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COORDINATION GUIDE

Setting Up and Coordinating Networks

2024



3.2.1. Introduction

This guide is built on practices implemented under the project "Reducing plastic waste pollution with local solutions," carried out by GreenHub together with its partners in 2020–2023. Because the project focused on marine litter and plastic pollution, the examples and information for establishing a network are based on that theme. This guide is intended for organizations and individuals who wish to establish and coordinate a network on any applicable topic.

Building and coordinating a network is essential in the following situations:

- When working on complex, multidimensional issues, including environmental issues;
- When aiming to establish an enabling environment for a project to carry out direct support intervention activities in selected areas;
- When developing master plans, building policy, and seeking supplementary funding;
- When operating in a (competitive) environment with many other participants who can complement and support one another's work;
- When aiming to scale up and mainstream good lessons learned.

Networks are valuable because they enable members to:

- Jointly tackle large, multidimensional problems that cannot be solved alone;
- Share the work;
- Limit overlap and waste of resources;
- Create a sense of solidarity and provide moral and psychological support;
- Broaden understanding of an issue by bringing together diverse participants;
- Promote the exchange of ideas, viewpoints, experience, and skills;
- Promote policy advocacy;
- Influence others — both inside and outside the network;
- Mobilize financial resources (under certain conditions);
- Find opportunities for effective coordination and cooperation.

In the context of the LSPP project, social and environmental problems are increasingly compounded by the demands of economic development, leading to the degradation of natural resources and environmental pollution that has not been addressed systematically. According to the United Nations global assessment on marine litter and microplastics (Secretariat of the United Nations Environment Assembly, 2008b), there are four main types of barriers to solutions:

- **Legal** (obstacles or barriers established by, based on, or created by law; the absence of laws, or the lack of implementation and/or enforcement of laws);

- **Financial** (when costs make a given activity hard to afford or carry out; some costs also constitute financial barriers);
- **Technological** (aspects related to production, manufacturing and product design, consumption, and the management of waste recovery and recycling);
- **Information** (access to data, research, transparency, education, and awareness related to plastics and the relevant stakeholders).

Some causes of these barriers are illustrated by the examples below:

- High cost of upgrading and changing plastic-production infrastructure;
- High investment cost and risk when transitioning to a circular model;
- Complex production and consumption supply chains in international markets;
- Lack of support for the circular model, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);
- Difficulties in cooperation between businesses;
- Existing subsidies leading to a lack of competitiveness for products from the circular economy model;
- Shortage of knowledge and human resources;
- Existing legal regulations that contain certain barriers;
- Insufficient legal frameworks and a lack of science-based standards;
- Inadequate monitoring and reporting data;
- Consumers who are not adequately equipped with knowledge.

To achieve success and overcome the barriers and challenges ahead, it is necessary to broaden participation and build cross-sectoral action with a shared vision and strategy, from which proposals can be made to develop long-term solutions. Promoting cooperation to form international and other national network linkages will add value in driving action to address social and environmental problems — mobilizing the active participation of stakeholders and sharing benefits, timely access to information, success in mobilizing resources, and the availability of financial, material, and labor resources — on themes such as:

- Knowledge of environmental health;
- Solutions based on information and data;
- Incentives and support;
- Business planning;
- Communications.

Addressing issues of supply, control, and the consumer network requires the active coordination of stakeholders. In professional terms, these stakeholders include investment, production, import-export, marketing, waste treatment and reuse, as well as policy-making, reg-

ulation, and research. Actions must be grounded in science and combined with business and social solutions.

These stakeholders span the local to provincial levels, both domestic and foreign, and include businesses and governmental and non-governmental units; geographically, they represent organizations operating on land, in freshwater, and in the sea and islands. The success of the network requires developing, coordinating, and sustaining changes in stakeholder behavior and consumer habits, as well as communication outreach campaigns — both traditional and modern — suited to each stakeholder in Vietnam and internationally. The network will be established to fit the needs for action and the common voice on the issues of the founding unit and other collaborating organizations.

