

StayOn_

A more inclusive, active
and creative world!

2nd Impact Assessment

IRELAND

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stay-on.eu



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1. INTRODUCTION

StayOn is a transnational project coordinated through the cooperation of eight European partners whose ultimate objective is to create conditions that enable young people to "stay on" rural areas by ensuring access to opportunities, benefits, services, and jobs. With this impact assessment report, we intend to measure and assess Meath Partnership's impact to improve it. This report is to be read as part of the project's "Impact management and research" work package, representing a systematic effort to provide credible evidence on the causal impact of interventions meant to integrate young adults, and NEETs¹ especially in the labor market.

The work package is managed by the European Center for Social Finance (ECSF). It encompasses a series of activities, including developing a Theory of Change and related impact management framework, creating periodic impact evaluations, and learning to inform decision-making within and among the organizations involved. This report proceeds as follows. After a brief introduction, Section 2 briefly describes the two types of interventions implemented. In Section 3, the report focuses on detailing the focus group methodology used to conduct the evaluation. Section 4 presents the finding, while Section 5 interprets them and discusses practical recommendations to facilitate the translation of findings into practice for the project's partners.

2. INTERVENTIONS

The project StayOn foresees the implementation of a four-stage community-based development approach (CBD) in five European countries. The first stage is called "community involvement" and includes the implementation of continuous life/career individual coaching support and a series of training courses on digital and environmental topics according to the local needs² aimed at developing soft and hard skills that are useful for personal development and facilitate entry into the labor market. This step includes creating a group of young local NEETs, the "community shapers", who are interested in the social and economic development of their community and will continue their StayOn path through the three following phases: "community catalysis", "community co-innovation labs", and "community entrustment".

Training courses

Meath Partnership is a dynamic partnership company established in 2006 to implement a range of rural, social, and economic programs at the local level across County Meath in Ireland. Meath Partnership aims to provide support and assistance to private individuals and community groups active at the local level through capital grant aid, technical assistance, guidance and mentoring, information and support, training opportunities, and development initiatives. The organization promotes youth employment interventions aimed at young people at risk. By the time the focus group was conducted, Meath Partnership offered the following training courses and the coaching concept described in the next section:

¹ Young persons not engaged in education, employment, or training.

² See the potentials assessment report for Ireland available at: <https://www.stay-on.eu/impact-compass/>

- Construction Safety Skills Workshop
- Hospitality Skills Workshop
- Conversational English (ESOL) workshop
- Social Media Skills
- Community Development Workshop
- Business Options
- Aromatherapy Workshop
- Food Production Workshop
- Essential Driver Training

Coaching

The main goal of the coaching in the context of StayOn is to support participants on their journey through the whole StayOn process:

- training, where they gain new skills and knowledge to improve their future career options; and also
- community shaping process, where they further explore their ideas for developing opportunities for youth in their communities.

The StayOn coaching process is aimed at developing a goal-oriented mindset with participants. The suggested methods to be used by coaches range from SMART goal methodology to dialogue groups. All sessions have a suggested outline to follow. However, these guidelines can be adjusted according to the coach's judgment to best use the process for the participants. The coach's role is to support the participants to make a change, learn something new and/or achieve their goals. The essence of coaching is not giving answers to participants but instead guiding them with curiosity and empathy to help them find answers on their own. Coaches in the StayOn project lead participants through the process of training & community involvement, help them identify their potential, and support them in overcoming obstacles to their empowerment.

Through the StayOn project, participants receive, on average, four individual coaching hours, mainly over a series of four sessions with the coach. Coaching sessions are divided into three main categories: I) introductory / starting session; II) implementation support / intermediate session; and III) follow-up/closing session. The coaches and coachees meet preferably in person, but some meetings also take place online. In order to create a relationship and create a more substantial impact, the coachees are encouraged to meet regularly and with a defined development goal, which also supports their training in the context of the StayOn project (or further). Coaches in the StayOn project participate in individual and group supervisions to help them better address the obstacles and opportunities of the coaching process. They help them be more flexible and open to opportunities in the process.

As of November 2022, Meath Partnership trained 109 people and coached 114. A selected group thereof will be involved in the focus group discussion at the center of this report.

