
Europiamo's Network Strategy 2024



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1. Introduction – Why Networks (and nonprofit) Need Strategies

European youth work has long relied on the idea of partnership. Projects are designed in consortiums, networks emerge around shared priorities, and collaboration is celebrated as a principle of good practice. Yet beneath this rhetoric lies a recurring fragility: when a project ends, so often does the cooperation that sustained it. The people remain committed, but the structure that held them together disappears.

For small and medium-sized youth organisations, those that depend on short-term grants and voluntary energy, this fragmentation is more than inconvenient; it limits their capacity to learn, grow, and influence their surroundings. Each new project starts from zero, with little institutional memory of what came before. Over time, this creates what we at Europiamo call the loop of beginnings: repeated starts, few continuities. Or worse, the so called "[Nonprofit Starvation Cycle](#)".

The Europiamo Network Strategy 2024 was designed as an answer to that problem. It is a deliberate attempt to turn episodic collaboration into an enduring community of practice. Rather than describing yet another list of activities, the strategy outlines how a network can stay alive between projects, how relationships can mature into shared capacities, and how young people and youth organisations can learn together across time and geography.

This document is produced in the framework of Connect 4 Impact (KA210-YOU-260AEE9E), an Erasmus+ Small-Scale Partnership exploring new ways for youth organisations to cooperate and strengthen their internal structures. The strategy therefore serves a dual purpose: it is both the operational backbone of Europiamo's own community work in 2024 and a transferable model that other organisations may adapt to design or refine their networks.

The reasoning behind it draws on contemporary literature on nonprofit strategy and impact management. Texts such as John M. Bryson's *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, the Bridgespan Group's studies on leadership in the nonprofit sector, and contributions and other literature from institutions such as the Stanford Social Innovation Review have all influenced Europiamo's approach. They share a common insight: in mission-driven environments, strategy is not about control but about learning. For a youth network, this means building the habit of reflection, continuously asking what value the network creates for its members, how that value is produced, and how it can be sustained.

From this perspective, the network strategy becomes less a management tool and more a practice of collective attention. It helps members decide what deserves their energy, what to stop doing, and how to align individual efforts with shared goals. It introduces rhythm (meetings, training, reflection sessions) that anchor the community's learning process.

2024 offered Europiamo a concrete laboratory for this practice. Through Connect 4 Impact, several key initiatives, such as Simple Project Writing training programme, and the "Agorà di Europiamo" reflection spaces, or the national Toolfair, were implemented as strategic experiments in engagement. Each was used to test how structured activities could coexist with spontaneity, and how community participation could become part of organisational design rather than an afterthought.

This report tells that story: not of a perfect model, but of an evolving framework that translates the theory of strategic nonprofit management into the daily realities of youth work. It is written for peers, organisations that, like Europiamo, are learning how to sustain collaboration when projects end and how to make strategy something that people can live, not just write down.

2. How the Strategy Was Built

The Network Strategy 2024 was not written in an office or imposed by a board; it emerged gradually, from conversations, experiments, and moments of collective frustration. In many ways, it is the most accurate reflection of how Europiamo learns as an organisation: through dialogue, observation, and iteration.

A Participatory Process by Design

The process began in early 2023, when the network had grown beyond what informal coordination could sustain. And also the general strategy developed in 2020 was about to come to an end in 2024.

More than forty organisations and dozens of young people were participating in Europiamo's activities, each with different levels of experience, geographical reach, and expectations. The team recognised that without a shared framework, enthusiasm could easily turn into noise. The question was not how to grow, but how to stay connected while growing.

Instead of drafting a plan and asking members to comment, we chose a slower route: to build the strategy with the network, not for it. Throughout the autumn of 2023, members were invited to contribute through open consultations held during various activities online and in presence, follow-up meetings, and targeted focus groups in the regional sub-communities of Lazio, Piemonte, Campania, and Puglia. The process was facilitated by the newly appointed Community Manager, whose role was to mediate between diverse perspectives and translate feedback into actionable insights.

The conversations were candid. Some members expressed fatigue at too many meetings; others wanted clearer value from participation. The emerging picture was complex but consistent: people wanted more connection, better coordination, and less bureaucracy. This kind of feedback required Europiamo to balance its instinct for inclusion with the need for prioritisation.

