



FoodPackLab 2.0

Deep Tech-Packaging Partnership for Food Innovation

Del 5.2. FoodPackLab 2.0 lessons learned and best practices

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1 Introduction

The content of this Deliverable 5.2. - Lessons learned and best practices - aims to provide tips and tools for the organization of international events for SMEs, both online and in presence.

At the time of the proposal writing, almost all the events were designed for running in presence, and the experience of the clusters (partners of the project) was mainly related to the organization of this kind of networking and business events.

The clusters are used to face Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA): four main challenges in the cluster mission to support European SMEs in increasing their competitiveness and resilience. These challenges were exacerbated by Covid 19 pandemic and made the whole consortium to re-think and re-build the organization of events and networking opportunities for SMEs.

The management of the typical cluster activities thus changed during the project duration, and the partners had the possibility to explore new ways of building relationships with SMEs and with the selected countries outside Europe, carefully evaluating the changing travelling conditions due to the sanitary emergency and also studying new and innovative tools for creating business meeting.

During the pandemic, clusters constantly monitored markets in search for new challenges and trends to develop, test, and evaluate targeted services for their members. Lastly, they established strategic partnerships with other ecosystems as gateways to go-to-market opportunities and support for companies. By acting this way, clusters became an important tool for SMEs to stay connected with the markets. This was done by organizing webinars to provide market insights, enhance companies' visibility and matchmaking opportunities. Moreover, by strengthening the exchange of information between organizations, clusters acted as a marketplace with collaboration offers and hints on funding opportunities for their members.

All these changes also affected the FoodPackLab 2.0 activities and the planned events.

In this deliverable we are thus presenting the know-how of the consortium partners in the organization of *in-presence* events (i.e. before pandemic); the new digital tools that were adopted for networking during pandemic; new approaches for b2b meetings to face travelling restrictions; tips and tricks for hybrid meetings organized in the last months of the project. In the final conclusion paragraph a new way of managing this kind of projects is highlighted. The lessons learned for other FPL2 project work packages are reported in the Appendix,

2 The organization of international events to support EU SMEs innovation and internationalization

The organization of events is a key activity to support the innovation and internationalization of SMEs: the main goal is to create business opportunities through b2b meetings and attract a large number of companies. In this paragraph we are presenting: (a) the best practices and tips for the organization of events; (b) the digital tools now available for the organization of online events; (c) the events in hybrid form and new approaches for the organization of matchmaking events.

2.1 Best practices shared by FPL2 partners

All the FPL2 partners were asked to provide their most valuable practices for organizing events, in order to design effective events for creating business opportunities for the FPL2 SMEs. Here in the followings, we are summarizing the best practices and the suggestions, and some of these are valid both for in presence and online events.

- 1) Communication: a crucial point is to spread the announcement of the event in the target community. It's important to disseminate the event to cluster as well as to non-cluster members. The first recommendation is to create a dedicated LinkedIn event page, in order to announce events and invite the FoodPackLab network to follow events. A special link is dedicated to each event. Those LinkedIn pages allow each cluster member to invite and share the event to reach different networks and catch the potential audience' attention. This is accompanied by a social media campaign (the preferred one is Twitter, as decided in WP2), that relies on posting reminders before the event. Each LinkedIn post included tagging all consortium members to allow them to disseminate the correct and complete information. Once the post is published to announce the event, you can create sequential posts on a regular basis to present the topics and to catch the interest from the largest number of entities (using hashtags, tagging different accounts in different sectors of activities).
- 2) Organize in due timings: Inform companies well in advance, so that they can organise themselves to participate in the events.
- 3) Make it attractive: This suggestion is particularly useful when organising in person events. It is better to organise the events in locations that are attractive and easy to reach with public transportation, and in the case of FPL2 highlighting the importance of the local agro-food and/or deep tech industry. Also, they can be organized in conjunction with fairs and other events dealing with the same or complementary themes as the project. The organization in conjunction with other events of international interest can even maximise the range of opportunities and entice people to attend the event. It is also important to create meeting occasions such as social lunches and dinners to bring participants together, outside a formal context; even guided or open tours, for example, can be potential opportunities to create a connection between participants, who in this way have diversified opportunities to interact.
- 4) Good logistics: Create enough time and spaces dedicated for b2b meetings, to bring companies together and facilitate interaction and mutual support.
- 5) Make it relevant: Invite companies, especially the ones that are recognized as "leader" in their own sector, to present e.g. practical cases, with real requests or needs, so that the companies can make a real contribution.
- 6) Monitor the results: organise regular meetings with the whole team to get a 'helicopter' view of e.g. the events status, most critical needs to seek partner support, discuss improvements opportunities and next steps.

