Cross-project collaboration: Are we there yet?

This report summarises the key insights and strategic recommendations from the panel discussion held during the FOREST4EU and ResAlliance projects final event in Vinkovci (Croatia), on the 12th of November 2025. The discussion featured seven staff members from organisations across Europe who are experts in the coordination of international, EU-funded multi-actor projects focusing on forestry, agriculture, and agroforestry. The main goal of the discussion was to improve understanding of how cross-project collaboration could be enhanced to ultimately optimise and scale up knowledge exchange, as well as ensuring the long-term impact of project outcomes among practitioners and real-world actors.

Before the project

Participants called for greater engagement from the grant-managing authorities to force collaboration between projects during funding calls

Calls for proposals should require inter-project collaboration, thereby forcing consortia to include dedicated tasks for this purpose in their proposals and allocate sufficient resources. These cross-project collaboration tasks should be reassessed at the Grant Agreement preparation stage, once the proposals that have been granted under the same or similar calls are known.

Plan your project to be embedded in a permanent organisation

Networks and permanent organisations, whether private or public and at the national or international level, may be able to link stakeholders and territories with project activities and outputs. These relationships should be planned during the project proposal stage, developed during implementation, and maintained long-term. The International Model Forest Network is an example of this.

During the project

Panellists stressed measures under projects' responsibility:

- Networking, joint events, and shared communication strategies are essential, because many projects work with the same stakeholders and face similar challenges. Cross-project coordination avoids duplication and makes better use of stakeholder's time.
- Some of the main barriers to collaboration included sectoral fragmentation, inconsistent terminology, differing regulations across geographical contexts, limited budgets for joint activities, and difficulties accessing or sharing data across projects.
- The need for multi-actor approaches, such as early stakeholder engagement, co-design, and the better integration of farmers, forest owners, advisors, and policymakers to ensure meaningful impact and the real uptake of results.
- Panel participants unanimously stressed that joint events with dedicated networking sessions are essential for increasing both the impact and effectiveness of EU-funded projects. Collaboration is crucial for optimising efforts, as well as resources. This would help to maximise the impact at many geographical levels: local-, national- and EU-wide. It would also pave the way for finding common strategies and better reaching communities of practitioners.

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Collaboration in multiple formats also facilitates data sharing, and ultimately knowledge transfer. Given the thematic overlaps in many EU projects (the so called "sister projects": projects funded by the same call), linking them would strengthen networks across project teams and increase impact on end users. This helps to create long-lasting relationships beyond the lifespan of the projects, paving the way for continuous collaboration and mutual learning. In this regard, networking and trust-building play a key role also in linking research findings to real-world needs, which necessarily implies amplifying impacts and meeting stakeholders' needs beyond individual project timelines.
The importance of providing compensation to involved farmers and foresters for their time commitment was also highlighted. Additionally, creating practical, profitable, and sustainable business models and value chains is also fundamental to ensuring that practitioners maintain contact. Cascade funding was also highlighted as a useful tool.

Panellists also requested the support from the European Commission and its agencies in:

Organising regular project coordinators meetings

Dedicated events that bring project coordinators together are very useful, particularly if organised by the EC. These events can open dialogues between project partners and help to coordinate the measures listed above. Grant-managing authorities can also use these events to ask project coordinators about any additional support they need from the EC. Finally, these gatherings also encourage policy officers in the different DGs to adopt policy-related project results.

After the project

- The difficulty of maintaining long-term structures such as living labs and communities of practice was highlighted: continuity requires motivated leaders, appropriate incentives for participants, and practical support mechanisms;
- Opportunities for future collaboration revolve around social innovation, value-chain connectivity, advisory networks, improved long-term, knowledge-sharing systems, and the better upscaling of Operational Groups' innovations. The aim is to achieve long-term impact that extends beyond the lifespan of individual projects.

The stability in funding was also pointed as essential. Panellists suggested different formulas, such as creating stable and permanent funding streams for well-established thematic areas, or facilitating public-private partnerships to attract complementary funding from the industry. Aside from the funding, the EC was called upon to ensure the long-term consistency and permanence of projects results databases, such as EU-FarmBook, to allow efficient access and use of the numerous knowledge generated by projects.
To maintain communities and living labs, the focus topic must be highly relevant to participants, and it would be ideally supported by a strong leader (i.e. a community champion) to keep up momentum once the project ends. This needs the appropriate on-line infrastructure.

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