The team drew inspiration from the literature on non profit strategy which encourages organisations to align planning processes with their available energy rather than ideal scenarios. The message resonated: a realistic, adaptive plan is more valuable than a perfect one that no one has time to use.

Radical Honesty as Method

The cornerstone of the process was what we at Europiamo calls “Radical Honesty”. It began as an internal motto and evolved into a genuine governance principle. The idea is simple: transparency about limits and challenges builds trust more effectively than optimism alone.

During the consultations, the team openly discussed the organisation’s constraints, limited funding for network facilitation, reliance on volunteer time, and uneven regional engagement. These admissions did not weaken the network; they humanised it. Members responded with more realistic expectations and a stronger sense of co-responsibility.

In practical terms, this meant setting fewer priorities and committing to visible follow-up. As one youth worker put it during an Agorà meeting, “*If we only do three things this year, let’s make sure everyone knows what they are.*”

From Dialogue to Structure

The participatory phase produced a rich map of needs and opportunities. Translating that into an actionable strategy required synthesis. With guidance from the Community Director, the lead of the internal team of volunteers supporting the community, we clustered the feedback into three recurring themes:

- The need for co-design spaces to develop and implement project ideas together;
- The desire for growth and development, especially around funding literacy and Erasmus+ capacity;
- The aspiration for representation, to make collective voices heard in policy and programme debates.

These became the three strategic pillars of the 2024 strategy: Co-Design and Collaboration, Growth and Development, and Representation and Advocacy. Each would later translate into specific activities, many of which found support through Connect4Impact.

Strategy as a Living Practice

One of the most consequential decisions came not from what was written, but from what was changed. Instead of using a static multi-year plan, Europiamo adopted the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) framework to set, review, and adapt goals every six months.

This shift was inspired by performance management approaches in the social-impact sector, which emphasises “strategic learning cycles” over traditional evaluation. The OKR method allowed Europiamo to combine flexibility with discipline: objectives articulate intent, while key results provide concrete signals of progress.

Twice a year, these OKRs are discussed publicly with the community. Successes are celebrated; delays are analysed collectively. This rhythm of reflection keeps strategy alive, less a document to be filed, more a shared practice of direction-setting.

Learning through Connect4Impact

The Connect4Impact project played a catalytic role in this process. It offered both a European perspective and the resources to test new ideas. Activities like the “Agorà di Europiamo” (monthly reflection spaces) and the National Toolfair became real-time experiments in participatory design.

Through these activities, Europiamo learned two practical lessons that shaped the final version of the strategy:

- Consistency matters more than innovation. The network's cohesion grew not through new formats, but through the predictable rhythm of existing ones.
- Facilitation is a skill, not an afterthought. When meetings are well-designed, people show up; when they aren't, even the most committed members drift away.

By mid-2024, the organisation had developed a stronger internal language around collaboration, clearer boundaries between enthusiasm and capacity, and a more realistic sense of what it means to “build a network”.

A Culture of Reflection

What distinguishes this process from typical project-based planning is not the structure, but the ethos. Strategy at Europiamo is closer to a conversation than a report. It relies on collective intelligence, assumes imperfection, and treats feedback as raw material for improvement.

The resulting document, therefore, is both a snapshot of where the network stood in 2024 and a framework for continuous learning. It does not claim finality; it invites iteration. It's an effort to make cooperation not a temporary condition but a long-term capacity of the youth sector.

3. The Europiamo Model – How a Network Organises Itself

Understanding the Network as an Ecosystem

When Europiamo began to map how its network actually worked, the picture looked more like an ecosystem than an organisation chart. There were youth organisations with different sizes and histories, small informal groups, individual youth workers, and local volunteers, all interacting in different rhythms. Some joined for training, others for partnerships, others simply to stay connected to the European field.

Trying to control this diversity would have been impossible. Instead, the team started to think ecologically: what conditions allow a network like this to thrive? The answer, they found, was not more rules, but better connections. Strategy, therefore, became a process of designing connections, between people, between ideas, and between opportunities.

Our model rests on three layers that together form its operating logic: people, spaces, and tools. Each layer supports the others and helps maintain coherence in a network that is intentionally decentralised.

People: The Human Infrastructure

At the centre of the system are the people who make coordination tangible: facilitators, connectors, and learners.

