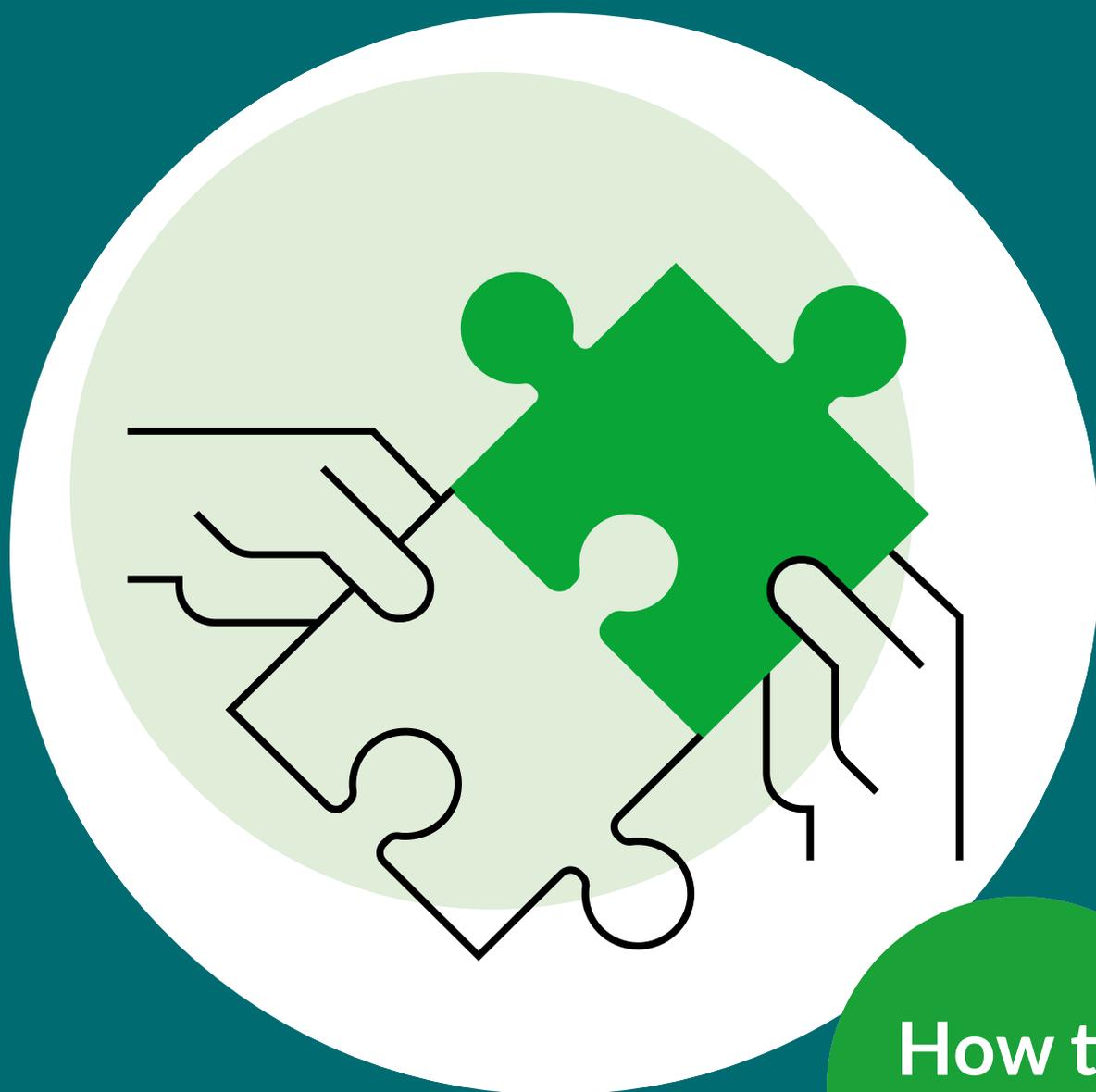


Healthy Partnerships

Version 1.0



How to
Guide

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 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 working in partnership with others.

Dynamic and active partnerships stimulate meaningful and proactive exchanges. A common success factor of such partnerships is the genuine sense of involvement and encouragement experienced by participants. Successful partnerships, therefore, need to have a good understanding of participatory methods for facilitating exchanges between people and to recognise and value the differences and diversity of the all consortium members. This How to Guide explores skills and considerations for effective co-ordination in order to build trust and deliver successful co-innovation projects.

