



**EMPOWERING CONSUMER
THROUGH FOOD INDUSTRY
CHANGE**

STRATEGIC VALUE OF TRANSPARENCY

Communication Toolkit for the Food
Industry Actors

Wageningen University



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Document Information

This Handout is a condensed version of the Communication Toolkit, Deliverable 3.1 of the CUES (Consumers' Understanding of Eating Sustainably) project. The full text can be accessed through the link: [\[LINK\]](#)

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Authors:

Kun Han, Tatiana van Aken, Shayegheh Ashourizadeh, [Wageningen University \(WU\)](#)
Maral Mahdad, [Eindhoven University of Technology \(TUE\)](#)

Contributors

Harris (Theocharis) Moysiadis, [Future Intelligence Ltd.](#)
Marco Gerevini, Gabriele Rivoltella, [Tecnoalimenti S.c.P.A.](#)
Ágnes Szegedyné Fricz, Katalin Kujáni, Viktória Nagy, [Kislépték](#)
Evangelia Kekeleki, [KEPKA](#)

In case you want any additional information, or you want to consult with the authors of this document, please send your inquiries to: shaya.ashouri@wur.nl, kun.han@wur.nl

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Addressing Food Industry Actors for Change

How can we motivate 3 million consumers to make sustainable food choices?

We, the actors involved in the CUES project, advocate consumer empowerment as the key to sustainable food choices. Consumers' motivation is central and can only be fully understood when the surrounding system enables informed, accessible, and meaningful choice. This leaves the CUES team with a crucial task: to direct and facilitate systemic changes so that consumers are equipped with the necessary information, access to sustainable food is secured, and freedom of choice is further promoted through policy reforms. This is what we call a Triple Change: CUES is accelerating **cultural, industrial, and political** change to empower consumers to make sustainable food choices.

This Communication Toolkit is a joint effort shared by industry and academia, a guide to creating and capturing value through transparency. It is a practical compilation of the results of eight co-identifying and co-creative workshops held in Italy, Greece, Hungary, and Iceland. In these workshops, a diverse range of food value chain actors were present, including food producers, food processors, food authorities, farmer cooperatives, policymakers, certification bodies, retailers, marketing agencies, and NGOs.

Based on the results of these workshops, the research team, supported by the technology provider, designed three intervention Scenarios. Each Scenario encompasses a specific context, suitable actors, purpose, and strategic considerations. A detailed 3-step implementation pathway and a digital tool to boost transparency are provided for each Scenario.

Communication Tool Input

8 co-identifying & co-creative workshops

desk-research to support the results

Incorporated consumer insights regarding sustainable choices

This Communication Toolkit presents a concise explanation of:

- Strategic value of transparency

How and why is transparency a value for both individual food value chain actors and for the food value chain?

- Three Scenarios

What scenarios are desirable to modern industry actors, according to the co-creation workshop results?

