COCOREADO H2020 PROJECT

FOOD SYSTEM INNOVATOR TOOLKIT

CH1 Developing Networks

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COREADO
connecting consumers and producers to rebalance farmers' position

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1.1- Why networks matter

There are people trying to make a difference [in food systems] in every part of Europe. By coming together, we can have a greater impact.

Participant of COCOREADO Ambassador Network

This toolkit section aims to define the most important elements to be considered when designing and developing a network to facilitate change.

When it comes to facilitating change in food systems, bringing together a group of individuals who share a similar goal can increase the expected impact in several different ways, such as:

- Knowledge exchange, including knowledge on food supply chain and policy influencing
- Gaining inspiration for new projects from other group members
- Learning and receiving support from professionals in the field
- Combining and integrating different interests in novel food initiatives, therefore making them also more inclusive
- Sharing skills (e.g. communication or business skills) and best practices (e.g. sharing experience with innovative green start-ups, building food hubs, building sustainable farms)

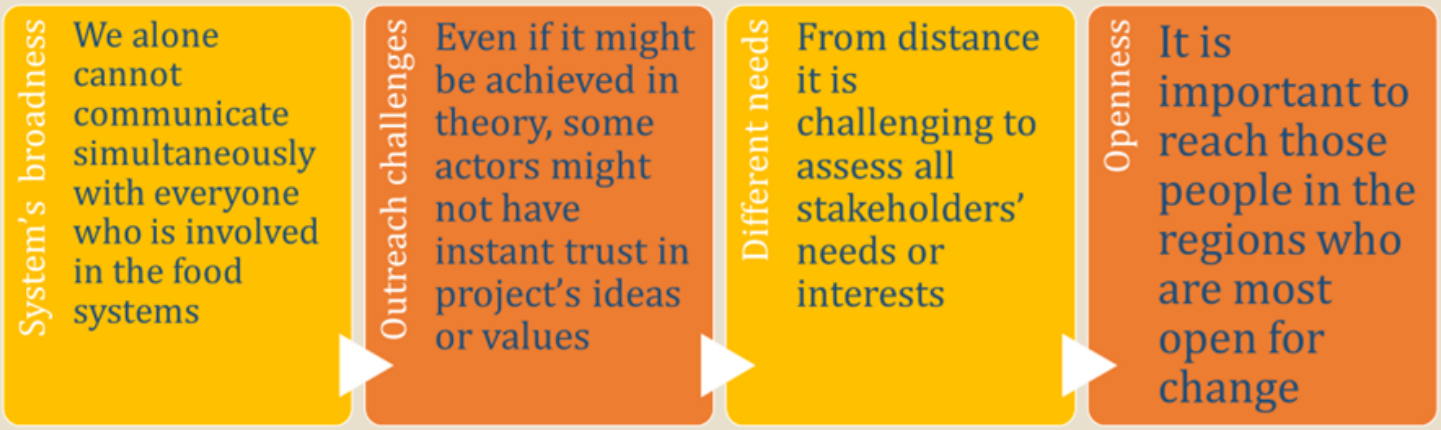


Figure 1. The impact of developing an international network of change-makers on local food systems.

During the **COCOREADO project**, an ambassador network was built by involving people with a common goal of helping connect consumers and farmers to rebalance farmers' position in food supply chains. Within this network:

- 40 ambassadors from throughout Europe are involved
- 6 seed initiatives to facilitate change were being developed
- 3 face-to-face trainings for the ambassadors took place in three different parts of Europe
- The ambassadors' knowledge was deployed to define good practices to change food systems
- The experience from building the ambassador network has been further used to help the ambassadors build their local networks for making positive impact on local and regional food systems.

