

Why Creative Ecosystems Matter for Regional Innovation?

Reflections from the REAVES + Pirkanmaa Innovation Portfolio workshop (Sept 2nd 2026, Tampere)

When regional innovation strategies are discussed, culture and creative industries (CCI) are often mentioned as important. That's also the case in the new Tampere region strategy, emphasising the importance of creative economy:

“Creative Economy. *At the heart of the creative economy lies creative, artistic, and cultural expertise. It is distinguished by its strong experiential value and capacity to create meaningful experiences. Intellectual property rights are a key enabler of research, development, and innovation (RDI) within the sector, while also supporting business growth, competitiveness, and scalability.”* (Tampere Region Development Strategy 2026-2029, p. 48)

Yet the question remains: how often CCI they genuinely included in innovation systems, development programmes, business support structures, and public decision-making? This question was at the heart of the REAVES X Pirkanmaa Innovation Portfolio's Workshop (Sept 2nd, 2026), in which participants explored the desired role of creative sectors in regional development and innovation ecosystems. The discussion revealed both opportunities and obstacles: While the significance of creative industries has increasingly been recognised in regional strategies, translating strategic ambitions into practical structures remains a challenge. As an example, small creative businesses can struggle to access support services because funding criteria and business development structures are often designed around traditional growth models.

The fact that CCIs are typically dominated by small, micro, and freelance-based organisations operating through project-based, short-term, and often precarious modes of production, supported by symbolic, cultural, and aesthetic forms of value creation (Comunian, Taylor, & Smith, 2014; Cruz et al., 2019), may hinder collaboration with other types of organisations. However, the workshop participants shared a common belief: the most meaningful innovations emerge when creative industries, businesses, researchers, public organisations, and communities work together. But turning that belief into reality requires new ways of thinking, organising, and collaborating. There is a significant, structural mismatch that complicates collaboration, as CCIs frequently lack the time, resources, and incentives to engage with e.g., with academic partners on universities' terms.

Creativity Is More Than a Sector

One of the strongest messages emerging from the workshop was that creativity should not be viewed only as something that belongs to artists or cultural organisations; Creativity is fundamentally a problem-solving capability. It becomes essential whenever society, organisations, or communities encounter complex challenges. Yet, traditional innovation and business development systems often struggle to recognise creative expertise as a strategic asset. Many participants noted that creative

professionals are frequently invited into development processes too late, after problems have already been defined. Instead, creative thinking should be integrated from the beginning, helping identify opportunities, challenge assumptions, and generate new perspectives.

This requires dismantling long-standing divisions between sectors: Too often, culture, business, research, and public administration operate in separate worlds with different languages, priorities, and funding mechanisms. Innovation ecosystems can become stronger when these boundaries are crossed. And when multi-sectoral collaboration happens, the impact needs to be assessed: as the participants noted that creative sectors often generate significant societal, economic, and wellbeing impacts, but those impacts remain poorly understood or insufficiently measured.

The Missing Ingredient: Coordination and Spaces for Organic Collaboration

Participants repeatedly highlighted a paradox; We know that breakthrough ideas often emerge through unexpected encounters and experimentation. Yet, most public funding mechanisms, organisational structures, and business models focus on measurable outputs and immediate results, though innovation rarely follows such a linear path.

Creative collaboration requires trust, curiosity, and opportunities to explore ideas without constant pressure to produce short-term outcomes. Participants emphasised the importance of creating spaces and conditions for people to meet, exchange perspectives, and test ideas before commercialisation becomes the primary objective. In other words, successful ecosystems need room for serendipity.

CCI ecosystems are deeply embedded in local histories, identities, and socio-cultural contexts, meaning that externally imposed strategies or generic policy models often fail to gain traction (Dent, England, & Comunian, 2023; Pohjola et al., 2023). Cities and public organisations have an important role in creating these conditions by acting as facilitators, conveners, and connectors rather than solely as funders or regulators. A recurring question throughout the workshop was simple but significant: Who is responsible for bringing people together?

The creative sector in Pirkanmaa contains remarkable expertise, yet many actors remain disconnected from each other. Small enterprises, freelancers, associations, researchers, and public organisations often work in parallel rather than collaboratively. Participants identified a need for a coordinating entity capable of supporting ecosystem development over the long term. Such a function could provide guidance on funding opportunities, support for partnership building, EU funding guidance and RDI advisory services

Several participants suggested that the region has produced many reports and analyses about the creative industries, but fewer mechanisms for turning those insights into coordinated action. The challenge is no longer understanding the ecosystem but activating it.

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