A4Cap Assembly 2023

Report on the 1st edition the A4Cap Assembly, an initiative by the **A**lternet **A**lumni **for Cap**acity-building Network

3-10 March, Spa (Belgium)











Summer school photos: Allan Watt

This pilot event took place thanks to the generous support of Biodiversa+ and Alternet.

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Summary

This report is the main outcome of the first A4Cap Assembly. The first section provides insight into the processes that led to the idea and construction of the A4Cap network. The second section provides a detailed description of the organisation, content and outcomes of the assembly. The assembly and prior experiences form the basis of the future for the A4Cap that we outline in the third section of the report. In the final section we briefly look at the next steps for the A4Cap network.

Key outcomes of the first A4Cap Assembly:

- The vision of the A4Cap network and its corresponding governance structure and relationship with the Alternet Association, the Alternet Summer School and Biodiversa+
- Proof of concept for a general structure and protocol for future A4Cap Assemblies

Highlighted benefits of the A4Cap to Alumni:

- Capacity building in the form of knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer training. This function was piloted during the assembly and is envisioned to be embedded in a "living tool box" to which alumni can contribute and draw from. This can also serve as the basis for presentations within the Alternet partners community.
- Creation of an up-to-date Alternet alumni contact list to foster the relationships within the network

A4Cap Benefits to Alternet Association:

- Formulation of a durable, long-term network model and governance structure for the Alternet Summer School alumni community
- Creation of a capacity-building platform for professionals and (young) researchers in the Alternet alumni community
- Exploration of opportunities for further Alternet-branded research activities, conference sessions, international presentations, etc.
- Further and more active engagement and exchange of knowledge, resources, and expertise between professionals of Alternet partners, especially including those at an early career stage
- Alternet branding and a presentation on the identity of Alternet and benefits of membership for non-partner participants
- Direct contact between the Alternet Management Board or Alternet Network Council to launch proposals relevant to alumni
- Alumni-led planning of potential future capacity-building events that reach beyond the direct alumni network (e.g. conferences, workshops)

1. The A4Cap Initiative

The value and impact of the Alternet summer school for education, capacity-building, and networking has been consistently demonstrated by testimonials and in follow-up surveys. With its integrative approach and emphasis on transdisciplinarity, the summer school occupies a distinct and crucial niche in the European biodiversity research sphere. Furthermore, its “Network for Life'' approach to community-building has proven highly successful. Summer school alumni comprise some of the most engaged, dynamic, and visible advocates for the Alternet community in Europe and beyond. However, following the conclusion of summer schools, alumni are currently lacking opportunities to continue nurturing the community initiated in Peyresq and to follow-up on opportunities for collaboration and peer-support. Only in the more recent years have Alternet Summer School alumni used the momentum and platform created by the summer school to stay more connected and collaborate on joint goals.

The summer school cohorts of 2019 and 2021 have independently organised consortium-building activities as alumni. The 2019 alumni consortium produced a successful Alternet High Impact Actions (AHIA) proposal leading to a paper currently under review. The 2021 alumni consortium conducted research on transdisciplinary education with the Alternet Summer School as a case study and published this in a scientific paper (Atienza Casas et al. 2023). For developing and writing the paper they hosted a self-organised “winter school” research workshop with support from the Alternet Mobility Fund. Both consortia additionally hosted sessions at the 2022 Alternet Conference in Ghent, and the 2021 alumni additionally presented an award-winning poster at the 2022 Ecosystems Services Partnership (ESP) conference.

These alumni initiatives have highlighted the potential Alternet Summer School has for a more active long-term impact. This potential was especially underlined by Atienza Casas et al. (2023): “*the changes experienced at the summer school can indeed contribute to transforming societies. This is supported by constructing a network of people willing to question how we live within the world, engaging in critical thinking, and integrating more transdisciplinarity into science education [...] the role of community was highlighted as key for learning how to enact change within society.*”

These initial activities of the 2019 and 2021 alumni cohorts have provided an effective platform for exploring the kinds of ongoing activities a proactive alumni community could be involved in, and outputs that could arise for furthering transdisciplinary research and collaboration. Furthermore, these activities have also explored what is needed to support a more connected and vibrant alumni community. With this support the alumni can work together to more fully live out the vision of the Alternet Summer School as a lifelong network among biodiversity and ecosystem service researchers and professionals.

To further stimulate such positive outcomes, a subset of the alumni from the 2019 and 2021 cohort, as well as from other summer school years, have taken the initiative to propose a follow-up activity to the Alternet Summer School and the more formal establishment of an active alumni network to which all past and future students are invited to participate. This subset of alumni aimed to continue and nurture the dynamic and productive post-summer school networks initiated in their respective years. Building on this goal, they envisioned the establishment of activities and community structures to facilitate the connection of current and future alumni and support an active alumni community. This idea inspired the proposed Alternet Alumni for Capacity-building (A4Cap) network and the corresponding annual assembly event of the network. The A4Cap network and annual assembly are proposed as an ongoing platform for Alternet Summer School alumni to stay actively engaged and further support each other by offering opportunities for peer-to-peer capacity-development.

This report provides detailed feedback on the first annual A4Cap assembly. As the first ever event of this kind, the main goal of the assembly was to come together as a multi-year alumni group to brainstorm the establishment of a more active and more broadly supported alumni network. Moreover, the event served as a pilot version of what is envisioned to become an annual event. This report details the program and outcomes of the assembly event itself, including the proposal for establishing the A4Cap network.

2. The pilot A4Cap Assembly

2.1. Location & accommodation



The A4Cap Assembly took place in the town of Spa, in Belgium from 3-10 March 2023. Spa is situated in a valley in the Ardennes mountains and it hosts a population of around 10,000 people in an area of ~40km^2. Spa was selected as the meeting location as it is central in Europe and has good accessibility by train. Moreover, the town is enveloped within a region rich in its unique natural landscape and cultural heritage. This provided a suitable backdrop for the A4Cap Assembly to nurture a similar spirit of engaged collaboration and a sense of community as is present in the Alternet summer school.

The A4Cap Assembly 2023 took place in a spacious house. This house was selected because it is large enough to comfortably accommodate at least 20 people. Furthermore, it has many common areas suitable for break-out sessions and one large room which served to hold general meetings with the whole group.





2.2. Functioning & Principles of the Assembly

The A4Cap Assembly 2023 was self-organised by Alternet Summer School alumni for Alternet Summer School alumni. A non-hierarchical structure was maintained throughout the organisation and duration of the event. This horizontal structure allowed for equal opportunity for participation and ensured transparency every step of the way (e.g. regarding organisation, planning, finances, short and long term goals, expected outcomes). In this spirit, participants determined their desired working principles for the 2023 A4Cap Assembly as a group. In addition to remaining self-organised, horizontal, and transparent, participants envisioned the following working and functioning principles:

- Ensure equitable opportunities for participation
- Encourage a collaborative, positive atmosphere that facilitates out-of-the box thinking and creativity
- Strive for openness and inclusivity to maintain trust and harbour a sense of security and support among participants
- Remain flexible to adapt well to new or unexpected situations, changes, or ideas
- Function in a way (as an individual and organisation) that considers and supports the physical, mental, and social health of all participants
- Aim to maintain a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere that encourages active involvement for the duration of the event and beyond

2.3. Format & Programme

Prior to the A4Cap 2023 Assembly, all participating alumni were invited to co-construct the program. The alumni could offer to hold a workshop on soft or hard skills and could give input on evening activities and field trips. This effort was coordinated by a group of volunteers from different years who circulated the schedule prior to the assembly.

