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EcoVolve: Evolutionizing Ecosystems for Social Enterprises in CEE Region

D12. Capacity-building expansion plan

Co-funded by the European Union

Project number: 101188814

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1. Preamble

EcoVolve: Evolutionizing Ecosystems for Social Enterprises in the CEE Region (Project number: 101188814) is an EU co-funded project started on 1 December 2024. The project aims to contribute to convergence of CEE social finance markets and thus mitigate their heterogeneity across the EU. The main outcome of this project include:

- continuing a capacity-building programme piloted in Austria, Hungary, and Romania from March 2024 to May 2025,
- rolling it out to preferably four more CEE countries (5-7 countries in total),
- providing capacity-building to at least 60 (ideally 100) social enterprises,
- the provision of new impact-linked financing (equity and equity-like) to 20 social enterprises,
- establishing an impact fund structure and raising at least 20 mln EURs in funding from impact investors.

The capacity-building programme has its own distinct name, the **Marc Impact Programme**; therefore, in the following sections, we will refer to it either as the **Marc Impact Programme** or the **Marc Programme**.

The Capacity-building expansion plan is a key deliverable under Work Package 5 (WP5), focusing on the roll-out of the Marc Programme to two to four additional CEE countries, building on the pilot phase conducted in Austria, Hungary, and Romania.

2. Objective of the capacity-building expansion plan

The capacity-building expansion plan is designed to achieve the following objectives:

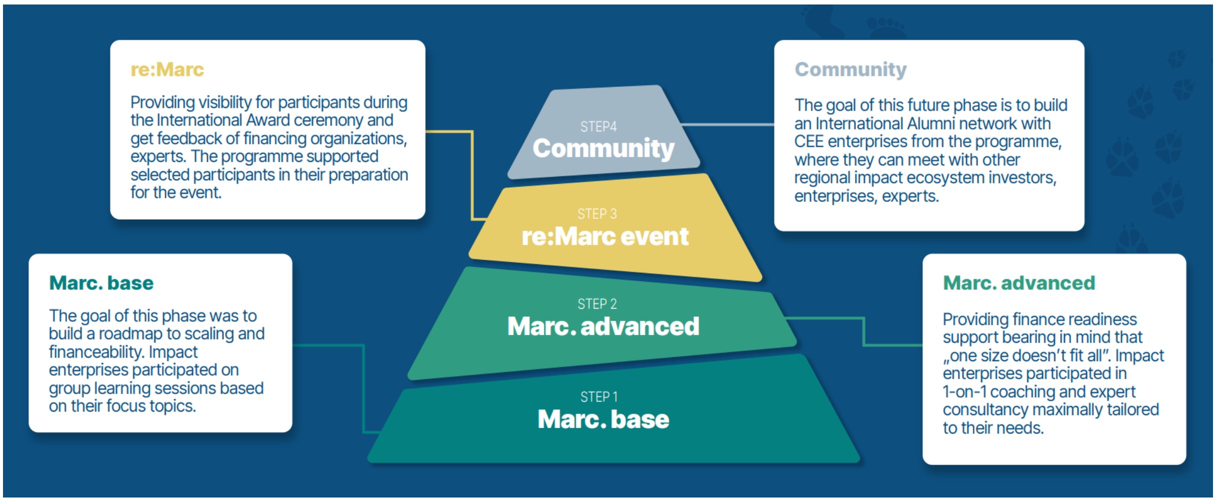
- **Develop a programme-level methodology framework:** Building on the experiences and lessons learned from the pilot year, establish a unified framework of values, approaches, and tools to ensure consistency and quality across all participating countries.
- **Expand the capacity-building programme to new countries:** Roll out the Marc Programme to two to four additional CEE countries, ensuring adaptation to local contexts while safeguarding its core principles and impact logic.
- **Engage and develop Local Programme Partners (LPPs):** Identify, select, and train LPPs in each new country to ensure effective implementation and sustainability of the programme.
- **Advance country-specific planning:** Develop detailed country-specific expansion plans, including localized methodologies to maximize the programme's impact in each target country.