EFFECTIVE CO-ORDINATION

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

An effective leader is a critical driving force for co-ordinating a multi-actor partnership. LIAISON's [Coming Together How to Guide](#) identified the skills and competencies needed by individuals leading a multi-actor project. These included both 'hard' technical and 'soft' functional (needed for working effectively in partnership) skills, as well as the ability both to lead and guide partners, and to engage with and communicate to different audiences.

In addition to these skills, it is also important for the leader (whether an individual or coordinating team) to embody the ways of working that the partnership wants to foster. This includes:

- enthusiasm and confidence in the co-innovation process
- openness and welcoming of differing viewpoints
- curiosity and a good sense of humour
- motivation and ability to enjoy a variety of working environments

- encouraging transparent and inclusive communication and collaboration
- 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

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 for making sure all partners are clear of their roles and responsibilities, as well as who is accountable for what.

For more information on creating a shared vision see the [GOOD PLANNING: How to Guide](#).

How much is effective co-ordination the 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 contributing to the co-innovation process of the group. Facilitation can be defined very generally as "the act of helping others to implement a process without getting involved in the process yourself". However, LIAISON identified that the tasks and skills in facilitation involved vary greatly from group to group. The facilitation skills required to work with a short-term farmer-led initiative be different from those needed

to co-ordinate a long-term multi-stakeholder project with international partners.

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

HOW TO WORK TOGETHER

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

Through its analysis, LIAISON identified a number of success factors that help to achieve effective collaboration and well-functioning multi-actor partnership:

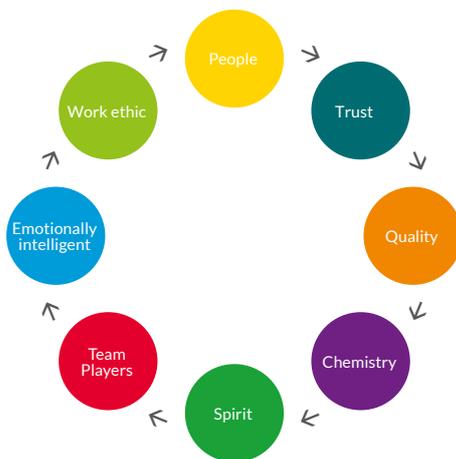


Figure 1: LIAISON success factors for effective collaboration

To form a multi-actor partnership that works well together, the co-ordinator (as well as relevant task leaders) needs to foster trust across the partnership and to value everyone as being key to the group's success. They must recruit and engage partners with the skills, behaviours, and high levels of emotional intelligence needed by the group, and forge a spirit of collaboration and good teamwork.

Crucially the project co-ordinator and 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 for working together in a partnership:

- Establish an open, friendly atmosphere
- Involve future users of the innovative solution in the whole process of developing it
- Listen to and gather input and insights throughout the innovation project
- 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 a strong and effective partnership can be created.

LIAISON PARTICIPATORY METHODS

Snowball method– helps groups to build knowledge and agreements gradually, starting with small group engagement that, at the end of the process, result in team-wide agreements.

Are there particular factors that 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 can contribute to successful collaboration in 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 innovation process and its outcomes
- Co-innovation is better/faster when the collaboration is **initiated by people who will be the users** of the innovation because:
 - (a) co-innovation is commonly the result of a clear 'need'/'motivation' for working together;

- (b) if the **motivation** is not solely linked to need – the ‘**will to succeed**’ is also an important factor to ensure a healthy and creative partnership; and
- (c) some members in partnerships for innovation 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 that participants know each other beforehand – and especially when there is a history of good working relationships – 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’ that are 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.

Frequent meetings (face-to-face or online) help to maintain the momentum of a group, as do 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 or countries can be effective in achieving peer-to-peer exchanges and can be very beneficial for fostering creativity.

The Covid-19 public health crisis significantly impacted the ability of partnerships to come together in more familiar, tried and tested ways. Restrictions on travel and public/private gatherings led to significant changes in the ways that groups could work together. While some outdoor activities, such as on-farm trials for example, were still feasible, most multi-actor partnerships had to adapt to collaborating almost entirely virtually. Understanding the full impact that this different way of working has had is yet to be fully evaluated. It is likely that there were advantages regarding the efficiency and engagement of group members and external stakeholders, but also many disadvantages.

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. This can be achieved 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. However, this does need good facilitation to be effective

- 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 an innovation partnership has something valuable to bring to the project, and it is important that each member understands the unique contributions that all 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 take account of different time zones when meeting virtually.