The program consisted of the following aspects:

- Group project:
  - Plenary meetings devoted to organising the A4Cap network
  - Break out sessions for working in sub-groups on tasks that have been assigned during general group work sessions
- Capacity building peer-to-peer workshops, where participants shared some specific skills and/or knowledge which they find helpful to support the professional work, as well as personal and professional well-being
- Nature walk in the Fagnes with the guide Philippe Calonne (in collaboration with the tourism office of Spa)

This was supplemented by a variety of physical health and teambuilding activities to engage the body and the heart:

- Yoga and/or sport sessions in the morning
- Communal cooking and eating
- Team building activities in the evening (e.g. games, poetry, singing, dancing, etc)

Apart from collective moments there were also individual working slots for working on individual tasks or for attending to work related commitments.

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>Friday</td><td>Saturday</td><td>Sunday</td><td>Monday</td><td>Tuesday</td><td>Wednesday</td><td>Thursday</td><td>Friday</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>03.03.23</td><td>04.03.23</td><td>05.03.23</td><td>06.03.23</td><td>07.03.23</td><td>08.03.23</td><td>09.03.23</td><td>10.03.23</td></tr>
<tr><td>Before 9</td><td colspan="8">Optional yoga with Louise and breakfast</td></tr>
<tr><td>9:00-10:30</td><td></td><td>General meeting and ice breaker</td><td>Break-out sessions</td><td>Break-out sessions</td><td>Break-out sessions</td><td>Break-out sessions</td><td>Break-out sessions</td><td rowspan="4">Departure 10 am</td></tr>
<tr><td>10:30-11:00</td><td></td><td rowspan="2">Nature park field trip</td><td>BREAK</td><td>BREAK</td><td>BREAK</td><td>BREAK</td><td rowspan="2">Farm field trip</td></tr>
<tr><td>11:00-12:30</td><td></td><td>Multifunctional Landscapes</td><td>Break-out sessions</td><td>Navigating oppressive academia</td><td>Break-out sessions</td></tr>
<tr><td>12:30-14:00</td><td></td><td>LUNCH</td><td>LUNCH</td><td>LUNCH</td><td>LUNCH</td><td>LUNCH</td><td>LUNCH</td></tr>
</table>

14:00-16:30		Project work	Project work	Project work	Project work	Project work	Project work	
16:30-17:00	Arrival	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	
17:00-18:00		Life Decisions	Deep Ecology	Shiny apps for research	Peer Mentoring	Science Communication	Packing	
18:00-19:30		Individual work	Individual work	Individual work	Individual work	Individual work	Individual work	
19:30 onwards	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	
	Team Building	Team Building	Team Building	Team Building	Team Building	Team Building	Team Building	
	Colour key:	Individual Time	Field trip	Capacity Building Workshops	Project work	Team building		

2.4. List of participants

The A4Cap Assembly 2023 was originally planned for a group of at least 20 people. However, due to different reasons (i.e., sickness, visa issues, unsecured funding at the time of booking) out of 21 registered people, six had to cancel their participation.
The following 15 people attended the A4Cap meeting in Spa:

Name	**Summer school cohort**	**Institution & Country**
Anna Heck	2022	INBO/ BBPf, Belgium
Carla Washbourne	2019	UCL, UK
Christine Frison	2021	UCLouvain, Belgium
Eleonore Slabbert	2018	UFZ, Germany
George Linney	2019	UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology
Jomme Desair	2021	INBO, Belgium
Julia Bethe	2022	FRB - Biodiversa+, France
Kristen Jakstis	2022	University of Stuttgart - ILPÖ, Germany
Louise Vercruysse	2022	INBO, Belgium

Maria Hänsel	2021	University of Bayreuth, Germany
Nicolas Dendoncker	2006	Université de Namur
Sofia Sadogurska	2022	M.G. Kholodny Institute of Botany, NAS of Ukraine
Thea Wübbelmann	2021	Climate Service Center Germany
Tyler Kulfan	2021	Alternet, Belgium
Francis Turkelboom	Summer school guest speaker	INBO, Belgium

2.5. Budget overview

Due to the lower attendance than initially expected, funding granted by Alternet and Biodiversa+ was not used in full. Details on the different budget lines are listed below.

	Initially requested	**Granted funding**	**Required funding**
Funding by Alternet	4000 €	**3000 €**	**1914.97 €**
for food			1343.01 €
for travel costs			571.96 €
Funding by Biodiversa+	4900 €	**5000 €**	**4856.87 €**
for accommodation			4500 €
for food			246.87 €
for field trips			110 €
Total budget	8900 €	**8000 €**	**6771.84 €**

2.6. Report of daily activities

2.6.1. Project work

The entire A4Cap assembly was articulated around project work. It was intended to formally agree on the format, content, and objectives of the A4Cap network and future Alumni assemblies, especially with the vision of establishing a more formal frame around the network of alumni that will grow every year after the annual summer school.

2.6.1.1. Working sessions

Everyday, a session was scheduled to work on the envisioned A4Cap network. These sessions always followed the same structure:

- Summary of outcomes and decisions from the previous session
- Action plan of the session and expected outcomes
- Open discussions
- Conclusion with summary of outcomes, potential actions points and follow-up needs for the next session

All decisions regarding methods and desired outcomes were discussed and agreed on collectively.

The first session of the project work was a scene-setting introduction. Alternet and Biodiversa+ were introduced respectively by Tyler and Julia, as these organisations co-funded the event. Previous alumni gatherings and their respective achievements were introduced as well, to exemplify possible outcomes of such events (e.g. the gathering in 2022 of 2021 summer school alumni that resulted in the submission of an academic paper).

This session was the opportunity to better understand the landscape in which the A4Cap intends to establish itself. This was achieved through open discussion and specific time dedicated to questions and answers regarding Alternet, Biodiversa+, and their structures and funding models. At the end of this session, discussions focused on the structure and relation with Alternet for future assemblies. This was a first step and during the week more targeted and detailed discussions were conducted that ultimately led to group decisions regarding A4Cap and the annual Assembly.

This introductory session was concluded with the agreement to discuss the following day the needs and wants of alumni with regards to such an alumni network. A “brainstorm wall” was established for the consideration of long-term funding and the general funding model of the proposed active alumni network including its relationship to Alternet and Biodiversa+.



Picture: Brainstorming of the vision for A4Cap, grouping of ideas in response to the question “Our Vision for A4Cap & Network in general”.

The second session of the project work aimed at mapping the vision for A4Cap, with the postulate that the vision would help clarify the governance needs, which at a later stage guide the way to define the desired relationship with Alternet and Biodiversa+.

After a recap of the previous day's outcomes, there was a short time of open discussion on what the added value of the network would be in complement with other existing networks (ESP, YESS, …). It was agreed to work on identifying and describing goals, structure, functioning, and outputs of the alumni network to distinguish these from other groups.

Two sub-groups were established, one working on ‘governance’ and the other on ‘vision/mission’. Both groups discussed openly the ideas they had for these two key pillars of the network.

On governance, it was agreed by consensus to adopt a horizontal structure. The alumni with past experience of governance of horizontal organisations shared their experience to provide examples. The working group proposed the following: A core group, composed of alumni from various years, would lead the overall work of the A4Cap through task forces. The main challenge highlighted regarding this structure, was to ensure that knowledge and experience from previous alumni is well communicated to the new alumni every year, as well as to engage the new alumni sufficiently to contribute with their own experiences and knowledge.