3.2.2. Key Considerations for a Successful Network

The concepts of "network" and "networking" have become widespread, widely used, and broadly adopted in development planning and project design as effective means to expand and enhance impact.

There are many types of networks, which can be classified by membership, geographic scope, main activities, objectives, horizontal or vertical orientation, and structure (formal or informal). Networks are formed around a common objective or shared interest and are sustained through some form of communication and information exchange. Most networks have information-sharing as their first objective, while some have the further objective of improving cooperative relationships among agencies — including joint planning, joint implementation of intervention activities, and the development of a shared work program.

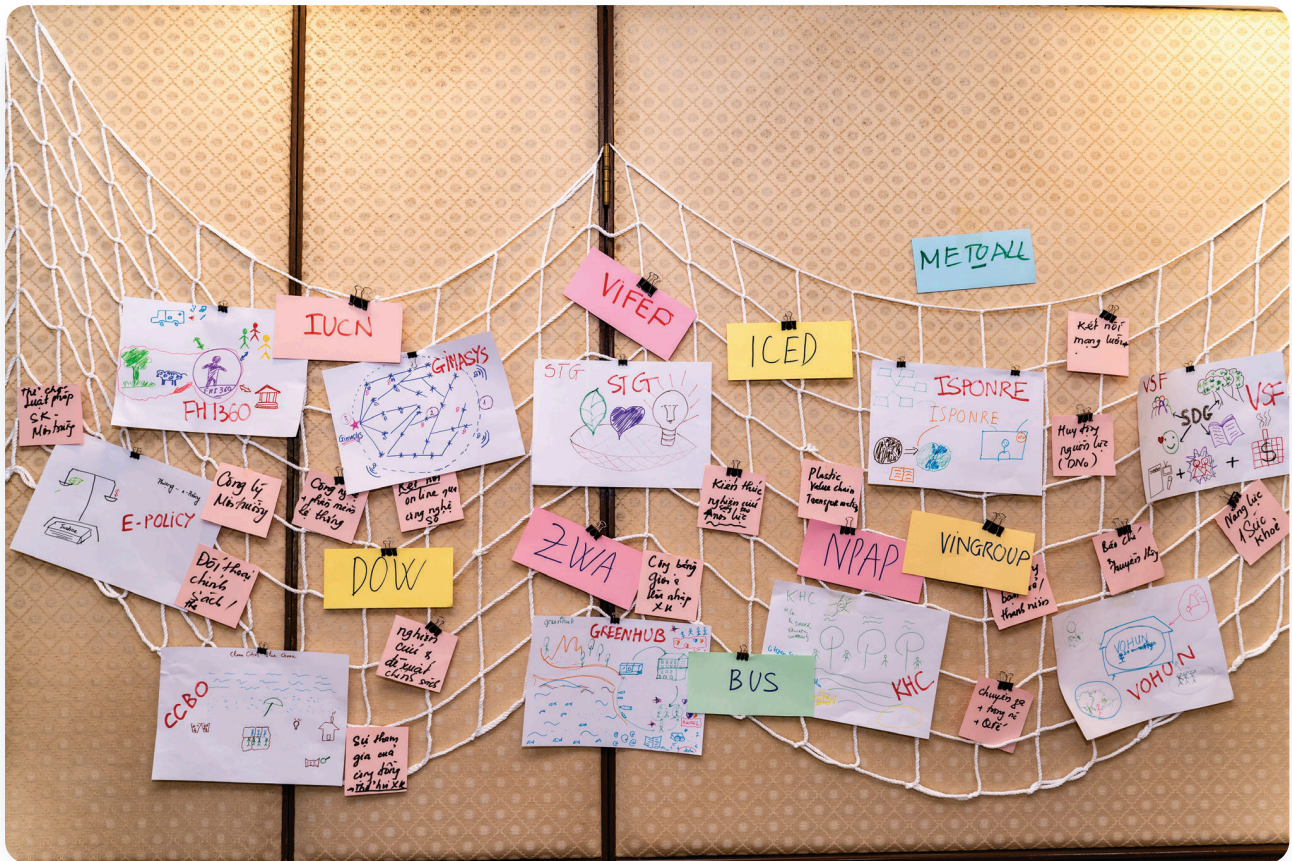
Donors also recognize the potential to expand a network's reach through investment. However, amid this enthusiasm, the reality is that organizational factors that pose a threat to a network's success can be overlooked, leading to potential effects on its long-term effectiveness and sustainability. Some important factors include the following.

