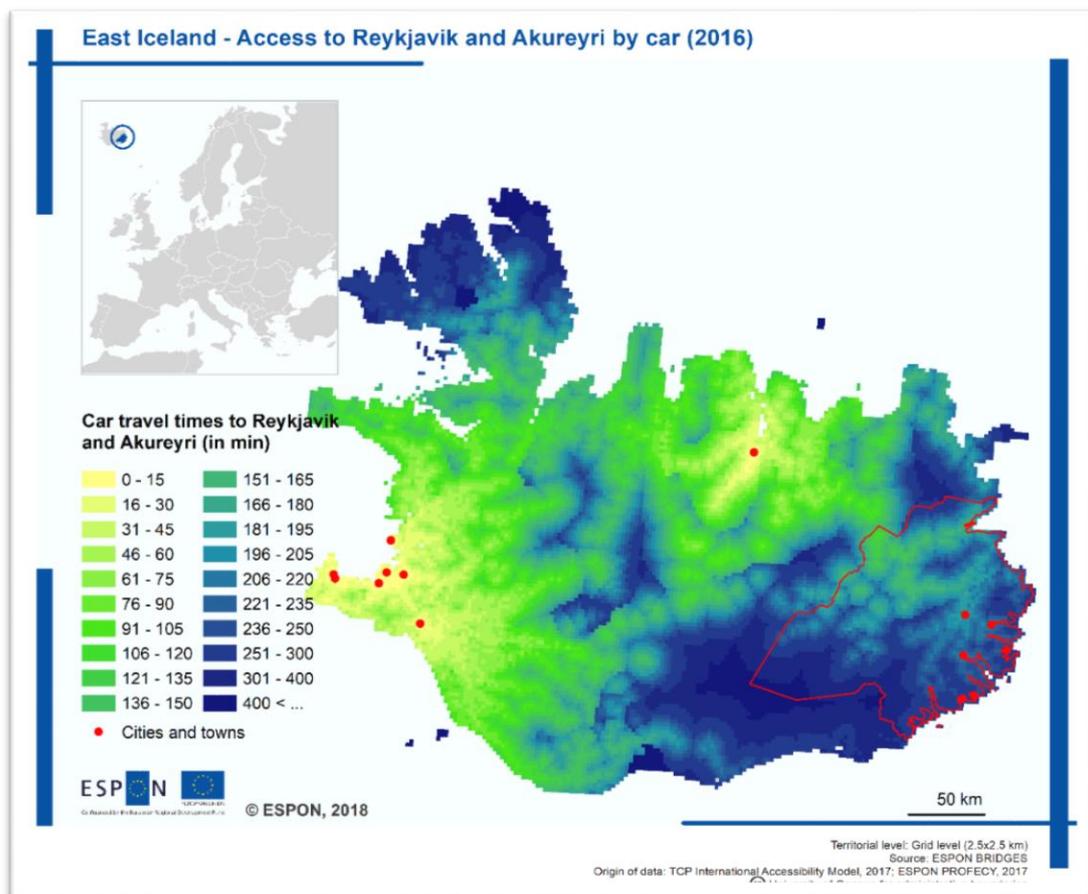


Figure 3.2: East Iceland. Accessibility and travel times.

3.2 Social and economic key figures

3.2.1 Economic specialization

Recent data on employment by different sectors of the economy are not available from Statistics Iceland by regions (LAU 1) or municipalities (LAU 2). However, data from Statistics Iceland shows that there is a considerable difference between regions according to the main occupational groups. Professionals are the most

common group in the capital region but only 15% in the other regions outside the centre of state administration, businesses and economic life. On the other hand agriculture and fisheries are relatively much more important in other regions and so is craft and related trades workers.

The Institute for Regional Development in Iceland carried out a survey in East Iceland¹. In that survey we can see the percentage division of respondents by economic activity. East Iceland shows similar main differences from the capital area as mentioned before.

Table 3.1: East Iceland, employed in main job by economic activity.

