

Play in farming: seriously?

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This paper explores the potential of using playful and gameful approaches for facilitating and strengthening the collective action, networking, and negotiation of individuals, groups, and entities related to the farming sector across Europe, which include farmers and land managers. Framed under the EU Funded BOND project (bondproject.eu), we developed, experimented, and reflected on three playful tools for enabling the ‘bonding’ of various stakeholders in the sector towards creating strong, dynamic and effective organisations that have a voice and a place in policy design. The paper describes playful tools implemented in the project, which are based on the approaches designed under the award-winning GameChangers initiative (gamify.org.uk) and LEGO® Serious Play®. These tools have been repurposed through engagement with stakeholders from 17 partner institutions across 12 countries in Europe. Findings and reflections from practice-based exploratory investigations are discussed.

Keywords: play, games, GameChangers, gamification, farming

1. Introduction

The use of play and games in the context of developing either behaviour change or imparting knowledge on the intended player, has long been in use in a number of contexts including education, health, and business (Boyle, 2016; Arnab, 2020). Play and playfulness demonstrate values related to openness (Hug, 2017), emphasising autonomy and agency in creativity and exploration (Dalsgaard et al., 2017). Arnab (2020) suggests that we can view ‘play’ as an activity/instrument/tool and ‘playfulness’ as an attitude/practice, that can inform the facilitation of empathic experiences in serious purposeful context.

As part of the investigation into participatory approaches for creating strong, dynamic, and effective partnerships in the farming sector framed under the EU-Funded BOND project (bondproject.eu), we explored playful approaches for facilitating inclusive and creative collaborations between the various stakeholders in this sector in Europe. BOND stands for ‘Bringing Organisations & Network Development to higher levels in the Farming sector in Europe’. Farmers and land managers as example stakeholders play a key role in the environmental and economic sustainability of the farming sector. BOND aims to empower them to participate in policy-informing activities towards developing a healthier, and more productive and harmonious farming sector in Europe in the long term.

With this context, the playful approaches in the project focus on the development of empathy and professional relationship building, aligning with the need to facilitate and strengthen the collective action, networking, and negotiation of individuals, groups, and entities related to the farming sector. In order to develop a structured approach to developing a playful strategy for training and personal development purposes, it is imperative that other examples of good practice in similar areas are drawn upon. The paper discusses three playful tools that are repurposed in this respect. Two of the tools are based on the approaches designed under the award-winning GameChangers initiative (gamify.org.uk, Arnab et al., 2017): (1) the ‘Remixing Play’ approach for encouraging stakeholders to co-create playful solutions as part of their discussions on farming-related issues, and (2) ‘What is your story?’ cards for facilitating empathic team building, focusing on empowering the individual stakeholders to share their stories and experience towards instilling better understanding of each other’s background and personality. The third tool is based on the LEGO® Serious Play® approach, where the use of metaphors to express ideas and views can encourage stakeholders to have the opportunity to participate in discussions.

The next section describes the background of playful perspective, followed by the descriptions of the BOND playful tools. The remaining sections discuss the engagement pathway from onboarding to practice-building and insights based on practice-based exploratory investigations.

2. Background

Meaningful play is often used in the discussion surrounding the concepts of serious games and gamification meaning that the motivational activity of ‘play’ also has additional benefits such as learning, health, and/or behaviour change outcomes. Meaningful play is described as what occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of gameplay (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The EU report on ‘The Potential of Digital Games for Empowerment and Social Inclusion’ (James et al., 2013) offers a multifaceted picture of how ‘meaningful play’ can be adapted to promote societal progress. This term underpins the strategy in which the playful methods are developed in the BOND project to enable the mapping between the playful “tasks” against specific purposeful outcomes.

The merging of the formal and informal contexts is also essential in engaging with the farming stakeholders. Through purposeful play, we can create the “meta-game” (the cultures, narratives, and social systems that develop around playing a specific game) in creating powerful learning ecologies and dynamics, not necessarily in formal settings but simply “by hanging out, messing around, and geeking out” (Ito et al., 2013).

