

Connected Partnerships

Version 1.0



**How to
Guide**

ENGAGING WITH AND BUILDING NETWORKS

This ‘How to Guide’ explores effective ways to connect co-innovation activities with the broader knowledge exchange system to engage a wide group of stakeholders in finding out about, and taking part, in co-innovation projects.

Multi-actor innovation projects do not exist in isolation. They are informed and shaped by what comes before, during and afterwards, as well as what happens around them. Effective innovation is enriched by knowledge sharing through continuous dialogue with a wider set of external stakeholders. This needs to occur throughout the lifetime of an activity – from developing an initial idea to the implementation or commercialisation of an innovative solution, both among partners and a broader user group.

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. One of the project’s findings is that sharing and exchanging knowledge and expertise beyond a project team is essential for an innovation to be widely adopted and that this strengthens and enriches the original activity. This How to Guide explores the opportunities and barriers to building a ‘connected partnership’ which is effectively engaged with wider networks.

EMBEDDING A CO-INNOVATION PROJECT IN THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT

The importance of engaging external stakeholders in multi-actor partnerships.

Many funders have an expectation – and frequently requirements – that the findings and activities of a project be shared with others outside the core partnership, especially the potential future users of an innovative solution. Many of the partners will share this ambition. In order to meet this expectation (or requirement), the project partners will benefit from taking time, from the very outset, to scope out who they want to involve or consult, when and how. As an exercise this should be carried out at the beginning of the process, but it should also be periodically

reflected on, amended and updated as the project activities develop and new opportunities arise.

LIAISON has compiled a selection of tools to help groups to evaluate potential external relationships and who to engage. These focus on effectively planning and managing outreach to, and the involvement of, external stakeholders. To find out more about these tools and how to implement them use the LIAISON Tool Box.

LIAISON TOOLS

A rainbow diagram can help classify the degree to which external stakeholders may influence or be influenced by the multi-actor partnership activity over its lifetime.

Who, what, how and when is a comprehensive tool to develop clear and coherent plans of interaction with external stakeholders (e.g. who should we engage with? Why would they want to engage with us? What are their motivations? What can we offer and how might we work with these various actors?)

LIAISON PARTICIPATORY METHODS

Collective feedback facilitation – provides a safe space outside the regular workflow where partners can share their ideas and reactions to the project’s progress.

When forming an innovation group there will be limitations as to who can be involved, but there are also ways to address them. For example, LIAISON found some instances where a project wanted to engage with external stakeholders, but due to resourcing or capacity issues they were unable to join the consortium. Instead, they were invited to be engaged at key mile-stones in the project, as their insights and networks were highly valued. This is one way of connecting with others, who cannot be fully involved in the co-innovation process. Co-innovation does not only involve collaboration within a group of fixed

members but includes also the effective involvement of others. It is important not to lose sight of the range of stakeholders who could add value to and/or benefit from a targeted innovation.

Evaluating the interest of particular stakeholders

Connecting with a wide range of networks can be beneficial, but it is important to understand the motivations and likely benefits for other stakeholders when seeking to engage them with the consortium's work. Understanding their needs, and how they might engage with, and benefit from, the project is essential. Plan a clear and thorough strategy to do this and do not underestimate the time it takes to reach out and bring in more people into a co-innovation activity. In the future, those seeking to access funding through co-innovation programmes, such as the EIP-Agri, will be expected to engage more proactively with other networks and similar programmes. Such connections speed up innovation and the adoption of new practices. Proactive engagement can be planned for, and embedded into projects, from the design phase and should be maintained throughout the duration of the activity, as opportunities arise. This can be achieved by fostering a participatory approach throughout a project's lifecycle, which is also an effective way of increasing engagement in the outcomes of its activities.

Project partnerships aiming to work in areas (whether geographical or thematic) where access to knowledge and insights is disconnected or poorly structured can face a range of challenges that make it more difficult to engage with others outside of the core group of partners. This may include a lack of connections between researchers and practitioners that goes beyond personal contacts, or a failure to grasp the perspectives of the range of value chain actors (such as farmers, foresters, processing and marketing SMEs and/or researchers) in relation to the co-innovation activity.

LIAISON TOOLS

Group building of personas – a participatory tool to create detailed 'personas' with a description of the potential beneficiaries of the results of the innovation in order to plan a strategy to engage them.

Interest – influence matrix – to identify and classify external stakeholders according to their likely level of interest and the potential influence they may have on the interactive innovation process.

Obstacles to engaging different stakeholders

In rural innovation, maintaining the engagement of a larger stakeholder group, including farmers/ foresters, in projects can be difficult unless their participation is planned from the beginning (or the project itself is promoted or initiated by them). In addition, participants' different backgrounds and priorities, which can range between management, research or co-ordination roles on the one hand, and those of beneficiaries / end-users of the innovation on the other, can lead to misunderstandings on what is being developed and the best tools to adopt. This can make it difficult to co-innovate and share the same goals.

