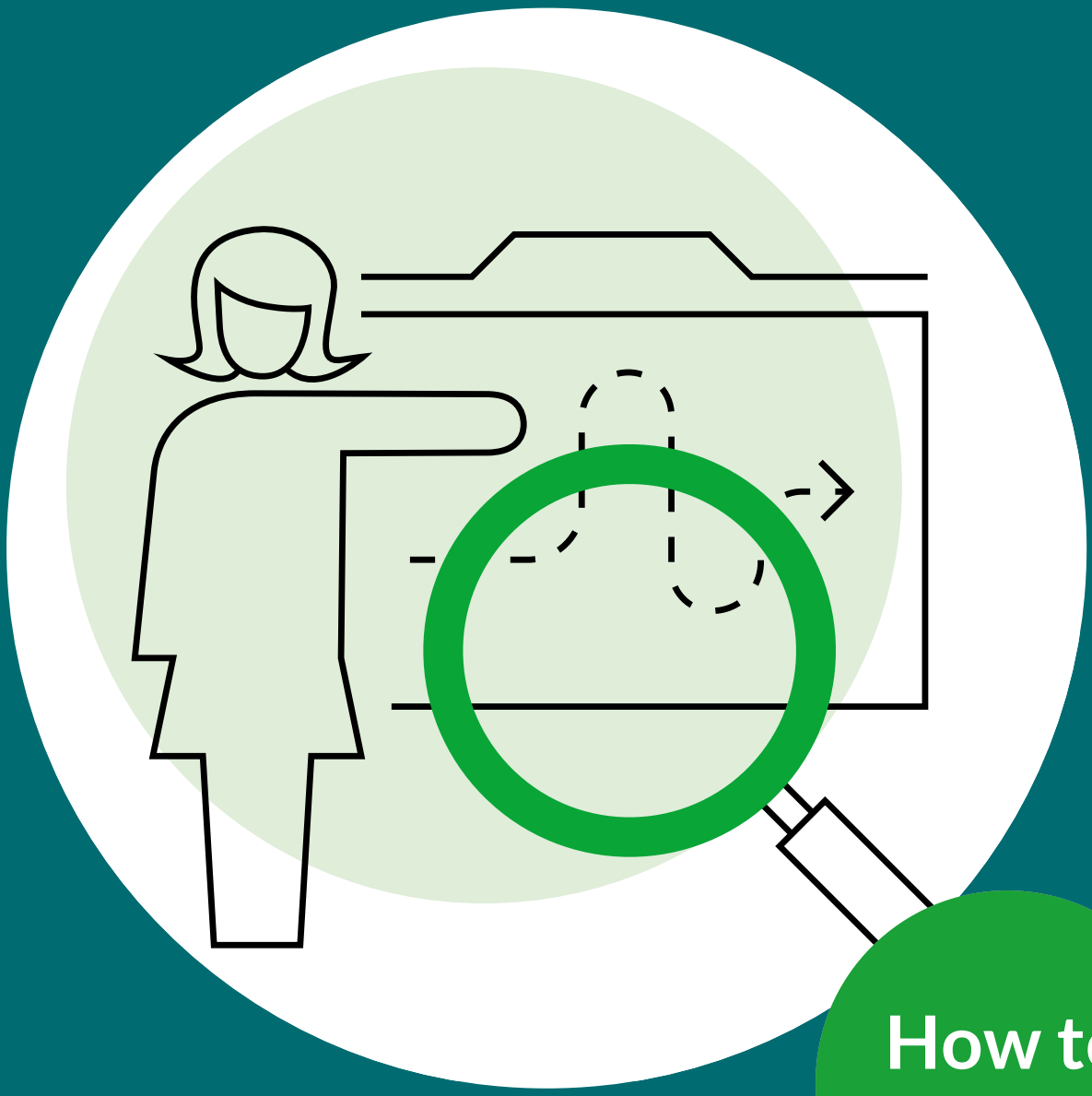
LIAISON

Optimising interactive innovation

Good Planning

Version 1.0



How to Guide

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DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

This 'How to g uide' explores the ways to effectively establish multi-actor partnerships for collaborating 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 rural innovation through working in partnership. LIAISON explored a wide range of partnerships, some were formal (e.g. established with a legal agreement) and others were informal. Numerous examples of effective ways to come together to work in partnership for co-innovation – the so-called interactive innovation approach - are presented in the Coming Together: How to Guide.

This How to Guide uses the findings of LIAISON to explore how to build a strong foundation through working 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 (whether known or still being sought). It is the leader's role to build and form good work-ing relationships from the start. Good relationships can achieve well-functioning communication among partners for the lifetime of the co-innovation activities and beyond.

The case studies examined by LIAISON identified several ways of defining the objectives of a project or activity, including:

- Initial scoping to agree objectives that were then elaborated further by a smaller group
- Objective setting led by a core team (e.g. of senior partners) with some consultation with other partners
- A collective approach with substantial input from all partners into defining the objectives
- One dominant partner leading the process
- Not all partners choosing to participate and leaving others to take responsibility
- Consultation with targeted users in the early stages of goal setting
- Contribution or steering from the public or private funder.

