



# Action Learning Methodology for Accelerator Teams



Dear reader,

this document is first and foremost targeted at the project partners of SEMPRESS Accelerators: in simplified terms, this document represents the Terms of Reference for the local activities of SEMPRESS Accelerators. The main purpose is to develop a shared understanding of Action Learning and its application in the project context. Against this background, the following sections might sound rather project-specific.

Nonetheless, if you plan to apply Action Learning in service development or entrepreneurship support, this document may help you find inspiration for your activities. It accompanies the "SEMPRESS Guidebook for Empowerment Training", of which the second, revised edition has been published in spring 2021 at [www.sempress-accelerators.eu](http://www.sempress-accelerators.eu). Next to Action Learning as a method, the SEMPRESS Guidebook for Empowerment Training additionally shows how Action Learning can be applied in practice.

On the following pages, we would like to describe

- the basic principles of action learning,
- the roles of the Accelerator Team (AT)\* and its Facilitator and members,
- how communication in the ATs should be organised
- steps to be taken (implementation of actions, critical review of actions and feedback cycles)
- a list of tasks for the facilitators concerning reporting about the AT progress

## SEMPRESS Accelerators for Service Co-Creation

SEMPRESS Accelerators is a project that supports inclusive social entrepreneurship in the Baltic Sea Region. Its objective is to accelerate the growth and development of eight local co-creation initiatives, so-called "micro projects", and to turn them into successful, self-sustaining social start-ups that consistently offer services and/or products on local and regional markets.

The micro projects have been developed in previous projects called SEMPRESS – Social Empowerment in Rural Areas (2016-2019). The SEMPRESS partners compiled and tested empowerment tools which social service providers can use to assess service needs among disadvantaged groups and to involve members of these groups in co-creation processes that lead to the development of new social services. While SEMPRESS focused on the development of business ideas with tools such as the social business model canvas or theory of change, SEMPRESS Accelerators goes further. The project partners have formed "accelerator teams", each of which consists of representatives of the disadvantaged groups and established social service providers. The teams pool the ideas and experiential knowledge

of the service users and the professional know-how of the social workers in order to overcome such challenges as setting up stable and efficient management and leadership structures, extending the range or improving the quality of the services, acquiring financing and involving more service users in the start-up.

SEMPRESS Accelerators thus creates eight good practice examples of dynamic and successful social start-ups that enrich the social service landscape and take pressure off established service providers and public authorities who face increasingly difficult framework conditions for service provision in rural areas.

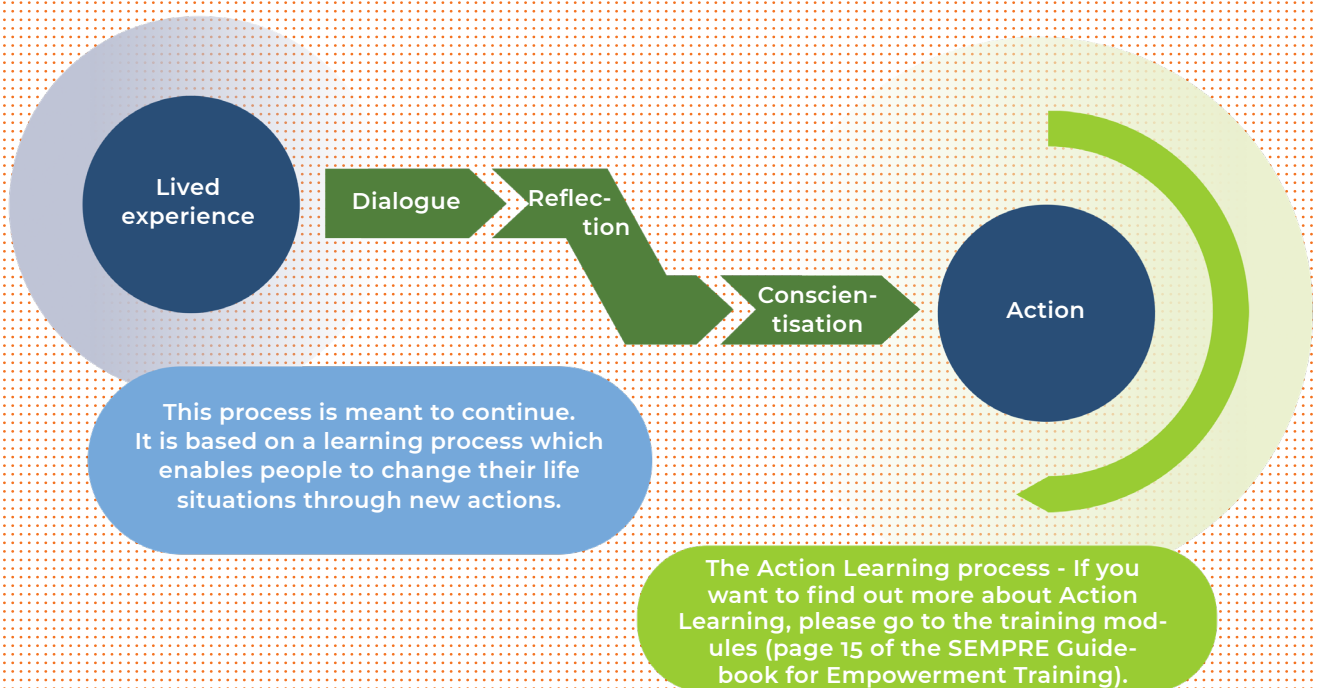
Examples of social start-ups:

- "Stop over in Liepa ": A coffee shop that serves as a meeting space and work place for parents and young unemployed people in Vidzeme, Latvia
- SIVANs: A dog day care centre run by people who have had trouble entering the labour market in Luleå, Sweden
- Newspaper & Web: A group of migrants that writes and publishes articles on integration issues in a regional magazine and on a website in Nordfriesland, Germany

\* In SEMPRESS Accelerators, so-called „Accelerator Teams“ (ATs) have been introduced as a practical framework to apply Action Learning in mixed learner groups. The setup, functioning and purpose of the Accelerator Teams will be described in detail on page 5.

# Basic Principles of Action Learning

The collaboration in the Accelerator Teams (ATs, see page 5) will be based on the principles of Action Learning, an approach that has been identified during the SEMPRES project as an effective and empowering way of joint problem-solving. In this way, all ATs work with a similar Action Learning approach, and this shared approach will make it easier to identify and compare learning achievements. In the SEMPRES project we developed the SEMPRES approach to Empowerment and operationalised working with Empowerment with Action Learning (AL). The Empowerment approach builds on Paolo Freire's experiences and his concept on Empowerment (Freire, 2000). "The crucial elements of his concept are dialogue, reflection, conscientisation and action. These elements interact with each other in such a way, that they build a continuous loop of transformation", illustrated as:



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Action learning is based on the relationship between action and reflection and is thus a continuous process of action, reflection and learning. The actions are based on actual problems experienced by the participants. In other words, it is based on "lived experiences" like the empowerment process. Participation is voluntary, and it takes place in special organised learning groups. In the SEMPRES project, we wanted to emphasise change and transformation regarding individuals and groups, their living conditions and the organisations concerned. We developed our concept of Action Learning according to these demands.

Action Learning is organised in learning groups, where the members work with individual or joint actions based on real problems. They experience these problems themselves, and they want to change the situation. With the help of a facilitator and different ways of organising themselves, they define a problem – either together or individually – and describe and carry out actions in relation to what they want to change. Moreover, they observe actions when they are carried out. An example could be to observe each other and write a logbook. The participants then meet in the learning group and reflect on the actions. They extract learnings from the process before formulating another problem.

**“Action Learning (AL) is joint learning through questioning, investigation and reflection in relation to participant’s actions (projects, acts, practice, experiments) and organised in special framed learning groups with voluntary participation.”**

Benedichte Madsen (2008)

**In the context of Action Learning, an action can be defined as an experiment, project, act or practice to be carried out in practical terms. The action...**

- **should relate to the problem,**
- **should be limited and evident to actor and observer,**
- **should be described as a series of actions,**
- **has a purpose - it must lead to something,**
- **can be evaluated against success criteria defined beforehand.**

The problems must be formulated in a way so it is possible to act in relation to them. Big problems must be transformed into smaller entities. Members of the learning group can be colleagues; it can be a mixture of users and social workers or others if they have a common task or purpose.

You can read more about action learning in the SEMPRES Guidebook for Empowerment training, p 13, 38, 46ff. You can find the Guidebook on the SEMPRES Accelerators webpage: [www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results](http://www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results). In this publication you will also find templates, that describe all phases of the Action Learning process, how to work with formulating the problem and planning the actions, how to observe, how logbooks could be designed, and how questions may trigger reflection and learning. Moreover, a movie on Action Learning is available here (<https://youtu.be/SCLfgGYnLlw>). It shows an example of working with Action Learning.

**Observation, reflection and learning:** While you carry out actions, you observe how you carry them out and what happens. One way of doing this is in logbooks. You describe your actions in a logbook, what happens during the actions and the outcome of the actions.

