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**STRONGER
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How to Engage Network Members

Part II:

**From Member Participation to Concrete Results:
Strategy, Action Plan, Measurement, and Adaptivity**

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Introduction

Strong membership brings people to the table. **Effective processes** ensure that the time they give produces results. Many networks lose momentum not because members disengage, but because participation doesn't translate into **shared priorities, coordinated action, and visible progress**. When members don't see movement, they stop investing energy.

This material focuses on the operating system of a network: **strategy-setting** that is participatory but not exhausting; **action planning** that is realistic; **measurement** that proves value; and **adaptivity** that keeps engagement relevant as circumstances shift.

What You Will Learn?

How to run **strategic planning** that builds buy-in without overburdening members?

How to build an **annual rhythm** that makes engagement predictable?

How to translate strategy into **action plans** with clear roles, timelines, and participation options?

How to **measure engagement** and outcomes in ways members and funders understand?

How to **stay adaptive** through feedback loops, learning cycles, and short planning iterations?

1) Strategy as an engagement process

Strategy is one of the most powerful engagement tools a network has, because it answers: **What are we doing together that we can't do alone?** When strategy is unclear, members feel pulled in many directions. When it is overly ambitious, members feel guilt and fatigue. When it is dominated by a few voices, others disengage.

Strategic planning helps **align members around a shared purpose** and concrete objectives. It should be **participatory but not overly burdensome**. It is not just a technical exercise to produce a document — it is a process that can either strengthen member buy-in and commitment or alienate them if handled poorly.

Key Milestones:

- Vision & mission review.
- Mapping external context & opportunities.
- Setting strategic priorities.
- Developing an action plan with clear roles and timelines and options for both high- and low-intensity participation.

Key Considerations and Watchouts:

- **Representation and Inclusion**
 - Ensure **diverse representation**: large and small members, different thematic areas, active and less active members.
 - Avoid planning dominated by a few vocal members — use facilitation techniques (breakout groups, anonymous voting tools) to balance voices.
- **Managing Member Capacities**
 - Keep the process **time-efficient and predictable** — e.g., shorter, focused workshops rather than long, open-ended sessions.
 - Key discussions are **best held in person**, in a safe space and sufficient time window.
 - Use **diverse input options** (survey on priorities, collaborative documents for comments) to include those with limited availability.

- **Transparency and Communication**
 - Communicate **why the process matters** and what members can expect.
 - Share drafts and progress updates to maintain trust and show that member input is shaping the outcome.
- **Balancing Strategic Ambition and Realism**
 - Avoid overly ambitious agendas that the network lacks resources to implement – this leads to frustration and disengagement.
 - Use data from **monitoring systems** to ground discussions in evidence rather than anecdote.
- **Conflict and Consensus-Building**
 - Be prepared for tensions when prioritizing focus areas – particularly in heterogeneous networks.
 - Apply **participatory decision-making tools** (such as consensus-building workshops) to reach broadly supported decisions.
- **Post-Planning Engagement**
 - Include members in defining **next steps and responsibilities**, not just vision and goals.
 - Plan for regular review points where members can revisit and adapt the strategy.

Practical implementation: “Minimum Viable Strategy”

Keep strategy lean and usable. Focus on:

- Shared purpose (why the network exists)
- 2–3 strategic priorities (what matters most now)
- Target audiences
- Ways of working (participation norms, decision principles)
- A commitment to review (when you’ll revisit assumptions)

Tip: Use [Worksheet 1](#) at the end of this material to articulate your strategy in a simple format that members can understand and apply.

2) Action plan: make participation predictable and roles clear

Once strategy planning is inclusive and manageable, you need to convert it into delivery – without becoming a project management nightmare.

Action plans succeed when they do **three things**:

1. Translate strategic priorities into concrete activities.
2. Assign roles without overloading the same people.
3. Offer multiple participation intensities.

Practical implementation:

For each strategic priority, define:

- 3–6 activities with clear deliverables
- Owner (responsible), contributors, and decision checkpoints
- Time estimation and “light-touch vs high-touch” participation options
- Dependencies (what must happen first – next ...)
- A communication rhythm (when members hear updates)

A useful rule: if a member can't understand how to participate within a few minutes of reading the plan, it's too complex.

This becomes much easier if the network also runs on an annual rhythm – so engagement isn't a constant surprise.

Tip: Use [Worksheet 2](#) at the end of this material to create a simple action plan with clear roles.

3) Engagement plan & annual calendar

An engagement plan — a different, participation angle to action plan — **turns governance and strategy** into action by structuring **how, when, and through which mechanisms members can engage**. Having **a clear, predictable rhythm** helps busy members plan ahead and makes participation feel manageable rather than overwhelming.

