





**COLOFON**

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Europees Landbouwfonds  
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Europa investeert  
in zijn platteland



provincie  
Oost-Vlaanderen



## FOREWORD #1

“How can we make the local community a flourishing one through tourism?” That was the central question of the transnational project we realised together with partners from Romania and Scotland.

This project was based on a theoretical concept developed by Anna Pollock. Her ideas made the journey of this project possible. We have started to shape a future that is not just about attracting more and more visitors to a region or place. We need to look further and think about why we want to invest in tourism: what do we want to achieve in the long term?

Four years ago, at the same time that this project was launched, Tourism Flanders started shaping a new vision on tourism under the title Travel to Tomorrow. The Flemish region Meetjesland, between Ghent and Bruges, was a pilot region to start experimenting with this new philosophy. And experimentation is exactly what we did in this project.

We explicitly opted for a co-creative approach whereby we started thinking together with the local community about what added value tourism can bring to their own community, to their own neighbourhood. What can we do together so that tourism can contribute to the prosperity of the destination and the prosperity of the community?

During this project period, we have worked by trial and error. Constantly making adjustments, talking about it a lot, continuing to experiment. During the project period, we exchanged this very approach with the partners from Romania and Scotland. We also learned a lot from their approach and their specific context in both regions during the exchange visits.

How we did this and what we learned from it can be read further in this travel report. I wish you much inspiration.

### **Leentje Grillaert**

*Deputy of tourism, province of East-Flanders*

*Chair local action group LEADER Meetjesland*

*Chair Tourism East-Flanders*





## FOREWORD #2

As chair of Tourism Meetjesland I am glad to have been able to experience this period of European encounter and cooperation. I see a future for tourism. In Europe and in our region. It will be less and less a tourism of seeking quantity and more and more a tourism of creating quality. I think that in our region we certainly possess that quality and we want to develop it further.

Throughout the drafting of our Future Plan, we have constantly kept in mind the lime tree of the place and the placeholders, and I am therefore very pleased that our Future Plan is permeated by the idea that residents, visitors and entrepreneurs should benefit from regional tourism. That the place must improve. That the places in our region must improve. So good that visitors enjoy coming here and residents enjoy living there, and that the local economy benefits.

Tourism Meetjesland considers the municipalities as its first partner, and with Flourishing Destinations we had the opportunity to work very intensively with the municipalities of Assenede and Sint-Laureins. In retrospect, that turned out to be a gift from heaven. We are convinced that being close to the municipalities has become even more important. In the meantime, it has already led to fairly intense processes with the municipalities of Lievegem, Eeklo, now Aalter and soon also Maldegem. We are preparing an intense cooperation with the municipalities in the 'Stadsrand' (the urban periphery of Ghent, capital city of our province, and its harbour): the municipalities Evergem, Zelzate and Lievegem. We want to extend this way of working to every corner of our working area.

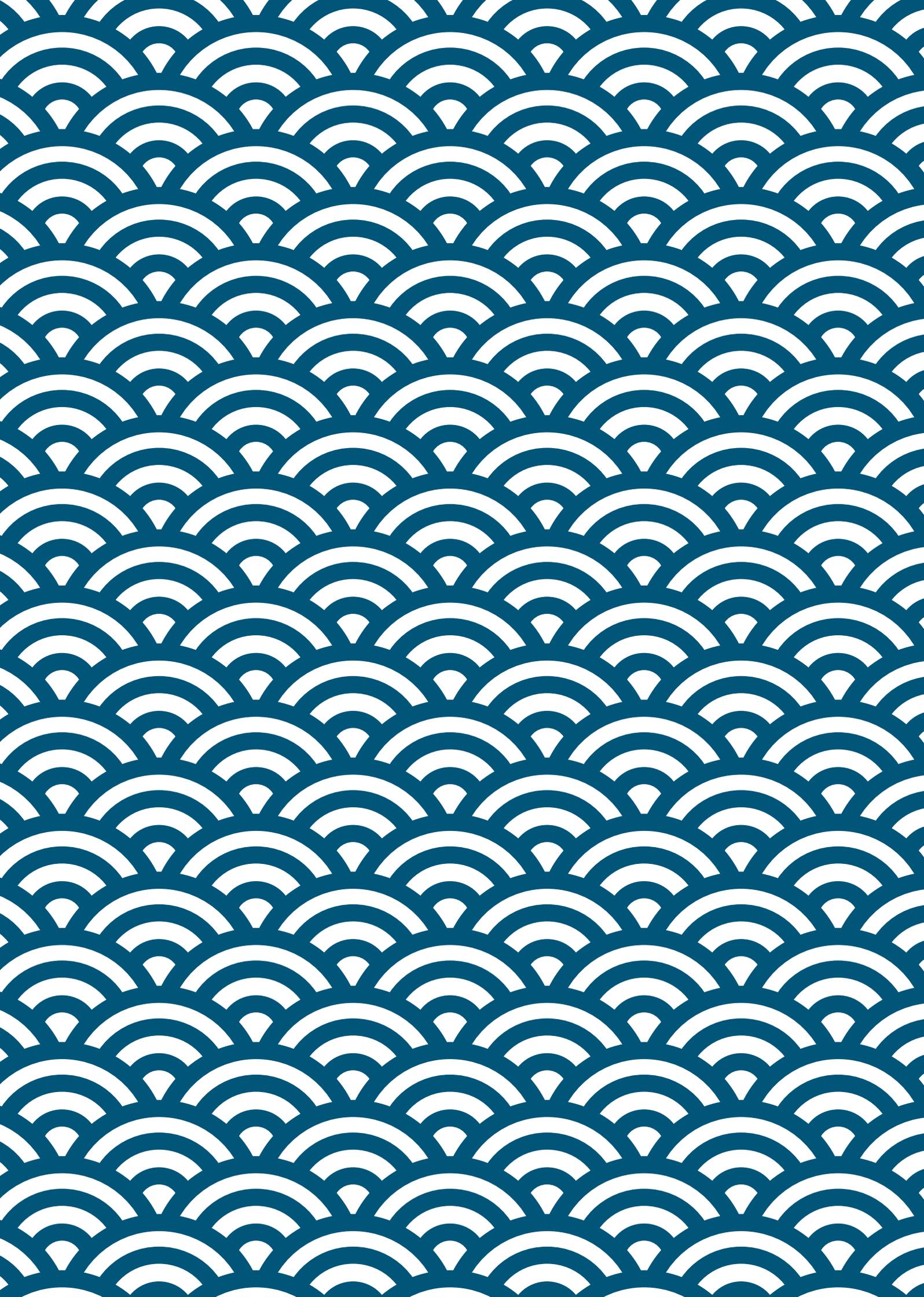
We also made progress in the area of sector cooperation. Cooperation becomes co-creation. We do our marketing with the sector and in service of the sector. Together, we promote the region. Together. The magic word.

We have learned that an appreciative approach and a positive attitude produce more than thinking in terms of solving problems. Co-creation also means: listening and not trying to convince. Growing dynamics should not be disturbed but watered like a flower. With Tourism Meetjesland we want to become even better at co-creation and that is why we let ourselves be guided by people who are skilled in the appreciative approach. In this way, through trial and error, we want to improve our place, improve the Meetjesland as a tourist destination.

I would like to thank all the enthusiastic people there and especially our partners from Romania and Scotland. It was a beautiful trip. But the journey does not stop here. We will continue full of energy to make this transition in tourism a reality, each in our own part of the Meetjesland and our own part of the world.

**Vincent Laroy**

*Chair Tourism Meetjesland*



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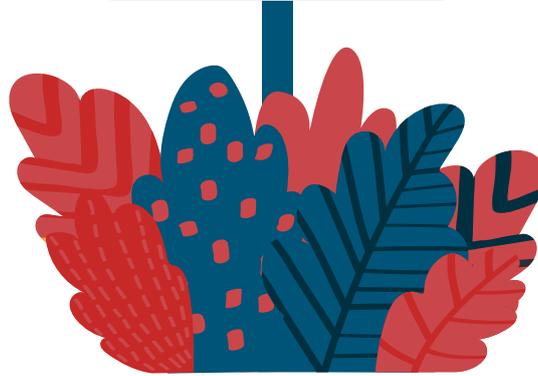
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# INTRODUCTION

*Tomorrow's tourism will be rooted in local communities. In neighbourhoods, villages and cities that are thriving. Flourishing places. Therefore places like that are eager to welcome visitors. A flourishing destination is firmly connected to its place, where people work together, visitors can come home and residents and entrepreneurs cherish and pass on their love for the place..*

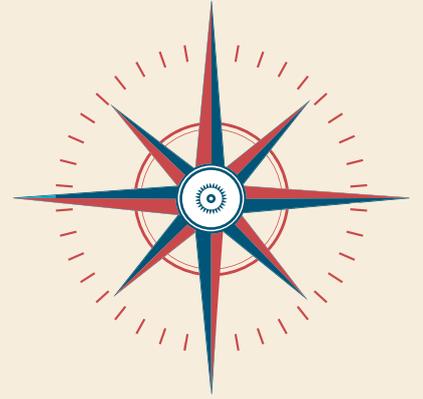
With this vision of the future in mind, Tourism Flanders launched the Travel to Tomorrow project in 2017. Tourism Meetjesland hears the call and joins the adventure. As determined pioneers they are among the first to put on their backpacks. For a voyage of discovery into a new, still unknown world. Enthusiasm, inspiration and the desire to discover new things are the driving force behind their search for the right ingredients for a new and different future for tourism.