Economic activity	%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	5,1
Fishing and aquaculture	5,8
Manufacturing other than fish	7,8
Processing and preserving of fish, crustaceans and molluscs	4,5
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	6,8
Construction	7,0
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	5,0
Transportation and storage	3,5
Accommodation and food service activities	5,5
Information and communication	1,8
Financial and insurance activities	2,3
Real estate activities	1,5
Professional, scientific and technical activities	6,8
Travel agency, tour operator and other reservation service and related activities	0,9
Public admin., Education and Health/Social activities	5,3
Education	13,2
Human health and social work activities	10,3
Arts, entertainment and recreation	3,6
Other activities	1,4
Non specified activities	2,0

(Þórðardóttir, 2018)

3.2.2 Total population and population change

The figures in the next table show clearly that while the population in the region and in Fjarðabyggð has increased significantly since the turn of the century, a totally different development has been the case in the small village of Stöðvarfjörður where our case is located. This underlines the special situation in

¹ No. of responses 1,051, response rate was 48.7%.

the village of Stöðvarfjörður that suffered from economic shock, loss of jobs and depopulation of 1/3 which is very much the opposite to the region and the municipality as a whole.

Table 3.2: Population in East Iceland, Fjarðabyggð municipality and the village Stöðvarfjörður 2000 - 2017.

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2017	2000-2017	%
East Iceland	9,568	10,073	10,373	10,346	10,310	742	7.8
Fjarðabyggð	4,156	4,137	4,641	4,747	4,691	535	12.9
Stöðvarfjörður	276	257	223	198	184	-92	-33.3

(Statistics Iceland, n.d.)

3.2.3 Share of people with tertiary education

Data on education by individual regions or municipalities is not available from Statistics Iceland. However, there are some indications from a survey (Þórðardóttir, 2018) carried out for the Icelandic Institute for regional development in 2017². According to the survey 32% of respondents in East Iceland had university degrees at the same time that supply of jobs for educated is not much in the region. In other words, people who live in the region and want to live there might have to create their own job opportunities or to migrate in order to obtain jobs in other regions.

3.2.4 Unemployment and employment

In general, unemployment in Iceland is very low. That goes for all parts of the country. East Iceland has only 1% unemployment compared with 2% in the capital area. Both can be considered as very low in a European context. Employment in the country is also high, around 88%. We do not have figures for Stöðvarfjörður as such, but unemployment was considerable there after the closedown of the fish factory.

Table 3.3: Unemployment and employment in selected areas in Iceland in August 2017.

	Unemployment	Employment
East Iceland	1.1%	87.8%
Fjarðabyggð	1.3%	87.8%
Stöðvarfjörður	x	x
Capital Area	2.0%	88.3%

(Directorate of labour, n.d.)

² No. of responses 1051, response rate 48.7%.

3.2.5 Average available household income

The average income in Fjarðabyggð was 18.1% above the country average. This is shown in the next table. The comparatively high income in Fjarðabyggð is primarily due to the good wages in the aluminium sector and the fisheries sector. People working in other sectors do not have the same wages.

Table 3.4: Average wage income in Iceland and Fjarðabyggð municipality 2017.

	ISK	EUR
Whole country	4,291,000	34,535
Fjarðabyggð municipality	5,068,000	40,788

(Statistics Iceland, n.d.)

3.2.6 Migration trends and patterns

Fjarðabyggð municipality has had a net out-migration to other regions during the past few years but has had immigration from abroad. In the most recent years there has been a net out-migration to other municipalities in the region, most probably to the regional service centre Egilsstaðir.

Table 3.5: Net migration of Fjarðabyggð municipality 2011-2016.

	Total	Within region	Between regions	Between countries
2011	12	-20	6	26
2012	-22	-11	3	-14
2013	12	-2	-30	44
2014	31	-4	-14	49
2015	-90	-9	-67	-14
2016	-40	13	-75	22

(Statistics Iceland, n.d.)

Data on migration also shows that while Fjarðabyggð has lost people to the capital area in the last years there is a plus in favour of Fjarðabyggð when we look at migration balance against foreign countries – a plus of 120 persons.