The network is supported by two roles introduced in 2023 and consolidated through Connect4Impact:

- The *Community Manager* is the operational heart of the network. She connects local sub-communities, gathers feedback, facilitates collaboration between members, and ensures that no organisation feels left behind. Her task is part logistical, part relational. A bridge between everyday needs and long-term goals.
- The *Community Director* acts as a translator between the operational level and governance. He monitors the coherence of the whole, ensures quality standards across initiatives, and guards against the drift that can occur when multiple projects coexist.

These roles respond to a common challenge in youth networks: the assumption that “community manages itself.” In practice, unstructured collaboration often dissolves into silence. The introduction of professional facilitation restored rhythm and accountability without suffocating participation.

However, facilitation also creates new tensions. The more active the facilitators, the greater the risk of members becoming dependent on them. Europiamo’s answer has been to gradually share facilitation with local sub-communities, encouraging distributed ownership.

Spaces: Where Participation Happens

If people are the network’s bloodstream, spaces are its beating heart. Europiamo’s strategy organises participation around a set of recurring spaces (some online, some in person) that together create rhythm, predictability, and moments of reflection.

The Agorà of Europiamo - A monthly online conversation open to all members, the Agorà focuses on themes derived from the European Youth Goals and the lived experience of youth participation. It is not a webinar, but a facilitated dialogue where organisations reflect collectively on challenges in their communities.

During Connect4Impact, the Agorà became a testing ground for participatory facilitation methods, from open questions to storytelling exercises. Its main outcome was not a document, but a culture of regular reflection.

Town Halls - Shorter online meetings provide updates on Europiamo’s ongoing projects, calls for participation, and opportunities. They are designed for transparency rather than

decision-making: a place where members can see how the network evolves and how their input has shaped it.

Co-Design Tables - These are temporary working groups created around specific funding opportunities or thematic challenges. They bring together organisations interested in submitting Erasmus+ or ESC proposals, allowing for peer learning and shared risk-taking. The method evolved from simple brainstorming sessions into structured co-design labs, supported by templates and follow-up mentoring.

The National Toolfair - The Toolfair is Europiamo's flagship annual event, a two-day national gathering for youth organisations and young people to exchange practices, methods, and tools. In the 2024 edition, supported by Connect4Impact, we managed to involve also international participants from Projekta Malta, and the initiative moved beyond the traditional conference format: each workshop was facilitated by practitioners from the network, and there were more than 10 different practices relevant to the field of youth work that were presented. And that were later shared through the network's internal channels, creating a small but growing library of field-tested tools.

The Bootcamp - Held once a year, the Bootcamp is an intensive week of project writing and team-building. Participants live together, co-write proposals, and build partnerships across regions. The format has proved essential for cultivating trust: collaboration, it turns out, grows faster around a shared deadline than a shared ideology. This is part of the bigger learning path of Simple Project Writing, it's a blended course open to Europiamo's members that support the participants in learning and practising how to write an erasmus+ project in the field of youth.

Local Sub-Communities - Europiamo currently sustains four active sub-communities in Piemonte, Lazio, Campania, and Puglia. These groups organise local events, workshops, and advocacy initiatives, often in partnership with municipalities or schools. They represent the network's decentralised face, a place where to continue the relationship building in person, and where European youth policy meets local reality.

Tools: The Communication Backbone

Running a participatory network is as much about infrastructure as about ideas. Without accessible and reliable tools, enthusiasm evaporates into disconnected chat threads and lost documents.

Our tools in 2025 are:

- WhatsApp Communities serve as the main platform for everyday communication. Divided by region and theme, they allow members to share updates, invitations, and questions in real time.
- A monthly internal newsletter summarises what happened, what is coming next, and where members can get involved. It also includes a “resource of the month” (a practice, toolkit, or article relevant to youth work) and short highlights celebrating members' achievements.

- Google Drive hosts shared documents, calendars, and the growing archive of practice cards produced during training and events.

Slack, initially tested as an alternative, proved less inclusive and was discontinued; participation dropped quickly.

This decision to prioritise simplicity is deliberate. We believe in the principle that tools should reduce friction, not create sophistication. The aim is not digital transformation but communication continuity, that is ensuring that every member, regardless of their organisation's size or technological literacy, can access and contribute to the network's life.

Principles in Practice

From the outside, Europiamo's system might appear lightweight. But behind this apparent simplicity lies a set of strong organising principles that guide how the network learns and grows:

Radical Honesty: Clear communication about capacities, priorities, and limits keeps trust intact. Members are regularly updated not only on successes but also on delays or difficulties.