Core Components of an Engagement Plan

- **Participation Opportunities:** Map all points of member involvement (e.g., assemblies, working groups, surveys, consultations).
- **Roles & Responsibilities:** Clarify who leads which process — board, secretariat, or members themselves.
- **Resource Planning:** Allocate budget and staff time to member engagement activities.
- **Communication Plan Integration:** Sync engagement activities with communication updates and data collection.
- **Feedback Loops:** Build in moments to collect member input and adjust the plan based on their needs.

Annual Engagement Calendar — example

Month/Quarter	Engagemnt activities	Purpose
Q1	Annual Members' Assembly & Strategic Planning Workshop	Review past year, set priorities
Q2	Working Group Launch Meetings	Deep dive into priority topics
Q3	Mid-Year Member Survey + Reflection Webinar	Take stock, gather feedback
Q4	Knowledge-Sharing Event / Celebration	Showcase results, build community
Ongoing	Monthly Newsletter + Active Chat Groups	Keep members informed & connected

Practical Recommendations

- **Diversify Engagement Formats:** Alternate between online and in-person events, synchronous and asynchronous contributions, to respect capacity limitations.
- **Build Rituals:** Annual retreats, celebration/learning events, “State of the Network” reports, monthly digest, or member spotlights create a sense of continuity and identity.
- **Keep it Lean:** Use digital tools to streamline logistics (Doodle polls for scheduling, Zoom for hybrid participation, shared docs for collaborative input).
- **Link Engagement to Value:** Make sure every activity answers the member’s question: “What’s in it for us?”

Example: A mental health advocacy network issues a yearly “Impact Snapshot” — a 2-page infographic highlighting collective wins — and uses it to open its annual general assembly.

4) Measurement of engagement that makes sense

Networks often avoid measurement because it feels technical or burdensome. But without **evidence of value**, engagement weakens over time – especially when funding is tight.

Practical implementation: keep measurement simple and meaningful

Use three layers:

- **Engagement indicators** (participation, contributions, working group activity)
- **Output indicators** (briefings produced, joint statements, events delivered)
- **Outcome signals** (policy wins, partnerships formed, improved member capacity, stories)

Then package it so members can absorb it quickly, for instance:

- a two-page “impact snapshot”
- 3–5 key numbers
- 2 short stories showing concrete value

Measurement is not only about reporting – it is also about learning and improving based on concrete data.

Tip: Use [Worksheet 3](#) at the end of this material to assess your members engagement and what your network and your members gain from it.

5) Staying adaptive: work with feedback loops and learning cycles

Member engagement is not just about participation rates — it is about ensuring that the network stays **relevant, resourceful, and resilient** in the face of change. An adaptive engagement approach keeps the network's shared purpose alive, nurtures long-term commitment, and allows it to pivot when circumstances shift.

Why Adaptiveness Matters for Member Engagement

- **External Changes:** Political, funding, or societal shifts may require a network to re-prioritize goals or adjust its advocacy strategies.
- **Internal Evolution:** Membership composition, capacity, and priorities change over time — the network must revisit its value proposition and engagement model regularly.
- **Avoiding Stagnation:** Static engagement calendars risk becoming rituals with low participation. Regularly refreshing formats, topics, and roles keeps members energized.

Practical Ways to Build Adaptiveness

- **Continuous Listening & Feedback Loops:**
 - Regular pulse surveys, online feedback forms, or member check-ins to track evolving needs.
 - After-action reviews after major activities (“what happened, why, what next”)
Example: A network sends a 3-question quarterly survey (“What’s top of mind? What’s working? What’s missing?”) and adjusts its next-quarter plan accordingly.
- **Iterative Strategic Planning:**
 - Build shorter, rolling planning cycles (e.g., 2-year strategies with annual refreshes) instead of rigid 5-year plans.
Example: Each year, the network holds a “future scenarios” session to stress-test its strategy.

- **Flexible Engagement Formats:**
 - Offer multiple entry points (webinars, peer-learning groups, asynchronous collaboration spaces) to suit members' capacity.
 - Pilot new formats, retire those with persistently low participation.
- **Strengthening Member Capacity:**
 - Provide training or peer-support opportunities to build members' ability to contribute.

Example: Host a mini "skills clinic" on using collaborative tools or policy advocacy.
- **Embedding Resilience Practices:**
 - Encourage shared leadership (rotating facilitation, peer-led sessions) so engagement does not depend on one or two leaders.
 - Foster a culture of trust and openness where members can raise concerns or suggest changes without fear of disrupting the network.

Example: A youth advocacy network noticed declining attendance at monthly calls. After polling members, they switched to shorter calls plus a shared online update board — participation rose by 40%.

Adaptivity is key to strengthening resilience: engagement doesn't depend on one leader or one format, it's embedded in how the network operates.