LIAISON identified some factors which can, and sometimes do, limit the capacities of some stakeholders to join in, contribute to and benefit from a co-innovation activity. These might include a lack of competencies in particular disciplines, such as experiential knowledge of farming and forestry practices, or academic knowledge. Organising more interactive 'seeing is believing' type activities, such as study groups, field visits, roundtables and open events can help to engage and build links across a range of stakeholders in a more informal setting.

Demonstration events are a very important way of engaging farmers or foresters, as they tend to be more willing to learn from other practitioners, especially when they do not have the desire to be pioneers themselves. By organising demonstrations of examples of good practice, more practitioners can be encouraged to innovate and adopt the innovations proposed. The EU Nefertiti Farm Demo Project has created a *Farm Demo Kit* to assist in planning such activities.

It is important to be aware that professional language can also be a barrier, both during communication throughout the project and dissemination to a wider audience. Sufficient funding and time should be allocated to 'translating' activities, lessons learned and results into the vocabularies and expressions that are most commonly used by target audiences. This includes avoiding the use of jargon, which can be a major obstacle to effective communication between groups from different professional backgrounds.

A CONTINUUM OF CO-INNOVATION AND IDEAS GENERATION



Sourcing from the wider network

Sharing knowledge outside the partnership is not a priority for some groups, yet there can be real value in expanding relationships and contacts, especially if the group is lacking some core competencies or key contacts. Most partnerships that LIAISON studied recognised a need for dialogue with others, in order to check and validate their results, as well as to source knowledge and expertise – especially from farmers and foresters - but also other value-chain stakeholders.

Extending beyond the core group can be challenging, but there are ways to make it easier by linking directly with well-connected stakeholders who, in turn, can provide links with others. They may be involved in the early development phases of the innovation, the refinement of the final product or throughout the co-innovation journey. Other specific skills that may need to be found include financial management (especially where multiple funding sources are involved), professional public relations skills and specialist technical expertise. Dialogue with these external stakeholders can be through informal or formal networks or via boards/panels. Other connections may also be necessary: for example, commercialisation may involve passing on innovative solutions to business accelerator programmes or to new or existing companies that can develop a concept further to bring it to market.

Although co-innovation projects can benefit from these outside contacts, in some instances they are not required. A few groups studied by LIAISON showed no evidence of knowledge-sharing outside the partnership, especially where the group was a large cluster or a network that included all the required competencies, including the communication and dissemination skills required to meet the goals of the project.

On other occasions, external engagement was sought solely for dissemination.

For more on dissemination see the **ACHIEVING IMPACT: How to Guide**.

Gaining insights as the project develops

Interaction with external stakeholders, even when it does not contribute directly to the co-innovation process, can help the partnership to stay anchored in reality. The engagement of external stakeholders can be formalised through connections made by the core group. These ‘formal’ modes of direct interaction can take the form of technical meetings as, for example, in the *Arena Skog* project where external experts were invited to provide ideas and updates on relevant topics.

There are National Rural Networks in all the EU Member States. These connect a broad range of rural stakeholders, especially those actively involved with EU funding for rural development (e.g. LEADER Local Action Groups). The function of these rural networks is evolving and it is expected that they will play a much greater role in the future in encouraging the involvement of a wide range of actors in multi-actor partnerships and co-innovation projects (e.g. EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and Horizon Europe Thematic Networks).

In the case of LIAISON, close co-operation with existing research and innovation networks from the very beginning ensured a proper needs assessment of the policy-related target group, critical feedback at certain milestones during the work in progress and the validation of findings. Moreover, it was found to aid the dissemination of outputs at the end of projects’ lifetimes.

LIAISON also looked beyond the various sources of funding for co-innovation projects such as the EU research and innovation, Interreg and LIFE programmes, plus the national implementation of the EIP-Agri, to include the experiences of non-project approaches to multi-actor innovation involving different types of formal and informal partnerships and networks, and even activities with no external funding. In order to involve, and learn from, co-innovation groups that are not part of any official innovation programme, the LIAISON project organised a Europe-wide innovation contest (EURIC) from which 15 *Rural Innovation Ambassadors* were identified as examples of good practice.

Creating a two-way exchange

While a one-way approach can be helpful in getting a project's outcomes across, it is not really interactive nor effective. It can be easy to fall into one-way engagement with stakeholders if co-innovation groups do not spend time from the outset agreeing clear plans for the engagement of other people and understanding their motives for giving up their time and resources to participate. It is essential to consider from the start the anticipated contributions from each type of stakeholder and when they will be required. Without this it will be difficult to gain the feedback, insights and ideas to improve the project's outputs.

LIAISON has identified a number of tools that can help groups to appropriately and effectively gather and incorporate feedback (see the links in this Guide).

It is also important to be aware of the need to effectively manage and resolve any conflicts that may arise. This is particularly important if there is the potential for commercial competition. The key is to adopt a participatory approach and to ensure that the opportunity exists for well-facilitated and confidential discussions.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF CHAMPIONS



The benefits of fostering a participatory approach throughout the lifetime of the project

The success of many co-creation projects or partnerships has been built upon the establishment of long-term participatory processes (e.g. not simply one-day conferences or workshops) for engaging with interested stakeholders and potential end-users of their work. For example, several EU funded multi-actor projects identified by LIAISON set up 'practice-led

innovation networks' or 'farmer innovation groups' to foster co-creation. To find out more see the [case studies](#) section of the LIAISON website.