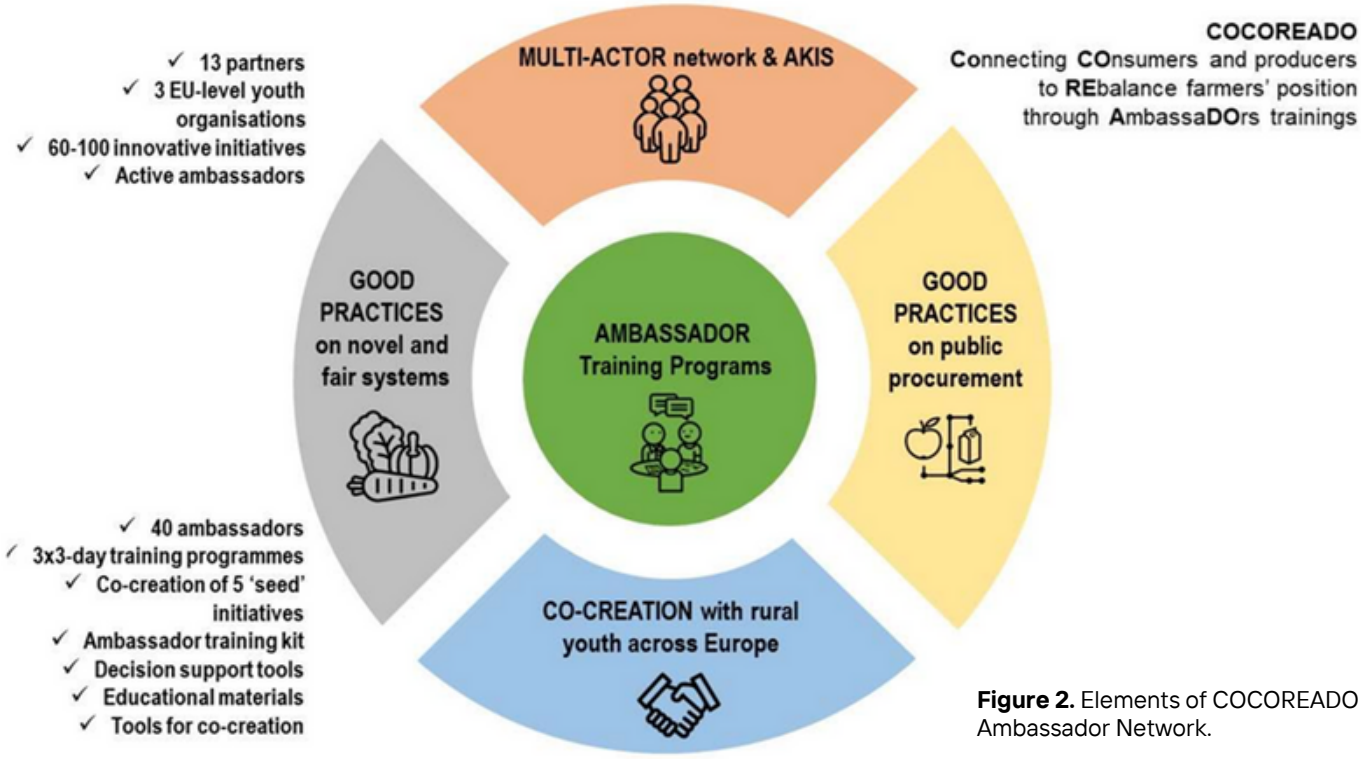


Figure 2. Elements of COCOREADO Ambassador Network.

The COCOREADO ambassador network is used in this chapter to exemplify different steps of building and maintaining a network for facilitating change.

The next section gives an overview of building and maintaining a network, including a description of step-by-step activities taken to build a network and highlighting possible challenges that might be encountered in the network-building and maintenance process.

1.2- Steps of building a network

If you want to change something, one of the most important things is bringing people together. There are many people with very good ideas, but there is not all the expertise and all the practicalities, and the skills in one person. If you want to change something, you will need to bundle forces. Do that over generations, do that across disciplines, do that with academics together with non-academics.

Tessa Avermaete, project coordinator
KU Leuven, Belgium

Some networks for facilitating change may grow naturally out of a group that shares common interests or an organisation such as an NGO that has set a certain goal and field of interest. However, while these networks are often effective at local levels, it is more challenging to develop a network of change-makers at an international level, involving people who have not had any professional ties before, that could bring further impact and new knowledge to the local level agri-food systems.

In the case of COCOREADO, the intention of the ambassador network was to bring together young people from across Europe who represent the whole food supply chain to build their capacity for facilitating change in food systems through reconnecting consumers and producers.

For this purpose, a step-by-step plan for the development and consolidation of the COCOREADO ambassador network was deployed (see information on the following page).

BUILDING COCOREADO AMBASSADORS' NETWORK

THE ROLE OF COCOREADO AMBASSADORS - HELPING REBALANCE FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN AND REBUILD CONNECTION BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS IN EUROPE

1

ANNOUNCING THE PROGRAMME AND OPENING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

- Setting clear requirements for ambassadors' profiles
- Announcing the ambassador programme via the webiste and personal networks

SELECTION PROCESS OF COCOREADO AMBASSADORS

Selection criteria: experience with food systems, engagement in the local community, communication skills, reasons and motivation for applying

2

3

ANNOUNCING THE RESULTS OF THE SELECTION AND ORGANISING THE FIRST ONLINE MEETING

- Individual emails to the applicants
- First online meeting: introduction to the project, programme's goals, next steps.

BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR COMMUNICATING ONLINE

- Using 'Slack' platform for communication with and among the ambassadors
- Creating network-specific channels (#cocoreado-official, #ideas-collaboration, #seed initiatives etc.)

