

1. Social Enterprise Networking

1.1 What is social enterprise networking?

Networks connect enterprising community organisations, social enterprises and social entrepreneurs who operate within a specific geographical area (regional, national, international). Networks can also connect within a specific sector (for example - agriculture, tourism, food, youth, older people), or who are united by a shared social or environmental purpose/mission (homelessness, ocean plastics, food poverty).



This gives members a platform to interact with other like-minded people, to ask questions, share ideas and experiences, and identify opportunities for working together. Events such as conferences or networking events are a great way to be able to make the right connections and build your network.

Social enterprise networks (SENs) can connect individuals and organisations from across different communities, social enterprises and locations into supportive networks, where they have an opportunity to work together, have a collective voice and access to resources, advice and peer support.

See this short factsheet from Senscot about 'Local Sens: What are they?'

<https://sencot.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SENs-What-Are-They.pdf>

Why is this important for small, community-led social enterprises?

Grassroots or community-led social enterprises benefit from being members of a social enterprise network because they provide access to a shared wealth of resources, expertise, contacts and peer support. As individuals or individual organisations the pool of knowledge, resources and support is much more limited.

Being based in a rural and remote location can add rural-specific challenges, so it is important to have a platform to discuss and share with similar people and organisations, your approaches, solutions and experiences of dealing with common challenges.

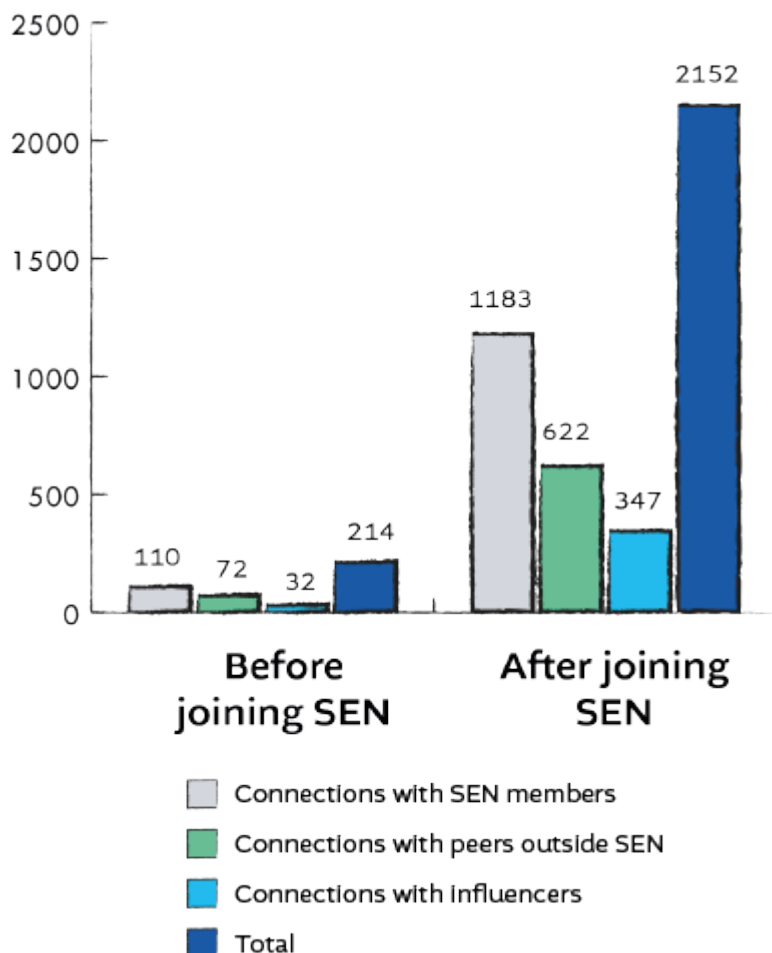
Remote geographies often restrict the ability to network in person, or attend networking events due to the financial and time constraints of travel so by networking with organisations across your region, or with a rural-focus, you will likely find that they promote a greater number of locally-held events, events based in nearby rural locations or virtual networking opportunities, rather than centralised urban networking events, to encourage rural participation.

An example of the benefits of joining a network in numbers:

Senscot is Scotland's national agency who support social enterprise networking. They published this blog post '*Putting the benefits of SEN membership into numbers*', which examined the actual social and financial impact made by four social enterprise networks in Scotland. The study compared the connections that individuals and/or organisations could expect to gain from joining a network, and compared the before and after. This is shown in the graph below.

The headline figures to come out of the report are that individuals and/or organisations who join a social enterprise network can expect to make:

- **10 times the amount of connections** to other social enterprises and sector influencers. This equates to a **900% increase in connections**, just by joining a SEN!
- **11 times as many connections to influencers and policymakers** than social enterprises outside of networks. The before and after connections to influencers and policymakers **increases by almost 1000%** after joining a network!