Other types of projects and non-project activities among those reviewed by LIAISON also adopted comparable outreach practices, including farmer discussion groups, clusters, co-innovation sessions and appointing ambassadors for innovation and technology. *Food Heroes* is an example of the latter approach. There were also instances of consortium launching calls for innovation projects.

It takes time to build networks

A fully-formed and engaged network does not develop instantly. It builds on the connections that the consortium members have and build over time. It can be helpful to consider the longer-term impact of the co-innovation project (i.e. in its next phase) and gather insights into the appetite of the participants for future topics. It is worth emphasising that it can take considerable time to build a robust platform to support the commercialisation or adoption of an innovative new idea.

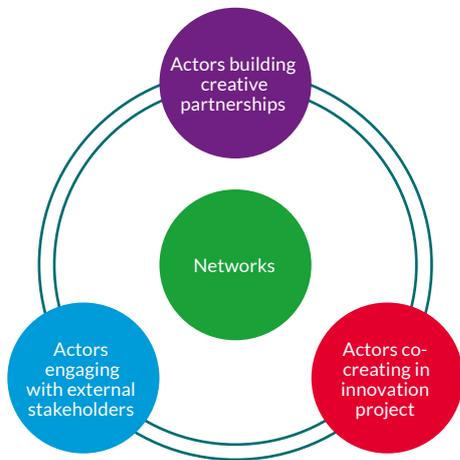
Achieving effective engagement within a diverse network

Networks are not just about getting connected. Effective engagement needs to be fostered within the network and LIAISON found that important factors for achieving this are:

- Encouraging openness and understanding within the network, whilst taking account of the specific context.
- Making time for face-to-face talks with participants in the network.
- Allowing enough time for informal interactions to develop into relationships.
- Recognising the value of field visits for getting people from different backgrounds communicating and sharing their knowledge and understanding.
- Finding effective 'champions' (see below).

Cross-pollination of ideas between countries, regions and sectors can be extremely powerful. For example, as climatic conditions change, farmers and foresters will need to be open to exploring new practices and opportunities, including those coming from further afield. There will be a growth in demand for cross-border collaboration and sharing of ideas, which will continue to increase as the search for solutions to emerging challenges accelerates. The LIAISON case study *Food Heroes* is an example of this where the successful practice of

encouraging farmers and designers to come together to solve a certain societal challenge at farm-level in the Netherlands was used as a basis for transnational co-operation with other partners in other countries. In each case the different countries adopted and applied the process in their own way.



The skill of effective communication

One aspect to keep in mind is that different stakeholders will respond to information in different ways. The way that a project’s innovative solutions are communicated needs special attention, for example selecting effective ways to share complex academic findings to a wide range of practitioners working in differing situations and occupations.

A number of the case studies explored by LIAISON highlighted the need to be sensitive as to how findings and recommendations are presented to farmers. For example, there were occasions when miscommunication led to conflicts between farming practitioners and environmental NGOs, which generated nervousness about the viability of the collaboration and its future access to funding and support. This type of challenge highlights the importance of bringing in a wide range of relevant people and organisations through the process and taking the necessary steps to keep them involved and engaged as the co-innovation project progresses.

What makes a good champion?

A *champion* is a person, probably well-connected in the sector, who believes in the innovation and is willing and able to help make connections to take it forward. While it is likely a co-innovation partnership will have its choice of champions from within, it can be valuable to seek out external advocates for

the new insights or innovative solutions generated by a co-innovation project. When trying to take innovations beyond the group, finding a strong champion can make all the difference.

In the Portuguese example of *Programa de Sustentabilidade de Vinhos do Alentejo*, a group of champions was cultivated in order to lead demonstration activities and catalyse interest from other wine growers. The support of these five key farmers, sharing their experiences, helped the project manager to recruit a cohort of 300 farmers who continue to be engaged in the project.

Without doubt, the charisma of key individuals driving or facilitating the innovation process is a key factor for engagement. Being knowledgeable and having authority on the topic is essential, as is having a focus on co-innovation and inclusion is also required. Therefore, it can be worthwhile to spend time briefing and upskilling such champions for public speaking, media interviews, social skills etc. to help them integrate and disseminate the findings effectively by adopting a collaborative approach.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Focusing on context-specific indicators

There is a range of tools available to groups wanting to evaluate their engagement and co-innovation activities with external stakeholders. As with the tools used to identify and map out who to engage with, it is also important to find an approach that will work for the project. It helps if this is flexible and adapted to fit the needs and focus of the co-innovation activity.

LIAISON identified a wide range of needs and capabilities related to the use of evaluation tools, which are set out in our *ACHIEVING IMPACT: How to Guide*. It can be beneficial to customise the evaluation approaches required at an individual project level.

LIAISON TOOLS
System ID – uses a participatory approach to create a systems schematic for a project/initiative and determine the features of the system in which the project/initiative is operating.

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 Connected 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.

