

INNOVATION CAMP

A Model for Youth Participation and Community Innovation



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INTRODUCTION

From a Business Challenge to a Model for Youth Community Innovation

Junior Achievement Innovation Camp methodology - The roots of the Innovation Camp in Silistra lie in the Junior Achievement Innovation Camp methodology, which encourages young people to work in teams, explore real business challenges, generate ideas, and develop solutions with mentor support. Over the past ten years, the Innovation Camp in Silistra has evolved from a school-based entrepreneurship challenge into a broader model for youth community innovation.

In 2016, this approach was already being used in Silistra during Global Entrepreneurship Week, in which the NGO ‘Paralel-Silistra’ also participated as a forum organiser. Over time, the Camp was adapted to the local context. It began bringing together students from different schools and municipalities in the Silistra region, with a growing focus on local challenges, community development, and young people’s role in shaping their region’s future.

2017-2018 - A key step came in 2017-2018, when the Camp became part of the project “Entrepreneurship for Youth Labour Mobility”, funded by the INTERREG V-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme. This added a cross-border dimension and connected young people from Silistra and Călărași. In 2018, students from several municipalities worked in mixed teams to develop business ideas based on local culture, traditions, and resources, with support from business mentors. This showed that the Camp could be more than a competition. It became a space where young people from diverse communities meet, exchange perspectives, work in multicultural teams and explore how local resources can become opportunities for development.

2022 - The Camp’s themes have also evolved. Earlier editions focused mainly on entrepreneurship and regional development, while later ones explored cultural heritage, rural development, local traditions, and green entrepreneurship. In 2022, the theme was “Entrepreneurial projects for rural development”, encouraging participants to use local potential as a basis for business initiatives. The programme also included more non-formal learning methods, such as practical exercises, visual materials, and reflection sessions. The Camp has strengthened its links with the local business community from the ‘Rotary Club’, involving their representatives as speakers, mentors, and jury members. This helps young people test their ideas against real experience and better understand the entrepreneurship process.

Another important development has been the involvement of the Silistra Branch of Ruse University “Angel Kanchev”. University teachers have contributed to the educational content, while university students have acted as mentors and facilitators. This benefits both school students, who develop their ideas, and university students, who gain practical experience in teamwork, communication, and mentoring.

2024-2025 - Recent editions show the direction of this development. In 2024, the eighth edition focused on “Green Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Communities”. In 2025, the ninth edition, “Green Entrepreneurship with a Civic Focus”, brought together 24 students in six teams to develop sustainable business ideas with support from university mentors. The initiative now connects entrepreneurship with environmental responsibility, community needs, and civic participation.

Today, the Camp is organised through a partnership model. NGO “Paralel-Silistra” plays a central coordinating role, working with the Regional Department of Education - Silistra, the Municipality of Silistra, the Silistra Branch of Ruse University, local businesses, civil society organisations, and other community stakeholders.

Impact - Over the years, more than 350 young people from the Silistra region have taken part, generating more than 50 ideas for regional development. The Innovation Camp has grown through practice, with each edition adding new elements: regional cooperation, cross-border exchange, business involvement, experiential learning, university participation, mentoring, sustainability, and youth civic action.

The model presented in this document reflects this accumulated experience. It is rooted in the specific context of Silistra but designed to be transferable. The local challenge, partners, participants, and themes may change, but the core principle remains the same: young people learn best when they work together on real problems, develop their own ideas, and see that they can contribute to their community.

Non-governmental organisation ‘Paralel-Silistra’



INNOVATION CAMP

Young Innovators for Sustainable Communities

1. Concept

Today, the Innovation Camp is a challenge-based learning experience for young people. It brings participants together to address real problems affecting their community and use entrepreneurship as a practical response.

The Camp is based on a simple idea:
Young people can become active innovators when they have the opportunity to work on real problems, work with different people, and turn their ideas into practical solutions.