Participation as Method: Members are involved in designing, evaluating, and evolving activities. Every space includes time for feedback and co-creation.

Light Structure, Deep Relationships: Minimal bureaucracy allows facilitators to focus on quality interactions rather than reporting. The depth comes from continuity, not paperwork.

Strategic Learning: Every event and process includes a reflection loop: what worked, what didn't, and what will be adjusted next time.

These principles translate the organisation's strategic thinking into practice.

From Structure to Culture

Over time, these mechanisms have shaped not only how the network operates but how its members think. Organisations that once saw Europiamo as a project coordinator now perceive it as a platform, a shared resource for knowledge and relationships. The staff themselves have shifted from managing activities to facilitating connections.

Still, this balance is fragile. Participation fluctuates, and maintaining quality across regions remains difficult. But the architecture gives something rare in youth networks: a memory. It ensures that when people change, the learning remains.

This is, perhaps, the core insight for all the organisations trying this path: *A network becomes sustainable not when it stops changing, but when it learns how to remember.*

4. Strategic Pillars and Key Activities (2024)

When Europiamo's network strategy was drafted, the community insisted that the plan should remain simple enough to remember.

Three pillars were chosen not because they captured everything the network did, but because they represented what members cared most about: working together, learning together, and being heard together.

In practice, these pillars became the framework through which Europiamo tested, refined, and scaled its approach to community engagement throughout 2024.

Pillar I: Co-Design and Collaboration

Purpose and Context

The first pillar addresses the network's oldest tension: collaboration is easy to celebrate, hard to sustain. Many small youth organisations in Italy operate in parallel, each with limited administrative capacity, project-writing skills, and access to international partnerships. The Co-Design and Collaboration pillar sought to make partnership itself a shared competence, to teach members how to cooperate before asking them to do so.

Key Mechanisms

The Community Manager's Brokerage Role - The newly formalised Community Manager (Sara Ienco) began systematically mapping the skills, interests, and funding needs of each member organisation. This process, supported by Connect4Impact resources, allowed Europiamo to identify potential synergies between local actors, turning sporadic partnerships into more predictable collaborations.

Co-Design Tables - Introduced in spring 2024, the Co-Design Tables evolved from informal brainstorming calls into facilitated workshops where members worked on real Erasmus+ and ESC project ideas. The format used a structured "idea canvas" developed internally: members had to describe not only their project concepts but also the value they offered others.

The learning curve was steep. While participation was high at the start, fewer organisations followed through to proposal submission. Still, several concrete outcomes emerged:

- Two youth participation projects were developed collaboratively (one led by Europiamo, one by a regional partner).
- At least five local partnerships continued meeting after the tables ended, showing that the real impact was relational rather than procedural.

The Bootcamp - The Bootcamp, held each summer, condensed the co-design logic into an immersive week of project writing. It brought together about 25 participants from across Italy to live and work together on new ideas.

The main discovery was that collaboration flourishes when people share time, not just files. Many participants described the week as "a crash course in collective problem-solving,"

producing not only draft proposals but also friendships that later translated into operational partnerships.

Lessons Learned

The pillar confirmed that co-design requires both structure and slack. Without facilitation, discussions drift; with too much, creativity dies. Future iterations will keep the facilitation light but consistent, combining clear templates with informal mentoring.

Another insight was that collaboration cannot rely only on opportunities (funding calls), it needs a culture of reciprocity.

Pillar II: Growth and Development

Purpose and Context

The second pillar grew from a simple observation: if collaboration is to be meaningful, members must first have something to bring to the table. In 2023, several small organisations joined Europiamo because they admired its European reach but lacked the tools to participate effectively in programmes such as Erasmus+ or the European Solidarity Corps.

The Growth and Development pillar aimed to change this dynamic. Rather than offering generic training, Europiamo sought to create a learning ecosystem: a set of recurring opportunities where members could strengthen their capacity, exchange practices, and learn from one another.

Key Mechanisms and Activities

Simple Project Writing (SPW) - The Simple Project Writing course became one of the signature activity of Europiamo. Designed as an open, modular online training, SPW helped youth workers and youth understand the Erasmus+ logic, interpret calls, and design realistic proposals.