These objectives build on the market research and country assessments conducted in a separate Work Package (WP3), ensuring that the expansion is evidence-based, context-sensitive, and aligned with the opportunities and needs of each target country.

3. Lessons Learned from the Pilot Year

Market research conducted under WP3 confirmed that capacity-building is essential in the CEE region, as most social enterprises face common challenges: limited access to appropriate finance, underdeveloped support ecosystem, and a lack of tailored expertise.

The **Marc Impact Programme**, launched in 2024, aimed to support bold, impact-driven enterprises in Austria, Hungary, and Romania. The Marc Programme offers capacity-building solutions that improve enterprises' ability to generate social impact and secure financing, providing practical support and expert guidance. The main **building blocks** of the programme are as follows:



The pilot year (2024/25) provided **invaluable insights that will shape the Marc Programme's future expansion and methodology**. Key learnings are summarized below:

General insights

- **Local adaptation needed:** Market maturity differs significantly by country. A uniform programme design is not effective; local adaptation is necessary.
- **Role of Local Programme Partners:** The success of participant recruitment and programme execution heavily depended on the networks and expertise of LPPs. Identifying partners with the right connections and knowledge was critical to achieving programme goals.
- **Value of mentorship and peer-learning:** Participants consistently identified mentoring and peer learning as the most impactful components of the programme, underscoring their importance in capacity-building efforts.
- **Financing gaps:** Across all three countries, enterprises highlighted the lack of early-stage and risk-tolerant funding. This reinforced the need to introduce innovative financing tools, such as impact-linked finance, to address these gaps.

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Thematic lessons

- **Recruitment and outreach:** LPP networks in right areas were key. In less developed ecosystems, more active promotion and awareness-raising were necessary.
- **Methodology framework:** While the central methodological framework (see the building blocks above) was effective, its application varied by country. For example, Austria emphasized individual mentoring, while Hungary placed strong emphasis on group training sessions as well.
- **Training curricula and materials:** The pilot year demonstrated that the real value for participants lies in receiving **country-specific and tailor-made support**. While the program provides a common framework through three core thematic areas - **financeability, impact measurement, and impact scaling** - the content and delivery are adapted to local needs and contexts to maximize relevance and impact. At the same time, centrally developed resources, such as investor one-pagers, remain important to connect organizations to the international ecosystem and ensure coherence across countries.
- **Partnerships:** Ecosystem-building activities, such as engaging investors, banks, corporates, created great added value beyond direct enterprise support.

Conclusion

Certain components of the programme, such as the emphasis on individual mentoring and the programme-level impact measurement methodology, can be implemented in new countries without modification. Other aspects, including the training curricula and recruitment strategies, need to be adapted to the maturity and specific needs of each local ecosystem. The pilot year showed clearly where adjustments are needed, and building on these lessons will help the Marc Impact Programme expand successfully while addressing the unique challenges and opportunities in each country.

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4. Program-Level Methodology Framework

4.1. Common values and approaches

The programme is built on a shared set of values and principles that provide a stable foundation across all participating countries:

- **Financeability:** supporting organisations in developing viable, investable business models.
- **Impact measurement:** strengthening the capacity to define, measure, and communicate impact.
- **Impact scaling:** helping organisations design and implement strategies for broader and more sustainable impact.
- **Ecosystem building:** fostering networks of investors, mentors, and peer organisations across Central and Eastern Europe.

These principles emerged as the most relevant and valuable during the pilot year and will remain the central pillars of the programme.

4.2. Core building blocks

The methodology defines the essential programme elements that each country will implement, while allowing adaptation to local needs:

- **Tailored group-capacity building:** instead of generic curricula, participants receive support adjusted to their country context, sector, and level of maturity.
- **Mentoring and peer learning:** individual guidance and regional peer-to-peer exchange are mandatory features of the programme design.
- **Investor and partner engagement:** structured interaction with financial and ecosystem actors ensures market orientation and practical relevance.

