Flying as a **Partnership** Towards a Sustainable Future

Guidelines and lessons learned for building a partnership in the food domain

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Funded by the European Union

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A Handbook for pragmatic changemakers

Climate change, land degradation, biodiversity loss, hunger, malnutrition, diet-related diseases, social and economic inequalities and political tensions, and safeguarding food culture are among the many challenges impacting local, regional, national, European and global food systems, threatening their sustainability and potentially compromising the lives of future generations. This requires immediate actions, not only from individuals, but from groups that mobilise collective intelligence by bringing people with diverse roles, expertise and perspectives together in an inclusive manner.

This Handbook is for them. It is for anyone willing to partner with others and act at local, regional, national or global levels to transform food systems. Here, they will find guidelines on how to build an inclusive partnership, based on lessons learned over three years from cases where food systems actors joined forces around a shared goal of making their systems sustainable.

We recommend that you use this handbook as a "first taste" of the topic. This Handbook is a summary of a more **exhaustive Manual** [1] developed by the EU-funded project FOODPathS. If you intend to develop a partnership yourself, or want to actively participate, we suggest exploring the details of the more comprehensive Manual.

[1] How to build a partnership toward SFS in Europe? A comprehensive manual. FOODPathS, Deliverable 2.7 'Manual & Presentation of the Prototype 2.0 Partnership on Sustainable Food Systems'

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Links included in this handbook are related to more extensive deliverables and resources produced by the FOODPathS project.

What is FOODPathS?

In 2019, the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) of the European Commission and the Food System's Strategic Working Group of the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR SWG FS) set the basis for the creation of a Sustainable Food Systems Partnership. This is an initiative to fund Research and Innovation (R&I) projects that support the transition of European food systems. However, before officially establishing it, it was necessary to develop an initial "prototype" together with food systems actors, in order to illustrate how such a partnership could work and to collect best practices and practices to be avoided from similar initiatives.

In 2021 the European Commission funded FOODPathS (through the Horizon Europe Programme) exactly with this scope, and intention to be as inclusive as possible in the definition of the prototype and the requested recommendations. FOODPathS gathered 17 partners and their network of actors from public, private, philanthropic, academic, civil society sectors, which are operating from local to global scales. In this way, FOODPathS functions as a "mini-partnership", to verify if and how a larger, inclusive partnership, could work in practice.

Today, the Sustainable Food Systems Partnership is established, called **FutureFoodS**. The Manual and this Handbook, represent the legacy of FOODPathS for existing and forthcoming partnerships, like FutureFoodS.

What does Sustainable Food Systems (SFS) mean?

According to FAO (2018), a Sustainable Food System is "a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised".

To address the FAO's definition, urgent and radical measures in the way we eat, process, connect and govern food systems are needed. Such measures can be effective only if jointly developed and implemented by "a partnership" of different actors, like researchers, policy makers, citizens, etc.

What is a "partnership" in the eyes of FOODPathS

In the FOODPathS context, we consider "a partnership" any collaborative initiative that respects the definition provided by the UN. In this sense, local initiatives of different food systems actors cooperating can be considered a partnership, as well as certain EU-funded project consortia.

Meanwhile, the European Commission puts attention on three kind of partnerships in the R&I domain: Co-funded Partnerships (delivered by different funding agencies together), Co-programmed Partnerships (shared agenda setting by parties involved in the partnership) and Institutionalised Partnerships (formalised and long-term collaboration agreement between partners). A series of partnerships has been launched within the Horizon Europe programme for addressing Europe's most pressing challenges in the agrifood sustainability domains, such as FutureFoodS, Agroecology Partnership, Circular Bio-Based Europe Joint Undertaking (CBE JU), and PRIMA.

"

A Sustainable Food System is a food system that delivers **food security and nutrition for all** in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised.

FAO, 2018

A Partnership is "a voluntary and collaborative relationship between various parties, both public and non-public, in which participants inclusively agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits" (UN, 2013).

The FOODPathS' Partnership Prototype

In the FOODPathS understanding, a partnership can be visually represented with the image of a "flying bird". This bird is facing planetary and societal challenges that its activities must help to solve. Thanks to the observatory, it can weigh trade-offs and co-benefits, allowing it to remain flexible and adapt the flight path.

Each part of its body symbolises one of the elements of the Partnership Prototype:

The head of the bird serves to intelligently govern its activities.

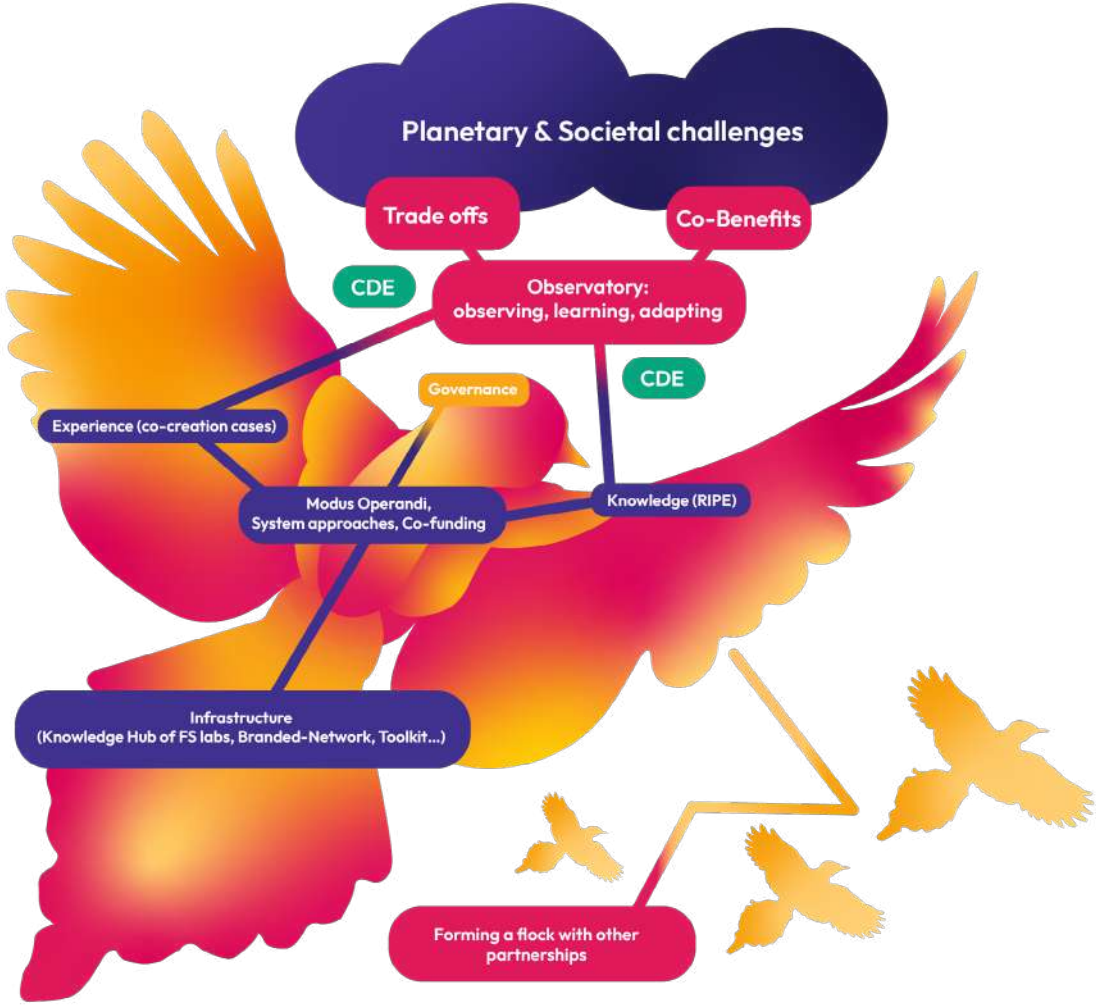
The body entails all the efficient operational activities of the partnership.

