

how to guide

Healthy Partnerships

ACTIVE COLLABORATION AND WORKING TOGETHER

This 'How to Guide' identifies some of the key learnings from LIAISON that can help improve the quality of collaboration, communication and co-ordination in multi-actor partnerships.

The LIAISON project has been focused on finding and identifying the factors for success in a wide range of multi-actor partnerships including those framed by the EU's EIP-Agri programme and other initiatives. The success factor common to these partnerships has been a genuine sense of involvement and encouragement to participate; by being dynamic and active partnerships they achieved meaningful and proactive exchanges. Successful partnerships have a good understanding of the **benefits of participatory processes** and a recognition and valuing of difference and diversity. This How to Guide explores skills and considerations for **effective co-ordination** in order to **build trust** and deliver successful co-innovation projects.

- enthusiasm and confidence in the co-innovation process
- openness and welcoming of differing viewpoints
- curiosity and a good sense of humour
- capacity to enjoy a variety of working environments
- encouraging a transparent and inclusive process
- dealing effectively and positively with disagreements when they arise with a solution-oriented mindset
- enjoying meeting and spending time with members of the consortium
- delegating and sharing management and co-ordination of tasks

EFFECTIVE CO-ORDINATION

What is required of a good leader for co-innovation projects?

An effective leader is a critical driving force within a multi-actor partnership. LIAISON's *Good Planning How to Guide* identified the skills and competencies needed by individuals co-ordinating a multi-actor project. These included both technical and functional skills as well as the ability to lead and guide, and the capacity to engage with and communicate to different audiences.

In addition to these skills it is also important for this individual to embody the ways of working that the partnership wants to foster. This includes:

How to avoid getting caught up in the day-to-day project management?

It is the responsibility of the co-ordinator to monitor and keep the partnership on track. Through effectively managing the group's activities the co-ordinator can ensure the project's objectives are met.

Project management involves complex processes from planning, organising, managing and controlling, to budgeting, monitoring, testing and implementing. Maintaining oversight of the whole process is essential in making sure all partners are

clear of their roles and responsibilities and who is accountable.

For more information on creating a shared vision see the *Good Planning How to Guide*.

How much is effective co-ordination as a result of expert facilitation?

Co-innovation projects require leadership and effective facilitation to get the best from everyone. It is a team effort. Facilitation can help to ensure engagement, consultation and encouragement to make sure that everyone is actively involved and fully inputting into the co-innovation process. LIAISON identified that the facilitation skills required to work with farmer-led initiatives will vary from those needed to co-ordinate a multi-stakeholder cluster requiring long-term leadership towards a particular societal goal.

For more guidance on effective facilitation for co-innovation projects, see the LIAISON handbook on participatory methods in co-innovation initiatives

HOW WE WORK TOGETHER

What factors help to maximise the success of co-innovation partnerships?

There are a number of success factors that can help to achieve effective collaboration and well-functioning groups. These include:



Figure 1 LIAISON success factors for effective collaboration

These success factors have been identified through an analysis by LIAISON of 200 multi-actor partnerships. To form a group that works well together the co-ordinator or team need to foster trust across the partnership, value everyone as being key to success, make sure they recruit and engage partners with the quality of input, behaviours and high levels of emotional intelligence needed by the group, and forge a positive chemistry between participants that provides a spirit of collaboration and good teamwork.

Crucially the project co-ordinator or team leaders need to be aware of and comfortable in the knowledge that they cannot do everything themselves, and be willing to delegate specific activities to other partners. A beneficial result of constructive delegation is that it can be an effective way to get to know each member of the partnership, value and recognise their strengths, share knowledge and help others to develop along the way.

How can trust be effectively achieved within a partnership?

The following actions can be used as part of a strategy to foster trust and underpin effective ways to work together in a partnership:

- Establish an open, friendly atmosphere
- Involve beneficiaries of the innovation in the whole process of developing the innovation
- listen to and gather input and insights throughout
- Generate an open space for dialogue where everyone can express their needs without fear
- Encourage all participants to see each other as colleagues rather than as competitors
- Create social and spatial proximity to promote familiarity amongst participants
- Organise successive workshops and field visits where everyone can exchange experiences

With all these factors in place it will help to create a strong and effective partnership.

Are there particular factors which enhance co-innovation partnerships?

