

How to engage food system actors for your project?



Author: Adrián Escribano // INNOVARUM ES

Successful engagement starts with a clear and appealing activity for the engaged entities followed by a mapping of the food value chain. It is key to identify the actor groups involved such as primary producers, processors, product developers, wholesalers, distributors, retailers, food-service operators, policy representatives, business-support organisations or consumers, and check which links are missing for the planned activities. The next step is to list and rank candidates according to how much they can contribute and benefit and their influence in their sector. Using existing networks from project partners is essential to select a balanced group of actors, countries, organisation types and genders, to keep reserve candidates to replace dropouts. In LIKE-A-PRO, this approach produced a preliminary Food Actor Network of 50 organisations covering all 14 identified middle-food-chain subgroups and 18 countries.

It is very helpful to use a short information kit explaining the purpose, expected contribution, time commitment, benefits, data use and right to withdraw. It is important to check conflicts of interest and obtain informed consent before participation. Engagement should be a structured process, not a one-off consultation: combine meetings involving the whole network with smaller mixed groups, retain the same participants across activities if possible and guide the discussion to turn ideas into shared visions and actions.

Engaging food system actors creates stronger partnerships, reveals operational barriers and market opportunities earlier, and produces solutions grounded in real business needs. It can improve service design, strengthen market fit and accelerate the uptake of sustainable food innovations.