An adventure in which the roads are sometimes straight, sometimes winding, always wondrous. With a clear destination, where the travellers lay the path to it while walking. With unexpected challenges along the way. With inspiring guides who help cross the thresholds. With curious fellow travellers who join in along the way and help determine the direction. With a sense of beauty and taste on the path. With wonderful surprises on the chosen roads.

When the travellers return to the old world after five years of adventure, they have changed forever. They have left traces behind, and bring back new memories. Gifts that will also transform the old world.

The story of this adventure, of the people who travelled with them and of the places, is told in this booklet. We make visible what works, for this community and in this context.

We share our gifts to inspire you, the curious reader, as you too set out on your journey.



# Familiar old world



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# Unexplored new world



# SIGNPOSTS FOR THE READER

Looking for ways to tell our story, we came up with Hero's Journey. We constructed our travelogue according to **the journey of a hero**. According to this model, the heroes (in this case Travellers for Tomorrow) leave the comfort and security of everyday life to overcome obstacles.

The Hero's Journey resonates because it reminds us of our higher potential. The Hero's Journey helps us to understand that real, meaningful transformation is possible.

The metaphor of "the journey" makes it clear that we regularly have to leave our familiar surroundings. We have let go of certainties in order to tap into something new. In ourselves or for our organisation. In order to initiate growth and to unlock our true potential, we need to cross a threshold and shift boundaries. In the process, we say goodbye to accepted paradigms. The journey has ups and downs. Fortunately, experienced guides are with us, keeping an eye on our compass. Along the way, we become stronger by facing difficult situations. We discover new possibilities. The encounters, the calls, the exhortations, the turns send us forward. The Travellers to Tomorrow come home after their journey with lessons for the future that they have learned along the way. The travellers are transformed, and their surroundings are transformed too.

**Three pathways** converge in this travel report:

- The future plans of Tourism Meetjesland, 'on our way to a flourishing destination'
- LEADER 'Flourishing Destinations': the transnational project with Angus (Scotland), Bazinul Dornelor (Romania) and Meetjesland (Flanders/Belgium)
- Toerisme Vlaanderen: the trajectory/project Tourism Transforms, later called 'Travel to Tomorrow...' (Reizen naar Morgen...) [www.traveltotomorrow.be](http://www.traveltotomorrow.be)

The three pathways are closely intertwined, and alternately play different roles for each other: from initiating, to aligning, to pushing forward.

In the following chapters, you will find the following components for the first four **stages** of our journey:

- Our journey: the stories of what happened in the 3 pathways
- Our maps, signposts and guides: models and methods that provide guidance
- Our travel log for this stage: photos and personal notes from the Travellers for Tomorrow tell of the lessons learned along the way for the future. These lessons relate to both the theme of thriving destinations and the methods used during the journey:
  - #FD: about Flourishing Destinations
  - #HOW: on the process, approach and methodologies

In these publications, you will **come across poetic stories**. They are reflections in the form of a Pantoun, also called Malay verse or Tibetan poem. These moments from the journey were sourced by Weavy, a story chatbot, created especially for the final reflection, in English and Romanian. 'I remember' is a powerful opener of many memories, the reflective additional questions make the moment vivid and clear again. These reflective poems tell something about what jumped out during the trip.



# THE FUTURE PUSHES THE TRAVELLER IN THE BACK

*In which the traveller comes home from an adventurous trip, unpacks his rucksack, gives the gifts he received along the way a place and sticks the photo memories in an album. Yet he continues to feel a certain unease. The future calls for further research and experimentation. When the old memories, the existing theories, are no longer enough, the desire for new ideas arises. The traveller prepares to embark on a new quest, with a diverse travelling party, the necessary maps and inspiring guides...*

## Our journey

Tourism Meetjesland has a long tradition of pioneering, research, experimentation and innovation. Thus, from 2008 to 2013,

they participate in the Interreg IVB project COLLABOR8<sup>1</sup>. A trans-European project in which policymakers and tourism entrepreneurs work together to develop tourism networks and to examine the role of government in this. The

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<sup>1</sup> COLLABOR8 2008-2013: Toerisme Oost-Vlaanderen vzw is one of the nine European partners involved in the COLLABOR8 project. Within the objectives of this European project the Meetjesland served as pilot region. There was plenty of opportunity to experiment with innovative forms of cooperation. The objective was to encourage entrepreneurship and to get small-scale tourism businesses more involved and stimulated into action. The critical evaluation of existing networks and the creation of new networks (aimed at product development) was an important point of attention. In addition, the role of the tourism networks was analysed in the area-oriented development processes of the Meetjesland.

recommendations after this project quickly trigger the urge for something new. Connecting, strengthening, differentiating and continuing to experiment are the challenges that lie ahead.

**New questions arise.** Not just from this project, but also from a rapidly changing world in search of answers to complex issues:

- How do we increase the involvement of participants in our networks?
- How can we strengthen ownership?
- How can we use tourism for the liveability of villages?
- What can tourism contribute to the strengthening and care for nature and landscape?

In 2017, Tourism Flanders started the project 'Tourism Transforms', later called 'Travel to Tomorrow...'. Because the world and tourism are changing at lightning speed, people feel the need to look for the right ingredients for a new, better future for tourism. The old tourism model, mainly focused on economic growth, is reaching its limits. A transition from 'more tourism' to 'better tourism' is imminent and challenges existing underlying systems. The economic, ecological, social, cultural and political systems. Does tourism itself have to transform to meet the challenges of the future, and how do we do that? The guiding question for Tourism Transforms closely links up with the questions that live in the Meetjesland. British tourism expert Anna Pollock, tells within this project **her story about a flourishing host community** as the basis of tourism development. Tourism Meetjesland is all ears, and triggered by this life-giving vision of tourism.

From contacts with Romania and Scotland, the idea of a transnational LEADER project<sup>2</sup> on tourism grew in the same period. Tourism Meetjesland is asked to join. The **'Flourishing Destinations'** project is born with partners from the Angus region (Scotland) and the Bazinul Dornelor region (Romania). Making local communities flourish through tourism, tourism with and for the benefit of the local community, that's what the project is about. Anna Pollock's ideas are the starting point. She even joins the project as a partner. The three regions share the desire, in a world of climate change and a world where we are more confronted with the limits of the economy, to look for other ways to deal with this in tourism.

In Meetjesland, the project focuses on the municipalities of Assenede and Sint-Laureins, where tourism projects that contribute to a flourishing destination are set up from the community. The provincial regional centre Huysmanhoeve is also involved, where they are working on improving the hospitality skills and the development of crafts on the site with a strong relationship to the environment. The aim is to establish new forms of cooperation with the local community as a basis for structural changes. Five transnational meetings with the partner regions in Scotland and Romania serve for joint training, exchange of experience and project visits.

*The insights gained from previous adventures and the encounter with new visions make one long for an unknown, new world. A group of international fellow travellers provide the impetus to embark on this journey. The traveller group is diverse, and unites on a common sense of responsibility for the place where they organise tourist activities, and for the people who contribute to them.*

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2 LEADER stands for "Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale", freely translated "working together for rural development", and is a European subsidy programme for rural development. For the period 2014-2020, 12 regions in Flanders have been recognised as LEADER areas (including Meetjesland), within which certain projects aimed at rural development can be subsidised. LEADER is financed with European (50%), Flemish (25%) and Provincial (25%) funds.

## *Our maps, signposts and guides*

Tourism as a means for a flourishing community and destination  
(Anna Pollock) - #fd

Anna Pollock, founder of Conscious Travel, makes the tourism industry aware of the importance of a thriving host community or a flourishing destination as the basis for tourism development. Tourism has brought employment and prosperity to many parts of the world. Travel has a positive power that can transform people and places. Tourism can bring added value to all the players involved.

However, Anna warns of the destructive impact of tourism in certain places in the world. The economic model that has dominated our society in recent times is one-sidedly focused on growth and profit maximisation for a few. The tourism industry, too, speaks in production terms: tourist products, tourists or customers, tourism providers. Success is about the growth of overnight stays, spending and employment. A couple of fundamental things disappear from view: the real cost of tourist activities, for a place, a community of people and for nature, is not taken into account in this measuring system.

