SMCNetZero

Achieving Net-Zero through Innovation in
Small and Medium sized cities

D4.3 Catalogue of experience and best practices for matchmaking and collaboration activities at the organisational level

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Extract from DoA & GA	To share experience and knowledge at the organisational level to increase the innovation capacity of low innovation countries' network and ecosystems, a catalogue of best practices and experience will be created. Input from all consortium partners will be gathered in interactive roundtables to create a catalogue to share experience and best practice across consortium partners.					
Participants	All partners					
Comments						

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4   Southern Regional Assembly
5   Foreningen BLOXHUB
6   WE BUILD DENMARK
7   UrbanDNA Solutions LLP

About SMCNetZero

SMCNetZero brings together six successful urban innovation initiatives in Europe with seven (7) regional and Pan European networks and their partners to create a **Satellite Network of innovation actors** to support public sector representatives from Small and Medium-sized cities (SMCs), SMEs, academia, NGOs, and investors across Europe to **facilitate decarbonisation in SMCs**.

The SMCNetZero consortium is composed of:

BABLE Smart Cities, Germany (BAB)
ODRAZ - Održivi razvoj zajednice, Croatia (ODZ)
Smart City Cluster, Spain (SCC)
Southern Regional Assembly, Ireland (SRA)
BLOXHUB, Denmark (BXH)
WE BUILD DENMARK, Denmark (WBD)
UrbanDNA, United Kingdom (UDNA)

This project is unique in that its diverse consortium partners and broad commitment from target stakeholders in the Satellite Network ensure **focus in regions with less innovation capacity**, with written confirmed commitment from nearly 100 innovation actors at the proposal stage, to participate in the activities- including an emphasis on largely underrepresented regions and stakeholders.

The project will leverage its diverse Satellite Network to:

- Gain an in-depth understanding of SMC needs and barriers towards achieving Net Zero emissions.
- Raise awareness and simplify access to existing successful initiatives supporting decarbonisation.
- Support matchmaking between supply and demand sides by linking SMEs, researchers, and investors with SMCs.
- Help identify and open access to funding for enabling innovation deployment in SMCs currently underrepresented in the European innovation ecosystem.

SMCNetZero's vision is to **create and strengthen local innovation ecosystems' interrelations in SMCNetZero regions** through brokerage and knowledge-building activities as well as digital resources to increase capacity **for planning, deploying, and**

scaling up of decarbonisation solutions, overall focusing on increasing the inclusivity of these innovation ecosystems and minimizing existing innovation divides.

To achieve this vision, SMCNetZero has the following primary strategic objectives:

- Open up opportunities and stimulate the dissemination of information and exchange of knowledge on best practices on decarbonization for SMCs (and as a result, SMEs).
- Increase implementation prospects between providers of zero-emission solutions and public authorities from SMCs by designing, developing and providing a digital space and accompanying toolkit for collaborating, learning and networking.
- Identify and engage innovation leaders from the public and private sectors from "strong" innovator regions and "moderate" to "modest" innovator regions within the project's focus countries.
- Design and deploy engagement and knowledge-building activities for ensuring wide participation for SMCNetZero and maximum impact.
- Facilitate the understanding and implications of the implementation and scale-up of innovation projects in SMCs.

Contents

Introduction

In the realm of fostering innovation, constructive and smooth collaboration among the consortia partners plays a key role. This report seeks to share experiences from the project partners on learnings, critical success factors, and best practices from the consortium collaboration in order to learn from and implement these in future collaborative structures and consortiums. The result is a best practice catalogue, summarizing the collective learnings of the collaboration between the consortium partners during the execution of the SMC Net Zero project. The catalogue emerges from interview sessions with all consortium partners, where insights, experiences, and knowledge have formed a portfolio of best practices.

The catalogue provides insights into how internal synergy and collaboration in a consortium affects the project aim, in this case, the external collaboration with SMC cities and the innovation capacity of low-innovation ecosystems. Therefore, the catalogue guides partner collaboration processes and formats to facilitate successful collaboration and affect the outcome, in this case, the best possible approach to SMC cities.

The foundation of the catalogue consists of statements from consortia partner interviews concerning both positive outcomes and challenges, exploration of new collaboration potentials, new learnings and initiatives, and assessing the impact on partner procedures, formats, or processes. By drawing upon experiences and insights shared within the consortium, the catalogue aims to provide actionable knowledge. It has also been an aim to capture the essence of collaborative innovation, reflecting the consortium's collective knowledge to give valuable advice on fostering impactful and harmonious collaborations in consortiums in the future.