The wings represent its knowledge and experience.

The tail incorporates the structural elements needed for experimenting.

Finally, **its nervous system** symbolises the communication, dissemination and exploitation of its activities.

The bird is flying in **a flock**, where the other birds represent other partnerships with whom it communicates and exchanges.



CDE: Communication, Dissemination, Exploitation
RIPE: Research, Innovation, Policy, Education
Source: Modified from H. Schepers and H. de Vries

Like the Manual, this handbook follows the narrative of the FOODPathS' bird, presenting its key elements, practical steps to guide you in how to use its methodologies and tools, and lessons learned. Each chapter of the handbook corresponds to a chapter of the Manual, where you can find all references and additional documents and readings you can further explore.

At the end of this handbook, you will also find an exercise that you can use to develop your partnership: it was tested by different stakeholders during a co-creation workshop and it works!

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CONTENTS

6 The Observatory

9 Governance

12 Operational Activities

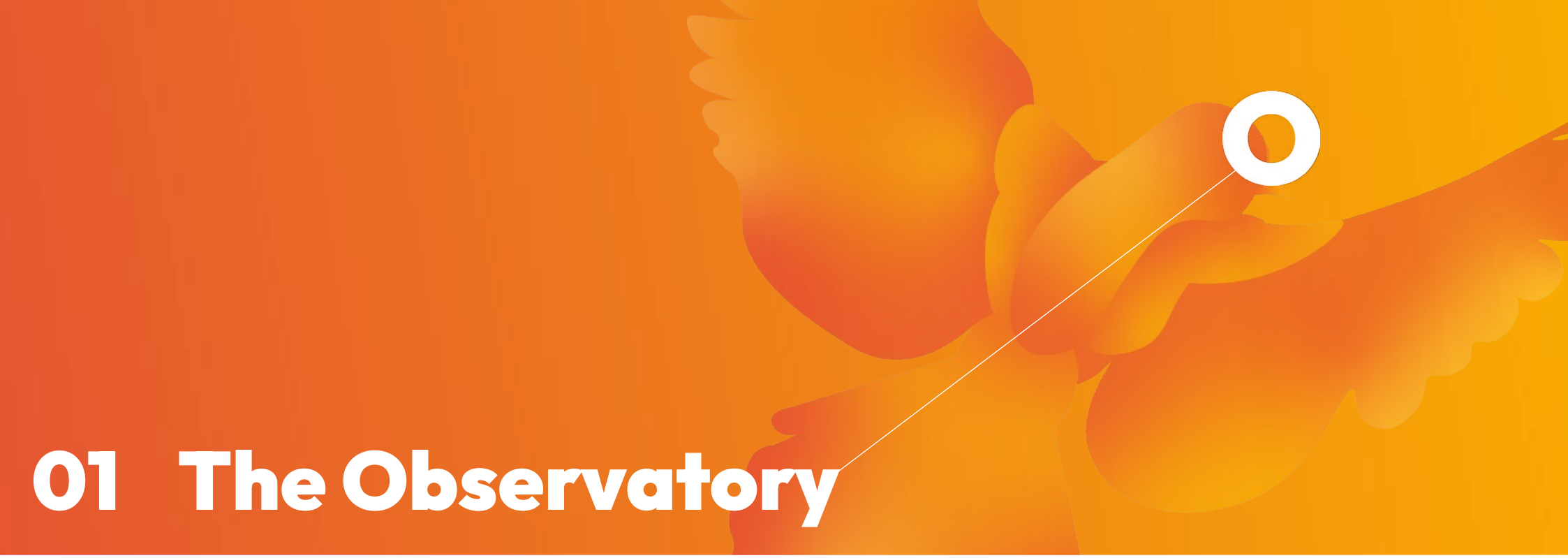
17 Knowledge & Experiences

22 Infrastructure

26 Communication Activities

29 Forming a Flock with Others Partnerships

31 Exercise – The Bird Puzzle



01 The Observatory

The Partnership Bird's flight towards sustainable food systems is endangered by challenges such as climate change, hunger, political instability and more. The bird must decide upon its ideal flight path, also considering co-benefits and trade-offs as a consequence of its decisions. **With its eyes** – here considered as its Observatory – the bird scans the environment, to anticipate obstacles and adapt its course, when necessary.

The role of the Observatory is to enable actors of the partnership to choose the most relevant thematic focus areas and transversal activities by detecting challenges, trade-offs and co-benefits, as early as possible.

Definition

A Food Systems Observatory gathers, analyses, and utilises data on Food Systems from multiple sources to allow for the monitoring of their performance and to guide transformation efforts. An Observatory should be used for establishing collaboration and to share knowledge, ideas and then create additional data.

How can I establish an Observatory as part of my partnership?

Step 1: Identify

Identify quantitative and qualitative data to use as indicators to assess whether you are on the right flight path towards sustainable food systems. We recommend considering the major planetary and societal objectives and boundaries as a guidance.

Step 2: Research

Have a look at the already existing food systems observatories (you can use the list created by FOODPathS): check the data they offer and the ones missing to address your objectives. We suggest you implement a new observatory only if it can provide data and analysis for your indicators that are genuinely missing from the existing ones.