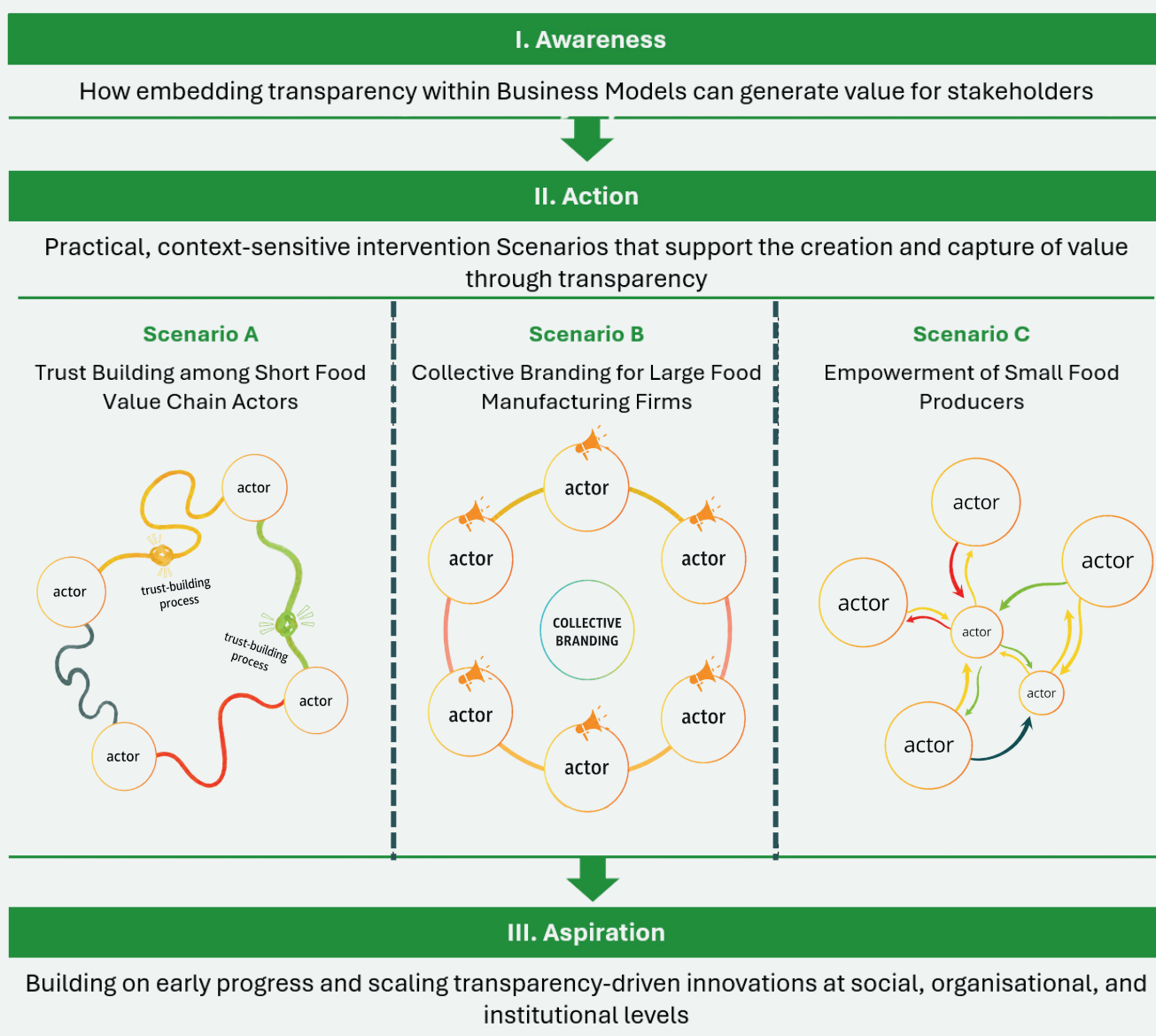
- Step-by-step guide

What pathways lead to these desirable scenarios? What digital tools can enhance transparency, traceability and trustworthiness in communicating food sustainability?

- Considerations for scaling-up

How do food value chain actors continue once an intervention is implemented and a digital tool is part of everyday operations?

This Communication Toolkit contains three chapters: Awareness, Action, and Aspiration, to enable food value chain actors to address and bring about change. The Awareness section shows how embedding transparency in Business Models benefits stakeholders. The Action section offers practical interventions to support value creation. The Aspiration section encourages scaling transparency innovations socially, organizationally, and institutionally.



AWARENESS



To understand the effects of transparency for a food industry actor, we first need to establish common ground on what it means to be transparent.

Transparency originated to meet demands for better food quality, safety, and sustainability. As expectations grew, so did the standards of transparency. Initially, transparency meant information disclosure and company accountability. Now, it's seen as a multidimensional process that builds trust through accurate, clear, and timely information—sharing only what is relevant. Today, **transparency is a performative, social process involving ongoing dialogue, negotiation, and interpretation, generating value and unintended consequences.** Openness to dialogue is key, serving as a tool for social, transformational, and environmental change. Food value chain actors, mindful of benefits and risks, can promote sustainable consumption and add value within the chain.

Value of Transparency for Industry Actors



financial
value



organisational
value



relational
value

transparency-generated
values

How does transparency help food industry actors?

First, transparency has financial value. Being transparent increases firm valuation and improves investment efficiency.

Secondly, transparency has organisational value. Transparency boosts innovation, enhances efficiency, and builds trust between employers and employees, thereby improving labour performance.

Thirdly, transparency has relational value. Transparency enhances stakeholder engagement and helps build trust between industry actors and the public.

Value of Transparency for Industry Actors: Platform for Social Change

*“Transparency is not only a tool for clarification and accountability. It is now a movement for **social change**.”*

Consumers' understanding of transparency has moved beyond merely providing certain information to seeing it as a platform for social change, with social sustainability becoming a **central driver of sustainable food choices**. Consumers call for more comprehensive labelling that, alongside ecological sustainability, provides information on the societal aspects of food production. Consumers want to know whether societal injustices such as unfair working conditions, exploitation, and child labour are embedded in the production, processing, or distribution of food. Thus, transparency is not only a tool for clarification and accountability. It is now a movement for social change.

Unintended Consequences for Industry Actors

Transparency is not a one-sided act of providing information. It is a complex and dynamic process that entails **unintended consequences** for an industry actor, which should be taken into account when setting your enterprise on the path to transparency.

Being transparent requires providing accurate information regularly and in a timely manner, and engaging in ongoing dialogues with stakeholders, consumers, or the public. This may create administrative burdens.

Moreover, in pursuit of the values transparency offers, one may choose to report selectively, bend information to make it more representative, or orchestrate information for a particular audience.

Lastly, increased observability may reduce employees' work performance, as it may violate group privacy.

unintended consequences



Key Takeaways on Transparency

01

The understanding of transparency has evolved from reporting to a complex performative process involving communication, negotiation and interpretation.

02

Transparency is not only a tool for information disclosure, but it's a now a moverment for social change.

03

Transparency creates financial, organisational and relational values for industry actors.

04

Alongside these values, transparency entails unintended consequences, such as administrative burden, reduced work performance, and selective reporting.

ACTION

02

This section outlines effective intervention Scenarios to activate transparency, traceability, and trustworthiness across the food value chain and to achieve a desirable context-specific outcome.

Once opportunities for transparency are identified, an intervention should bridge the gap between reality and the desired vision. To address this, three intervention Scenarios were designed based on the co-creation workshops, specifying suitable actors, applicable contexts, enabled outcomes, and strategic considerations. Each Scenario aims to strengthen specific aspects of the food value chain in a particular context.