3.2.2.1. Recognizing the Need for Relationship Governance in the Network

For networks to be truly successful, they must be established with clear operating principles and managed effectively with a robust monitoring system. This requires creating a clear network structure, setting agreed-upon objectives, developing work plans with specific milestones and desired results, and implementing decision-making mechanisms in which all parties participate. In addition, commitments must be established to resolve disagreements, add members, and facilitate the departure of members who wish to leave. Throughout this process, simplicity, transparency, and professionalism should be prioritized.

It is important to recognize that ideas about "networks" may be interpreted differently by potential members depending on their prior experience. Perceptions can vary, from positive to negative, regarding the value, usefulness, and level of contribution of the network. These

perceptions can affect the degree of participation and members' willingness to share openly. Understanding and addressing these diverse expectations and concerns becomes critically important. By doing so, the network can foster the need for inclusion and cooperation, leading to more effective outcomes for all stakeholders.



3.2.2.2. Emphasizing "Network Advantage" and "Network Benefit" for Each Partner

Motivating network members is extremely important. This involves clearly demonstrating the unique value and benefit that members can gain by working together — a factor often overlooked in the development of many networks. Emphasizing the advantages of collective action and cooperation, which bring direct benefit to each member, is very important compared with operating individually or without a shared vision.

The "members" of a network include both the member organization and the individual representing that organization. The selection of organizations should be based on their particular importance, including the expertise, knowledge, and requirements of essential stakeholders — all of which contribute to addressing the identified needs to ensure the network's success. Equally important are the individuals who represent these organizations in the network. They must be committed, actively engaged, practical, action-oriented, able to influence their organization's decision-making, and dedicated to advancing the network.

For effective communication and outreach, the network should focus both on internal communication among organizations and members and on external communication with the

broader base of stakeholders. The reputation, impact, and influence of the network depend on several factors, including expertise, the network's credibility, the time and effort of participating members, and the quality of the work process. To raise its visibility and influence, the network must be proactive in communicating and promoting its activities and results, reaching out to stakeholders and providing necessary feedback. By continually demonstrating the tangible benefits and results of cooperative efforts, the network can further consolidate its position and achieve lasting success.

3.2.2.3. Planning for the Financial and Organizational Sustainability of the Network

A common challenge to a network's sustainability is securing long-term funding. Many networks operate as project models with limited budgets. After a project ends, competing needs and funding uncertainty become major problems for sustaining network operations. This affects the credibility, reputation, and capacity — especially for network coordinators. Current and prospective new members can also be affected. Seeking diverse funding sources and demonstrating the network's value can help address these challenges.



3.2.2.4. Difficulties of a Network

In light of these difficulties, the core unit or coordinating board can pose questions in order to answer how our network can succeed. The difficult factors include:

- **Lack of clear objectives.** Networks can be pulled along by the interests of dominant individuals or organizations.
- **Inequality among members.** Some individuals and organizations may dominate the network. When people with opposing views meet, they can disrupt meetings and cause disputes over ideas, methods, or techniques. This can make those who feel unfairly treated — or simply discouraged — withdraw from the network.
- **Domination.** A network can easily be dominated by organizations, interest groups, political persuasion, or other divisive influences, which can isolate particular individuals or groups.
- **Concentration of power and bureaucracy.** Concentration of power occurs when a coordinator, secretariat, or steering committee of the network begins to control and run the network for their own benefit rather than to coordinate and promote members' activities. This is often combined with domination of the network linked to the secretariat, host organization, or steering committee. The danger of power concentration is that if the coordinator or secretariat of the network stops functioning, the entire network may also cease to operate.
- **Lack of trust.** This prevents the open sharing of information.
- **Lack of authority to represent the organization.** Some members send representatives who lack sufficient authority to make commitments on behalf of their agency, or whose participation is not included in their job description, hindering effective commitment, advancement, and cooperation.
- **Lack of resources.** Unless the network has a specific budget to support travel, only individuals or organizations with abundant resources can participate in activities regularly.
- **The reality of disparities.** Only those with easy access to computers and email can join electronic discussion groups. Although email technology is developing rapidly, its users are still mainly staff in privileged organizations, and email groups tend to comprise the more developed members of society — often far removed from realities at the village level.
- **Resource mobilization.**
- **Misinformation within the network.**
- **Competition.** A network can be affected by competition from other networks or organizations with overlapping programs. This can create creative cooperation but can also lead to competition due to limited resources and membership status.
- **Interference from the funding agency.**

