

## Session 7: Supporting Agroforestry Innovation Networks (13:45–15:15)

### Objective

Expand the perspective to longer-term support of agroforestry networks and communities of practice. Participants will learn how to foster continuous knowledge sharing, maintain engagement over time, and spread innovation beyond an initial group (scaling out through networks). They will explore tools for networking (both in-person and digital) and consider how to measure and sustain the impact of the networks they facilitate. By the end, advisors should understand their role not just as meeting facilitators, but as ongoing network coordinators or “innovation brokers” who nurture connections and drive collective innovation in agroforestry.

Begin by defining “innovation network” in this context: a network is a net of individuals or groups who exchange knowledge and collaborate on a shared interest (here, agroforestry). Unlike a single project with a fixed timeline, a network is more open-ended. Examples: the participants of this training could form a network; or multiple farmer field schools in agroforestry across a country form a network to exchange results; or European agroforestry associations form a network. Facilitators (or “network coordinators”) help to keep these networks alive and vibrant.

### Key Considerations for Sustaining Networks:

- Regular Communication:** Networks die out if people do not regularly interact. Discuss channels: periodic meetings (quarterly or annual gatherings), field visits exchanges, email newsletters, WhatsApp or Telegram groups, online forums or social media. Advisors can take initiative in setting up and moderating these channels. For instance, an advisor might send a monthly email update to all network members highlighting one group’s work, upcoming funding opportunities, etc. Encourage participants to leverage simple tools (a WhatsApp group is often easiest for farmer networks; an email list or Facebook group might involve more diverse stakeholders including those less technologically adept).
- Shared Learning Events:** Encourage networks to have events like annual symposiums, farmer innovation fairs, cross-visits to demonstration sites, etc. These events reinvigorate interest and bring new knowledge. The facilitator often helps organize and ensures these events are participatory (not just lecture-style – include roundtables, open discussions, poster sessions for farmers to showcase, etc.). If possible, mention a real example: *“The Hungarian Agroforestry Network holds a yearly field day rotating among farms – this has been key to keeping members engaged and recruiting new ones.”* If you are in Hungary, make sure this true before you say it!
- Diversifying Leadership:** One person cannot carry a network forever. Encourage building a **leadership group or rotating facilitation** within the network. This could mean after establishing trust, the advisor intentionally empowers others (perhaps training some members in facilitation skills too, a cascade effect). For example, have different members host meetings or lead sub-committees (like a research subgroup, policy advocacy subgroup). This not only shares the load but also deepens member commitment.
- Showcasing Successes:** Celebrate and broadcast the network’s successes. People stay engaged when they see impact. If a member farm achieved great results or a joint project got funded, share that success widely (local media, network newsletter, etc.). The facilitator can help package success stories. Perhaps mention creating a **network toolkit or manual** if the network’s work can be replicated (like how one project compiled a “how-to” guide for others, as noted in the Project Management Module). Agroforestry networks in Europe like AF4EU and AFINET produced materials that others could use to start their own groups. Such outputs also lend credibility and attract new partners.
- New Member Integration:** Over time, new stakeholders will join the network while others may leave. Discuss having an onboarding process – e.g., a brief orientation or a “mentor” system where an existing member pairs

with a newcomer to introduce them to the group's norms and history. This links back to having that group charter/mission available so recent members align quickly. A facilitator might manage a contact list or membership registry to keep track.

- **Resource Mobilisation:** Networks might need resources (funding, knowledge, tools) to sustain activities. Advisors can guide the network to funding opportunities (like grants for network activities, or crowd-sourcing within the group for minor expenses). They can also link the network to external experts or research outputs. For instance, connecting an agroforestry network with a forestry research institute to provide occasional expert advice. Essentially, the facilitator acts as a connector between the network and the outside world of resources.
- **Monitoring Impact:** Though not formal like an M&E plan, it is good for a network to reflect on what it has achieved and what challenges remain. A facilitator can initiate an annual survey or reflection meeting: *“What have members applied or changed because of this network?” “What topics do we need more knowledge on?”* This keeps the network purposeful and can justify its existence to funders or the members themselves. If they see tangible benefits (like adoption of new practices, improved yields, policy influence), they will stay engaged.

