

Report on Lessons Learned from Integrating Physical and Virtual Networking and Co- Creation Tools

MARGISTAR COST Action

Transforming marginalised mountainous
areas towards their green, digital, and
healthy futures

Deliverable No.: WG1

Prof. As. Dr. Mirela Mango Tase
Dr. Murat Sarginci
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Executive Summary

MARGISTAR was founded on face-to-face meetings, simultaneous knowledge sharing, and collaboration and co-creation. In Europe, FAIRWAY offered a continuous digital platform; webinars and online WG1 meetings provided regular opportunities for thematic and operational contact; physical workshops kept discussions connected to the mountain regions and the actual situations of the various stakeholders; and Virtual Mobility turned our interactions into a common policy output. The different tools worked most efficiently as part of an integrated engagement system, rather than as individual activities. The main lesson is that hybrid networking creates value through continuity. Physical meetings were important for building trust, providing context, and achieving a shared understanding. At the same time, virtual tools reduced the sense of distance, enabled greater participation from different countries, and allowed the work to continue between events. Webinar recordings, file sharing, and platform posts introduced an asynchronous dimension to knowledge exchange, making it reusable. The approach also revealed recurring difficulties: uneven participation, language barriers, unclear monitoring data, insufficient follow-up after events, and a lack of long-term platform moderation and funding. Overall, FAIRWAY functions most effectively when each activity includes a clear process from preparation through live interaction, output documentation, and follow-up and reuse. Although technology enables co-creation, facilitation, ownership, and evidence management determine whether the engagement leads to long-term collaboration.

1. Purpose and Evidence Base

The report corresponds to WG1.4, which is the eight-month deliverable covering Months 32 to 40. It draws on the most recent WG1 progress presentation, the WG1 work plan, the Virtual Mobility report, the tracked WG1 draft, and public information available on the MARGISTAR, FAIRWAY, and COST websites. The analysis is thorough: it examines what has worked, what has not, and what should be kept or improved beyond the Action—the integrated networking and co-creation model. According to the official description of the Action, MARGISTAR is a society-science-policy forum that uses both physical and virtual meetings to co-design the future of mountain life, making it greener, more digital, and safer. WG1 realized this through its relationships, knowledge exchange, co-production, and continuity. FAIRWAY supplied the digital infrastructure that researchers, civil society organizations, policymakers, NGOs, SMEs, and public bodies needed. The in-person workshops added depth to the group; webinars and online meetings enabled daily contact and the sharing of documents and recordings; and Virtual Mobility facilitated production between meetings (COST, 2026; MARGISTAR, 2026a).

2. How the Tools Complemented One Another

FAIRWAY in Europe	Persistent multilingual community space; posts, interest groups, messaging and access to shared content.	Launched in January 2024. Latest internal monitoring reports 150+ members and 13 languages.	Registration does not automatically translate into active contribution; moderation and post-event follow-up are essential.
Webinars / Summit Series	Low-cost transnational knowledge exchange, visibility for member research and reusable recordings.	Eight webinars reported in the latest WG1 deck; the public program began in May 2024.	Interaction can become one-way if sessions lack structured questions, breakout work and a documented follow-up task.
Online WG1 meetings	Coordination, rapid feedback on questionnaires and planning across countries.	The latest progress deck reports fourteen meetings; earlier records show attendance ranging from 21 to 46.	Participation and completion of assigned contributions were uneven.
Physical workshops	Trust, field observation, informal	Albania workshop, 5-6 October 2023; Bulgaria workshop	Higher cost and smaller reach; learning can be

	exchange and locally grounded co-design.	reported for September 2024.	lost unless captured and transferred online.
Virtual Mobility	Focused bilateral co-production involving HEIs and students; conversion of exchange into a policy brief.	Four meetings and multiple exchanges in June 2025; student input from Albania and Türkiye.	Language support and clear evidence protocols were needed; participation figures differ across records.

3. The Co-Creation Cycle

There is a genuine cycle at work: you define the problem and identify the participants; you prepare using FAIRWAY and shared files; then you meet either in person or online; you record the decisions and capture the knowledge of the stakeholders; you publish the output; and finally you send it back to the platform for further discussion. When this cycle breaks down, it accounts for many poor results. An event that fails to produce a reusable output is merely episodic; a platform post that lacks facilitation rarely leads to co-creation; and a workshop that omits digital follow-up restricts transnational learning.

The SMART-RURAL COST Action has said they are interested in taking over the management and maintenance of FAIRWAY.

