GUIDELINES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A EUROPEAN NETWORK OF COMMUNITY COOPERATIVES

"THE UNITED VOICE FOR COMMUNITY COOPERATIVES"

Introduction

Networks as Examples for Sharing, Learning and Applying

Working on development of the training programme of the ENTCOM Project, the consortium met some examples of national networks, such as:

The Community Action Team of the Rural Community Council All Over England

This network was formed in 1924 with the aim of providing support to rural communities in England, helping community leaders in working on community planning, engagement, consultation, wellbeing. The RCC organises competitions to encourage villages to undertake new projects and to maximise the use of existing services and facilities.

Sources: http://www.ruralcc.org.uk/

ViabilityNet in Prague

The ViabilityNet programme connects and supports groups of individuals and non-profit organisations committed to strengthening civil society in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The Via Foundation assists group of people who have taken the initiative to create positive change in their communities. The work of the network rests on the belief that a sense of responsibility, willingness to participate in public affairs and stewardship of our communities are essential to life in a free society.

http://viafoundation.org/serving-communities/viabilitynet.shtml

Starting from these examples and recognising the importance of sharing practices, learning from each other's experiences, working for local needs analysis, valorising the local resources, and stimulating local engagement, ENTCOM Project propose the guidelines from a European Network of Community Cooperatives.

Purposes of the Guidelines

In these guidelines, the advantages of network cooperation between community cooperatives such as sharing common problems and providing resources, complementing competencies and capacities, initiating the process of networks, will be discussed.

We can define a "community cooperative" as an association of people, in a small local community, which provide services that have no answer in that community and manage the common good through the work and the engagement of member citizens. The community cooperative is characterised by the active participation of a large number of citizens, who self-organize themselves into a cooperative with the same purpose.

A "community cooperative network", is considered as an integrative part of the Project ''ENTCOM – Entrepreneurship and Community Cooperatives'' in order to create value and to support and provide resources, experiences and good practices to existing cooperatives, to groups who are working for a new community cooperative initiative, and to Community Cooperative Facilitators.

In addition, approaches to network initiation have often placed too much focus on infrastructure. They have not paid enough attention to the cooperation between local initiatives and failed to embrace a more organic process of network initiation.

The guidelines focus on ''how to initiate network of community cooperatives'' and ''how to be united as a whole in different parts of countries''.

The network of community cooperatives are understood as groups of legally independent organisations (and its individuals) that aim to cooperate together and on a long-term basis with significantly fewer centralized management functions than traditional organisations.

The specific objectives of these networks are:

- Help CCFs and members of community cooperatives understand the crucial aspects (success factors) in the set-up process;

- Enable them to shorten the process and save time, and to have more effective results;

- Introduce initiating groups to existing initiatives, share experiences and resources

The early phase is particularly critical for the later stages of network cooperation and requires careful support and guidance.

Success Factors for a Community Cooperative Network

Good practices reveal that the success of a network of community cooperatives largely depends on five key factors:

Network management: The need for network cooperation needs to be identified and there must be essential rules for it. Networks are organizations with a little hierarchy. Network management plays a critical role in the initiation process. The network has to define its own management, and also to practise rotation between members for managing and coordinating activities.

Opportunity shows itself: When a network is initiated by a group of community cooperatives or by a supporting organisation, the succeeding steps for networks of community cooperatives seem to lead a productive cooperation.

Commitment to active cooperation needs to be assured: Active involvement of all participants and sufficient allocation of resources (time and people) are critical for a network to identify and realise opportunities.

Trust needs to develop as the foundation of cooperative behaviour: Community cooperatives have to get to know each other and work together in order to develop trust. It is also important that networks must not only rely on personal trust but also need to establish norms to institutionalise trust.