Tourism of the future, according to Anna Pollock, means that you don't just try to limit the negative impact of what you do, but that you go a step further and make a positive contribution to the place or destination, its inhabitants, its visitors and its entrepreneurs with your tourism activities. Tourism can and must change. From a force that extracts and exploits to one that regenerates and gives life. Anna calls for a radical change of purpose and a shift of focus from volume growth and financial gain for a few to the thriving of all stakeholders in a community.

*“We need to think seriously about what kind of tourism we can create that fits the conditions of the future and brings a more positive balance for the traveller and the host. Tourism of the future is inseparable from life. It will flourish when the destination, the place, its entrepreneurs and its inhabitants themselves flourish. Flourishing destinations are places where hosts are proud of their location and care for it with a shared passion. Visitors experience an authentic welcome that inspires and generates transformative experiences.”*

— Guide Anna Pollock

With an extensive career as a researcher, strategist and change catalyst serving the international tourism industry, Anna Pollock travels the world passionately to engage people for thriving tourism. She believes in the ability of tourism to generate well-being, prosperity and good fortune for people and places, out of a respect for the interdependence and interconnectedness of all life and in harmony with the laws of nature.

Anna Pollock received the 2022 Journey Woman Award for Lifetime Achievement, as a visionary and role model within the tourism industry, by leading the conversation around regenerative practices for decades. Long before the idea of 'regenerative tourism'<sup>3</sup> was hip and trending, Anna was working with tourism destinations to recognise and acknowledge tourism as a living, breathing ecosystem, inextricably linked to the world we live, travel and work in.

3 *Regenerative development is based on a world view that “sees” man as an integral and crucial species in nature and of nature, with a self-awareness that demands that we also take responsibility for the earth and its future. Sustainable travel minimises impact and takes care of the environment. Regenerative tourism also makes the destination or the place better, creating added value for the guest, the inhabitants and the entrepreneurs.*

## Leader – support opportunities for rural development - #how

Each LEADER project is based on a number of values that serve as a guideline in the implementation of the project. These values are:

- Working bottom-up
- Being innovative
- Multi-sectoral and integrated work
- Area-oriented work
- Networking
- Working Together

The Flourishing Destinations project clearly echoes these values. The theme 'Flourishing Destinations' is innovative for the tourism sector. The three regions expressly want to involve the local community in tourism policy, and to develop new tourism activities on the basis of cooperation. The dream here goes even further than bottom-up work, towards a shared responsibility and commitment of all players in the system, and also beyond their own tourism sector.



# OUR TRAVEL JOURNAL OF THIS STAGE



#FD  
 I was touched by the words 'flourishing & thriving'. These words made me so curious and called me to adventure.



#FD  
 I would like to learn more about other initiatives that serve to develop a more conscious tourism activity that adds value to the place, its inhabitants, visitors and entrepreneurs.



#HOW  
 I remember the first contact with the famous team of thriving destinations, in Romania and then in Scotland. The enthusiasm and energy of the group in Ghent, which called me to action, to get going. The group spirit pulled me forward.

#FD  
 The place itself must become better through tourist activities. We visited beautiful places and projects.



#HOW  
 It always surprises me that there is more that unites us than divides us, despite the distance. Searched for and found: fellow travellers

# I remember... Îmi amintesc că... Ik herinner me...

"I remember the first time I heard Anna Pollock  
talk about Flourishing Destinations

In Brussels at the Hotel Bloom

I saw a lot of happy people marvelling at what was happening  
My listening moment full of energy at her analysis, I wanted to capture  
this special moment

In Brussels at the Hotel Bloom

This was the moment I was waiting for: answers  
came to several questions  
My listening moment full of energy at her analysis,  
I wanted to catch this special moment  
This was the moment: a new train departed  
and I wanted to travel with it

This was the moment I was waiting for: answers  
came to several questions

I feel connected with colleagues in the hall  
This was the moment: a new train left and I wanted to travel with it  
The beginning of a whole new period of exchanging experiences

I feel connected with colleagues in the room  
Warm and welcoming

The beginning of a whole new period of exchanging experiences  
Making new friends in Scotland and Romania

Warm and welcoming

I see a lot of happy people marvelling at what is happening  
Making new friends in Scotland and Romania  
I remember the first time I heard Anna Pollock  
talk about Flourishing Destinations"

Traveller Erik Hennes



## THE TRAVELLER HASTENS SLOWLY

*The moment in which the traveller embraces uncertainty. When crossing the threshold into the new world, no one knows in advance what new insight or initiative might result. What gifts will return with them in their rucksacks? What old baggage, certainties and opinions will they leave behind? It takes courage to make the leap into the unknown.*

*New beginnings do not like haste or impatience, but neither do they like to be too hesitant. The traveller looks for islands of certainty and even more fellow travellers.*

*Together, they point their compasses to prosperous destinations...*

### Our journey

Tourism Flanders invites regions and cities to experiment within the 'Tourism Transforms' project. The project becomes 'Travelling to Tomorrow', and puts **the lime tree** forward as a symbol. The lime tree as a place where justice was traditionally spoken and where people came together to celebrate. The tree is firmly rooted in its location, connected to all other

living organisms in its environment. It blossoms when all its parts get enough sun, oxygen and water. The lime tree is the symbol of a thriving destination, where residents, entrepreneurs and visitors are connected to the place and all draw life from tourism.

Toerisme Meetjesland, Toerisme Kempen and Visit Mechelen are the first to put this image of the future into practice on the site. During a

meeting in Sint-Laureins, Anna Pollock will tell her story to local entrepreneurs and inhabitants of Sint-Laureins and Assenede. The key figures of the international partners from Scotland and Romania will also be present. Afterwards, the participants will use their own travel experiences to look for the most important elements that point to the transformative power of tourism. They will examine what these insights can mean for the future of tourism in their own communities, for their own destinations, points of interest, offers, activities, accommodation and associations. And they are allowed to dream about five years from now. During a **cocreative workshop**<sup>4</sup>, some twenty fledgling local project ideas are put on the table.

The enthusiasm after the first workshop threatens to stagnate for a while. The feelings, opinions, judgements and experiences of the first workshop are varied: from 'wildly enthusiastic' to 'too little concrete'. Conversations with participants range from 'it was super interesting, getting to know new people and seeing new collaborations' to 'concern about how to proceed'. The question of a quick follow-up arises. For some, to be able to see each other again and think about some of the ideas, for others to get into action and see some things realised. A meeting with an expanded core group takes time to reshape the project together. Providing a safe space in which to share uncertainties helps to get the group moving on again. Looking back together at what was, expressing what is now, and formulating wishes for the future help the preparation of the next meeting one step ahead. They discover that the participants have

joined because of the novelty of the project, the cooperation with the three countries, the exciting, energy-giving process and the curiosity about how to go from concept to reality. The wish is expressed to be able to set processes in motion so that inhabitants and entrepreneurs understand the vision and apply it, to come up with ideas for future policy, to obtain more initiative from the bottom up, to set up new networks from which new projects arise and to work out a range of tourism opportunities according to the new vision.

Meanwhile, Tourism Meetjesland is finding its way to the Learning Network Appreciative Inquiry and Change. This learning network is set up by Everyone Deserves a Holiday<sup>5</sup>. In a rapidly changing world, the methods of **appreciative enquiry**<sup>6</sup> help organisations and people to move with the times. It is a powerful instrument to cause positive change. Tourism Meetjesland welcomes this methodology to shape their activities in the trajectory flourishing destinations. Everything starts from the joint study of what gives life and what works. Appreciative research leads to shared knowledge that stimulates real innovation. You can read more about it in the third stage.

At the end of 2018, the leaders of the three regions Angus, Bazinul Dornelor and Meetjesland gather for a Kick Off Meeting of the transnational LEADER project in Ghent. They will work together for three days to make the project concrete and lively. Appreciative enquiry and other participatory methodologies are central here, to determine what exactly they are going to

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4 *"By local cocreation, we understand collaborative processes that start from places or challenges where stakeholders create value together by building their community or community. Characteristics of cocreation are: shared ownership, connection, shared challenge, tackling together, creating value, advancing insight, strengthening ecosystems." Definition of Schakel - supporter of local cocreative Meetjesland projects.*

5 *In 2001, Tourism Flanders established the Holiday Participation Centre. The goal was to make the right to a holiday come true for holidaymakers with a limited budget, a disability or a special request. Since 2014, the Network Everyone Earns Holidays has organised learning networks on various themes, in which organisations from the broad tourism sector can participate.*

6 *Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed by the behavioural department of Case Western Reserve University, by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. Opposing the overuse of 'problem solving' thinking, they set out to explore together what gives life, to stimulate social improvement. Since the 1990s, AI has revolutionised organisational development, and foreshadowed the emergence of positive organisational studies. More about AI in the 3rd stage.*

do, in what way, with what activities and what expectations. They **connect** with each other and together give language to the common dream for #FD2020, the hashtag given to the project during the meeting. At the same time, the participants are immersed in participatory methodologies and the principles of appreciative work. The group will carry and propagate these principles together during the further process. Support increases and experimentation is encouraged.