Hereby, we present these Scenarios, with a detailed explanation of:

- What is this Scenario?

A description of the intervention and what it aims to achieve.

- Who can use this Scenario as a starting point?

Signals to help assess whether this Scenario aligns with the current state of affairs of a food value chain actor.

- What does the intervention enable?

The possibilities that become available through intervention.

- Strategic considerations

Key aspects to think about when implementing the intervention.

- Implementation pathway

A staged approach to integrating the intervention into the Business Model.

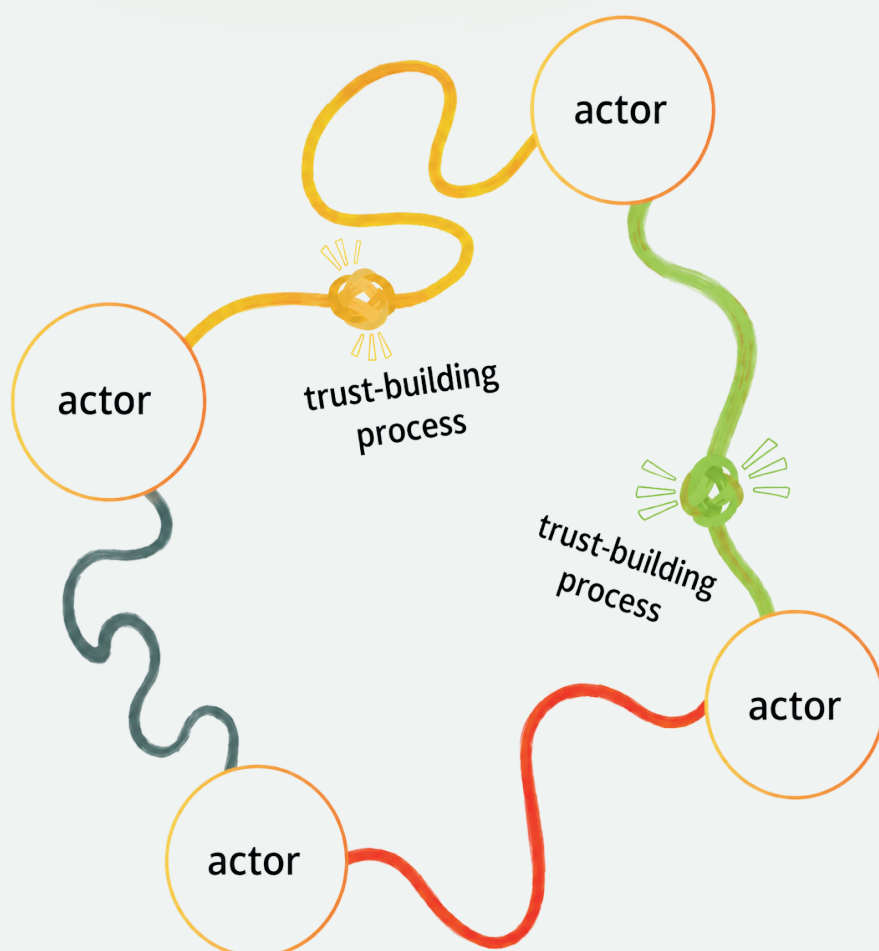
Recommendation

- We recommend reading through all three Scenarios before deciding which approach best matches your needs. Many practitioners may find that elements of multiple Scenarios are relevant to their situation.
- To implement these scenarios effectively, we recommend consulting a technology provider to customize solutions for your specific requirements.

SCENARIO A

Trust Building among Short Food Value Chain Actors

This Scenario uses a digital tool to strengthen connections across the short food value chain, thereby **building trust** among food value chain actors and consumers.



FOR WHOM IS IT APPLICABLE?

- The actor is located in a short food value chain.
- Value of transparency is sensed and recognized.
- Direct relationships with buyers and consumers are beneficial and highly valued.
- Sustainability practices invested in a final product are not visible.
- Consumers are unaware of the collaborative efforts among value chain actors in delivering the product, due to insufficient public visibility.

WHAT IS ENABLED?

Visibility is improved through **a simple, standardised, and user-friendly digital representation of local farms**, which enhances transparency and fosters trust among farmers, retailers, and consumers. Such uniform digital representation enables consumers to accurately trace where food was produced and which practices were employed.

MAIN STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Transparency does not require revealing everything. Consider disclosing the most relevant information for your target audience.
- Increased visibility may generate greater interest and more interaction requests.
- Different audiences may value different types of information.

Scenario A: Implementation Pathway

STAGE 1: PREPARATION

What to Assess

- documentation and information which has already been shared on the public websites like CAP, as part of routine operation;
- additional documentation or records available for sharing about business practices;
- digital platforms where the digital tool can be embedded as a widget (websites, blogs, mobile applications, Facebook page etc.);
- in case no digital platforms are available, assess digital communications channels, where a link to the information about a farm can be shared;
- time available for the possible interaction with other actors due to the increased visibility.