From a deeper pedagogical perspective, adult education requires a tailored approach to delivery of training or educational materials in order to reflect the differences of adult learners from different backgrounds and experiences. The stakeholders involved need to be onboarded onto the new approach for facilitating inclusive and creative discussions. Stakeholders in the onboarding stage can be viewed as adult learners, who tend to favour a learning style that is very task and problem orientated, and they are generally found to be more motivated intrinsically through drives such as curiosity. Knowles et al. (2005) indicates that motivation in adult learners is both extrinsic and intrinsic, and influenced and impacted by factors, which include the need to know, the learners’ self-concept, the role of the learners’ experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning and the motivation to learn.

It was essential to acknowledge these differences when designing the playful method integrated in the BOND project, in order to achieve maximum engagement and retention of new skills within the stakeholders as adult learners.

3. BOND playful resources

The resources include experiential and participatory tools for facilitating open, empathic, collaborative, and creative environments for the project’s stakeholders to connect with one another and to discover new insights on specific issues towards forming better understanding, strategic visions, and solutions. The three tools adapted are based on LEGO® Serious Play® and GameChangers. Aligning with BOND’s main aim, the approaches look to build empathy and understanding of different perspectives towards breaking down barriers and building relationships. These outcomes are important for enabling the ‘bonding’ of various stakeholders in the sector towards creating strong, dynamic and effective organisations that have a voice and a place in policy design.

3.1 BOND LEGO Sessions for team bonding and negotiations

We adapted the playful methodology of the original LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP), and simplified the stages to allow for shorter engagement often required by roundtables. The process is based on a set of fundamental beliefs that leaders do not have all the answers. It is important that everyone’s voice is heard to ensure the right choices are made. Too often teams work sub-optimally with little communication. Building open channels leads to open knowledge. By giving everyone an opportunity to contribute to discussions and the decision-making process, organisations can build more sustainable business models.

The LSP process enables every person in a meeting to create and share their ideas using LEGO bricks, encouraging participatory group discussions. Working on the ability of humans to imagine, describe and create, thoughts and ideas that are built with our hands are expressed in greater detail and are recalled more readily. Based upon these principles, BOND LEGO sessions were formulated in a levelling-up for onboarding the participants through to practice-building and mastery of the approach so they can implement the approach in their own engagement with stakeholders in the farming sector, such as group discussions in roundtables for policy design.

3.2 BOND Remixing Play Workshop

The 'Remixing Play' approach is inspired by the 'design thinking' approach based on the Stanford Design Thinking Process but with the addition of play at its core development. The approach acts as the inspiration for facilitating a rapid-prototyping approach for the creation of new playful tools and resources that can be tailored to any discipline or problem. The approach has been developed with a key aim to make game-based and playful design thinking more accessible to anyone with different literacies in games design and/ or experience.

Remixing Play consists of repurposing existing games or playful activities into new playful solutions. Figure 1 shows an example of a simple Remixing Play concept (the Flash Game version) that is used to nudge participants to rapidly and playfully construct a playful concept in a brief period. This agile and playful approach helps to nudge them to realise their ability, what they care about (motivation) using simple prompts and triggers, in this case, the two cards showing (1) game/play Inspirations and (2) Challenge/Topic. The "behaviour" that we are expecting to be nurtured is the sustained practice of playful and creative thinking – a "brain-worm" that will nudge participants to continually/automatically think about playful solutions for problems, needs, challenges and opportunities that you see in your day to day living (Arnab et al, 2019b).



