

THE FLOW FORWARD PLAYBOOK

**The Flow Forward is a flexible, practical
innovation methodology, built for and proven in
complex real-world challenges**



*This playbook is your guide to understanding and applying Flow Forward.
Discover the full toolkit and more resources at flow-forward.eu.*



While many methodologies exist, they often fall short in **tackling complex challenges in fast-changing environments**. Flow Forward fills this gap with more than just a methodology: it is an **adaptable** way of working driven by a new **mindset**.

This participatory approach puts the **user at the center**, operates in **short cycles**, and delivers **immediate results** through **practical tools**.

Tested across six countries in the Connected River project, this methodology **supports you during the entire journey**: from building your network, to testing ideas, and scaling results.

Instead of a rigid framework, Flow Forward adapts to the context and maturity of your organization. It gives you the flexibility to only use the elements relevant to your specific challenges.





PREFACE

Welcome to the Flow Forward Playbook. This playbook is your guide to understanding and applying Flow Forward. So, if you are looking for a flexible, practical innovation methodology, to support in your innovation project or challenge, you are in the right place.

MOTIVATION

The Flow Forward is a proven result of the Connected River project, a cross-border initiative that united 13 partners from six countries to tackle shared challenges in managing waterways and waterfronts.

Traditional and static approaches may work for routine water management, but they often fall short for innovation in fast-changing and complex environments. That is why Connected River developed Flow Forward: a flexible innovation method built on a mindset of adaptability, collaboration, and continuous learning.

Flow Forward provides a practical framework for navigating uncertainty, creating momentum, and turning emerging opportunities into tangible results.

In complex, fast changing situations, this playbook offers a missing piece of the puzzle. After all, if we keep working the same way, we will keep getting the same results.

For more detailed insights into the Connected River project, [see website](#).

If we keep working the same way, we'll keep getting the same results. That's why it's great we explored a new methodology.

EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

Flow Forward was developed using insights from six pilot areas across five countries, balancing theory with practical action while navigating cross-cultural collaboration. To build this methodology, a multidisciplinary team of experts joined forces, bringing together expertise in fields of ecosystems, design thinking, innovation, co-creation, and participation. These diverse experiences and collaborative insights enriched the methodology, resulting in a highly practical and ready-to-use playbook.

The project consortium consists of 13 partners from 6 different countries (Germany, Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands & Sweden) and brings together scientific expertise, public authorities and economic actors.

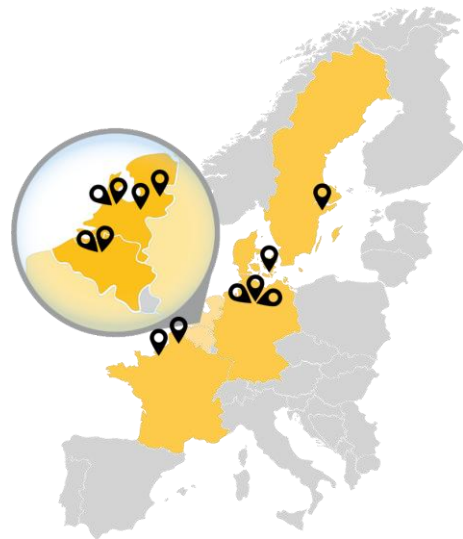




TABLE OF CONTENT

PREFACE	3
1. THE FLOW FORWARD PLAYBOOK	5
WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS PLAYBOOK?	6
WHY WE NEED A NEW METHODOLOGY?	7
WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT FLOW FORWARD?	8
CASE STUDIES	10
2. THE FLOW FORWARD FRAMEWORK	11
WHO SHOULD USE FLOW FORWARD?	12
WHEN TO USE FLOW FORWARD?	13
UNDERSTANDING THE FLOW FORWARD	14
THE THREE ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF INNOVATION	15
THE THREE CORE ASPECTS OF FLOW FORWARD	16
NAVIGATING THROUGH FLOW FORWARD	18
HOW TO USE FLOW FORWARD?	20
3. BUILDING BLOCKS, ACTIVITIES AND TOOLS	25
BUILDING BLOCK STRUCTURE	27
BUILDING BLOCKS OVERVIEW	29
ECOSYSTEM BUILDING BLOCKS – OVERVIEW	31
EXPERIMENTS BUILDING BLOCKS – OVERVIEW	32
GOVERNANCE BUILDING BLOCKS – OVERVIEW	33
4. PLATFORM AND SUPPORT	35
THE FLOW FORWARD PLATFORM	36
SUPPORT	37
CONNECTED RIVER BACKGROUND	38



1. THE FLOW FORWARD PLAYBOOK

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS PLAYBOOK?

This playbook is your practical manual to the Flow Forward methodology. While this book covers the essentials, you can explore the complete library of tools, templates, and case studies on the [online platform](#).

WHAT IS IN THIS PLAYBOOK?

The playbook is divided into four sections. Together these form the guide of the way of working for the Flow Forward methodology. The sections are:

1. The Flow Forward playbook

This first part focuses on “why” a new methodology is needed, and why specifically the Flow Forward approach.

2. The Flow Forward

This section explains the Flow Forward framework in more detail. It outlines who can use it, when it can be applied, and how it works. It also explains different ways the framework can be used.

3. The building blocks, activities and tools

The building blocks are the main components of the Flow Forward methodology. These are practical, step-by-step plans to help you with your challenge. They outline clear activities and include hands-on tools you can apply immediately to solve your problems. Instead of a rigid, fixed process, these building blocks allow you to design and customize your own specific innovation journey.

4. Platform and support

This playbook outlines the core principles of the Flow Forward approach: think of it as a rulebook for a game. All the resources you need to get started, including in-depth information, building blocks, use cases, experiments, and tools, are available on the [online platform](#).



Flow Forward playbook: Game manual, to understand the way of working



Flow Forward platform: Game components, to play /execute the game

HOW TO USE THIS PLAYBOOK?

This playbook explains the Flow Forward methodology. You do not need to read it from start to finish, but you can simply dive into the specific sections you need.





WHY WE NEED A NEW METHODOLOGY?

We need a new methodology because traditional, static approaches fail in today's fast-changing world, with challenges like urbanization and climate change. Flow Forward meets this need. While it was originally developed for shared waterways, its flexible tools are universal and can be applied to any complex, multi-stakeholder challenge or organizational transition.

THE PRESSURE ON SHARED WATERWAYS

Waterways and waterfronts are vital for the region's economy, ecology, and quality of life. However, growing pressures from urban development, commercial, and recreational activities increasingly lead to a decrease in safety, accessibility, and liveability.