4 Social Innovation in East Iceland

4.1 Social Innovation projects in East Iceland

One project similar to our selected case of social innovation in Stöðvarfjörður can be pointed out in the region of East Iceland: *The International Art Folk High School* in Seyðisfjörður; *LungA school*. It was founded in 2013 but still standing on older ground. The school attracts students from more or less the whole world and of

different age. The people behind this are mainly artists who wanted to add something different from fish and fish processing to the coastal society in Seyðisfjörður. It started with saving old houses from being demolished and then one thing led to another.

4.1.1 Austurbrú

Austurbrú (East Iceland Bridge) was established in 2012. It was the first of its kind among similar organisations in Iceland. It was founded after a merger of several smaller units serving the region and regional matters of East Iceland. Austurbrú has outposts in many of the towns and villages in the regions. Among the tasks are: continuous education and serving as a node for distance education in the region. Austurbrú is also responsible for structural funds in the region, economic development/innovation and culture. The tasks of the association of municipalities in East Iceland are under its umbrella, including looking out for the interests of the region.

The Structural Fund (Uppbyggingarsjóður Austurlands) gives direct grants to various projects within culture and innovation in the region and even gives assistance with formalities to applicants. Further, Austurbrú makes cooperative agreements with projects within the creative branch and contributes/supports with expertise and marketing.

5 Social innovation: The case in Stöðvarfjörður

5.1 Fish Factory Creative Centre

5.1.1 The background. The foundation of the centre

In 2011 a group of people in the community founded a non-profit cooperation in order to utilize the abandoned fish factory. The aim was to do something different with it than had been done before and by that try to contribute to regeneration of the community of Stöðvarfjörður (Copus et al., 2016). Rósa Valtingoer, who is born in Stöðvarfjörður is one of the five founding members of the centre but there were several local people among others who contributed to the startup in 2011. Rósa tells us that she and her husband moved to Stöðvarfjörður in 2007 but were in sort of an existential crisis, as she puts it. They wanted to change things both for themselves and the place and the community. The idea was to start a community

project, something that would benefit not only them but also the local community. These were the years after the shutdown of the fish factory and the economic life and other activities were not lively. A demolition of the fish factory building was coming closer. They decided to found a cooperative around their idea of trying to avoid demolition and instead use the house for something constructive but different. They tried to present their idea but the community and the municipality seemed to be reluctant and lack interest in these innovative and somewhat exotic ideas (Valtingoer, 2018). Signý tells us that in the beginning they did not get a chance to present this idea at an open citizen meeting in Stöðvarfjörður. However, with some help they arranged their own open meeting in the village and presented the idea. Even members of parliament from the constituency were present! This made the wheels running and the municipality of Fjarðabyggð was helpful in the first steps. After having bought the factory house at an auction for a symbolic sum of money the municipality came in and depreciated old real-estate tax debts and arranged for agreements with insurance debts. This was important for making things happen and the structuration of a creative centre began. The economic support was gradually followed by a moral support from the locals. This turned into more voluntary work from the local people in renovating and getting the old fish factory ready for other purposes. This project had become a community project initiated from below and realised with support from authorities (Ormarsdóttir, 2018). Rósa tells us that there was a soil for this kind of project in Stöðvarfjörður where people stood together by tradition, where the spirit was good. Additionally there was a great handicraft tradition there. That mattered, says Rósa. People were eager to help us to get going and start this project (Valtingoer, 2018).



Figure 5.1: “Without creativity, there is no evolution” - Stöðvarfjörður and the Fish Factory Creative Centre (Fish Factory Creative Centre, n.d.).

5.1.2 The activities in the centre

The Fish Factory Creative Centre describes itself as „the Centre is an independent initiative and all team members are volunteers still today“ (Fish Factory Creative Centre, n.d.). The Centre is meant to be a platform for offering workshops and facilities where small initiatives could thrive and jobs be created. In the centre there are studio spaces, a cultural venue, a banquet hall, school camps and a local products market. Some parts of the factory are even used for local fish industry activities – something related to the earlier use of the facilities.