Step 3: First concept

Develop a first concept of your observatory, collect data based on the indicators you identified, and analyse these with representatives of different food systems actors. Use the food systems approach in this process to understand what the relations between different stakeholders are, which potential, influential, interventions are possible (called 'leverage point') and what 'barriers' or 'traps' (called 'lock-in') may arise.

Step 4: Finalise

Build a final version of your observatory asking yourself the following questions: What do I need to monitor? How should this be monitored? By whom should they be monitored and analysed? In which way can findings be critically assessed to optimize Partnership activities?

Lessons learned in FOODPathS

- The most critical factor is the way an Observatory is formulated in a Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA, see page 23) and its action plan: to ensure it becomes acceptable and valuable for food systems actors, you should **consult them, asking for contributions to and verification of your proposal for an observatory**.

- In the implementation phase of a partnership, **the involvement of the various actors deserves continuous attention** because all their contributions are essential and their interpretation of outcomes count: you need experts in certain domains, but their knowledge should be complemented by other stakeholders' insights and experiences.

- Do not stick to scientific wordings but **translate insights into plain language** readable for citizens, policy makers, entrepreneurs, etc.: verify with stakeholders if the insights are relevant for them and for their food systems activities.

- Do not stick to only global or European levels but include also **national, regional, local levels** with the help of all local actors.

- In all cases, an Observatory should be used for **establishing collaboration and to share knowledge, ideas and then create additional data.** This concerns both data for the transition towards sustainable food systems and internal process data. The latter, a partnership can follow to take the right steps to collectively reach sustainable outcomes.

- Co-benefits and trade-offs should be analysed through the different kind of food systems actors' **"perspectives"**.

02 Governance

In its head – representing the Governance – the Partnership Bird reflects on what it has observed and uses this intelligence to design the path forward toward sustainable food systems. In practice, the governance process defines a vision and mission for the partnership, and prioritises pathways that all actors can follow and agree upon. It also formulates the boundaries (rules) within which a partnership can operate.

In the context of a partnership, a Governance model (or framework) defines clear decision-making processes, communication channels, and rules fostering the commitment and involvement of all partners throughout the partnership's lifecycle. The use of Mirror Groups ensures that engagement is extended beyond active members of the partnership, and also reaches implicated and impacted stakeholder groups.

Definition

Governance of Food Systems for sustainability is meant as "the continuous process of orchestration of policies and (multiple) food systems consisting of diverse interacting actors, respecting (in)formal rules and striving to provide food for all, in equitable and environmentally friendly ways, at any time and in any context". (Donner et al., 2024)

Definition

The Mirror Group process is a methodological approach used by FOODPathS to include local, regional, national, and global representatives from the public sector, civil society, farmer organisations and other private sector parties. Mirror Groups help to sense check the activities of the partnership and learn about good practices from outside the partnership. They elevate the participants' voices, priorities, reflections, and feedback, ensuring inclusiveness and transparency.

How can I implement an inclusive governance model?

Step 1: Organise

Organize workshops to increase collective awareness about the governance of inclusive food systems: discuss common objectives, the partnership's vision and explore potential critical issues. You should involve anyone who can contribute to the objectives of your partnership. In parallel, organize Mirror Groups to collect feedback and opinions by external stakeholders: you should engage organisations and initiatives not directly involved in your partnership but who may be impacted by it or have valuable related experience to contribute.

Step 2: Use and discuss

Use and discuss the consequences of the 'conceptual framework for food systems governance for sustainability' for your partnership with all the actors you are involving. Review and reflect on the "governance" definition provided: it will guide you in the identification of most relevant governance issues for your partnership.

Step 3: Interviews

Learn about governance from collaborative existing cases by conducting interviews and mapping them: this will help you on how to concretely develop and implement your own governance architecture.

Step 4: Co-create

Co-create your ideal governance architecture with all your partners involved during a workshop(s). You can use a value network map to identify the nature of key connections (e.g., knowledge, finance, cooperation) between the governance bodies. Co-building the governance architecture will ensure the partnership's legitimacy and increase the commitment of all partners involved.

Lessons learned in FOODPathS

- Since governance of partnerships is not an easy element for many food systems actors, we recommend spending some time during already planned workshops/meetings to discuss what “governance” means for you.
- A mapping of governance architectures used by other collaborative initiatives can help you to better understand shortcomings to be solved and help you to choose the most appropriate architecture for your partnership.
- Mirror Groups are useful to receive input into decisions made within the partnership, before they are implemented, and to verify how internal decisions and external factors impact the partnership, specifically looking at the trade-offs and co-benefits.
- A classical governance model of a partnership has a general assembly representing all partners, an executive committee and working groups. However, partnerships are all different and we dare you to be innovative in your architecture: consider including other bodies suggested in this handbook, such as Mirror Groups, Observatory, Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs, Funders Body, etc.
- Involving an independent and impartial facilitator in the decision-making process is strongly recommended to avoid conflicts of interest and seek consensus (Mamès & al., 2025).

03 Operational Activities

The body of the Partnership Bird represents all operations that allow the bird to fly. It is composed of three elements: the systemic approach, enabling it to adapt the flight via feedback loops and iterations; the Modus Operandi, serving as its "blood system"; and the co-funding mechanisms that "fuel" the Partnership Bird.

Definition

The **Food Systems Approach** is a research and innovation model that accounts for the complex web of interactions within the entire food chain, from primary production to waste management and from health to sustainability.

The **Food Systems Approach** is recommended to be applied in the development of the different elements and activities of the partnership, such as the elaboration of a R&I agenda, the structure of the Observatory, definition of funding programmes, etc.

Definition

The **Modus Operandi (MO)** establishes how all the elements of the partnership (e.g., governance, observatory) are orchestrated, the guiding principles used (e.g., co-creation, food systems approach) and practical features operated (e.g., secretariat, internal communication processes and tools).

The **Modus Operandi** concerns all the operational tasks carried out by the executive board or management team of the partnership. They also make sure that the Food Systems Approach is implemented in the partnership's activities.

One of the crucial operational activities of the partnership is the **R&I co-funding mechanism**, created to fund food systems-oriented research and innovation projects. The mechanism is established by different actors playing the role of "funders" that allocate their resources through transparent and fair processes, described in a funding programme. Such a programme should be adapted in the long term according to results obtained by projects funded (monitored via the Observatory), lessons learned from its practical implementation, feedback received, and resewarch priorities and funders' needs changed.

How can I establish operational activities that make the partnership work?

The Food Systems Approach

Step 1: Organise

Organise a workshop with the different actors involved in your Partnership to introduce the Food Systems Approach. Also, make explicit what you mean with a food systems approach in your SRIA and in the portfolio of activities of the Partnership.