4

5

FIRST AMBASSADORS' TRAINING

- Networking via formal training events: lectures, site visits, and group work
- Informal networking activities: sharing meals and coffee breaks, energizers

ACTIVITIES IN-BETWEEN THE TRAININGS

- Voting, selecting, and developing seed initiatives
- Informative sessions on skills development (pitching with impact) and practical topics (precision farming)

6

7

SECOND AND THIRD AMBASSADORS' TRAININGS

- Second training: focus on the seed initiatives. Working with the collaboration model
- Third training: ambassadors choose among three training tracks

The first three steps refer to the activities aimed towards **setting up the network**. Precise decisions in these steps regarding aspects of network development, such as **clearly defining the aims of the network and selecting highly motivated people** with common goals and diverse backgrounds, are crucial for the future network to operate smoothly and bring change to the food systems at both local and international levels. In addition to defining a common goal, there are variables that influence stronger cohesion and effective work of the future network, such as **age, gender diversity**, **and common professional background**, so these variables should be considered when creating a network.

The fourth step, **building communication channels,** is necessary to ensure that communication between members of the network can happen flawlessly during the ambassador trainings, and even more importantly, in between face-to-face meetings. **Regular communication possibilities**, especially between distant participants in the international context, are also crucial for building and maintaining a sense of belonging to the network. In our case, we chose to use "Slack" as a platform for communication; however, communication via e-mail and later through a WhatsApp group were still mostly preferred by the participants. Therefore, we advise introducing any new tools and apps cautiously and mindfully of participants' digital skills and willingness to use new communication tools for networking.

The last three steps include different **face-to-face and online activities** that brought the participants of the network together and allowed them to find common ground for discussions, reflect on the local challenges of the food systems, find possible solutions, and learn from each other's ideas and experience. These steps are crucial in allowing the participants to get to know each other and build new professional connections.

The last and final step is **supporting the evolution of the network beyond** the project lifetime (find more about this step in part 2.5. "How to maintain a network").

1.3- How to facilitate a network

I have had the opportunity to know different people from different parts of Europe. And I realise that each region has its own features. This has been rewarding!

Participant of COCOREADO Ambassador Network

A network can only fulfil its purpose if it is **cohesive, focused, and proactive** as much as it is **productive**. To achieve and maintain these qualities of a network, necessary efforts must be made in its facilitation. Facilitation involves recognition of both the entire network's and individual participants' needs, aspirations, and resources.

On the next page you can find the practical elements that should be taken care of when facilitating a network's activity and growth for an extended period of time (which will have several distinctions from facilitating networking for a one-time event or activity).

MANAGING THE NETWORK: ROLES AND RESPONSABILITIES

Internal communication

Assigning a contact person between the project and the network (or among the network of participants, if the network has been built in a different setting outside the project framework) for delivering messages to the network members.

Messages should be communicated well in advance before expected actions (e.g. participation in an online or face-to-face event, filling out a survey), with the possibility for members of the network to reach out in case of any questions and comments.

Planning and organising face-to-face and/or online events

Planning the event agenda, speakers, and visits of local sites (in case of face-to-face trainings) and aligning them with the overall goals of the network is a task that needs dedicated time and resources.

It's better to take up planning of events as a group rather than alone, as it leaves room for brainstorming of ideas and ensures that a single person does not get overwhelmed with tasks.

Facilitating trainings/events

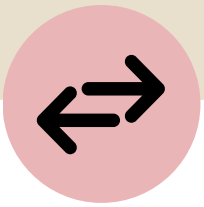
When the agenda of the event has been laid out, it is important to ensure that the overall event will be facilitated by dedicated people who keep the flow of the event going and help to establish and maintain the overall thread of the event.

External communication

If the goal of the network is to facilitate change, external communication channels are crucial.
COCOREADO ambassador network had established **social media accounts on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.**
You can read more about these communication tools in Chapter 4 of the Toolkit, "Communicating Change".

Administrative tasks and practicalities

If the network activities are funded by a project, as in the case of the COCOREADO project, there must be dedicated staff undertaking the administrative and financial tasks, especially in the case of organising face-to-face events that involve considerable costs for renting the event premises, accommodation, and travelling.



Monitoring the network and adapting to change

A network of people does not to tend to stay as a static entity; sometimes the participants change or new needs emerge. It is essential to gather feedback from the participants regularly and adjust the planned activities to the expectations of the participants.

For a network to be **cohesive**, it is essential that its individual members relate to the purpose of the network in such a way **that everyone wants to be a fundamental part of a more complex system.** This recognition of the network's overall objective allows individuals, even if they come from different settings and countries, to connect with a common goal that brings them closer together. To ensure that each member of the network feels more connected with others, it is useful to share the profiles of all network members, including their experience and goals, with others.

