

# Good Planning

## DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

This 'How to Guide' explores the principles underpinning how to effectively establish multi-actor partnerships to collaborate in innovation projects and activities.

The multi-actor project LIAISON (Better Rural Innovation: Linking Actors, Instruments and Policies through Networks) has been studying ways of speeding up innovation in agriculture, forestry and related sectors. Through LIAISON we explored a wide range of formal and informal partnerships, and gathered examples and evidence of effective ways of coming together to collaborate in interactive innovation projects. This How to Guide uses the findings of LIAISON to explore how to build a strong foundation through coming together around a **shared vision**, establishing models for **group structure** and **leadership**, adopting **clear** and **well-matched roles and responsibilities**, **fostering trust and good communication** and planning ahead for **monitoring and evaluation**.

### A SHARED VISION

#### How can co-ownership of the idea from the outset improve results and outcomes?

Coming together to respond to a particular challenge or opportunity requires embracing a co-innovation process from the beginning. How formal or informal this process is depends on the group and what they are trying to achieve as well as the requirements of the funder (known or sought). It is the leader(s)' role to build and form good working relationships from the start, as good relationships can translate into well-functioning communication among partners for the lifetime of the activity and beyond.

There is a variety of ways to come to a shared vision. Groups will want to consider how the process will be managed and think about how co-innovation at this stage can ensure participants sign up to the goals and ambitions. The case studies evaluated for LIAISON reported several ways of defining the targets and objectives of their project or activity. Approaches included:

- Initial scoping to agree targets and objectives that were then elaborated on by a smaller group
- Objective and target setting led by the core team (of senior partners) with some consultation with others
- A collective approach, expecting substantial input from all partners into defining the targets and objectives
- One lead actor dominating the process
- Not all partners choosing to participate, leaving it to others to take responsibility
- User consultation in the early stages of goal setting
- Contribution or steering from the public or private funder.

Keeping everyone motivated and signed up towards this shared goal is important. Through LIAISON evidence was gathered on how to approach a particular issue when different members of the partnership had diverging opinions. Adopting participatory methods is one way to assist in

bringing together others to co-innovate. This approach can help participants to express and share their ideas, fears, expectations, agreements and disagreements in greater depth, and come to agreed upon goals and project scope through a step-by-step process. This can take time and benefits from good facilitation. This initial process fosters mutual understanding, which helps to build trust, an essential foundation of partnership.

**To find out more about the effectiveness of and guidance on the use of participatory methods, see the LIAISON handbook.**

Working in groups from diverse backgrounds – for example researchers, academics, NGOs, farmers and foresters – brings together many different ways of thinking and doing concerning problem solving, time management, planning and taking on tasks. In order to work effectively as a multi-actor consortium, all are part of a process that demands practice, time and experience. By joining forces it is possible to achieve common goals, purposes and mutual understanding for building confidence, learning, acting and reaching compromises.

*"A happy bunch of people working well together and having lots of fun, generating new knowledge and a new insight, new tools, new products and developed a trademark within the project which has been a lot of fun".* Quote from a Work Package leader from a public research organisation

Engagement with intended users of the innovation at this early stage of planning and design helps to improve the uptake of the final outputs. Groups can benefit from planning their farmer and forester engagement from the outset and being open to effective participation and engagement from the start.

**For more on stakeholder engagement see the *Connected Partnerships How to Guide*.**

### What if we want to deviate from the original plan?

It is likely that co-innovation projects won't exactly follow the ambitious plans the group held at the outset, but not having a plan in place makes it very difficult to identify and evaluate how and why the

activity changes and deviates as it progresses. Striking a balance between a rigid plan and having the confidence to respond to unforeseen opportunities that arise during the project can have a major impact on outcome success.

Having a detailed workplan from the start is required but adjustments are always possible. However, they need to be justified by the overarching objective of the activity and it will be necessary to negotiate any changes with the private or public funder. In the case of public funding this will require a formal amendment process. This can be time consuming for both the partnership and the staff of the funding body.

