

Networking: strategies, tools and analysis

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Innovation often thrives in collaborative environments where knowledge, ideas, and resources flow freely. Building and leveraging networks can catalyze this process. In the development conference held in Malmö, spring 2024, different strategies to accelerate (energy) innovation were presented by experienced orchestrators of networks for Biogas, Hydrogen in the built environment, Hydrogen for transport and hydrogen market development. A summary of these strategies and their learnings is captured in this document. Based upon the dialogues with project partners, stakeholders and the orchestrators, we found the following generic elements that contribute to a successful strategy:

Clear Objectives

Clear objectives are important for engagement, they give the first reason to get engaged. Clearly outlining the purpose and objectives of your network can be the most important instrument to attract members. Having a clear mission statement helps align members and focus efforts on common goals.

Stakeholders

Focus on attracting the key stakeholders, they in turn will bring their partners and contacts. Identify key stakeholders who can contribute to the network's success. This includes individuals, organizations, or groups with relevant expertise, resources, or influence.

Diversity and Inclusion

Foster a diverse and inclusive network where different perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences are valued. This enriches discussions, enhances creativity, and strengthens the network's effectiveness.

Relationships

It is important to get to know members and stakeholders. Build strong relationships with network members- this creates sense of trust and common vision. Invest time and effort in regular communication, active listening, and demonstrating value to members.

Empowerment

Empower network members to take ownership of initiatives, projects, or activities within the network. Provide opportunities for leadership, decision-making, and skill development.

Communication

Effective communication channels will be important to facilitate information sharing, collaboration, and engagement among network members. There are many different solutions, not all will be viable

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or technically possible, choose smartly among online platforms, email lists, forums, or regular meetings.

Collaboration

Encourage collaboration and knowledge exchange among network members. Facilitate partnerships, joint projects, or working groups to address common challenges or pursue shared objectives.

Value of the network

Offering tangible benefits or value to network can stimulate and sustain participation and engagement. This could include access to resources, opportunities for collaboration, or professional development.

Partnerships

Strategic partnerships with other networks, organizations, or stakeholders that share similar goals or can provide complementary resources. Collaborating with external partners can extend the network's impact and provide added value to members.

Networking Events

Networking events are very important for members to further build their contacts and competencies. Organize networking events, workshops, or conferences where members can connect, share ideas, and build relationships. These events will even bring a sense of community and collaboration.

Celebrate Successes

Achievement, both small and big should be recognized to help create positive culture but also make sure that engagement and work is seen and appreciated. Recognize and celebrate achievements, milestones, and contributions within the network.

Adapt and Innovate

Be flexible and willing to adapt your approach based on feedback, changing circumstances, or emerging needs. Embrace innovation and experimentation to keep the network dynamic and relevant.

Practise (1): Regional long-term network for biogas

Identification of main regional problems: CO₂ emissions connected transport and the use of natural gas in industries.

Aim: To stimulate a growth of local market for biogas.

Target: lead to market growth through strong network of stakeholders.

Driving forces: An ability to press politicians as a united front.

Organization: network coordinator, steering group, and network members. The group work with a 2-year action plan which plans out the work through lobby/knowledge work, individual counseling, network meetings, specific conferences as well as project.

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Tools used:

Mapping and visualization of the stakeholder system

A puzzle was laid out of how the biogas ecosystem could look like. It covered all crucial stakeholders, from farmers to gas distribution companies as well as municipalities and the academy.

Looking at puzzle makes it easy to understand whom we need to select from each segment. Strategic stakeholders and companies were then recruited for the network. Puzzle is used as well to illustrate importance of all kinds of stakeholders while recruiting/talking to any potential member.

Lobby and capacity building work

- conference for biogas companies (producers), politicians and industry companies (consumers), resulted in building a pressure on national politicians.
- conferences with exhibitions of biogas driven trucks for stakeholders in the transport business. Today 13 % of new trucks are run by liquid biogas.
- meetings on different levels: individual counseling, network meetings, specific conferences as well as project
- mitigating risks for producers by stimulating municipalities to invest in biogas: switching to biogas driven vehicles, purchase of biogas instead of fossil gas in heating.
- bringing authorities on all levels together with the purpose of building knowledge and guidance on permit and permit application.

Lessons learned:

- Local or regional authorities/organizations can't make change of their own. All stakeholders are needed to build a working system.
- Understand the actors, stakeholders, and their motivations to be able to satisfy their needs.
- Adapt on demand- with time going the needs of network and stakeholders are changing.
- Use the different skills and knowledge of different actors to build capacity of the network.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Time perspective on long term network give another dimension to efforts needed and makes it more interesting to participants	Similar approach perhaps unavailable yet to drive H ₂ demand by public investments
Important role played by authorities as orchestrating efforts	If similar made for H ₂ , not just one decision will be of importance: H ₂ vs diesel
Wide groups of stakeholders involved: good to cooperate with experts to ensure reliable outlook and data	Hard to work only for H ₂ in transportation in the same way- many questions are valid for municipalities: H ₂ , biogas, biodiesel
Important to have big/important players: the ensure powerfulness of network	Patience is needed- it takes a long time to reach the goals, maybe the goals need to be changed over time
Good to gather the "coalition of the willing"	Integrated approach: energy, fuel