THE NEED FOR A NEW METHODOLOGY: FLOW FORWARD

To effectively respond to the growing pressures of themes like climate change, urbanization, and evolving societal needs, a fundamentally new approach was required. To address this gap, the Flow Forward methodology is developed. It provides a future-fit response by.

Flow Forward supports projects from building your network (Ecosystems), through testing ideas (Experimentation), to securing the results (Governance). This ensures that good ideas don't just stay small but turn into real impact.

1. Building ecosystems

Complex challenges like climate change or urban development cannot be solved by one organization alone. They require collaboration across different sectors. This is what building an ecosystem is all about: combining the strengths of various stakeholders to find shared solutions. Flow Forward helps you build these partnerships, align everyone's goals, and co-create solutions that actually work.

2. Smarter and short cycle experimentation

The Flow Forward is about testing new ideas in a smarter, short-cycle way. By combining Agile, Lean Startup, and Design Thinking, you get a structured approach that keeps you flexible. It allows teams to learn and adapt quickly, making your project far less vulnerable to unexpected changes as it evolves.

3. Effective governance for scaling

Good ideas shouldn't stay small. Turning a pilot into a lasting solution requires a solid way of working together. That is why Flow Forward governance grows with your project: it starts simply, with basic agreements to keep everyone aligned. As solutions matures, Flow Forward helps you put the right structures, roles, and resources in place. This ensures your innovation is maintained, aligned with governance processes, and built to scale effectively.



flow
forward



WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT FLOW FORWARD?

If we keep working the same way, we will keep getting the same results. Flow Forward provides a future-fit response because it is fundamentally different. It is defined by a unique mindset that bridges the gap between high-level strategy and hands-on execution. To genuinely solve complex challenges in our shared spaces, we must change how we think and act. The Flow Forward approach is built on eight practical shifts in mindset. These mindsets are explained below and summarized on page 9.

1. GO OUTSIDE

Stop planning from behind a desk. Go to the location, observe and truly listen to the users. Stop seeing the area (in this case the river) merely as a technical object for shipping and start treating it as a shared living environment.

2. MEASURE, DO NOT GUESS

Let go of predefined solutions. Gather real data on what is happening and ask people what they value, rather than relying on internal assumptions.

3. ASSESS BEFORE ACTING

Based on the insights gathered, honestly evaluate: is there an actual problem to solve, and is there a latent social ecosystem present to successfully kickstart a co-creation process?

4. CO-CREATE WITH THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

Do not design *for* people design *with* them. Co-create directly with users, explicitly inviting those rarely at the table, for example youth and recreational visitors. Actively integrate non-human voices so natural elements are also represented (in this case the "voice of the water").

5. TEST SMALL AND LEARN FAST

Instead of spending months perfecting a massive plan, test small ideas quickly in the real world. See what works, learn from what fails, and adapt immediately.

6. EMBRACE UNEXPECTED SOLUTIONS

Be open to unexpected, simple interventions, such as behavioural nudging, rather than relying solely on traditional, heavy, expensive solutions.

7. SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY

Successfully scale and secure solutions by anchoring them not just within formal organizations, but directly with the users themselves (for example, a community-run social sauna).

8. LEAVE A LASTING ECOSYSTEM

The goal is not just to finish a project and walk away, but also to organize a permanent, active network. You are building a resilient ecosystem that will continue to care for and adapt the space long after the initial project is finished.



WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT FLOW FORWARD?

SHIFT YOUR MINDSET

1. GO OUTSIDE:

Go into the field



Multi-perspective view



2. MEASURE, DO NOT GUESS:

Validating assumptions



Monitoring / sensing



3. ASSESS BEFORE ACTING:

Define and assess problem



Unusual approach



4. CO-CREATE WITH THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS:

Co-creation



Non-human and unusual partners



5. TEST SMALL AND LEARN FAST:

Fail fast



Short cyclic & simple prototyping



6. EMBRACE UNEXPECTED SOLUTIONS:

Lightweight change first



Nudging



7. SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY:

Built together for broad support



Shared responsibility



8. LEAVE A LASTING ECOSYSTEM:

Ecosystem building



Lasting impact



CASE STUDIES

The Flow Forward was developed and refined through real-world application. The following case studies showcase how the methodology has been used to tackle complex challenges, providing concrete evidence of its effectiveness in practice.

CASE STUDY: AMSTERDAM IJ

The Amsterdam IJ case shows how behavioural change on a busy waterway can be achieved through close collaboration with public authorities, users, and local partners. Visual nudges for recreational skippers were co-created and tested directly in the environment. Through short-cycle experimentation, the most effective interventions were quickly refined. Successful solutions were then scaled across the area, improving safety across the IJ. [Read the full article here.](#)



CASE STUDY: KLEINE NETE

At the Kleine Nete the “Message in a Bottle” experiment was used to actively involve unusual partners, including schoolchildren, in river restoration. Their messages symbolised the voice of the next generation and were collected in bottles and formally presented to the Governor of Antwerp. The approach helped broaden participation in the ecosystem and strengthen shared responsibility for healthy waterways. [Read the full article here.](#)



CASE STUDY: NIJMEGEN (SPIEGEL)WAAL

The Spiegelwaal in Nijmegen shows how water quality in an urban river recreation area can be managed more effectively through collaboration across the local ecosystem. Municipalities, researchers, and users such as rowing clubs jointly tested and applied rapid qPCR methods to measure water quality faster and more accurately than traditional sampling. Short-cycle experiments enabled continuous learning and quick adjustments based on real-time insights. The approach was scaled through shared ownership of data and monitoring, strengthening collective responsibility for a safe and usable river environment. [Read the full article here.](#)



CASE STUDY: HAMBURG

The Discovery Hamburg Tour in Hamburg demonstrates how ecosystem collaboration can activate innovation in a port-city context. By bringing together port companies, public stakeholders, and young users, the initiative creates real-life interactions across the maritime ecosystem. This solution was scaled and embedded as a replicable model for talent engagement across the port. [Read the full article here.](#)



2. THE FLOW FORWARD FRAMEWORK

WHO SHOULD USE FLOW FORWARD?

Flow Forward is for everyone, from absolute beginners to experienced innovation experts. Your level of experience does not matter, what matters is how you apply the methodology. A beginner might follow the complete step-by-step guide, while an expert might just pick specific tools to overcome a hurdle. Below are some concrete examples of potential users of the methodology.

Most important is that Flow Forward is for those people who want to innovate and are open to a more flexible, collaborative way of working. To successfully apply the Flow Forward, the mindset defined earlier is required.

THE FLOW FORWARD IS FOR THOSE...