Many funders now request a risk register as part of the project proposal. This tool can be enormously helpful in identifying the events that could cause the group to deviate, and occasions when they need to build on the original plan. Understanding what these might be, and the factors at the group's disposal to help mitigate these obstacles, enables the group to track and confidently identify their innovation journey milestones and learnings along the way.

### What type of leadership is best?

There is no one defined/replicable model for the leadership of multi-actor partnerships but there are core responsibilities and characteristics that can improve collaborative ways of working. When groups are forming around an idea, project or activity it is essential that an individual or team taking the lead can demonstrate:

- **Interpersonal skills** for managing difference of opinion and to facilitate decision making
- **Technical skills** for the development of innovative approaches
- **Functional skills** for the engagement in co-innovation such as:
  - Leading (contributing) to **longer-term group processes**
  - Understanding **partners' interests** and motivations
  - Speaking '**different languages**' (science, practice, administration etc.)

- **Facilitation**/moderation of innovation workshops, meetings and other co-innovation activities
- Guiding through and **engaging in self-assessment** and critical reflection
- Spreading the news (communication, **dissemination**)

As well as openness and self-confidence, trust in others and ability to inspire.

### LIAISON TOOLS

**Creating a Needs Register** – helps partnerships to understand the diverse range of needs of everyone in the partnership.

**Causes and Effects tool** – used to build hypotheses to help link actions to results. It is particularly useful for identifying and planning desirable outcomes from projects.

**Hot Topics tool** – helps to create relevance across professional and disciplinary boundaries with the aim of creating coalitions within multi-actor teams around mutual 'hot topics' of interest rather than on the basis of disciplinary

A group should consider the best management approach to achieve their required goals. Some groups will decide that an informal structure is sufficient to deliver their activities. Others will need a more formalised approach which sets out in much more detail how the group will work together. Sometimes the degree of formality will be influenced by the funding received and certain rules and reporting requirements. Defining these ways of working in project reference documents sets the ground rules for how the group will work together.

Working together effectively requires being open and inclusive. This can be more challenging within more 'formal' partnerships delivering projects rather than innovation networks and clusters. Building a supportive environment for all members of the group can help everyone to contribute as well as develop along the way. This can foster a culture of

mutual trust where the fine balance between rules and spontaneity is achieved.

*[Nod Verde](#)<sup>1</sup> is a Romanian food hub initiative. The partnership developed a formal business plan but while working together was open to making small internal adjustments. This helped specifically when working with other hubs when they established informal agreements based on mutual trust. While this example is focused on a business-to-business relationship this can be replicated in other situations.*

Whatever type of management is preferred it will be important to decide whether collective leadership should be fostered, how inclusive and participative the partnership wants to be, or if in order to achieve the goal a more directive management approach is required. In the LIAISON case studies we found that both partnerships with a clear 'hierarchical' leadership and those with a more collective approach can work effectively. What is important is the capacity to listen to each other and create the openness for partners to share their ideas or have room for experimentation and exploration. However, such fruitful consultation and shared decision-making processes will require additional time and the use of skilled facilitation processes.

### Should all partnerships have a written agreement?

Often when a diverse range of people come together to innovate, it is in order to form a project or programme intended to tackle a particular issue or respond to a funding call. The latter usually requires a partnership agreement as part of the funding criteria. Creating an agreement, no matter how informal, is good practice so everyone can be clear about what they have signed up to do and their role in making it happen.

The following **checklist** can be utilised to ensure that any partnership is operating as effectively as it can:

**Duration** – is there a fixed timeframe or are we more relaxed about seeing where our discussions and actions take us?

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<sup>1</sup> [liaison2020.eu/casestudy/nod-verde/](http://liaison2020.eu/casestudy/nod-verde/)

**Agreement** – do we need a contractual agreement, memorandum of understanding or more flexible commitments to collaborate or both?

**Objectives and targets** – are these set by consensus or proposed, for example, by a delegated task group and agreed to by all partners? Do we want clear and specific timeframes and tasks for all or the freedom to self-define activity to meet objectives?

**Work plan** – do we identify and action ideas and opportunities as they arise or are they clearly set up and defined at the outset? Is there a focus around practical activities or events or is work specified around clear and defined outputs?