2.2 Digital tools for the organization of the events

The introduction of digital infrastructures passes through the diffusion of a series of digital platforms that during the pandemic period had their greatest peak of expansion, spreading widely in every aspect of our daily, personal and professional lives. There are several online tools and portals: among them are Zoom, Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Skype, jitsi meet, Facebook workplace, EzTalks and Big Blue Botton, and many others. These communication channels already existed in the pre-pandemic phase but grew exponentially during the lockdown.

The ubiquitous spread of digital infrastructures to make up for the lack of physical and social contact has brought another world into the limelight: the metaverse. The metaverse is a vast expanse of digital space focused on social connection, in a synthetic hypothetical environment linked to the physical world. In the metaverse, users can interact with each other in real time and obtain similar and sometimes additional experiences to those they experience in the real world.

Many of these cyberspaces currently exist or are being developed by organisations operating in different sectors: e.g. Diesel, Maison Margiela, Gucci and Balenciaga in the luxury sector; Decentraland, Blocktopia, Sandbox and Star Atlas in that of online gaming, Facebook (now Meta) is turning its social network into a metaverse, Microsoft and Amazon will be the next to present their own interactive virtual spaces.

In this new reality, Foodpacklab 2 was able to make use of a platform developed by the project leaderSecpho.

Secpho has created a platform that fully replicates networking events related to photonic technologies, artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, advanced materials, and blockchain. This platform connects entrepreneurs, end-users, researchers, investors, public administrators, clusters, research institutes, large and small companies operating in the deep tech sector, in order to connect different competences with the challenges of modern society, fostering applied research while promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and value chain enhancement.

Secpholand (<https://www.secpho.org/secpholand/>) creates opportunities to connect with other users, share ideas and develop innovation projects together through the use of customised virtual spaces open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, where they can organise their own interactive events and attract potential customers and contacts of interest.

Secpholand offers immersive 3D experiences as it gives participants the possibility to create hyper-realistic avatars; each avatar, in fact, is modifiable in every aspect, thus allowing users to better express their personality also on the platform.

Secpholand also paves the way for the era of conversational avatars because each avatar can interact with the proximal user through the activation of customisable and private chats, multiplying the possibilities of contact with the user, as well as being able to constantly update the personal and professional information entered on the platform.

Each avatar also has the opportunity to publicise his or her research project or innovative technology or company, during virtual events on the platform, sharing through maxi screens in the conference rooms his or her work, literally giving voice to his or her avatar, reminding everyone that innovation, projects, and companies are made by real people.

During the pandemic, the FPL2 consortium thus used digital tools to create networking opportunities and learning together how to manage at best all the different tools.