3.2.3. Establishing the Network

"Establishing" a network is different from "Starting" a network. To operate durably, a strategic approach with a sustainable financial plan is needed from the outset. A network established on a carefully researched technical foundation brings trust and transparency when its operating principles are shared. Members with expertise in the sector, a shared vision, and value gained from participating in the network ensure a positive state.

3.2.3.1. Stages of Network Development

The process of developing a successful network comprises the following stages, built on a shared vision of needs derived from an analysis of social trends and persuasive technical work, as well as the commitment and skills of members:

a. Identify the "gaps" in current knowledge, strategy, and priority actions related to the project's issues:

- Analyze the status of the issue and the stakeholders through available documents/field research and stakeholder consultation.
- Identify knowledge "gaps" about the project's issues, especially for priority stakeholders, and the results promoted in the media (traditional and digital).

b. Define the objectives and operating principles of the network and the "Theory of Change" (ToC) in order to determine the network's success (how the network can best advise and orient the project's success).

Establishing the network is based on a shared need for action and a unified voice on the project's issues, held by the founding unit and other stakeholders. The network operates on several model levels.

(i) The Network's Vision: The Network's Vision is a written statement that briefly expresses the network's purpose by defining its key long-term objectives.

(ii) The Network's Mission: Mission statements serve a dual purpose by helping partners maintain focus on current tasks and encouraging them to find creative solutions to advance toward strengthening activities to achieve the network's objectives.

- A mission statement is used by the Network to explain, in simple and concise terms, its reason(s) for existing.
- It is usually a single sentence or a short paragraph explaining the culture, values, and ethics of the network.
- The mission statement serves several purposes, including motivating partners and any other purposes.

- To develop a mission statement, consider how the Network affects partners and stakeholders and why you are trying to help them.
- A mission statement may overlap slightly with other communication content, but it differs from a vision statement, values statement, brand, or slogan.

(iii) The Network's Core Values: The network's core values set requirements for how members behave. Together with the network's mission statement and vision, they form a foundational part of the network's structure. These values articulate the basis of belief and the fundamental purpose that each member of the organization commits to fulfilling.

What do core values answer? Ask questions to help you discover the Network's core values:

- What unchangeable things are important to the success of the Network?
- What guiding principles are core to how this organization operates?
- What actions do you expect from the network?
- What are you willing to support, even at the cost of a partnership or of time?

Monitoring and evaluation. This is a difficult matter by its very nature: networks tend to operate informally with loose structures and prefer to focus on future progress rather than past experience. Even well-organized networks with a high concentration of power find it difficult to define reliable success criteria for the network and to quantify the effectiveness and benefits of network building.

c. Build the criteria for selecting network members (organizations, individuals) and define the value and skills that selected members bring to and receive from the network:

(i) Specific objectives are as follows:

- Review existing partnerships at the national and international levels;
- Propose the structure and working mechanism of the network;
- Facilitate agreement among different stakeholders on the Network's cooperation plan;
- Identify priority actions for the Network in its first years.

(ii) Method:

- Method for collecting, analyzing, and evaluating data: Review national and international networks/partnerships operating at the international and national levels in the project field to understand where the focus areas are, how the networks/partnerships operate, and what working mechanisms could be applied to the Partnership.
- Consult with national partners/initiatives on the project issue to identify opportunities for cooperation with the Network.