The target group is primarily artists but activities related to fish processing are also possible in the centre. Studios for up to seven artists are available. One that is open for 6 artists and one private studio. One can hire a place in the shared studio for 85,000 ISK pr. month (690 EUR) and in the private for 95,000 ISK pr. month (775 EUR). To get access or participate in a Workshop in the Creative Centre, membership is required. Membership can be bought for 30,000 ISK pr. year (245 EUR). Use of facilities can also be bought on a monthly or even daily basis. Access means that people can work on their personal projects. Projects cannot be regular production or industries but only making of prototypes, reparations or creation (Fish Factory Creative Centre, n.d.). A member has access to the material storage of the centre such as welding rods, screws, cutting discs, sandpaper, clay, etc. Further, it gives access to open workshops which are open 4 hours pr. working day. Included

in this fee is accommodation in two separate houses in the village where each guest has private bedroom but shared kitchen and shower.

Three people run the centre on a daily basis: Rósa Valtingoer, Una Sigurðardóttir & Vincent Wood and they are the only permanent staff of the centre. Additionally a lot of volunteers from abroad also help with the operation. Around 80 artists visit the centre every year, hiring localities and facilities for a shorter or longer period.



Figure 5.2: From the Fish Factory Creative Centre (Fish Factory Creative Centre, n.d.).



Figure 5.3: Products from the Centre (Fish Factory Creative Centre, n.d.).

5.1.3 Running the centre

Public grants and support and consulting have come from local, regional and national actors. Public grants to the centre have been in the period 2011 – 2017 totally 13.65 million ISK. The East Iceland Economic Development Centre

(Þróunarfélag Austurlands, later Austurbrú), has supported the project with grants from The Cultural Council of East Iceland (Menningarráð Austurlands) and grants from East Iceland Structural Fund (Uppbyggingarsjóður Austurlands) with a total sum of 8.65 million ISK (Sköpunarmiðstöð, 2018). Additionally, Fjarðabyggð municipality and the primary school in Stöðvarfjörður (Stöðvarfjarðarskóli) along with several private companies are also contributing – the municipality has granted with 4 million ISK in the period 2011 – 2017 (Sköpunarmiðstöð, 2018). Financial support for the project from Fjarðabyggð is also in form of exemption from property tax, a total of over 10 million ISK in the period 2012 – 2017 (Sköpunarmiðstöð, 2018). The Creative Centre also gets support from the newly founded Cultural Office of Fjarðabyggð (Menningarstofa Fjarðabyggðar) which works for supporting the local cultural life and recreation in general. Austurbrú also tries to point its activities to the centre as for example hiring out localities for meetings and conferences and thereby contributing to the income of the centre. Local and regional support is apparent. A state grant in the period 2011 – 2017 has been 1 million ISK (Sköpunarmiðstöð, 2018).

Signý points out that the running of the centre is vulnerable and a considerable state grant to the final phase in the structuration of the centre would be needed in order to make it more financially sustainable into the future. A considerable grant from the state institute Byggðastofnun (Regional Development Institute) could in this case make the whole difference (Ormarsdóttir, 2018). Rósa tells us that the day to day running is sort of going, but all construction work on finishing renovating the old house is voluntary. That is voluntary work from the owners of the centre and the local people. “The local people are very helpful and they help us if needed. For example the guy on the forklift in the harbour who always assists us when we need it. Companies in the region have also been very helpful in one ways or another – such as in low pricing. This is a community project and it is therefore so many are willing to help” (Valtingoer, 2018). But completing the renovation part of the project is costly. An estimated cost of finishing the renovation is 80-100 m ISK (650,000 – 800,000 EUR) and the current annual contribution from the municipality is not more than 5-6 percent of the total cost.

5.1.4 The Impact of the centre

A direct economic impact of this project is perhaps not big compared with the very biggest branches in East Iceland, fish and aluminium. The impact is rather social and cultural and of course biggest on location in Stöðvarfjörður and neighbourhoods. Gunnar says that on the other hand this project has broadened and enriched the community life – given Fjarðabyggð something else than fish or aluminium which are pretty dominating as the pillars of the economic life. It is the opposite by not being a big-scale project. He sees the centre as a part in a progress in culture. “The Creative Centre is a core of arts and culture which can be spread to other places in Fjarðabyggð”, he says (Jónsson, 2018). Still people are coming to Stöðvarfjörður because of the centre and use some of the services available such as restaurants and guesthouse etc. That contributes to create jobs locally.

