

Two Countries – One Destination Interreg Nord project

Summary 17.11.2022

Noora Barria, Business Tornio

Project goals and expected result

The funding for the Interreg Nord-project, Two Countries – One Destination (TCOD) was finalised in February 2020 and the project period was from January 2020 until September 2022. There were several goals in the project and most of the goals were achieved by following the work packages that were defined in the project plan. The great part of the project was highly affected by Covid-19 and its' restrictions. Since the project funding was applied before the pandemic, the work packages and the planned actions had to be re-evaluated. The border between Finland and Sweden was closed for over one and a half years during the pandemic. Clearly, this affected the cross-border cooperation and development of cross-border products and packages. There were also several personnel changes in both project team and steering group. The changes clearly influenced in the progress of the project.

The desired result of the project was defined as creating a common operating model and organization for tourism between the cities of Tornio and Haparanda.

Figure 1. The goals of Two Countries – One Destination.

Creating a common operating model and its challenges

Throughout the project we strove to promote things in order to achieve the expected result. We arranged workshops with the entrepreneurs and city representatives, discussing the needs and expectations for the collaborative development and marketing model in HaparandaTornio. The results from the workshops were that we definitely need to do something together, but all actors had a bit of a different perspective on this topic. Different actors do have a different point of view on how the common model will or will not be achieved. The cities differ in their opinion on how the collaboration should work. Different companies and actors on the tourism field also have different needs and goals.

The unifying factor in the formation of cooperation is trust. The entrepreneurs need to trust in the city representatives and the officials on the other side of the border. The officials also need to trust each other across the border. We noticed that the politeness and a fear of conflict during the project was one of the main obstacles for developing cross-border cooperation. You must be able to hold even difficult discussions in order to create a common understanding of issues and to be able to decide on common lines of action and goals.

The different sides of the border have a different situation in terms of tourism marketing and development. On the Swedish side, there is a functional regional organization, DMO, that focuses on international marketing, PR and tour operator cooperation. The participating companies, and for that reason also the Haparanda municipality, are satisfied with the organization's operation. Thus, different things are expected from HaparandaTornio's cooperation model than on the Finnish side, where trust in the current regional organization is not the best possible and both companies and the municipality need to focus on their own cross-border product packaging and package marketing to an international network of tour operators. Swedish DMO has had projects where they have been developing the collaboration with the tour operators etc. What is lacking is the sales engine, and that is where the focus has been in Finland. Finnish DMO operates also as a DMC, selling packages and providing web shop to both consumers and tour operators.

On Finnish side the marketing has not been well executed and the focus in the projects has been in digitalization. DMO's across the border work in different ways and have not been communicating with each other before the TCOD project. Swedish side has not seen the border and Finnish side as a unique selling point, but after the mutual meetings is now eager to collaborate on DMO and destination level. The future for regional DMO in Finland is open and that is why the cities need to make sure the tourism development work, marketing and networking continues, and the collaboration between the cities and Swedish DMO, Heart of Lapland must continue.

A finding in the project is that many of the area's businesses need higher support on personal level, which means a workshop is not always the right solution for development. As our organisations in Haparanda and Tornio are of different structures, this becomes a challenge since the organisations offer different solutions. As mentioned, on the Swedish side, there is a strong DMO which supports the tourism business in development of both products-, services and their business models. There is only a few of these companies, that are export ready, but they are really important for both HaparandaTornio and Heart of Lapland area and therefore are part of all marketing and development work. In Finland the support for marketing, product development etc. will be offered after the project by the city's business development company BusinessTornio. Finding a way for these two different structures to work together in an efficient way for developing tourism in HaparandaTornio area is the prerequisite to cross-border cooperation and growth. There are also businesses on both sides of the border that offer crucial services, e.g. cruises, in the destination but are not ready to invest on the development, marketing and sales work for international market. BusinessTornio is willing to offer help in in productization and marketing for a service fee.