The guidelines that we can sharefor organizing digital meetings are reported in the followings:

1. Digital tool selection: Select a tool for a specific kind of meeting. Not all digital tools offer the services optimized for all kind of meetings. In our experience, commonly known digital infrastructures that are easy to use and flexible are ideal for internal meetings (e.g. consortium meetings) or for direct b2b communications. On the other hand, the metaverse is a fancy and new way to organize large events, such as conferences or international missions.
2. Creation of business opportunities: this is very challenging when organizing online events. It takes more time and more work from the organizer side, mainly because the the physical interaction like in face 2 face meetings, is missing here; moreover, the occasion of “unplanned” meetings are almost null. This is why FPL2 proposed the “technology challenges”: we organized specific b2b meetings, with carefully selected companies (both EU SMEs and Indian/South African companies). The proposed approach is as follows: 1) the consortium (usually the project leader) receives a technology request/challenge launched by a (large) company in one of the target country (India/South Africa); 2) each partner looks for companies/SMEs interested in offering a technological solution, in each own territory/Country; 3) online b2b meetings are organized, in order to introduce the two companies and see if there is the possibility for partnership/business creation. The last point is the most critical one, due to culture and language differences, and a careful preparation and support from the interested cluster and the project leader is mandatory. This approach is time consuming for the partners, but the most useful for companies.
3. Collaboration with other organization (cluster/entities): especially in case of online events, it is very important to attract the real interested and relevant participants, in order to keep the attendees during the whole time span of the event. Selection and targeting of the companies can benefit from the inter-cluster collaboration (i.e. same technology, but different geographical areas; different and overlaying technological areas) and also from collaboration with other entities (e.g. public bodies as Embassies, or Chamber of Commerce of Industrial Association). They can also be invited to participate to the same event.
4. Pay attention to critical foreseeable situations: when organizing online events with countries outside Europe, or with rural European areas, pay attention to possible situation that can compromise the use of digital infrastructure. The most common problem is the presence of poor internet connections (low digitalization in the country). However, also shortage in electricity distribution can affect the good result of digital events, as in case of South Africa where blackouts are common.

The other tips are the same of the in-presence events:

5. Communication: a crucial point is to spread the announcement of the event in the target community, by the use of online tools. The recommendation is the same for the in-presence events.
6. Monitor the results: organise regular meetings with the whole team to get a 'helicopter' view of the events status, most critical needs to seek partner support, discuss improvements opportunities and next steps.

2.3 The events organized in digital and hybrid format

The project events were organized in different ways, following the pandemic restriction on distancing and travelling.

The consortium organized 3 types of events:

1. Fully digital events: these were organized mainly in the first year of the project, using digital platforms for online calls, b2b and webinars. One of the Missions was also organized remotely, in Secpholand (2020-2022).
2. In person only events: the two missions organized in South Africa and India, respectively (May and June 2022).
3. Hybrid events: meetings and events were also organized in the hybrid format. The first hybrid meeting was organized for internal communication purposes and for consortium meeting in December 2021 in Florence. The second consortium meeting in hybrid format was organized in March 2022 in Barcelona. The Final Dissemination event was organized in June 2022 in Dijon in hybrid format.

As you can see from the dates of the events, their organization was time consuming because of the measures that had to be taken to guarantee safe in person meetings (pandemic situation) in parallel with the organisation of the on-line meetings (i.e. tool set up). Each time this format had to be designed starting from scratch, because of the changing locations and pandemic situation at that moment. This is why the most important events for creating business opportunities were organized in the last part of the project time span. This affected also the follow up on the events: at the proposal writing time, we wanted to follow up the b2b results in different post-event periods. In this case we had no time to make 6 months follow up of the in-person events, instead an immediate feedback was requested to the companies, with digital surveys and with direct interviews.

3 Lessons learned

The main lessons we took out during the project activities is about our approach, about knowing how to adapt, not falling into despair and never give up.

Our first lesson is about dealing with problems with enthusiasm. Despite the critical situations we faced, we achieved excellent results, thanks to the stubbornness of the project consortium partners who never gave up.

In fact, we organized events entirely online, hybrid events and then returned to organizing events onsite. This was possible due to the continuity of the work that distinguished us; a work vacuum could have been deleterious for the organization of the missions. We have identified 10 innovation challenges solved by the technology companies we have involved, bringing together tens of companies from partner countries together with Indian and South African companies.

Another lesson we have learned is that every mission, event or meeting opportunity is an opportunity to be seized to bring concrete examples of companies with technological requests in order to capture any collaboration and thus make the most of the missions and organized events fully digital, hybrid or face-to-face.