What distinguished SPW from typical webinars was its community-based pedagogy: participants worked in teams, shared drafts, and received feedback from peers. By the end of the cycle (and thanks also to the bootcamp), several organisations had submitted or prepared applications with minimal external support.

The course also provided a valuable dataset for Europiamo's internal learning: it revealed how difficult it still is for small organisations to navigate bureaucratic language, and how much they benefit from peer mentoring rather than formal instruction.

The Agorà of Europiamo - The monthly Agorà sessions, launched under Connect4Impact, evolved into a regular reflection space open to all network members. Each meeting focused on one of the European Youth Goals and explored it through stories, experiences, and concrete actions.

Over time, the Agorà became an unexpected pillar of community engagement: a place where members could connect beyond project deadlines and rediscover the civic purpose of

their work. Many participants later described these sessions as “the moments that remind us why we do what we do.”

National Toolfair - The 2024 Toolfair, supported by Connect4Impact, was the network’s first large-scale event after the pandemic. Over two days, more than 20 participants (youth workers, volunteers, and partner organisations) shared methodologies, from SNAC practices to youth policy process for rural areas.

Partnership with Assifero - In 2024, Europiamo also began a collaboration with Assifero, the Italian association of philanthropic foundations, to explore how youth organisations can access private funding and diversify their sustainability models. The early stages were exploratory, but they opened a new line of reflection on the role of philanthropy in youth work, a topic rarely discussed in the sector.

Lessons Learned

The Growth and Development pillar demonstrated that capacity building works best when it is rhythmic rather than event-based. A mix of monthly, quarterly, and annual learning opportunities kept members engaged without overloading them.

It also confirmed that training and community-building cannot be separated: people learn faster when they feel part of something. The Agorà and Toolfair, though different in scale, both achieved this by blending learning with belonging.

Finally, the collaboration with Assifero pointed to an emerging strategic question for Europiamo and its peers: how can youth organisations remain mission-driven while diversifying their funding base? This question is likely to shape the next iteration of the strategy and discussions.

Pillar III: Representation and Advocacy

Purpose and Context

The third pillar was, and remains, the least structured of the three, not by design but by nature. Advocacy in youth work is unpredictable; it responds to political cycles, policy changes, and windows of opportunity that cannot be planned in advance.

Still, members wanted a way to coordinate their voices when issues affecting the sector arise, whether it be Erasmus+ reforms, national youth policy, or civic-space restrictions. The Representation and Advocacy pillar therefore aimed to build a responsive, lightweight system rather than a permanent campaign.

Key Mechanisms

Rapid Consultation Process - Drawing on lessons from previous years, Europiamo introduced an informal but replicable process for collective positioning: when a relevant issue appears, the Community Manager circulates a short survey to all members, gathers responses within 72 hours, and convenes an open online discussion.

If consensus emerges, a one-page position note is drafted and shared publicly, often co-signed by other networks. This approach was first used in 2024 to respond to the European Commission's new limit on the number of Erasmus+ applications per organisation.

Erasmus+ Coalition Italy - During 2024, Europiamo co-initiated Erasmus+ Coalition Italy, a national advocacy network promoting a stronger and more inclusive Erasmus+ programme for the next EU budget cycle. The coalition became the main channel through which Europiamo practised external advocacy, connecting local youth actors to European-level dialogue.

Dialogue with Decision Makers - Representatives of the network participated in several policy events and conferences, including meetings with the Italian National Agency and members of the European Parliament. The emphasis was less on visibility and more on representation: ensuring that the perspectives of small youth organisations are heard in conversations usually dominated by larger NGOs.

Lessons Learned

This pillar exposed the paradox of youth advocacy: everyone supports it in theory, but few have time to do it in practice.

Europiamo's flexible, low-barrier approach worked reasonably well, but it also revealed structural limits, particularly the lack of resources for sustained policy work.

Despite its imperfections, the pillar had one clear impact: it helped normalise the idea that advocacy is part of youth work, not an extra. By discussing policy alongside training and co-design, the network began to see itself as a civic actor, not just a service provider.

Interactions Between the Pillars

In reality, the three pillars are less separate compartments than interlocking processes.

- Co-Design creates relationships;
- Growth and Development strengthens the skills that make those relationships productive;
- Representation and Advocacy gives them voice.

When these processes align, the network behaves like a collective actor rather than a loose coalition.