Experience from the pilot year showed that participants gain the most value from country-specific, tailor-made support. Therefore, each Local Programme Partner (LPP) is empowered to adapt delivery methods, training formats, and engagement strategies to their local environment. This includes the flexibility to decide whether to implement a one-stage or two-stage ("tunnel") programme design and whether to provide base support to participants, depending on the local ecosystem's maturity and the needs of enterprises.

4.3. Central tools and resources

To ensure overall coherence and quality, centrally developed resources complement the locally adapted approaches. These include:

- A few **standardised templates**, such as one-pagers, to support international networking and ecosystem connections.
- A **common framework for impact measurement** and reporting.

- **Shared communication materials** and digital platforms.

5. Expansion strategy

5.1. Country Selection

The selection of new target countries is based on three key criteria:

- **Stakeholder interest:** One of the consortium members of EcoVolve is Erste Social Finance Holding, and one of the initiators and co-financiers of the Marc Programme is the ERSTE Foundation. Countries are prioritized where Erste's social banking operations are active, enabling Erste to provide strong support, both financial and non-financial to impact-driven social enterprises. This alignment ensures that local programme partners and participants can leverage the existing social finance ecosystem effectively.
- **Ecosystem readiness:** The country should have some incubators, accelerators, or networks capable of supporting social enterprises, as well as active impact investors or relevant institutions. At the same time, there should be a clear **need for the Marc Programme**, meaning that existing accelerators or government programs do not fully cover capacity-building or financing gaps for the target enterprises.
- **Market potential:** A minimum of 10–15 eligible social enterprises per country ready to participate in capacity-building, ensuring a critical mass to generate measurable impact.

5.2. Phased rollout

The expansion will follow a phased approach to allow adaptive learning:

- **Phase 1 (2025):** Launch in three countries (Czechia, Serbia, Croatia). Focus on onboarding and training LPPs, testing localized methodologies and piloting capacity-building modules with a manageable cohort of social enterprises.
- **Phase 2 (2026):** Expand to additional countries (mainly Slovakia). Apply refined methodologies, leveraging insights from Phase 1 to ensure efficient adaptation and measurable outcomes.

5.3. Approach to rollout

Steps to ensure successful adaptation and sustainable implementation:

1. **LPP Selection:** Identify, evaluate, and onboard LPPs with relevant expertise and networks.
2. **Methodology framework application:** Implement the central framework, adapting central processes, modules, mentoring structures, communication and impact measurement tools to local needs.

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3. **Customization to local contexts:** Adjust recruitment, outreach, partnerships, and communication strategies to reflect each country's ecosystem maturity and culture.
4. **Stakeholder engagement:** Build relationships with local investors, corporates, policymakers, and ecosystem actors.
5. **Monitoring and feedback:** Establish country-specific monitoring to track progress, capture lessons, and continuously improve programme delivery.

By following this stepwise approach, involving the LPPs and the local Erste Social Bank heavily in steps #2-5, the Marc Programme can expand effectively across new CEE countries.

6. Role of Local Programme Partners

Local Programme Partners (LPPs) play a pivotal role in ensuring the successful expansion and implementation of the Marc Programme in each target country. Their responsibilities are designed to guarantee high-quality delivery, local adaptation, and strong engagement with the social enterprise ecosystem.

Responsibilities of LPPs:

- **Planning & Alignment:** Develop local programme content and activity plans in consultation with the local Erste Social Bank, ensuring alignment with regional priorities.
- **Participant management:** Recruit, select, and contract participants; provide individual and group capacity-building, mentoring, and training.
- **Promotion & Communication:** Lead local outreach and marketing; provide programme materials to the local Erste Social Bank; coordinate events and campaigns to increase visibility and engagement.
- **Collaboration & Methodology:** Contribute to methodology development, share local best practices, and involve the local Erste Social Bank in programme activities where relevant.
- **Impact & Reporting:** Collect and report standardized impact data; implement feedback; participate in regular progress updates; provide early warnings on risks or challenges to programme management.