3. METHODS

Focus group design

A focus group collects qualitative data by gathering individuals together to discuss a specific topic in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. The purpose is to understand better how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service. Questions are open-ended to stimulate an informal discussion with participants to understand their perceptions, beliefs, fears, questions, and information needs. Participants are selected because they have specific characteristics in common (here: participants to training and/or coaching services offered by Meath Partnership) that relate to the focus group topic. The moderator creates a permissive environment that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view. The aim is to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions. The group discussion is conducted in a semi-structured manner so that researchers can identify trends and patterns in perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Based on the “Focus Group Content Form” (Appendix A) received by Meath Partnership and other project partners, researchers at the ECSF created the focus group implementation concept that covers 90 minutes and is divided into five parts, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus group implementation concept

PARTS	AIM AND CONTENT	METHOD AND TOOLS	TIME (in min.)
Part I	Setting the stage: Introductions and creation of a welcoming, safe and open space	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Participants arrive	- Moderator and local representative allow participants to arrive and settle in the virtual room	/	~5
Welcome and moderator’s introduction	- Moderator introduces him/herself (briefly) - Moderator explains the purpose of the focus group and the process, including the agenda and the “rules” - Moderator starts the recording	Optional slide n. 2 (Appendix D)	~5
Icebreaker and participants’ introductions	- Getting a sense of who is in the room and getting feedback on recruitment, the moderator asks: "Could you please introduce yourself and tell us how you learned about the project StayOn in the first place?" - Participants’ introductions	Optional slide n. 3 (Appendix D)	~10
Part II	Getting feedback on minor activities	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Getting feedback on minor activities (including day-to-day communication and use of technology in communication,	- What do you think of StayOn’s channels of communication? - Was information communicated clearly at all times? - Did you get a StayOn certificate? How important is it to you? How do you plan to use it?	Optional slides n. 4 and 5 (Appendix D)	~20

awarding of certificates)			
Part III	Getting feedback on core activities: training courses	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Getting feedback on core activities: training courses	- What training contents do you think were the most relevant and why? - What training methodologies do you think were the most effective and why? - What aspects of the training courses could be improved and why?	Optional slide n. 6 (Appendix D)	~20
Part IV	Getting feedback on core activities: coaching	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Getting feedback on core activities: coaching	- Did coaching help you in setting goals/overcoming obstacles and why? - Would you continue with coaching if you had the opportunity and why? - What is one defining moment you remember from your coaching sessions? - How can you be supported further after the coaching ends? - What aspects of the coaching could be improved and why?	Optional slide n. 7 (Appendix D)	~20
Part V	Ideas generation and conclusion	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	10 in total
Generating ideas for new services and concluding the focus group	- What new services would you recommend and why? - Closing comments and overall impression - Time for questions - Moderator stops the recording	Optional slide n. 8 (Appendix D)	~10

Participants

Meath Partnership gathered seven participants who:

- share the same language at a high level (English);
- are available at the agreed date and time of the focus group workshop;
- have heterogeneous demographic characteristics;
- are willing to openly communicate pain points as well as ready to question the status quo critically;
- possess a PC with a stable internet connection.

We provide a summary of information regarding the seven participants selected in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of participants selected for the focus group

PARTICIPANT #	GENDER (F/M/Other)	AGE	SERVICES USED	LABOR STATUS
1	F	23	Coaching and training	Unemployed
2	F	29	Coaching and training	Unemployed
3	F	20	Coaching and training	Unemployed
4	F	26	Coaching and training	Unemployed
5	F	20	Training	Unemployed
6	F	23	Training	Unemployed
7	F	22	Training	Unemployed

Strategy and data analysis

In preparation for the focus group workshop, Meath Partnership filled out the “Focus Group Registration Form” (Appendix B). The moderator was provided with optional materials, including the “Focus group Moderator Script” (Appendix C) and the “Focus Group Slides for Moderation” (Appendix D). The latter is a PowerPoint presentation template where slides 3 to 8 are representative of the feedback elicited (outreach and communication, including the awarding of certificates, training courses, and coaching) to stimulate discussion about the participants’ opinions in the specific category. Analysis of the data collected co-occurred with data collection. Researchers at the ECSF were responsible for analyzing the data further using a combination of approaches but roughly orienting themselves on Krueger's (1994) five key stages: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation. The last two steps required active participation by the project partners.