- **Who are facing complex, fast-changing challenges** where traditional methodologies fall short.
- **Who want to innovate** and seek smarter, more adaptive ways of working.
- **Who are open to a new way of working** that embraces flexibility, co-creation, and experimentation.
- **Who are dealing with unclear project goals** where outcomes evolve over time.
- **Who tackle multi-stakeholder problems** that require ecosystem innovation and diverse input.
- **Who value a modular methodology** using actionable 'building blocks' to structure their own process.
- **Who want to work in an agile and iterative way** and are willing to test, learn, and improve.
- **Who are aiming to achieve real impact** by building strong ecosystems and scaling successful solutions.

...and really, anyone who could use a little extra support in their project.

GETTING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

A basic understanding of innovation processes, Design Thinking, and collaborative working is recommended to apply Flow Forward more effectively. Experience with stakeholder engagement, facilitation, and working in complex, multi-partner environments is also beneficial. Most importantly, users should be open to learning, adapting, and co-creating solutions throughout the process.

To apply Flow Forward successfully, it is essential to involve the right people with the right mindset and skills. If you or your team have limited experience with innovation, especially within complex environments, we highly recommend seeking experienced guidance.

Don't hesitate to reach out to us at the Connected River team (see page 38) or collaborate with someone else who brings the right experience to the table.

"Flow Forward is for the curious, the courageous, and the collaborative, anyone with a challenge in mind, ready to start or get unstuck, and willing to solve problems together."



WHEN TO USE FLOW FORWARD?

The short answer: whenever you need practical support to navigate a complex situation.

Flow Forward is not a rigid methodology. Every project has its own unique rhythm and challenges. Flow Forward gives you the freedom to step in at any given moment.

THE FLOW FORWARD SHOULD BE USED WHEN...

Flow Forward works best when a challenge is complex, involves multiple stakeholders, and there is no clear solution yet. It is particularly useful when organizations want to move beyond planning and start learning through action.

The approach helps teams tackle shared challenges by taking small, low-risk steps together, testing ideas in practice, and adapting based on real experiences. Rather than developing large strategies upfront, Flow Forward focuses on creating momentum through experimentation and collaboration.

Building on Design Thinking and Ecosystem Innovation principles, Flow Forward connects immediate actions to longer-term system change. It enables partners to align around real user needs, strengthen trust and shared ownership, and turn successful experiments into lasting improvements.

The approach is particularly relevant for rivers, waterways, and waterfronts, where improving safety, accessibility, liveability, and resilience often depends on working together across sectors and disciplines.

If you need to move forward while learning, adapting, and building support along the way, Flow Forward is the right approach.





UNDERSTANDING THE FLOW FORWARD

This chapter explains the core of Flow Forward: three key aspects, three maturity stages, and how they work together in a 3x3 matrix that guides your project as it scales from an initial idea to a mature solution.



THE THREE ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF INNOVATION

The Flow Forward methodology supports innovation by focusing on three essential aspects: (1) Ecosystems, (2) Experimentation and (3) Governance.

ECOSYSTEM

Complex challenges like climate change or urban development cannot be solved by one organization alone. They require collaboration across different sectors. This is what building an ecosystem is all about: combining the strengths of various stakeholders to find shared solutions. Flow Forward helps you build these partnerships, align everyone's goals, and co-create solutions that actually work.



EXPERIMENTATION

The Flow Forward is about testing new ideas in a smarter, short-cycle way. By combining Agile, Lean Startup, and Design Thinking, you get a structured approach that keeps you flexible. It allows teams to learn and adapt quickly, making your project far less vulnerable to unexpected changes as it evolves.



GOVERNANCE

Good ideas shouldn't stay small. Turning a pilot into a lasting solution requires a solid way of working together. That is why Flow Forward governance grows with your project: it starts simply, with basic agreements to keep everyone aligned. As the project matures, Flow Forward helps you put the right structures, roles, and resources in place. This ensures your innovation is maintained, aligned with governance processes, and built to scale effectively.



THE THREE CORE ASPECTS OF FLOW FORWARD

Flow Forward covers three core aspects of innovation: Ecosystems, Experimentation, and Governance. Each aspect is divided into three stages, so the methodology can adapt to the needs of your project. As your project grows from an initial idea into a larger solution, your partnerships, testing activities, and ways of working become more structured and professional at the same pace.

ECOSYSTEM

This aspect focuses on how you bring together the right people and organizations to solve complex challenges together.

- Stage 1: Build the core team of partners and a shared agenda.
- Stage 2: Expand the network and maintain partner alignment.
- Stage 3: Secure long-term partnerships to sustain the solution.

EXPERIMENTATION

This aspect focuses on how you reduce uncertainty by testing ideas, learn from results and improve your solution step by step.

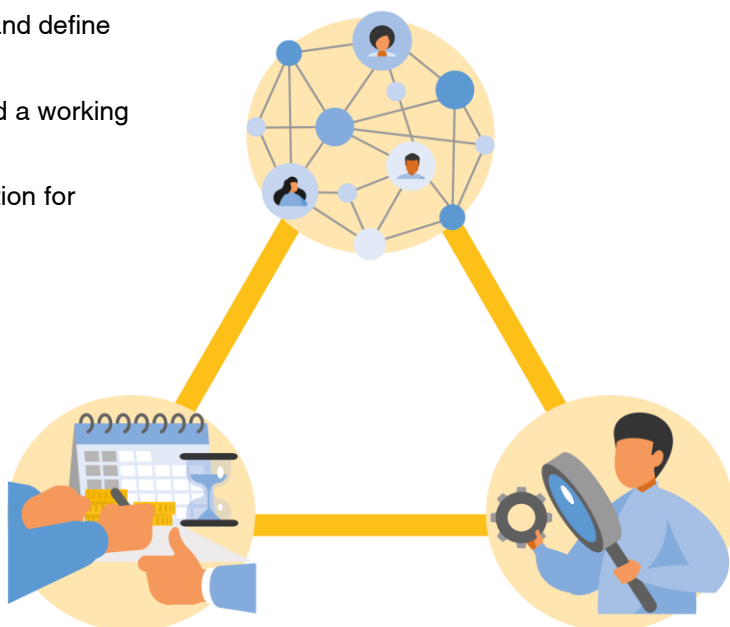
- Stage 1: Discover the challenge and define the project scope.
- Stage 2: Test step-by-step to build a working version (MVP).
- Stage 3: Prepare the proven solution for growth and new markets.