Concerning the vision and mission, a collaborative thinking exercise led to the establishment of the following:

Mission	Create a **transdisciplinary collaborative network** of the Alternet summer school

	alumni. Create a **safe, supportive and inclusive** network by cultivating equitable opportunities and respect among researchers. Advocating and advertising this ethical research environment to Alternet partners and beyond. **Develop skills and capacities** through knowledge exchange events such as A4Cap assemblies: i.e. soft skills, methodology oriented, transdisciplinary , interpersonal skills, communication, etc. Implementing a **non-hierarchical and self-organising working structure** (cf. governance). Preserve the longevity of this network through an **annual A4Cap knowledge sharing event** and possible interim online gatherings. Have lots of fun by doing all of the above.
Vision	**Develop collaborative networks** - Safe* - Supportive - Inclusive - Fun - Develop skills and capacities - Horizontal and non-hierarchical structure - Transdisciplinary - Long lasting (network for life) ** trust, health, feeling comfortable to speak / be heard*

In the third working session, summaries of the vision and governance structure were informally presented. These presentations were followed by discussions on the concrete implementation of the governance approach through mapping. It was rapidly agreed that formal structures such as Advisory Boards were not fitting for the A4Cap model considering the desired flat hierarchy. Regarding governance, the role and number of possible core teams were also openly discussed, based on the outcomes from the previous discussions concerning the hierarchy and the will to let new alumni take active roles in the network when they step in. It was decided that team compositions and tasks for the coming year would be discussed each year during the annual A4Cap assembly meeting.

In order to find a network name both catchy and representative of the network objectives, A brainstorm was conducted during this session. It was decided in session 4 the next day that propositions from everyone would be welcomed and shared with everyone for a vote. The votes would be anonymous and through an online poll.

Session four, started with a summary of the progress so far. Overall, it was made clear during the introductory discussion that collaboration of the network would need to be

strong. Additionally, for the governance to be effective it should not be too strict or with too many boundaries, but strong and clear enough to not change in an undesired direction over time. The question on how to promote the network to future alumni was raised; the possibility to have dedicated time during the summer school was discussed as an option to address this need.

The session objective was to establish the branding and public identity of the network. It started with discussions on the name, with votes on each other's proposals (see above, session 3). This led to framing the relationship with Alternet and the summer school through an open discussion. As a result of this discussion, it became clear that there is a will for the network to not function as an Alternet taskforce, but rather be a more collaborative entity emphasising its own culture and goals. Similar discussions were conducted on the relationship with the summer school, with concerns raised about the already-full summer school agenda and remoteness of the location making it unfeasible for an A4Cap member to attend and promote the network.

Regarding the financial plan, it was highlighted how important it would be to secure funding for the network to be more stable, and not only rely on students' and alumni's organisation funds. Different options were explored, from applying for external funding to asking for support from Biodiversa+ and Alternet. Based on the first A4Cap assembly in 2023, around 10 000 € (see section 2.7.2 below) is likely necessary to organise a yearly meeting.

In the fifth session, the discussions centred around the purpose for future and new activities on the A4Cap, as well as how to manage a contact list and database of members. Ideas were shared for the next A4Cap schedule and activities (2024 edition). This included preparation for participation in the next Alternet Conference. Different proposals for the format and schedule of future A4Cap assemblies were discussed and it was commonly agreed that the best option would be a hybrid meeting during the first day for the general assembly, and the rest of the activities and work in person. Ideally future A4Cap assemblies will be a full week, from Monday evening (arriving) to Sunday morning (leaving) (see section 2.7.1 below).

In terms of communication, a contact list of alumni would be established, understanding the limitation that it will be more difficult to obtain up-to-date information for alumni from earlier years. Regarding branding, it was agreed that it would be optimal to secure permission from Alternet to use their logo as a base for the A4Cap logo. This logo could be developed in the coming year.

The last session for the project work focused on the outputs, additional follow-up tasks, the agreed upon final governance structure, and determining teams to divide work arising from identified 'next steps'.

The poll for the name of the network also closed on day six with the most votes for: A4Cap (Alternet Alumni for Capacity-building).

Concerning the next steps, it was decided that a report would be written on the basis of the shared notes taken during the session, in a joint effort by all attendees. Additionally, some communication work would be started, i.e. contacting alumni that had previously expressed interest in joining A4Cap activities.

Ultimately, the outcomes of the project work sessions led to the formal proposal detailed in section 3 "A4Cap: A formal proposal for developing an Alternet Alumni network for capacity-building".

2.6.2. Peer to peer capacity-building workshops

One of A4Cap's objectives is to build capacity of skills and competences that are necessary to carry out research on, or work in the field of, biodiversity conservation, and more broadly to support life and activities in academia and beyond. During the A4Cap Assembly 2023, six capacity building workshops took place, which are summarised below.

2.6.2.1. Healthy Working Habits by Maria Hänsel

Objective & context: The objective of this workshop was to identify the type of working habits that we have (good vs. bad) in order to consciously choose more healthy habits to support our work in academia and beyond.

Process: This interactive workshop comprised individual, partner, and full-group activities. First, participants were asked to write down their best and worst working habits. These working habits were shared with a partner and mitigation strategies were discussed. Each pair then added their thoughts on best practices, ideas about what healthy working habits include, and unresolved problems on shared flip chart papers. Finally these three points were discussed with the entire group.

Activity: After thinking individually, participants shared their best and worst working habits in groups of two and discussed potential mitigation strategies. Each pair was then asked to respond to the following prompts: (1) What does having healthy working habits include for you?, (2) What are best practices when it comes to healthy working?, and (3) Which unresolved problems do you have regarding healthy working habits? (see Figure 4.1.1). Each of these points was then discussed as a full group.

Regarding question one, the workshop participants generally agreed that having healthy working habits means that: work is not too draining and there should be capacity left for other activities, other people & ourselves, the work you do should not be equated with who you are as a person, you should still feel connected with your body by the end of the day, it is okay to postpone a task to a better time, it does not feel like you are always trying to catch up, and that work does not negatively affect your mental or physical health (Figure 4.1.1., left).

Best practices listed by workshop participants to achieve these healthy working habits include: taking creativity breaks to process new inputs, drawing inspiration from nature, having a collaborative (and not competitive!) approach to work, setting well-defined working times during the day and week, using visualisation and illustration of ideas to support strategic thinking and framing of ideas, making lists to declutter your mind, not working at full capacity 100% of the time, Pomodoro, turning off notifications, going for a walk, and asking for help (Figure 4.1.1, middle).

Finally, unresolved issues that prevent participants from engaging in such healthy working habits included: general work overload, constant pressure of deadlines, feeling as if a task cannot be fully finished without a deadline, constant call of social media, deciding when to work on tasks that are really exciting but not a priority, and finally, knowing how much is enough (Figure 4.1.1., right).

Conclusion: By the end of this workshop, participants had identified their best and worst working habits and brainstormed in pairs potential solutions to these poor working habits. Collectively a vision of how healthy working habits should look and best practices of how to maintain them was achieved, and any unresolved issues regarding barriers to healthy working habits brought forward to the full group for constructive discussion. This workshop will help participants in the future to identify poor working habits as they arise and actively make choices to create healthy working habits for their future work.