4. FINDINGS

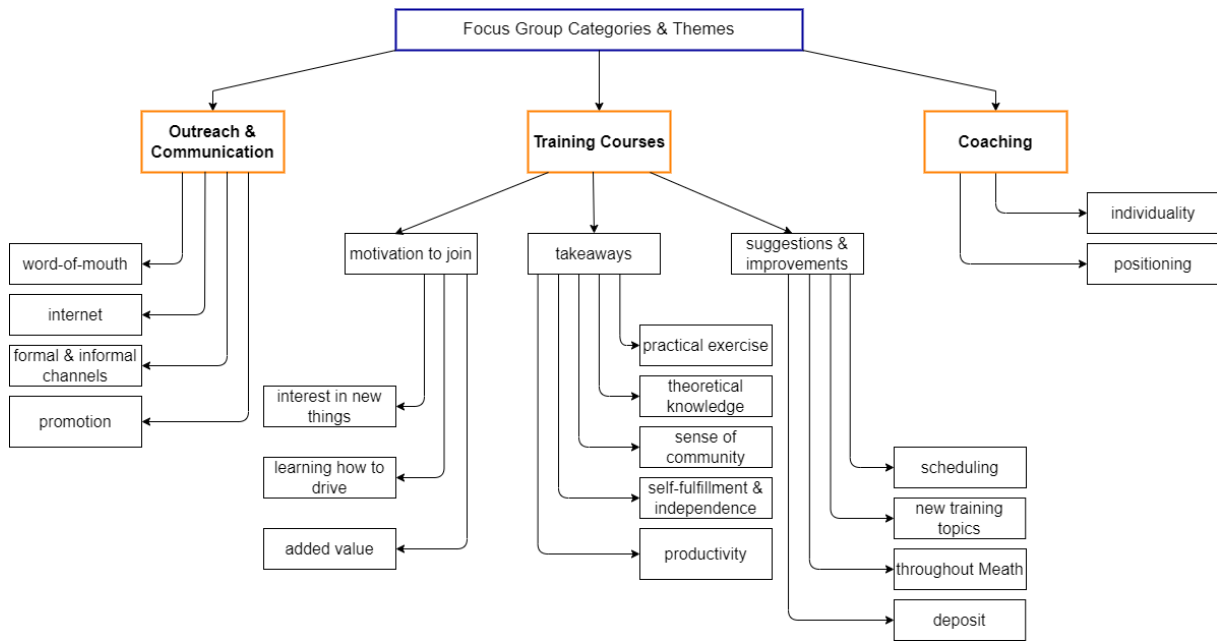
Procedure

The focus group in Ireland occurred on 6 December 2022 in an online form. It hosted four participants (three of the seven participants selected dropped out at the last moment) and lasted for about 70 minutes. The event was moderated in English via Zoom, recorded and transcribed to use the data best for the evaluation (the participants have been informed about the recording in advance). All information collected has been anonymized for the report. It has been ensured and conveyed to the participants that the focus groups, despite the recording, remained a safe space to express their opinions openly.

Themes

Several themes emerged from the three categories (outreach and communication, training courses, coaching) orienting the focus group discussion. These are described in the following paragraphs and summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Concept map of focus group categories and themes



Outreach and communication. Regarding outreach, two participants in the focus group were recruited for the project on a *word-of-mouth* basis. More specifically, they explained that they personally knew somebody who directed them to the Meath Partnership Facebook page explaining the project. The other two participants clarified that they got to know StayOn and related services through the *internet*. Once in the program, all participants declared that Meath Partnership employed an adequate mix of *formal and informal communication channels* to obtain and deliver information, as Participant 1 explains: "So, the communication was first by phone and followed up by email. But then, even when we advanced with the course, the coach was very open and friendly; we could contact her at any time if we had questions". When inquired about the best way to follow up on their employment journey after their involvement with StayOn staff is over; however, all participants emphasized that they would rather be asked if they would like to be contacted in the first place as well as how, for instance by email or phone.