GOVERNANCE

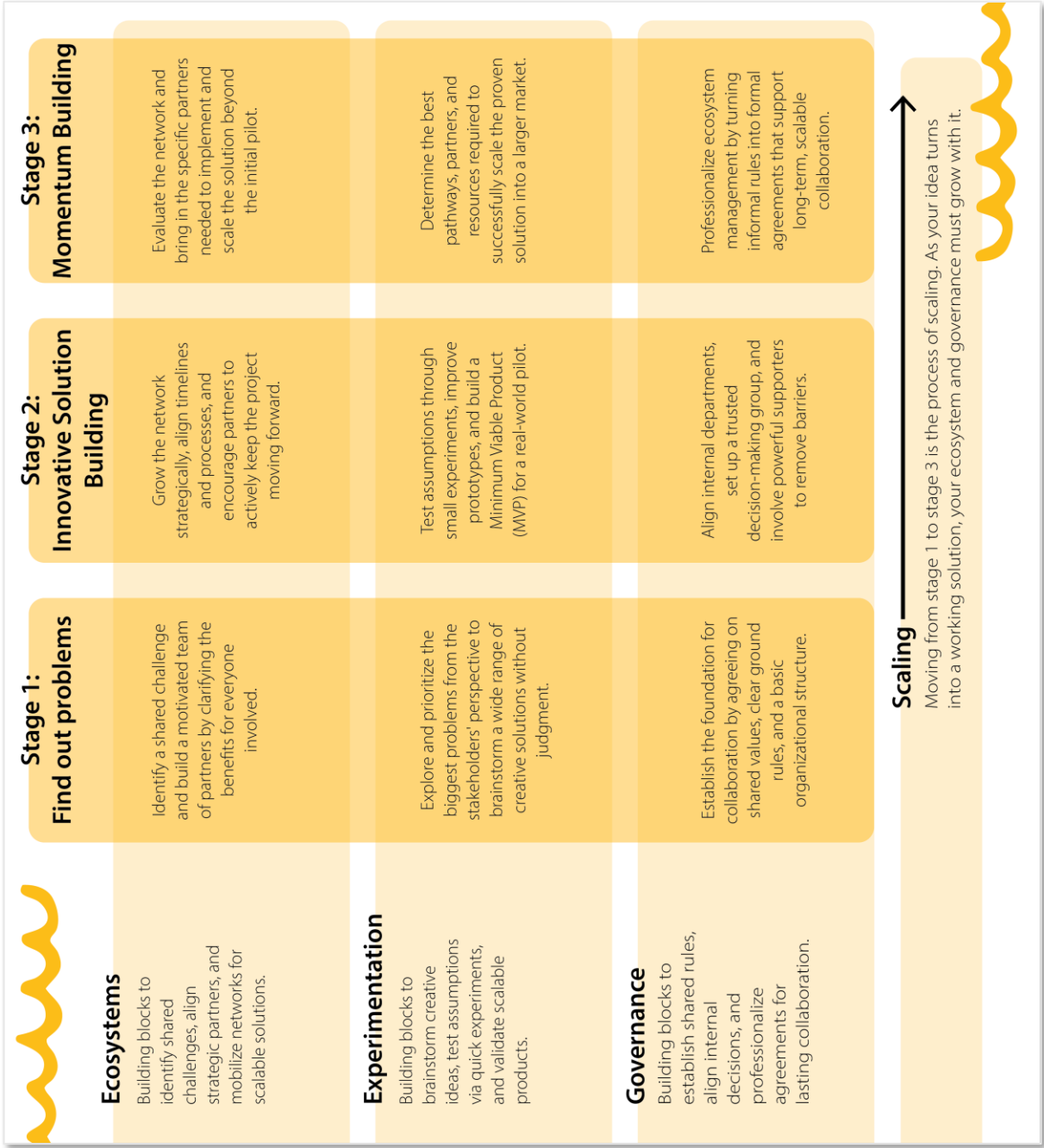
This aspect focuses on how your team works together and makes decisions.

- Stage 1 (Informal): Simple guiding principles and basic coordination for fast decisions.
- Stage 2 (Structured): Internal alignment and formal decision-making bodies.
- Stage 3 (mature): Professional rules and formal decision-making structures.

An overview of the aspect and stages can be found on page 17.



THE THREE CORE ASPECTS OF THE FLOW FORWARD



The 3x3 Matrix: This overview maps the three core aspects against the three maturity stages. It serves as a practical 3x3 matrix showing the specific actions at every phase.



NAVIGATING THROUGH FLOW FORWARD

The coming section explains how to use the Flow Forward and where to start so you can get to work!





BEFORE STARTING ENSURE TO:

- Understand the Flow Forward and develop the right mindset (through the playbook)
- Access building blocks, the maturity scan, and additional information (through the platform)

Choose how to use the Flow Forward...

1. AS A GUIDE



2. SOLVE BAD HABITS



3. AS INSPIRATION



Identify the right building block

Go to the platform and complete the required building block(s)

BUILDING BLOCK

Activity 1



→ Tool 1A

→ Tool 1B

Activity 2

→ Tool 2A

→ Tool 2B

Activity 3

→ Tool 3A

→ Tool 3B



HOW TO USE FLOW FORWARD?

You are in control of how to use the Flow Forward, as it is built for flexibility. Use building blocks or individual tools as standalone solutions, or follow a recommended path based on your project's maturity scan or anti-patterns.

ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR CONCRETE USE CASE...

Once you have your concrete challenge in mind, you can choose exactly how you want to navigate the process. You have three ways to get started:

1. USE FLOW FORWARD AS A GUIDE

Best for: Structured, step-by-step support.

- 1A. Start from scratch: Follow the complete methodology, from the very ecosystem set up to the final implementation of the solution.
- 1B. Take the maturity scan: Not sure where you stand? Use our maturity scan (page 21) to assess your project's current status and find exactly which building blocks fit your needs right now.

2. SOLVE YOUR BAD HABITS

Best for: When you feel stuck and have specific struggles.

Look for the bad habits (page 22) that matches your struggle. Each bad habit points you to a specific building block designed to overcome the bad habit and get the flow back.

Example: "Endless talking but no testing?" → Use 'Setting up Experiments' building block.

3. PICK AND MIX FOR INSPIRATION

Best for: Quick wins and inspiration.

Already know which kind of tool you need? Or simply want to take inspiration? Pick the individual building blocks or standalone tools that solve your issue and inspires (page 23). You are completely free to use only the elements you actually need.

1.



2.