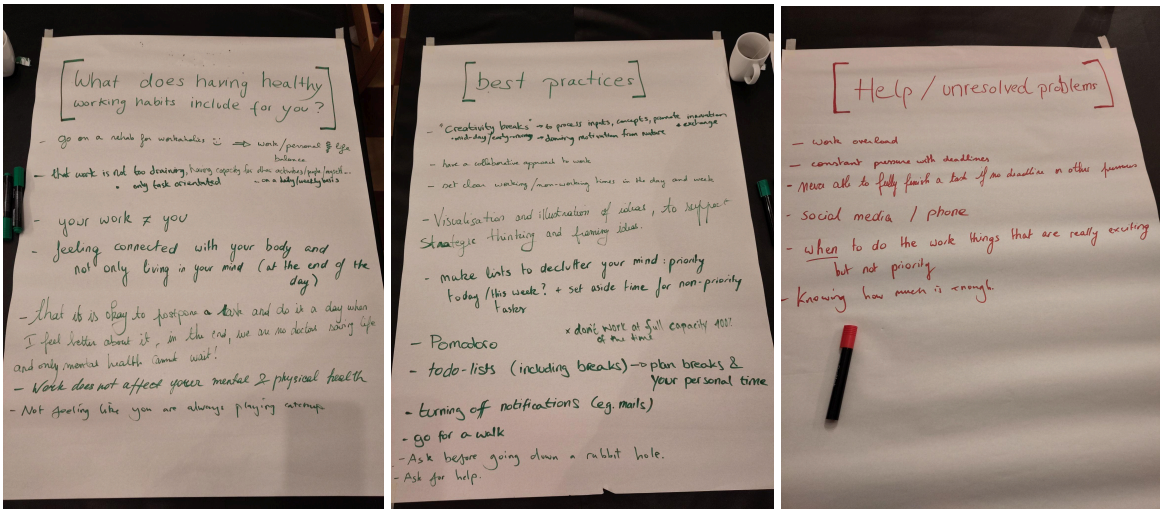


Figure 4.1.1. Participants' visions of (left) healthy working habits, (middle) best practices to achieve such healthy working habits, and (right) unresolved barriers to healthy working habits.

2.6.2.2. When the water is too deep: An exploration of the Landscape Park ("Landschapspark") Zwinstreek participatory workshop by Francis Turkelboom & Louise Vercruysse

Objective & context: The objective of this session was to learn about and practise a participatory workshop activity using a real life example from an ongoing project at Krekengebied in Flanders, Belgium.

Process: To achieve this goal, the session was structured into two main parts. In the first half of the session, the background of the project site and information about an associated in-practice participatory workshop were shared. In the second half of the session, A4Cap workshop participants were assigned a fictional identity to role play one of the activities planned for the in-practice participatory workshop.

Activity: In the first half of the session the background of the approximately 800 ha project site (i.e. Krekengebied, Flanders) was presented. Krekengebied in Flanders is a landscape dominated by semi-natural, brackish streams that are a part of the Natura 2000 network and agricultural parcels. Main stakeholders, potential conflicts, and other historical (e.g. no history of being a nature conservation area) and ecological factors of the study site were shared.

After introducing the study site, the objectives and plan for a one day participatory workshop among the stakeholders scheduled for March 10th, 2023 was discussed. The main objectives of the participatory workshop were to achieve a better understanding among the stakeholders, determine desirable futures of the area, and to identify potential solutions for long-term water management and cooperation. Three activities are planned for the participatory workshop closely aligned with these objectives: (1) An exploratory field trip where each sector chooses one point to talk about their fears or hopes for the area, (2) interviews between two parties from different sectors (e.g. farmer and nature conservationist), where the nature conservationist then presents the point of view of the farmer from to the main group, and (3) brainstorming concrete solutions that focus on win-win situations.

In the second part of the session each participant was provided with a detailed profile of a fictional character belonging to one of the sectors presented in the introduction. Each person assumed the role of one of these characters and the interview activity of the planned participatory workshop was acted out. These interviews were conducted in pairs for ten minutes. After the interviews, the full group reconvened and each person presented the point of view of their interview partner, including their vision for a sustainable future in their sector, and what other sectors they think they could work with to achieve that vision.

Following this participatory activity, the last ten minutes of the session were dedicated to conclusions from the exercise and feedback from the participants to the workshop leaders and vice-versa.

Conclusion: In this session, A4Cap workshop participants were presented with a first hand example of a planned in-practice participatory workshop and became more deeply acquainted with one activity through a role playing exercise. In this way, participants not only practised a potential participatory workshop activity, but also learned about (and experienced) the associated benefits and challenges. The workshop leaders facilitated the discussion on these benefits and challenges and offered potential solutions based on their experience. The A4Cap workshop participants were also given time to offer other impressions from the activity and concrete suggestions of how it could be improved and streamlined for the actual participatory workshop that took place on March 10th.

2.6.2.3. Using shiny apps for communication and engagement in your research by George Linney

Objective & Context: The objective of this workshop was to introduce the participants to Shiny apps, advantages of using them, and guide the creation of a simple Shiny app using interactive examples.

Process: A two part workshop was conducted to achieve these objectives. In the first part of the workshop, Shiny apps and some of their potential uses were introduced using participatory examples. In part two of the workshop, the basics of creating Shiny apps were presented with interactive examples.

Activity: The session began with an introduction to Shiny apps, which allow users to interact with shared R code in a web browser with a user friendly interface. Reasons for making and using Shiny apps (e.g. to support academic papers, as a tool for both researchers and decision makers, data collection, engagement and outreach) were shared and supported with examples. For instance, to demonstrate some of the data visualisation and data collection potentials of Shiny apps, George shared first hand examples of Shiny apps he created during his PhD as well as apps created by others.

After this brief introduction, the basics of how to create a simple Shiny app were presented with an interactive example using a short R-script shared with the participants before the workshop. George talked through and demonstrated a further simple Shiny app he created specifically for this workshop that allows the user to assign values to land classes in Belgium. Participants could run the app themselves using the previously shared code and George demonstrated areas where participants could add new features to the apps themselves.

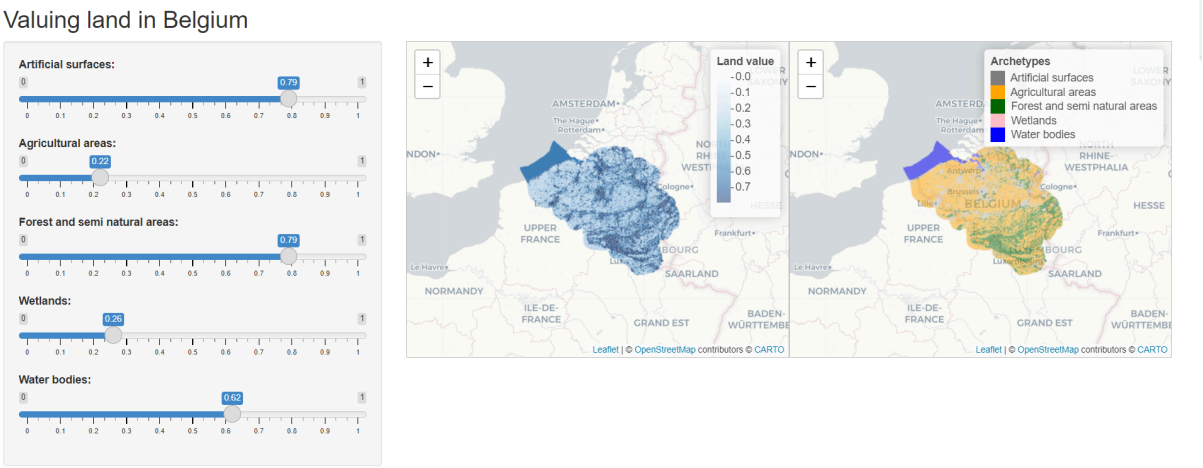


Figure 4.1.2: Screenshot of the shiny app for assigning value to land in Belgium.

Conclusion: A4Cap workshop participants learned that Shiny apps are a useful resource to present complex data, and ultimately make research results more accessible to non-specialists. Resources (e.g. code, app links) were also shared prior to the workshop to allow participants the opportunity to build on this knowledge and learn more about creating and using Shiny apps post workshop.

2.6.2.4. How to safely navigate academia as a violent institution by Christine Frison

Objective & context: The purpose of this workshop was to explore violence in academia from the victim's perspective and to brainstorm solutions (at an individual level and at a systemic level) so that such violence is not further perpetuated.