Participants suggested *promotion* ideas for Meath Partnership and the program to reach more young people. Participants agreed that posters and flyers in universities and secondary schools will be beneficial for promotion and can help young people gain consciousness at an early age. Participant 1 stated: "They should be going into the schools and talking to students and telling them who they are and what they do because I definitely think I would have availed of their services when I was finishing high school if I had known about them". Another suggestion was to gather a group of volunteers or ambassadors who completed the StayOn program to inform young people in different towns, provide information about Meath Partnership, and thus reveal to a young population that they could get professional guidance after finishing school rather than facing this challenge alone.

Training courses. Concerning the *motivation* to join the project, interest in seeking new experiences guided the participants' decision to join and their choice among the several available courses. Participant 3 explained: " *There are not many kinds of stuff around for young people, so I thought the aromatherapy course was interesting and it would be exciting to learn about bath salts and all that kind of stuff and how to make them.* However, interest in new things was not the only factor playing a role. At least two participants also declared that they participated in the program to learn how to drive since " *it's so hard to get driving lessons.*" Additionally, all participants highlighted the potential value added that the training course and the related certificate would bring when competing in labor market.

Participants in the focus group also discussed several *takeaways* from the training courses. First, they all highlighted the importance of getting both practical exercises and theoretical knowledge about a specific topic. Courses with practical applications were deemed to be more comprehensive than theory-only courses. For instance, Participant 2 explains: " *It was pretty handy when you got hands-on with it and learned how to put stuff together and do it yourself instead of just watching.*" The advantages of a practical, in-person approach to teaching and learning were directly connected to another takeaway pointed out by several participants: the sense of community established within the course. The latter allowed participants to get in touch with new people of similar ages. The training sessions, often implemented in groups, let the trainees bond; Participant 4 called it " *getting involved with other people.* "

During the focus group discussion, the participants conferred self-fulfillment and independence as one of the essential takeaways from participating in the project. They stated that the way they are accomplishing something for themselves by participating in the program not only allowed them to get out of their comfort zone but also gave them the opportunity for independence in the future. Participant 2 supported this view by saying: " *I think that self-fulfillment and independence are what young people need, especially nowadays after COVID and not leaving the house a lot. I think that is a big takeaway.*" In the focus group, attention was drawn by the participants to how beneficial it was for them to be provided with both Zoom and in-person meetings, areas where they could spend their free time and specialize on new topics, being productive, as well as the opportunity to meet and interact with other people during their unemployment.

Another prominent aspect of the focus group was *potential improvements* highlighted by the participants, including scheduling different training courses separately and attractive new training topics for the future. Regarding the first aspect, one participant wished the training courses were organized on non-overlapping days or time shifts to ensure participation in more than one training topic at the time. Additionally, the participants discussed potential new training topics. Participants 1, 2, and 4 suggested that a different approach to digital production could have been taken in the training sessions, such as programming languages, creating a website, and basic ICT skills. Participant 2 shared her point of view by saying: " *You can't just assume people know how to work a load of stuff online and program and stuff like that because they're young. That's an unrealistic expectation to have on someone.*" Another suggestion that all the participants agreed on is having training on how to start a small business, especially

considering the characteristics of the rural area they live in. Additionally, a self-advocacy course was proposed to learn how to speak up for oneself and one's interests.

Another improvement mentioned by the participants was the opportunity to implement the training courses in different regions of Meath County, not only in Kells. In this way, it was argued that more young people could be reached, and the participants would be facilitated in terms of transportation. The last issue was that a few courses could not be held due to the lack of participants. Participant 4 explained: *"Unfortunately, because people dropped out or people didn't show up, we didn't have a quota for the day in the kitchen. We were supposed to have a hands-on day where we made a few different foods."* In order to overcome this problem, Participant 4 suggested that Meath Partnership could request a deposit from the participants who are willing to participate in a training course.