**Roles and responsibility** – how clearly defined and shared are these? Do certain participants have specific tasks and lead roles?

**Managing the work** – do all partners share the activity or do core partners take on most of the work?

**Hierarchy** – are all partners equal or is a leader appointed with a core project team?

**Knowledge and information sharing** – do we encourage informal ways to share or adopt a formal approach on a ‘need to know’ basis?

**Communication** – is there an agreement in place around whether communication happens openly and freely across partners without gatekeepers, or are there pre-planned and defined communication tasks or protocols?

Special attention should be given to how to engage and ‘formalise’ the participation of stakeholders outside of the core group.. It is necessary to be clear on how they will collaborate with the core group and their role in the activity and division of work, and to ensure that they are aware that their engagement is important and valued.

**For more on how to engage others from outside the partnership see the *Connected Partnerships How to Guide*.**

Every partnership should consider setting aside time to discuss and agree on a governance structure. This can help with organisation, structuring and sharing leadership, and is particularly beneficial for complex projects with large consortia (such as those funded by Horizon 2020). Partners need to be prepared to set aside plenty of time to get it right from the outset. This is important because everyone needs to have the opportunity to adapt to the ways in which the consortium works together, which for

some could be unfamiliar, such as the requirement for transparency and open communication. To achieve this successfully the group’s co-ordinator must be able to convey an overall vision for how the consortium will work together. Taking responsibility for fostering and creating a connection between all and being clear on the roles and responsibilities they have. A certain flexibility and freedom to adapt and evolve must also be achieved – a critical factor in innovation projects and activities.



**LIAISON** has compiled a handbook on participatory methods for co-innovation initiatives, and a Tool Box of evaluation and impact assessment tools.

## MOTIVATIONS TO COLLABORATE

### How can partnerships ensure that everyone is making their full contribution?

As a multi-actor group forms, it is necessary to consider all the aspects that can help to improve the effectiveness of the partnership. These include strong project management as well as good cooperation between everyone in order to recognise and value complementary skills. Good practice examples identified by LIAISON include:

- Considering the needs of the project and finding a diverse range of collaborators who have both the hard and soft skills required to achieve the group’s aims
- Celebrating and recognising the motivation of partners and the skills and experience they bring
- Not underestimating the time and other resources it takes to implement the planned activities by making sure everyone is clear about their expected contribution
- Being sufficiently flexible and creating space and time for people from differing backgrounds and varying levels of experience to become familiar with each other and build trust

Large consortia (representatives from 10+ partners) may benefit from forming a core group to maintain overall strategic oversight. This group might allocate specific tasks to other members linked to work packages, tasks and outputs.

There is no doubt that working with partners from a previous collaboration can provide real value to the innovation process as good working relationships would have already been formed. Even so, it is important to think about who could bring new insights, ideas and ways of working to the partnership. Ensuring that new collaborators feel welcome and included from the outset by providing sufficient time and space to get to know others informally can help to boost their input and confidence from the start. This is also relevant if a new partner joins part way through the planning process to fill a gap that has been identified.

There are several tools which partnerships can use to help them identify the stakeholders that may be interested in and motivated to join in. These tools are included in the LIAISON Tool Box.

### LIAISON TOOLS

**Actor/Participant ID** – can be used to carry out an appraisal for the different stakeholders, their motivations and expectations for participation, as well as their skills and imagined roles within the project.

### How long should a partnership work together?

Partnerships often come together for the first time around a funding opportunity. While some participants will join for the duration of the project or beyond, some will only have a short-term role. This is especially true for funders and sponsors or specialists delivering technical input or expertise at a certain stage of the co-innovation process. However, how each group chooses to collaborate and continue to work together in the future should always be part of the ongoing discussion. Often when groups come together to innovate, it is to tackle a particularly difficult problem or significant

societal challenge. This may only be partly solved through the initial planned activity.