Signý argues that the economic impact is underestimated. The centre is always fully booked and that has impact both socially and economically. People have to stay somewhere and eat somewhere (Ormarsdóttir, 2018). “Ten people added to a community not bigger than Stöðvarfjörður is quite a lot”, says Rósa (Valtingoer, 2018).

And the impact is not only economic. It is on a regional level as well as local. People connected to the centre teach at the regional gymnasium school in Egilsstaðir and giving courses in the primary school in Stöðvarfjörður, so the contribution is not only limited to the village. And now the closest village to Stöðvarfjörður, Breiðdalsvík in Breiðdalshreppur, has been amalgamated with Fjarðabyggð. The hinterland of The Creative Centre will grow and more and more opportunities for cooperation will show up. There is no reason to believe that the centre will have any negative effects for other local operations – it is totally an addition to everything going on in Stöðvarfjörður.

5.1.5 The future

All our interviewees pointed out the fact that the Fish Factory Creative Centre in Stöðvarfjörður was in a development phase, even though it started in 2011. The key to sustainable future seems to get larger state grants to finish the structuration of the centre.

But it is Rósa who expresses the foresight (Valtingojer, 2018). There are several important things in it:

- To contribute to the educational system in East Iceland through providing teachers in the field of arts.
- To strengthen cooperation with Art Universities both in Iceland and abroad.
- It is important to finish the building in order to be able to offer as many as possible to come here and do constructive things.
- It is important to offer diverse facilities – in particular for small handicrafts and industries.
- To finish the professional sound recording studio which they have already started with is vital for the future.
- That the centre can do its share in ensuring that people can live in Stöðvarfjörður and work here as well. “Too many that live here commute to other places to work”, says Rósa.
- An ultimate goal to run the centre without any grants.

6 Summary and discussion

The driver behind the foundation of the centre was that the pioneers wanted to change things both for themselves and the place and the community. To start a community project, something that would benefit not only them but also the local community.

Volunteers were needed and showed to be very important in the start phase and there is still volunteering and in-kind contribution. The volunteers come even from abroad. It is highly emphasised by our interviewers that the Fish Factory Creative Centre is a community project and other evidence gives that indication. Private companies contribute and show goodwill. The regional development institutions in the region have been helpful and still are. The project is accepted and seen as important locally and within the municipality by the community and other communities as well. This appears to be the strength of this project.

Our interviewers pointed out the fact that the Fish Factory Creative Centre in Stöðvarfjörður is in a development phase, even though it started in 2011. The running is however vulnerable and still needs economic support, voluntary work and some in-kind contributions. This is the weakness of this project. A bigger grant is needed to make the project sustainable. There is some local economic impact in form of multiplicatory effects on provided services in the village – 80 people every year is a considerable input into a small community but the extent of that impact is difficult to calculate. It has to be had in mind that accommodation is included in the fee for being at the centre and there is no grocery store in the village. The social and cultural impacts seem to be most significant.

Who might be the lessons learned from this case? What has been successful and what not? The idea of using the location and the landscapes of the east Icelandic coast to attract customers to the centre seems to have succeeded. The high and steep mountains on one side and the sea on the other side make this for many foreigners exotic environment which seems to attract people to come, stay and work temporarily. The evidence of fully occupied centre throughout the year speaks for itself. There is no doubt about that the geographic characteristic is used to attract people, one has just to look at the homepage of the centre (www.inhere.is) and see that very many of the pictures there are of the village and the landscape around it. In this sense the project is successful. The rather financial basis is however something that makes this vulnerable. A full renovation of the building is said to be necessary but the financial strength to do that is lacking. At the same time we hear that the people who are running the centre are not paying themselves any director-level salaries. The Fish Factory Creative Centre is however still running. Maybe the biggest lesson learned is that to make an idea or project like this possible in the first place are enthusiastic and selfless people willing to work day and night. Additionally, considerable voluntary work is necessary from the locals. In Stöðvarfjörður that has been the case and also on a more regional level. The local people seem to support this in various ways. Finally, the support from the municipality seems to be vital for the centre. Those are probably the lessons learned that should be had in mind by those who might get a similar idea of social innovation initiative elsewhere.