Step 2: Survey

Since the concept of a food systems approach can be hard to grasp, serious gaming and other workshops can be set up that provide practical examples. Additionally, you can diffuse a survey among your partners to test the comprehensiveness of the Food Systems Approach and to exemplify positive changes that it can bring.

The Modus Operandi

Step 3: Define

Envision the Modus Operandi of your ideal partnership, including all appropriate operational activities. Discuss which are the key 'Success pillars' of your partnership. Define the successive stages of its life (launch, engagement, expansion, collaboration) which is needed to establish the actions to be implemented: in doing this, take into account different future possible scenarios for your partnership.

Step 4: Learn

Learn from in-vivo Modus Operandi: map case studies and interview stakeholders to better understand what the most suitable operational activities and mechanisms of collaboration for your partnership are.

Step 5: Setup

Analyse feedback collected in the previous step to setup a final roadmap for your partnership, where you identify concrete activities for your Modus Operandi and establish shared guiding principles.

Co-funding Mechanisms

Step 1: Map

Map the potential funders of food partnerships. Articulate a narrative to show funders the value of joining the mapping exercise. Make sure that they are well informed about potential conflicts of interest, especially NGOs and academia: for example, if a university is involved in formulating calls for funding, it would become ineligible to apply to them.

Step 2: Organise

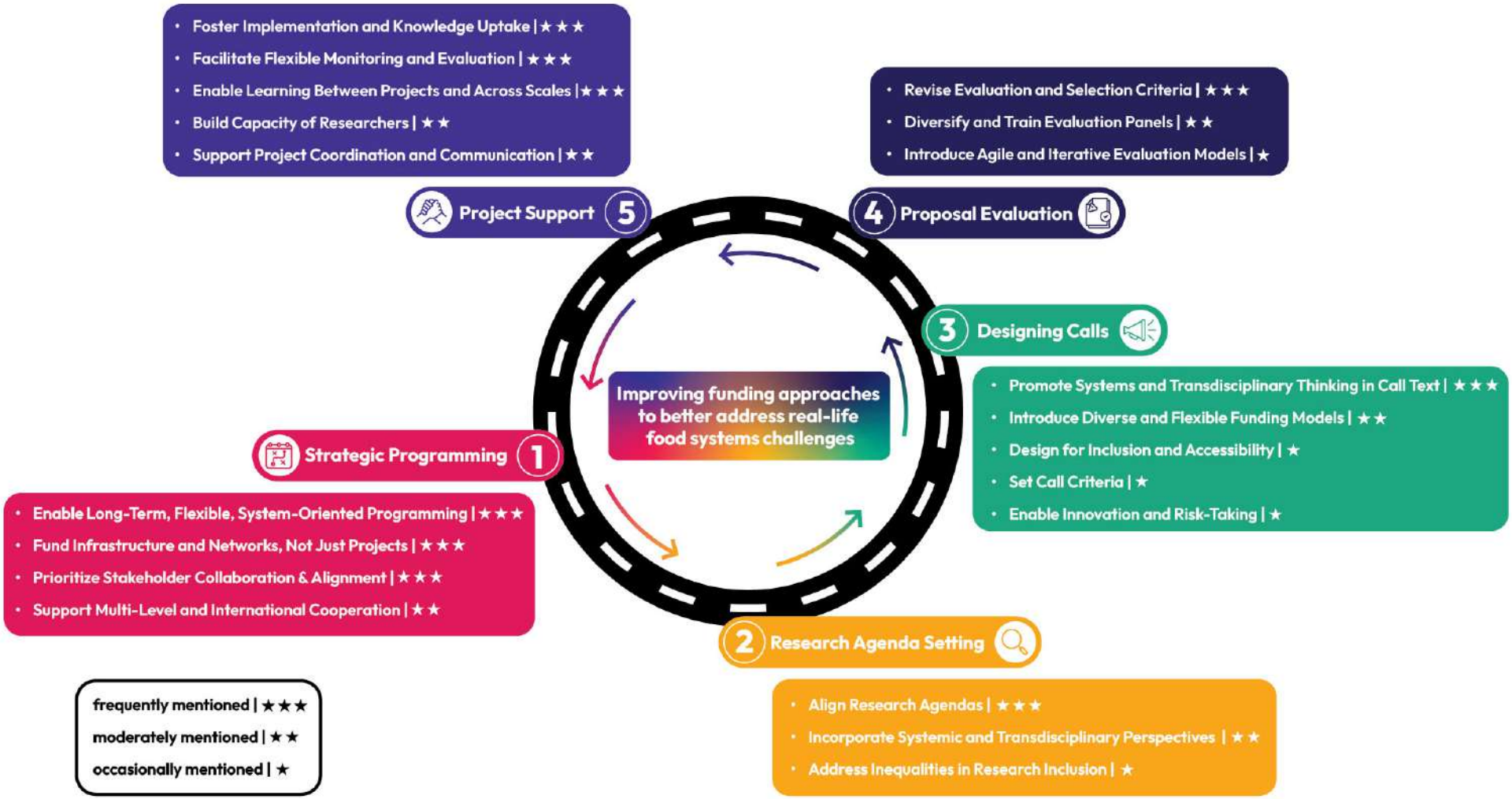
Establish a Funders' Forum to bring together the diverse funders and representatives of all food systems actors. Organise Forum meetings to address the following questions: About funding of research, what changes are necessary to support a transformation to sustainable food systems through transdisciplinary research? What impact and interesting examples (good and bad practices) can be shown? You can address the proposed questions also by interviewing experts, and examples can be collected from past projects funded by previous 'partnerships' calls (i.e., ERANETs, Joint Programme Initiatives, etc.).

Step 3: Identify

Based on the results obtained in the previous two steps, identify the key priorities of your funding strategy.

Step 4: Co-create

Design the implementation process of your funding strategy in a structural way: get inspired by the FOODPathS proposed structure!