The project should hold multiple working sessions and consultation workshops with organizations, partners, and individuals working on relevant issues to present the proposed operat-

ing mechanism and to call for collaboration and participation in the Network. Proposals and comments from the consultation provided important input for finalizing the Network's mechanism. The consultation workshops also called for the participation of various organizations as partners of the Network.

In-depth workshops with all partners should be held to promote the Network's mission, vision, core values, and Action Plan, bringing about consensus among partners after the workshop. The project team reviewed the results and input from bilateral and multi-stakeholder meetings to propose the specific characteristics of the Network relative to other partners/networks, focusing on the project issue and on developing a digital database and mechanisms for cooperation with other ongoing networks/partnerships.

d. Finalize and invite potential members to join the network, clarifying their roles and terms of reference as well as the benefits of the network when they join.

e. Meet and reach agreement as a group on the objectives, work program, and operating principles.

f. Conduct a Needs Assessment of members' priorities to develop capacity for the Network's effectiveness, and use the results to prepare a member Capacity Development program, identifying the parts that will need to be prepared for the project team.

g. Develop communication tools and events to share information and develop the network's capacity: use tools and implement communication events to share information and build capacity — for example, a network website, e-newsletter, webinars, workshops, a website, and field visits. The network will need to prioritize implementing the proposed tools and events based on needs, cost, and funding availability.

h. Publicize the establishment of the network to the members of the organization and widely to stakeholders.

i. Monitor the network's progress against the objectives set out in the work program, with feedback to stakeholders.

3.2.3.2. Strengthening Network Capacity and Communications

The success of a network depends on a culture of learning, on knowledge, and on the impact of the network's results. As part of the strategy, each network should strengthen capacity at both the network-member and individual levels, based on a needs assessment and an agreed capacity-development program delivered by professional services, with small mobilized funding. Members need communication skills to advance the network's purpose. At the member level, these skills include cooperation, conflict resolution, meeting management, policy advocacy, policy dialogue, public presentation, and working with the media. At the organizational level, skills promote the importance and services of the network, win new partners, and enhance public visibility.

Network members will also need to master multidisciplinary information related to plastics — business, science, conservation impact, socio-economic factors, innovative development options, links to national sustainable development, and regional and international initiatives. This will require developing a system for organizing knowledge collection, tracking the significant development of reviews and publications related to plastics, innovative solutions in the 3Rs and the Circular Economy, and international trends.

Approach to developing network capacity and knowledge:

1. ● Assess members' priority needs to achieve the network's effectiveness.
2. ● Build a Capacity Development Program with a Small Grants Fund Proposal.
3. ● Set up the Network's Website (password-protected) for information exchange.
4. ● Build an e-Newsletter (developments and updates from members and general Network information).
5. ● Organize Webinars presented by network members and invited experts.
6. ● Organize thematic Workshops for network members: assessing plastic issues.
7. ● Organize capacity-building training Workshops: communication skills.
8. ● Organize stakeholder information exchange and learning.
9. ● Organize field visits to illustrate plastic issues and engage stakeholders.

3.2.3.3. Network Structure and Function

Establishing and launching the Network. The Network's operating structure can be diverse to suit members' participation but should include the following elements:

- **Objectives.** The network's objectives should be reviewed periodically to assess the progress achieved and whether those objectives remain relevant. Networks must be prepared to evolve over time and change their objectives as circumstances change and initial objectives are achieved.
- **Specific activities.** The strength of a network can be sustained through enthusiastic participation in specific activities — activities that allow members to share with and influence one another.
- **Core group.** Because each member has daily professional work, a core group is needed to work for the network. Most successfully operating networks succeed thanks to a core group of individuals.
- **Secretariat.** The secretariat is responsible for matters related to the network's operations and helps maintain the network. Adequate financial means are needed for these bodies to operate.
- **Avoiding the concentration of power through delegation.** This helps avoid the risks of power concentration, domination, isolation, and passive participation. Network members should not expect that all of the network's work will be arranged by the core group.