Regarding the organization of the events, we were witnesses and actors of the acceleration in digital transformation brought by the pandemic: the hybrid events are useful way to organize current and future large events. From the organization point of view, this kind of events are more time consuming, in planning, communicating, selecting the right attendees, and managing the event, in order to obtain the maximum results. At the same time, these events are perfect for companies: reduction of travelling costs, time spent, supporting green transition, efficacy of the b2b meetings. Hybrid events are more inclusive and affordable even for very small companies, with a limited budget.

Another key aspect of the hybrid events that we observed, is about the duration of the event. When performing an online event, the duration of the whole activity can be longer in versus in presence meetings because of shorter coffee or launch break, and no time lost for travelling. However, the

attention span of the attendee on a single presentation/topic might be shorter. So, for online events it is better to have more speakers with relatively short talks.

The description of the lessons learned for other work packages (WP1, WP3, WP4) is reported in the appendix of the present document.

4 Conclusions

In the period before the pandemic, meetings and events were organised in physical locations, in order to allow the interaction of participants and promote collaboration between companies.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, technological advances were used to enable the consortium to continue pursuing the project goals. This came to fruition with the introduction of smart working. The FPL2 consortium was assessing from the start which digital tools to use to meet the project goals in an efficient and effective way. In this historical period, the partnership evaluated how to best handle the situation and which digital tools to select in order, in order to keep its habits intact, directing all project activities towards an ever-present digitalization.

To overcome the issue of maintaining distance and the imposed restrictions for travelling, networking moved online, as well as all the other activities that could be moved there. There has been an increase in the online organisation of workshops, conferences, consultations with experts and the use of virtual rooms where people can meet, exchange ideas and opinions, and create new opportunities for collaboration.

In this way, new collaborations were nourished, safeguarding the efficiency of existing collaborations and expanding the network, fostering the uninterrupted continuation of social dialogue on the technology platforms since the beginning of the emergency.

In this context, the Partnership put its organisations in a position to not only implement their services and processes, but also to rethink possible new ways of interaction, in order to support the restart of the most diverse sectors in the delicate post-pandemic phase.

FoodPackLab 2 demonstrated its interest in the digital world: as a new mode of contact with its clusters, as a tool to reach completely new partners or SMEs and to amplify its audience. The consortium started network project that was fully digital at the beginning. The consortium was able to enhance social networking, rethink critical processes, reorganise work and operating spaces, in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

During this period, we saw an increase in the use of digital platforms such as zoom, teams, webex in order to flank and support current and future partners, responding to the need to intercept new technologies and tools, and identifying new collaborations with which to dialogue and develop innovative ideas.

In addition to the use of digital platforms, however, the consortium went much further. In fact, during the pandemic, the project coordinator developed its own metaverse, Secpholand, where social interactions are the basis of collaborations. With the use of Secpholand, the consortium demonstrated that it has at its heart the basic aspect that initiates collaborations of all kinds: communication.

In this way, the consortium compensated for the lack of physical and social contact by using the metaverse platform, represented by interconnected spaces in which one can move freely from one to another, with people represented by their personal avatar in all its locations, with a goal to continuous and increasing collaboration, following the technological revolution of the 21st century.

During these events, we experienced an increased participation by SMEs; in this sense, online networking proved to be more inclusive, allowing smaller organisations and entrepreneurs around the

world to access previously unexplored opportunities. In this way, digital platforms offer more flexibility for small businesses that very often did not have the opportunity to participate in face-to-face events.

The project was carried forward thanks to the use of digital infrastructure, which ensured an effective work continuum.

The use of technological resources enabled the partnership to meet the project needs. This resilience in the pursuit of objectives is indicative of how an already established partnership can make the best use of digital resources and carry out activities related to joint planning, involving its clusters in project activities.