## *Our maps, signposts and guides*

Symbol of journeys to tomorrow and flourishing destinations: the lime tree - #fd

There is a lime tree in the heart of many Flemish villages. It is the place where people build memories together. The lime tree is a symbol of flourishing destinations and communities and tells of the connection between people and place and between residents, entrepreneurs and visitors. The local community, in turn, is part of and connected to a larger world.

Place holders, or place keepers as they are called in the Meetjesland, are the many people who take the initiative to work together on a flourishing community. They can be local entrepreneurs and all kinds of organisations, but also private individuals who are committed to a pleasant neighbourhood. They are the strongholds of a flourishing community, the trunk of our tree. They deserve encouragement, support and room to experiment.

### **A community flourishes when the visitor**

- feels warmly welcomed
- can fully experience the DNA of the place
- experiences a positive impact of his/her stay, new energy and inspiration, personal growth, connectedness with the place and the people he/she meets
- shows respect for nature, culture and the uniqueness of the place
- embraces the place and its people, feels involved and will gladly return or recommend the place to others
- ...

#### A community thrives when the entrepreneur:

- is vital and profitable and can cope resiliently with change
- enjoys/gets good working conditions and appreciation
- is passionate and innovative/creative about his/her product or service and safeguards his/her individuality
- is an ambassador for the place where he/she works
- strives for high satisfaction through sincere hospitality and professionalism
- takes into account the impact of his/her activities on other place holders and the place
- wants to contribute positively to the society/community/place
- ...

#### A community flourishes when the place:

- is attractive, pleasant and safe
- invites residents, entrepreneurs and visitors to meet each other and does not exclude anyone
- allows its unique character to speak for itself, preserves its identity and its natural and cultural heritage
- offers space for creativity and experimentation
- draws on the intelligence of the local community
- connects with the rest of the world and makes a positive contribution to a flourishing planet
- ...

#### A community flourishes when its inhabitants:

- like to live in the place, knows the place and is proud of it
- are involved in the (tourism) policy of the place so that he/she joins in the desired development of their place
- enjoy the positive effects of tourism: preservation and strengthening of facilities, heritage, culture, income, jobs, intercultural encounters, etc.
- find no nuisance because of tourism
- ...

#### Drawing the flow of the project together - #how

As Heraclitus said, you never step in the same river twice. Every moment in the present carries the entire flow of the past. When new people join an ongoing process, it is important to regularly make the flow of the past visible again. In an interaction in which both long-time participants and newcomers can share their stories. In this way, everyone is given the opportunity to step into the stream and allow their own tributaries and branches to flow from it.

*“The direction of our itinerary is done in interaction with a broad group. A core group that organises and always involves a wider group. An important tip here is to make sure that many people know the history, the spirit, the dream of the project. By drawing the river together, with all those involved, we rediscover where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going. It makes us know everyone’s needs and requirements, and see the connection better. We come to a new understanding of why we do the things we do. The resistance and discomfort disappears, the noses are pointed in the same direction. This repetition is necessary.”*

— Traveller Erik Hennes

The flow of the river is drawn on the basis of questions that probe the past, present and future. What is already flowing in the river? Where and when did I step into the river? What role do I have in it? What makes it important for me to be here? How does this relate to the others? What does the travelling party look like and what do they and I need? What rivers and side streams do we want to sail on together? The advantage of this method is that you can always take a step back, without having to do or explain everything all over again.

# OUR TRAVEL JOURNAL OF THIS STAGE



#HOE  
It is about being constantly aware that new people will join us on the way, who do not automatically know what we are doing. Dive into the river with many so that you can continue to feed the story, and it will spread as you go.



#FD  
As an entrepreneur, I see my guests enjoying themselves because I transmit my passion with fire, am enthusiastic, and am engaged with my guests with dedicated attention.



#FD  
The local culture, authenticity, meeting local people, friendships that are formed and integration into the local community make me feel like a different person after a trip. The experience makes you think about life in a different way.



#HOE  
I remember how we learned to do things differently in Ghent. Working in a participative way, involving everyone, asking questions instead of giving answers or trying to convince. Curious questions pull the traveller forward.



# I remember... Îmi amintesc că... Ik herinner me...

I remember sharing knowledge and learning together as been very good, I have learned many things.

To listen more effectively  
I was in a workshop in the hostel in Gent  
I see people, chairs, postcards, pens  
Flowing lines of chatter, liltng, rising, ebbing

I was in a workshop in the hostel in Gent  
Brings back many happy memories  
Flowing lines of chatter, liltng, rising, ebbing  
Composition

Brings back many happy memories  
Energised  
Composition  
Joining together

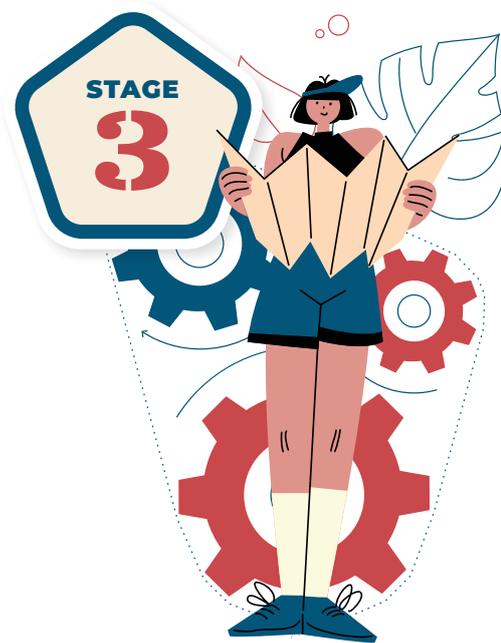
Energised  
Alive  
Joining together  
Weaving

Alive  
I see people, chairs, postcards, pens  
Weaving

I remember sharing knowledge learning together as been very good, I have learned many things.

To listen more effectively

Traveller Norma Lyall



# TRAVELLING IS ACTING TO BRING ABOUT A NEW WAY OF THINKING

*In which the traveller crosses the threshold into the new world. He seizes opportunities offered at the moment and opens himself up to the unexpected. Leaving the beaten track and following intuition, wonder and imagination. Everyone gets an invitation to travel along. Thus, each fellow traveller gets the chance to discover the whole, by creating a mosaic of what they already know individually. Roads never travelled before become visible. Meeting and sharing with other travellers who are also walking the new world inspires and encourages. Connecting, appreciative enquiry, curious questions and attentive listening are signposts in the complex landscape...*

## Our journey

In order to get innovation and development going, it is important to give some thought to **the composition of the group** beforehand. Who is needed to properly explore the question that is being asked? Limiting the invitation to only professionals or to 'the usual suspects' does

not bring about enough innovation and does not contribute to a broad base of support. By drawing out the system, you put a strain on its boundaries. The circles around the communities, organisations or the theme are constantly expanding.

During the second workshop 'Working on Tomorrow's Tourism' in Assenede, this becomes absolutely clear. The objectives of the workshop are:

- Encouraging the tourism sector and inhabitants to help make Meetjesland a flourishing destination and a thriving community
- Stimulating & supporting bottom-up tourism initiatives that contribute to a thriving community
- Entrepreneurs, residents & visitors come up with and develop initiatives to make Meetjesland a flourishing destination and thriving community
- Working further on the early brainstorming ideas from the previous workshop: critically examine the concept of a thriving destination, make them more concrete, go deeper and make commitments
- Creating new networks as a municipality from which new projects originate

The initiative to invite people lies with, among others, the tourism officer of the municipality of Assenede. She immediately involves her colleagues from the Leisure Services department in order to reach more people. Breaking the boundaries of disciplines by involving relevant sectors. The result? An unexpected turnout of eighty participants. Sitting and thinking in pigeonholes is over. From tourist entrepreneurs to artists to involved residents... They are all around the table. People who did not know each other, or had never worked together before, discovered unexpected possibilities and new connections.



“I remember an article about ‘flourishing destinations’ in the newspaper. I was not a participant, but I found it interesting to read about the European exchange. The term ‘flourishing’ attracted me. I wanted to know more.”  
Fellow traveller Micheline De Kreijger

Source: De Belleman, municipality magazine of Assenede



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Constantly making adjustments, talking a lot about it, and above all doing it. With trial and error. Communicating with colleagues from other regions and cities in Flanders helps to sharpen the lines, and to make progress with your own project.

**The Travel to Tomorrow trial projects** launched by Tourism Flanders in early 2019 are an inspiring learning and exchange platform for this. Els Meersschaert facilitated the group by letting them network and make the connection between theory and practice. Appreciative enquiry with curious questions is also the common thread here. In four learning days, the participants - policy makers, entrepreneurs and stakeholders from Meetjesland, Kempen and Mechelen - investigate different aspects of flourishing destinations: *community engagement, sense of place, purpose of tourism, meaningful encounters and the needs and future role of entrepreneurs.*<sup>7</sup> During the sessions, Anna Pollock always brings new concepts and insights. The Living Labs are a safe place to discuss difficulties along the way and to look for solutions and new possibilities together.