LPPs ensure high-quality programme delivery, local adaptation, and strong engagement with the social enterprise ecosystem.

Selection criteria for LPPs:

- Relevant expertise and experience in supporting social enterprises.
- Strong embeddedness in the local ecosystem, including networks with incubators, accelerators, investors.
- Strong organisational ability to manage programme delivery, including training, mentoring, and reporting.

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7. Country-Specific Expansion Plans

This section presents the Marc Impact Program roll-out in selected CEE countries. Each plan highlights the local ecosystem, launch timeline, LPP selection process, and implementation approach, ensuring effective adaptation of the central methodology while leveraging local Erste Social Bank support:

Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Austria	Most mature, established, recognised, influential impact economy, as a significant „third economy" between NPO and business. Strong start-up ecosystem; good availability of grants and micro-financing for idea/seed/start-up stage. Sufficient investor and bank offerings for mature-stage enterprise needs. Main challenge: "death valley" financing in expansion stage as grant opportunities dry out.	The capacity building was piloted in 2024–25 with 32 participants. **In 2025–26, 25 enterprises are planned to participate.** The cohort size for 2026–27 will be determined at a later date.	It has been already selected in the pilot year: Impact Hub Vienna	Continuous application, one-stage format (no base phase, only for advanced participants) **Main topics discussed:** finance readiness, impact measurement, go-to-market strategy, valuation methods, marketing, sales strategies, investor pitching, tax and legal, industry-specific topics etc. **Work methods:** • tailored mentoring sessions (20+ expert hours, 16 dedicated coaching and development hours per participant) • group sessions (content workshops and networking events) • local demo day **Communication Tactics:** strong reliance on Erste and LPP networks. **Risks:** largely homogeneous cohort (mostly greentech startups, few social or diverse-profile participants), participant engagement may drop if not financially incentivized.

Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Hungary	Many small, local social enterprises; few strong NPO spin-offs are viable. Start-up ecosystem and development not yet outstanding. Grant opportunities are limited at all stages, forcing enterprises to fight for survival. Political and economic challenges exist. Some new, innovative impact start-ups emerge thanks to long-term support organizations, state programs, strong civil society, and local banks/investors.	The capacity building was piloted in 2024–25 with 14 participants. **In 2025–26, 15 enterprises are planned to participate in the Base, 6 in the Advanced Phase.** The cohort size for 2026–27 will be determined at a later date.	It has been already selected in the pilot year: IFUA Nonprofit Partner & SIMPACT	Two-stage program with Base and Advanced Support; **<u>Base phase</u>** **Main topics discussed:** Financial planning, funding options, sales training, impact measurement, team building **Working methods** • group capacity trainings: in person one-day group training sessions (3x) • tailored sessions with the goal of diagnosis and creating individual development plans **<u>Advanced phase</u>** **Main topics discussed:** Individualized topics (e.g. growth strategies, entering international markets, pricing, etc.) **Working methods** • individual mentoring with two mentors / organisation • pitch preparation: one-day workshop, one-on-one consultation • local demo day **Communication Tactics:** strong reliance on Erste and LPP networks, info sessions for early-stage enterprises, identifying and engaging key players in recruitment (e.g., mentors); strong collaboration with local impact investors (e.g., Impact Venture). **Risks:** too-many too early-stage ventures, limited funding possibilities

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Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Romania	SME, NPO, and start-up ecosystems remain relatively underdeveloped for the country's size, though still significant in absolute terms. Investors, especially impact investors, are less present and focused. Government programs support idea and seed-stage impact start-ups, and strong NBFIs provide micro-financing. The impact economy mainly consists of successful NPO spin-offs and few impact start-ups.	The capacity building was piloted in 2024–25 with 24 participants. **In 2025–26, 12-15 enterprises are planned to participate.** The cohort size for 2026–27 will be determined at a later date.	It has been already selected in the pilot year: SYNERB Venture Catalyzer	One-stage format (no base phase, only for advanced participants) **Topics discussed:** finance-readiness, impact measurement, pitch preparation **Work methods:** • tailored mentoring sessions (6*3 hours one-on-one support) • group sessions (3 days long Scaling Camp and 3 webinars) • local demo day **Communication Tactics:** strong reliance on Erste and LPP networks, direct outreach to promising ventures; presence at events relevant for the target group; organizing own events to engage participants. **Risks:** too early-staged or not financeable organisations, participant engagement may drop if not financially incentivized.

Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Czechia	Ecosystem is growing but fragmented. NPOs, for-profits, and start-ups exist, but few identify with an "impact economy" mindset. No legislative framework; "social" has negative connotations. Finance-ready impact ventures exist among SMEs, start-ups, and NGO spin-offs, but mindset shifts are needed. Marc fills this gap with mentoring, workshops, peer learning, and investor engagement, connecting ventures to the broader ecosystem. Strong local investors, some with impact focus, create additional opportunities.	Expansion in 2025; **In 2025–26, 10-15 enterprises are planned to participate.** The cohort size for 2026–27 will be determined at a later date.	LPP has been already chosen for impact start-up experience and robust local networks: Startup Kitchen	One-stage format (no base phase, only for advanced participants) **Topics discussed:** funding options, finance readiness, impact measurement, marketing and communications, sales, and other relevant subjects **Work methods:** • 9 expert-led workshops • individual mentoring: approx. 10 hours per participant • expert consultations: approx. 15 hours per participant • peer learning and ecosystem networking • local demo day with investor feedback and visibility **Communication Tactics:** strong reliance on Erste and LPP networks. **Risks:** reaching NGOs and other personas may be harder due to weaker connections outside start-up sector.

Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Croatia	Very small impact ecosystem (~500 ventures). Most social needs are state-financed, environmental issues receive limited attention. Strong start-up ecosystem and active investors, but "impact" is underdeveloped and requires education. Marc can guide SMEs, start-ups, and larger for-profits toward structured, sustainable impact growth. Marc can help by guiding SMEs, start-ups, and larger for-profits with potential impact to shift from isolated initiatives toward structured, sustainable growth.	Expansion in 2025; **In 2025–26, 10-15 enterprises are planned to participate.** The cohort size for 2026–27 will be determined at a later date.	LPP has been already chosen: Entrepreneurial Centre of Krapina Zagorje County Ltd	One-stage format (no base phase, only for advanced participants) **Topics discussed:** Idea validation & user needs, Business model & market analysis, Financial planning & pitch preparation, Investment readiness **Working methods**: • hybrid format: e-learning, mentoring, in-person workshops. • mentoring: total mentoring hours per team: 40 hours (modular expert mentor 6 hours/team, business development and pitch mentor: 6 hrs/team; impact mentors: 8 hrs/team, ECKZC team lead mentor: 20 hours/team) • Local Marc Pitch Arena & CEE Marc Pitch event for investor presentation. **Communication Tactics:** collaboration with LPP and Erste networks and key stakeholders, online info session **Risks:** very small ecosystem limits peer learning; low awareness of impact potential.

Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Serbia	Impact ecosystem underdeveloped, partly due to non-EU status limiting growth and grant access. Entrepreneurs are resilient, often succeeding regionally, but finance is scarce at early stages. Erste and some umbrella organisations play key roles. Marc presents an opportunity because it can help ventures move from survival mode to sustainable growth through tailored mentoring, practical workshops, peer learning, and connections to investors and ecosystem partners.	Expansion in 2025; **In 2025–26, 10-15 enterprises are planned to participate.** The cohort size for 2026–27 will be determined at a later date.	LPP has been already chosen: Association for Affirmation of Culture	One-stage format (base and advanced phase but everyone participates in both) **Topics discussed:** business modelling, financial planning, theory of change and social impact strategy etc. **Working methods:** • base development workshop: 3-day intensive training, networking, diagnostics • individual development plans for selected teams • tailored mentorship: 8 flexible sessions per team • pitching & Presentation skills workshops • local demo day **Communication Tactics:** collaboration with LPP and Erste networks and key stakeholders, online info session **Risks:** limited funding access; fragile start-up ecosystem; low engagement due to early-stage challenges; limited investor participation.