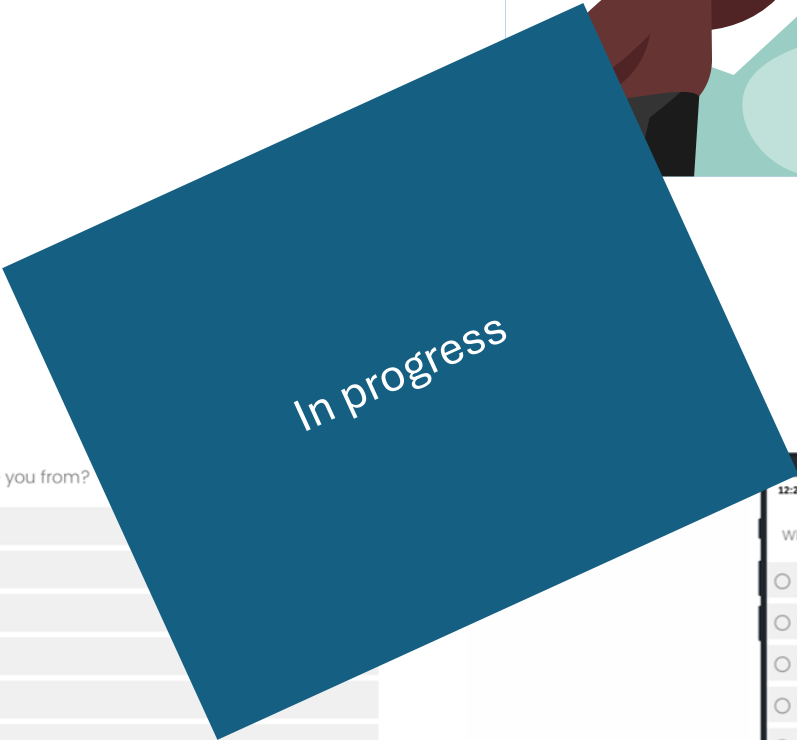
3.





1. USE FLOW FORWARD AS A GUIDE

Use Flow Forward as a guide for structured, step-by-step support. Not sure where you stand? Use our maturity Scan to assess your project's current status and find exactly which building blocks fit your needs right now.



Which pilot area are you from?

☐ Amsterdam

☐ Hamburg

☐ Kleine Nete

☐ Lille

☐ Nijmegen

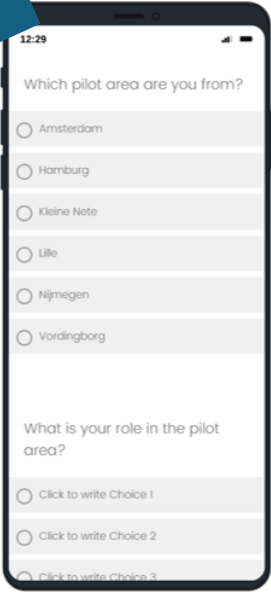
☐ Vordingborg

What is your role in the pilot area?

☐ Click to write Choice 1

☐ Click to write Choice 2

☐ Click to write Choice 3



2. SOLVE YOUR BAD HABITS

Use Flow Forward to solve bad habit. When you feel stuck and have specific struggles, look for the bad habits that matches your struggle. Each bad habit points you to a specific building block designed to overcome the issue and get the flow back.

FINDING BAD HABITS IN YOUR PROJECT

In Flow Forward, bad habits are recurring patterns in your project methodology that slow progress and stall innovation. Even the best teams can get stuck in these habits without realizing it. Recognizing them is the first step to restoring momentum.

This section helps you identify methodological bad habits and shows which building blocks can help you overcome them. To make this easier, the bad habits are organized by aspect:

Are you struggling with your ecosystem?

→ see the ecosystem bad habits

Are you struggling with experimentation?

→ see the experimentation bad habits

Are you struggling with governance? → see the governance bad habits

An overview of all bad habits can be found on [the online platform](#).



3. PICK AND MIX FOR INSPIRATION

Flow Forward is not only a structured methodology or a response to a specific challenge. It can also be used as an open source of ideas, examples, and practical learning.

A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Whether you are looking for a concrete tool, searching for experiences from similar contexts, or simply exploring how others have approached complex challenges, Flow Forward brings it all together in one place.

Each case, tool, or lesson is designed to travel: to inspire new thinking in other places and contexts, and to help teams rethink how they approach their own challenges. It encourages users to look beyond their own domain and learn from how others experiment, adapt, and scale solutions in practice.

Get inspired by everything the [online platform](#) has to offer, and discover new ways to move ideas forward in practice.





SEEN ENOUGH TO GET STARTED?

Visit flow-forward.eu for the complete building block library, tools, and more.



3. BUILDING BLOCKS, ACTIVITIES AND TOOLS



**REMEMBER: THE
TOOLS WORK BEST IF
YOU ADOPT THE
FLOW FORWARD
MINDSET.**



BUILDING BLOCK STRUCTURE

Building Blocks are the main components of the Flow Forward methodology. They are practical, step-by-step action plans designed to tackle specific innovation challenges, such as setting an agenda or launching a first experiment.

Building blocks consist of two to three activities (what to do) and per activity one to two tools (how to do it).

BUILDING BLOCKS

Building Blocks are the core of the Flow Forward methodology. Each block offers a repeatable way of working designed specifically for innovation in complex, multi-stakeholder environments. To ensure they are practical and easy to use, every building block is organized into two layers that provide step-by-step guidance on specific tasks, such as 'Agenda Setting' or 'Launching an Experiment'.

1. **Activities (what to do):** each building block consists of two to three activities. These are the essential, structured actions required to perform the building block.

Example: For agenda setting the activities are 'Identifying stakeholders', 'Defining the common challenge' and 'Engaging the coalition of the willing'.

2. **Tools (how to do it):** Every activity is supported by one or two practical tools. These are practical helpers such as templates, canvases, checklists, or workshop formats, that facilitate the work and structure your results.

Example: For agenda setting, the activities 'Identifying stakeholders', consist of the tools 'Stakeholder Radar'.

The combination of **activities + tools** makes each building block both actionable and repeatable, so everyone can apply them confidently in different contexts and stages of their process.

FLEXIBLE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR INNOVATION

Each building block in the Flow Forward methodology focuses on a specific challenge or question that can arise during innovation. To understand the focus and the expected impact of a building block, refer to the 'Goal' and 'Result' sections at the beginning of each building block.

These building blocks are not tied to a strict order. Instead, they support one or more of the three core innovation aspects: Ecosystem, Experimentation, and Governance.