A proposal for the structure of your funding strategy (FOODPathS own design)

Lessons learned in FOODPathS

- Bear in mind that cultural dimensions have an impact in all operational activities, including in the Modus Operandi (e.g., how cultural differences influence decision-making, communication, and collaboration, both locally and at European scale).
- The appropriate application of the Food Systems approaches requires periodic evaluation of your activities: assessing the results achieved and consulting stakeholders about their expectations and preferences can let emerge that your partnership is not going in the right direction. Then, you need to be ready to adjust your strategy.
- It is crucial that the whole process of applying a Food Systems approach actively includes stakeholders: if they become real agents of change in your partnership, they will increase their commitment and motivate other actors to join. Then a snowball effect is generated, increasing the impact of your partnership.
- Underrepresented or underserved stakeholders should be meaningfully included in operational tasks: to ease their involvement, mechanisms to reimburse their time and effort can be established.
- Engaging and involving stakeholders along the different steps of the creation of the funding mechanism and of the establishment of a structured dialogue for stakeholders can result into higher investments from funders.
- Capacity building activities on food systems approaches are necessary to mainstream it, also in co-funded calls and R&I projects: provide guidelines and daily support.
- Conflict of Interests is an important issue in the development of a co-funding mechanism and calls. It could undermine the inclusion or exclusion of some relevant actors. A partnership should identify and implement solutions to mitigate this issue, ensuring that funding mechanisms are dealt with in an objective and transparent manner.

04 Knowledge & Experience

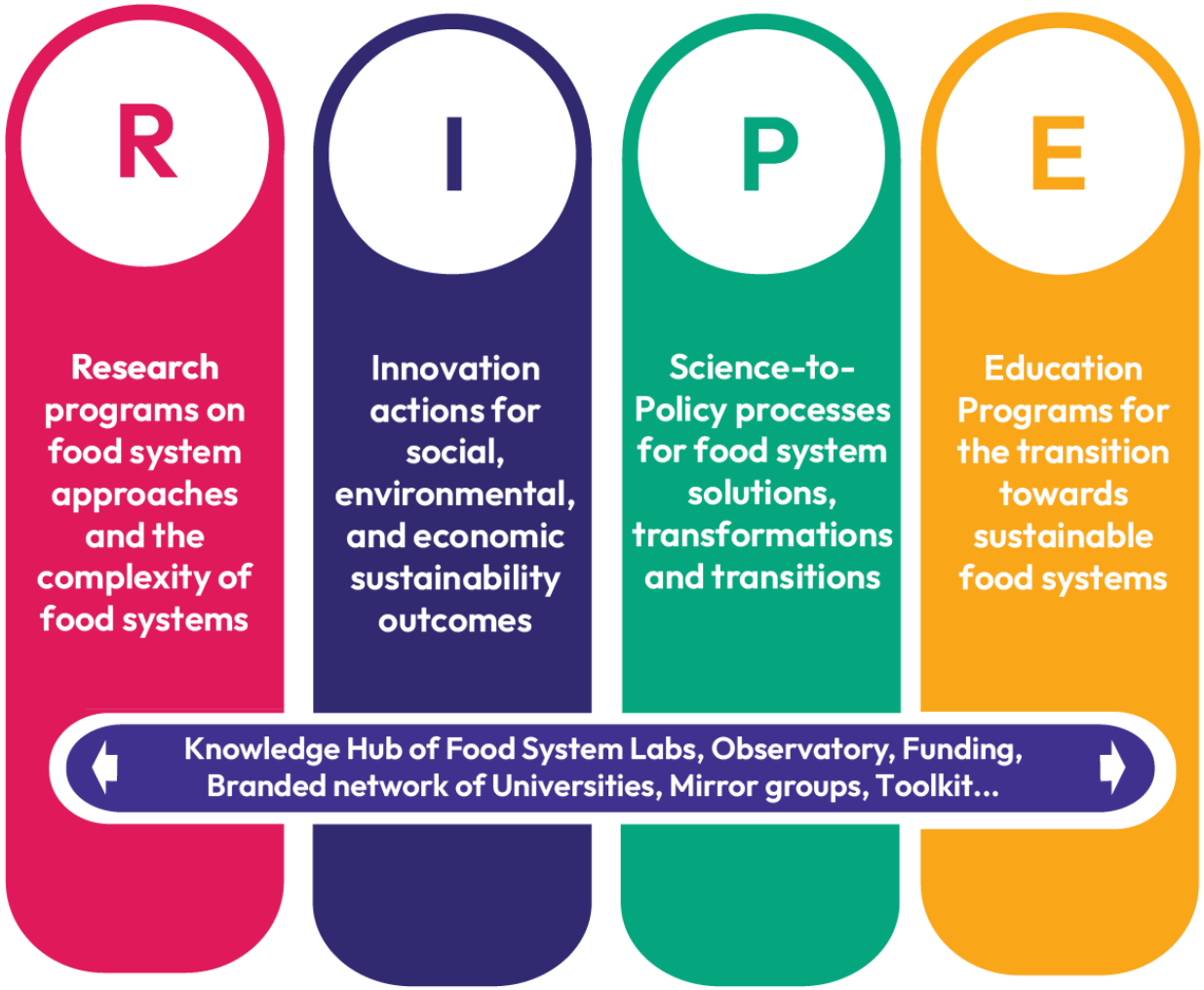
The two wings of the Partnership Bird represent Knowledge – gained through research, innovations, policies and education (RIPE) activities – and Experience, obtained through co-creation cases (FOODPathS publication on co-creation). These two elements allow the bird to adjust its direction and keep 'floating in a balanced manner' in the sky: it continuously absorbs new knowledge and exploits best practices to safely continue its flight.

Next to knowledge, the 'Experiences' plays a crucial role: learning from existing food systems cases and stakeholders' experiences can avoid duplicating work and facilitate joint efforts to accelerate the transformation. In this respect, the partnership is recommended to map existing initiatives and stakeholders and – where possible – dialogue with their representatives (e.g., via civil society organisations).

Defintion

The RIPE concept supports partnerships in integrating scientific expertise (R), technological, social or organizational innovations (I), research-based advice to policy makers (P) and education programmes (E). It describes interdependencies between RIPE components of the food systems and enables the consistent synthesis and translation of insights across food systems governance levels.

The RIPE concept should be applied throughout different stages of the partnership and targeting different actors. Thanks to their inputs, RIPE permits defining a series of coordinated actions to ease the transformation towards sustainable food systems, addressing diverse thematic and action areas. It also helps in clarifying the complexity of food systems.



How can I generate knowledge and gain from other initiatives' experiences for my partnership?

Step 1: Define

Define Research and Innovation (R&I) priorities with all actors (stakeholder representatives) involved in your partnership. In the meantime, join forces in defining R&I with other existing partnerships active in fields like yours – i.e., production (land/marine), water, bioeconomy, biodiversity, etc. – and cover the entire food systems domain.

Step 2: Build

Build a strong Science-to-Policy Interface (SPI) to contribute to the development of future policies: the SPI will ensure research integrity and independence of the advice to civil servants/policy makers, by providing open dialogue spaces (i.e., thanks to the use of Living Labs) and promoting co-creation processes.