Figure 1. Example cards for the Remixing Play flash game (Arnab, 2019b)

Once introduced to the context of 'remixing', a group of workshop participants is encouraged with a step-by-step process (see <https://www.bondproject.eu/remixing-play-approach/>) to rapidly conceptualise a playful product or experience for their chosen audience. The design of playful experiences is tailored to a target audience (clients, stakeholders, customers, employees, etc.), which informs types of services, products, and/or technologies that can be used to facilitate those experiences. Through the use of empathy and understanding the needs of the intended audience, participants of the workshop design playful solutions to challenging problems. In the context of BOND, the approach enabled participants to discover creative ways for ideating and designing solutions to challenges and opportunities they may face in the farming sector.

3.3 What's Your Story Card Game

'What Is Your Story?' (WIYS) is a card game that promotes empathy, understanding, and communication skills amongst players, to be used with a range of audiences and stakeholder groups, across levels and disciplines, and can be made topic specific either by structuring workshop delivery around given topics, and/or adapting the design of the cards with new images. Also available in an online version (see <https://wiys.dml.org.uk/>), WIYS has three card elements: People, Context and Activity. The aim of the game is for players to create a narrative around a given topic using those elements, and to share their story with other players. The activity encourages players to employ a complex combination of skills to link disconnected abstract images to a theme. Players are encouraged to share their ideas and develop confidence in doing so, and require peer review of ideas shared.

The expected outcome is for players to recognise the value of collective intelligence based on cues which are often interpreted differently by different people as inspired by their various backgrounds, and experiences. The more we respect and are considerate of everyone's views, the more wholesome and collective the decisions and reflections we make.

WIYS aligns with BOND's core objectives in that meaningful connections are formed between individuals from different backgrounds and working environments. It is intended for use to aid relationship development, break

down barriers in communication, and begin to build confidence in individuals to stand up for stronger negotiation positions.

4. Onboarding to practice pathway

Fogg (2009) proposes a behaviour model that suggests that motivation, ability, and prompt/trigger must converge at the same moment for a behaviour to occur. In the case of promoting purposeful playful activities, the project partners and their stakeholders will need to be at the stage where these elements exist for transformative engagement and interaction to happen. There are three general phases that can help contextualise playful activities, forming the triggers that correspond with the motivational needs and ability (Arnab, 2020): (1) Onboarding - the need to encourage individuals to discover and engage with activities, (2) Practice building - scaffolding knowledge and skills development activities, and (3) Mastery/Consolidation - achieving mastery, consolidation of knowledge and competencies in the process.

Our investigation is practice-based and exploratory, providing insights into the iterative and incremental approach from the onboarding through to the consolidation phase. The following sub-sections describe some of the practice-based implementation with partners and their stakeholders to serve as examples of the activities associated to the partner and stakeholder engagements, and the role of playful techniques in these. As a baseline, all partners and members of their stakeholders were not familiar with the playful approaches from LSP and GameChangers. The aim was for these target audiences to reflect on their engagement with such approaches for providing insights into the feasibility of using the proposed tools as enablers for engagement in such serious environments.

4.1 Onboarding project partners towards practice

The partners regularly engage with farming stakeholders and in policy design. It is crucial for them to be onboarded into the understanding the value of playful approaches in their context. Workshops were organised to demonstrate the value of playful methods as powerful means for creative and inclusive team bonding, negotiations, and decision-making. The project partners were taken through the simplified LSP-inspired workshop in which they were asked to identify potential issues for the BOND project and to then develop shared strategies to minimise any impact from those issues.



Figure 2. Partners onboarded into the use of LEGO blocks for breaking barriers to team communication and decision making

The project partners were also onboarded into the WIYS approach for developing empathy and means for negotiations in a creative way. The approach has allowed them to better understand each other through the dynamics of storytelling, demonstrating the value in collective interpretations of perspectives inspired by the differing backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences.