- **Decentralization of networks.** Central units should help promote independent activities organized by network members so that they are not merely disseminators of information. This will not only add to members' professional experience, status, and responsibility, but also enhance the network's sustainability prospects when the central unit is no longer active.
- **Sharing, duty, and openness.** The process of making decisions, choosing network activities, and the means of carrying them out should be democratic and allow members to see that they can participate in the entire process.
- **Resources.** Members and agencies that contribute to the network can commit to its success. The more a network is supported by its members, the stronger it becomes. Supporting resources need not be monetary but can be "in kind" or in participation time.
- **Legitimacy.** Legitimacy attracts participation and promotes funding. It can be enhanced by having respected people take part in events, or by going public. Legitimacy and recognition can be promoted by the repeated use of a recognizable name (or acronym) and symbol for the network.
- **Complementarity and linkage.** Networks may address the same issues in different ways. Such networks will have "gaps" that need to be complemented.
- **Monitoring and evaluation.** Although difficult, regular monitoring and evaluation is still necessary.
- **Learning and teaching.** Most people working in networks learn by trial and error. Regional-level training courses related to network building can be beneficial.
- **Participation of beneficiaries.** Domestic and international networks can benefit from close linkage with region-specific networks or with domestic beneficiary-based networks. Exchange between countries, in particular, can be valuable. Network members can help establish connections between local groups and promote subsequent implementation activities.
- **Participation in the network and benefits.** Members need a stake in the common objective, an interest in specific activities, a desire to contribute, a sense of responsibility and respect for the network, and trust in the leadership, in success, and in future capabilities.

The structure of the Network, based on the experience of the LSPP project, was designed as follows: (1) a Partnership Committee acting as the Steering Committee; (2) a Secretariat; (3) a Technical Working Group; and, finally, (4) the Network Community interested in the project's issues.

- The **Partnership Committee** represents organizations committed to long-term contribution to the network, at the decision-making level, playing a connecting role, spreading the mission and core values of the network to realize the shared vision.
- The **Secretariat** represents organizations committed to long-term contribution to the network, at the technical level, advising the Partnership Committee, coordinating joint

activities, and implementing initiatives, including thematic working groups.

- The **Technical Working Group** is formed from active members who share expertise and wish to cooperate to conduct research or implement projects in specific fields related to their expertise and to the organization's mission or vision.
- The **Network Community** represents all units and individuals interested in the project field who wish to participate in any activity and/or contribute to the development of the Network.

Although the above structure can work in most cases, it is not the appropriate structure in every situation. In many cases, a structure proposed and built by the network members is the most suitable and effective.

3.2.3.4. Supporting the Network

a. Factors and conditions affecting the network's dynamism:

- **Network culture.** Members need to recognize that they are part of a group, sharing a common purpose and holding both rights and responsibilities. This idea needs to be acknowledged, supported, and nurtured as the basis and content of the network.
- **Clear objectives.** Time is needed to reach general consensus among members on objectives.
- **Being realistic.** No network can be all things to all people.
- **Developmental nature.** Networks are often formed and dissolved, and members may increase or decrease, but purposes and objectives are always evolving.
- **Flexibility.** Change the priority of activities in the network as the priorities of the members themselves change.
- **Not competing but cooperating.** It is important that the network does not compete with its members.
- **Ownership.** If members do not feel a sense of ownership, there will be no commitment.
- **Exclusionary relationships among members.** It is harmful if one member, or a group of members, dominates and excludes other members from activities.
- **Volunteer workforce.** Because resources are scarce, a volunteer workforce from among the members is needed to help the network operate.
- **Testing viability.** When funding is hard to attract, can a network survive at all — even informally?
- **Communication** is a common difficulty. Commitment is needed in terms of staff time and funds to cover the costs of communication.
- **Mutual trust.**

3.2.3.5. Case Study: The LSPP Project — the PHA Network

Implementation Activities

(i) Participation and cooperation. From the preparation stage for establishing the Network, a direct-participation model must be applied in all of the Network's activities to ensure fairness and transparency and to mobilize as much of the members' resources as possible.