The Innovation Camp in Silistra combines learning with action. It connects entrepreneurship to community needs and links environmental responsibility with economic thinking. It creates opportunities for people from different backgrounds across the Silistra region to learn from one another and work for their community's benefit. Its main innovation, therefore, is not a specific workshop or business tool, but the way these elements come together in a single process.

The Camp combines four main dimensions:

- Green innovation - participants develop solutions that respond to environmental and climate-related challenges.
- Community inclusion and activism - participants consider the needs and perspectives of different groups, involve relevant community stakeholders, and take informed collective action to address identified needs and promote positive change.
- Intercultural communication - participants learn to work with people who may have different cultural, social, educational or professional backgrounds.
- Entrepreneurial learning - participants learn how to turn an idea into a viable business model.

The four dimensions are connected throughout the Camp. They are not separate activities. Participants practise communication while working in diverse teams. They consider environmental and social impact while learning to be entrepreneurs and developing their business model.

This concept has been implemented in the Silistra region for 10 years. As a result, the Innovation Camp is a living laboratory where young people from our diverse district co-create solutions to real community challenges.

2. What Makes the Innovation Camp Innovative?

The Innovation Camp is different from a conventional entrepreneurship workshop because participants learn through action. They work on a real challenge from the beginning. They use the knowledge and tools they receive immediately to develop their solution. The Camp also changes young people's role. They are not only learners or future entrepreneurs. They become co-creators of solutions for their community.

The Camp connects several groups that do not always have opportunities to work together:

- young people and university students;
- educators;
- entrepreneurs and business representatives;
- public institutions;
- civil society organisations and community representatives.

To support the effective participation of these groups, the NGO “Paralel-Silistra” provides a set of learning materials, including toolkits and worksheets. The materials are designed to guide participants and consultants through the different stages of the Camp.



The Camp also uses a broader understanding of entrepreneurial success. A good idea is not judged only by its potential to generate income. It should also respond to a real need and create value for the environment and the community.

The central principles are therefore:

Competition between ideas, collaboration between people, intercultural communication and knowledge exchange.

3. The Starting Point: A Real Community Challenge

The Innovation Camp starts with a challenge that is relevant to the local context.

The original business case focuses on the environmental and social challenges faced by the Silistra region. These include climate change, drought, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, waste management, limited use of renewable energy and insufficient awareness of sustainable practices. The business case also points to demographic decline, youth migration and low levels of civic participation. The challenge therefore connects environmental and community issues.

Participants are asked to consider:

How can young people develop a viable business solution that addresses a local environmental problem and contributes to a more sustainable and active community?

The challenge gives the teams a common starting point. At the same time, it leaves space for different interpretations and solutions.

4. The Innovation Challenge

Each team represents a youth start-up working for the sustainable development of the local community.

The team must develop a business model for a social enterprise that:

- addresses a specific environmental or climate-related problem;
- uses the principles of the circular economy;
- seeks to reduce environmental impact;
- involves members of the local community;
- encourages cooperation between generations where appropriate;
- has a realistic way of generating income;
- includes an element of civic participation or youth initiative.

Possible areas include:

- reuse of waste;
- organic waste management;
- sustainable agriculture;
- circular products;
- biodiversity;
- responsible consumption;
- environmental education;
- community initiatives;
- low-impact technologies.

The teams are also encouraged to use local resources, knowledge, and traditions when they add value to their ideas.

5. The Four Learning Dimensions

5.1 Green Innovation

The environmental dimension gives the community challenge a clear purpose. Participants are encouraged to look at local environmental problems as opportunities for innovation.

For example, waste can become a resource. Organic waste can be used for composting or other forms of recovery. Local knowledge and resources can be used to develop new products or services.

The Camp therefore asks participants to consider two questions at the same time:

Can this idea work as a business?

and

Can this idea contribute to a more sustainable community?

This connection between business value and environmental value is essential to the Camp.

5.2 Community Inclusion and Activism

Community inclusion is not an additional activity at the end of the Camp. It is part of the challenge itself. Participants are asked to consider who is affected by the problem and who should be involved in solving it.