The international group with the partners from Romania and Scotland also forms a safe haven to rely on. This safety is created by connecting well with each other before diving into the content.

To be able to learn together and to find the way together, connection with each other and **connection** to the theme is a basic condition.

During the course of the meeting in Romania, the need for connection becomes clear. Because the project in Romania has not yet been approved and the partners on the ground do not yet have the necessary budgets, there is no local facilitator for the transnational meeting. The interaction between the different countries is therefore difficult to start up. Participants remain stuck in their own 'country group'. In order to get more interaction, the organisers themselves schedule an extra liaison workshop in which they invite the participants to discuss the themes of the project together in mixed country groups at different tables. An enriching experience. This approach lays the foundation for a real exchange and deeper contacts grow between the participants.

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<sup>7</sup> *Community engagement: local commitment to the community*  
*Sense of place: experiencing the place*  
*Purpose of tourism: the higher purpose of tourism*  
*Meaningful encounters*  
*Needs and future role of entrepreneurs: needs of (tourism) entrepreneurs and their future role in flourishing destinations*

## *Our maps, signposts and guides*

### Invite the whole system #how

In order to determine what 'the whole system' is, and to invite a good mix, the following acronym is a useful tool: 'the people who **ARE IN**':

**A**uthority to act: policy makers, people in charge in organisations and communities

**R**esources: people who have contacts, time, means

**E**xpertise: people with knowledge about the theme

**I**nformation: people who have information about the theme that others do not have

**N**eed to be involved: people who will be touched by the results and can say something about the consequences

In Meetjesland, and for flourishing destinations, we hook up with inhabitants, visitors, entrepreneurs and place, as an invitation around the table.

### Appreciative inquiry - #how

Appreciative enquiry is a participatory method used in change processes in organisations or companies. The method is particularly suitable when the challenge is complex, no one has the answer to the question alone, and each individual feels involved in the issue. Instead of trying to solve problems, appreciative enquiry focuses on possibilities. The method is not a purpose in itself. It serves to help the realisation of the goals as they are formulated. The common wisdom of the group is invited, to find common ground together. The facilitator's task is to get the best out of the group. By giving the best of himself for the group. It is all about the group and what happens in it. The facilitator has faith in the group and builds on its collective wisdom. The mandate lies with the group. *wijsheid die daar zit. Het mandaat ligt bij de groep.*

Activities in appreciative enquiry:

- Connecting to each other and to the theme
- A positive core theme is central and is researched in an appreciative way in 4 steps
- Working with generative questions will trigger positive change
- Celebrating successes as a stepping-stone to the next phase

*"Appreciative Inquiry, why don't we learn it at school? It may take some time to master, but once you are out there, you can achieve so much! You just get a lot of 'gusto' to go on with this!"*

Traveller Sofie Van Waes

### Connecting to each other and to the theme

Connecting does not happen by itself. It takes time and attention. When you get together with people to discuss a topic, tackle a project, a question or a problem, an important first step is to make a connection before diving into the content. People are not machines. Talking to each other in a purely functional way about themes that matter at that moment can lead to alienation from each other, to less cocreation, to less willingness to listen and to lapsing into opinions instead of listening to each other's stories.

To start the meeting, after the welcome, you set a tone, an atmosphere that can contribute to the outcome. When people meet, it is important that an atmosphere is created in which everyone involved can show themselves. Connecting well has a positive effect on the feeling of equality between the participants. A connected group has more courage and confidence to embark on a journey into the unknown.



Connecting people is more than 'getting to know each other'. From a narrative approach<sup>8</sup>, we learn that the questions in a connection round are not about the piece of identity that everyone already knows ('who does what...'), but about what touches the emotional side of people, what touches the heart. It takes time and powerful questions. But it also delivers. In the beginning, it seems like extra time, but in the long run it does pay off. After such a person-to-person meeting, a substantive topic usually follows. A strong round of connecting both with each other and with the theme ensures a higher learning yield for most participants. Passion is ignited, you are recognised for what you can do and the foundations of the content are laid. A reflection on the connection round completely perpetuates the connection made.

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<sup>8</sup> *The narrative approach looks at people as meaning makers and storytellers of important moments in their lives. Moments are seen as the smallest unit of experience. By giving meaning to our experiences, moments are strung together into a story. These stories are powerful as they shape and sustain people's identity, relationships, lives, history, future and reality. - Chené Swart, Griet Bouwen, Marianne Schapmans*

## A positive core theme is central and is examined appreciatively in four steps

The first step in AI is to define a positive core theme. For this pathway, we formulated:

*“Growing further towards a thriving destination and community”.*

This positive core theme forms the focus of the conversations about the project, moving towards a result in four steps, the 4D Circle.



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1. DISCOVERY  
Discover and appreciate 'the best there already is'.
2. DREAM  
Imagine what is 'possible'.
3. DESIGN  
Design what is 'necessary'.
4. DESTINY  
Make 'the future' happen.

### **Celebrating successes as a stepping stone to the next phase**

Celebrating small and large steps or results increases job satisfaction. It also contributes to the further development of people and groups and motivates them to go further. It strengthens the connection in a group and is the stepping stone to new successes.

### **Working with generative questions triggers positive change**

The questions asked in appreciative enquiry are of great importance. A question can paralyse someone, or just push them into action. A well-aimed question can set change in motion. In appreciative enquiry, you ask questions for which there is no right answer, but which help to find words for things for which there are as yet no words. We call these 'generative questions'. Because they have the capacity for growth and they are life-giving. Because they appeal to the imagination. Because they call for engagement. Questions that generate images and help create new language. The facilitator has the co-responsibility to use powerful questions to set the group in motion, and to have them reflect regularly. Generative questions are part of all activities of appreciative enquiry, from connecting with each other and with the theme, to going through the four steps, until the reflecting phase.

#### **To make a connection**

- What makes it important for you to be here today?
- What questions have you brought with you?
- What do you want to contribute to our project?
- What gifts do you hope to receive from this meeting?
- What makes you proud of the place where you live?

#### **Inquire and appreciate what works**

- Tell each other about an experience you have had since the start of this project, where you felt something was set in motion, a moment related to the project that made you happy. Where, when, with whom, how?
- Tell about an experience in your work in tourism in the region that did something to you, set something in motion. Where, when, with whom, how?
- Tell each other about a moment when you were welcomed on holiday, on a trip, on an outing. What did it mean to you?
- What would you like to tell a future generation about your work on thriving destinations?

### **Imagine... the future**

- We are going forward five years in time to discover our future... We are interviewing tourists who have had a wonderful experience in our municipality, at our destination, with our offer, our activity, in our accommodation, our association .... An experience that did something to them, that touched them, that set something in motion. What do these tourists say? What do you hope they will say? What did they experience in your community, at your destination, with your offer, your activity, in your accommodation, your association ...? What are its most important elements? How is it different from how it is now? What has changed?

### **Design... the future**

- If this is the future you see in your imagination, what do you need today to take steps in the direction of this imaginary future?

### **Reflect intentionally**

- What surprised you during the exchange?
- What gave you hope?
- What did you learn that can move us further towards flourishing destinations?
- Tell each other about a moment when you saw yourself growing while setting up flourishing projects?

### **Celebrate successes together**

- What makes you grateful today?
- What do you want to celebrate with each other?



# OUR TRAVEL JOURNAL OF THIS STAGE

**#FD #HOW**  
We have explicitly chosen an approach in which we, together with the local community and inhabitants, have started to think about what added value tourism can have for their own community, for their own neighbourhood.



**#HOW**  
A personal approach and approaches that ultimately brought in a lot of people, but also very time-consuming. Fortunately, we could count on the enthusiasm of several colleagues, including municipal officials.

**#FD**  
A warm welcome at the meeting place helped me to feel at ease. I remember the first evening in Scotland where we received a warm welcome. Eating together brings people closer together.



**#HOW**  
I now realise that when a workshop or meeting does not go quite as expected, it often has to do with not taking enough time to make a good connection between the attendees. When the connection is gone, the results are poorer.  
I am amazed at how deep our conversations can go. What helps to connect well is doing things together, and meeting live. In the beginning each delegation was a bit on its own, now you feel a real connection.



# OUR TRAVEL JOURNAL OF THIS STAGE



**#HOW**  
Facilitating the group process plays at least as important a role as guiding the content. It is important that such workshops are well led. We want to learn this in Romania. To be able to quickly apply this in our own work and make a difference there.

**#HOW**  
You learn more in a well-facilitated workshop than in a succession of quick study visits. A well-considered alternation is necessary: the study visits inspire, and we harvest by reflecting.

**#HOW**  
Many workshops are a waste of time and energy; sometimes you have to wait until the time is up. These workshops are different. I really learned. Through the questions that were asked, I felt stimulated to reflect.