What emerged is not a perfect system but a rhythm, a cadence of interaction that makes collaboration habitual.

5. What We Learned - Reflections and Challenges

By the end of 2024, Europiamo had become a visibly stronger and more connected network. Yet, perhaps the most valuable achievement was less tangible: a deeper understanding of what it takes to make a network actually work. Strategy, as the team came to realise, is not a product of intelligence alone; it is an act of maintenance. It requires care, repetition, and a willingness to confront the uncomfortable truths of collective work.

The lessons that follow are not neat conclusions but recurring patterns, the kind of insights that appear slowly, in meetings, in missed deadlines, in unexpected moments of collaboration.

Continuity Requires Intention

The first and most obvious lesson is that continuity does not happen by itself. Even the most motivated community will drift if there are no recurring structures to hold it together. The Agorà di Europiamo and the internal newsletter proved crucial in this regard: not because of their content, but because of their rhythm. Every month, something happens, a space opens, a message arrives, people remember that they are part of something.

This principle may sound trivial, but it marks the difference between a project community and a network. The former peaks around activities and dissolves afterwards; the latter survives because it cultivates predictable routines of connection.

In strategic terms, this means allocating time and resources not only to create new initiatives but to sustain the ones that already work.

Facilitation Is Not Administration

The second lesson concerns a persistent misunderstanding in the youth sector: that managing a network is a bureaucratic task. In reality, it is a facilitative one.

When Europiamo introduced the Community Manager role, many expected a classic administrative coordinator. Instead, they found someone who asked questions, linked people, and encouraged dialogue.

Over time, this role transformed from “managing participation” to curating relationships. The distinction is subtle but decisive: facilitation is about energy, not control.

The challenge, of course, is sustainability. Facilitation requires time, and time requires funding and this is something that project-based frameworks rarely accommodate.

This remains one of Europiamo’s most significant strategic questions: how to finance the relational work that makes collaboration possible. Connect4Impact offered a rare opportunity to fund that work directly; replicating this in national or local contexts will require new models, perhaps in partnership with philanthropic actors such as Assifero.

Participation Is an Art of Balance

In 2024, Europiamo learned that participation can be both a strength and a trap. The network’s open culture invites everyone to contribute, but this inclusivity also generates overload. Meetings multiply, messages flood in, and decision-making slows.

To manage this, the team began experimenting with what they called bounded participation: keeping processes open but giving each space a clear purpose, timeline, and follow-up. This discipline reduced fatigue while preserving openness.

The insight here echoes the literature on collaborative governance: participation without structure breeds confusion; structure without participation breeds apathy. The art lies in

balancing the two. This translates into a practical takeaway: before expanding participation, ensure that facilitation capacity grows at the same pace.

Learning Is the Real Outcome

One of Europiamo's most meaningful shifts in 2024 was from measuring activities to documenting learning. The adoption of OKRs encouraged this shift by forcing teams to articulate not just what they planned to do, but what they hoped to understand.

Every activity always concluded with a short debrief asking:

- What did we expect to happen?
- What actually happened?
- What will we do differently next time?

Over time, these micro-reflections accumulated into a culture of continuous learning. As one youth worker put it during a follow-up meeting: “We no longer need an external voice to tell us what we learned, we know it because we have talked about it.”

The Limits of Volunteer Energy

The vitality of Europiamo's network rests on an uncomfortable paradox: it runs largely on passion, not payroll.

While this enthusiasm is our organisation's greatest strength, it is also its Achilles' heel. Sustained engagement often depends on individuals' personal availability, which fluctuates.

This is not unique to Europiamo; it is a structural condition of the youth sector. Yet recognising it openly, practising what the “Radical Honesty” we spoke about, has helped manage expectations and prevent burnout.

The team now explicitly distinguishes between voluntary and strategic commitments, ensuring that unpaid efforts align with personal motivation rather than institutional need.

Still, the issue points to a systemic gap: European funding frameworks rarely support the maintenance work that networks require between projects. For real sustainability, programmes like Erasmus+ might need to rethink how they value the invisible labour of connection.

Strategy as a Practice of Care

Perhaps the most profound insight to emerge from 2024 is that strategic planning, at its best, is not a bureaucratic exercise but a practice of care.

Care for members: ensuring they are informed, listened to, and connected.

Care for the mission: ensuring that decisions align with purpose rather than convenience.