This also facilitated the return of the organisation of onsite events such as the two missions we organised in NAMPO- South Africa and MUMBAI- India, and the organisation of hybrid events (both online and in-presence) such as the final dissemination event organised in Dijon, France.

The final project results were made possible through the strong solidity and reliability of the network that the project consortium has built despite the pandemic, and the effective communication, focusing on the needs of event participants.

All these lessons learned during the project activities were presented by the project leader, during international networking meetings. The first one was held in Thessaloniki on the 14th of June during the annual meeting of the ERIAFF Network. The title of the talk was “Internationalisation support for European companies in covid19 and post-covid times. Lessons learned from FoodPackLab 2.” The talk was part of the session entitled “Projects and Good practices from ERIAFF members”. The second event was held online on the 5th of July during the webinar “Feedbacks & Advices Webinar. How can clusters better build international missions for SMEs?”.

5 Appendix: lessons learned in WP1, WP3, WP4

If the work of clusters always has been in a VUCA environment, the covid-19 pandemic extended it to other spheres making linear planning and project execution much more challenging than normal. Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, these are four main challenges faced by clusters in their mission to support European SMEs in increasing their competitiveness and resilience, and they need different types of responses. Hence, clusters invest in versatile profiles of their management teams and liaison with experts from very specific areas, sometimes even niches. They constantly monitor markets in search for new challenges and trends to develop, test, and evaluate targeted services for their members. Lastly, they established strategic partnerships with other ecosystems as gateways to go-to-market opportunities and support for companies.

During pandemic situation, when many European companies were struggling to maintain their very core businesses, dealing with lockdowns, shortages in supply chains, remote working and work-life balance of their employees, clusters became an important tool to stay connected with the markets. They realized this by organizing webinars to provide market insights, enhance companies' visibility and matchmaking opportunities. Moreover, by strengthening the exchange of information between organizations, clusters acted as marketplace with collaboration offers hints on funding opportunities for their members.

FoodPackLab 2.0 is an example of such a platform, focusing on fostering technological innovation at the intersection of deep tech, packaging and agrifood industries.

WP 1

Agile project management approach to face the unprecedented challenges of the covid-19 pandemic situation during the project life time, the Partnership decided to follow agile project management principles, including:

- Flexibility – the project execution was adapted to a changing environment, including management tasks. For example, partnership meetings were organized online in times of lockdowns and travel bans and became hybrid when the sanitary situation improved. Work breakdown – while keeping the big picture of the project, its vision and missions, the partners focused on concrete tasks of short duration with a dedicated team composed by people with predefined roles
- Value of teamwork – The partners' personnel formed a project team and distributed the work according to their roles and responsibilities. They worked closely in smaller groups assigned to dedicated tasks
- Iterative improvements – all the tasks were constantly monitored with upcoming risks and challenges assessed by teams involved in given tasks and improvements made when relevant

To improve:

More meetings in person – although most of the meetings and activities were implemented online achieved their goals, meetings in person are more effective in establishing strong relations between partners

WP 3

Online market entry strategy

The partnership market entry strategy to India and South Africa was based on online tools. First, the local ambassadors were identified and selected, consisting of local offices of ACCIO – Catalan Agency for Business Competitiveness in both India and South Africa. They were responsible for organizing fact-finding missions in form of teleconferences between representatives of the Partnership and key stakeholders from food and packaging industries in selected territories.

Online meetings allowed partners to reach more actors than missions onsite, overcoming barriers related to geographical location and time. Therefore, partners had calls with entities located in different parts of both countries, scheduled over longer times than the timeframe for the mission onsite, which normally takes 3-4 days.

Nevertheless, online meetings required much more efforts for the follow-up activities from the Partners, as most of the Indian and South African companies were not responding to messages, although their representatives expressed their interest in collaboration with the partnership during the calls.

Target groups for strategic partnership-building in selected countries

There were two factors determined by the partnership as key elements for identification of potential partners of European companies in both targeted countries: type of organization and profiles of professionals attending the online meetings.