Process: To achieve these goals, this interactive workshop included time for individual reflection, small group work, and full group discussions.

Activity: The first task was a five minute individual brainstorm where participants wrote down examples of violences experienced in academia from personal experiences, or experiences of colleagues. As a full group, characteristics of violent behaviours in academia were shared. Some examples brought forth by the participants included: precarious contracts, ageism, lack of accountability for supervisors behaviour, imbalance of power, intellectual property theft, isolation, classism, racism and exclusionary vocabulary (inherent structural biases), ableism, unhealthy pressure to perform, tolerance of violent structures/situations, and domination of western knowledge (Figure 4.1.2, left).

From these collected ideas, participants broke into small groups and discussed in more detail an aspect of violent behaviour in academia and potential solutions to avoid or mitigate such situations. After 15 minutes of small group discussion, ideas for solutions were shared and collected on flip chart paper and posted. Examples of such solutions include: breaking

dependency, young researcher empowerment, system to monitor performance of supervisors, creating resilient systems, and searching for external mentors to obtain the needed feedback (Figure 4.1.2, right).

Conclusion: This workshop offered a safe place to share (personal) experiences of violence in academia and brainstorm potential solutions. The workshop discussions indicated that there is progress towards a safer academia, but there is still much room for improvement and people (including A4Cap workshop participants) need to continue collectively pushing forward. It was further emphasised that those who feel they are in a privileged position and don't personally identify with the issues of violent academia, should get informed and learn how they can make a positive impact. Academia can change but it's a tough fight.

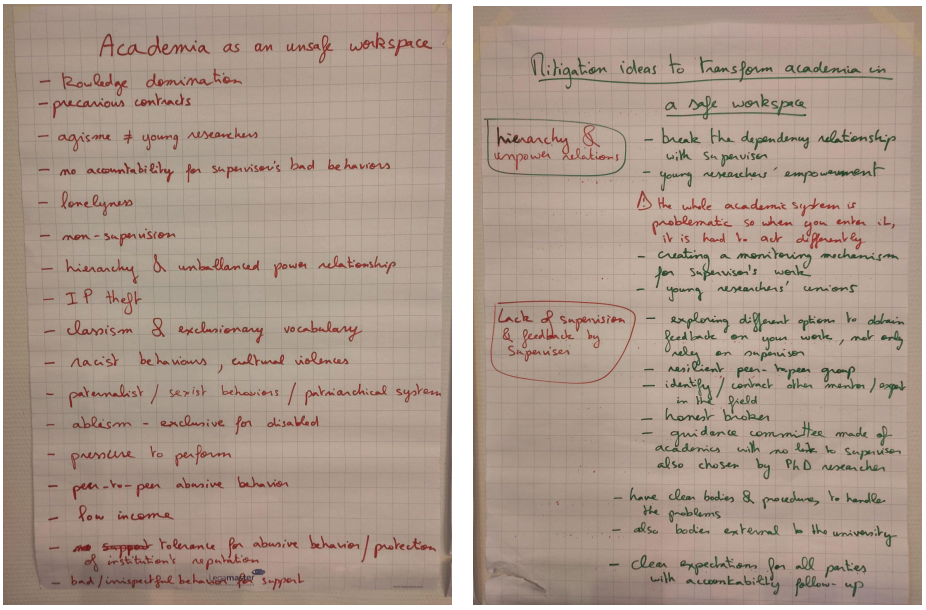


Figure 4.1.2. (left) Collected examples of violent behaviours in academia that can make it an unsafe workspace and (right) mitigation ideas to transform academia into a safe workspace.

2.6.2.5. Peer mentoring by Eleonore Slabbert

Objective & context: Peer mentoring can be a useful practice to support and receive support from colleagues at similar levels in potentially similar situations. The purpose of this workshop was to introduce the idea and benefits of peer mentoring, share suggestions to facilitate a successful peer mentoring session, and to practise peer mentoring in a safe environment.

Process: To achieve these goals, a short brainstorming session about characteristics of constructive peer mentoring conversations was conducted as a full group, followed by the presentation of a peer mentoring framework and tips on how to be a good mentor. This framework and tips were then put into practice with a short role-playing activity in small groups.

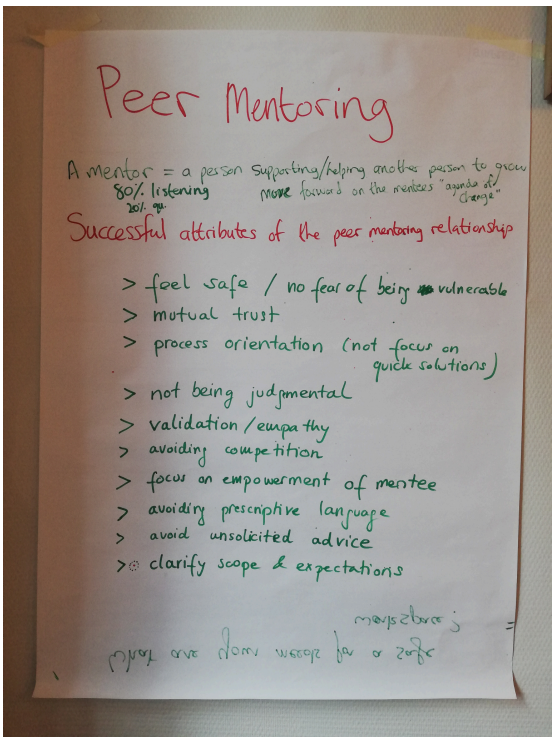
Activity: The first activity in this workshop was a ten minute, full-group brainstorming session in which participants shared attributes and characteristics that they thought should be included in a peer mentoring conversation. Suggested attributes and characteristics of peer mentoring conversations included: mutual trust, process-oriented rather than solution-oriented, no judgement, safe enough to be vulnerable, valuing the other person's feelings, empathy, non-competitive, active listening, and constructive (but not unsolicited) feedback.

These ideas were then built upon, as Eleonor presented the GROW framework for peer mentoring and tips on how to ask appropriate questions. The GROW framework can be used to guide a successful peer mentoring session by guiding the conversation using four focal points: (1) What is your **goal**? What do you plan to achieve in the coming months?; (2) What is your current **reality**? Where are you right now, and what's holding you back from achieving your goal?; (3) Think of your **options** and discuss them with your mentoring group; and (4) **What's next**? The mentor asks questions to help the mentee to structure an action plan for how to follow through with some of the options that were brainstormed by the mentee in the previous part of the conversation.

After introduction of the GROW framework further points were highlighted to outline some best practices for a peer mentoring session. These included asking questions that set the goal for the conversation; mentor should do only about 20% of the talking; the mentor's contributions should be question-based, not solution-based; guiding questions should be avoided as well as closed-questions; pay attention to body language (should convey the mentors attention and interest in the mentee); and stay focused on the mentee.

Peer mentoring using the GROW framework was then practised in groups of three, where each participant rotated through the roles of being the observer, mentor, and mentee (15 minutes). The whole group was brought back together in the final minutes of the workshop to discuss the peer mentoring practice sessions, including what was difficult as the mentor and what was particularly helpful as the mentee.

Conclusion: In this workshop, A4Cap participants learned about peer mentoring and how (with the GROW framework and tips) to be a good mentor to support their peers when they ask for help. The small group work helped solidify these ideas and put them into practice, which will help facilitate the use of these peer-mentoring guidelines and tips in real-life situations. A handout summarising the GROW framework and key points for mentors was provided at the end of the workshop for future reference (Figure 4.1.3).