**For more detail on the value of maintaining a long-term view beyond the duration of a funding programme or project timeframe see the *Impact How to Guide*.**

### How to identify and invite the best people and organisations to collaborate with?

The following steps can help to build a strong and effective consortium:

**Step one** – form a core group of one or more partner(s). This group usually consists of individuals that have come together around a shared opportunity or idea and initiated the co-innovation activity e.g. a funding proposal or new market/added value opportunity. This can start from an individuals' idea or a group's or a network's activity.

**Step two** – use a range of strategies to build your consortium:

- Use networks known to the partners to identify prospective members
- Build a partnership around actors that you have previously worked with or have a track record with, or expertise in the topic area (make sure to generate a shared understanding of their strengths and what they can offer)
- Reach out to existing clusters formed around specific long-term objectives and strategies
- Seek new relationships where no partner has collaborated before in this way perhaps through brokerage events or identifying them through known intermediaries
- If possible, seek the support or guidance of the funder or if available its official innovation support service, set up to help innovation groups to prepare for a project (e.g. an Operational Group funding).

**Step three** – Evaluate potential roles in the consortia based on individual or organisations skills and abilities (see next section).

**Step four** – Last minute additions, particularly to larger consortia, can present challenges both in the early stages and throughout the activity. Careful planning from the start can reduce the chances of tasks being given to partners who lack the skills and competencies to achieve them. If last minute additions are unavoidable, the partnership should be clear that this presents risks and should consider factors to mitigate them. This may involve getting additional support from other participants in the planning and early stages of implementation to help build new partners' capacity and capabilities to deliver.

### LIAISON TOOLS

**Stakeholder Associated Risk Analysis** – used to assess the impact of individuals involved in the activity and their role and responsibilities within the process.

**Database of actor categories** – used to identify the motivations of individual partners and group together under themes.

There are several factors which govern the selection of partners based on their capacity to deliver both physically and financially, as well as having the resources to achieve the co-innovation goals. The partnership should include the correct balance of skills. Sometimes the composition of partnerships is determined by the requirement of the funder, for example seeking specific scientific expertise or engaging directly with individual farm businesses (rather than via an NGO of farmer association).

The knowledge and experience that a group requires is not confined to the technical capacity of the partners. It also includes their networks which can be exploited during the implementation of the project, to recruit further partners. Another important factor in determining suitability of stakeholders to join a consortium is their attitude and interest or willingness to take part in the co-innovation activity. Factors to consider include:

- Ability to work hard
- Preparedness to work in a diverse partnership

- Reputation
- Access to networks
- Willingness to co-innovate
- Demonstrating/track record of neutrality, credibility and reliability
- Communication skills e.g. practitioners languages, administrative/academic language, foreign language.

LIAISON found that organising events to exchange ideas can encourage communication and co-development of innovation solutions, as well as being an effective way to get to know each other in the early stages. This is particularly important if the members of the group do not know each other well.

*Arena Skog<sup>2</sup> is a value chain driven wood and forestry industry based innovation cluster in Norway. In order to explore ideas for new urban food constructions it held dedicated events where participants presented challenges, solutions and points of view in order to co-create ideas for progression. This mutual learning process was developed through discussions and presentations in informal groups during project meetings to provide the opportunity to present and openly discuss problems and achievements from the different phases within the project.*

## SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

### How can skills and knowledge be effectively identified and matched to meet the needs of the group?

When considering the tasks that need to be delivered and matching the right partners to fulfil these roles, the suitability of the prospective partner for the planned tasks should be carefully assessed. It can often be easier to work with someone who is motivated but does not have all the technical knowledge than someone who has the necessary knowledge but is not particularly interested or motivated in the co-innovation partnership.

*“The project partners were carefully chosen for their friendly, hardworking and generous natures. When selecting the work package leaders the nature of the individual was a key criterion, which means a person*

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<sup>2</sup> [liaison2020.eu/casestudy/magners-farm-copy/](https://liaison2020.eu/casestudy/magners-farm-copy/)

*with whom it is easy to work with (e.g. non-aggressive, flexible personality and devotion) and to build trust”* Quote from a LIAISON participant

### **What is the range of competencies and experiences that collectively achieves effective interactive innovation?**

An effective partnership will draw on the expertise from the range of stakeholders involved, both from a technical and practical perspective, to ensure complementary skills within the group. These skills may include:

- Administrative and management competence
- Research knowledge and experience, including ability to conduct research or on an applied research (e.g. on field studies)
- Entrepreneurial spirit and a desire to innovate
- Practical knowledge and experience on range of relevant topics
- Knowledge and experience of farming and/or forestry e.g. market, environmental or social issues.
- Business management and commercial experience
- Dissemination and marketing skills
- Local knowledge and experience as well as sector-specific understanding
- Experience with methods for knowledge-exchange, peer-to-peer learning, on farm demonstration etc.