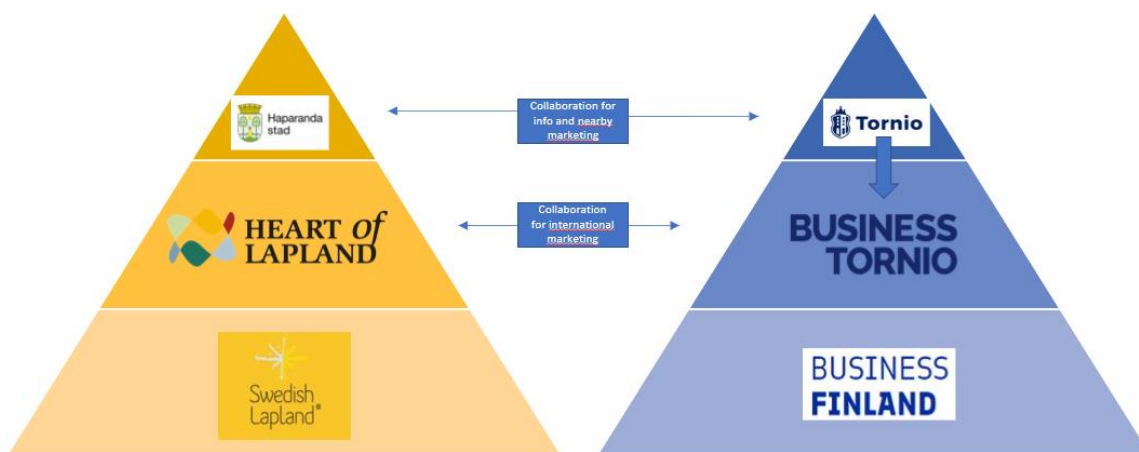


Figure 2. Optional structural model for tourism development and marketing.

Benchmarking the twin-cities in Europe

In order to create interesting products and develop the business model for the twin-city of HaparandaTornio, we did research and benchmarking on other European twin-cities. We investigated more than 20 twin-cities and took a closer look on 4 destinations where they have reached a more collaborative way of working together on mutual tourism development and marketing. We found out that even the focus groups and marketing strategies can mostly collide, there never seems to be a mutual organization. Some of the marketing and development actions are done together, but the others still separately. The reason for this seems to be the same as in HaparandaTornio. There is a different rhythm of election periods, decision-making and budgeting on different sides of the border. The cities must listen to and serve taxpayers, and although tourism is generally seen as an important industry that brings vitality to the locals, they are not prepared to budget a lot of money for it, especially in a difficult economic situation.

We also visited the Bodensee tourism office during our benchmarking trip to Germany and Switzerland. The local DMO represents four countries around the Bodensee area and have succeeded in establishing the common organization and annual funding of half a million euros for marketing. They still struggle with the same issues as other destinations, and a large part of the time is spent on networking, lobbying and explaining the existence of the company to the city representatives.

All differences mentioned before complicates the joint development work and the decision-making process for HaparandaTornio. These differences must be taken into account both in the projects and in other collaborative development work between the cities and countries. The way to communicate, the hierarchy and the processes for doing things are different and affect every day work. Understanding and learning from another is important in the border area. Communication must be open and the decisions given time. A clear process must be created for decision-making, which must take into account the way both sides operate. As a result of the project, Business Tornio has created the position of tourism Marketing Manager in its service agreement with the City of Tornio, whose task, together with companies in the area and in cooperation with wider regional organizations, is to continue making HaparandaTornio known as a unique destination. Business Tornio will have a budget for marketing actions, and will sign annual service contracts with companies in the region, enabling planned and systematic execution of regional marketing to both tour operators and consumers in nearby areas. The international media and tour operator cooperation should then be done in collaboration with other destinations and DMO's. Monthly meetings with Heart of Lapland has been agreed on and Marketing Manager will also be in close collaboration and communication with a tourism representative from Haparanda. Regarding the tactical marketing and communication via HaparandaTornio website, social media, events and communication, Business Tornio needs to agree with Haparanda municipality. There could be an annual contract signed between the City of Tornio and Haparanda, and Business Tornio will manage the tasks accordingly.

Language barrier within the cross-border cooperation is still a relevant issue. On that account, the project tried different solutions for solving this barrier. Some workshops were held in English, other both in Swedish and Finnish either in one session with interpretation, or two separate language sessions. The result is that to get more entrepreneurs involved, we need to use several languages. Those companies who are already in the international business and understand the value of it, can operate in English. That saves time, but sometimes leaves room also for misunderstandings.

Cross-border products and marketing

During the project, a marketing reference group consisting of entrepreneurs in the area was established. In this group we created the marketing strategy and plan for HaparandaTornio. We decided on the target groups, that was important and at the same time difficult due to the current Covid-19 situation. Predictability was almost impossible and situations changed very quickly. Following the plan the Marketing Manager participated on tourism marketing events, arranged virtual and offline familiarization tours and created marketing material during the project. The marketing group should continue its operation and meet approximately 3 times a year, and the members could be the partners that sign the service contracts with Business Tornio.

