
Europiamo's Members' Needs

A Participatory Journey in Strategic Planning (2023-2024)



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Between 2023 and 2024, Europiamo embarked on a two-year participatory process to redesign its organisational strategy. What began as a simple update to its 2020-2024 strategic plan evolved into a deep listening exercise that reshaped how the organisation understands its community, its purpose, and its limits.

The process followed the [Strategic Planning in Nonprofits framework developed by NonprofitWA](#), structured around six iterative phases - Prepare, Listen, Envision, Plan, Execute, and Evaluate. For Europiamo, this model offered both discipline and flexibility: a structure robust enough to hold a community-wide conversation, yet open enough to adapt to the realities of a volunteer-driven organisation.

This document summarises how the process was organised, how members were engaged, and what lessons were learned along the way. It aims not only to document Europiamo's experience, but also to serve as a practical reflection tool for other membership-based organisations that wish to make listening and co-creation the core of their strategic practice.

The complete Report on Members' Needs, produced from interviews and focus groups, is attached as an annex to this document.

1. Preparing the Journey: Setting the Foundation for a Participatory Strategy

Why We Started

In 2023, Europiamo faced a familiar moment for many growing youth networks: the end of one strategic cycle and the beginning of another. The organisation's first strategy (2020-2024) had been designed when the network was still small and largely experimental. Four years later, Europiamo had grown into a national community of young people, youth workers, and organisations active in European projects and local youth participation.

Growth brought success, but also complexity. The team recognised that the 2020-2024 plan no longer captured the diversity, scale, and ambitions of its members. New questions emerged:

- How can we support both individual members and organisations?
- How do we balance local presence and national coordination?
- What kind of network do we want to become over the next five years?

Rather than answering these questions from the top, Europiamo decided to turn them into a collective conversation. This marked the start of the participatory planning process that would produce the new Strategy 2025-2029, a process driven not by external consultants but by members themselves.

The Framework We Chose

To guide the process, Europiamo adopted the six-step Strategic Planning in Nonprofits framework used widely in the nonprofit and philanthropic sector:

1. Prepare → 2. Listen → 3. Envision → 4. Plan → 5. Execute → 6. Evaluate

The team appreciated this model because it reflects a cycle of learning rather than control, a principle consistent with our participatory culture.

Each step became a distinct phase in the two-year journey, adapted to fit the organisation's capacity and volunteer-based structure.

This framework can be valuable for other membership-based organisations seeking to strengthen participation without losing direction. Below is a detailed account of how Europiamo interpreted and applied each phase.

Preparing: Laying the Groundwork

The preparation phase began in early 2023 with a clear premise: strategic planning is only as strong as the participation it enables. The Board of Directors initiated the process by discussing how to open it up to members while keeping it manageable. A small team of volunteer facilitators was identified to lead the process, most of them with little or no prior experience in strategic planning.

This decision carried both risk and intention. It was slower and messier than hiring professionals, but it turned the process itself into a capacity-building exercise. Volunteers learned by doing: conducting interviews, analysing data, and moderating group discussions.

For other organisations, this experience highlights a key trade-off: participatory processes are educational but resource-intensive. When planning such a process, ensure that:

- Time and coordination are treated as real resources, not as “free” volunteer labour;
- Facilitation and documentation roles are clearly assigned;
- The scope is scaled to your team's realistic capacity.

In Europiamo's case, preparation included three essential actions:

Revisiting the 2020-2024 Strategy - The team re-read the previous plan to assess what had been achieved and what remained aspirational. This step provided continuity and prevented the new process from starting from zero.

Designing the Consultation Architecture - Together with board members and key volunteers, a simple roadmap was developed. It outlined the main listening tools (survey, interviews, focus groups), the audiences to involve (youth, member organisations, volunteers, staff, and governance bodies), and a timeline that stretched from spring 2023 to (after an extension) late 2024.

Communicating Intent - Before launching the process, Europiamo explained to all members why their input was crucial. A short note on the internal newsletter described the upcoming consultation as “a collective act of sensemaking, not a formality, but a chance to imagine our next chapter together.” This was also shared in every possible conversation online and during events.