Conclusion

For members' joint work to produce concrete results, a network needs **well-designed internal processes that serve as a bridge between membership and impact**. **Strategic planning** should be participatory while also respecting members' capacities. A clearly formulated **action plan** ensures that priorities do not remain only on paper. It **translates strategy into concrete steps** and clarifies who is responsible for what.

Members are more likely to engage actively when the network offers **different formats of collaboration** with varying levels of time commitment and responsibility. Opportunities to engage should not arise randomly or at the last minute; they should follow a **predictable rhythm** that members can plan for. Planning and process design should be **grounded in concrete data**.

Evaluating engagement does not have to be complex, and it can provide valuable insights for the network. If a network does not regularly reflect on how internal collaboration is evolving and how members' needs are changing, it risks gradually losing relevance. **The ability to respond to change** is therefore essential for the network's long-term resilience and impact. In this way, members' collective efforts can lead to results that individual organizations would struggle to achieve on their own.

Questions for Your Reflection

- Are you asking members for input in ways that feel meaningful and time-efficient?
- Can members clearly see the network's priorities and where they can plug in?
- Do you have a predictable annual rhythm — or are you constantly improvising?
- Do you measure progress in a way that supports learning, not bureaucracy?

Worksheets

Use these worksheets for group reflections within your network. Suitable occasions might include interactive sessions at the general assembly, a retreat, strategic planning sessions, or other member, leadership, or working group meetings.

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2. 2–3 Strategic Priorities

List up to three priorities for the next period (e.g. 6–12 months). Keep them realistic and specific enough to guide action.

- Priority 1:

- Priority 2:

- Priority 3 (optional):

3. Target Audiences

Identify the key audiences your network seeks to influence, support, or engage.

4. Success Signals (What will tell us we are making progress?)

Describe what visible change would indicate progress. Focus on observable signals rather than abstract ambitions.

5. Ways of Working (How do we collaborate?)

Clarify how you will work together to implement this strategy. Focus for example on who will make decisions and how, what will be your communication rhythm, how will you coordinate the work and how can members with different capacities contribute (feedback, working groups,...).

6. Review Moment (When will we adapt?)

Define when and how you will review this strategy.

Review date or milestone:

How will you assess progress and adjust if needed?

Questions for discussion:

- Are your priorities realistic given your current capacity?
- Is the strategy clear enough to guide everyday decisions?
- Would a new member easily understand it?
- Who might disagree with this direction and why?

Example

A national network of organizations working on civic space and rule of law wants to clarify its direction for the next year. The network has 32 members, including advocacy NGOs, legal experts, and umbrella organizations.

1. Purpose (Why do we exist?)

To protect and strengthen civic space by coordinating civil society voices and promoting enabling legal and policy conditions.

2. 2–3 Strategic Priorities (What will we focus on?)

- **Priority 1:** Improve the quality and visibility of civil society input into national legislative processes.
- **Priority 2:** Strengthen mutual support and rapid coordination in response to threats to civic space.
- **Priority 3:** Build the capacity of members to engage effectively in policy dialogue.

3. Target Audiences

- National ministries and parliamentarians
- Media and public opinion leaders
- EU institutions and international partners
- Member organizations (as internal beneficiaries)

4. Success Signals (What will tell us we are making progress?)

- At least three coordinated joint statements submitted to legislative consultations.
- Two instances where member input is reflected in policy drafts.
- Increased participation in coordination calls (at least 50% of members represented across the year).
- Positive member feedback on the usefulness of coordination and rapid response.

5. Ways of Working (How do we collaborate?)

- A core coordination group prepares draft positions, validated by wider membership.
- Clear participation pathways: light (feedback), medium (working group), high (lead role).
- Monthly coordination call with structured agenda and short follow-up notes.
- Transparent communication and shared document repository.

6. Review Moment (When will we adapt?)

Mid-year review in June and final review in December. Progress will be assessed based on participation data, policy outcomes, and short member feedback survey. If capacity becomes overstretched, priorities may be reduced from three to two.

2. Create a Simple Action Plan with Clear Roles

A practical tool to convert strategy into realistic delivery.

This worksheet helps you **translate strategic priorities into concrete activities with clear responsibilities**. The goal is not to create a detailed project plan, but to ensure realistic delivery and balanced participation. You can use this matrix to **clarify who does what and by when**.

Instructions:

- Choose one of your current strategic priorities
- Identify **3–6 key activities** that are realistic within your current capacity and that will contribute to the strategic goal.
- For each activity, define a clear deliverable (what will be produced) and timeline (by when).
- Assign roles using the RACI logic (Responsible, Accountable, Contributors, Informed) and be careful about not overloading the same actors.
- Include at least one light-touch participation activity (e.g. feedback, endorsement, short input) so that members with limited capacity can still contribute.
- The final action plan should feel realistic, coordinated, and manageable.