Finally we try to summarize some main facts and figures about the project in the following figure and table.

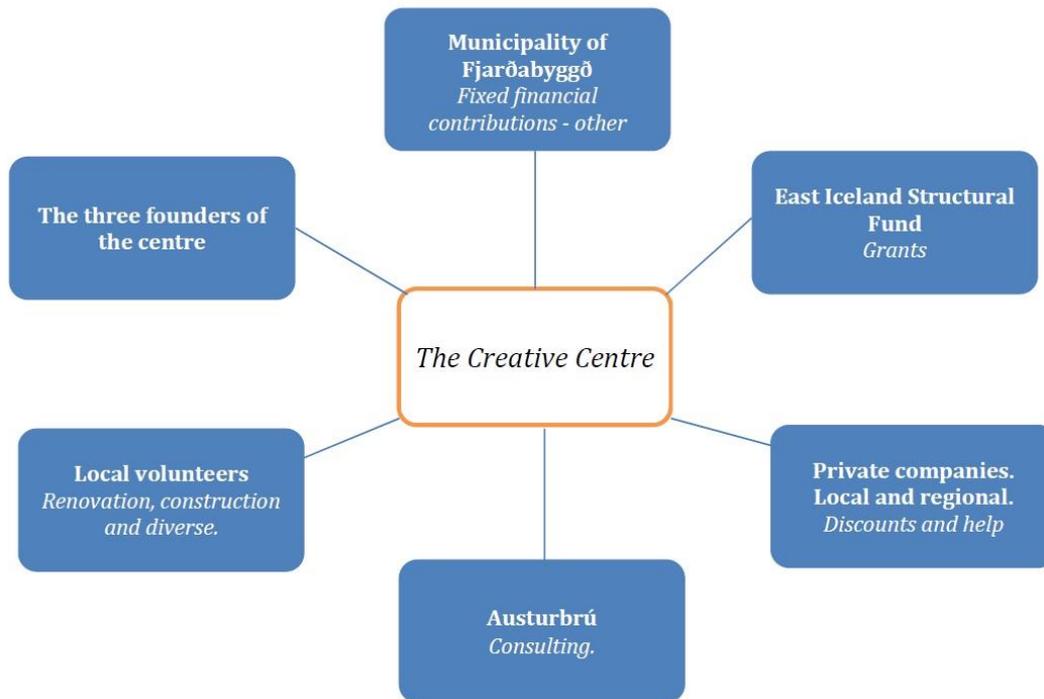


Figure 6.1: All actors involved in the Fish Factory Creative Centre or have contributed to it.

Table 6.1: Overview of some basic facts on the operation of the Fish Factory Creative Centre.

Year established	2011
Target groups	Mainly artists but even fishermen
Opening hours	All day whole year
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fish factory 2800 M2. • 2 separate houses for accomodation. • Artists in a shared studio (95m2). • 1 private studio (19m2). • 1 recording studio • 115 m2 concert hall • Rooms and equipment for working with Wood, metal, textile, ceramic, printing and painting.
Costs and prices	<p>Shared studio: 85.000 ISK pr. month Private studio: 95.000 ISK pr. month Membership: 30.000 SIK pr. year Accommodation included in studio prices.</p>
Operators	Rósa Valtingojer, Una Sigurðardóttir and Vincent Wood

Update after the final report was submitted to ESPON in April 2019:

In April 2019 the Ministry of Communications and Local Government granted the Centre 60 million ISK (425.000 EUR). In an interview on that occasion, Rósa Valtingojer said that this changed the picture totally. This will enable renovations of the roof and other localities and set the running of the centre in to another and more positive context.

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