**#HOW**  
In a workshop, a participant was complaining all the time. By asking the question: 'What brought you here?' the conversation changed instantly. You could see this participant start to think: 'oh yes, I came here of my own free will...'

**#HOW**  
Through the international aspect and going out with the international group in your own region, and being able to tell about it, we also get to know our own region better.

**#HOW**  
Even with colleagues I have known for a long time, I had inspiring conversations. That was because of the questions that were asked. They are different from the questions in our daily work.



**#HOW**  
As a tourist region, we immediately had common ground to exchange ideas with our partners in Scotland and Romania and that alone makes the Leader funding and the effort we make as a province to promote and support Leader so valuable. By thinking together, we became smarter together.



**#HOW**  
Sharing stories is so important. By listening to the stories, we learn about other regions and also about ourselves. The story of Farmer seeks Bank reminded me of my own life. Because other people were interested in our projects, I felt proud.



**#HOW**  
Speaking in a big group is not something I like to do very much. Because we worked in smaller groups, I felt free to speak up. I remember people being so open. We had deep conversations about purpose. It also made me think about who I am.





# I remember... Îmi amintesc că... Ik herinner me...

I remember meeting likeminded peers for the first time.  
Giving me confidence in my own abilities, but encouraging me to strive  
for better, to not be scared of asking questions and to work with others  
to find a solution.

Gent

I saw a room full of engaged individuals  
They welcomed me to Gent to start a journey together.

Gent

It was my introduction to Belgium  
They welcomed me to Gent to start a journey together.  
I am proud that after 5 years I can see the potential for more.

It was my introduction to Belgium  
Inspired

I am proud that after 5 years I can see the potential for more.  
I know that what we started with FD will continue for much much  
longer than the time of our project

Inspired

Positive and uplifting  
I know that what we started with FD will continue for much much  
longer than the time of our project  
Positivity and enthusiasm

Positive and uplifting

I saw a room full of engaged individuals  
Positivity and enthusiasm

I remember meeting likeminded peers for the first time.  
Giving me confidence in my own abilities, but encouraging me to strive  
for better, to not be scared of asking questions and to work with others  
to find a solution.

Reiziger - Alison Elliot



## EXPERIMENT AND DISCOVER ON THE ROAD

*The traveller in the new world, experiment after experiment, discovers that lasting transformative change does not come solely from a top-down approach nor from an exclusive bottom-up approach, but from dialogue from equal positions. In which space and possibilities are kept open in the face of unexpected obstacles. In which it becomes clear that change comes from the whole...*

### Our journey

The positive core theme '(keep on) growing towards a thriving destination and community', is branched out into sub-themes, relevant to parts of the group. The 25 project ideas that came out of the local workshops in Sint-Laureins and Assenede will be categorised thematically (events, ambassadorship, group offerings) and then further concretised in smaller workshops. This makes cooperation between the projects

even more possible and ensures a more concrete approach. For the time being, a dozen viable small and **local initiatives** are emerging that want to contribute to a thriving destination and community. Some of these initiatives may still need some guidance, while others flourished of their own.

Some examples:

- **Farmer seeks bank' in Sint-Laureins**



During the workshops, several farmers indicated that they would like to make contact with walkers and cyclists who pass by their farm. They are curious about the stories of the passers-by and would like to tell about their passion themselves. Such a meeting could take place by placing a picnic bench on their property, together with the commitment to regularly join them at the table for a conversation. A simple concept that, after the first three benches, will soon be followed by three more benches at even more farms and a connecting cycle route. In the meantime, you will also find a vending machine in a few places where you can taste local products.

- **Creek experience spots in Assenede**

The idea of the creek experience spots arose from a private offer for improving the walking network, which ultimately did not succeed. These are quiet places near a number of guest houses and restaurants where you can enjoy the peace and quiet, the landscape, the creeks or streams, the passing deer, etc. The first locations are ready, but remain secret. Visitors to an accommodation or catering establishment who show an interest in peace and quiet will receive the locations as a gift from the owner. With the request to keep them secret as well. Silence and tranquillity are precious commodities. A new experiment is born. Perhaps the rest of the municipality and the region will follow.

- **The Pig's Eye Walk and the old abbey in Oosteeklo**



Tourist activities are revived on the initiative of an enthusiastic local guide.



*“What used to be a very popular day trip for groups, ‘Out with Félicienne’, where we went out with a pig, suddenly wasn’t possible anymore. Because of this and because of corona, there was not much left of my tourist activities as a guide. I had to look for other things to bring visitors to my village Oosteeklo. Together with the ‘Orde of the Smoutpot’, which in the meantime had installed itself on the site of the old abbey, an idea began to take shape. What if we were to tell the history of the abbey to casual visitors via a circumambulation with information panels as stations? That would suit an abbey, I thought. And what if we did the same for the story of the pig, the inhabitants’ nickname? And what if we were to realise all this with only people from Oosteek: content from local experts and guides, local artist, local photographer and layout, placement by the municipality and financing from #FD2020? And so it happened. The ‘pigommegang’ was born.”*

Traveller Godfried Stockman

The sub-theme that the Huysmanhoeve is working on is **‘Hospitality+ and strengthening the volunteer work at the Huysmanhoeve’**. They are bringing their volunteers and professionals together to examine the hospitality skills and the voluntary work from the perspective of the lens of flourishing destinations. Three workshops with the volunteers and professionals led to a concrete action plan for an integrated reception by all persons present on the farm and for a conscious welcoming of the visitor. The first tangible results on the ground are the realisation of ‘De Wand’ (The Wall), a creative interpretation of the partition in the middle of the site during the renovation works, and various ‘garden rooms’ that volunteers and staff developed across the farm.

At the transnational meeting in Angus, Scotland, the sub-theme **‘Sense of Place’** is central. Probing the values that ‘the place’ and ‘placeholders’ radiate, provides an insight into

possible obstacles and opportunities that may arise on the way to a flourishing destination and a thriving community. This better understanding is a useful tool for developing leadership and guidance in creating a tourist destination that flourishes.

At a time when the travel community is about to embark on the journey back to the old world, Brexit and COVID are forcing the world to put the brakes on. The Angus region is finding it difficult to participate in #FD2020, as they no longer have access to European funding. They are committed to actively participate in the project with **their own resources**.

Due to COVID and a long lockdown, tourism entrepreneurs are groaning under the effects of this unprecedented crisis and survival is the message. In this time of crisis, the travel company demonstrates man's resilience and inventiveness, man's capacity for community spirit and common sense. The LEADER project temporarily switches to online activities. There is a great need to discuss ways to help tourism recover from the effects of the pandemic. With questions probing how everyone's work in tourism looks in times of crisis, how everyone adapts in this situation, and what this can mean for the future, the travellers tell each other hopeful stories of the future.

In order to find courage again in moments of crisis, they look for traces of hope. Less than fighting a crisis, they look for small innovations, for mini experiments. For points of light that move forward. Because of the territorial limitations, **new initiatives emerge on the ground that strengthen and connect the local community**. Mutual dependence on each other and supporting 'the place' and its thriving community is more visible than ever. Places nearby are (re)discovered, local entrepreneurs and traders are supported in their creative solutions, technology is cleverly used. An opportunity to evolve even further towards a flourishing destination and thriving community, with tourism reinventing itself and reorienting itself towards a sustainable future model.

## *Our maps, signposts and guides*

Holding space, keep things open and unspoken #how

For a transformation or a change, we have to let go things from the past. This requires a willingness to change on everyone's part, and a safe space in which this can happen. The term 'Holding Space' means something like 'caringly keeping the space open for others'. A space in which people and collaborating groups can grow in appreciative enquiry. In order to find solutions to challenges (and crises) from there. In this space, people are prepared to work together without judging or giving the other the feeling that they are failing.

### **The principles of 'Holding Space':**

- Consciously remaining silent to invite others to speak.
- Giving people space to tap into and trust their own intuition and wisdom.
- Creating a safe space where people are allowed to make mistakes.
- Giving people as much information as they can handle.
- Putting people in their power.
- Allowing emotions, including negative ones.
- Respecting decisions other than the one you would like to make.

The person who keeps the space open will not try to influence the result, and will open that space again whenever necessary. Together with Tourism East Flanders, Tourism Meetjesland keeps this space open, in which the paradox of experimenting, delivering results and controlling can be dealt with.



© Toerisme Meetjesland

### Generative leadership #how

Being able to keep the space open requires a special kind of leadership. The challenge that organisations and their leaders face is not in controlling, but in letting it go. Whereby letting it go is not about 'dropping away', but about holding on differently. Like in the parable of the sand. If you fill your hand with fine sand and close it, the sand will slip between your fingers. The harder you squeeze, the more sand will disappear, and when you open your hand, you will find that there is almost no sand left in it. But if you fill your hand with sand and hold it open like a bowl, perhaps a grain here and there will be blown away, but most of the sand will remain and will shine brighter and brighter in the light.