Methodology

Serving as the backbone of the report's conclusions, a comprehensive interview methodology was employed. Every one of the consortium's seven partners were interviewed. The partners were asked questions about the different phases of collaborating in the consortium, while also handed the opportunity to point out challenges and learnings themselves. A semi-structured interview approach allowed both the interviewer and the interviewee to be flexible with the questions in the original interview frame. The interview frame was designed to elicit detailed information about successfully used methodology, challenges faced, lessons learned, and recommendations for improving consortium collaborative practices.

After the interview, an analysis and synthesis of the interview data was conducted, and the partners were made aware of the interviews' extracted topics. This iterative approach ensured that the catalogue reflects a comprehensive understanding of consortium needs and incorporates insights from all partners, thereby enhancing its relevance and utility within consortiums.

Learnings and Best Practice Catalogue

The following pages provide learnings of four topic areas with actionable advice for each section. The areas underscore the strengths, challenges, and strategies employed within the consortium collaboration and serve as guidance for a robust foundation for successful partnerships and inspiration for collaboration in other consortiums.

1. Collaborative Knowledge-Gaining Groundwork

By acknowledging the challenge of engaging small and medium-sized cities due to time constraints and capacity issues in the project, the consortium partners early in the collaboration agreed upon the importance of the groundwork needed to be done. A comprehensive market research around SMCs was conducted to gain as much knowledge about SMCs as possible and to find out how to approach them. The market analysis was based on a methodology reviewed and agreed upon by all members of the consortium that allowed the collection of information to be replicated in all participating regions in a homogeneous manner. All the partners collaborated in conducting interviews and searching for information, which has made it possible to obtain consistent and conclusive results on the subject of the study. The knowledge gained from the market research formed the basis for a structured and cohesive city engagement strategy. The market research was fundamental in the consortium's ability to approach external partners – in this case, cities - in a structured and cohesive way. Each partner benefited from the collaborative approach and learnings in the market analysis, which created a common ground of knowledge and engagement. Especially the partners with relatively lower innovation capacity were able to enhance their knowledge of cities and urban tendencies, to the benefit of the collaboration in the project, as well as in their work outside of the consortium.

In essence, having partners initially collaborate on a knowledge-gaining groundwork was a learning as it enhances the collaboration's common understanding of the project as well as the strongholds of each of the consortium partners in their approach to the external partners - the SMCs. The common groundwork also limited different cultural interpretations of different urban definitions and methodologies to the benefit of the ongoing partnership. Based on the collaborative experience of conducting initial market research, learnings suggest ensuring a sufficient collaborative groundwork by:

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Have a tailored approach: A consortium can benefit from agreeing to an outreach approach to external partners and tailor this approach to each city or partner based on its specific characteristics. A tailored approach allows the partners to gain new knowledge and thus enhance their innovation capacity, by getting exposed to different city urban, cultural, or political challenges, which further elevates the homogenous understanding in the ongoing collaboration among partners. By confronting a variety of challenges and contexts, partners develop more robust and adaptable solutions that can be applied across different settings.

Shared Data Collection: Partners can benefit from collaborating on gathering relevant data about relevant parameters and pooling their resources to ensure comprehensive coverage. This involves sharing methodologies, tools, and findings to collectively analyze the data and extract valuable insights. Partners can draw on each other's standardized approaches to data collection, ensuring consistency and comparability across different contexts. Sharing tools and resources also reduces duplication of effort and minimizes costs associated with developing proprietary data collection methods, maximizing efficiency and resource utilization within the consortium. Overall, the interdependency regarding data will improve the collectiveness in the consortium.

Collaboratively align project activities with results of groundwork: Training, education, workshops, and other activities following the groundwork should collectively be adapted to the findings in the groundwork to address specific challenges or opportunities that have emerged. It is important to, collaboratively, adjust these activities so each partner utilizes its competencies in the best way

possible in future planning. By collaboratively aligning their activities with the insights gained from the knowledge-gaining groundwork, partners can ensure that their efforts are targeted and impactful when reaching the next steps in the project.