What to Prepare

- Check what information is already in public databases. If it's enough for transparency, data submission is complete.
- If not, identify 2-3 key practices or details lacking, such as sustainable farming, financial information, or strategic plans.
- Discuss who will manage integrating the digital tool into current platforms and coordinate with internal stakeholders like retailers and consumers.
- Assess potential risks or unintended consequences, like increased public engagement or bureaucratic burden.

Scenario A: Implementation Pathway

STAGE 2: GETTING STARTED

What Happens

- Access the digital tool and familiarise yourself with its basic features (e.g. user interface, shareability, how easy it can be embedded into existing communication platforms).
- Check that the information provided about your farm or production facility is true and up-to-date.
- Keep in mind your target audience, with whom you want to establish trust. Think of what information your target audience is most interested in.
- In case more relevant transparency-enabling information should be displayed, make sure to submit this information.
- Assess the digital tool's readiness to pilot:
 - Is the target audience clearly identified?
 - Is the information for the target audience relevant and complete?
 - Does the visual representation of a farm look lean and comprehensive?

Expected Changes

- At this stage, changes are minimal, and the time is spent primarily learning about the system.
- No significant changes to core operations are required.

Scenario A: Implementation Pathway

STAGE 3: INTEGRATION

What Happens

- The first results of the heightened visibility start appearing: the local public becomes aware of the local food producers. The first direct contact is established between local food producers, retailers, businesses, and consumers.
- The impact of the disclosed information starts being visible through the first interactions with the short value chain actors. For example, through interactions with retailers and consumers, it may become clear which information is most necessary, which is redundant, and what essential information is missing.

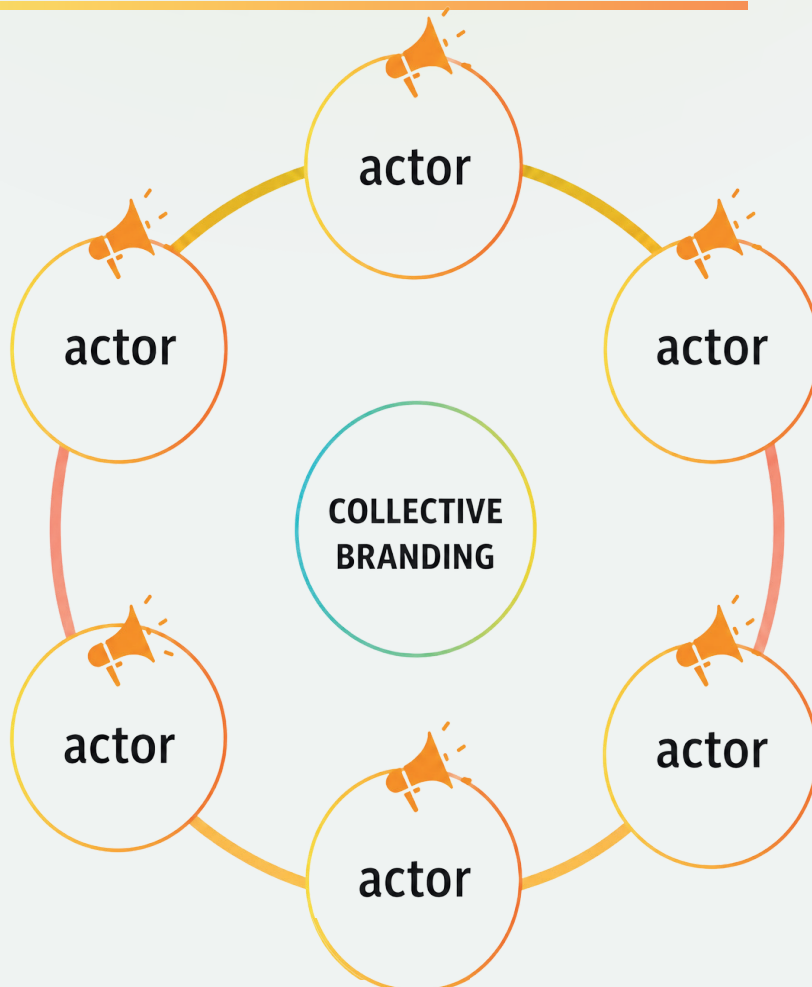
What structural changes have been made

- A successful pilot implementation of the digital tool has been achieved, and the tool is used as a reliable up-to-date visual representation of a farm.
- The habit of collecting and sharing information is achieved.
- Gathering and digitising documentation becomes integrated into a process.
- Resource allocation and time investment stabilise, making an intervention viable for upscaling.
- Transparency boosts visibility, and engaging regularly with short food value chain actors fosters collaborations, trust, and added product value.

SCENARIO B

Collective Branding for Large Food Manufacturing Firms

This Scenario uses a data platform with an integrated AI Agent for coordinated communication and **unified storytelling**, creating a more comprehensive and credible picture of the sector.



FOR WHOM IS IT APPLICABLE?

- Using a unified story instead of individual ones improves communication across the food value chain.
- The agri-food sector is criticised for issues caused by some actors, even though the majority follow sustainable practices.
- Individual stories regarding the same topic are varied in the value chain.
- Individual communication efforts, such as sharing information through marketing channels, social media posts, or word-of-mouth, have limited reach or impact.

WHAT IS ENABLED?

The **data platform, with an integrated AI Agent, synthesises credible information into a cohesive narrative and collectively debunks myths**, without requiring actors to surrender their individual identities.