Appendix

Peer Mentoring

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. 1 Thessalonians 2:8

Jesus' method of discipling was more often through asking questions and telling stories than by giving answers. This is the biblical model for spiritual mentoring and discipling. Two other well-known biblical examples of discipling are Moses and his father-in-law Jethro (Exodus 18), and Barnabas and Paul (Acts).

A mentor can be simply defined as one person helping another person to grow. The primary goal in a mentoring relationship is to help your peer move forward on their 'agenda for change'. An agenda for change centres around an 'Aha!' Moment, also known as a main learning point. The agenda should include:

- Where the person is in relationship to this learning point
- The ways in which the person needs to grow/change in order to apply this truth to current life circumstances
- The steps for how they will make those changes
- When they will start those steps

Framework for peer mentoring

In the first session participants will be divided into groups of mentoring triplets/pairs. Each person within that triplet will get to be both a mentor and a mentee. Time for mentoring groups will be set aside as part of the programme for every meeting.

Participants should use this time to share with the group about their situation. They should then follow the GROW model, which provides a helpful structure for mentoring conversations:

G - What is your **goal**? What do you plan to achieve in the coming months?

R - Think of where are you right now, of your **reality**. What's holding you back from achieving your goal?

O - Think of your **options** and discuss them with your mentoring group.

W - **What's next**? Decide what you are going to do in the time before the next peer mentoring meeting. Decide on some small steps that you know you can achieve in this time period.

How to be a good peer mentor

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12

A peer mentor is…	A peer mentor is NOT:
• **a coach** who helps his peer explore his situation, process his thoughts and feelings, and clarify his values, attitudes, motivations, and perspectives; • **an accountability partner** who accompanies his peer through the growth/ changing process with gentleness; • **a resource** of feedback, stories, and ideas (if and when the peer asks for it); and • **an intercessor** committed to pray for his peer and ask for updates.	• **a saviour** – the peer needs to take responsibility for her own decisions; • **an expert** – the peer is the expert about herself; • **a counsellor** – if the peer wants advice, she will ask for it; • **the main speaker** – the peer is the one who talks the most; and • **a problem solver** – the focus is on the person, not on the problem they are sharing.

Peer mentoring skills
- Active listening with your full attention and a non-judgmental attitude;
- 80% of your time should be spent listening and 20% spent talking
- Asking good questions:
  - Open questions that can't be answered with yes, no, or one word, and that do not suggest an answer (ex. Your situation seems complicated, doesn't it?)
  - Secondary questions which invite the mentee to explore and clarify, not to meet your own agenda
  - Paraphrases allow the mentee to hear what you heard them say in your words, which helps avoid misunderstandings but also may provide opportunities for adding missing details
  - Follow-up questions about the agenda for change - helps mentee make an agenda by asking about the small day-to-day steps that are needed for the change (ex. What do you think is best to do in this situation? How will you move towards your goal? When will you start?)
- Regularity of contact
  - Face-to-face or online meetings work but make sure they're regular!

How to prepare for peer mentoring meetings

Mentee:
- What is my long-term goal that I'm heading for?
- What did I decide at the end of the last session?
- How am I doing on the actions I came up with last time?
- Which issue or issues do I want to focus on in this session?
- What is coming up in the next 30-90 days that I need to think about?
- Have I emailed my Mentor in advance with anything they need?
- Check planned time of call and call the Mentor at the time (they won't call you!)
- Pray for divine wisdom and insight.

Mentor
- Re-read notes from last session
- Review overall direction: goals, issues and progress
- Has Mentee emailed anything that I need to review before the call

Figure 4.1.3. Peer mentoring handout for participant reference detailing the GROW framework and tips on how to be a good peer mentor (worksheet appendix from Cross-Current workshop, IFES Graduate Impact).

2.6.2.6. Why facts don't change minds: Paper discussion by Nicolas Dendoncker

Objective and context: The purpose of this workshop was to discuss the findings of the paper "Why facts don't change minds: Insights from cognitive science for the improved communication of conservation research" (Anne H. Toomey, 2023). and identify how such ideas can be applied in our own research and research communication.

Process: This workshop was organised around participant discussions (full-group and small-group) and key outcomes of the paper.

Activity: The workshop began with a very brief introduction to the article and its context. One of the key points of the article is that sparking discussions is still one of the most successful ways to disseminate new ideas. The article discusses how findings from cognitive behavioural science could or should influence or alter the way conservation science can communicate to the public and between or across disciplines for improved impact.

The methods we use or have used to communicate our own research and the impact of these efforts were then shared and discussed as a full group. Such communication methods included: using social media, engaging with policy makers/ministries, including stakeholders in research projects by using their plot of land, being part of dedicated communication strategy through working with/for an NGO, interacting with stakeholders on results of research, outreach to general public through simplified versions of research results, creating videos to repackage findings from briefs that were created during project, 1-1 discussions with stakeholders discussing research outcomes, fielding questions for further research, through an interactive process embedded in local community, and broader outreach through radio programme. It was generally concluded from these discussions that assessing the impact or our own research is not necessarily something that the research community does.

After this group discussion, four common myths around communication on conservation science from the paper were shared, namely:

- *Facts change minds:* When situations are complex and/or uncertain, our brain cannot cope and we make decisions based on "bounded rationality", meaning the decisions are satisfactory rather than optimal. There is also a strong confirmation bias. Also, conservation managers, when faced with complex issues, tend to make decisions based on intuition rather than fact. Human beings struggle making decisions based on statistics and probability.
- *Science literacy leads to enhanced research uptake:* Actually it's the opposite, it's rather values, beliefs and worldviews that determine this. So there is again a confirmation bias which even increases polarisation ("boomerang effect"). This is also true for scientists themselves. The more information we have, the more likely we are to find counter arguments.

- *Individual attitude change will shift collective behaviour:* Lots of campaigning is still based on this principle. However, as a species we survived by sharing collective knowledge. So approaches targeting social and cultural contexts should be privileged.
- *Board dissemination is best:* Big media are not effective in the spread of social norms and knowledge has no influence unless it's changed in real social networks. Information shared too broadly is also likely to be polarising or perceived as manipulative.

These myths and potential solutions were discussed amongst ourselves, first in two groups and then as a full group. Ideas of different ways to disseminate research included: use emotion rather than fact, use different vehicles (e.g. art, movies, novels,...) so that relating to research outcomes is easier, involve creators or artists to make your results beautiful and appealing, use personal stories, find local champions that can help you rally your cause and reach your stakeholders more effectively than you ever could because they are an expert in the local network, use appropriate metrics to measure the success of your communication effort (100 views are better than a million if you reach the 100 right people), determine before/during who your stakeholders are and how you can communicate with them effectively, view communication as an interaction rather than you just delivering information to them, focus on relationship building, and the message should be adapted according to each group you're trying to reach.

Once these ideas proposed by the A4Cap participants were discussed, participants then engaged with suggestions from the paper, namely:

- *Engaging the social mind:* People are better at solving problems when they engage with them as a group (reduced confirmation bias and polarisation). These groups should be mixed (plea for transdisciplinary research) in order to reach these results and have clear mechanisms for discussion to empower everyone in the discussion.
- *Understand the power of values, emotions and experience:* Affect is crucial for decision making and this is not a bad thing, as intuitive decisions are often based on knowledge and experience. This is also while local knowledge and traditional knowledge is crucial. You should mobilise emotion through storytelling rather than facts, as this method has been proven to change behaviour, simply as it's more enjoyable.
- *Changing collective behaviour:* Engaging a group of people in an action will prove more successful than a single person as the social value is very important to people when learning/ changing behaviour.
- *Thinking strategically for the biggest impact:* The more groups of people change, the more groups will follow. Searching for strategic groups of stakeholders that can be targeted and would lead to a broader reach through their own networks rather than going broadly right away proves more effective (looking for local champions).