What can 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, or 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 arise
- **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 about the problem-solving processes to follow as part of a formal or written agreement of ways of working together can help.

Should all partnerships have a formal governance structure?

There are pros and cons in adopting very formalised governance structures for multi-actor projects. Ultimately, whether a partnership needs to adopt a formal governance structure will depend on the degree to which this is a requirement associated with the project funding. It should not be assumed that the bigger the project, the more formalised the governance structure should be. There is potential for varying degrees of formalisation in co-innovation projects of any size where there is a need to keep all members moving in the same direction, and at the same time. This need must be communicated and understood, and all members of the group should be comfortable with it and not afraid of it.

In the establishment phase of any multi-actor partnership, it is important to be clear about ways of working together and to take the time to properly assess the full range of opportunities for doing this. 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**.

Do co-innovation projects need an action plan?

Partnerships are recommended to develop a clear action plan with all project tasks allocated to appropriate members of the group. 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 straightforward and effective. Difficulties can arise when things do not go according to plan and there should always be some scope for flexibility to modify and adjust the co-innovation processes depending on changing needs and context.

Co-innovation collaborators should always be prepared to deal with unfortunate situations within the group, with the funders or even with the wider group of people interested in 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 also be a helpful tool for co-innovation partnerships.

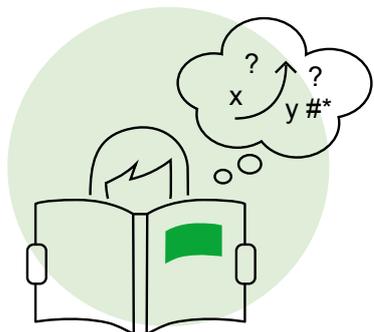
Can the whole partnership be involved in decision making?

A range of participatory methods can be adopted to help everyone be actively involved in the co-innovation project. Working with these methods also helps ensure that decisions made by the partnership fully reflect the different opinions of all members. The co-ordinator may still take the lead when a decision needs to be made, but 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.

Care should be taken to fully clarify the decision-making process within the partnership, particularly for members who are new to the participatory approach to working together. Adapting to these new conditions requires patience and perseverance from everyone involved.

See the **LIAISON handbook on participatory methods in co-innovation initiatives**

What happens if the project gets overwhelmed with jargon?



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 recommended to highlight this potential problem within 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 own business practices or customers’ needs which may not always be understood by other partners.

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 effectively cooperating to develop innovative solutions together is to acknowledge these differences and address them.

For multi-actor projects working with farmers, for example, there are many specific practicalities that need to be taken into account. These can occur when research activities are being carried out on-farm, or

when the common aim is to create a new business opportunity.

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

“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 need 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 of 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** – used to self-assess for how empowered an actor is in an interactive innovation process, and to take actions to improve empowered participation
- Gender Appraisal** – helps in evaluating the presence of biases and supporting empowered, diverse participation
- Satisfaction Survey (internal)** – useful to determine the level of satisfaction of actors in an initiative
- Appraisal of Group Dynamics** – assesses trust, willingness to share information and general social well-being in a group context
- Ground Rules: Identification of Opportunities and Challenges of Agreement-Based Cooperation** – identifies norms held by different actors and helps in establishing ground rules to help the group work together

LIAISON identified that there can also be regional variations in the ability and willingness of multi-actor partnerships to co-innovate. For example discussions with practitioners from the Mediterranean region shared how the following factors led to limitations in co-innovation and transfer of knowledge:

- a limited culture of entrepreneurship
- challenges mobilising actors with the necessary 'soft' skills needed for working effectively in partnership
- minimal support structure to bring farmers together
- fragmented opportunities for knowledge exchange in rural areas.

For practitioners in north-west Europe, where there is already a strong tradition of farmers and foresters co-operation and diverse communities confident in their local identity and cultures, LIAISON found that it is 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 multi-actor partnerships work together to deliver, adapt and develop activities.

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 adopted.

Groups must be prepared to adapt to changing conditions, both internal and external to the project. The impact of real-life conditions and pressures such as financial resources, time limitations, available help, skills, and competencies etc. can disrupt a well-functioning partnership. Nonetheless, maintaining constant and proactive self-observation is not always possible so it is important to be pragmatic while monitoring progress towards 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 a one-off activity at the start.

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 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 through an interactive approach can deliver solutions that are well adapted to circumstances 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.

The information in this guide is for general informational purposes only. Readers are advised to check any information against regulations or ways of working in their own locale. Any use of this information is at your own risk.



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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-innovate in farming, forestry and rural development.

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