MAIN STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

- It is important to identify what collective branding intends to challenge (e.g. fake news, misinformation, disinformation, etc.).
- It is essential to agree on what is understood by “collective branding”, on how it should be built and who can take part.
- A digital tool should enhance rather than replace individual presence.

Scenario B:

Implementation Pathway

STAGE 1: PREPARATION

What to Assess

- To identify specific practices or commitments to form or contribute to a collective narrative and shared vision: *What practices are followed by an industry actor that can be used to aggregate the collective story (sustainable farming, social advocacy, artisanal knowledge)?*
- Consider what type of false or harmful information regarding the agri-food sector would be beneficial to tackle: *What types of false or harmful information are circulating around the agri-food sector?*
- How can this unified story contribute to achieving a shared promise?

What to Prepare

- Gather the evidence of the identified practices: *What is the evidence or documentation of these practices (published and unpublished)?*
- Contact an existing networking organisation in the value chain (food collectives, marketing agencies, innovation hubs) that can become an orchestrator of the unified story creation via the data platform with an integrated AI Agent: *Who are the potential actors for building a collective branding?* To that end, compile a list of 5 actors to contact and begin outlining ideas for a potential collective branding and individual responsibilities.

Scenario B: Implementation Pathway

STAGE 2: INITIAL USE

What Happens

- In case the information about practices has already been published, share the sources with the data platform for the automatic data aggregation, analysis and synthesis.
- In case the information has not been published, share a story about one chosen topic with the data platform.
- Make sure your information and shared documentation are in alignment with the collective branding aims and/or shared visions.
- Begin to see how your contribution fits within the unified collective story.

What Changes in Your Procedures

- Initial time investment to align your documentation with collective branding aims and/or narrative.
- You may need to adjust how you describe or categorise your practices.
- Core operations remain unchanged - the change is in how you communicate about them.

Scenario B: Implementation Pathway

STAGE 3: INTEGRATION

What Happens

- Your participation in shaping the unified collective story becomes a regular part of your communication approach.
- You regularly refresh your information based on collective requests that align with market or consumer needs.
- You may engage with collective activities, such as responding to sector issues, participating in shared initiatives.

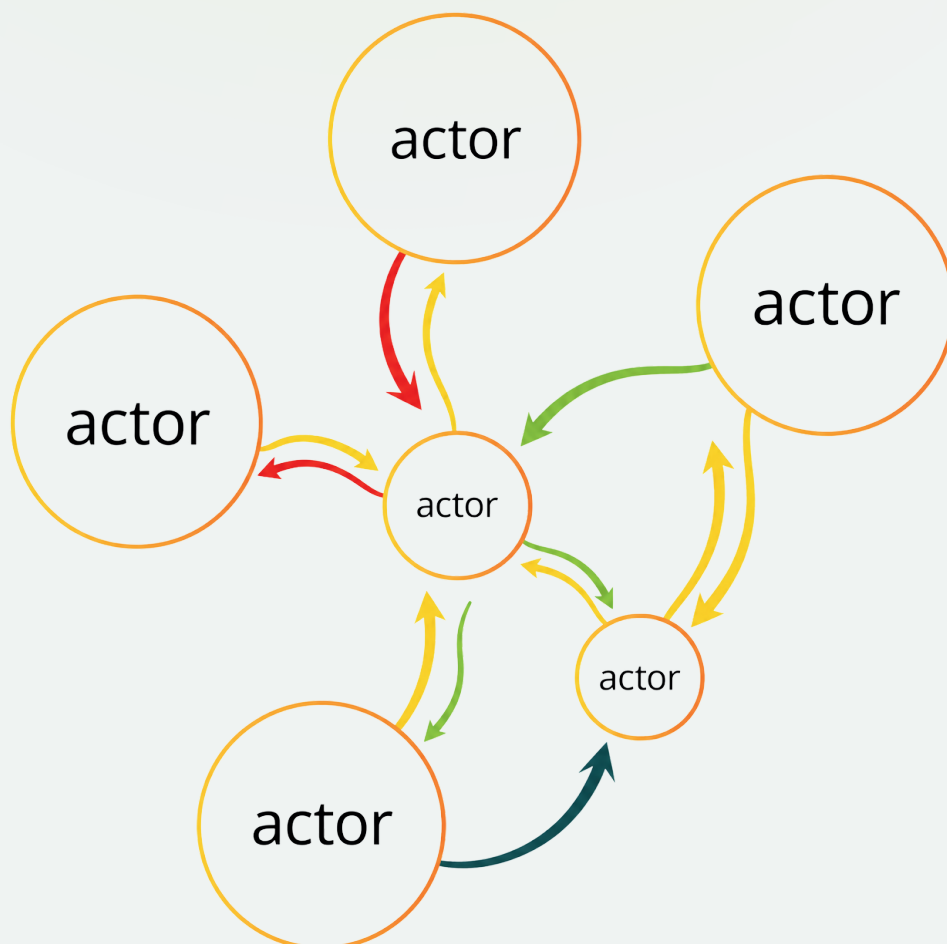
What structural changes have been made

- Moderate adjustment: maintaining consistency with collective branding aims and/or narrative.
- Some coordination with other contributors to the collective branding may be needed periodically.
- Time investment depends on the level of collective activity.
- Some false and harmful information about the industry is tackled, and the renewed collective branding starts being acknowledged and recognised.
- Being a part of collective branding yields the first benefits. When an individual actor seeks public association with sustainable practices, the collective brand's reputation begins to benefit the individual. Emphasising individual voices within a shared narrative strengthens the brand by revealing previously unseen nuances.