An issue which can arise is that when preparing the proposal, highly capable and respected individuals may be involved. However, once the funding is secured, those people may be too busy to do the work and, instead it may be that other colleagues are involved instead. It is not sufficient to bring together the necessary knowledge in the proposal, it must be available for the co-innovation activity! If this problem cannot be avoided, the partner concerned should put in place an effective handover and mentoring or peer support procedure to ensure that the value of their contribution to the work of the group is fully maintained.

Researchers and farmers/foresters may not possess the full range of knowledge and expertise across

their value chain. In this case partners such as food processors, hotels and restaurants, water companies and consumer associations can contribute additional competences, as too can advisors.

### **How does taking part in multi-actor partnerships impact on the individual?**

LIAISON considered the impact that collaborating with a wider range of stakeholders can have on the individuals involved. Coming together can empower different people in many ways, sometimes unexpected at the outset. It can be transformative especially in projects that add value to farm businesses, develop new enterprises or transform farming practices. It can also open up people to skills sets they have not previously used or understood. This exchange of knowledge and know-how can help strengthen an individual's role in the innovation process, encourage learning, introduce people to new networks, build trust and generate and strengthen social capital.

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Understanding individuals' characteristics and circumstances**

As with any partnership it is important to understand the habits and attitudes of all those engaging directly in the activity, as well as the realities and practicalities that could result in barriers to their full participation in the co-innovation process.

Joining a partnership, even towards an agreed common goal, requires recognition of factors limiting the capabilities of different partners and stakeholders to participate. These could include time, ability to travel to meetings, access to resources or funding etc. It is important to understand and recognise these challenges in order to avoid any misunderstandings. This is especially true when it comes to farmers and foresters who may have greater limitations with regard to time or resources and may require assistance to engage

## Engaging with farmers and foresters

LIAISON studied a wide range of co-innovation projects and other activities involving farmers and foresters as users or direct beneficiaries of the outputs. These members hold a significant stake in the project, but are often not engaged in the early stages of the co-innovation activity unless contacted by organisations such as associations that represent them.

The partnership must be clear about how it plans to engage with and value these groups to get the best results. Does the activity embrace farmer-led innovation or is their role intended to provide expert advice or other forms of consultation?

## LEADERSHIP

### What is the most effective way to lead a multi-actor partnership?

It is important to be clear on the role of leadership within any consortium. How is it embodied by the partnership? Can it be shared or concentrated on one individual or lead organisation? Crucially, how will decisions be made, stakeholders consulted and actions taken within the consortium.

Whatever the preferred option, it requires both individual and collective maturity to build an effective working environment to share responsibilities, interact effectively, deal with conflicts and collectively achieve their objectives.

### Can a multi actor partnership be successful without a dedicated co-ordinator?

The role of the co-ordinator is to broker partnerships and facilitate dialogue between members. At the heart of this role is an understanding and familiarity with participatory methods. The role is to drive the collaboration and facilitate group events or dialogues within the group and with external stakeholders. Appointing a dedicated co-ordinator, highly skilled in working with multi-actor partnerships is advised. It is particularly worthwhile if the activity includes a complex range of interconnecting activities and outputs.



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## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

### What is the role of monitoring and evaluation to support and inform decision-making throughout the project's life?

Relevant monitoring and evaluation from the outset can provide an ongoing source of information that can aid decision-making at various steps along the project's path.

The information is also important to highlight and document positive outcomes and successes of the group and activity along the way, inform reflections, and identify and address problems and weaknesses before they become critical and have a detrimental impact on the activity.