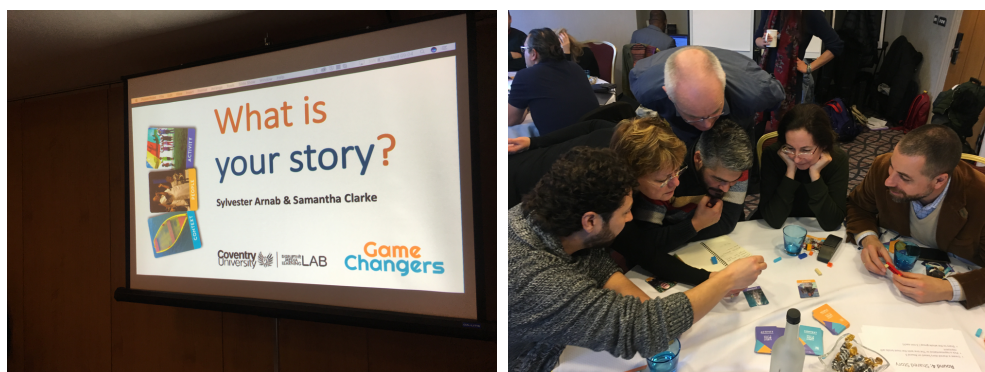


Figure 3. Partners totally immersed in the story-telling mechanics of WYIS

Partners' interest grew as they started to apply them throughout the various BOND activities and beyond, within their own organisations and networks. From the partners' reflections, LSP was the preferred tool, and it was extensively used in different contexts. Partners found that LSP allows to "bring the inner child in every person", that it is "soft and non-aggressive", and "inclusive". It facilitates "active listening" and expressing oneself in "a different way". With LSP, people speaking different languages could express themselves better and be understood. Most importantly, it was found to be a "liberating" exercise that puts people on the same level of understanding, in a safe and protected environment. A tool to "support the emotional space" is lacking in organisations. LSP adds "colours" to topics that are usually "serious and dry", allowing "out-of-the-box" thinking. The fact that there is no competition and judgement in this play was appreciated as everyone is "able to have a say and to forget personal inhibitions". Interestingly, in case of controversial issues and "hot debates in which we would grab each other's neck", LSP led instead to the creation of "a collective plan".

Similarly, cards in WIYS were found useful for negotiation and for people to open up, helping to provide "freedom of thinking". It was found effective for creating an empathic environment to initiate an event. It was suggested to tailor-make the cards to suit the farming context. Often reluctant at the start, in most cases people would become engaged and appreciate the playful approach, talking about "being thrilled" by this new discovery, and finding it "really amazing", as it was "helping to make the first steps", to enter into the flow of topics, which "as a wave" would take participants "further and further into the conversations".

4.2 Onboarding through trials with stakeholders in a real environment

This part of the onboarding is to discover the reception of playful methodologies when engaging with real stakeholders within the farming environment. The playful LEGO session was delivered as a half-day workshop at the Gyüttment Farmers Festival in Hungary. The session was open and available to attend for all interested members of the public who attended the festival.



Figure 4. Participants of the Trial run of the playful LEGO session in Hungary

To assess the reception of such a playful approach with real members of the targeted farming community, a questionnaire was developed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. The session attracted 11 participants in total. They were between the ages of 18–30 and were a mixture of students and professionals.

The responses were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting reflections on positive bonding opportunities, better understanding of how people express themselves, and creative potentials for solving problems in a team.

Although the trial of the LEGO session yielded a small sample size, the reflections that were collected provided valuable and positive insights into the participants' acceptance and perceived usefulness of the method. The festival provided a testing environment to develop understanding of the audience and allow a deeper understanding of how learning environment, and atmosphere of our future LEGO sessions should be considered. It also provided a deeper understanding of some of the issues facing the project, including the diverse end user groups and their concerns regarding the farming industry currently. This information has been used to inform the development cycle of playful approaches to be ran with the 'Champions' as part of their training.