The way a partnership works together and the characteristics of the individuals involved can have a considerable impact on what the group achieves. LIAISON found the following characteristics and ways of working could contribute to successful co-innovation processes:

- Personal characteristics and capabilities of the individual or team leading the co-creation process: this can make a big difference (both positive and negative) to the quality of the process and its outcomes
- Co-innovation is better/faster when the process is initiated by people who will be the users of the innovation because:
 - (a) co-innovation is as a result of a clear 'need'/'motivation' for working together;
 - (b) if the motivation is not solely linked to need – the 'will to succeed' was also an important factor to ensure a healthy partnership; and
 - (c) some actors in the co-creation process are more results-orientated than others and will tend to push/pull the process more rapidly
- Existing relationships between partners before the project. The better participants know each other beforehand – and especially when there is a history of good working relations – the more trust there will be within the group and the more members will be prepared to take risks together
- Clarity of communication between people working together, especially when it comes to how they will organise work, is essential for effective co-innovation. More specifically, it is very useful to:
 - (a) agree 'clear rules of engagement' established before starting
 - (b) ensure that these 'rules' are followed consistently and transparently
 - (c) set a clear protocol for compliance with the rules from the start of the project

The Global Covid-19 Pandemic significantly impacted the ability of partnerships to come together in more familiar, tried and tested ways

such as frequent face-to-face meetings that help to maintain momentum and field visits which can be useful to motivate and inspire participation. Finding opportunities to seek ideas from outside the group to 'fertilise' or 'stimulate' the co-innovation process such as 'exchange visits' between projects/countries can be effective in achieving peer-to-peer exchanges.

Travel restrictions meant changes to ways of working. While outdoor activities – on-farm trials for example – were sometimes feasible, teams had to adapt to collaborating almost entirely virtually. Understanding the full impact this different way of collaborating has had on multi-actor partnerships has yet to be fully evaluated. It is likely that there have been gains in regard to efficiency and engagement of stakeholders, but also disadvantages.

What might hinder the co-innovation process?

As much as any partnership will strive to work together as effectively as possible it takes hard work, determination and openness to deal with problems when they arise. Multi-actor partnerships can experience a range of challenges along the way, particularly at stressful times when deadlines are close or the project faces difficulties. Behaviours which can arise at such times can include:

- **Power plays** – misuse of power, taking over, forming cliques
- **Negative attitudes** – obstructing progress
- **Lack of recognition** – ignoring others, excluding certain members of the group
- **Verbal insults**
- **Exclusive communication** – leading to conflicts or people being left out of discussions

Proactively tackling these issues when they arise is the best way to solve them:

- **Raise awareness** – be clear with all partners how and with whom to raise concerns or complaints
- **Utilise the skills and experience** within the group to remind everyone of the value of being open and sharing issues when they arrive

- **Create a neutral or safe space** with a clear process to raise any concerns
- **Assign roles** to members of the group to lead on issues such as gender and equality to provide support and guidance to all affected

The speedy and effective resolution of conflicts can be helped by bringing in external help to mediate and resolve issues. Any group planning to work together should be open to the potential of conflicts arising at any time and discuss at the beginning how these will be tackled as they pose a significant risk. Being clear on the processes to follow as part of a formal or written agreement of ways of working together can help.

Is it better to be clear from the start about a formal governance structure and an action plan to follow?

There are pros and cons in adopting very formalised governance structures for multi-actor projects. Ultimately, whether a consortium needs to adopt a very formalised governance structure will depend on the degree to which this is a requirement of the funding body. It should not just be taken for granted that the larger the consortia, the more formalised the governance structure should be: there is potential in groups of any size to need to keep all members moving in the same direction and at the same time and be rigid in how this is communicated and understood. However, for co-innovation projects there is a need to be comfortable with and not fear the need to adapt and change.

In the establishment phase of any group it is important to be clear about ways of working together and to make the time to scope this out properly. The group's ability to actively collaborate will depend on being open and realistic about what will be needed from the outset; and result from having the confidence and structures in place to periodically evaluate, review or identify when things need to change and agree together how they will be modified.

For more on managing the planning stages, see the *Good Planning How to Guide*.

Partnerships will find value in having a clear action plan with tasks allocated accordingly. This helps to

keep everyone on track and provides clarity on who is doing what and when, thus making the co-ordinator's role more effective. The main difficulties arise when things do not quite go according to plan. However, every process can be modified and adjusted depending on the needs and the context in which it works. Co-innovation collaborators should be prepared to deal with unfortunate situations within the group, with the funders or the wider periphery of the innovation project. The trick is not to waste valuable time, and instead address the problem and put in place the required changes, delegating these new tasks to members of the group who have the necessary characteristics to deliver on the activity. Having a thorough risk management plan can be a helpful tool for co-innovation partnerships.

How can a culture of sharing and cooperation be created?

Creating a culture of sharing and cooperation has been proven to deliver numerous benefits for multi-actor partnerships. Whatever the operating structure chosen, it should promote co-operation throughout by:

- **Creating space** for exchange – provide options and distinct times for sharing and working jointly at different levels. The more diverse the range of participants in the group, the more vital these instances are to foster co-operation and build group cohesion. To be effective they benefit from good facilitation
- Encouraging **direct exchanges** as much as possible, as this helps to break down barriers and speed up activity across the partnership
- **Working together** to agree on how decisions are made and keeping these agreements continually under review to evaluate their suitability
- Being clear about when **delegation** is required if things are not progressing according to the group's plan; and being explicit about the allocation of responsibilities

Everyone in a partnership has something valuable to bring to the project, and it is important that each

member understands the unique contributions individuals bring. Even when this information is clear, special focus should be given to addressing differences in how each member likes to work. When professional disciplines vary, for example between researchers and farmers, take time to consider the best ways to work together from the start. For example, staying on farm can be more comfortable for farmers, but researchers may feel unfamiliar with the interruptions of a working farm and this might disrupt their ability to work effectively. For multi-national projects it is also important to fairly factor in different time zones when meeting virtually.