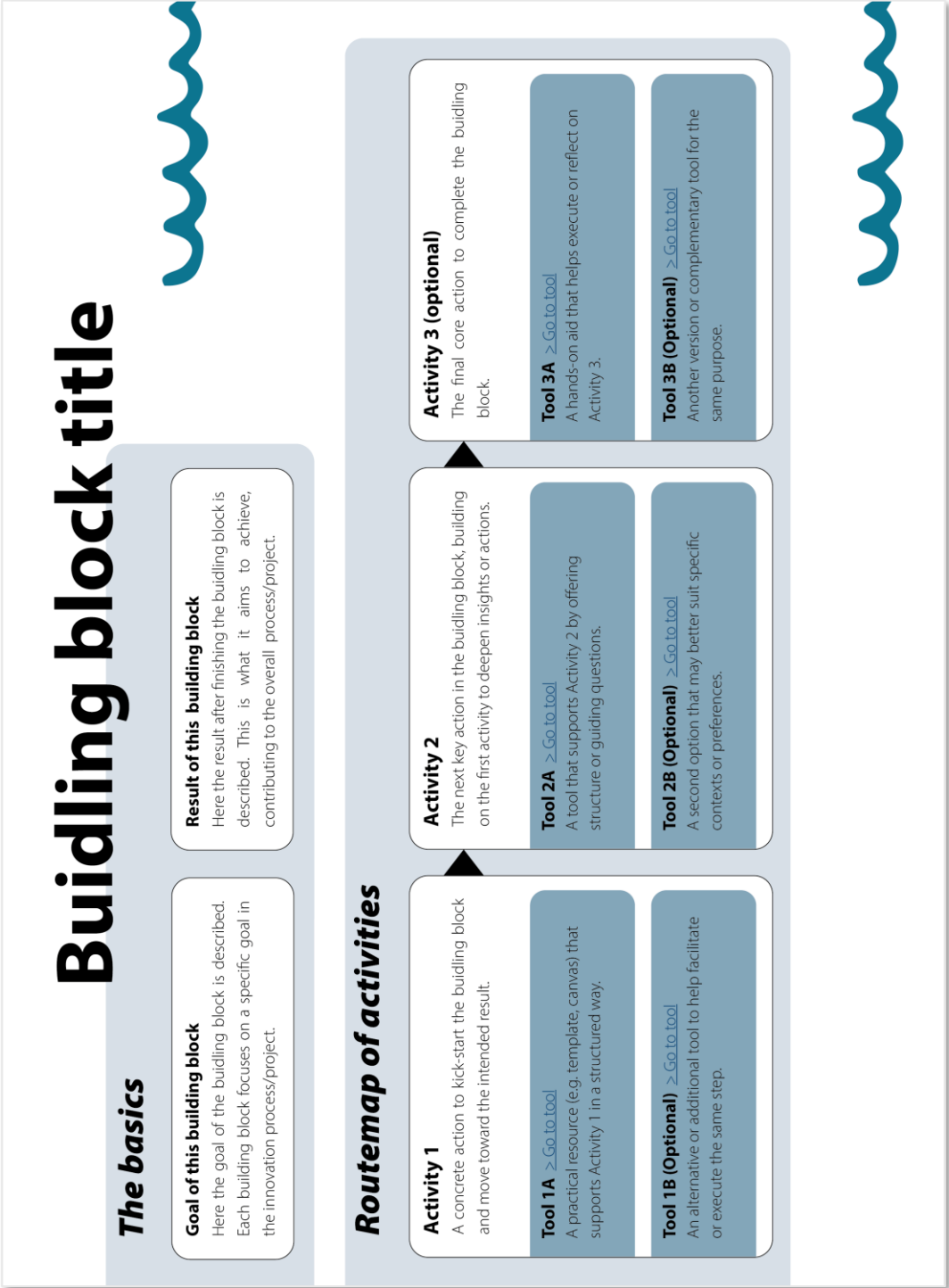
Flow Forward is built for flexibility. Use building blocks or individual tools as standalone solutions, or follow a recommended path based on your project's maturity scan or bad habits.

This flexibility makes Flow Forward highly adaptable. Whether you're just starting to build your ecosystem, testing new ideas, or scaling successful results, the building blocks offer practical support at every step.

"Flow Forward is built for flexibility. Use building blocks or individual tools as standalone solutions, or follow a recommended path based on your project's maturity scan or bad habits."



BUILDING BLOCK STRUCTURE





BUILDING BLOCKS OVERVIEW

The Flow Forward offers a rich library of building blocks. They are organized into a logical 3x3 matrix based on two dimensions: the three key innovation aspects (Ecosystem, Experimentation, and Governance) and the three maturity stages (1, 2, 3) defined earlier.

THE 3X3 MATRIX

The 3x3 Matrix serves as a practical framework for navigating through the building blocks. Each cell of the matrix corresponds to a specific combination of innovation aspect (Ecosystem, Experimentation, and Governance) and maturity stage (1, 2 or 3).

In this way, you can easily explore the different building blocks and also assess which of the building blocks fit the current maturity level for your project.

WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

In the following section, you will find a visual overview of all building blocks within this 3x3 matrix. After the matrix, a short description of each block, sorted by aspect, is provided to help you quickly understand what it covers and when it might be useful.