They need to think about different groups in the community, different needs and experiences, access to opportunities, the role of local organisations, cooperation between generations, and possible partnerships with businesses and institutions. The Camp gives young people an opportunity to move from discussing community problems to working with others to develop possible responses.

In this sense, inclusion means more than ensuring that different people are present. It means activating young people to create opportunities for different perspectives to influence the solution.

5.3 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is developed through the way participants work together. The Camp brings people with different experiences and perspectives into the same teams. Depending on the Camp's composition, these differences may be cultural, national, social, educational, generational, or professional.

Participants need to listen to different perspectives, explain their ideas clearly, ask questions rather than make assumptions, negotiate different opinions, manage disagreement, reach decisions together, adapt their communication to different people and recognise the value of different experiences.

Intercultural communication is therefore not treated only as a theoretical subject. It becomes part of the learning process. When participants have different cultural or national backgrounds, the Camp creates a direct opportunity to develop intercultural competence. When the Camp is organised in a local setting, cultural, generational, educational and professional diversity can also provide a basis for this learning.

The important principle is that diversity becomes a resource for innovation. Different perspectives can help teams see a problem from different angles and develop solutions that they might not have reached individually.

5.4 Entrepreneurial Learning

Participants learn about entrepreneurship by developing an idea from the initial problem to a business proposal. They learn how to identify a need, define a problem, generate ideas, identify customers and beneficiaries, define a value proposition, develop a business model, identify resources and partners, consider costs and revenues, and present and defend an idea.

The Business Model Canvas provides a practical framework for this process. Participants work with the nine elements of the model:

1. Value Proposition
2. Customer Segments
3. Channels
4. Customer Relationships
5. Revenue Streams
6. Key Resources
7. Key Activities
8. Key Partners
9. Cost Structure

The purpose is not to turn participants into professional entrepreneurs in two days. The purpose is to give them the knowledge and confidence to understand how an idea can become a viable initiative and how they can become positive changemakers.



6. Methodology: Learning by Doing

The Innovation Camp follows an Innovation Journey. It takes participants from a real community challenge to a possible solution. The journey has several connected stages. At each stage, participants learn something new and immediately apply it in their teamwork.

1. UNDERSTAND - Start with the challenge

The process starts with a real problem. Participants first try to understand the problem, who it affects, and why it matters. They listen to different perspectives and consider the local context. This stage is important because participants do not start with a business idea. They start with a community need.

2. CREATE - Explore possible solutions

Once the problem is understood, teams begin to generate ideas. Creative thinking methods help participants look at the problem from different angles and consider different possible responses. The aim is not to find the perfect idea immediately, but to explore possibilities and select an idea with potential.



3. BUILD - Turn the idea into a model

The selected idea is then developed further. Participants define the people who may use or benefit from the solution and consider the value it can provide. They use the Business Model Canvas to examine how the idea can work as a business. They consider resources, activities, partners, costs and possible sources of income. At the same time, they consider the idea's environmental and community value.

4. TEST - Learn from others

Teams discuss their ideas with mentors, business representatives and other stakeholders. They receive questions and feedback. This stage helps participants see

what works and what needs to be changed. They may return to an earlier stage, revise their idea or change part of their business model. This is an important part of learning by doing. Participants learn not only from success but also from questions, mistakes and feedback.

5. PRESENT - Share and defend the solution

When the idea is ready, the team prepares its final pitch. Participants learn how to communicate their solution clearly and how to explain its value. They present the problem, the solution, the business model and the expected environmental and community impact. They also answer questions from the jury.

6. REFLECT AND MOVE FORWARD - Look beyond the Camp

The final stage is not only about choosing the winning team. Participants consider what they have learned and what could happen with their idea after the Camp. Some ideas may need further development. Others may lead to a youth initiative, a partnership or a future business project.

The Innovation Journey is therefore not a closed process. Feedback can take participants back to an earlier stage. A new understanding of the problem can lead to a new idea. A new idea can lead to a different business model.