2. Openness and Trust

The consortium's ethos of openness, flexibility, and mutual respect has fostered an inclusive and productive environment crucial for harmonious collaboration. It can, as in our case, be beneficial that some partners have worked with each other before and know each other well. When primarily collaborating through online formats, the knowledge and understanding of each consortia partner can be challenging to gain but seem crucial to successful partner collaboration. Here, it can also be beneficial to use simple online behavioral tools that help speed understanding and teamwork. The consortium's commitment to openness and availability of information has been ensured by all voices being heard and considered in each project step. Here, the Project Coordinator has played a vital role in ensuring inclusivity. Inclusivity is particularly important when dealing with diverse small and medium-sized cities, each with its unique characteristics. Internal inclusivity ensured that the needs and priorities of the SMCs were properly addressed in planning and collaboration, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes. In other words, an inclusive environment in the consortia creates a solid base for an open collaboration process with external partners like SMCs. To create openness and trust in consortium cooperation, it is important to:

Ensure consortium cohesiveness: Partners who have previously worked together bring a pre-existing understanding of each other's working styles, strengths, and areas of expertise. This familiarity fosters a smoother

collaboration process, allowing for quicker alignment of goals and strategies. Additionally, a relatively small and agile size of the consortium allows the partners to gain in-depth knowledge and meaningful interactions with the other partners that allow a trust to grow. Furthermore, partners' diverse expertise complements and enriches the project's offerings and ensures a comprehensive cohesiveness of impact. In the initial phase of the project, it can be pivotal to let the partners meet in person to quickly gain an understanding of fellow partners, which outbalances the difficulties of gaining this understanding through online platforms.

Involve all consortium partners in decision-making: By involving every partner in key decision-making processes, the consortium can foster a sense of ownership among all partners, which promotes diverse perspectives, and enhances overall project effectiveness. By involving all partners in key decision-making, it is possible to gain insights that might be crucial for comprehensive problem-solving and innovative solutions. This can be done by establishing inclusive decision-making processes, such as bi-weekly meetings, trainings, and workshops, where each partner has an equal opportunity to contribute ideas, provide feedback, and participate in consensus-building. Another way of ensuring involvement of partners is by integrating RACI as a responsibility assignment matrix. The model can help consortiums define different responsibilities in consortiums, while enhancing the transparency of assignments.

Utilize the Project Coordinator role wisely: The role of a project coordinator is important in maintaining effective communication and collaboration across the consortia. The coordinator plays a role in facilitating interactions, ensuring that

information flows seamlessly among consortium members, and addressing any issues that may arise. However, the role of the project coordinator must be flexible along with the project when dealing with the complexities of engaging with e.g. SMCs, as other partners may also have utilizable coordination competencies depending on the activity. In general, the role can benefit from an in-depth understanding of partners to make a precise and accurate task delegation to utilize the consortium's different expertise.

3. Partner communication and interactions

Communication discrepancies, schedule and time constraints, and geographical dispersion can obstruct collaboration if not structured appropriately, especially when engaging with diverse external partners like cities. Partner diversity will also lead to varying interpretations of terms and concepts due to cultural and language boundaries. However, some of the internal collaboration restraints can be solved by having a project coordinator and by integrating collaboration tools in the collaboration process from an early project state. An in-person meeting in the initial phase of the project was concluded missing in this project. This was not prioritized and has been expressed by partners as a learning for future projects to boost collaboration processes initially. When approaching cities, the consortium met coordination and scheduling challenges, affecting internal communication and scheduled processes, providing the consortium with a learning to ensure flexibility to incorporate external meetings and interactions. Therefore, the partners collaboratively formed a communication strategy towards the involved cities, to make sure their external communication functioned cohesively. To ensure effective communication and interactions among busy consortium partners and external partners, the consortium must:

Have a communication strategy: While being a strength, geographical dispersion among consortium partners presents a hurdle by limiting face-to-face interactions. Overcoming this challenge necessitates a strategy of overcommunication to bridge the gap caused by physical distance, emphasizing the role of continuous dialogue and the effective utilization of digital tools in fostering collaboration. This involves the inclusion and understanding of digital communication platforms like Teams, interactive digital collaboration tools, and ad-hoc communication tools. Regular Teams meetings can be an interface for consortium partners to engage and share viewpoints and questions. Meeting execution can happen independently, whether all consortium partners can attend or not, which ensures continuity and progress.

Have partners interact face-to-face: To increase the effect of geographically dispersed communication, the consortium can benefit from having met face-to-face at the start of the project. Face-to-face interactions provide a unique opportunity for consortium partners to build personal connections, which creates a foundation for trust and more effective and comfortable remote collaboration. The interactions could happen while simultaneously working with external stakeholders in consortium activities. Consortium partners will often leave face-to-face interactions with an understanding of their individual and collective contributions to the project, which can take a lot more effort to gain from remote.