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Both individual counselling and network meetings ensures willingness to participate	Driving a network is a long-term solution to changing goals/methods within a political agenda and it takes time to see effects
To lay a picture of networking organisations as puzzle makes it easy to understand own importance, where your organisation fits and gives a common vision	Challenges with recruitment- you need the big players to create “importance” of the issue
Can be operative on any subject, not only biogas	
Clear structure makes willingness to participate	
Low risks for involvement for participants: you gain a lot, invest little	

Practise (2): Result-oriented lobbying

Result-oriented lobbying with 9 steps. Lobbying is not the best way for every cause. But it is a good tool when you can't do it alone because of limited resources, when you don't own the decisions making, when rules and policies are hard to work with and you need to scale up your cause.

Step 1: focus withing your own organization

Focus within your organization is very important. Long time commitment is a key aspect, nothing happens in a week. To make a strong position on where you are going helps you lobby.

Step 2: decide on the objective. What do you need to change, why and when

The objective is composed of:

- what you want to change, action to take must be clear
- for whom: whom you represent/beneficiaries
- to whom: target- who is the decision maker of the case?
- scale: how large the change should be
- time frame: timing including the decision-making process

Also important: Make sure that lobby objective harmonizes with objectives of your own organization. Try to find win-win/mutual gains and be solution oriented.

Step 3: Know your beneficiaries

Who is supporting you benefits from your cause? What is their interest, their view of you and your goal. Knowing you beneficiaries and find gains for them as well for exchange of benefits is key. The image they have of your organization and how the cause might benefit them are useful things to know. Make a row when needed! Keep them updated on strategy, progress, outcomes.

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Step 4: Know you target

Who are your decision makers and what goals and interest they have? Understand the decision-making process and relevant procedures. How decision makes perceives you and your beneficiaries?

Other important steps are understanding your own organization, your enemies, making the lobby plan, and setting the monitoring of progress.

Lessons learned

Even a small town can make a big change, with a concrete lobby plan. It's not about size but about motivation. Seeing other perspectives were a big part of the success.

Lobbying for something else than money might bring easier results. A big part of lobbying is finding out what others knows about you cause- often it is wrong picture they have.

Long term commitment where the challenge it to persevere. There are many thresholds to step over; when you win one the next is coming.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Making an appointment to person who was in charge: makes you focus your idea to key facts	You need to know the decision makers
You learn to be convincing	You need to know your enemies
One on one strengthen your position	Political frame/goals- hard to change political goals
Show the advantages. Do not be against and show the solutions instead	It is not building on personal relations
Bringing a professional lobbyist on board- this keeps the focus, makes access easier to relevant persons	Difficult to keep attention of decision makers over long term
Professional approach. Think big	Staff rotation makes is vulnerable
Tiny house as an artefact for communication	Changing political context makes it vulnerable
Continuity of staff and people involved	A lot of effort for a result: you get all or nothing
Commitment- stick to the plan	Takes time, you need to be patient
Ensure commitment of your own organisation	You need to be standing for yourself and you can't do it alone
Fun while working means people want to belong to	It can be difficult to find a right person/right company to help you
Great with structure for work and division into steps/parts	Few stakeholders, few resources
You build up competence of the subject	You make yourselves enemies
Your organisation gets knowledge	



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Idea/method could work anywhere	
Commitment within your organisation and other companies	
Trained to be a lobbyist at your job, learn to make a difference	
You become professional and secure	
Nice to have a checklist of what should be done	

PRACTISE(3): Networking event

Stakeholder networks at different levels. In preparation for the Hannover meeting a great deal of things were considered to create a good meeting for networking and making connections between participants.

Lessons learned

What to do more of for good networking:

- Personal invitations, so they know they fit into the discussion and reduce the fears of languages barriers.
- Make a non-formal frame to relax participants. Examples: informal dinner, poetry slam, many coffee breaks.
- Small groups for workshop to increase participation.
- Have a “plan-b” to get the discussion started.
- Use social media.

How to overcome language barriers?

How to get people to talk to persons they don't know?

Informal settings can help integrate and get to know each other. For example, the sight-seeing tour on buss in Germany and city tour in Malmö made this. It was not just for fun, but it was meant to foster business, too. The organizers can help with integrating new people and making new connections.

Ensure participation

Challenges are how to get everyone to participate in the whole program, and not to skip parts of the program. Here the social aspects are important- make the breaks in the program long enough so that participants can mingle and create contacts. Use website to get everyone to connect with others.