Conclusion: Group discussions in the context of the paper "Why facts don't change minds: Insights from cognitive science for the improved communication of conservation research," allowed A4Cap workshop participants to critically consider how they currently disseminate their research and brainstorm methods to better communicate their research in the future for the largest and most appropriate impact.

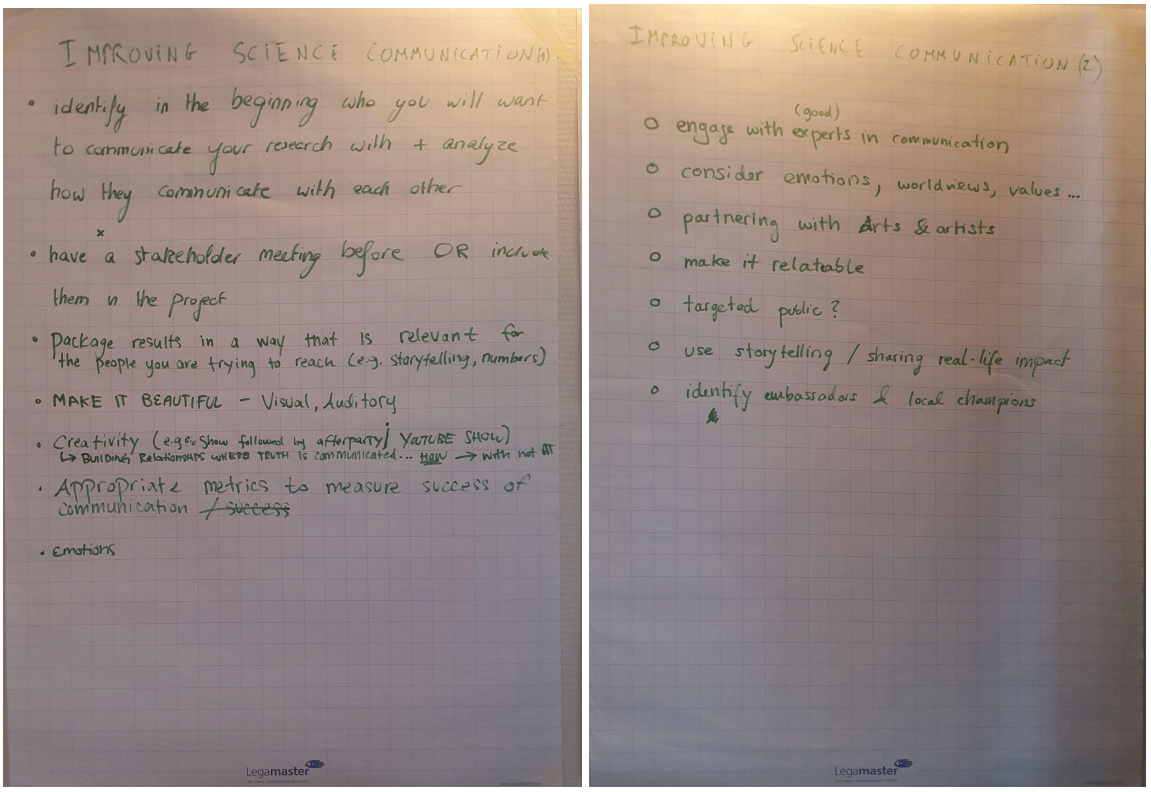


Figure 4.1.4. Ways to improve science communication for conservation research collected by the two breakout groups during the workshop.

2.6.2.7. Life decisions by Maria Hänsel - 30 second pitch

An idea for a future A4Cap workshop about life decisions was shared by Maria Hänsel. The workshop would be based on the idea that the decisions we are struggling with are due to contradicting opinions within ourselves. When these opinions are given more body it is possible to think about what 'voices' are influencing decisions. The first step is to identify and characterise each voice and then get those voices to talk to each other. In this way, it is possible to see the fuller picture and understand the root of any unease regarding a decision.

2.6.3. Field Trips

Two field trips were organised for the A4Cap Assembly 2023. The first field trip was a guided walk in the Natura 2000 reserve of the Fagnes, organised with a guide from the Spa tourism office (Philippe Calonne), who specialises in the biodiversity and ecosystems of the Fagnes.

The second planned field trip would have been a visit to the Micro Farm “du bout du monde”, led by Michaël Dossin, to show how he produces organic local fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants following agroecology principles on a very small scale (cancelled due to inclement weather).

2.6.3.1. Nature Walk : Excursion through the highs of Belgium - following the ways of water

Any stay in a new place should start with an immersive experience to get to know the local ecosystem. And this is what we did during a two hour hike on the first morning of the assembly. The guide started the walk at one of the springs of Spa, where we tasted the iron- and magnesium-rich water. This water has already had a long journey. Filtered by the bogs that characterise this part of the Belgian Ardennes, the water becomes so clean that only some cray fish find their habitat in it. At this stage, the water is captured by the company Spa, who bought large parts of nature to ensure its purity. In a later stage, the water passes deeper through Cambrian rock formations, where it gains the minerals that we tasted in that spring. The minerals have proven helpful for a particular Russian tsar, who came to this area when suffering from alcohol-borne illnesses and was cured after just one week of drinking from the springs. In an old-school media campaign, Spa became known all over the world for its healing water and gave its name to springs and wellness centres.

Our walk continues to the peat bogs themselves. In recent years, they have been suffering from droughts which releases carbon and makes the peat susceptible to fires that are almost impossible to extinguish as they happen to a certain extent underground.
The guide tells us about the local flora. There’s the common spruce, growing here because of the acidic soils, but suffering from the typograph insect, which eats the bark. Drought is again a problem here, as the trees don’t have enough water to produce the sap that would drown the beetles. For us, there’s much to eat in the pine and white birch forests: cranberries, blueberries, boleto mushrooms. But stay away from any phallus-looking species, as the poison of the Amanite Phalloide breaks down the cells of your liver and kidney and doesn’t leave the body.

Because the soil is too acidic, traditionally farmers in this area burn the soil coverage and plant rye and oat in the ash heaps. These days, the wolf passes through the area, bringing in new dynamics for the farmers.

The peat bog has been slowly disappearing, and programs have been set up to bring back the mineral-peat moss, as it is essential for climate change mitigation due to the large uptake of carbon. However, increasing droughts are a big threat to this ecosystem, as it is kept alive by the flow of water, leading to the springs that brought fame to the town itself.

2.6.3.2. Micro Farm "du bout du monde" visit

The Micro Farm field trip scheduled for Thursday, March 9th was cancelled due to inclement weather.

2.7. Lessons learned for future editions of the A4Cap Assembly

Part of our project work was dedicated to evaluating the pilot assembly. The following are some recommendations for future editions.

2.7.1. Timing

In order to allow a wider array of people to attend, it was discussed to modify the timing of the assembly. The following is proposed for the next edition:
Arrive Monday evening and leave on Sunday morning, meaning 2 travel days (Monday and Sunday), 5 work days (Tuesday to Saturday). The first full day (Tuesday), a general assembly in hybrid-format should be held in order to accommodate those who weren't able to travel to the assembly.

We also discussed that the next A4CapAP assembly should take place in April, in order to allow a better experience of local biodiversity (e.g. on field trips), while still remaining in off-season for most places, which in turn enables better access to affordable accommodation.

2.7.2. Financing

Envisioning the participation of 25 people, we foresee €10.000 as needed funding support for the next A4Cap Assembly. Flexibility between budget lines would be necessary. Depending on the location and participants, there might be slightly higher/lower needs for the different estimated costs listed below. Budgets might need to increase yearly to take into account inflation (for instance taking into account a 2-4% bi-annual flat rate).