4.3 Onboarding the 'Champions' through training in playful methodologies

Nine 'Champions' were selected to represent the farming communities in the various countries in Europe to receive face-to-face training in Coventry University for both the playful LEGO and the Remixing Play approaches. The LEGO session facilitated the identification of context to the challenges in their sector, leading to a shared understanding of what the solutions could be. These insights were then used to inspire the Remixing Play activities, where the champions worked in teams to develop playful solutions to the challenges.



Figure 5. The LEGO Session with the Champions – from identification of challenges through to shared decisions

When creating playful solutions to address some of the identified challenges during the Remixing Play workshop, it is observed that the Champions had now the understanding on the value of play that made it possible for them to design, test, and pitch their solutions. Some of the solutions developed by them are shown in Figure 6, which act as the outcome of their playful inquiry from the LEGO session through to the co-creative Remixing Play.

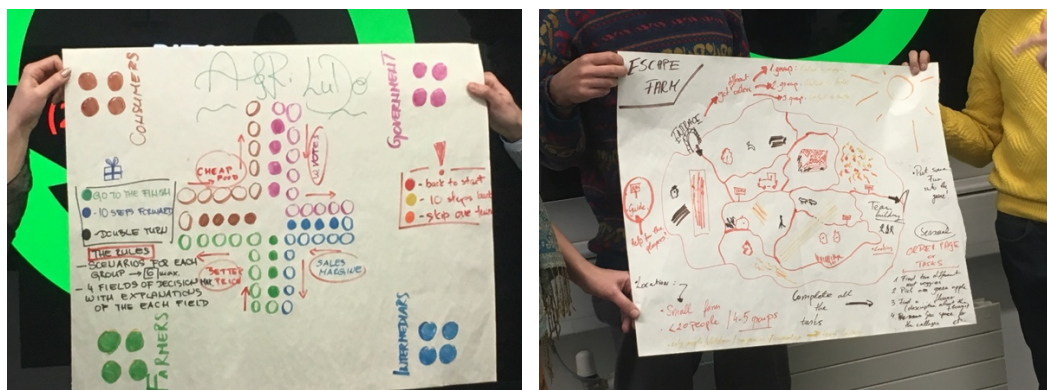


Figure 6. Two examples of the playful solutions designed by the Champions: (left) The remixing of the Ludo game for addressing decision-making in agriculture, (right) Escape Farm - remixing the escape room concept for economic diversification at an actual farm owned by one of the Champions.

Equipped with the new tools for engaging with others in the sector, these 'Champions' would then act as playful representatives across the partner countries to train others and deliver playful experiences in the national and regional roundtable workshops, with the support of the partners who have also been onboarded in the playful approaches.

4.4 Practice-building through Champions' adoption and adaptation

The playful activities have been undertaken and proposed by the Champions. This section presents an overview of how the playful methodologies can be used and adopted into real-world scenarios with the intended farming sector audience based on the Champions' accounts and reflections.

4.4.1 *Champion A*

A workshop was held in Poland with the aim to develop a communication strategy on the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, adopted by the UN on December 17, 2018, organised with representatives of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The 28 participants included organic farmers, among others associated with the Association of Food Producers (Eco-Friendly Methods EKOLAND and in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Association of Ecological Producers EKOŁAN), members of food cooperatives (Poznan and Jurajska), representatives of the Nyeleni Poland food sovereignty movement, and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

In addition to traditional forms of workshop, BOND playful methods were implemented, such as the playful LEGO session and the WIYS Card workshop, to increase the level of involvement of the participants performing specific tasks. The approaches gave everyone a chance to speak, demonstrating the richness of diversity, teaching how to work out compromises, and also mobilising the resources of subconsciousness and imagination that can be helpful in a decision-making process.

During the LEGO session, the participants were divided into two smaller groups with specific purpose to test the method learned during the implementation of the BOND project, build openness among the workshop participants, build mutual trust between the participants of the workshop, and raise the level of communication between workshop participants. The delivery of LEGO session at the beginning of the workshop prepared the participants for the next sessions, where it was important to work in a group and reach an agreement on the final workshop document. One of the groups developed a short "declaration" for the future, which illustrated the progression from the problems raised during the workshop and the ability to reach mutual agreement enabled by the approach.