**Logbook:** You use the logbook for reflections about the actions. The logbook is just for observing actions. You can use the logbook as inspiration and source diaries such as the micro project journals that we kept in SEMPRES.



# Action Learning in SEMPRESS

## Accelerators: About Micro Projects, Accelerator Teams and Facilitators

### Micro projects

Micro projects are defined in SEMPRESS as small-scale initiatives at the local level that aim to improve the living situations of members of disadvantaged target groups. To be considered as a micro project in SEMPRESS, initiatives must fulfil the following criteria:

- They must be initiated at least partly by service users (members of a disadvantaged group).
- They must react to the specific needs of this disadvantaged group.
- They must deliver a service that was not previously available or follow a newly developed approach. The service users thus become co-producers of social services, while the traditional social providers act as facilitators rather than drivers of this process.

The activities in this project intend to strengthen and upgrade the entrepreneurial skills and competencies of the service users involved in the micro projects and mentor the micro project groups on their way to becoming mature and stable actors in the service sector. The eight SEMPRESS micro project groups that have been selected for this project have already identified a number of challenges which they need to tackle. Thereby, they want to improve their performance, the quality and range of activities and services, as well as their human and financial resources.

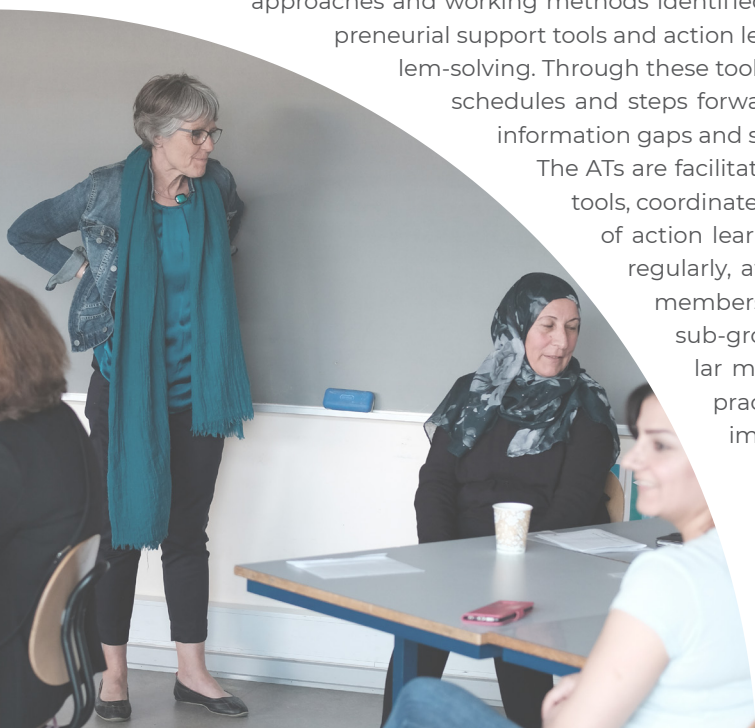
### Accelerator Teams:

Each project partner will establish a so-called Accelerator Team (AT). The Accelerator Team is set up at a kick-off workshop that addresses the micro project members and the service providers who are willing to take part in this activity. The AT consists of up to three members of the micro project group and up to four staff members of the social service providers. The AT should not have more than eight members (core group), which is a good size for intensive work sessions.

The aim of the ATs is to find and implement solutions to the challenges and foster the growth and development of the micro projects into social start-ups.