SCENARIO C

Empowerment of Small Food Producers

This Scenario **equips** less-advantaged food producers with **technological and organizational capabilities**



FOR WHOM IS IT APPLICABLE?

- You are a small food producer with limited capacity and resources
- Sustainable practices are present, but the resources to document and/or communicate them are limited.
- Farming practices would greatly benefit from informed decision-making.
- Optimal decision-making is often not possible due to the lack of knowledge or technical capabilities.

WHAT IS ENABLED?

The intervention offers digital tool designed to gather essential data that **enhances production, organizational, and communication capabilities**. Additionally, it transforms the captured and accumulated data into **company assets** for business and communication purposes.

MAIN STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Understanding specific barriers enables the intervention to address the most relevant challenges and request appropriate support.
- It is important to begin with the support option that addresses the most pressing need.
- Having identified what matters most, it is important to proceed consistently.
- Not all available support is relevant to all actors.

Scenario C:

Implementation Pathway

STAGE 1: PREPARATION

What to Assess

- What are the most pressing constraints (time, technical skills, equipment, connectivity, knowledge gaps)?
- What practices would be valuable to document or make visible?
- What decisions cannot be currently made due to the lack of knowledge or technical resources?
- What kind of support would be most helpful? Funding, training, technical assistance, peer advice, or connecting to markets?
- What actors in the industry face similar challenges who might benefit from a connection?

What to Prepare

- Identify 1-2 practices that matter most to document, without trying to cover everything.
- If resource access is the priority: list the types of support you are seeking (knowledge sharing, funding, training, peer-to-peer consultancy, etc.).
- If help is the priority, formulate a question whose answer would allow you to make a decision.
- If peer connection is the priority, consider what challenges you would like to discuss with others.
- If market access is the priority, identify what you would like potential buyers to know about your operation.

Scenario C: Implementation Pathway

STAGE 2: INITIAL USE

What Happens

- Get familiar with the digital tool and find the features that are most relevant to the identified challenges.
- Educate yourself to make informed decisions based on the data generated from the digital tool.

What Changes in Your Procedures

- The adjustments in your data collection procedures are minimal; however, the procedures for data analysis that integrate into daily decision-making will undergo moderate changes.
- Time investment varies by entry point, but should be modest.

Scenario C:

Implementation Pathway

STAGE 3: INTEGRATION

What Happens

- Your initial engagement with the digital tool becomes a regular practice, for example, digital documentation becomes an automated part of how you work.
- You may begin to use the collected visualised data for business and communication purposes
- You may explore additional features of the digital tool as comfort grows.

What Structural Changes Have Been Made

- The habit is established, time investment should feel manageable.
- You may consider expanding to additional dimensions/features if capacity allows.
- Organizational capability begins to build as the engagement with the digital tool progresses
- The establishment of data-collection practices starts yielding the first results. It becomes possible to establish transparent communication with the food supply chain actors.
- Thanks to thorough data management and analysis, more control over farming is gained. Thus, it becomes less risky to start implementing sustainable practices or make existing practices more sustainable.