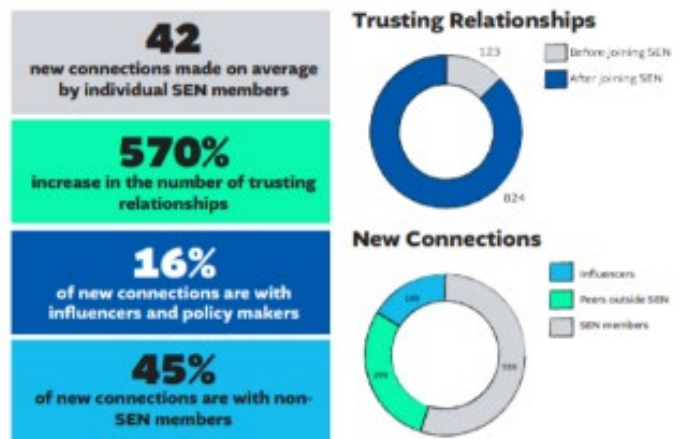


Access the report here:

https://senscot.net/senscot-blog-putting-the-benefits-of-sen-membership-into-numbers/?utm_source=New%20Senscot%20Bulletin&utm_campaign=8c6c4f0b90-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_05_24_03_50_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8a7c21a02d-8c6c4f0b90-114372549

A short infographic of the same report can be accessed here, which provides specific information on the benefits gained:

<https://senscot.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Unlocking-Potential-in-Numbers.pdf>



Networks are highly useful to enable you to identify potential partners with common goals to work collectively and collaborate. Other benefits of networks include the ability to inter-trade, to be able to reach a wider market and to raise your profile collectively.

1.2 Existing networks

Social enterprise networks (SENs) exist locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Their members are connected either by geography (for example, region or municipality), theme (arts or recycling), social mission (employability or tackling loneliness), or a combination of these.



Joining a local network will help you to network and connect with social enterprises and entrepreneurs in your area who you might not already be aware of. It will also help you influence local decision-makers, including political representatives, local councillors, council officers and local media, to make them aware of your successes, needs and ideas.

National networks bring together all types of social enterprises and supporters under one umbrella to network, campaign, exchange ideas, and help shape the social enterprise movement in that country. Membership to a national network can give you a voice in national policymaking and government decisions which affect your enterprise and the sector more widely.

SENs which have a national or international focus give their members more visibility on the global stage, allowing them to connect with members from a range of countries worldwide and improving access to international collaborations and projects.

How do I find social enterprise networks to join?

A quick google search for social enterprise networks in your area (local, national), or within your theme/sector, will provide you with a starting point for some research into what networks you might consider joining. See the links below for ViSEnet informative documents about the social enterprise networks you might consider joining internationally, within Europe and nationally.

International Networks: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_23973&client_id=hfwu

European Networks: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_23976&client_id=hfwu

Estonian Networks: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_24658_download&client_id=hfwu

Finnish Networks: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_24608_download&client_id=hfwu

Scottish Networks: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_23974&client_id=hfwu

Romanian Networks: https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_24553_download&client_id=hfwu

The ViSEnet International Network of Rural Social Enterprises is a network for rural social and/or community enterprises, and can be found at this link:

COMING SOON!

1.3 Building your network: Networking with like-minded organisations; making the right contacts; identifying who to network with; and extending involvement.

Two key things to remember first:

1. Networking is a two-way process. It's not about you asking for favours from someone else - it's about creating mutually beneficial relationships.
2. Every contact you meet should lead you to new contacts. This is why it's called networking, just like a net, every connection leads off in two or more directions. **Be generous with sharing your own contacts** too, and introduce people from your network(s) to each other.

So how do you meet like-minded people?

Many social enterprise sectors hold networking events. It can be of value to organise a session in your own locality and invite organisations to attend. A programme which includes time for introductions (so as everyone gets to learn who is attending as well as relevant talks, interspersed with plenty of breakout/refreshment time for conversation and networking.

Networking events assist organisations and entrepreneurs to build their networks and identify opportunities for collaboration or partnership.



Tips for networking when attending larger meetings, conferences or events:

Attending networking events is a useful way to meet like-minded individuals and organisations, and there are several important points to remember:

- ***Have a short elevator pitch prepared***

- What are your organisation's key highlights and challenges? Be ready with a short success story about what you do.
- This should be 1 min max, enough to give context, but not an information overload.



- ***Bring some information from your organisation or business cards***

- These can be a useful prompt for conversations and can provide some follow up information. Don't feel you need to hand them out to everyone though, just where you have made a connection can be the best approach...