In addition, the criterion of Cooperation in all activities was adopted by the organizations that founded the Network. Since it officially began operating, this criterion has been maintained by the individuals and organizations in the Partnership Committee, the Secretariat, and the Network members across many activities, such as:

- Developing operating regulations;
- Developing the work plan;
- Organizing workshops;
- Organizing communication events;
- Organizing policy dialogue forums;
- Organizing training;
- Implementing small projects.

Lessons learned from cooperation among Network members are as follows:

- Members need to meet and exchange directly from the activity-planning stage; the benefits that cooperation topics will bring to the participating parties need to be clarified; and the role and responsibility of each party when participating, along with the resources needed and how to mobilize them, need to be specified.
- The Network, and especially the Secretariat, plays an intermediary role, connecting and coordinating the content of cooperation among the parties.
- Cooperation methods need to be diverse and open — for example, bilateral cooperation, multilateral cooperation; cooperation to implement activities by mobilizing knowledge and human resources without necessarily mobilizing finance; and integrating activities along an existing project that has already been allocated resources by a member organization.

(ii) Setting priorities. For the Network to operate smoothly and align with its vision — to become a pioneering, autonomous partner cooperating responsibly in the project's field — the Partnership Committee and the Secretariat outlined the priorities on which the Network needs to focus, including:

- The draft operating mechanism needs to be finalized so that it can be applied when the Network begins operating officially.
- Building a communication network and a branding toolkit for the Network.
- Reviewing research studies, then analyzing and identifying gaps to improve the Network's operations.
- Developing a digital information portal on the project's content to promote communication events and raise awareness, or to conduct policy dialogues.

The lessons learned are: (1) The top priority is to focus on the continuous and consistent application of the Network's operating mechanism. These are the "rules of the game" that members need to understand and act on appropriately in order to cooperate and operate effectively. (2) The second priority is that the Network needs to focus resources on reviewing research related to the negative impacts of plastic products and plastic-waste pollution on human health and the living environment, then analyzing and identifying gaps. For this priority, members did not coordinate well, so the Network was not yet able to determine the most important content for action. (3) The third priority is to build collective action capacity for members. Enhancing this capacity should be done as early as possible, because it will give members new knowledge in the fields of plastics and health. This will also encourage members to cooperate in implementing joint initiatives on the themes planned by the Partnership Committee.

(iii) Flexibility.

Adjusting the form of cooperation to fit. As mentioned above, the Network always seeks every means to meet the members' different cooperation needs. The Network coordinates cooperative activities between 2 members (bilateral cooperation) or among 3–4 members (multilateral cooperation) in mobilizing resources and carrying out activities.

Flexibility across cooperation topics. Over more than a year of operation, the Network has met and exchanged with members many times about new trends related to plastics and health. As a result, the Network has introduced several new activities for members to consider and act on, such as promoting a green-hospital model aimed at reducing single-use medical plastic products, and applying the circular economy in the health sector.

Flexibility and diversity in the information-sharing mechanism. The Network's usual information-sharing mechanism is based on email and a formal quarterly and annual reporting system. However, to get information to members and the Network community as quickly as possible, the Network has used an instant, informal channel via Zalo. The advantage of this channel is that information is delivered directly to each member's personal computer or smartphone. For important information, the Network's Secretariat sends the information or notice to registered members by email and notifies them via Zalo so that these members know to check the email the Network has sent. In addition, the Network makes use of Google Drive to share other necessary information and data with members on request.

c. Supporting partners.

Objective: The main objective is to strengthen the role and participation of the Network in major forums and events, while also communicating about the Network to seek opportunities for cooperation with domestic and foreign organizations and businesses. The main objective is divided into several specific objectives, as follows:

- Improve the effectiveness of coordination among Network members;
- Communicate and promote in order to increase the number of Network partners;
- Share experience and challenges in implementing the activities set out in the joint Action Plan in the project localities with target audiences.

Detailed information is available via the QR code.

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