Country	Impact Economy	Timeline / Cohort size	LPP selection	Core implementation approach (application process and methodologies, communication tactics, risks)
Slovakia	Broad social economy legislation and many idea/seed/SME grants exist, but these do not foster a true impact economy. Start-up and impact ecosystems remain underdeveloped; most ventures remain small or collapse after initial grants. Marc can help by supporting ventures to move from grant-dependent survival mode to sustainable growth. Erste, as a leading microfinance and impact funder, offers an important local partnership opportunity.	Expansion in 2026; tbd. enterprises	Not selected yet	Will be defined based on the lessons learned of the first extension round.

8. Timeline and Milestones

The introduction of capacity-building in each country has been carefully planned. The key steps and deadlines are outlined in the following schedule:

#	Activity	Notes	2025												2026												2027				
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5
1	**Gathering lessons learned from the pilot (Marc)**	**OPP and LPPs meeting in HU, Advisory Board meeting in AT: adjust programme, prepare next year's activities**																													
2	**Expansion high-level planning**	**Preparation of the next expansion phase**																													
2.1	Market research processing & stakeholder consultations	Process results, consult local stakeholders in new countries																													
2.2	Decision on extending the programme to other countries	Decide on new countries and entry timeline																													
3	**Expansion – Phase 1**	**Entry of the first group of countries: Croatia, Czechia, Serbia**																													
3.1	Select LPPs in the new countries	Croatia, Czechia, Serbia																													
3.2	Onboard LPPs	Define capacity building goals, target groups, operating frameworks																													
4	**Implementation of the 2025/26 capacity-building programme**																														
4.1	Recruitment, Application in the new and pilot countries	Online platform, campaign, applications in the new and pilot countries																													
4.2	Evaluation, Selection	Review, selection, onboarding in the new and pilot countries																													
4.3	Implement capacity building	Trainings, mentoring, networking, peer learning in the new and pilot countries																													
4.4	re:Marc event (closing of the 2025/26 cohort)	"Best of CEE" regional event with the participation of the new and pilot countries																													
4.5	Impact report preparation	Preparation for 2025/26 end-of-cohort data collection and impact report																													
4.6	Adjust capacity building programme and expansion plan for the next period	Prepare next expansion phase																													

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#	Activity	Notes	2025												2026												2027				
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5
5	**Expansion – Phase 2**	**Entry of the next group of countries: Slovakia**																													
5.1	Select LPPs in the new countries	Slovakia																													
5.2	Onboard LPPs	Define capacity building goals, target groups, operating frameworks in the new country; adjust in the existing countries																													
6	**Implementation of the 2026/27 capacity-building programme**																														
6.1	Recruitment, Application	Online platform, campaign, applications in the new and Phase 1 countries (may be adjusted based on previous year's experience)																													
6.2	Evaluation, Selection	Review, selection, onboarding (may be adjusted based on previous year's experience)																													
6.3	Implement capacity building	Trainings, mentoring, networking, peer learning (may be adjusted based on previous year's experience)																													
6.4	re:Marc event	"Best of CEE" regional event with the participation of the new and Phase 1 countries																													
6.5	Collect lessons learned	Gather and analyze findings																													
6.6	Impact report preparation	Preparation for 2026/27 end-of-cohort data collection and impact report																													
7	**Programme Management, Admin, and Compliance**	**Administration, coordination, compliance**																													
7.1	*Monthly coordination with LPPs*	Monthly status calls with local LPPs and LCCs																													
7.2	*Semi-annual lessons learned workshops*	Joint reflection and learning workshops every six months with LPPs, local banks, OPP, and other central stakeholders																													
8	**Communication**	**See communication strategy**																													
9	**Quality and Impact Measurement**	**Monitoring, evaluation, tracking indicators**																													
10	**Alumni and Eco-System Management**	**Alumni network, ecosystem development**																													

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