And care for time: recognising that impact unfolds slowly, through relationships that need continuity to grow.

This perspective reframes what “strategic capacity” means in a youth organisation. It is not about adopting corporate tools but about cultivating strategic empathy, the ability to sense what the network needs at any given moment and to respond accordingly.

The Open Questions

The 2024 journey left several questions unanswered, not failures, but frontiers for the next phase:

- How can networks formalise shared governance without losing flexibility?
- What is the right ratio between professional coordination and voluntary initiative?
- Can youth networks create hybrid funding models that sustain relational work beyond project cycles?
- How can learning from one year be systematically transferred to the next generation of members?

6. From Model to Practice – A Replication Guide for Other Organisations

One of the ambitions of Connect4Impact was not only to strengthen each partner’s internal system but also to document how others might do the same.

Europiamo’s network strategy offers a model that is neither prescriptive nor technical; it is a collection of tested habits and structural choices that make collective work sustainable.

What follows is a synthesis of those practices and a series of guiding questions for organisations wishing to build or renew their own network strategies.

The Essential Ingredients

After more than a year of experimentation, three elements proved indispensable for sustaining a membership-based community:

Dedicated Facilitation

Networks do not self-organise. Someone must hold the space, a Community Manager, coordinator, or rotating facilitator. This person’s job is to listen, connect, and make participation easy, not to produce documents.

Ask yourself: Who in our organisation holds the invisible work of connection, and how can we support them sustainably?

Rhythm and Predictability

Engagement thrives on rhythm. Monthly meetings, newsletters, and seasonal events provide continuity. Predictability does not reduce flexibility; it gives members the stability to improvise within a known frame.

Ask yourself: What are the recurring moments that keep our community alive? Are they too few, too many, or poorly timed?

Clarity of Purpose

Each activity must answer the question “Why are we meeting?” Members join when they see personal and collective value. Strategy helps by defining the few priorities that matter most.

Ask yourself: If we could only achieve three outcomes this year, what would they be, and who would care about them?

Designing Your Own Network Strategy

A replicable network strategy is less a template than a process that guides organisations from conversation to coordination. Based on Europiamo’s experience, this process can unfold through six practical steps:

Listen Before You Plan Conduct a lightweight consultation with members. Ask what they need, what frustrates them, and what success would look like for them. Don’t aim for consensus; aim for patterns.

Name the Principles Identify the values that will guide collaboration. At Europiamo we used “Radical Honesty,” “Participation as Method,” and “Light Structure, Deep Relationships.” Write them down. Refer to them often.

Define Three Pillars Keep it simple. Choose three domains that capture your community’s work (e.g. Co-Design, Learning, Advocacy). Each pillar should have 2-3 core activities and clear expected outcomes.

Assign Roles Decide who will coordinate what. If resources are limited, rotate facilitation. Formal roles create accountability without hierarchy.

Build the Infrastructure - Choose tools that everyone can use (WhatsApp, Drive, shared calendars). Favour accessibility over sophistication. A simple, active channel is worth more than an elegant but silent one.

Review and Adapt Regularly - Adopt a rhythm of reflection: quarterly check-ins, OKR reviews, or brief feedback loops. Keep a living document; never let the strategy become a relic.

These steps can be implemented incrementally. The key is to start small and design for iteration.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Replication does not mean reproduction. Every ecosystem has its own constraints. Still, a few warning signs are universal:

- Over-Designing the Plan - Networks collapse under the weight of overambitious strategies. If it cannot be remembered, it cannot be implemented.
- Underestimating Facilitation - Assuming that community management can be done “on the side” is a recipe for disengagement.
- Ignoring Culture - Tools and meetings are secondary; what sustains a network is trust. Invest in transparent communication and shared ownership.
- Treating Evaluation as an Audit - Use reflection for learning, not punishment.

7. Closing Reflection - Networks as Living Systems

This story is not that of an organisation becoming more efficient; it is the story of a community learning how to stay connected while growing more complex.

In that sense, Connect4Impact has acted less as a funding opportunity and more as an accelerator of maturity. It allowed the network to pause, observe itself, and translate intuition into structure.

What distinguishes this experience from many short-term European projects is its insistence on internal coherence. The team learned that sustainable impact begins inside the organisation, in how people collaborate, share information, and make decisions.

Only then can external partnerships and advocacy become credible.