First, while selecting the key stakeholders for meetings, the partners focused on companies from food and packaging sectors in the targeted countries, rather than intermediaries such as clusters, chambers of commerce and other types of industrial associations. The Partnership aimed to shorten the time to reach potential partners for European companies as much as possible, assuming that, to build connections and relation online, it would require more effort to convert them into fruitful business opportunities for EU enterprises.

Second, within those companies, they identified profiles of professionals that could be most interested in establishing a collaboration with European tech providers. These included: management executives, packaging, operations, quality and control and engineering.

Type of collaboration with third parties in selected countries

While collaboration between clusters typically starts with signing a Memorandum of Understanding or other related documents, the partnership cooperation with identified stakeholders in this case varied. In case of public administration bodies, signing of any type of collaboration agreement was very problematic. For example, embassies usually do not enter into any formal cooperation, as it would require approval from the relevant Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, the cooperation with them can still be very helpful to contact local stakeholders.

Likewise, some enterprises, especially big companies, preferred first to sign Non-Disclosure Agreement before sharing their innovation challenges more in detail to ensure confidentiality of data provided.

To improve:

Fact-finding missions onsite – meetings in person ensure stronger relations between parties than teleconferences. If the sanitary situation allows it, it is recommended to visit the target countries in advance to plan the organization of the internationalisation mission for companies

Technical executives as a target group – while identifying internal stakeholders within the organisation, it is recommended to reach out to professionals who are directly involved in the industrial processes, as they know best the challenges faced by the company to manufacture its products

WP 4

Strategic partners for online events

While engagement of external partners in online events did not result in increased participation of attendees from targeted groups in matchmaking events, it was very effective when inviting experts to pitch on specific topics. For example, FoodPackLab webinar on IPR-related issues for European companies interested in Indian market was co-organized together with European Business and Technology Centre (EBTC) which provided specialists in that field.

European organizations in targeted countries to attract European companies for the missions

The Partnership collaboration with European organisations in both targeted countries resulted in reaching out to a wider range of European companies to promote FoodPackLab activities. For example, both companies participating in FPL 2 mission to South Africa were identified by EU Chamber of Commerce and Industry in SA.

Linking internationalisation mission with a bigger event (trade show) in the targeted country

The partnership decided to organize both FoodPackLab missions onsite and attend previously identified sectorial trade shows in the targeted countries, NAMPO 2022 in South Africa on agricultural machinery, and Interfoodtech 2022 in India on packaging and food processing. This approach, combined with external meetings, ensured b2b meetings with local stakeholders who were also attending the events as exhibitors or participants.

Flexible agendas for missions onsite

Both missions onsite had individual, flexible agendas for each participant, focusing on ensuring time for the personalized exploration of the trade show, rather than filling in the programme with pre-scheduled meetings. This allowed them to identify key internal stakeholders (decision-makers) in selected companies participating in the trade show. Many times they talked first to the representatives of a given company, responsible for the booth, to reach out to the decision makers who were then joining if only for a short meeting.

Logistics of onsite missions

While the content of the mission preparations focused on identifying key participants of trade shows as potential partners for European companies, it was the main task of the missions' organiser, to ensure smooth logistics during travel, crucial for participants to attend their meetings.

Both in case of South Africa and India, one of the most important tasks was to select a well-located hotel with safe sanitary conditions. While in South Africa, the trade show was organized in a large open field between small towns with no direct connection with any hospitality infrastructure, in India the main challenge was related to the traffic jams in Mumbai City. Therefore, to solve South African challenge, partnership decided to book rooms in a hotel located not more than 1 hour driving distance from the exhibition venue. In India, Partners made reservations in a hotel which was located closed to the airport, between the exhibition centre and downtown.

To improve:

More time to organize a mission – in normal non-Covid times, dates of international exhibitions can be published much more in advance. While thinking about next missions onsite, it is recommended to start identifying companies to participate in them as soon as the dates of selected fairs are confirmed, as it gives more time for enterprises to prepare for the travel.