KPI	Status	Goal	Outcome
Number of Users	152	140	Exceeded
Number of Visits	10,000+	2,000	Exceeded
Number of Group Page Visits	2,629	1,000	Exceeded
Time Spent on News Feed	200+h	150h	Exceeded

4. Core Lessons Learned

However, physical and virtual methods produce different kinds of value. The physical workshops were most effective for building trust, sharing informal knowledge, and providing relevant context. At the Albania meeting, we combined discussions on platform design with visits to mountain and rural areas, as well as interactions with external stakeholders. As a result, abstract questions about marginalization could be linked to our own lives, our institutional histories, and the local initiatives we had. In WG1, we looked at three design types and 15 sub-topics (MARGISTAR, 2023). The virtual methods

achieved the greatest reach, frequency, and continuity. WG1's online meetings allowed members from many countries to refine a stakeholder report model, develop a questionnaire, and plan webinar activities without traveling. The webinars provided experts with an opportunity to present cases from their countries, and asynchronously recorded knowledge could be made available. The takeaway is that one mode does not replace the other; each should be used for the work it does best.

Continuity should be based on outputs rather than on the number of events.

The increase in platform launches, meetings, webinars, questionnaires, manuscripts, and project applications shows that frequent contact can lead to a range of outputs. Recent evidence of progress also includes a policy paper, four manuscripts currently under review, an Erasmus+ proposal, and a Horizon Europe submission. This shows clear signs of network development beyond simple attendance, involving both collaboration and actual production. However, the early records of WG1 also show that only two people have carried out the requested stakeholder report. This suggests that sending invitations and holding meetings does not ensure contributions from a wide range of participants. Each activity should have a designated owner, involve a small, time-limited task, specify an agreed output format, and provide a visible return to contributors. Often, many members should make a brief contribution rather than only a small number completing an ambitious template.

It has nothing to do with the platform's features; it's about facilitation.

FAIRWAY includes a range of features typical of digital communities, such as profiles, general posts, interest groups, discussions in people's journals, and direct messaging, and it is intended to be an international platform. However, features alone cannot create network effects. Participation rose when an activity included a clear invitation, a topic to address, a speaker or facilitator, and a clear next step. We recorded live events, circulated webinar announcements, and connected subsequent posts to the platform. Yet we still need a more systematic approach to moderation if we are to turn viewers and registrants into regular contributors. Practical implication: Each webinar or workshop should include one pre-event prompt on FAIRWAY, one participatory task during the session, and one post-event output with a named follow-up owner. This simple sequence makes the platform an integral part of the method, not just a communication tool.

The useful life of collaboration can be extended through asynchronous access.

Webinar recordings, along with uploaded presentations, abstracts, and CVs, enable learning to continue after the live event. Because members of a geographically scattered network have competing academic and professional commitments, asynchronous access is especially important. It also benefits early-career researchers who may need time to get used to the topics being discussed or who cannot attend all the events. Materials are more likely to be reused when recordings include a short abstract, keywords, speaker information, and a discussion question, rather than being kept as videos alone.

Support for multilingual inclusion should be provided.

In the most recent WG1 deck, FAIRWAY is offered in 13 languages as a major design response to the European network; however, for the Virtual Mobility project, language remained a barrier because some students in Albania and Türkiye could not write in English and therefore needed translations. While platform translation helps with navigation, it does not necessarily lead to greater confidence, improved academic expression, or equitable participation. Achieving inclusive co-creation will require simple-language prompts, multilingual summaries, assigning translation responsibilities, and, where possible, accepting contributions in more than one language.

Virtual Mobility can turn networking into a bounded co-production model.

The virtual mobility event in June 2025 involving Mirela Tase and Murat Sargıncı was well organized and productive, featuring preparatory scoping, the sharing of relevant literature, the assignment of roles, a kick-off meeting with the students, the preparation of a questionnaire, the drafting of documents, and the development of a policy brief. Students from bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs expressed their views on sustainable development in mountain areas and the SDGs. The initiative linked two higher education institutions, included young participants, and produced a policy-oriented output that MARGISTAR (Tase and Sargıncı, 2025; MARGISTAR, 2025) could make available. Its strengths are instructive, as are its limitations. The internal report mentions that more than 20 students attended the kick-off meeting, whereas a subsequent article on the website states that over 50 did. This doesn't mean the activity didn't take place, but it does show the need for common definitions, attendance lists, and final evidence checks. Quality monitoring is part of co-creation quality because credible evidence supports learning, accountability, and future funding.

The study of hybrid networking showed common structural problems in the mountain areas.

Through webinars, workshops, and stakeholder engagement, four themes emerged: brain drain, limited economic and educational opportunities, a mismatch between local needs and the services provided, and fragmented action across governance levels. The integrated model enabled cross-country comparisons while still allowing place-specific interpretations. FAIRWAY could thus function as a comparative learning infrastructure provided that the cases are recorded in a common yet flexible format.