4. Forward-Thinking Approach

Building on the already mentioned objectives in the partner collaboration, a shared vision among the partners to extend the collaboration beyond the project's formal conclusion was committed. The consortium was motivated to extend the project by creating a comprehensive roadmap for SMEs, a living document securing the longevity of the project's outcomes, based on the insights and tools garnered throughout the project. Importantly, the roadmap and living document recognize the dynamic nature of SMEs and the business environment, allowing for continuous updates and refinements based on evolving insights and urban trends. Furthermore, the development of the roadmap involved knowledge transfer and capacity-building activities, where partners shared their expertise and experiences with SMCs to empower them to effectively utilize the insights and tools provided. This fosters a culture of learning and innovation among SMCs, enabling them to enhance their urban resilience.

Additionally, the consortium partners have actively exposed the other partners to each partner's ecosystems and connections. This includes the respective local cities, companies, and communities. With the partners consisting of different urban actors, they had the resources to further integrate the other partners' networks into their organizational formats. This was also a way of creating lasting collaborations. To collaboratively adopt a shared forward-thinking approach and to ensure future collaborations among the consortium partners, it is suggested to:

Ensure the project's longevity: Living documents, roadmaps, and digital forums, are ways of going beyond the immediate project deliverables and can function as a platform to allow continuous collaboration between consortium partners and with the SMCs. By embracing an iterative approach and leveraging these tools effectively, consortium partners can sustain their collaborative efforts over time,

address evolving challenges, and create lasting impact in SMCs. Therefore, every opportunity to ensure the project's longevity and relevancy must be investigated. This must be an integrated part of the project's initial activity planning phase.

Utilize created networks to sustain collaboration: Partners can take advantage of introducing each other to their networks. Networking opportunities are a way to ensure further collaboration among partners by finding shared interests and synergetic initiatives. Therefore, a recommendation is that a consortium should create opportunities for each partner to engage in networks, which can be done through in-person visits, workshops, co-hosted events, etc. Such activities facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and partnership development, strengthening the forward-thinking collaboration between consortium members and cities.

Conclusion

The Learnings and Best Practice Catalogue highlights learnings from the consortium collaboration to support successful partnerships in different consortiums. This report has explored the experiences and best practices gathered from the SMCNetZero project, offering insights into the dynamics of collaborative partnerships. The report's learnings have been gathered through interviews of the consortium partners about their experiences throughout the project.

Collaborative knowledge-gaining groundwork - comprehensive and collaborative market research can ease the initial phase of consortium collaboration. A consortium can benefit from creating a knowledge pool of their organizational experiences to increase all partners' innovation capacity, and to create a shared understanding of urban tendencies. Furthermore, consortiums can align activities to the results of initial groundwork or research.

Openness and trust - inclusive decision-making fosters ownership, diverse perspectives, and overall project effectiveness. The Project Coordinator role is important for maintaining effective communication and addressing issues within the consortium. In-person meetings in the initial phase of the project can limit partner differences or disagreements.

Partner communication and interactions - overcoming geographical dispersion requires a robust communication strategy. A communication strategy can from the project's start support building personal connections, establishing trust, and enhancing remote collaboration effectiveness. A cohesive internal communication strategy fosters a professional and comprehensive approach to city stakeholders.

Forward-thinking approach – creating viable and interactable documents/initiatives can serve as platforms to further collaborate with fellow consortium partners. A consortium can benefit from creating opportunities for the partners to engage in each other's network through seminars, workshops, or other events. Leveraging networks formed during the project offers an opportunity for sustained collaboration among partners.

Appendix 1 - Interview Questionnaire

The following questions were asked the seven partners, to cover all topics within the collaboration:

Motivation for collaboration

1. What was your motivation for participating in the SMCNETZERO EU Call?

Experience and role

2. How much experience do you have with working in consortiums in the EU or other bigger projects?

Learnings and new initiatives

3. How has the collaboration among partners evolved, and what strategies have proven successful in promoting effective communication and cooperation?

Challenges and potential in collaboration

4. How have you addressed (and overcome) challenges collaboratively, and what lessons have you learned that can benefit future collaborations?
5. Which collaboration tools have been used in this process?
6. How have you advanced the development of sustainability plans in collaboration with the external partners, and what steps have been taken to ensure the long-term viability and impact of the implemented solutions and the partnerships created?

Follow-up

7. In the last part of the questionnaire, follow-up questions on mentioned topics were asked, and the interviewee was given the opportunity to elaborate on concrete collaboration successes/challenges.