Keeping everyone motivated and signed up towards a shared goal is important and LIAISON gathered evidence on how best to proceed when different members of the partnership have diverging opinions. Various methods can be used to help bring partners together to participate in the co-innovation process. These participatory methods encourage and enable active involvement by helping everyone to express and share their ideas, fears, expectations, agreements and disagreements in greater depth, and thereby agree upon common goals for the project. This can take time and benefits from good facilitation, but if done effectively fosters mutual understanding and helps to build trust - an essential foundation of all partnerships.

Working in groups from a diverse range of 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. Working effectively as a multi-actor partnership involves being part of a process that demands practice, time and experience. By joining forces it is possible not only to achieve common goals, but also develop 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 engagement with other farmers and foresters 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?

Co-innovation projects do not always follow exactly the plans that the partnership has at the outset. However, not having a plan in place makes it very difficult to iden-tify and evaluate how and why the activity changes and develops 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 outcomes and achievements.

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 project, and it will be necessary to nego-tiate any changes with the private or public funder. In the case of public funding, this could require a formal amendment process, which can be time consuming for both the partnership and the funding body.

Many funders now request a risk register as part of the project proposal. This tool can be very helpful in identifying the reasons that could cause the group to deviate from the work plan, and occa-sions 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-innova-tion 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 un-derstand 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 pro-fessional and disciplinary boundaries with the aim of creating coalitions within multi-actor teams around mutual 'hot topics' of interest.

What management style is best for co-innovation?

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 formal-ised 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 balance between rules and spontaneity is achieved.

For example, *Nod Verde* is a Romanian food hub initiative. The partnership developed a formal business plan but 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. LIAISON 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.

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.

Should all partnerships have a written agreement?

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 Europe). Partners need to be prepared to set aside plenty of time to get it right from the beginning.

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.

Often when a diverse range of people come together to innovate, it is in order to form a project 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 as it means everyone can be clear about what they have signed up to do and their role in making it happen. The following checklist can be used to ensure that a partnership is operating as effectively as it can:

Figure 1: *Partnership agreement checklist*

Duration – is there a fixed timeframe or is the group comfortable with seeing where discussions and actions lead? Are ongoing activities envisaged?

Agreement – is a contractual agreement needed, or a memorandum of understanding, or is a more flexible commitment to collaborate desirable?

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

Work plan – should ideas and opportunities be actioned as they arise or are they clearly set up and defined at the outset? Is there a focus around practical activities or is work specified around clear and defined outputs?

Roles and responsibility – how clearly defined and shared are these? Do certain partners 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 – should a formal approach be adopted on a 'need to know' basis or will informal sharing be maintained?

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?

Special attention should be given to how to engage and 'formalise' the participation of stakeholders outside of the core group. If so, it will be necessary to be clear about how external stakeholders will collaborate with the core group, their role in the project and the division of work. Always communicate 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**.

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. Effective approaches identified by LIAISON include:

- Considering the needs of the project and finding a diverse range of partners 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 partners' team members , especially when they come from differing backgrounds and varying levels of experience. All individuals involved need to become familiar with each other and build trust amongst themselves

Large consortia (representatives from 10+ partner organisations) 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.

Working with partners from a previous collaboration can provide real value to the innovation process as good working relationships will usually 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 groups can use to help identify the stakeholders that may be interested in and motivated to join in. These tools are included in the LIAISON Tool Box.

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.

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 a substantial 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 **ACHEIVING 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 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 initiative.

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

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

Step three – Evaluate potential roles in the consortium based on individual or organisational skills and abilities (see Skills and Competencies section).

Step four – Last minute additions, particularly to larger consortia, can present challenges both in the early stages and throughout the future project. Careful planning from the start can reduce the chances of tasks being given to partners who lack the skills and competencies to achieve them. Such 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 the partner(s)' capacity and capabilities to deliver.

What criteria can be used in selecting partners?

There are several factors which govern the selection of partners based on their capacity to deliver both physically and financially to achieve the co-innovation goals of the partnership, as well as providing the required 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 rural businesses (e.g. rather than via a farmers cooperative or a nature conservation association).

The knowledge and experience that a group requires is not limited to the technical capacity of the partners. It also includes their networks which can be exploited during the implementation of the project in order to recruit further partners or disseminate results. Another important factor in determining the suitability of individuals or organisations to join a consortium is their interest and motivation 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 cooperate for the development or testing of an innovative solution
- 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 the collective identification of potentially innovative 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 is a value chain driven wood and forestry industry-based innovation cluster in Norway. In order to explore ideas for new urban wood constructions it held dedicated events where cluster members 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.

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.