Information exchange has to be intensive: During network initiation, a lot of information has to be shared between the potential network members that need to get to know each other well. Common problems in different areas of the countries need to be revealed and CCFs and other members of the community cooperatives must try to overcome these problems through networks of community cooperatives.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE	NETWORK MANAGEMENT	TRUST
OPPORTUNITY		COMMITMENT

The Initiation Process

The focus of this chapter is on the process of initiating the networks for community cooperatives. CCFs need to be brought together so that the initiation process can be compared to a group or team building process, consisting of the following phases:

FORM ➡️ STORM ➡️ NORM ➡️ PERFORM

Each phase needs to be completed before the next phase is reached. In the form phase, a newly established team gets together. In the storm phase, the group members aim to develop a common understanding in a sometimes conflict-ridden process. In the norm phase, the group eventually agrees on the specific rules of the game and then performs tasks. In the perform phase, the group starts creating solutions for the common problems of rural communities.

The model is supposed to illustrate that when initiating a cooperative network, the groups will go through a number of phases - form & storm & norm -before they can start to perform. It is the network initiator's task and challenge to guide the group through these phases which require significant time and effort depending on the particular situation.

Five Steps for a Connected Community

A) Taking First Steps (Bringing Cooperatives Together)

At the very beginning of the forming phase, it is necessary to gather a number of community cooperatives and community initiatives for the first time. This group of potential network members should be large enough to ensure that common problems for rural communities eventually become global issues that need to be solved through cooperation.

B) Creating Interest in the Network

The next step is to immediately follow-up on the first awareness created in order to generate actual interest in the cooperative network model. This core group should be brought together in several informal, but moderated meetings in order to develop a common agenda as soon as possible.

C) Moving from Interest to Commitment

The race is not yet won at this stage, because the difficult task is to bring community cooperatives from being interested in the network cooperation to actually generating alternative solutions to common problems for its implementation.

D) Promoting the Dialogue of the Network with Institutions and Public Bodies:

The main purpose of the network is to increase the capacity of civil society organisations and to strengthen their role within a participative democracy.

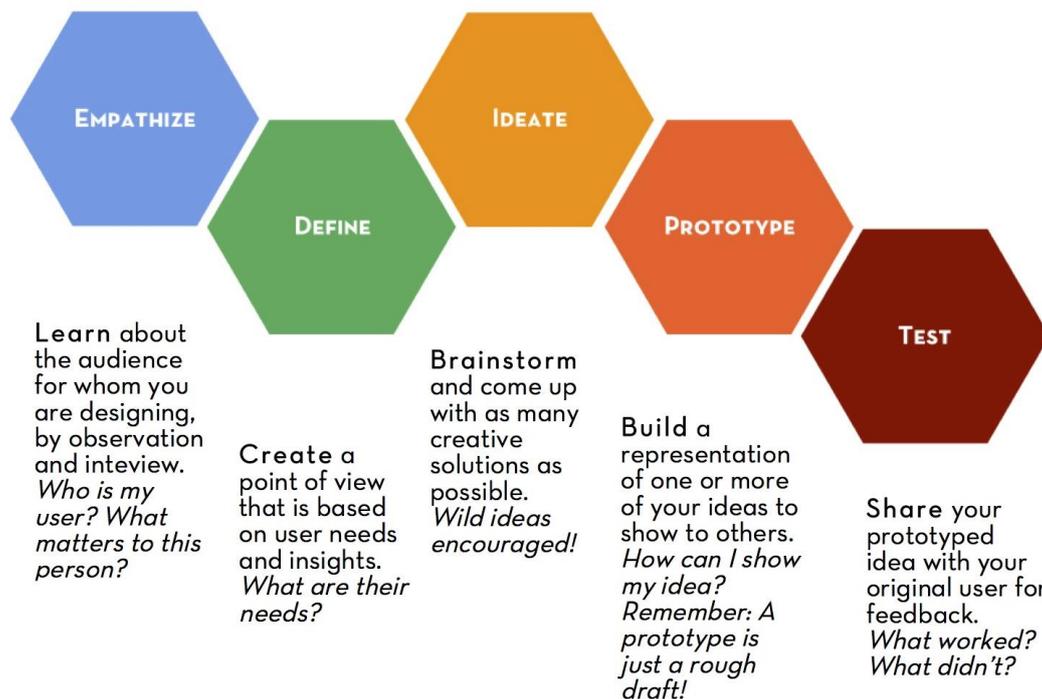Main expected outcomes of this Network are:

- Increased influence of community cooperatives

- Strengthened capacity of CCFs and members to further their agenda; also strengthened cooperation and networking among CCFs and between stakeholders and CCFs and members

- Raised public awareness of the community cooperatives

- Indication of the common economic, social, and cultural needs of rural areas and problem identification

- The preparation of proposals for law making and the provision of training and adequate tools.

## E) Planning for Sustainability

Cooperative networks require significant management (external or internal) effort before the network can eventually perform and create value. Therefore, issues concerned rural communities involved as members need to be identified and put on record as soon as possible. It should be ready and willing networks of people keeping in touch with themselves for common goals.

Suggestions

One of the biggest issues of the network might be the difficulty in supporting local initiatives in the start-up phase, with the tools and practices described in ENTCOM projects' materials, according to the following model (emphasise – define – ideate – prototype and test):

EMPATHIZE

DEFINE

IDEATE

PROTOTYPE

TEST

Learn about the audience for whom you are designing, by observation and inteview. *Who is my user? What matters to this person?*

Create a point of view that is based on user needs and insights. *What are their needs?*

Brainstorm and come up with as many creative solutions as possible. *Wild ideas encouraged!*

Build a representation of one or more of your ideas to show to others. *How can I show my idea? Remember: A prototype is just a rough draft!*

Share your prototyped idea with your original user for feedback. *What worked? What didn't?*

The network has to support groups and CCFs in working on the value proposition of the "business idea", through experience exchanges during the ENTCOM training courses and practicing enforcements.
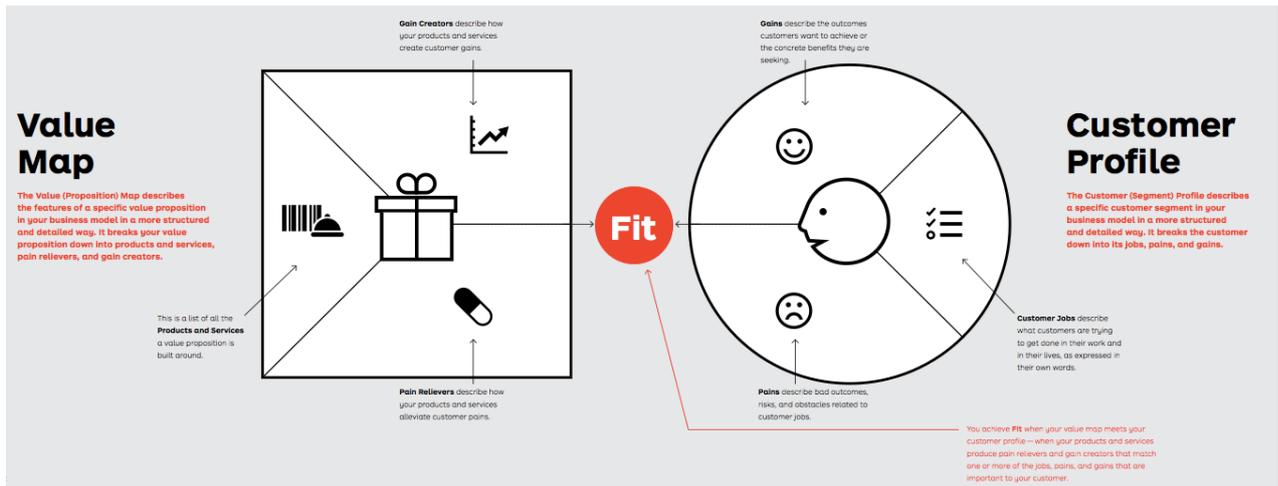
This could be done with a sort of informal mentoring ad tutoring programme among members (of the community cooperatives) which are at different stages of advancement in their projects of community development.