The process can be understood as:



The main principle is simple: participants learn by working on a real problem, and they improve their ideas by learning from others. This is what makes the Innovation Camp an experiential learning process. Participants learn from trainers and mentors, but they also learn from their team members, other stakeholders, and the process itself.

7. Core Components of the Two-Day Innovation Camp

First Day

7.1 Opening and Challenge

The Camp begins with an introduction to the theme, the challenge, the methodology and the expected results. Participants meet the trainers, mentors and other participants. The teams are then formed. The purpose of this stage is to create a common starting point and ensure all participants understand the task.

7.2 Creative Thinking Workshop

The first workshop introduces creative thinking methods. Participants learn how to identify problems, analyse needs, generate ideas, challenge existing assumptions, look for new possibilities and select promising ideas. The original programme includes a dedicated creative thinking workshop as one of three rotating workshops.

7.3 Business Model Canvas Workshop

The second workshop focuses on the Business Model Canvas. Participants learn how to move from an interesting idea to a structured business model. They consider who will use the solution, what value it provides, how it will reach users, what resources are needed, who the partners are, what activities are required, what the costs will be and how income will be generated.



7.4 Marketing and Pitching Workshop

Participants learn how to communicate their idea. They explore basic marketing principles and learn how to identify and address their target audience. They also learn how to prepare a pitch deck and present their idea clearly and convincingly.

That's how, on the first day of the Camp, participants enjoy practical workshops on creative thinking, the Business Model Canvas, marketing, and pitching. The purpose is to give them tools they can use immediately in their teamwork. The workshops are therefore not separate from the challenge. Young people move from learning to creating and apply what they learn directly. They discuss the problem, identify possible needs and develop ideas. They consider who could benefit from their solution and what resources and partners they may need. They also examine whether their idea can work as a business and whether it can create value for the community and the environment.



7.5 Business and Community Dialogue

The Camp includes interaction with representatives of the business community and other stakeholders.

Questions and Answers Session: An important part of the Camp is the interaction with local entrepreneurs and business representatives. Participants can discuss their ideas with real-life businesses, hear about their experience, and receive feedback. This allows the young people to hear about real entrepreneurial experience and discuss their initial ideas. The session can include examples of existing businesses, discussion of market needs, Q&A, feedback on participants' ideas, and discussion of possible partnerships. This element connects the learning environment with the real world.



Facilitators: University students studying pedagogy also participate in the Innovation Camp. They support young participants in forming teams, encourage effective intercultural communication and facilitate the teams throughout the different stages of the Camp. Through this experience, the future educators practice team-building, communication, facilitation and negotiation skills while supporting young people in developing joint solutions to community challenges. As a final task, they prepare a professional digital profile of the team members and present it at the end of the Camp.

Students' roles:



Second Day

The second day focuses on **developing, testing and presenting the teams' solutions**. Participants work intensively in the Team Innovation Lab with the support of mentors, further developing their business models, analysing the potential impact of their ideas and preparing their final pitches. After completing and rehearsing their presentations, teams present their solutions to a jury, respond to questions and receive feedback. The day concludes with the jury's deliberation, announcement of the results, awards and certificates, followed by a group photo and the official closing of the Innovation Camp.



7.6 Team Innovation Lab

After the workshops, teams work on their solutions. Each team develops a proposal that answers several basic questions.

What is the problem?

What environmental or community problem are we addressing?

What is the solution?

What product, service or initiative are we proposing?

Who is it for?

Who are the users, customers and beneficiaries?

What is the value?

What benefit does the solution provide?

How will it work as a business?

How will the initiative generate income and cover its costs?

What is its environmental value?

How will the solution contribute to sustainability?

What is its community value?

Who will benefit and how can people participate?

Who do we need?

Which organisations, businesses, institutions or community groups could become partners?

How will we start?

What are the first practical steps?

7.7. Mentoring

During the second day, the Business consultants/ mentors work with the teams. They help participants test the feasibility of their ideas, identify weaknesses, improve their business models, clarify their target groups, examine costs and revenues, identify potential partners, strengthen the environmental and community dimensions and prepare the final pitch.