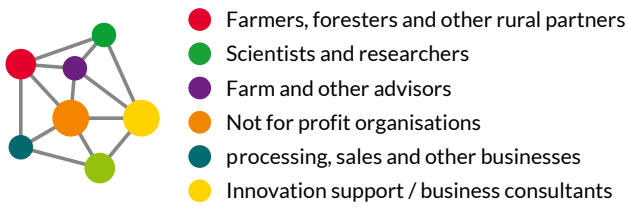
Database of actor categories – used to identify the motivations of individual partners and group together under themes.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

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

The suitability of any potential partner for the tasks planned in a project should be carefully assessed. This can include considering the tasks that need to be delivered and matching the right partners to fulfil these roles. It is often 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 criteria, which means a person 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 range of competencies and experiences achieve effective interactive innovation?
An effective partnership will draw on the expertise from the range of group members involved, both from a technical and a practical perspective. This can ensure complementary skills within the consortium. These skills may include:

- Administrative and management capabilities
- Research knowledge and experience, including ability to conduct research or work on applied research (e.g. on field studies)
- Entrepreneurial spirit and a desire to innovate
- Practical knowledge and experience on a 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.

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 can advisors and consultants.

One issue which can arise is that highly capable and respected individuals may be involved when preparing the proposal, but once the funding is secured these people may be too busy to do the work and involve other colleagues instead. Remember, it is not sufficient to solely bring together the necessary knowledge in the proposal, it must also be available for the co-innovation activity! If this problem cannot be avoided, the teams 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.

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

LIAISON considered the impact that collaborating with a wide range of persons and organisations can have on the individuals involved. Coming together can empower different people in many and sometimes unexpected ways. It can be transformative especially in projects that add value to farm businesses, develop new enterprises or transform farming practices. It can also alert 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 a collaborative spirit in general.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Understanding each other's characteristics and circumstances

As with any partnership it is important to understand the habits and attitudes of all those engaging directly in the project activities, 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 for working towards a clearly agreed common goal, requires recognition of the factors limiting the capabilities of individuals and different organisations to participate. These could include time, ability to join meetings, access to natural, technical or financial resources etc. It is important to understand and recognise these challenges in order to avoid any misunderstandings and encourage openness to discuss. 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 ensure their effective engagement.

Engaging with farmers and foresters

LIAISON studied a wide range of co-innovation projects, initiatives and networks involving farmers and foresters as targeted users of the outputs. These practitioners hold a significant stake in the project, but are often not fully and effectively engaged in the development of the idea or the co-innovation project unless specifically contacted by organisations such as farmer 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. Do the activities embrace farmer-led innovation or is their role intended to provide expert advice or other forms of consultation?

EFFECTIVE 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 will it be embodied by the partnership? Can it be shared or concentrated on one individual or lead organisation? Crucially, how will decisions be made, actions taken within the consortium, and external stakeholders consulted.

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 objectives.

> For more detail on effective leadership see the **COMING TOGETHER: How to Guide**.

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

The role of the co-ordinator is to bring together new group members, manage the partnership and facilitate dialogue within the consortium. At the heart of this role is an understanding and familiarity with the use of participatory methods for bringing partners together to participate in the co-innovation process, supporting collaboration between partners and facilitating group events or dialogues within the partnership and with external stakeholders. Appointing a dedicated co-ordinator, highly skilled in working with multi-actor partnerships is advised.

> For more detail on the role of co-ordinator see the **HEALTHY PARTNERSHIPS: How to Guide**.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

How do monitoring and evaluation processes support and inform decision-making?

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. It can help to inform reflections, identify and address problems and weaknesses before they become critical and highlight issues before they have a detrimental impact on the activity.

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

Embedding evaluation into the co-innovation activity

The evaluation process for co-innovation projects is potentially complex and dynamic. Given the interaction of multiple actors, evaluation plays an even more central role in assisting decision-making. It is useful for project co-ordinators and task managers to periodically undertake self-evaluation procedures to help all partners become aware of how the co-creation process is going, to identify how to improve it and to address possible alterations. Some factors that can improve the effectiveness of this process 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 external facilitator when the team does not possess sufficient expertise for assessment exercises when using the wide range of evaluation methods and tools.

How can effective monitoring and evaluation methods be built in when designing activities?

There are some basic steps for a group to develop and adapt its evaluation strategy during the project'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 structures or processes by choosing adaptable and effective tools and methods.
- Share periodic results to 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 contrib-ute significantly to the innovation process. It can provide relevant insights to support decision-mak-ing and continuous improvement, therefore resulting in the likelihood of achieving the group's goals. That is why when designing the work plan, groups should consider how evaluation will be managed during its development, as well as once it's concluded.

When developing 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 manag-ing authorities. Therefore, engaging with particular support services to find the right tool and measure results for the right audience is a relevant considera-tion in these early planning stages.

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

NOTES

LIAISON

Optimising interactive innovation

ABOUT THE LIAISON 'HOW TO GUIDES'

LIAISON has developed five 'How to Guides' to support practitioners taking part in co-innovation initiatives. For the purpose of these guides 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 compet-itive 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 expe-rience 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 through an interactive approach can deliver solutions that are well adapted to circum-stances and which are easier to implement.

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

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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-inno-vate in farming, forestry and rural development.

The Good Planning Guide was written by Helen Aldis, Ana Allamand and Simone Osborn with contri-butions from Liz Bowles, Evelien Cronin, Andrew Fieldsend, Susanne von Münchausen, and Eleonore Pommier. Thanks are also due to the partners in the LIAISON project that undertook the case studies cited in this guide.