Budget line	**Estimated costs**
Accommodation	4500 €
Food (preferably vegetarian, organic, local)	3000 €
Support for **travel costs** (for those with no alternative funding options, unable to attend otherwise - selected based on greatest needs).	2000 €
Field trips / invited speaker	500 €
Sum	**10000 €**

3. A4Cap: a formal proposal for developing an Alternet Alumni network for capacity-building

3.1. Vision statement

A4Cap envisions to provide a supportive community for Alternet alumni to build skills and capacities and to develop their collaborative networks within a horizontal and safe structure.

To achieve this vision, we aim to:

- Create a transdisciplinary, collaborative network of Alternet summer school alumni
- Create a safe, supportive, and inclusive network by cultivating equitable opportunities and respect among participants
- Facilitate the development of skills and capacities (e.g. soft skills, methodology-oriented, transdisciplinary, interpersonal and communication skills, etc.)
- Implement a non-hierarchical and self-organising working structure (see 'Governance Structure' below)
- Preserve the longevity of this network through maintaining a fun, welcoming atmosphere that encourages continued involvement and offers added value to active alumni (e.g. opportunities for knowledge sharing, capacity-building and collaboration in organisational events)

3.2. Governance structure

Key principles

- We have a horizontal governance structure where everyone is invited to take on responsibilities and initiate new ideas.
- We encourage as much as possible the mixing of alumni from different years throughout the structure.
- We keep the workings of and the commitments in the network as light and flexible as needed to accommodate the reality of unforeseen workpeaks for all members.
- We aim to have good and transparent relationships with funding structures such as Alternet and Biodiversa+.

The Alternet alumni network has a horizontal and flexible organisational structure. Each year at the beginning of the A4Cap Assembly, a hybrid-meeting will be organised where members of the network will have the opportunity to express their wish to partake in one or more working groups. There are a number of fixed working groups that are necessary to ensure the functioning of the network. These include:

Internal communication	This team will foster our social cohesion through managing our whatsapp, email, and other internal communication channels. They will also set up and monitor the online data management (e.g. google drive) and support event organisation through connecting interested people in our network.
Outreach	This team will take care of our (online) branding as a network. As the face of our network they will receive and answer questions of potentially interested alumni and possibly manage a website and other social networks (if applicable).
Planning for A4Cap Assembly	This team will organise our most important event: The A4Cap annual assembly. In order to organise this in-person meeting (with a hybrid general assembly moment), the team will secure an appropriate venue, facilitate the academic programme (e.g. group project or presentations/ workshops given by alumni) and extra-academic programme (team-building and social activities) and take care of logistics.
Coordination with funders	This team will liaise with our (potential)funders: Alternet, Biodiversa+,... They will maintain contact with them to identify emerging synergies (e.g. organising collaborative events), ensure transparency by reporting back to funders on financially supported A4Cap activities, and apply for funding in due time.
Reflexive monitoring	This team will reflect on the workings of our network, scan for emerging opportunities and evaluate our progress and potential. They will be in charge of making a yearly report that showcases the achievements and possible future directions of our network.

The possibility of forming new teams to deal with emerging needs, issues, and activities as they arise (e.g. Alternet conference, research paper, etc.) shall remain open at all times.

Each season, or as frequent as necessary, an inter-group meeting (round table) will be held. At the round table meeting delegates from each team will come together to keep each other up to date on the work of their respective teams, identify possible synergies, and ask for support where necessary.

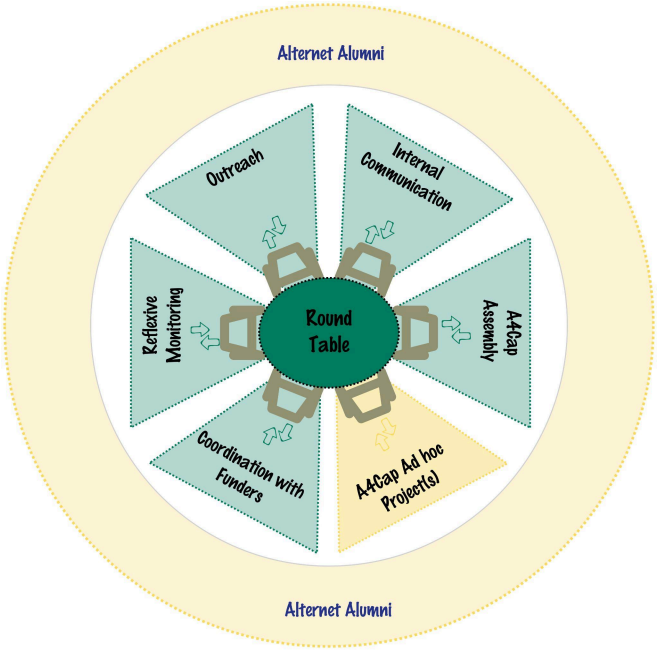


Fig 1.

A flexible working plan for the upcoming year is established within each team to guide the work and foster ideas. When possible, each team is encouraged to include a member with historical knowledge/experience to help orient new members and ensure knowledge transfer. Volunteers that engage in a working group are encouraged to participate for at least one year, with respect to their own schedule and workpeaks.

In all structures, we seek to maintain the long-term inclusion of past alumni while integrating the momentum of new incoming members. This ensures that preexisting knowledge is retained and new energy and perspectives are incorporated. Former alumni orientate and include newcomers via an introduction to the alumni network at and after the summer school. Opportunities for involvement, contribution, and follow-up will be identified to new members which are invited to engage in existing working groups and to form a new working group should new ideas emerge.

To promote the good relationships with funders we propose the following:

For representation within the Alternet Association, we propose to delegate a representative to serve in-kind on the Alternet Management Board for a defined period of time. This would equal the acknowledgement of the A4Cap network as an activity of the Alternet Network. The Alternet Management Board would have the opportunity to share projects and opportunities that would benefit from alumni participation and/or leadership at annual Management Board meetings and on an ad hoc basis.

For representation at the Alternet summer school we propose a designated delegate to promote the A4Cap network at the Alternet Summer School, either as a speaker or as an organiser.

For contact with Biodiversa+ we aim to have regular exchanges via email to keep them updated on proceedings within the network. When relevant, representatives of Biodiversa+ will be invited to meetings to identify synergies and possible collaborations. Furthermore, as Biodiversa+ staff are now also encouraged to attend the Alternet Summer School, there will be new Biodiversa+ Summer School alumni coming into the network every year.

4. What's next for A4Cap

4.1. Start-up of the teams

The teams were established during a meeting that took place after the 2023 A4CAP Annual Assembly. This meeting was open to all Alternet alumni and a contact list has been created to ensure that interested alumni who were not able to attend the A4CAP meetings so far are aware and able to join these teams.

4.2. Formalise collaboration with Alternet and Biodiversa+

This final report will be shared with both Alternet and Biodiversa+ and we welcome questions regarding the report and discussions concerning the next possible steps in the collaboration.

4.3. Recruitment of new members

The A4Cap network was pitched at the Alternet Summer School 2023 and the alumni were invited per email and whatsapp to an introductory online meeting on 16 November 2023. During these meetings, opportunities for these new potential members to engage with the network were identified and communicated to the 2023 alumni.

4.4. Tool-box with links and PPT of previous capacity building activities

The material of the previous assemblies has been gathered on a google drive to which all alumni are granted access on request. A formal structure or toolbox is yet to be established.

4.5. Prepare for next edition of A4Cap Assembly

Preparations for the A4Cap 2024 Assembly will start after the introductory meeting with the new alumni in November 2023.