This calls for special leadership competences that help to ensure that the organisation serves the person and the purpose: generative leadership. The person and the mission are placed at the centre of the network. The leadership keeps the space open for connecting and life-giving conversations. This space serves to learn and discover collectively and to weave between paradoxes. Not knowing is embraced and positive intentions are acknowledged: whoever comes, whatever happens,

we work with. Generative leadership has faith in what emerges. The answer to 'how' is 'yes'.

### International collaboration #how

The three regions of Angus, Bazinul Dornelor and Meetjesland are each working on 'flourishing destinations' and 'a thriving community' in their own places. Through the transnational meetings, the group gets to know different kinds of contexts. The culture in Romania, strongly rooted in respect for authentic traditions and generous hospitality, makes one reflect on what may have been lost here. In Scotland local entrepreneurs and the community of Angus shape and support the delivery of the tourism framework. Angus Tourism Cooperative are a collective voice for tourism in Angus. Their community based activity is now being more widely appreciated and supported by the marketing organisation. A broad collaborative approach now has strong foundations. A lot is left to the community itself, up to and including the maintenance of the public domain. Whereas Meetjesland is fully committed to participation and co-creation, we see in Angus that this is also finite. It is instructive to be able to share experiences, to get a different view of your own context.



# OUR TRAVEL JOURNAL OF THIS STAGE

**#FD**  
 The project 'Flourishing Destinations' makes us realise that we have now moved on a bit to distant travels, and that our own neighbourhood is also worth discovering. The evolution we want to continue: developing tourism not only for the tourist, but also for the benefit of the local inhabitants. That way of thinking is now in place, from the inspiration of the concept of thriving destinations, and it will not go away.

**#FD**  
 Our group of tourism entrepreneurs is growing and getting a louder voice. We work together more to find solutions and we find new ways to work together. This is how we develop new offerings and new products.



**#FD**  
 In Romania, during the pandemic, we transformed our activities into open air activities: our painted eggs festival, ecobrunches, open air cinema...

**#FD**  
 We have become one big family in our region: entrepreneurs and residents do a lot together. Bringing people together around a good meal, a good place and good stories.



**#FD**  
 We clearly became more aware of the values we hold dear. We learned to say 'yes we can'. To be determined. If someone says: this is not possible, then we know: because we want it, we can do it.

**#HOE**  
 It is sometimes very frustrating that you cannot pass on knowledge or explain the ideas. It sometimes takes a lot of energy not to be able to let the other person feel why it works. Apparently, you can only pass on knowledge by doing it and by going into the experience together. Understanding is in 'experiencing', not in 'being explained'. Our energy would be better put into experiencing.



# I remember... Îmi amintesc că... Ik herinner me...

I remember when we started this adventure but we had no idea where  
we would end up.

I was in Scotland for the first talks.

I see a green environment and welcoming people.

I was curious where this project would bring us.

I was in Scotland for the first talks.

I was curious.

I was curious where this project would bring us.

The project brought us more than I expected.

I was curious.

Pleased with the results.

The project brought us more than I expected.

Happy.

Pleased with the results.

Success.

Happy.

Energy.

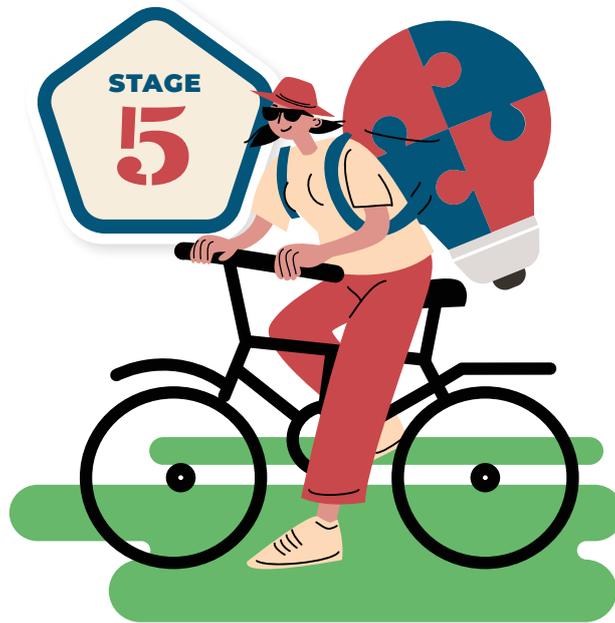
Success.

I see a green environment and welcoming people.

Energy.

I remember when we started this adventure but we had no idea where  
we would end up.

Traveller Annelies Waegeman



## RETURN JOURNEY WITH A BACKPACK OF MEMORIES FOR THE FUTURE

*The traveller, in preparation for his journey back to the old world, looks at his pictures. On the basis of the images, he discovers the transformations he lived as a result of the journey he has undertaken.*

*He arranges the pictures to show them in the old world. As a result, the old world itself will also undergo a transformation. Just as a butterfly cannot become a caterpillar again, the old ways of doing things will be irreversibly replaced by the new..*

During the last meeting of the transnational project in May 2022 in the Meetjesland, the participants made a time capsule, containing what they want to give to future generations who want to continue working on flourishing destinations and thriving communities. Each time capsule will have a telling photo that tells something about its contents.





- Find the small victories
- Keep it simple
- Do it again... and again...
- Positive leadership: create space
- Throw a stone in the water
- Work on common grounds and values
- Have a common dream/ambition
- Give it time
- Use the right language
- Tell the story



- Tourism means more than profit. It means connection, cooperation, creativity
- Slow down - Back to nature
- Determination "Yes we Can"
- We have learned to tell our story
- Developing at the grassroots level
- Cocreation as a new way of working together
- Open groups
- Stimulate participation



- Authentic experiences between visitors and hosts
- Openness and welcome
- Ambassadors as key players
- Awareness of nature
- Connecting people globally: locally and globally
- Looking with new eyes



Flourishing destinations are like the ceiling in the picture: the drawing of the wood reminds us of typical features of the 3 regions: the symbols on the houses of Ciocanesti, the patterns of the Scottish tartans, and the farm colours of the Meetjesland.

We want to remind the importance of inspiring stories, of traditions, identity, art and culture.

The various transformations are summarised below:

## **From tourism as a clean engine towards a tourism as a living and life-giving system**

Tourism in the new world will no longer be unilaterally focused on maximising financial profit for a few. A tourist spot in the new world is a living and life-giving system, where everything is closely connected. Based on a belief in human capital, the local community - residents and entrepreneurs - will be given the key to taking care of the place. Local hospitality is at the table: the community shares the place proudly, hospitably and generously with visitors, and asks visitors to listen to the voice of the place and to appreciate its demand for respectful treatment. A different form of growth, focused on smallness of scale and proximity, contributes to a higher quality offer for visitors. From a flourishing destination to a friendly destination. We work from the heart, not from the opportunities for pure financial profit.

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## **From collaboration with the tourism sector towards co-creation with everybody involved**

The best way to predict the future is to create it together, with a broad group of stakeholders: residents, visitors, entrepreneurs, policy-makers, experts in various fields, other policy areas such as heritage, sports, nature... Developing a common language stimulates doing things together. The thriving community (and flourishing destination) arises in cooperation, co-creation and shared responsibility. The contagiousness of the network. Growing dynamics are not trampled on, but are given water and food to flourish.

## **From explaining towards action and experience**

Every time we try to explain 'it', we find that it works better to let people go into the experience. Only then do they understand how it works. Creating space and time in between is necessary to go into the experience, and to discover, from their own stories, what possibilities there are for the future. A powerful invitation sets travellers in motion. Time and again, time is taken to make the shared dream visible to new travellers, to keep it alive and to help shape it further. Stories about projects that have already been realised lead to inspiration for others.



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*“What I have learned in the cooperation between the three regions Meetjesland, Angus and Bazinul Dornelor is to look at our growth potential as people, companies and local organisations. Let us tell each other our personal and professional stories more often. Let’s make every effort to welcome our guests, and tell them with passion the story of our place. Let’s work courageously towards where we want to go. And just as importantly, I realised that I need to learn how to ride a bike so that I can join a bike tour on my next visit. Thank you all, because during the Flourishing Destinations project we were able to make both our places flourish, but also the relationships between people. Good luck, see you on similar special occasions and projects! PS: For us, the project continues, fuelled by the inspiration of our friends in Meetjesland and Angus. Stay tuned!”*

Fellow traveller Monica David

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## **From control towards a generative leadership**

There are risks involved in any initiative or project. It comes down to allowing what happens, to happen. Generative leadership that focuses on the possibilities, and is prepared to deal with risks, releases a releasing force that sets the group in motion. When you get stuck, trust the group and consult them. The collective wisdom helps to discover how to proceed.



## **From uncertainty towards trust in the own possibilities**

By shifting from 'trying to solve problems' to 'discovering possibilities', the conversation changes. An appreciative approach increases confidence in one's own abilities. The growing confidence of each individual also strengthens the confidence of a group in their entrepreneurial potential. Lighting one candle after another ensures that the light never goes out.