- ***Identify the key people you want to make contact with***

- Use your time wisely, and don't try to meet as many people as you can. The introductory session can be really helpful, or if you have a note of who is likely to attend, you can do some preparation and highlight any contacts you think would be relevant. Focus on making a few good connections rather than having many brief interactions. A few good connections is likely to be more memorable and effective for follow up and learning.
- If you have any specific challenges or specific project activity or enterprise approaches that similar organisations may have had experience with, this is a good opportunity to find out about their experience and recommendations.

- ***Remember to listen as well as talk***

- The golden rule at networking events is to listen more than you talk. Being an engaged and active listener will help you to ask the right questions and consider how the information and contacts made can assist you. Have a few good questions in your back pocket that show you are interested in more than just your own opportunities.
- Questions could include:
 - What projects are you working on right now?
 - How did you get involved in social enterprise?
 - Have you heard about (relevant project/funding/news/other community)?
 - *heard about [relevant project/funding/news]?*



- ***Don't be afraid to join in***

- There is nothing wrong with joining a conversation and waiting for a natural break in the chatter to introduce yourself. In most cases, the people already speaking will enjoy the interruption because it gives them the chance to meet someone new. If you sense that you've entered into a serious discussion, it's okay to politely excuse yourself.



- ***Take notes***

- You probably won't remember the important details, so it can be helpful to write them down. After mingling with a few people, find a quiet corner to make notes or write down some key points as you go along. An info leaflet or if someone has given a business card can be a useful space to write notes. You can also write notes separately, but remember the name and contact as well as some prompts such as who the person is, what you discussed and any follow-up you want to make.
- Remember the purpose of a networking event is to connect with people in the future, and this will make following up with them much easier.

- **Follow up**

- If you want to reconnect with another person, be sure to get in touch a few days after the event. If making a phone call or by email, then make a personal connection as a prompt for example, mentioning something you spoke about. You can also follow up with connections via social media, such as friend requests on Facebook or follows on LinkedIn or Twitter.

1.4 Building a network contact list (with info on relevant contacts)

Building a network contact list will make your life easier by keeping a comprehensive record of all your contacts in one place, and will save you the hassle of trying to recall contact details at a later date. Having all of your contacts in one place might make identifying who to reach out to for help easier, or by browsing through your contacts you might realise the potential for a partnership between yourself and others, or that you should introduce some of your mutual contacts.



Your network contact list should include basic information: Name, email address, organisation/business; and any relevant details or info about them. A contacts address book is one way to store contacts, but can be difficult to update. A useful way to save this type of information can be in an Excel spreadsheet, where you can create columns, input large amounts of data, and edit information easily. The example below gives a useful format that could be used with electronic (Excel) and hard copy (address book) to store information.

Name: Jane Doe

Address: 123 Social Enterprise Street

Email Address: janedoe@rural.org

Phone number: 01234 56789

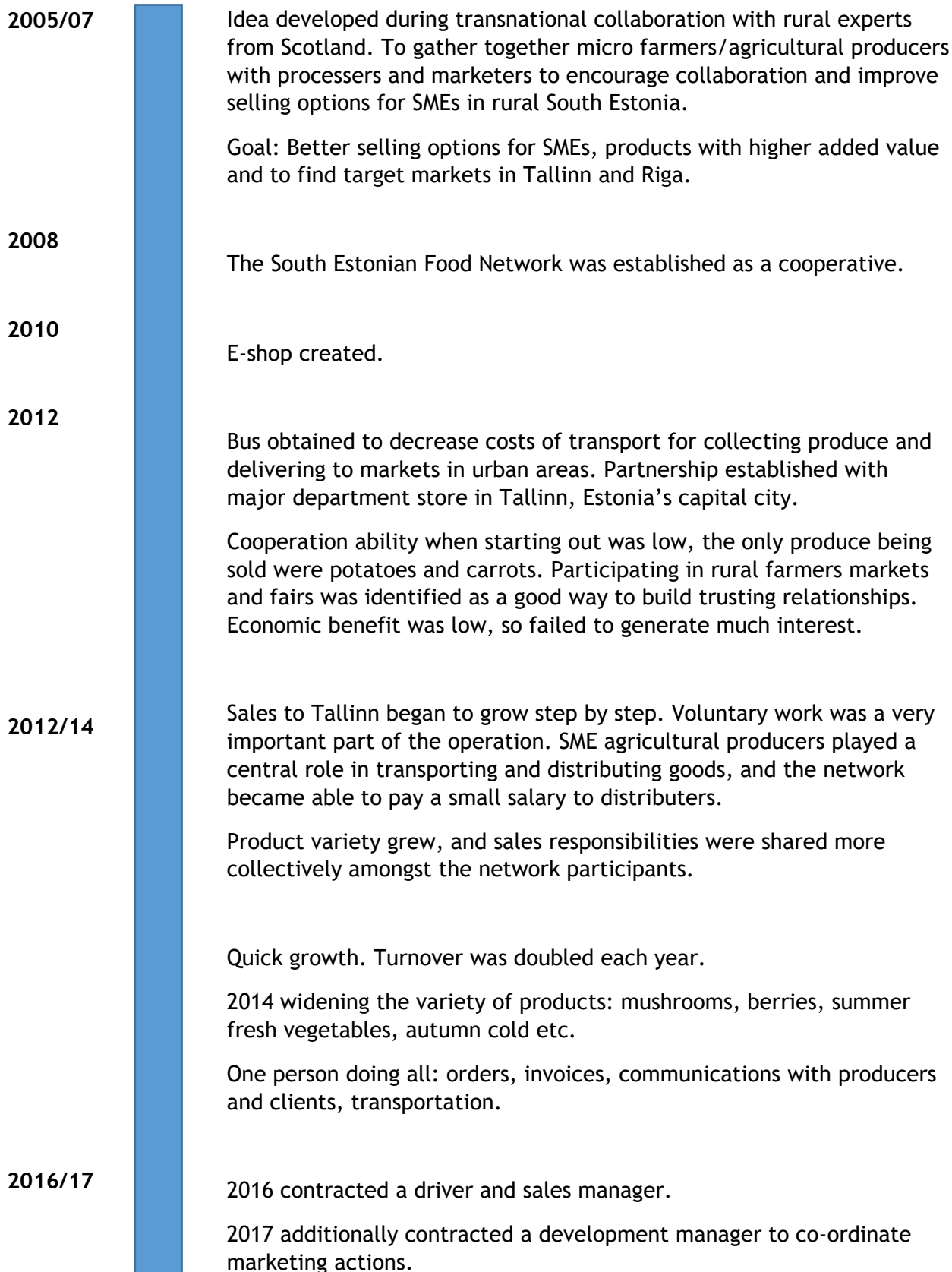
Memorable Info: Last met at networking event in Helsinki. Has an interest in community groups for the elderly. Spoke about learning visits and their benefit for rural groups.