Strategic priority (in one sentence):

Questions for discussion:

- Are responsibilities distributed fairly?
- Are you trying to do too much?
- Are participation pathways accessible for different capacity levels?
- Where could things get stuck? What are you relying on that might delay or block this activity?

Activities **Deliverable** **Timeline** **Responsible** **Accountable** **Contributors** **Informed**

Deliverable (What will be produced?) **Timeline** (By when?) **Owner** (R – Responsible) – Who leads the work?
Accountable (A) – Who ensures it is completed and aligned with strategy? **Contributors** (C) – Who actively supports delivery **Informed** (I) – Who is kept updated?

Example

Strategic priority: Strengthen joint policy influence on inclusive education reform.

Activities	Deliverable	Timeline	Responsible	Accountable	Contributors	Informed
Draft policy brief	6-page policy brief submitted to Ministry	April	Working Group Lead	Steering Committee	3 member organizations	All members
Consultation call	90-minute online consultation to validate key messages	March	Network coordinator	Working Group Lead	Interested members	All members
Parliamentary outreach	5 bilateral meetings with MPs	May - June	Network Advocacy Lead	Steering Committee	2 expert organizations	All members

3. Track the Engagement Payoff for Members

This worksheet helps you **assess what your network and your members gain from participation**. It supports evidence-based reflection and helps you **decide what to strengthen, adjust, or discontinue**.

Instructions:

- 1. Complete this review sheet **once per quarter**. Avoid tracking constantly – focus on periodic reflection.
- 2. Keep indicators simple and manageable. Use data you already collect where possible.
- 3. Combine numbers (participation, outputs) with qualitative insight (stories of change).
- 4. Present the results as a short **“impact snapshot”** to members – ideally in one page.
- 5. Use the findings to inform decisions for the next quarter.

This tool is most useful when it supports learning and adaptation, not just formal reporting. When filling it out, also reflect on whether you are measuring what members care about.

1. Engagement Indicators (How are members participating?)

Examples: attendance rates, number of active contributors, working group participation, response rates to consultations opportunities.

2. Output Indicators (What did the network produce?)

Examples: policy briefs, events, joint statements, coordinated actions.

3. Outcome Signals (What changed as a result?)

Examples: policy wins, new partnerships, increased visibility, improved member capacity.

4. Two Stories of Value: Describe two short examples of what changed for a member or for the network thanks to the network’s work. Focus on concrete, lived experience rather than abstract impact.

5. Stop / Start / Continue

Based on the data and stories, identify:

- What should we stop?

- What should we start?

- What should we continue or scale?

Example

Engagement Indicators:

- Webinar participation increased by 20% compared to last quarter (average 35 to 42 participants).
- Two new organizations joined the thematic working group.
- Response rate to consultation drafts remained low (only 5 out of 28 members provided input).

Output Indicators:

- 1 policy brief submitted to the Ministry.
- 2 coordination calls held (average attendance: 12 members).
- 1 practical advocacy toolkit published.

Outcome Signals:

- One policy recommendation from the brief was incorporated into draft legislation.
- A new partnership formed between two member organizations following a coordination call.
- Three members reported using the advocacy toolkit in their local work.

Two Stories of Value

- **Story 1:** A small regional NGO used the advocacy toolkit to structure a meeting with their regional authority and successfully secured follow-up dialogue.
- **Story 2:** Two organizations that connected during a coordination call are now preparing a joint funding proposal.

Stop / Start / Continue

Based on the indicators and stories above, the network identifies the following adjustments for the next quarter:

- **Stop:** Publishing lengthy consultation drafts without a clear summary and deadline (low response rate suggests the format discourages engagement).
- **Start:** Testing shorter consultation summaries with three clear guiding questions to increase member response rates.

Continue / Scale:

- Webinars (participation increased by 20%).
- Toolkit production (evidence of real-world use by members).
- Coordination calls (they led to partnership formation).

Key Resources

FHI 360 – Supporting Civil Society Networks

Practical guidance on planning and managing civil society networks, including governance, coordination, and sustainability considerations.

Available at: <https://www.fhi360.org/wp-content/uploads/drupal/documents/Supporting%20Civil%20Society%20Networks%20.pdf>

USDN – Network Governance & Leadership Structure Worksheet

A practical worksheet developed by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) to support core governance design decisions, including purpose, objectives, roles, and operating principles.

Available at: https://www.usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/usdn_network_practice_2_-_governance_-_worksheet.pdf

EPDN – Handout 5: Understanding CSO Networks

A concise primer explaining the purpose, roles, and functions of civil society networks. Useful for grounding strategic and governance discussions.

Available at: https://www.epdn.org/Uploads/Training%201%20Handout%205_%20Understanding%20CSO%20networks_4c2f.pdf