To be **focused and proactive** as much as it is **productive**, the network must be stimulated to deliver results that respond to the common need identified as the overall objective. It is important to create routines within the network and not allow it to become disconnected, whether in terms of interaction between individuals in the network, or in terms of proposing tasks that gradually create content and results. It should not be forgotten that the level of knowledge within the network must always be increasing so that the individuals themselves feel motivated to remain in the network, and that being part of the network also provides them with added value.

For instance, the members of the COCOREADO Ambassador Programme took part in three consecutive trainings, and each training was followed by a **survey** to monitor their benefits from the programme and future needs. Each **training was gradually adjusted** to the ambassadors' expectations, while also keeping the initially pre-defined overall goal of the network (connecting consumers and producers to rebalance farmers' position in the food system) in focus. Additionally, at the beginning of the trainings, the ambassadors received a **student binder** that, in addition to the agenda, provided the most important concepts, methods, and materials used in the training.

Once the initial group of change-makers has been formed and you have a clear idea for future activities, how do you ensure that the chosen group of people becomes a "network"?

Two characteristics are defined as essential for the network of people to form:

- They should have a **common interest, goal, or concern**
- They should keep a **remaining connection** with each other that is maintained through interaction, assistance, and support

Finally, for the previous two characteristics to remain stable, it is also highly recommended that a network operates **in a systematic way**. For instance, there is a set number of online and/or face-to-face meetings per year and the network is regularly updated on news and events via chosen communication channels.

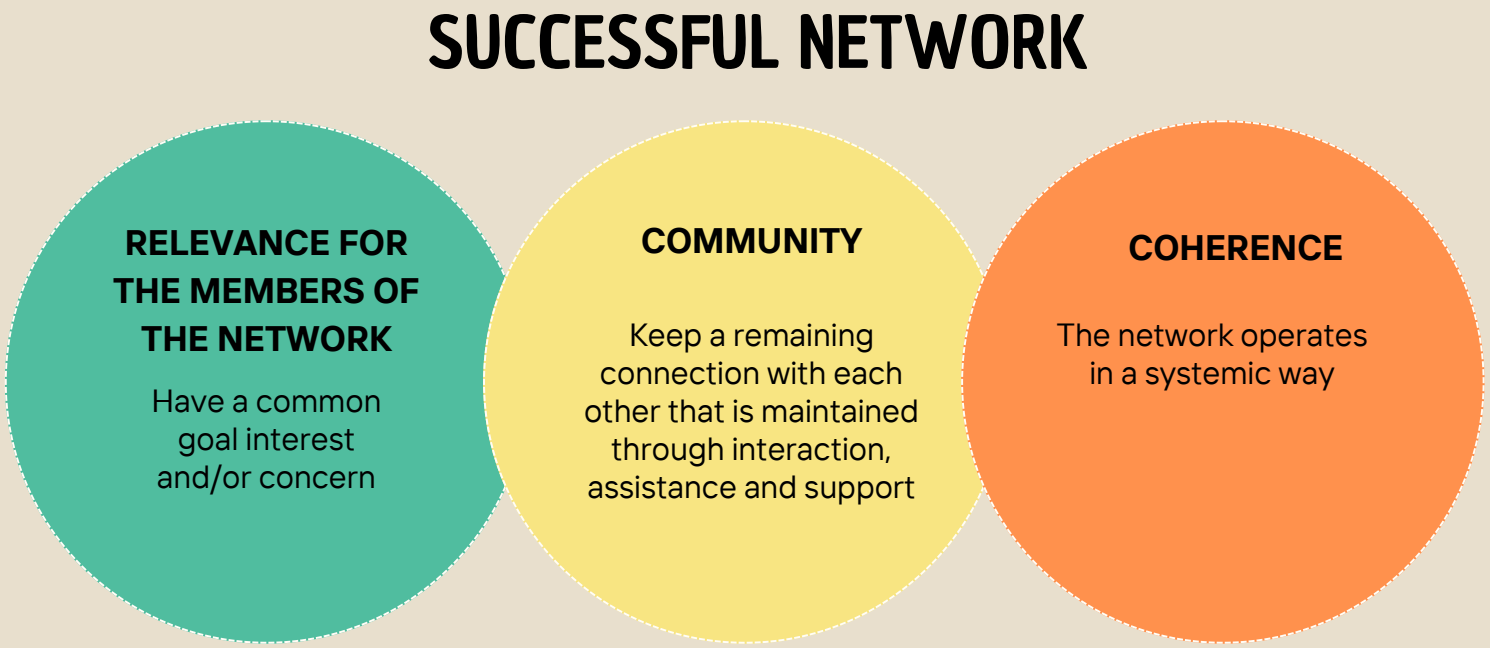


Figure 3. Key features of a successful network

In addition to these three core characteristics, we have named **other qualities and characteristics** that we have found to be essential **for a successful network** to form, based on our experience:

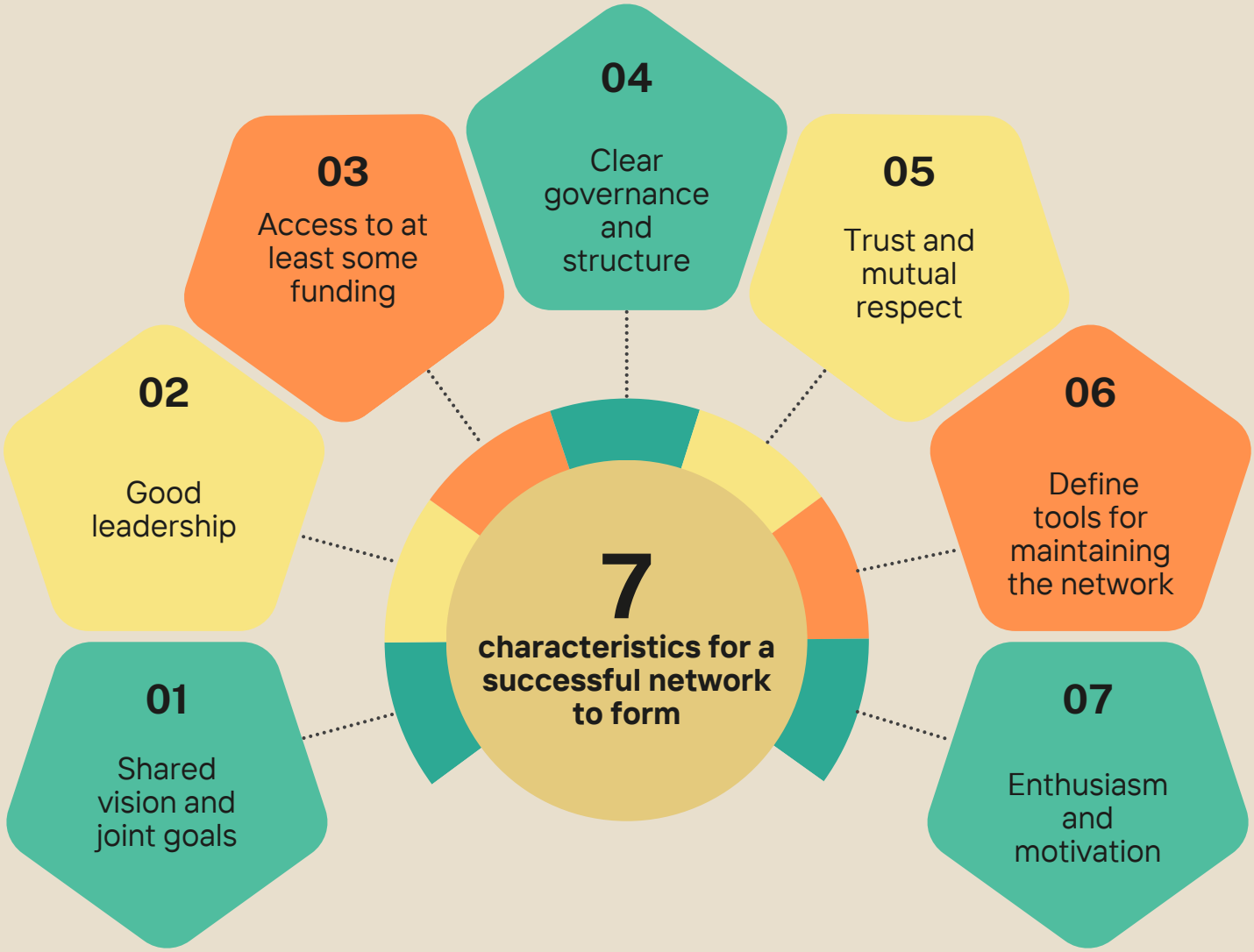


Figure 4. Characteristics that enable the forming of a successful network

How can you ensure that these pre-conditions are met and the networking takes place in a way that benefits the involved professionals and helps reach the chosen goal of the network? Below we give **a checklist of essential tools for keeping the network active within a two-year period.**

Once the network is created, it needs to be nurtured using some important tools such as:

- Team building (e.g. team building activities to get to know other participants, informal events of sharing local food and common meals, working in groups according to similar interests)
- Dividing long-term goals into smaller tasks achievable in the short-term (e.g. tackling 1-2 specific objectives and topics per session to be more productive)
- Create a trust environment where everybody can share inputs (e.g. setting simple rules prior to the events that highlight the network's values, such as respectful and active listening, openness to new ideas, and appreciation for experiences from different local contexts)
- Delegate responsibility (e.g. offer network participants to facilitate workshops and conduct sessions on project activities)

Figure 5. Tools to nurture a network that is already operating

1.4- Sharing skills and knowledge

The ambassadors approach is powerful and the mixed group of participants makes for really interesting discussions and is a great way to learn and grow.