Lessons from the Preparation Phase

The first months of the process revealed insights that may resonate with other organisations:

- Preparation is participation. The way you design the process already communicates your values. Involving members early in setting the rules creates ownership that will sustain later phases.
- Clarity reduces fatigue. People are more willing to engage when they understand what is expected from them and when the process will end.
- Volunteers need structure. Enthusiasm alone does not guarantee consistency. Simple tools (shared calendars, templates, brief bi-weekly check-ins) helped Europiamo's volunteer team stay aligned.

These small operational habits laid the foundation for a two-year process that, despite its complexity, remained grounded in clarity and shared purpose.

2. Listening: Understanding Members' Needs

Why Listening Came First

For Europiamo, listening was not a preliminary formality before writing a new strategy; it was the strategy. We understand that any meaningful plan must start with the lived realities of its members, their needs, frustrations, and hopes. This idea echoes the second step of the Strategic Planning in Nonprofits framework: before defining goals, take time to understand the ecosystem you serve.

The listening phase ran from spring 2023 to early 2024, and it became the most intensive and revealing part of the entire process. What began as a simple survey evolved into a multi-layered conversation involving nearly every segment of the organisation, from young volunteers to senior board members.

The Architecture of the Listening Process

To capture diverse perspectives while keeping the process manageable, Europiamo used three complementary methods: a short online survey, individual interviews, and a series of focus groups.

Each method generated a different type of insight: the survey provided breadth, the interviews gave depth, and the focus groups created synthesis.

The Initial Survey: Taking the Pulse of the Community

The first action was a concise online survey circulated to all members. It had only a few open questions, asking:

- What do you think Europiamo does best?
- What should we improve?

- What do you need from the network to grow in the next few years?
- Would you like to join the team leading this process?

Despite its simplicity, the survey accomplished three things:

- It surfaced early patterns of concern
- It mapped the diversity of member profiles.
- It identified a group of volunteers willing to join the facilitation team.

For other organisations, this step demonstrates that small-scale surveys can have strategic value beyond data: they help recruit allies and create early ownership of the process.

Individual Interviews: Going Deep

Following the survey, Europiamo conducted over 40 one-to-one interviews with members. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted online by the team of volunteers using a semi-structured guide.

Each interviewer took detailed notes using a shared template, allowing the team to identify recurring themes and illustrative quotes.

Common patterns emerged quickly:

- Community connection was Europiamo's strongest asset - members valued the sense of belonging more than any single service.
- Capacity gaps persisted, particularly in project management and communication.
- Members wanted more clarity of structure - who to contact, how to contribute, and how decisions were made.

A recurring tension appeared between local impact and European visibility: members wanted both, but felt resources were too limited to pursue each equally.

The volunteers found the interviews transformative. Many had never practiced active listening at this scale. The process itself became an exercise in empathy, a rare organisational moment where listening replaced explanation.

Focus Groups: Connecting the Dots

To complement the individual stories, Europiamo organised five thematic focus groups, each gathering a specific segment of the community:

- young members (18-30 years);
- representatives of member organisations;
- the Board of Directors;
- the Executive Team;
- the wider volunteer base.

Each session lasted about two hours and used participatory facilitation tools on Mural.

Participants discussed what they saw as Europiamo's strengths, blind spots, and long-term priorities.

Across sessions, three meta-themes consistently re-emerged:

- Belonging and Recognition - members wanted to feel seen and valued, not only as participants in projects but as co-owners of the network's vision.
- Clarity and Coordination - the network's informal culture was appreciated but sometimes created confusion about responsibilities and communication.
- Support and Learning - organisations wanted more concrete support in navigating Erasmus+ and developing local initiatives, while individuals sought mentoring and peer learning.

These discussions were synthesised into a concise internal report (the same one annexed to this document) which served as the analytical backbone for the next phases.

Lessons from Listening

Reflecting on this phase, Europiamo identified several insights useful beyond its own context:

- Listening takes time, and that's the point. The slower rhythm built trust and produced more honest feedback than any rapid survey could.
- Participation is not cost-free. Volunteer energy is finite; planning must account for human capacity as carefully as for financial resources.
- Different groups need different invitations. Youth participants responded best to informal calls and voice notes; organisations preferred structured emails.
- Sincerity sustains engagement. Members were more open once they saw that their feedback was documented and would influence decisions.