### Digital Tools for Networking:

Introduce a few digital tools that can support networks, especially relevant if members are geographically spread:

- **Messaging Apps (WhatsApp/Telegram):** For quick updates and peer support (e.g., a farmer shares a photo of a pest asking for advice and gets quick responses).
- **Email Groups or Forums:** e.g., Google Groups or an online forum for more in-depth discussions or sharing documents.
- **Zoom or Webinars:** Virtual meetups to supplement physical meetings, allowing experts or members from afar to join periodically.
- **Knowledge Repositories:** If the network generates knowledge (reports, manuals, videos), consider a shared Google Drive or a simple website/wiki where these can be accessed.

Advisors might need to take the lead in setting up these tools and teaching members how to use them (especially older farmers might need guidance to use WhatsApp or Zoom effectively). Including these in the facilitator's skill set extends their reach. A prime example of the this is the AF4EU MOOC or the AFINET-AF4EU alive handbook.

### Scaling Out Innovation

Emphasize that strong local networks can connect into wider networks (scaling horizontally). For example, each local agroforestry group in different regions might send a representative to a national network meeting – cross-pollinating ideas. Facilitators at local level can coordinate with each other via a meta-network. Mention that European networks like AF4EU/AFINET function exactly like this: regional groups feeding into an EU-level network. For advisors, being aware of higher-level networks (national agroforestry associations, European Agroforestry Federation) can provide channels for their local stakeholders to get broader exposure and support. So part of supporting networks is linking them to other networks – creating a lattice of innovation.



### Activity – Network Sustainability Planning (30 min)

Have participants develop a sustainability plan for an agroforestry network. Split into small groups (4–5). Pose this task- *“Imagine you helped establish a new agroforestry innovation network last year. It showed initial success but you worry about keeping people engaged over the next couple of years. Outline a plan with at least 3 strategies to maintain and grow the network's momentum.”*



Encourage them to use ideas from above (events, comms, leadership rotation, etc.) and also think of potential pitfalls (what if a key champion retires? what if funding ends? how to keep it going?). After 15 minutes, each group presents their top strategies. Synthesize these on a flipchart as a master list of best practices for sustaining networks. Make sure “regular communication”, “periodic meetings”, “show successes”, etc., appear and are understood. If some creative ideas come up (like creating a network logo/identity merchandise to build pride or having network awards for best innovator of the year), highlight those too. The point is participants leave with a concrete sense of how to nurture a network long-term, not just facilitate one meeting.

### Personal Action Planning

Before closing the session, pivot to each participant thinking about **how they will apply all this back home**. This will segue to the final session. Ask them to individually write down one specific thing they will do in the next month to practice their facilitation/network support skills (perhaps facilitate a meeting differently, start a WhatsApp group for their stakeholders, draft ground rules for an existing group, etc.). This primes their mind for the final wrap-up where they will refine these intentions.

**Methods Used:** Group brainstorming, discussion, mini lecture with examples, and personal reflection. Ensure energy stays up in the afternoon by keeping the discussion open and perhaps showing a short inspiring video or photo montage of a successful agroforestry network (if any available; if not, vivid storytelling can be sufficient).

Close Session 7 by reinforcing that creating and supporting networks is a journey – it requires passion and persistence, but the payoff is an empowered community driving agroforestry innovation from the ground up. As facilitators, their legacy can be these thriving communities that continue to make progress long after a project formally ends.

**Trainer Tip for Success:** If you have participants from different regions or localities, encourage them to network among themselves too. Day 2 afternoon is a good time to say, *“Look around – you are all now part of a facilitator network. Exchange contact info, you can support each other after this training.”* Maybe allocate a corner with a pin board for business cards or a contact list sign-up. This demonstrates the very principle being taught. Also mention any existing communities of practice, e.g., an online group of agroforestry facilitators, if it exists, or offer to connect them via email after training.