Participant of COCOREADO Ambassador Network

We have identified and brought together a group of young people who all want to change the system but, on their own, none of them could probably do it. Or some of them already had ideas, but then we brought them together with other, like-minded people. And I think that's the strongest thing to be able to, to feel like, 'Hey, I'm not alone!' That gives some kind of emotional, psychological consolidation. And then you also have these like-minded people give you advice on your ideas.

Mirentxu Asín Irurozqui, project communications officer
INICIATIVAS INNOVADORAS, Spain

One of the main purposes of building the COCOREADO network was to raise its participants' capacity for facilitating change in agri-food systems through knowledge sharing and skill development. We include formal and informal types of activities that have aided in sharing skills and knowledge across the COCOREADO network, including knowledge-sharing among the ambassadors and involving both the ambassadors and project partners (see Figure 6).

FACILITATING KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND NETWORKING

FORMAL AND INFORMAL ACTIVITIES TO AID THE KNOWLEDGE-SHARING WITHIN THE NETWORK

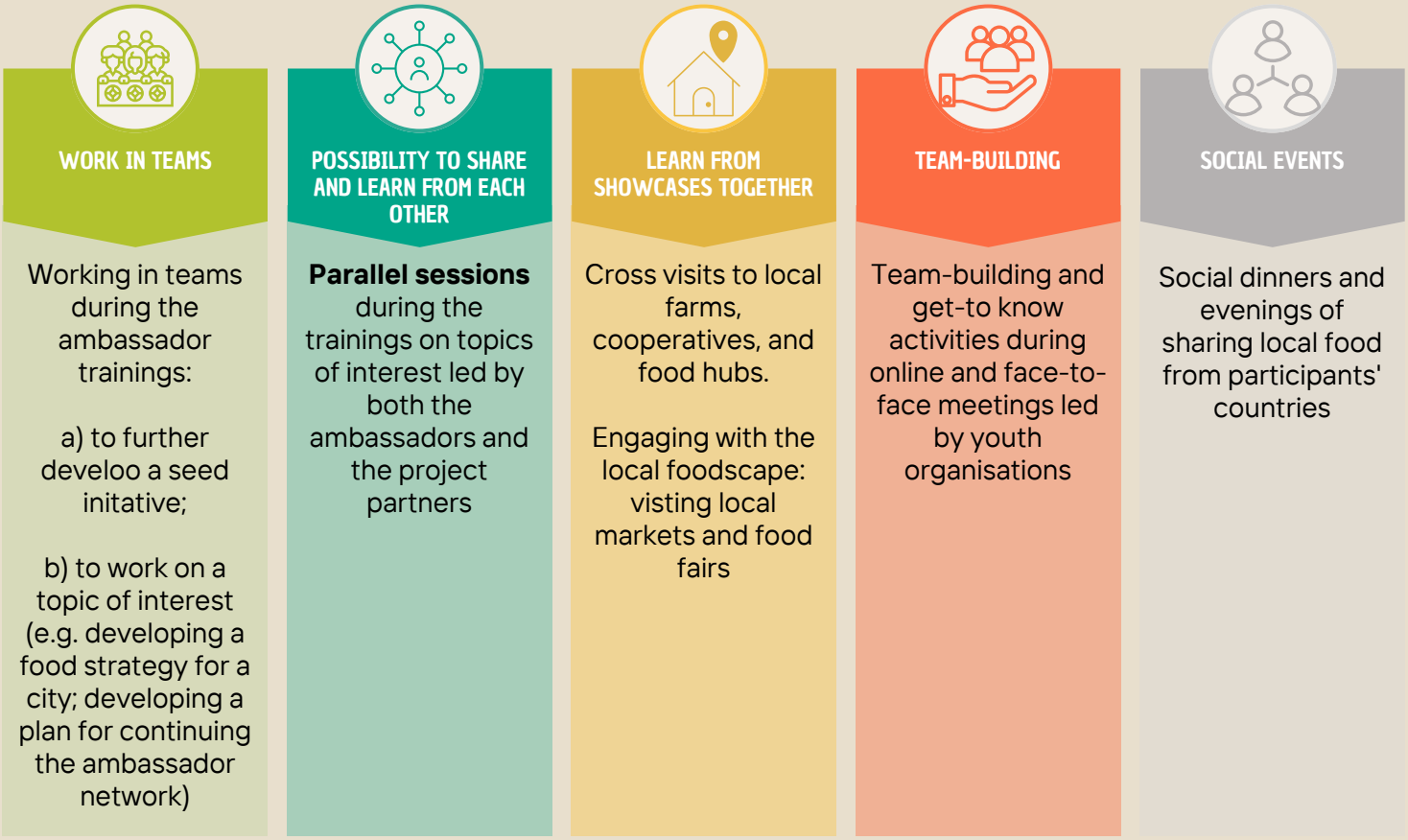


Figure 6. Examples of formal and informal activities to aid the knowledge-sharing within the network

While not all networking and knowledge-sharing within the network is always a result of deliberate efforts, various activities can be used to facilitate the exchange of skills and knowledge between participants. **Working in teams** can be used to work on more narrow topics that interest a certain group of participants, as well as to work on certain business ideas that the participants already have. Similarly, **parallel sessions** (online or face-to-face) are a way for smaller groups of participants to get more immersed in certain topics related to food systems. In between different learning activities, some brief **team-building activities** can be used, which are a less formal way to connect and learn more about each other. Similarly, **social events** such as social dinners and local food-sharing events are opportunities to get to know each other in more informal settings in the case of face-to-face meetings.