The third and final day of the workshop began with the second planned element of play, i.e. in which the WIYS playing cards was delivered. The game was carried out directly before the session devoted to communication strategy, and the main objectives of including this method were to test the card game method, build the openness of participants, strengthen the ability to speak, raise the level of empathy in relation to other participants, strengthen negotiating skills, and improve the group work skills necessary in the next part of the workshop.

The playful activities outlined in Champion A's account show how two examples of playful methodologies developed and repurposed for BOND can be successfully implemented into workshops and discussions to add useful context and framing for participants on large scale issues.

4.4.2 *Champion B*

Playful LEGO session was delivered during a meeting organised with the members of the Croatian farmers association. First responses from the participants indicated that they were very surprised when they first saw the LEGO bricks. It was initially difficult to persuade participants to sit down and to start engaging with the LEGO elements. The participants presented as very shy and difficult to take initiative with the building of metaphors. They were difficult to be encouraged towards building their vision on the topic of 'collaboration', and were easily distracted. However, as the session progressed, some participants became more involved in the activity and found it to be 'fun' even though they indicated they were still unsure of its purpose. When given a limited time to build, participants were put under a time pressure mechanic which they enjoyed.

Champion B's account of delivering LEGO as part of a session indicated the difficult nature of delivering playful methodologies to participants who may have very little experience of play as a tool. The champion indicated that it was difficult to engage the participants to try different things and to get involved. However, they indicated that they believed they would be more open-minded if the session was to be delivered again.

Suggestions for aiding the implementation of playful methodologies with potentially difficult participants include the need for pre-planning and including participants in this process. Informing participants beforehand of the activity will help elevate some of the surprises on the day. Ensuring participants are fully briefed before starting the activity will also help contextualise the purpose of the activity and help guide participants to the deeper understanding behind the method.

4.4.3 Champion C

Champion C provided a report that they had used playful methodologies over two different sessions. The first was delivered with the Croatian association of young farmers, in which a small meeting was scheduled to define how to better involve all members with association activities. The LEGO method was chosen to help guide participants in developing strategies. The session was used to trial the use of LEGO working with a smaller group, in preparation to scale up to a larger workshop to be used at the annual meetings held end of year. It was found to be a very helpful method, and many of the participants were surprised at how useful it could be. The session helped participants to develop some concrete guidelines that could be taken forward as action points. One issue observed was that it was delivered to a small participant group, however plans to scale the method to larger groups are in place.

The second occasion in which playful methodologies were delivered was at a company and employees meeting for GEORG Ltd. Firstly, a presentation about playful methodologies was delivered, followed by a LEGO session. The purpose of the session was to allow all members a chance to discuss what could be improved within the company, for both employees and clients. The session focused on questioning participants what did they enjoy about the company building up to the key question of what were the possibilities for GEORG Ltd. It was found to be helpful and surprising in terms of how some participants were very open with sharing their ideas. These proved to be very detailed as participants were willing to share. The session was delivered to 6 participants and was planned to last 2 hours in total. However the workshop actually lasted more than 4 hours in total.

Champion C indicated that the participants' openness in the session was unusual, as usually in meetings they "wouldn't talk a lot and wouldn't say any concrete ideas". They have indicated that the playful session was successful with ideas identified in the session already being implemented into currently working practice.

5. Conclusions

The use of playful methodologies can potentially disrupt the formality of workshops, roundtables, and meetings associated with activities of the farming sector. The paper has described the methodologies developed and re-purposed for the engagement with the stakeholders in this sector, underpinned by practice-based exploration, where partners and champions were onboarded towards practice-building in real environments.