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Advantages	Disadvantages
Scheduling wisely: planning for many breaks makes it work. Schedule can be design for optimal interaction between stakeholders	Personal priorities can win over - scheduling for longer breaks can lead to that's participants prioritize personal issues and even leave earlier
Pre mapping of stakeholders, getting to know their needs is crucial	Pre engaging with participants for recruitment is time consuming
Pre engaging participants- investment in contacting people in person leads to having motivated participants; important to get results (good soil makes a good growth). Personal contact in recruitment lead to higher participation rate.	Language barrier: How to make people come together when they are nervous to do this because of the language issue?
Design for networking broadly with others made getting new contacts efficiently.	Format resembling conference, a once off, not a network.
A social event as icebreaker to make people comfortable- helped to feel being a member in the group:	Other ways of sharing knowledge not utilized
Fun during activities leads to good work; important to have less rigid forms	
Lessons learned are applicable on any different types of meetings	
International settings bring the glam aspect increases importance if someone travels to see you	
Clear support of board /directors and internal commitment justified what was supposed to do	

PRACTISE (4): Working with networks for industries with limited number of participants

The goal of networks was to increase the energy efficiency in companies through systematic and structured energy work. This was done as a step towards the regional energy and climate goals.

Ensure participation

The business motivation was an important factor in inciting the participation of companies. These include decreased energy costs, more efficient energy use, increased competitiveness, and reduced vulnerability to increased energy prices.

For recruitment to the networks a series of unique selling points have been prepared.

Work approach of the network

Participation in the network starts with an energy audit by an energy expert who gives individual advice and support to create a structured energy work. A key part of the networks is participating in visits at each other's companies. Which is very important for the exchange of experience between them.

Effects of the network

Positive side effects from the networks include improved network of contacts, new business between participating companies, bringing energy issues to the agenda of management and increased understanding between different actors.

Ensure participation over time

To keep the engagement in the networks high finding themes that are relevant and interesting is a great aspect. Themes are the voted on by the group, themes with a high energy saving potential are suggested as well as workshops for sourcing the needs and wants from participants.

A challenge within this network is how to bring knowledge in the diverse group of companies and professions. For the meetings it is important to find a common language, different professions in the companies talk different languages. So that everyone understands and can contribute. A positive difference is having different types of companies as they often use the same energy intensive support processes.

To create interest and motivation the network uses:

- themes prioritized by participants,
- opportunities to visit each other's companies,
- clear rules for what is shared at meetings to build trust and confidence, "high ceilings and thick walls".

To build interest within participating companies, sharing knowledge from the network to build engagement and awareness are good steps to take. As well as having clear goals and milestones, follow up of implemented measures and celebration when success is achieved.

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Q&A:

Lessons learned:

- Trust is a key A network for a limited number of companies, 20-25 companies per network, is a very special settlement, as involved companies expect a certain degree of confidentiality and mutual trust, so that they can share their ideas and have free discussions.
- Participation fee can work well. To keep the involvement on professional level a participation fee can be charged. With the right financing of the project for running networks companies can get back some consultancy hours with an energy expert.
- How do you interest companies who don't have time for the network? The threshold is high just to get started, lots of information and good example are important.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Clear goals, attractive offer and set expectations makes easy to work together	May be too rigid if you need to combine different approaches
Build for limited number of participating companies	Limited reach, Limited number of companies
Tangible results work as a good motivator. In most cases results are translated to direct savings- what makes even better motivator	Time and effort demanding for SMEs to participate
Saving money for participants: good motivator	Some may question why it should be financed by participating companies
Participation fee- only something that costs you something you put worth on	Fees: Can be tough to find a critical mass
Costs means commitment from both coordinator and participants	External financing needed
External financing makes it possible to build and hold a structure over time	Short term program, not a network. How to secure continuation when the program is over
Step approach: Use your and your colleagues' network	Hard to recruit companies that can make commitment
Comprehensive tool for self-evaluation	
Visiting other companies of value. Learn from each other without fear of competition, mutual trust (high ceilings, thick walls)	
Good to workshop with other companies	

Practise (5): Focus on key stakeholders

The focus is to make the hydrogen system move forward. A regional authority don't claim ownership to it, we just want it to grow and make the region a hydrogen region as it has been an oil and gas region before.

Considering how the oil and gas industry grew, there was no organization the business grew from, leaders and stakeholders following.

Role of public sector

Public sector should only step in when the market fails. The sector creates a vision for how the branch might look and the companies can pick and choose from that.

Public sector should not interfere in the natural development of the market where companies lead; the public sector can instead focus on building an ecosystem in the region for all the needs of the hydrogen system. For example, making sure both technicians and the knowledge are available when needed.

Misinformation can spread and while it is done, it is hard to undo the harm. This may hinder growth and development. Public sector need to share more information, because no information is also misinformation. Decisions can't be made in a vacuum.

Work approach of the network

A technique used to create the system/network was finding leaders in areas where it was considered important to spread knowledge about hydrogen. Leaders were then prompted to invite their people and contacts to a meeting arranged by the regional authority, but it was the leaders that we asked to set the agenda. They have the "pull" that makes people show up and can bring an agenda of questions that are relevant to their branch of industry.

Private sector isn't interested in free money, they want information that is needed for their plan and vision for the hydrogen sector.