Meanwhile, **learning from showcases** is another excellent way of knowledge-gathering about innovative regional efforts of rebalancing the farmers' position within the food system. Within the COCOREADO project, this was done in the form of cross-visits **(Read more about the cross-visit approach in Chapter "Getting inspired from examples").**

Capturing the impact of the network on its participants is always a challenging task. Not all impact can be measured in an objective way immediately, since some knowledge and skills, as well as contacts gained, may prove useful for participants in the longer term. However, surveys and other forms of feedback can help to get an overview of the skills and knowledge gained that the participants have found most valuable. Figure 7 represents some of the skills and new knowledge that have been highlighted by COCOREADO ambassadors.

- Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary communication skills
- Communication in social media
- Awareness of the food system operation and regional challenges in other regions
- Using Business Model Canvas to develop a business model
- Knowledge about market power and value distribution
- Knowledge about public procurement, including dynamic procurement
- How to design a food strategy at the local level
- How to use decision support tools

Figure 7. Some of the skills and knowledge gained during the trainings of the network (feedback from the participants of the COCOREADO network)

Additionally, the exchange of knowledge between the network's participants, if a network is built at an international level or has gathered specialists from different regions within a country, is a great source of information about local particularities of food systems. For instance, the diversity of the COCOREADO network has also helped to enrich the project as such, so much so that some conclusions and results would not have been so easy to gather if it hadn't been for the existing network. The project, since it is **transversal to many European regions**, had its work developed considering various food production systems which were more easily perceived by the diversity of individuals who are part of the network.

1.5- How to maintain a network?

Challenges of building and maintaining a network

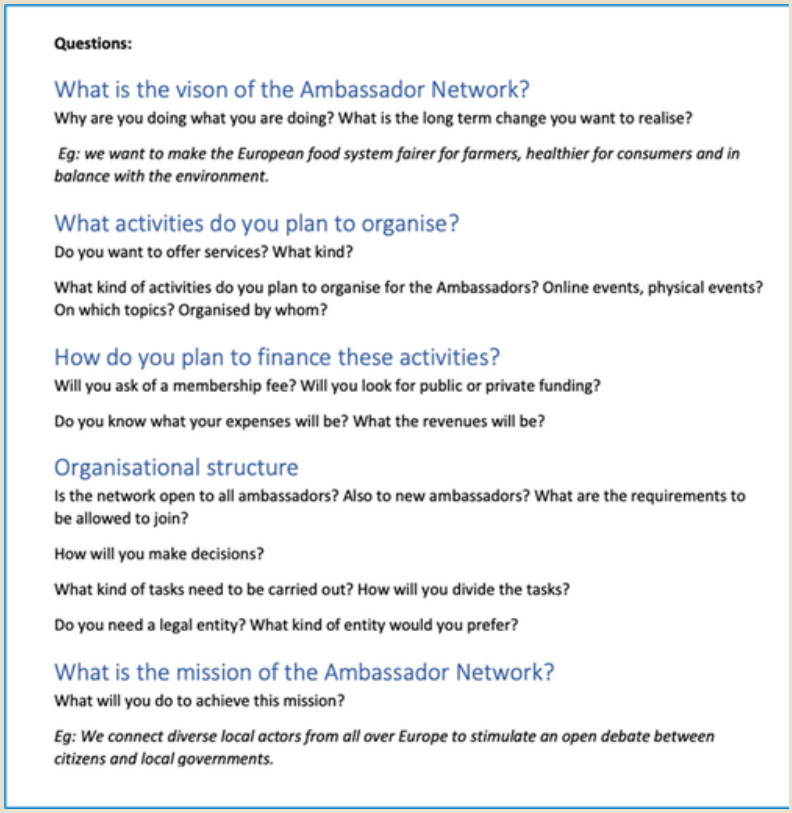
While the network offers significant benefits, the following list contains an overview of challenges that were encountered within the COCOREADO project and should also be kept in mind when developing any other network for change. The overview also includes possible solutions to these challenges.