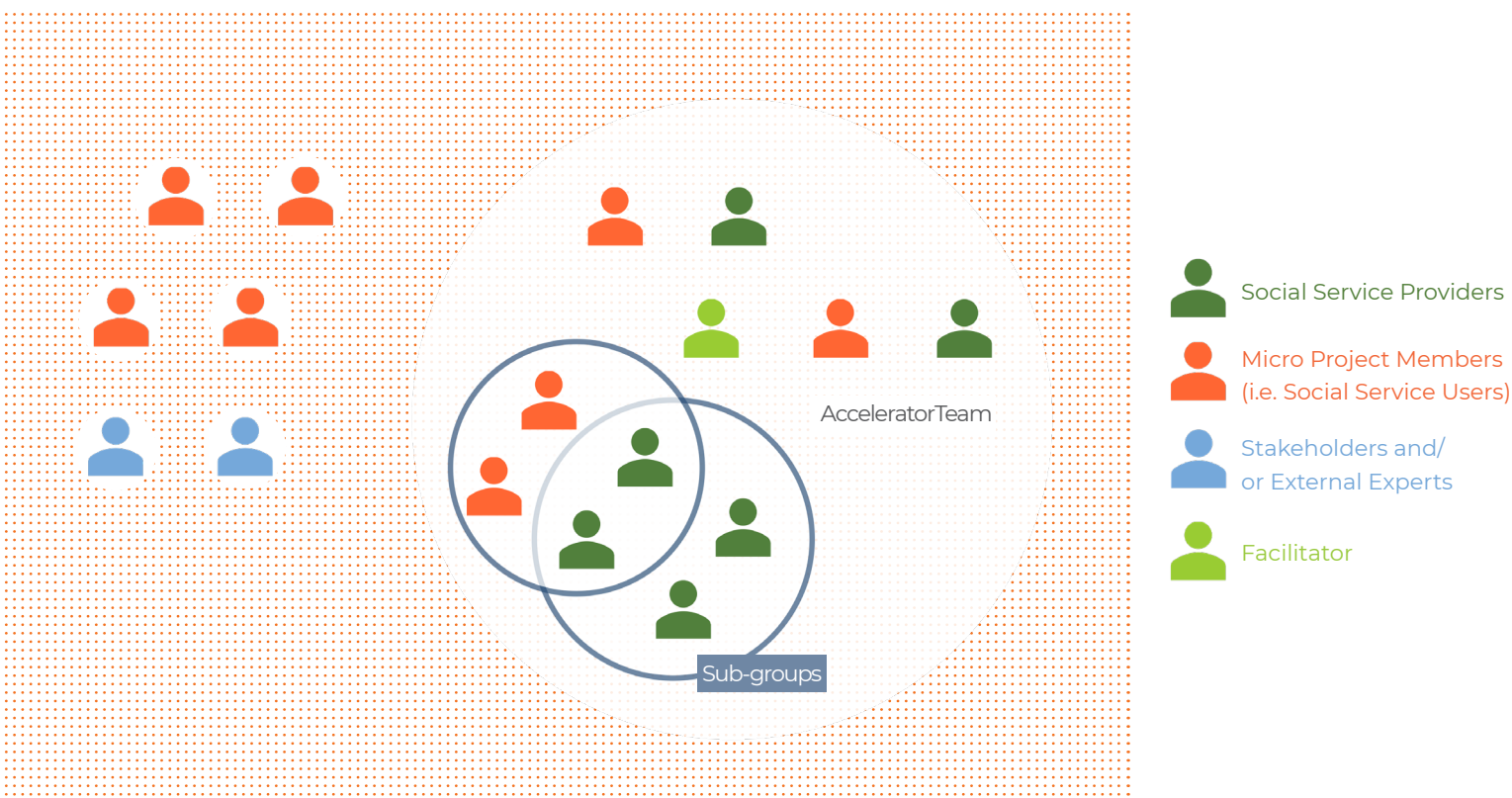
The ATs are a core element because they build upon already achieved SEMPRESS project results, and they are the concrete learning environment for micro-project owners and service providers. The ATs are testing approaches and working methods identified or developed in the SEMPRESS project, such as entrepreneurial support tools and action learning as a cooperative and empowering way of problem-solving. Through these tools and instruments, the micro projects refine the goals, schedules and steps forward. The ATs are the places where strategies, skill and information gaps and support necessities are discussed.

The ATs are facilitated by project partner staff who introduce the support tools, coordinate the accelerator team activities based on the principles of action learning and monitor the teams' progress. The ATs meet regularly, at least once a month. Between the meetings, the AT members will stay in contact via e-mail and telephone and hold sub-group working meetings if suitable. During these regular monthly meetings, the AT members report about their practical actions in their micro projects, receive feedback, improve their actions and plan next steps.



### Relation between Micro Projects, Accelerator Teams and Action Learning in SEMPRE Accelerators

- Each SEMPRE Accelerators project partner accounts for one micro project. Micro projects have different shapes and are at different stages of their development. During their development, they may branch out and differentiate their activities and goals.
- Each micro project forms an accelerator team at the kick-off seminar.
- The Accelerator Team consists of up to 3 persons that are part of the micro project and up to 4 persons that are established social service providers. The Accelerator Team can also include external expert help from time to time if necessary.
- The Accelerator Teams' task is to help the micro project to grow and become sustainable.
- Depending on the priorities of the Accelerator Team, sub-groups may be established, which may focus on specific challenges that were identified. The sub-groups can involve externals, yet there must be at least one person who is also part of the Accelerator Team.
- The work in the Accelerator Team is based on Action Learning, and the Accelerator Team forms the basis for the Action Learning process. This principle also applies to the sub-groups.
- The Action Learning method as a mindset is applicable in all parts of the micro projects, but in more or less framed settings.