ASPIRATION

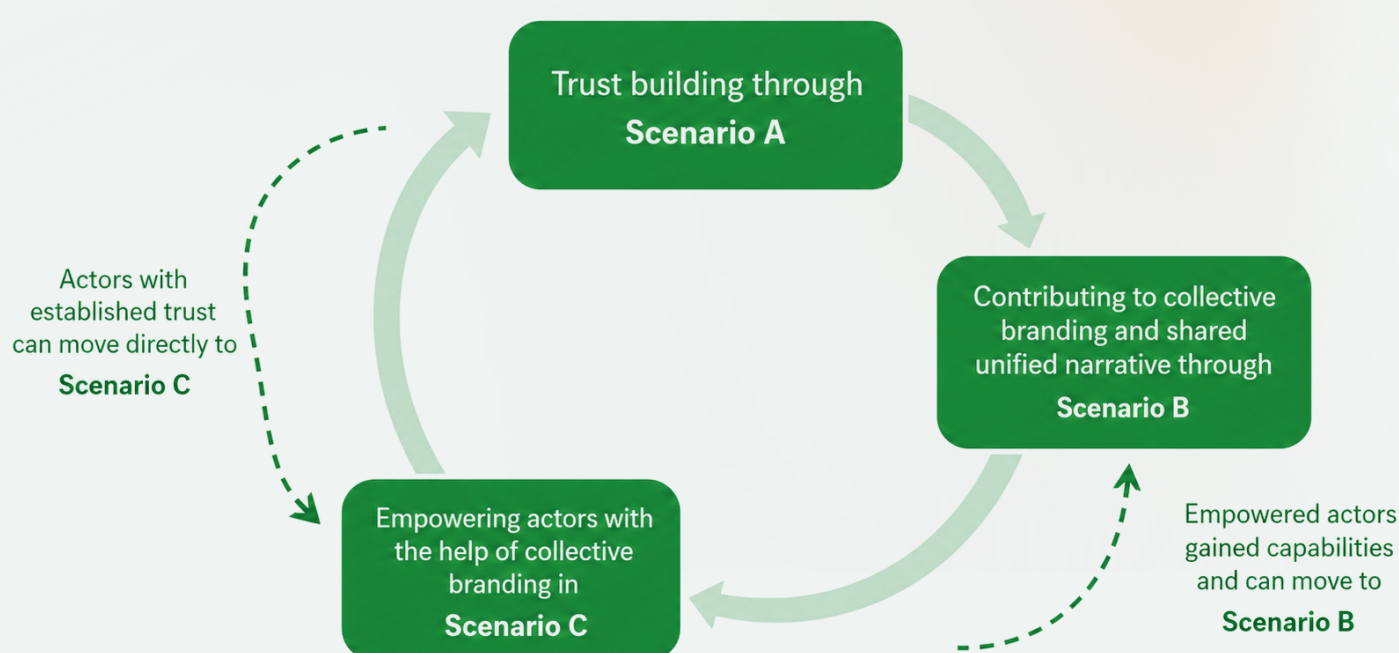
03

How can engagement with a digital tool within an intervention deepen and expand?
What collective activities might create impact beyond the proposed Scenarios?

This section invites food value chain actors to look further and consider what becomes possible beyond initial implementation.

Deepening and Extending the Intervention

Once routine engagement with the intervention and the digital tool is established (Stage 3 in the “Implementation Pathway” sections), new possibilities emerge.



*“The three Scenarios are **interconnected pathways in a dynamic ecosystem**, where engagement in one may enable entry into the next.”*

Extending Scenario A: Trust Building

EXTENDING THE TARGET AUDIENCE

Different audiences seek different information. Once trust is built, the target group can broaden. For example, an organic food producer might initially focus on nearby food processors and packaging companies. Later, targeting downstream actors like retailers and outside parties like customers and the public increases transparency's relational value and invites more participants in value creation.

DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS

Having made initial contact and established trust, sustaining relationships with industry actors and customers is key.

CONNECTING WITH PEERS

Linking with other actors using the same intervention can serve as a platform to share the ups and downs of implementation journeys, thereby creating a knowledge hub.

CONTRIBUTING TO TRUSTED INTERMEDIARIES

Trust established through transparency efforts is a foundation for the collective action described in Scenario B, "Collective Branding for Large Food Manufacturing Firms". A trusted, engaging, and sustained partnership is a starting point for establishing a collective voice.

Extending Scenario B: Collective Branding

EXPANDING THE POOL OF CONTRIBUTORS

Welcoming new members who share the collective branding commitments can be the next step to expand the intervention.

ADDRESSING NEW ISSUES

Extending the collective branding focus to additional sector challenges or opportunities can expand its potential.

TAKING ON COORDINATION ROLES

Taking a leadership role and demonstrating individual commitment fosters an environment for growth, innovation and collaboration.

ENGAGING IN POLICY DIALOGUE

The documented evidence of diverse practices, aided by the AI Agent tool, shapes a unified narrative that can inform policy discussions and drive changes.

SUPPORTING LESS-ADVANTAGED MEMBERS

Once a collective has been established, it is possible to consider helping actors with fewer resources participate fully, thereby entering Scenario C: “Empowerment of Small Food Producers”.

Extending Scenario C: Empowerment

PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

Once personal challenges have been addressed, actors can step into the “supporter” role and share their experience implementing the intervention with those at the beginning of the process.

STRENGTHENING MARKET POSITION

Once it becomes possible to establish a documentation and publishing routine, it is advisable to leverage improved transparency to access new services and markets (e.g., financial services and new selling venues).

JOINING COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

If it becomes clear that some challenges can be overcome only through collective effort, actors can leverage the capabilities gained and contribute to a collective branding, thereby moving to Scenario B: “Collective Branding for Large Food Manufacturing Firms”.