For networks considering similar consultations, Europiamo's experience offers a simple but transferable insight:

Listening is both method and message.

The way an organisation listens communicates what it values. A participatory needs assessment does not just reveal information, it creates relationships and teaches everyone involved what dialogue can look like.

By the time Europiamo concluded its listening phase, the community had already changed. Members spoke more openly, volunteers saw the bigger picture, and strategic thinking had become a shared language rather than an internal exercise.

3. Envision and Plan – Turning Voices into Vision

From Feedback to Strategic Coherence

When the listening phase concluded, Europiamo had an unusually rich portrait of itself, part diagnostic, part collective aspiration. The hundreds of pages of feedback converged on one clear insight: members did not simply want to participate in activities; they wanted to understand the direction of the organisation and to see themselves shaping it.

The challenge, then, was to translate qualitative insights into a coherent strategic framework that could guide the next five years.

To do this, Europiamo convened a series of structured envisioning sessions where members, board representatives, and volunteers examined the findings from the interviews and focus groups and began grouping them into thematic “clusters.”

These clusters eventually evolved into the four Areas of Work that form the backbone of Europiamo’s Strategy 2025-2029:

- Advocacy - Youth Policy Guru
- Best Practice - Hub Associazioni Giovanili
- Citizenship - Educare all’Europa
- Organisational Sustainability - Sicurezza per il Futuro di Europiamo

This synthesis did not happen overnight. It was the result of many iterative sessions where community members debated, challenged, and refined each element.

How Members’ Voices Shaped the Four Strategic Areas

Area 1 - Advocacy: “Youth Policy Guru” Members repeatedly highlighted the need for Europiamo to play a more visible, credible role in shaping youth policy - both in Italy and at the European level. During interviews, several youth organisations expressed frustration at the lack of a unified voice representing the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps ecosystem nationally.

This feedback directly informed the creation of the Youth Policy Guru priority, which commits Europiamo to:

- Participate actively in national and European youth policy discussions;
- Build alliances with networks and institutions;
- Strengthen internal advocacy competence; and
- Develop campaigns and projects that bring youth work into the public agenda.

Area 2 - Best Practice: “Hub Associazioni Giovanili” - A second cluster of feedback came from local organisations and youth workers asking for more tools, exchange, and structured opportunities to improve the quality of their work. This became the foundation of the Hub Associazioni Giovanili area. Members requested:

- Access to shared resources (templates, training, mentorship);
- Opportunities for inter-regional collaboration; and
- A consistent “home” where youth organisations could find both inspiration and peer support.

Out of these demands came initiatives such as Simple Project Writing, Officine Europa, and the national Toolfair Nazionale, all conceived as practical expressions of Europiamo's best practice mission: to make quality visible, accessible, and replicable.

Area 3 - Citizenship: "Educare all'Europa" - In nearly every focus group, participants spoke about the gap between young people and the idea of Europe. While many had participated in Erasmus+ or ESC, few felt that they had the tools or spaces to translate those experiences into civic engagement.

This insight inspired the third area, Educare all'Europa, which reframes "European citizenship" not as a slogan but as a practice to be cultivated. It includes three central strategies:

- Bringing non-formal education into schools and universities;
- Supporting "European Ambassadors" who promote peer learning and storytelling;
- Building a supportive network for young people returning from mobility experiences.

Area 4 - Sustainability: "Sicurezza per il Futuro di Europiamo"

Finally, feedback from both staff and volunteers converged on a practical but urgent concern: the need to stabilise Europiamo's growth. The participatory process itself had shown how stretched the organisation's human and financial resources had become.

Hence, the fourth strategic area places sustainability at the centre of the next cycle. Its focus is threefold:

- Leadership Development: empowering members to take on responsibility and grow within the organisation;
- Operational Clarity: documenting and simplifying processes so that everyone can contribute effectively;
- Intelligent Fundraising: experimenting with diverse income streams to support long-term stability.