The joint destination image and profile has also been created and that concept has been now marketed for the international tour operators and for all website and social media visitors. The visual image is fresh and different and we have agreed on continuing to use it in HaparandaTornio tourism marketing and communication. The two-times concept has also been tested for both international and national market in Sweden and Finland. The concept works well in the international market, especially in the Asian market where border-crossing is not something that can be easily experienced. The domestic market needs a bit more development, but we see a good potential there also. We are not so well known but the location makes us unique for also Finns and Swedes.

The pandemic affected highly on the project and especially on the cross-border development since the border between Haparanda and Tornio was closed for almost two years. During that time our entrepreneurs were focused on surviving the difficult time without travellers, which meant even less time for discussions and workshops on development. Many of our companies had to lay off staff due to the circumstances.

We organized workshops and trainings mainly online, but also offline, to help companies in their productization work and pricing process. This process was supposed to enable the internalization of the companies. HaparandaTornio as a destination needs more export-ready companies. Sustainability is also a big part of this process and we surely hope and believe that constant work with these topics will finally make a difference. In the area we have many small part-time tourism entrepreneurs. The tourism is more as a hobby than a career to some. Since the entrepreneurs do not work fulltime in their own tourism business, the focus is mainly on consumer sales and actual hands-on assignments such as guided tours. That results in difficulties for planning ahead and creating products and packages for sale. Cross-marketing and tour operator collaboration becomes too challenging. The small companies often offer services that represent local

authenticity which is a huge trend. These companies with their services bring the uniqueness and local touch to the experiences that the tour operators want to sell.

Companies' passive sales work and unprofessional actions are still visible to tour operators, making it difficult to win their trust and difficult to implement cooperation. If the businesses do not have time to solve this issue, there are big challenges to sell the area as a destination.

We still decided on showing also these local small-scale businesses and their services to the tour operators and added the products and companies in HaparandaTornio marketing manual. As a result, the tour operators found these services really interesting and unique and they would be willing to put them on sale. The development work needs to continue after the project. HaparandaTornio is a destination with hidden gems, there are now tourism hubs, places where to cue to get service. This is the destination where you can experience two countries at once and also enjoy a truly authentic holiday.

The tour operator collaboration led to HaparandaTornio being an interesting choice as a destination instead of a destination unknown. The marketing manager collected approximately 300 connections and met more than 150 tour operators during the project. There are already many new products on sale and some of the small companies in the destination have already created new marketing material and product cards in English.

Media results

Media cooperation proved to be very difficult during the project due to the Covid-19 limitations and for that reason the plans had to be renewed often. We were still able to organize both a domestic and an international media group visit, and we collaborated with influencers. At the time of the restrictions, we ended up with our partner making newsletters for international media. This was implemented in Italy and Spain and especially in Italy produced a good result. Various articles have been published in several magazines and in tourism publications online. Similar cooperation should also be considered in the future, both with the media and tour operators. We also collaborated with an influencer and a reporter from Germany that resulted in ads and articles in German tourism magazine and that supports the marketing with German tour operators.

In our opinion, influencer cooperation is also worthwhile in the domestic market. With it, we make the destination better known and more attractive to tourists and visitors. Our experiment with local ambassadors was also great and praised. We received content for both social media and online pages for a year without a break, and this is definitely worth considering in the future as well. It can be achieved with relatively small resources, but it frees up a lot of time for other marketing and development work.

Tourism Info

During the project the tourism info operation as a physical visitor's office was terminated. Analysing the destination and needs from the visitors we came into a conclusion that there is a need for a tourist info point, at least a seasonal one, and the area map. There still are visitors who like to stop in the info point to ask for the map and some questions face to face. Because our info point is not a sales channel there is no need for all-year-round active tourism info.

People mostly find the information online and that is why the website needs to be attractive and informative at the same time, providing the info that the visitor is looking for and charming the website visitor at the same time. Because the resources are limited the focus needs to be in good content that does not need to be updated often. We opened an info point in Tornio Walley Museum and Haparanda library during the project, but we also tried the outsourced info service for 6 months during the project. Both options worked fine, now the cities need to decide on the service level that is needed for HaparandaTornio and the resources that they are willing to use for it.