The partners were onboarded into the playful process and they then tested the approaches in their practices with positive feedback on the value and potential impact. Of particular relevance for the farming sector in relation to other constituencies, play was found relevant to help level power relationships and to allow voices to be heard. People could speak freely. It was found "liberating", opening the mind and visions, "digging in the brain", and "allowing to move beyond rigid mind frameworks. It was also found "emotionally involving", as it creates "harmony", and allows to "overcome barriers and prejudice". Overcoming their limits, people are then able to "open-up". The playful approach allows stakeholders to "reset the vision of an organisation", as well as an important tool for "collective diagnosis and collective solutions". The practice showed that with play, people would "think deeper" and all stakeholders, be it from farms, ministries, authorities, and beyond, would become "extremely proactive" and build their stories, thus generating heated and passionate discussions on farming, intimately connected to their own lives (Hilmi, 2018).

In some political contexts, it was found that the use of games would be difficult or premature, in view of the “stiffness” of government officials, and that these techniques are still “too far stretched”. As outlined by the Champions’ accounts and reflections on utilising the playful methods with their participants, evidence has been presented that stakeholders have found the methods to be useful, productive and a fun way to develop real-time strategies for their business needs. It has also demonstrated their formidable potential for negotiation with other entities, and levelling power inequalities. It has, however, also flagged up the need to ensure that target audience are given sufficient information around why playful methods are effective tools. Further support is required to further guide the Champions and partners of the BOND project to contextualise the use of playful methodologies within their practice towards mastery and consolidation of insights for sustainable practices. The importance of well-trained facilitators was repeatedly emphasised in the partners’ reflections. With additional guidance, the hope is to break down barriers and perceived notions of frivolous play with difficult-to-engage participants.

This paper has described some of the examples of our engagements that were enabled and complemented by the playful approaches. The overall outcome is that, prior to project start, in 2017, playful techniques application in serious domains were unfamiliar territories to the 17 consortium partners from 12 countries, and also to the 117 farmer representatives from 34 European countries. In January 2019, nine Champions were trained to become trainers and facilitators, and consortium partners were coached to be able to apply the techniques in their own countries. By May 2020, the techniques had been used throughout BOND activities namely in 14 national workshops in 10 countries, in 4 policy roundtables in 4 regions, in a youth forum in one country (Norway), and in the lab experiment in one country (Moldova). Overall, in just one and a half years, 172 people directly practiced gaming in BOND, and they themselves applied the techniques in their own networks. Today, 82 percent of the partners have reused and incorporated the tools in their own organisations for strategic planning and group cohesion, and over 80 percent of the champions have facilitated between two and four gaming sessions in food and farming workshops each.

As part of the ongoing engagement between partners and their stakeholders, the results of these playful sessions are reported as having: created better group cohesion and empathy at the start of the meetings, thus resulting in significantly better outcomes (reported in 18 major meetings); triggered in-depth discussion allowing better political debate (4 policy statements EU level produced as a result); allowed easier negotiation (12 Memoranda of Understanding produced with formal alliances intra and inter-regional as a result, <https://www.bondproject.eu/mou-memorandum-of-understanding/>); levelled power relationships (first time farmers sitting *and* debating with other constituencies reported in 2 thirds of the meetings); allowed people otherwise silent to express themselves and be heard (e.g. women farmers in Macedonia), with facilitators reporting that unleashing of marginal voices resulted in an increase in pride and a sense of belonging; broadened the vision (reported in four Board meetings) resulting in 29 plans of action being monitored; contributed to conflict resolution or to avoiding inherent conflict (three reported cases). A clear indication of success is that 85 percent of the people interviewed so far have either re-applied the techniques, either plan to apply them in the near future. In addition, numerous requests were received by the project Coordinator, to provide more training of Champions, and to create new games specifically dedicated to the farming community. Further work will include continuing with the engagement and feedback to be reported with findings to be published in the near future, building on the outcomes so far.

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