Finally, it can provide valuable information to generate insights and ideas for future actions to improve the project, or opportunities to collaborate together again in the future. As the saying goes, "what gets measured gets managed". Therefore to properly understand the project's evolution and act accordingly, it is relevant for the group to establish and agree on the monitoring and evaluation requirements and commitments for its planned activities and relations starting at the earliest stages.

### Embedding evaluation into the co-innovation activity

For co-innovation projects the process is complex and dynamic. Given the interaction of multiple actors, evaluation plays an even more central role in assisting decision-making. To evaluate processes it is useful to periodically carry out ongoing evaluations, especially self-evaluation by the managers in charge of the co-innovation initiatives. By self-evaluating along the way the group can become aware of how the process is going, identify



how to improve it and address possible deviations. Some factors that can make a difference to how effective a group is at evaluating its impact are:

- Choosing tools that can support appropriate evaluation of the co-innovation process
- Analysing and customising the assessment activity to the needs of the consortium, its goals and workplan
- Creating or using simple and easily understood self-evaluation tools
- Taking time to build stakeholders capacity around assessment by coaching them when they participate in the project and supporting them to conduct evaluation by themselves
- Engaging a skilled facilitator when the team does not possess sufficient expertise for assessment exercises when using the wide range of evaluation methods and tools.

### How do you establish the groundwork for effective monitoring and evaluation when designing activities?

There are some basic steps for a group to develop and adapt its evaluation strategy during the activity's duration:

- Collectively recognise and agree on the value and benefits of an evaluation process
- Identify what needs to be monitored, when and by whom
- Establish the best way to evaluate activities or processes by choosing adaptable and effective tools and methods.
- Make sure periodic results are shared and inform decision-making as the project moves forward
- If appropriate, make sure the evaluation results are easily available to members during the project's life for feedback (not only at the very end when this feedback will only inform future activities)

Evaluation should be an integral aspect of any project from its planning stages. A monitoring system applied continuously and in a self-reflective way can contribute significantly to the process of managing an initiative. It can provide relevant data to support decision-making and continuous activity improvement, therefore resulting in better chances of achieving the group's goals. That is why when designing activities groups should consider how they will be evaluated during development as well as once it's ended.

When developing their plans, groups should keep in mind that the monitoring and evaluation needed by the partners at a project level might differ from the requirements of the programme funder or managing authorities. Therefore engaging with particular collaborators to find the right tool and measure results for the right audience is a relevant consideration in these early planning stages.

There are a range of tools, resources and methods to consider and adapt when developing an evaluation strategy that suits each particular co-innovation project. Participants can reach into the LIAISON interactive Tool Box and select the quantitative and/or qualitative tools and approaches best suited to monitor and assess activities, to analyse group dynamics, and to evaluate key milestones and outcomes.



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## About the LIAISON 'How to Guides'

**LIAISON** has developed five 'How to Guides' to support practitioners taking part in co-innovation initiatives. For the purposes of this guide a 'practitioner' is any actor seeking to take part in or provide direct support for partners in co-operation initiatives or projects which innovate through a participatory processes.

**LIAISON** (Better Rural Innovation: Linking Actors, Instruments and Policies through Networks) is a multi-actor project which has been funded within the EIP Agri, an initiative launched by the European Commission in 2012 with its goal of fostering competitive and sustainable agriculture and forestry that *"achieves more and better from less"*.

The interactive innovation approach brings together a diverse range of public and private innovation actors (farmers, advisors, researchers, businesses, NGOs etc.) with complementary knowledge and experience to appraise, gather, co-create and disseminate practical solutions to the real needs of farmers and foresters. These needs are driven by and derived from the real opportunities and day-to-day challenges faced by farmers, foresters and rural businesses. The innovations generated with an interactive approach can deliver solutions that are well adapted to circumstances and which are easier to implement.

- **Coming Together**
- **Good Planning**
- **Healthy Partnerships**
- **Connected Partnerships**
- **Achieving Impact**

These guides highlight what we have learned from **LIAISON's** activities and data collection. The aim is to help all that use them enhance the way they co-innovate in farming, forestry and rural development.

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