Step 3: Identify

Identify gaps in skills and competences of food systems actors in research, innovation and policy activities, to adapt future education programmes. Look for already existing exemplary training programmes.

Step 4: Organise

Now that you have a clear view on the four RIPE pillars, organise workshops to discuss connections and develop synergistic solutions between the pillars.

Step 5: Assess

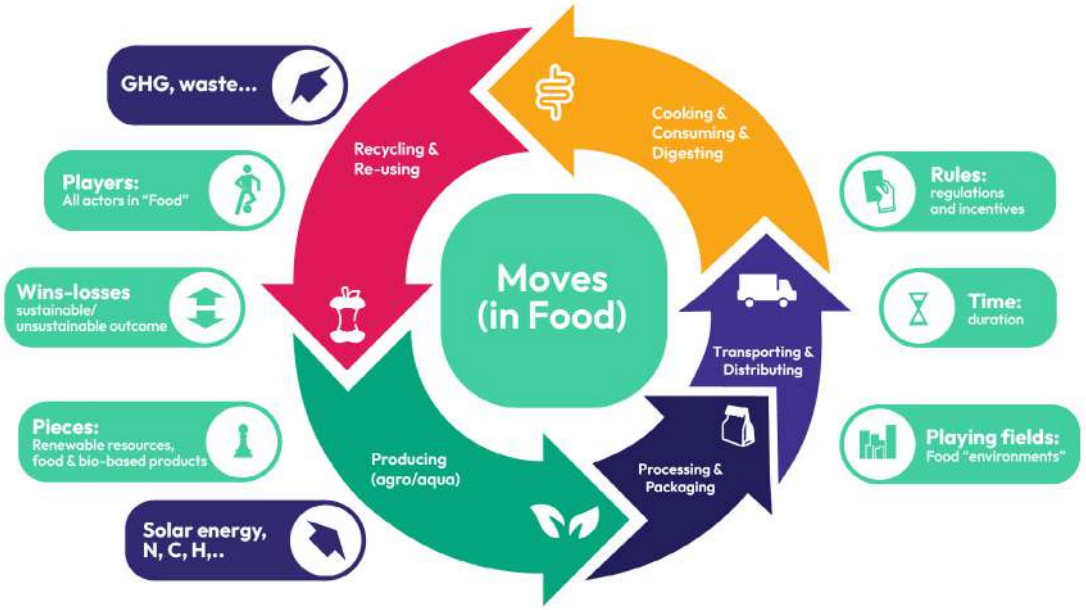
Select a methodology to collect 'experiences' (good and bad practices or case studies) and assess them, preferring one that is understandable and practically usable by all food systems actors. FOODPathS used a "game" structure methodology and a template able to similarly describe each food systems case study in terms of players, rules, time, playing field, pieces, win-lose and moves (De Vries & al., 2022).

Step 7: Categorise

Define a system to categorise the co-creation cases enabling food systems actors to consult them and find the most appropriate ones for their activities. FOODPathS categorised its +70 cases along 7 dominant orientations (research, innovation, policy, education, observatory, networking, and entrepreneurship) and scales of operation (from local to global).

Step 6: Build

Develop your dedicated database of collected 'experiences' from which you can draw inspiration for new RIPE themes and co-creation cases. This database may contain more generically described cases as well as cases studied in-depth. In the next chapter, you can find a virtual platform for sharing these experiences (the Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs).



The FOODPathS game structure

Lessons learned in FOODPathS

- Data used in the RIPE process should be expressed in a language understandable for everyone, allowing all actors to join and actively participate in the development process of the RIPE concept.
- The RIPE concept allows for the translation of the partnership's priorities into concrete and practical actions: making them visible and accessible to others, for instance through an interactive platform (see the FOODPathS' example of the Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs in the next chapter).
- The food systems domain is so extensive and complex that food systems actors may struggle to find co-creation cases relevant for them: this problem can be solved by categorising them in the most appropriate way for your partnership.
- The validity of "best" practices should be carefully examined, as it may require an in-depth assessment of their sustainability impact (e.g., through sustainability impact studies).

05 Infrastructure

The tail of the Partnership Bird represents the infrastructure or structural building blocks – i.e., toolkits, strategic documents, and blueprints of networks – that help in steering its course. In the FOODPathS Prototype, the building blocks identified are: a Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA), a toolkit with practical tools for a specific partnership activity, the Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs and a Community of Practice for Universities.

Definition

The **Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA)** is a guiding document that presents key thematic areas for R&I in a specific domain and the actions to carry out R&I activities.

Definition

A Toolkit provides practical guidance and instruments (templates, worksheets, resources, etc.) that help a partnership carry out its tasks and address challenges (e.g., methodologies to include all stakeholders' voices).

Definition

A Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs is a platform to showcase mapped co-creation cases and share knowledge among food systems actors and existing initiatives.

Definition

A Community of Practice (CoP) for Universities brings together university members to collaborate, share knowledge, and exchange resources. Through peer-to-peer learning, best practice sharing, joint activities, targeted seminars and sessions with a network of leading universities and experts, the CoP helps showcase and scale innovative Sustainable Food Systems initiatives across the network. The CoP is guided by a Sustainability Charter on Sustainable Food Systems Education, which outlines the commitment of organisations to sustainable practices and guides their decision-making processes. A Code of Conduct, a set of rules outlining the social norms and responsibilities, ensures that organisations comply with the Charter.

How can I establish the building blocks of my partnership?

Deisgn of a SRIA

Step 1: Prepare

Prepare an SRIA with the involvement of different experts and representatives of stakeholders, their networks and other existing initiatives: be as inclusive as possible and aim to have a wide variety of perspectives. Bear in mind that the SRIA must contain a narrative describing what a partnership wants to achieve, do and how it plans to act.

FOODPathS' visual representation of the four thematic and the four transversal action themes identified for the Partnership Sustainable Food Systems (SCAR, 2023).

Step 2: Develop

Develop and standardise a partnership-specific toolkit. First, identify which tools are most valuable and categorise them (e.g., coordination or communication tools). Second, design each tool individually and set up a helpdesk for tool users. Third, ensure all tools follow a common format and are reviewed by external experts. Are you lost? Check the FOODPathS toolkit and how we organised the resources!

Creation of the Knowledge Hub

Step 1: Develop

Develop, design and launch a Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs. First of all, develop a virtual platform to showcase co-creation cases you collected and categorised (see previous chapter).

Step 2: Study

Use a few of them to study in-depth: for example, discuss with stakeholders how a Hub can support smaller-scale innovations for addressing global scale challenges.