Can the whole partnership be involved in decision making?

Adopting a participatory process helps everyone to be actively involved in the process. This also results in the group's decisions reflecting the different opinions of members. While the co-ordinator may take the lead when a decision needs to be made, this can be in consultation with the other members of the group, and in a way that is clear and transparent with effective communication to all.

However, taking care to clarify the decision-making process, particularly for members in the partnership who are new to the participatory approach to working together, is important. Adapting to these new conditions requires patience and perseverance from all of those involved.

[See the LIAISON handbook on participatory methods in co-innovation initiatives](#)

What happens if the project gets overwhelmed with jargon to the point that not everyone understands some aspects?

A number of LIAISON case studies highlighted how challenging it can be to use technical language appropriately and effectively. A multi-actor partnership will, by its very nature, engage with individuals from very different backgrounds and disciplines. Even if they are committed to achieving the same goal, jargon can make working together difficult.

It is relevant to highlight this potential problem across the partnership from the start: all partners should recognise and understand that not everyone will know certain technical terms or practices being discussed and used. Therefore participants should try to simplify the way they communicate and everyone should have the confidence to ask for clarifications. For example, farmers can get very technical about their practices, researchers often fail to make scientific outputs readable to a broader audience, and value chain actors may focus on their business or customers' needs which may not always be understood by practitioners or primary producers.



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

EFFECTIVE CO-CREATION

What is the best way to manage differences between stakeholders?

In multi-actor partnerships there are a range of ways in which participants will differ, be it in terms of their personal or professional experiences, or as a result of the interest they have in the project's outputs. The first step in effective co-innovation is to acknowledge these differences and address them.

For multi-actor projects working with farmers, for example, there are particular practicalities that need to be taken into account: some of these instances are when research activities are being carried out on-farm, or when a co-innovation activity's aim is to result in a new business opportunity.

Another area where researchers and farmers may differ is with regard to duration of tasks. Researchers are often working across multi-year projects with long-term goals, whereas farmers can be fixed by the particularities of the growing season or lifetime of an animal. These differences in their mindsets can impact the project schedule.

“It is sometimes difficult to match two very different ‘worlds’ or researcher and entrepreneur oriented organisations: different language, different business models, different view on Intellectual Property... in order to successfully co-create, these two worlds needs to be aligned and openness created.” Quote from a LIAISON participant

In multi-actor partnerships cultural differences can present themselves in a range of ways. There can be cultural differences within a group farmers in terms of the type of enterprises that they farm, differences in their interest in engaging more directly with the supply chain, as well as variation between more traditional farmers and pioneering ones. Success in engaging with farmers can be linked to how well they have been connected with, and involved in, networks beyond the local area. Taking time to understand how much previous experience they have had working with others, and their appetite and drive to get involved in new ways of working, can help to identify the best ways to collaborate.

LIAISON TOOLS

Empowerment Appraisal
Gender Appraisal
Satisfaction Survey (internal)
Appraisal of Group Dynamics.
Ground Rules: Identification of Opportunities and Challenges of Agreement-Based Cooperation

LIAISON identified that there can also be regional variation around capacity and willingness to co-innovate. For example discussions with practitioners from the Mediterranean shared how a limited culture of entrepreneurship, challenges mobilising actors in soft skills and a limited support structure to bring farmers together alongside fragmented knowledge exchange in rural areas all led to limitations in co-innovation and transfer of knowledge. For the Atlantic/North Sea practitioners, where there was already a strong tradition of co-operative approaches and diverse communities confident in their local identity and cultures, it seemed less challenging to unify around a shared idea and goal. The lack of a supportive and effective enabling environment can be a major challenge to getting co-innovation projects started and being successful. This difference becomes further

amplified when working across multi-national groups.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

What is the best way to manage and adapt to change?

Reflexive monitoring is an important approach to use in co-innovation projects. It is vital to understand the ways in which partnerships work together to deliver, adapt and develop activity.

Fostering a degree of versatility and adaptation allows the partnership to solve problems as they arise and enables partners to adjust the co-innovation methodology they have engaged with flexibly.

Groups will need to adapt to changing conditions, both internal and external to the project. The impact of real-life conditions and pressures such as resources, time limitations, capacity, energy etc. can disrupt a well-functioning partnership. Maintaining constant and pro-active self-observation is not always possible so it is important to be pragmatic while monitoring progress toward agreed deadlines, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and outcomes.

Are there tools that can help measure and monitor how effectively a partnership is working together?

LIAISON has developed an interactive Tool Box which contains a range of tools and methods that can be used and adapted by groups to monitor and evaluate their performance. These can be adopted at key milestones and planned for throughout the duration of the activity or as one-off activity at the start.



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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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