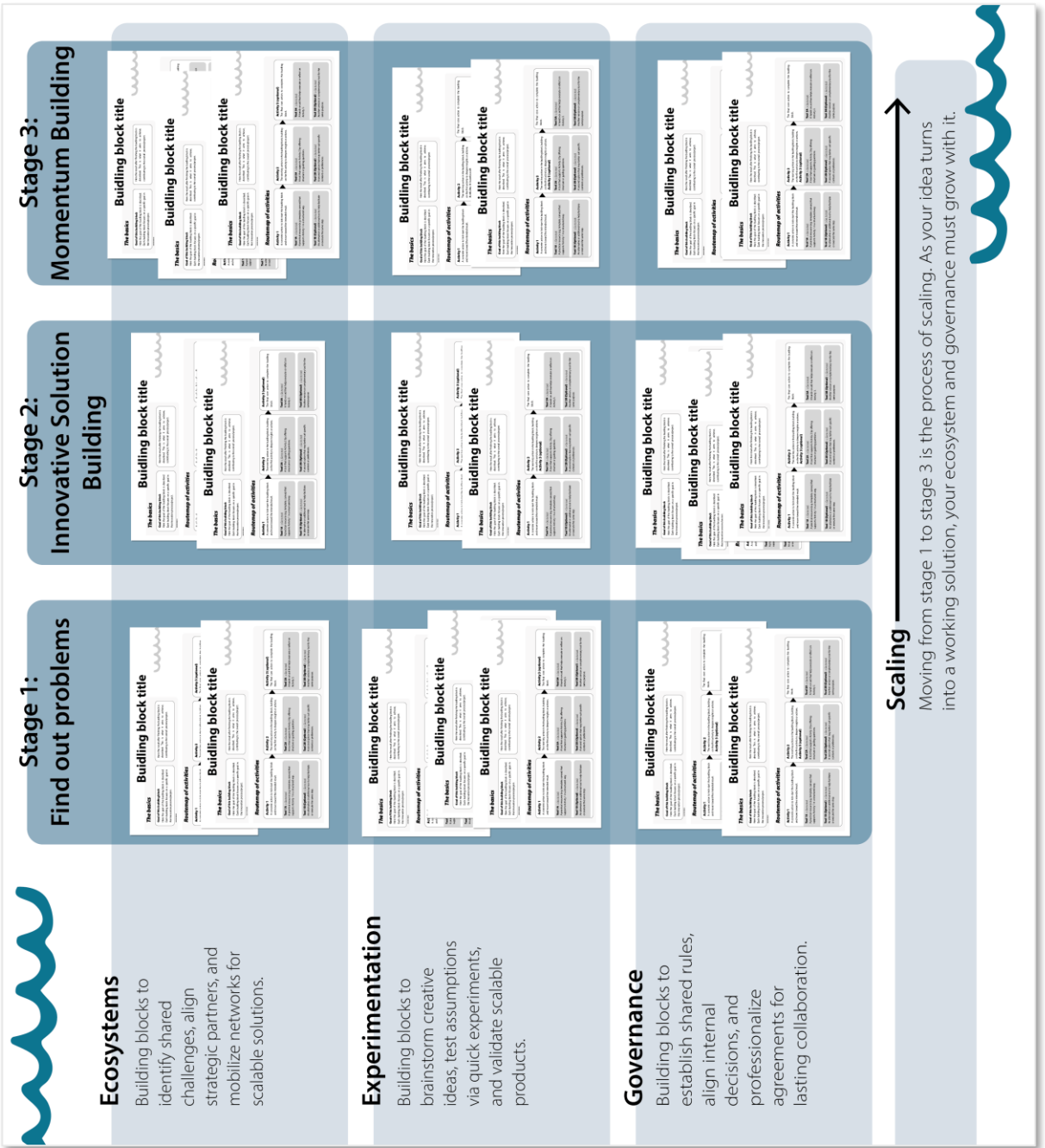
EXPLORE THE FULL TOOLKIT ONLINE

This playbook provides the summaries. The complete building blocks, including all details, activities and tools, are available on the Flow Forward platform. Visit the [online platform](#) and start applying the building blocks that fit your context!

"You don't need Stage 3 tools for a Stage 1 challenge. Guided by the 3x3 matrix, these building blocks ensure you take the exact right steps at the right time, with clarity and confidence."



BUILDING BLOCKS OVERVIEW



The 3x3 matrix with building blocks: This overview maps the three core aspects against the three maturity stages. It shows that every aspect x stages contains one or more building blocks.



ECOSYSTEM BUILDING BLOCKS – OVERVIEW

	Building block title	Goal
Stage 1 Find out problems	Set a shared agenda	Finding big, painful challenges that affect or attract a broad stakeholder base. These challenges must represent a cross-section/ touchpoint to all stakeholders.
	Enlarge the value	Ensure the challenge includes topics that matter to all partners. This helps attract more interest and support and prevents potential blockers later on.
	Ecosystem set up	Ensure that the right partners are involved in the ecosystem. Activate your initial 'coalition of the willing' and strategically expand the ecosystem by identifying missing partners and engaging new partners.
	Value for all stakeholders	Ensure the collaboration is relevant for every partner. It defines exactly what benefits they gain, answering the question: What is in it for me?
Stage 2 Innovative solution building	Expanding the ecosystem	Attract and engage the right interested parties, organizations, and people to strengthen the ecosystem, e.g. for an experiment. Connect with related initiatives to bundle forces and increase influence.
	Stakeholder process alignment	Align partners timelines, decision processes, and internal workflows to support joint implementation.
	Let the ecosystem work	Create buy-in and an action-oriented mindset in the ecosystem. Shift partners from passive interest to proactive participation to drive the project forward.
	Ecosystem check-up	Ensure that the right partners are involved in the ecosystem. Actively engage both new and existing stakeholders to build a strong network that is ready to sustain and scale.
Stage 3 Momentum building	Ecosystem check-up	Ensure that the right partners are involved in the ecosystem. Actively engage both new and existing stakeholders to build a strong network that is ready to sustain and scale.
	Partnerships for scaling	Mobilize specific partners to implement and sustain the solution beyond the pilot phase.





EXPERIMENTING BUILDING BLOCKS – OVERVIEW

	Building block title	Goal
Stage 1 Find out problems	Challenge discovery	Clearly define challenges by gathering stakeholder perspectives and analyzing data to create structured, actionable challenge statements that address verified problems rather than assumptions.
	Researching stakeholder	See the challenge through the eyes of the people affected to define the right challenge.
	Shared challenge prioritization	Prioritize the most critical challenges across stakeholders. Using collective criteria and voting to prioritize the most urgent issues.
	Define the scope	Establish specific boundaries and focus area for the upcoming project. Define what is included and what remains out of scope for the project.
	Solution generation	Generate a wide range of creative ideas through open thinking sessions without premature judgment. This ensures a diverse pool of potential ideas.
Stage 2 Innovative solution building	Setting up experiment(s)	Plan a small, focused experiment to test the important assumptions. Define clear test boundaries, focus on learning what works and use few resources.
	Improve the prototype	Don't expect the first shot to be a hit. Improve and refine the idea by validation sessions and testing.
	From prototype to minimum viable product	Prioritize essential features to develop a Minimum Viable Product (MVP). This functional version allows for a real-world pilot to test the full solution.
	First pilot(s)	Launch the Minimum Viable Product (MVP) in a real-world environment to test the value proposition against actual market demand and confirm it meets stakeholders needs and solves the defined challenge.
Stage 3 Momentum building	Exploring pathways for scaling	Identify the best path, internal or external, to scale the solution and secure the needed resources, governance, and business model.
	Finding next growth market	Validate a solution in a focused, real-world setting to prove its effectiveness and build momentum for wider adoption.





GOVERNANCE BUILDING BLOCKS – OVERVIEW

	Building block title	Goal
Stage 1 Find out problems	Simple guiding principles	Set shared values and clear rules to guide partner interactions and decisions without needing constant governance.
	Minimum Viable Infrastructure	Define the logistics and organizational standards, like documentation, meetings, and roles, to keep the project running smoothly.
Stage 2 Innovative solution building	Manage your own organisation	To align internal departments, incentives, and leadership mindsets to get the buy-in, access and resources from the leadership team but also the support from other internal stakeholders/ departments for the issue at hand.
	Decision-making body	Establish a trusted and representative decision-making body with clear roles, mandates, and processes for governance within the ecosystem.
	Involving power promoters	Identify key ecosystem barriers and activate influential supporters who can help remove resistance and accelerate adoption of the solution.
Stage 3 Momentum building	Professionalizing (ecosystem) governance	Design and professionalize ecosystem governance to enable structured, long-term collaboration between partners. Move from informal coordination to clear agreements, roles, and decision-making that support ecosystem growth and impact.