Mentoring is important because it gives participants feedback from people with practical experience. Usually, these Business consultants/mentors are local businesspeople; they might be representatives of public institutions or NGOs.

7.8. The Final Pitch

At the end of the Camp, each team presents its solution to a jury and explain:

1. The problem.
2. The proposed solution.
3. The innovation behind the solution.
4. The target users or beneficiaries.
5. The value proposition.
6. The business model.
7. The environmental impact.
8. The community impact.
9. The implementation plan.
10. The support or partnerships needed.



The pitch is not only a competition exercise. It is the final demonstration of what the team has learned. Participants must explain their idea, respond to questions, and defend their decisions within a set time slot.

7.9. Evaluation

The jury evaluates the solutions according to transparent criteria. The evaluation should recognise that a successful solution needs to combine different forms of value.

Criterion	Weight
Innovation and originality	15%
Relevance to the local challenge	15%
Environmental sustainability	15%
Community and social impact	15%
Business model and financial viability	15%
Feasibility	10%
Civic and youth participation	5%
Quality of the pitch	10%
Total	100%

A strong idea should therefore demonstrate:
economic value + environmental value + community value + civic value.

The competition is an important part of the final stage, but it does not define the whole Camp. During the learning process, cooperation, exchange and mutual learning remain the main principles.



7.10. Awarding ceremony

The **awarding ceremony** at the end of the Innovation Camp also provides an opportunity for local governments to recognise and celebrate the achievements of their young people. Representatives of local institutions award **different prizes and certificates** to participants and winning teams, recognising their creativity, initiative, and contribution to addressing community challenges. This public recognition can strengthen young people's sense of belonging and show that the local community values their ideas and efforts. It also creates a direct connection between **young people, local institutions and the wider community**, encouraging continued youth participation in local development.



8. Expected Learning Outcomes

By the end of the Innovation Camp, participants should better understand the environmental and community challenges affecting their local context. They should be able to explain the basic principles of green and social entrepreneurship and understand the main elements of a business model. They should also recognise why community participation is important when developing solutions to local problems.

Participants should be able to turn a real challenge into an idea for a possible solution. They should learn how to define a value proposition, develop a basic business model and identify the resources and partners that may be needed. They should also be able to think through the first practical steps to put their idea into action.

The Camp should improve participants' ability to communicate their ideas. They should become more confident in presenting and defending a proposal and in explaining their decisions. At the same time, they should learn to listen to different perspectives, negotiate within a team and adapt their communication to different people and situations.

Participants should also develop their ability to work with others. They should experience how people with different backgrounds and viewpoints can contribute to the same task. They should learn to manage disagreement constructively, make decisions together, and build relationships with people outside their immediate learning environment.

Finally, participants should be able to connect entrepreneurial ideas with real community needs. They should learn to consider the environmental and social impact of a proposed solution and recognise that a successful idea can create more than economic value. It can also create value for the community and the environment. The Camp should encourage participants to think about what they can do next and how they could develop their idea further after the Camp.



9. Expected Impact

Impact on Young People

The Innovation Camp can help young people develop entrepreneurial skills and gain confidence in presenting their ideas. It can improve their ability to work in teams and solve problems. It can also increase their awareness of local environmental challenges and give them direct experience of working with businesses and other stakeholders. Most importantly, the Camp can help young people understand that their ideas can contribute to their community

Impact on the Community

The Camp can generate new ideas for local challenges and strengthen cooperation between young people and local stakeholders. It can increase awareness of green entrepreneurship and create opportunities for youth-led initiatives. It can also encourage dialogue between people with different experiences and perspectives. In this way, the Camp can strengthen connections between young people and the communities in which they live.

Impact on the Local Innovation Ecosystem

The Camp creates a space where young people, businesses, community members and educators can meet and work around a common challenge.



The value of this cooperation can go beyond the two-day event. New contacts can lead to partnerships. Ideas can be developed further. Students can continue working on their projects. Businesses and institutions can support promising initiatives.

The Camp can therefore become a meeting point between education, entrepreneurship and community development.