## **From pure targeting towards celebrating successes together and sharing gifts**

A gift is something the travellers learned along the way, a change in attitude or thinking that comes from listening and exploring with others. By exchanging gifts, reflecting, we learn again. We gain additional insights and acquire new knowledge.





# THIS IS NOT THE BEGINNING OF THE END, BUT THE END OF THE BEGINNING

*The traveller is called to new adventures. He takes the memories of the past trip with him in his backpack. The future pushes the traveller forward again. He looks for a new travelling companion and new guides...*

The flourishing destinations project continues to have an impact on more and more activities of the Meetjesland Tourism Office and also of East Flanders Tourism.

## **Stories that shape the future**



'Cocreating a flourishing community' is the central aim of the new **Future Plan for Tourism in Meetjesland 2021-2026**. In the Future Plan one can read a lot about the will to involve visitors, inhabitants and entrepreneurs in the development of tourism in this region. To arrive at this plan, an appreciative participative approach

was explicitly chosen. Both a flourishing destination and an appreciative participative approach are prerequisites for the new vision on the sector of Tourism East Flanders. The Future Plan was further elaborated in co-creation with the tourism sector, municipal administrations, related sectors and inhabitants. The first result is already a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment.

## Connectivity in all areas

In addition, the memories of the trip are starting to become more and more accepted as a general frame of reference within the partners' operations. As a result of the exchanges and experiences gained from this project, the **Sint-Laureins Tourism Board** now organises its activities and events with a focus on the concept of a thriving destination as much as possible. Following the example of the Tourism Board in Sint-Laureins, **tourism platforms** are also starting up in other municipalities in the Meetjesland. People are brought together again, they learn together again, they draw the river again. Flourishing destinations and appreciative work are central to this. In the municipalities Lievegem, Eeklo and Aalter they develop **municipal vision plans and action plans** for tourism in this way. The municipality Maldegem also has opted for this approach.

*“This project set so much in motion. Very visible are the concrete projects such as Boer zkt. Bank (Farmer seeks bank), the Kreekbeleafplekken (Creek Experience Spots) or the eight other initiatives, but what I notice even more is the enthusiasm and the change in mentality. Even more than before, tourism is a story that we write together with entrepreneurs and residents. Through this project, we could also realise the Future Plan in an appreciative and co-creative way, thus including the entire region in this story. Also at Tourism East Flanders this project and the Journey to Tomorrow trajectory gave rise to a new sector vision and a new mission and vision for the entire organisation”*

Traveller Erik Hennes

## Sparkles and bubbles become new projects

In Scotland, the Brechin Community Led Tourism Project from the Angus region has been selected for a pilot project on **Community Led Tourism**. They will have a project officer available for one year to implement this project. This is a direct result of successful experimentation during the #FD2020 trajectory.

The insights from our journey 'Flourishing Destinations' are taken as a basis for new projects. Tourism Meetjesland is starting a new project "**An Attractive Urban Periphery** (in the north east of Ghent and the harbour area)", in which they will work with this philosophy and method in the urban and harbour area including parts of Zelzate, Evergem and southern Lievegem. What at first did not appear to be a real tourist area - because of the presence of the North Sea Port - suddenly appears to be very dynamic and also interesting for tourism. Through this project they want to use this dynamic and increase the tourist experience, again from appreciative co-creation.

The **silence initiatives in Meetjesland**, that are included in the Future Plan, have their origin in the activities based on silence, that were previously set up in the context of flourishing destinations in Sint-Laureins and Assenede. Tourism Meetjesland is allowing these to grow further throughout the entire region. Other new local project ideas are also supported by this five-year journey.

## **Co-creation from appreciative enquiry and appreciative work**

Tourism Meetjesland wants to evolve even further from participation to co-creation, where participants can not only make their voices heard, but also co-decide and implement. For the various **local flourishing experimental projects** that see the light of day in the Meetjesland, keeping the space open for this is a tough balancing act. How to ensure that something is set in motion without 'taking over'? A learning network for the project stakeholders and personal coaching for the project groups will help to take further steps here.

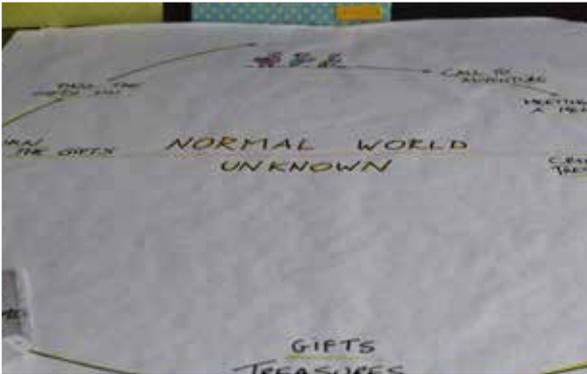
*Tourism Meetjesland resolutely chooses to continue on this path. In 2022, the organisation celebrates its 50th anniversary. And look: the sky-high ambitions of the region today are still very much in line with the dreams and wishes of the pioneers fifty years ago.*

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*The future pushes the traveller forward, the traveller hurries slowly, acts to find a new way of thinking, experiments and learns along the way and returns with a rucksack full of memories of the future...*



# THE TRAVELLING COMPANY



## THE WRITER AND THE READERS

### The writer of the Travel Report:

Els Meersschaert

**The readers and co-editors:** Erik Hennes, Marianne Schapmans, Sirka Lüdtke, Bart Van Damme, Annelies Waegeman, Luc Feusels, Willy Van Zandweghe, Vincent Leroy, Anna Pollock, Alison Elliot, Norma Lyall, Laura Albu, Nicolas Cammaert

*The Weavy storychatbot (the poems) was developed by Marianne Schapmans*

The translation was done by the team of Tourism Meetjesland with the help of Deepl.com and under the watchful eye of the Scottish partners.

### Photographs

Toerisme Meetjesland, Bas van Oort, Luc Hinderson

### Graphic design:

Jos notteboom

## ROADMAPS FOR THIS TRAVEL REPORT AND FOR FURTHER SELF- DISCOVERY

### About flourishing destinations and other inspiring examples:

**Hoe reizen naar morgen gisteren startte,** Greet Vandenrijt, Toerisme Vlaanderen (article, Dutch)

#### Paradijs in de polder

Ontdek wat landschap je vertelt, Arita Baaijens (Dutch)

#### Reizen naar Morgen,

Toerisme Vlaanderen (magazine, book and website, Dutch)

#### Toerisme Meetjesland

www.meetjesland.be (website, Dutch)

### About community building:

Community, Peter Block

### About appreciative inquiry and similar methods

**Connect your story – Verbind je Verhaal,** Griet Bouwen & Chené Swart & Marianne Schapmans (Dutch)

**Don't just do something, stand there!** Ten principles for leading meetings that matter, Marvin Weisbord & Sandra Janoff

**Het filosofisch gesprek,** Kristof Van Rossem (Dutch)

**Het Groot Werkvormenboek,** Sasja Dirkse-Hulscher & Angela Talen (Dutch)

**Open Space Technology – A user's guide,** Harrison Owen

**The art of Holding Space,** Heather Plett

**The practice of peace,** Harrison Owen

**Waarderend onderzoeken als katalysator voor vernieuwing en verbinding,** Iedereen Verdient Vakantie (Dutch)

**Waarderend veranderen – Appreciative Inquiry in de dagelijkse praktijk van managers,** Saskia Tjepkema & Luc Verheijen & Joeri Kabalt (Dutch)

### About generative leadership:

**Generatief leiderschap in teams en groepen,** Petra Van de Kop

**Generative leadership.** Over leven en leren in een turbulente wereld, Ivo Callens (Dutch)

**The Soul of Place,** Michael Jones

### Other sources of inspiration:

**Collabor8,** Sirka Lüdtke

**Into the wild,** Jon Krakauer

**I remember,** Joe Brainard

**Kairos, een nieuwe bevlogenheid,** Joke J. Hermsen (Dutch)

**Opnieuw beginnen.** Metamorfosen in het bestaan, Marli Huijter en Reinjan Mulder (Dutch)

**The hero with a 1000 faces,** Joseph Campbell

**The Hero's Journey,** Christopher Vogler

**The Soul of Place Creative Writing Book,** Linda Lappin

**Toekomstplan Toerisme in het Meetjesland,** Els Meersschaert & Bart Van Damme & Erik Hennes (Dutch)

**Weavy – PantounGenerator,** Marianne Schapmans

**Wie kies je om te zijn Gesprekken en gedachten over een nieuwe tijd,** Roek Lips (Dutch)



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**Toerisme Meetjesland**  
Provinciaal Streekcentrum Huysmanhoeve  
Bus 1 (zijstraat Peperstraat), 9900 Eeklo  
T 09 37786 00  
info@toerismemeetjesland.be



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