The AT frames planning of actions and reflection on actions. Actions can be pursued in sub-groups, in the micro projects, or even in other settings within the micro project goal to improve the micro project and its way to sustainability. At AT meetings, problems and challenges are discussed. They must be addressed to decide which settings are preferable to carry out the actions in the best way. The ATs work with actions in different ways and in different settings as it makes sense in relation to the work in the micro project. They form actions in cooperation, carry out the actions, make a logbook, and reflect on their actions and their learning in the setting where they carried out the action. They bring their reflection to the AT, and together with the other members, they reflect on each other's actions and learning, plan new actions, the settings in which they should be carried out, and who should do it. What this could look like in practice is described in the following two scenarios:

**Scenario 1:** The AT identifies a challenge or a problem i.e. that some micro project members do not thrive in the project and seem scared in some situations. The AT decides to form a sub-group as it seems that this problem could need a series of actions. Two members of the AT form the sub-group and invite members from the micro project. The members of the sub-group meet and plan concrete actions. One approach could be that members of the sub-group contact the persons in the microproject that do not seem to thrive and talk to them about how they are, and what their needs are, possibly using parts of the Kitchen Talk method (described in the Empowerment Handbook, see [www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results](http://www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results)). They observe (logbook), reflect in the sub-group, learn from the action and plan and carry out next actions. This could be:

- arrange a workshop in which the entire groups participates in planning activities like Future Workshop (see Empowerment Handbook, [www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results](http://www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results)),
- observe, reflect in the sub-group, learn from the action and plan next actions,
- make social arrangements depending on needs

The members of the AT bring their reflection, learning and planning of new actions to the AT for discussion and feedback. This process is facilitated by the Facilitator using the Action Learning template as inspiration.

**Scenario 2:** The AT identifies insufficient media coverage as a major challenge of their micro project. The AT decides to appoint one particular AT member to work in this issue. This AT member might have special skills or contacts related to the problem. The Facilitator uses the AT template to identify and plan the action. The action could be for example:

- contacting a journalist at the local paper,
- writing a letter for the newspaper,
- sending out a press note and calling different papers or radio and TV channels afterwards.

The AT member carries out the action and makes a logbook according to the Action Learning template. At the next AT meeting, the Facilitator leads the process of reflection, learning and planning a new action if necessary.

## Tasks of the AT Facilitator

Each AT is facilitated by a staff member of the respective project partner or an external expert henceforth referred to as Facilitator. The Facilitator supports the micro-project owners' learning processes, but not as a teacher delivering knowledge and assessing progress in a school like manner. In order to monitor change and at the same time facilitate learning and progress of micro-projects on their way to social entrepreneurship or the like, it is essential that Facilitators themselves can reflect critically and redefine their own role in the whole process. The Facilitator applies the Action Learning methodology to the AT based on the SEMPRES Guidebook for Empowerment Training (see [www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results](http://www.sempre-accelerators.eu/results)). In case the Facilitator realises that for a specific challenge in-depth expertise is needed which cannot be found amongst the AT members, he / she may invite an external expert for support. This external support may be necessary and beneficial for instance when turning to financial or legal questions

The Facilitator covers the following tasks in the Accelerator Team: facilitate, document, connect, communicate and evaluate.

### Facilitate:

- Organise Kick off workshop
- Organise and facilitate regular (e.g. monthly) AT meetings
- Prepare an action plan/timetable for the upcoming meetings
- Involve external experts as needed

Document:

- Monitor the progress, document the progress
- Assist micro project members in documenting their own progress, in their own way, for example by keeping a “micro project journal” or other types of diaries

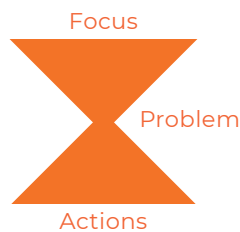
Connect and Communicate:

- Help identify training needs
- Take part in training sessions and pass on know-how to AT members
- Assist AT members in presenting their micro projects to external audiences
- Organise additional activities (in the context of SEMPRES Accelerators for example a job-shadowing)

Evaluate:

- Carry out the final evaluation of the AT process using methods such as Appreciative Inquiry

On a more theoretical level, the first thing the Facilitator does is to establish a contract between all participants about how the process should take place and how the Facilitator will act as a facilitator. It is important to distinguish between facilitation, supervision, group work, coffee talks and therapy. The Facilitator starts with facilitating a broad focus, narrowing into a one sentence problem, and then widening it up again in different tasks or actions in order to solve or work with problems.



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