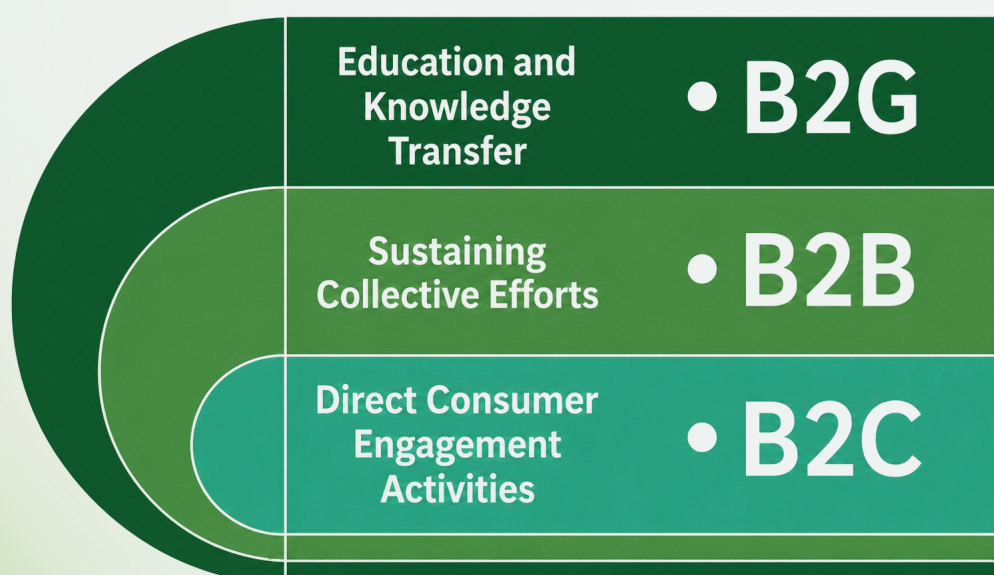
BUILDING DIRECT RELATIONSHIPS

Once the necessary operational and communication capabilities are established, transparency can be used to connect with buyers or consumers, thereby moving the intervention to Scenario A: “Trust Building among Short Food Value Chain Actors”.

Going Beyond Scenarios

“Collective action beyond the proposed Scenarios, in which actors collaborate for shared goals, is vital for **systemic change** and sustainable consumer behaviour.”

In this section, activities at three levels (Business-to-Customer, Business-to-Business, Business-to-Government) are proposed as an aspirational guideline.



Direct Consumer Engagement Activities

Connections enabled by transparency can be sustained by physical encounters. Workshop participants across countries emphasised the value of bringing consumers into direct contact with production.



Consumer visits to production sites

Organised visits where consumers can see production methods first-hand and communicate with producers directly, while a digital tool from Scenario A can facilitate coordination and booking.



Events to promote local products

Open-air events, taste-testing opportunities, and festivals that **showcase products** from multiple producers. These create visibility and build connections with the local community.



Information days for consumers

Interactive sessions with panels of stakeholders from across the food value chain. These sessions become a **space for dialogue** rather than one-way communication.

Sustaining Collective Efforts

Collective activities need ongoing individual commitment. Enthusiasm may wane, coordination costs can add up, and free-rider issues can reduce participation.

ALIGN INCENTIVES WITH PARTICIPATION

Actors need to see ongoing benefit from their involvement. This might include access to shared resources, market advantages, cost savings, or reputation benefits.

DISTRIBUTE COORDINATION RESPONSIBILITIES

If coordination falls entirely on a few actors, they may burn out. Thus, it is crucial to share responsibilities across participants.

CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

It is crucial to develop clear accountability mechanisms that enable a collective to measure, monitor, analyse, and improve the performance of individual industry actors.

BUILD ON EXISTING STRUCTURES

It is advisable to integrate collective activities into existing organisations (cooperatives, associations, professional bodies) rather than creating entirely new structures.

CELEBRATE AND COMMUNICATE SUCCESSES

Visible achievements maintain motivation, attract new participants and become case-studies of successful innovation implementation.

Education and Knowledge Transfer

Transparency has a limited impact when consumers lack the knowledge to interpret and use the information provided. To turn transparency into value, **food literacy education** should be considered a collective investment.

Implementing **food literacy** in educational programmes is an effective way to highlight the environmental and social impacts of the food industry and to connect with global and local food producers.



Supporting
educational
programmes

Collaboration with educational institutions (e.g. schools, universities, and professional training programs) can help ensure the **systemic implementation of food literacy education**.



Collabora-
ting with
educational
institutions

Limited consumer understanding of the benefits and mistrust of certifications and labels stem from a **lack of awareness** and insufficient knowledge. Creating **accessible materials** can help consumers understand what the communicated information means.



Accessible
information

Strategic Consideration: Greenwashing Awareness

Although certifications and official labels may be trustworthy, broader greenwashing practices can undermine consumer trust in them. This can be addressed by educational communication campaigns or programmes to raise awareness of greenwashing practices and the companies that engage in them

Strategic consideration: Resource Awareness

Education is a long-term investment. Partner with organisations whose mission already includes education (schools, universities, consumer organisations, farm-school programmes) rather than trying to build educational capacity from scratch.

Closing Remarks

This Communication Toolkit has guided the reader from “Awareness”, recognising the value of transparency, to “Action”, learning how to realise that value through interventions and digital tools, and finally to “Aspiration”, exploring the possibilities unlocked when individual efforts come together as collective action.

With this Communication Toolkit, we attempted to provide a comprehensive guideline to enable transparent, trustworthy and traceable connections across the food value chain with a goal to empower consumers for an informed, sustainable food choice.

The central principle of this Communication Toolkit is that the three proposed intervention Scenarios are not linear stages but interconnected pathways within a dynamic ecosystem. Actors do not "complete" one Scenario and stop. Instead, engagement in one pathway may generate capabilities that facilitate movement toward another.

This circular logic illustrates the evolving nature of transparency. As capabilities develop, relationships strengthen, and ecosystems mature, actors realign themselves within the transparency landscape. Therefore, the Communication Toolkit fosters adaptive reconfiguration, a key dynamic capability, rather than rigid implementation.

What matters most is starting, building a routine, and sustaining the commitment. Even modest transparency efforts can drive meaningful change in how agri-food systems operate and how connections among actors are established.

*“The journey of a thousand miles
begins with **one first step.**”*

— Lao Tzu