Funding (most of it coming from the government) is not evenly spread across the country, with smaller regions receiving less. Expectations differ among people in rural areas, citizens in general, and the various levels of government. Citizens should take a more active role in decision-making. Small municipalities (those in rural areas) outside mountainous regions can also be considered marginal areas. Rural areas face management challenges (social, economic, and environmental). Infrastructure is the main problem in marginalized areas, and digital infrastructure is, too. Connectivity is hard to achieve. Roads are in poor condition. Policy outlooks need to change because too few are tailored to mountainous areas. We should concentrate on mountainous areas rather than on all rural areas.

5. Constraints, Risks and Corrective Responses

Evidence supports a credible hybrid model, but operational weaknesses could reduce its effectiveness if not addressed. Key limitations include participation, evidence quality, inclusion, cross-channel integration, and sustainability after the COST Action.

Uneven contribution	Attendance could be strong, but very few members completed the requested follow-up products.	Reduce contribution size; assign named owners and deadlines; publish a visible contribution tracker; recognize completed inputs.
Event-platform disconnect	Announcements and recordings were uploaded, but the team did not document a consistent pre-, during-, and post-event engagement sequence.	Use a standard engagement protocol linking each event to FAIRWAY before and after the live session.
Monitoring inconsistency	Internal and public sources contain different counts for members, meeting attendance, and milestone progress.	Create a data dictionary, evidence register, and single validated dashboard with a reporting cut-off date.
Language and digital barriers	Multilingual infrastructure supported access, but some participants still required translation and support.	Provide plain-language prompts, multilingual summaries, designated translation support, and low-bandwidth alternatives.
Stakeholder imbalance	Researchers were easier to mobilize than local actors, SMEs, public administrators, and policymakers.	Recruit through trusted intermediaries; use targeted country invitations; compensate or recognize stakeholder time where possible.
Sustainability risk	WG1 identified the need for a post-MARGISTAR host, moderation model, and funding route.	Agree ownership, governance, moderation effort, minimum service level, data protection, and a funded transition plan before Action closure.

In future reports, we should address these aspects at the appropriate levels. Reach refers to the number of people who received or viewed the content; engagement means that a person attended, commented, answered a survey, or took part in a discussion; co-creation occurs when a person has influenced something, for example, a dataset, a concept, a recommendation, or a jointly owned output. If all three are counted as participation, the impact may be overstated; reporting them separately would make FAIRWAY's performance more transparent and show where facilitation is effective and where further support is needed. Principle relating to quality: a smaller, more diverse group that

transforms an output through deliberation represents stronger co-creation than a larger audience that merely receives information.

6. Recommendations for the Final Phase and Continuation

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Adopt FAIRWAY engagement protocol.	a	For every event: publish a pre-event question, use one interactive task, upload a structured summary, and assign a follow-up owner within five working days.	Connects platform activity, live interaction, and reuse; increases conversion from attendance to contribution.
Establish evidence monitoring system.	one and	Use standard definitions for registered, active, attending, contributing, and co-creating participants. Reconcile figures before publication.	Improves credibility, comparability and final reporting; supports funding proposals.
Curate searchable knowledge collection.	a	Tag recordings, abstracts, cases, questionnaires, policy outputs and presentations by country, topic, actor and output type.	Turns dispersed activity into an accessible resource for researchers, stakeholders and young scholars.
Strengthen inclusive facilitation		Use multilingual summaries, accessible prompts, varied session times, stakeholder-friendly formats and targeted invitations through local intermediaries.	Broadens participation beyond the most confident and digitally active academic members.
Formalize post-Action governance		Name a host, moderation team and advisory group; define costs, responsibilities, data rules and an escalation process; pursue continuation funding.	Protects the investment in FAIRWAY and avoids a decline after September 2026.
Close the learning loop.	the	Publish this report with a two-page practice note and invite a final FAIRWAY validation discussion with members and non-academic stakeholders.	Tests the findings, documents dissent and produces a transferable model for other COST Actions.

7. Conclusion

WG1 shows us that integrated networking is not a trade-off between physical and virtual interaction; rather, it is a purposeful division of labor across different modes of interaction. In-person workshops built trust, place-based knowledge, and more informal interaction. Virtual meetings and webinars expanded geographic participation and sustained momentum. FAIRWAY provided continuity, visibility, and asynchronous access. Virtual Mobility demonstrated how structured online collaboration can produce a concrete policy output and involve young people from different countries. The model is most effective when we connect activities and knowledge with facilitation, documentation, and ownership. So our next stage should not be adding events, but transforming each event into participation, co-created outputs, and reusable evidence. FAIRWAY needs a sound monitoring system, language support, a searchable knowledge collection, and a funded governance model to remain relevant beyond MARGISTAR. Transferable lesson for COST Actions: Think of the digital platform as an engagement process with named human roles, not as a repository. As indicators of collaboration, we use physical meetings for depth, virtual meetings for continuity, asynchronous resources for reuse, and shared outputs.

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