Step 3: Organise

Organise events to promote knowledge sharing, scaling-up innovations, strengthening food ecosystems, and boosting cross-border collaboration. Such activities will help you to build a vibrant community involving all food systems actors.

Realisation of a CoP for Universities

Step 1: Investigate

Develop the contours of the CoP by first investigating the existing portfolio of programmes and courses, joint degrees, alliances and networks on sustainable food systems education. At the same time, investigate the national and transnational administrative and legislative barriers for existing and new initiatives to establish CoPs. Include facilitators that can support in overcoming these barriers.

Step 2: Create

Operationalise the CoP by co-creating a Sustainability Charter on Sustainable Food Systems Education to guarantee that all participating universities share common values and goals. This charter can also be used as a guide in their decision-making processes for reaching sustainability outcomes. Identify universities with good practices on topics like institutionalising a Food Systems approach, implementation of the Sustainability Charter, or defining a supporting Code of Conduct. Give a name and a logo to the CoP to make it recognisable.

european network for food sustainability education
powered by foodpaths

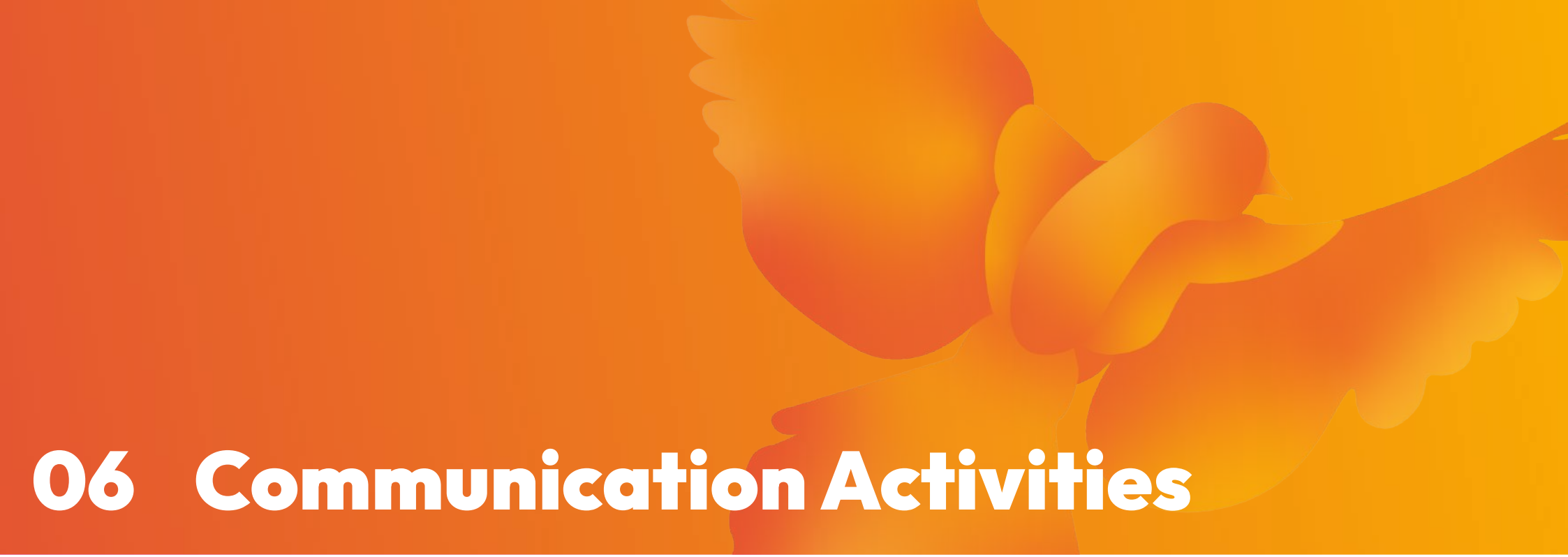
The FOODPathS logo for a possible CoP for universities

Step 3: Connect

Think about all other potential structural building blocks that help a partnership in its daily functioning and its value for its food systems actors. Many inspirational infrastructures contributing to sustainability exist in Europe; they all have a core focus point at either a city, region or country level. Connect these to your Knowledge Hub of Food Systems Labs or CoP for Universities.

Lessons learned in FOODPathS

- A regular update of the SRIA and a cross-analysis of SRIAs from other partnerships in the broader agrifood domain are recommended to ensure its alignment with evolving challenges, its coherence and the possibility of including the latest feedback from different stakeholders.
- Items of the toolkit must be accessible, precise, instructive, and presented in a coherent way to make them usable for different stakeholders and partnerships.
- The practical usage of the tools should be regularly verified via a survey, supporting the improvement and adaptation of the toolkit's items to users' needs.
- A Knowledge Hub can benefit from the involvement of technology platforms (e.g., the National Food Technology Platforms, NFTPs): they can act as key multipliers and ambassadors, also ensuring cross-country relevance, regional mobilisation and representation of micro, small and medium-sized actors.
- Adopting a user-informed design process for the Knowledge Hub (i.e., regular targeted surveys, organisation of multi-stakeholder workshops, etc.) can support you to validate stakeholders' expectations and modify functional priorities of the platform.
- An online Knowledge Hub or CoP would benefit from the integration of interactive features, such as matchmaking tools, customisable dashboards, and forums.
- A jointly developed Sustainability Charter is considered acceptable by most universities, while a common Code of Conduct is regarded as too detailed and organisation-specific to be suitable for joint development; universities should therefore have the freedom to develop their own Codes of Conduct in line with their internal policies and practices, and in line with the jointly developed Sustainability Charter.
- Before setting up a new CoP, identify and assess CoPs in existing university networks and alliances. This ensures that new initiatives complement rather than duplicate existing efforts and explore whether alternative forms of collaboration might be more effective.



06 Communication Activities

The "nerve system" of the Partnership Bird consists of the communication activities within and outside the partnership. Internally, communication is aimed at sharing insights and coordinating activities in a transparent way. Externally, it helps the Bird to exchange with other birds (partnerships), allowing it to join forces – flying as a flock – to overcome the challenges and achieve wider impacts.

To communicate properly, a partnership should build a strategy that defines messages, activities and channels tailored to the different actors it wants to reach. However, to ensure the efficiency of the communication measures, the strategy should be defined in an interactive way: exchanging with food systems actors and asking for their feedback will ensure that they are open to listening and working with you, as well as to help tailor messages to their needs.