Follow-up: Introduce her to John Smith from Elderly Inclusion Group in Scotland - they have a shared interest in a partnership opportunity.

1.5 Case Study

The South-Estonian Food Network was established as a cooperative in 2008, after a 3-year international collaboration with Scottish rural experts. The goal was to improve selling options for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) operating in south Estonia by connecting farmers, processors and marketers to improve access and strengthen the capacity of rural SMEs to sell their goods into the supply chain.

Using a combination of digital technologies and networking to create partnerships and collaborations, the South-Estonian Food Network has now become a highly successful vendor of organic agricultural produce and improved access to markets for SMEs in rural Estonia. The timeline on the next page shows the journey that they took to build their network.



2018/19

Additionally contracted a driver and substitute driver, buying-selling specialist and sales manager. Bookkeeping is subcontracted and the new E-Shop platform is turning over 370,000 EUR per annum.

There are 11 all year round producers and more than 20 on high season. There are direct sales to 75 active clients (including branches). Transport logistics have been simplified and combined to take in different locations.

Variety of organic produce continuing to expand: Potatoes, vegetables, greens, apples, juices, fresh and preserved mushrooms, cereal products and teas.

New Goal: To continue to improve logistics and sales services for farms.

Key Learning Points	Description
Building networks with like-minded organisations.	South-Estonian Food Network are involved with the Organic Farming Networking Chamber, which helped them to meet like-minded organisations and promote their name among rural participants and SMEs. This has helped increase awareness of the Food Network and encourage producers to get in contact.
Organising local or regional network events and activities.	Only some events are arranged. Informal events are just as important as attending formal events. They attend many events on farms, learning exchanges, visiting fields and meetings by interest groups. For more information on learning exchanges, see Module 2, Section 5. Social Enterprise Learning Exchanges .
Building a network contact list.	Contact list began to grow simply through collaboration with more organic producers. Their network is known and people who want to sell to them will seek them out. Their contact list is stored in the E-Shop, where producers present their products themselves and customers order from.
Digital networking.	E-Shop platform for selling agricultural produce, setting up the logistics and placing orders. Access is only for producers and clients. Individual customers are not seen as clients, keeping the operation large-scale. Digital platform should suit needs of producers, clients and delivering company. Identified need to have good contact with IT company.
Common mistakes of digital networking.	They recognise that not all clients are able or prepared to use the E-platform. About 1/3 of clients prefer to send orders by

	<p>email. Some supermarkets say that they are not allowed to submit online orders and require paper documentation. This ultimately makes additional work for staff to manually insert orders but is essential to remain inclusive for everyone and maintain sales growth.</p>
Benefits of using social media and digital networking.	<p>Their digital platform is very important however they recognise that social media is very underutilized and could be used to effectively promote goods to the final customer.</p>
Benefits of partnership.	<p>The partnership of producers and clients (supermarkets and restaurants in 3 large towns and cities in Estonia) forms the basis for sales through the network.</p>