**FIND THE COMPLETE
BUILDING BLOCKS ON
flow-forward.eu**



4. PLATFORM AND SUPPORT

THE FLOW FORWARD PLATFORM

While this playbook provides the blueprint, the Flow Forward Platform is your active workspace. The platform serves as the central hub for everything you need to put the methodology into practice. There you will find the complete building blocks, in-depth explanations, background information on the Connected River project, and practical case studies and experiments.

THE COMPLETE BUILDING BLOCK LIBRARY

Access the full collection of complete building blocks. Here you will find all the detailed, step-by-step activities and tools needed to execute them.

STANDALONE TOOL CATALOG

In addition to being integrated within the building blocks, the tools are also accessible as a standalone section on the platform. This catalog allows users to browse all available tools, each accompanied by a brief description, making it easy to quickly locate and access the resources they need. Users can use these tools either as part of a building block or independently, depending on their specific goals.

INSPIRING EXPERIMENT CARDS

Get inspired by real-world experiments from the six pilot areas. These cards show exactly what the outcomes were, even when things didn't work out as planned. By breaking down the problem, the applied solution, and the key insights, they help you learn from both successes and failures.

REAL-WORLD CASE STUDIES

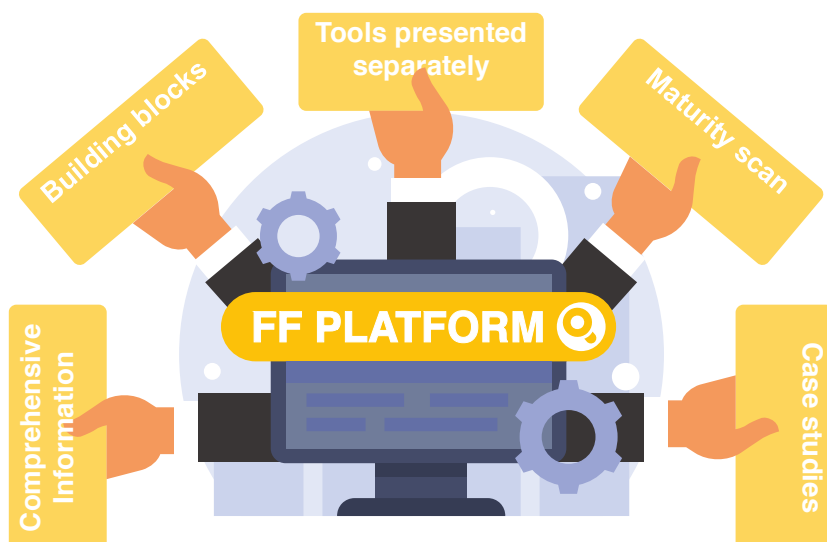
Learn from practice. Discover how the six pilot areas successfully applied specific building blocks and tools to overcome real challenges, such as stakeholder engagement or ecosystem management.

THE MATURITY SCAN

Take the online maturity scan to determine your project's current maturity stage (1,2 or 3) for each aspect (Ecosystem, Experimentation, and Governance). The scan instantly highlights your areas for growth and recommends the exact building blocks to take next.

OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INFORMATION

The platform offers a more comprehensive information on the Connected River project, the Flow forward, the six pilot areas and the performed experiments.





SUPPORT

The Flow Forward methodology was developed through the collaborative efforts of the Connected River consortium. We are passionate about fostering innovation in complex, multi-stakeholder environments and are here to help you move forward.

NEED HELP OR WANT TO DIVE DEEPER?

We're here to support you. Don't hesitate to reach out. Depending on your exact needs, you can easily get in touch with our dedicated experts:

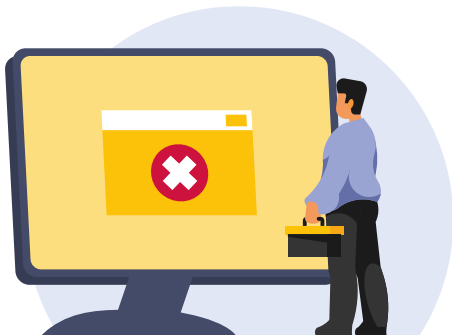
Depending on your needs, you can easily connect with our dedicated experts:

- For guidance on the Flow Forward methodology, including how to apply it to your specific organizational challenges
- The ecosystem perspective for building and aligning networks and stakeholders
- The Connected River consortium and its six pilot areas, including opportunities to learn from real-world practice and get involved in the wider network.

VISIT THE PLATFORM TO FIND MORE INFORMATION

We invite you to explore, adapt, and evolve the Flow Forward methodology to shape the future of innovation in your own region. Discover everything you need at <https://flow-forward.eu/> Let's make impact together!

We invite you to explore, adapt, and evolve Flow Forward and to shape the future of innovation in your own context.





CONNECTED RIVER BACKGROUND

Connected River is an EU funded (Interreg North Sea) transnational innovation project addressing challenges related to shared use of waterways and waterfronts. The aim is to find solutions for contemporary issues like conflicting usage, accident risks, and pollution with a new approach. As a result, the project aims to increase safety, accessibility, and livability of the main waterways and waterfronts.

TIME TO INNOVATE

Waterways and waterfronts are vital for the economy, ecology, and quality of life in the North Sea region. However, the growing urbanization, commercial developments, recreational pursuits, and other activities is placing an increasing pressure on those areas.

Traditionally, responsible authorities applied a static approach to respond to such issues and pressures. While these methodologies remain effective for core tasks such as water management, they are increasingly insufficient in a rapidly changing environment shaped by climate challenges, urbanisation, and evolving societal needs.

To address this common challenge, some authorities explored new, innovative methodologies and smart solutions. Yet, these efforts were typically isolated and concentrated in larger cities, leaving rural areas behind. This created a clear need to break down these silos and learn together.

The Connected River project seized this opportunity. The project focused on enabling efficient experimentation with emerging digital technologies, new innovation methodologies, and forms of collaboration, with a strong connection to society in waterway and waterfront regions.

Based on the practical lessons learned from six real-world pilot projects, the consortium developed the Flow Forward methodology. This playbook translates those insights into a practical guide, designed to maximize the uptake and transferability of the methodology so you can effectively tackle your own complex challenges.

CORE DOCUMENT

The Flow Forward playbook is the main and core playbook of the Connected River project. It brings together the key lessons and experiences from the project in one methodology: Flow Forward. The pilot areas have applied the approach in different contexts and on different themes. This provides a reason and foundation for developing more specific playbooks for particular sectors or local challenges in the future.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CONNECTED RIVER PROJECT?

Visit the website via:

<https://www.interregnorthsea.eu/connected-river>

“Flow Forward comes from the Connected River project’s philosophy to ‘flow like water’: working more agilely and becoming less vulnerable to change. It offers a unique, flexible way of working to address complex waterway challenges.”