Definition

Even if generally referred to as communication activities, a partnership should distinguish among the **communication, dissemination and exploitation ones**. Communication activities address a larger audience and aim to mainly create awareness of the partnership and its initiatives. Dissemination activities target technical audiences that might be interested in using the knowledge created by the partnership; for this reason, the language used in them contains more technical jargon than in communication activities. Exploitation activities are the ones put in place to use results and knowledge in the longer term and in other contexts (e.g., the creation of a new partnership, the use of data generated by the Observatory for activities external to the partnership, etc.).

How can I maximize the impact of the partnership through communication activities?

Step 1: Strategise

Draft a strategy for your communication activities. Think about who your target audiences are, their challenges and the messages to engage them: based on this, you can define the most suitable activities and channels, set a timeline and Key Performance Indicators to assess the implementation and, most importantly, revise your strategy. Ask relevant stakeholders to provide their feedback on your draft strategy and be ready to improve it by adopting their suggestions.

Step 2: Engage

Implement communication activities to inform and engage a broad audience about the partnership's existence and scope. Use simple, clear language to raise awareness and attract the interest of diverse stakeholders.

Step 3: Connect

Implement dissemination activities to develop connections with stakeholders who already have a background in, or contribution to, Food Systems. The goal is to build relationships with actors interested in sharing experiences, co-developing and adopting pilot results. This engagement leads to learning more and replicating best practices within their geographical, social, economic, and/or research contexts.

Step 4: Adapt

Revise your strategy regularly, based on the results obtained and new feedback collected from stakeholders; adapting the strategy over time can lead to better promotion, acceptability and adoption of results, thus increasing your exploitation chances.

Lessons learned in FOODPathS

- Communication activities are essential to define a common narrative among diverse food systems actors and to raise awareness of your partnerships' objectives.
- Webinars and podcasts show the value of interactive presentations and discussions among representatives of diverse stakeholder groups with potential users (i.e. actors within partnerships, large initiatives, or any interested actor in partnership activities).
- Dissemination should be bidirectional to share information and receive feedback, in line with the food systems approach. Workshops and co-creation activities are great ways to enable these exchanges, helping the partnership become more inclusive and better focused on sustainability outcomes.

07 Forming a Flock with Other Partnerships

Since the current environmental, economic and social challenges are overwhelming, the Partnership on Sustainable Food Systems, called FutureFoodS, with a focus on post-farming and post-fishing cannot find solutions without cooperation – or forming flocks – with other partnerships in the agri-food domain and beyond.

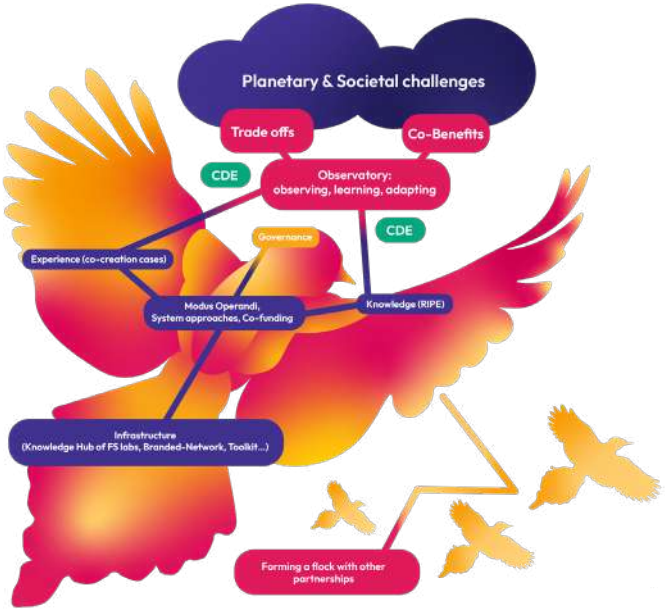
These partnerships form a flock of birds using collective intelligence; this is needed to jointly fly in the right direction, towards sustainable outcomes.

Exercise
The Bird Puzzle

Objective: To creatively use the Bird Model to design governance solutions for real or imagined scenarios through group collaboration.

Materials per group:

- One printout of the original Bird Model
- Two to three printouts of the proposed scenarios
- One printout of each puzzle piece — Head, Eyes, Body, Wing 1, Wing 2, and Tail (a Canva template with the bird puzzle pieces can be accessed here)



Methodology:

1. Divide the audience into groups of 6–10 people.
2. Provide each group with the materials described above.
3. Ask each group to assign a note-taker and a rapporteur to present their Bird Model at the end of the exercise.
4. Each group will select one of the proposed scenarios or quickly create a new one. They will then apply the Bird Model to this scenario.
5. Group participants will work collaboratively (or in pairs) on each “bird piece” to develop it based on the chosen scenario. Example: For the “Head” puzzle piece, the group will define a governance structure suitable for addressing their selected scenario. Notes can be written directly on the puzzle piece.
6. At the end, each group will present their bird to the plenary, forming the complete “flock of birds.” Be creative! (Is your bird a peacock, a hawk, or a sparrow?)

Constitution of the group and Duration:

It is recommended to have representatives of different food systems actor groups involved. The duration of the exercise is arbitrary. A first image of the bird model can be created in 1 hour; however, a more detailed description asks for at least half a day.

Examples of scenarios at different scales to create your unique Bird Model

Urban rural strategy to fight food insecurity
Apply the Bird Model for a partnership that develops an urban rural food systems strategy to counteract food insecurity for all its inhabitants. For example, the city council and philanthropic foundations may be in the lead, but all other kinds of food systems actors are actively involved, supported by the citizens.

Education within a Living Laboratory Campus
Apply the Bird Model to create a sustainable food environment on a university campus, integrating local sourcing, waste reduction and eco-friendly logistics. Alongside these measures, the programme introduces courses and workshops that teach students and staff about sustainable diets and responsible consumption. Over time, the campus becomes both a living laboratory for sustainable food systems and a model for health.

Regional collaboration
Apply the bird model to connect multiple regions in developing alternative proteins by leveraging unique resources such as forgotten cultivars and/or marine production (algae…). Local governments, cooperatives, and food systems actors collaborate to manage shared agricultural risks, including seasonality and climate-related losses, while ensuring flexibility in processing and retail. Together, they create an adaptive framework that strengthens resilience, supports sustainable diets, and balances local needs with global sustainability goals.

Partnership of partnerships
Apply the bird model to connect three European Partnerships working on food systems issues at different points in the value chain (e.g., production, consumption, waste). By linking EU initiatives on agroecology, biodiversity conservation, future diets, and animal welfare, interdisciplinary expertise is shared and utilised to create a common knowledge base. Together, they build an accessible framework that makes insights available to all stakeholders and drives coordinated transformation of food systems.

foodpaths

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