Info phones and email operate as info channels for mainly Swedish and Finnish visitors planning on crossing the border for shopping or visiting for vocational or family purposes. There is a separate phone for Swedish and Finnish and the phones are also in hands of two different persons. From Business Tornio's perspective there is no need for a separate Finnish info service phone. It would be best to operate all communications from the same office: phone, email, website, social media. In this way the communication, feedback etc. could be more efficiently handled. There should be an official agreement between Business Tornio and Haparanda Municipality on how this operation should be implemented. Tour operator marketing will be handled by BusinessTornio, but in collaboration as mentioned before. Networking, meetings, development workshops etc. should also be coordinated together.

Main attractions in HaparandaTornio and the infrastructural development on the area City center

During the previous Masterplan project, the main attractions and development areas in HaparandaTornio were decided. We have been working with the development plans for these selected areas in TCOD project. Now we have a clear plan for the city centre area for the tourism boulevard. The budget and plan have been presented to the cities' technical department and in order to continue the work, the plan should be taken to the municipality council in Haparanda and Tornio. More united and attractive path following the coast line of Torne River would be beneficial for both locals and tourists. It could attract more people walking and biking along the river, crossing the border and potentially using the services along the way better. We also made a pilot in digitalization of the information along the way and the stories to support the digital route for the users have been written during TCOD project. The tourism boulevard definitely would be a showcase of this twin-city and its collaboration, great continuation for the pedestrian bridge and the biking and minigolf area on the border. Having a well-designed route would be good for the city image.

Kukkola village

Kukkola area definitely is the highlight in HaparandaTornio. There is a need for the area development and new services in Kukkola. We made a pre-study and the plan for Kukkola bridge. It would be a bridge for pedestrians and bikers. This would be great for people to experience both sides of the Kukkola Village and would motivate more entrepreneurs to develop the services in the area. The bridge would open new ways for cross-border tourism. Kukkola dipnet fishing is also looking for the immaterial UNESCO Heritage and if it receives it, there is a need for the development and in a sustainable way. HaparandaTornio will be on a map in a new way after that, and there will be more visitors. The area has to be developed in the way that pays attention to the

sustainability and accessibility for the area. The bridge would literally strengthen the collaboration even more across the border.

Cape east - Toranda

The eastern most point of Sweden is located near the Cape East Hotel & Spa. It is an interesting place at the moment for being the film location for Selvitytjät Pohjola and Robinson Expedition in 2020. Cape east has become a well-known hotel&spa and here is a lot of visitors from Sweden. Toranda event centre located on the opposite side of the river and border. There has been a plan to have a cable car service from Finland to Sweden above the Torne River from Toranda to Cape east. We were involved the development work between these two companies when creating the picture of the plan to attract future investments. We also collaborated with a student who investigated the capacity in HaparandaTornio for bigger events. We see that this border crossing cable car would attract also people from different parts of the world. The tour operators would definitely include HaparandaTornio in their packages more with the Kukkola bridge and the cable car connection. This would also create more interest in event organisers, which would be great for HaparandaTornio.

Routes in archipelago and on land

We also made a plan for route development both on land and water during the project. There is now a ready set of routes planned for kayaking and canoeing and also several routes on land in the city areas but mostly along the river and in the country side in HaparandaTornio. The Struve meridian points have been taken into consideration when planning the routes and surely the border crossing matter. The development of tourist routes is an essential part of tourism development work. The increase in year-round tourism and overnights requires that tourists have a versatile guided and self-directed program at the destination. Among other things, year-round cycling has become wildly popular in recent years. In order for HaparandaTornio to attract cyclists to the area, the routes must be in good condition. In addition to cycling, the routes must serve e.g. snowmobilers, hikers, skiers, and boaters and paddlers. Companies offering activities must be taken into account and opportunities created in collaboration with them to produce versatile services. In addition to snowmobiling and cycling, the collecting culture and general enjoyment of nature are also trending among the tourists today.

In route development work we also wanted to concentrate on the future aspect. The plan cannot be implemented in the next upcoming years, so we need to be able to see many years ahead. The various sports that the arctic water front enables in both summer and winter came up in the plan. Competitions and events in different sports would also bring more visibility to the area and, with that, the opportunity to grow and develop. The area's rivers and the sea with its archipelago create opportunities that the rest of Lapland cannot offer. There are also two national parks in the Bothnian Bay and HaparandaTornio, which gives the destination its own added value.

The routes serve both domestic tourists and international guests. At the same time, they increase the attraction of the city and bring more content to the local resident's free time. With the development of the routes, the area also offers opportunities for new business and investments.