CHALLENGE	POSSIBLE SOLUTION
Recruiting participants that would be a good fit for the project and the programme.	A very focussed call for participants. The call for participants is disseminated through project partners' networks from all over.
Involving representatives of the whole system	A call for participants that could be interesting for a wide range of professionals within the field. Focus on diversity during the selection process.
Maintaining internal activity and visibility of the network	Involving professionals to facilitate communication activities within and outside of the network.
Maintaining ongoing interest	Development of an engaging training programme that would be interesting for young people from across Europe. Focus on both the newest research in the field and topical issues for the target group. Linking activities to real-life situations and challenges and demonstrating impact.
Development of relevant skills	Focusing on the ambassadors' needs and doing a constant monitoring of their change. Developing an open, bonding relationship with the involved participants and identifying a) the necessary skills b) ways to develop these skills.

Plan for maintaining a network

Sometimes networks for change are built within projects with a limited time frame. However, once the network has been set into action, the goal is for it to keep functioning beyond a project's lifetime. This can be a challenging task; therefore, we share our insights into possible steps and activities to be taken to ensure that the network keeps functioning beyond the project's lifetime.

After the last ambassador training, we encouraged the network of ambassadors to select **ambassador representatives** who would become a point of contact between the ambassador network and the project. The next step was to gradually put more responsibility in ambassadors' hands. The ambassadors were provided with **a template for a plan** for continuing the ambassadors' network which you can find below. The template can be used at different stages of the network forming process.



Questions:

What is the vison of the Ambassador Network?

Why are you doing what you are doing? What is the long term change you want to realise?

Eg: we want to make the European food system fairer for farmers, healthier for consumers and in balance with the environment.

What activities do you plan to organise?

Do you want to offer services? What kind?

What kind of activities do you plan to organise for the Ambassadors? Online events, physical events? On which topics? Organised by whom?

How do you plan to finance these activities?

Will you ask of a membership fee? Will you look for public or private funding?

Do you know what your expenses will be? What the revenues will be?

Organisational structure

Is the network open to all ambassadors? Also to new ambassadors? What are the requirements to be allowed to join?

How will you make decisions?

What kind of tasks need to be carried out? How will you divide the tasks?

Do you need a legal entity? What kind of entity would you prefer?

What is the mission of the Ambassador Network?

What will you do to achieve this mission?

Eg: We connect diverse local actors from all over Europe to stimulate an open debate between citizens and local governments.

Figure 8. The template that the Ambassadors received

Following the template, the participants of the COCOREADO network (the ambassadors) came up with their vision and mission statements, as well as a list of future activities that can serve as an example for other networks.

The vision

"Cocoreado envisions a sustainable and equitable food system in Europe where producers and consumers are seamlessly connected, and the balance of power in the food supply chain is restored. We see a future where knowledge exchange is the driving force, empowering farmers and consumers alike."

The mission

"Our mission is to create a vibrant and diverse network of passionate food ambassadors from across Europe. We strive to uncover, evaluate, and promote best practices for direct selling and short food supply chains. Our commitment is to spread these innovative concepts throughout all European countries through our ambassador community, fostering a dynamic, knowledge-driven ecosystem. We also engage with stakeholders at all levels to drive positive change in the European food landscape."

The envisioned future activities include:

- Online problem-solving meetings (discussions with experts about selected topics)
- COCOREADO Summit (annual physical conference for networking, offering services, and showcasing the work of COCOREADO)
- Growing and intensifying partnerships and approaching new strategic partners
- Organising trainings and workshops for small scale farmers and producers

Considering the organisational structure of the future network, the participants have created an **NPO (non-profit organisation)**, **COCOREADOx**, that serves as a formalised network that can offer services and apply for future funding.

The board of the NPO consists of: A chair, a secretary, a treasurer and a vice chair. Two auditors have been also elected to assist the board in its oversight to safeguard the organization's financial integrity.