Coaching. The participants emphasized the importance of the *individuality* of the coaching sessions. They explained that the coaching hours had been beneficial in developing individual goals since they were tailored to each participant. Additionally, Participant 2 also pointed out that *positioning* the coaching sessions is advantageous since the coaches scheduled the sessions on the day after the training courses were completed, allowing the participants to discuss their experiences. One of the common issues that all participants agree on is that it would be more beneficial to provide more coaching sessions throughout the week and organize them by the end of the training course or the end of the day by giving the name of the coach and contact details or set an appointment directly to avoid miscommunication or lack of contact afterward.

5. MAIN MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this focus group report provides a positive assessment regarding the services offered by Meath Partnership within the context of the StayOn project. This evaluation presents the perspectives of four university students currently involved in training and/or coaching. The students are facing similar experiences and the responses did not differ among sub-groups of participants (e.g., by gender, age). The main messages expressed by the focus group's participants and related recommendations have been discussed with one representative within Meath Partnership and are listed in the table below.

Table 3. Summary of main messages and recommendations

MESSAGE	RECOMMENDATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal networks are crucial for enabling recruiting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing a group of "ambassadors" to promote StayOn and Meath Partnership in the students' community and several towns in Meath County.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both formal and informal communication channels seem adequate, depending on the type of message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to the participants' preference, formal and informal communication channels should be used for follow-up after the end of training and/or coaching.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overlapping training courses might cause deprivation of participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the scheduling and creating the opportunity to join multiple training courses.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital production training courses are not sufficient in terms of variety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing programming languages and primary ICT skills classes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New training topics could be potentially very useful and relevant for participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing entrepreneurship training courses to build innovative products linked to local region requirements and a self-advocacy course possibly relating them to social occasions (group tasks, activities, exercises, and projects).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization of coaching sessions requires more clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building an agenda for each participant, clarifying the training and coaching session dates and hours by asking participants about their needs and expectations.

REFERENCES

Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. SAGE Publications.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th Edition). SAGE Publications.

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Content Form

1. Project partner: Insert the organization's name and country

3. Name, surname, and e-mail address of the person filling this form:

2. Focus group main purpose: What is the overall objective of the focus group? Are you interested in improving your services, changing them or generating ideas for potential new services?

3. Organizational services or practices: Are there specific services or practices you would like feedback on? (e. g., recruiting, service delivery, certificates awarding, communication, training, coaching)

4. List of questions: If you could choose anything, what questions would you like the independent moderator to ask?

5. Additional information: Do you have further comments, remarks or ideas?

APPENDIX B: Focus Group Registration Form

1. Project partner (*insert the organization's name and country*):

2. Focus group scheduled on (*insert the date and time*):

3. Local representative's contact³ (*insert name, surname, and e-mail address*):

4. Modality (*fully online or hybrid, add the name of the platform you participants would prefer*):

5. Participants (*insert name/s, surname/s, gender, age, and all services used within the StayOn project, e.g., coaching*):

Name and surname	Gender (M/F/Other)	Age	Service/s used
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			

³ This refers to the local person responsible for the organization of the focus group.

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Moderator Script

Part I: Welcome and moderator's introduction

Moderator: Hi everybody, and welcome! My name is [NAME] and I work at / collaborate with the European Center for Social Finance. We're a competence center of Munich Business School in Germany, and we help several organizations in Europe evaluate their services and make them better. So, this is precisely why we're here today. I'd like to get your feedback on [NAME OF THE PROJECT PARTNER]'s services to learn how they can be improved in the future. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group. I have a few guidelines and rules to facilitate our discussion:

- The focus group will last about one and a half hours and will be roughly divided into 5 parts.
- I want you to do the talking and we'd like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We expect and want to hear a wide range of views and don't anticipate consensus, just sharing. You can address each other if you like. We are only here to assist in the discussion.
- I emphasize that what is said in this room should remain here. I will record this session. However, it remains confidential and all information collected will be anonymized for the report. We don't identify anyone by name in our findings. Therefore, you will remain anonymous. The recording won't be shared with anyone besides researchers at the European Center for Social Finance.

Are there any questions? Very well. Let's get started... [*Start recording.*]

Part I: Icebreaker and participants' introductions

Moderator: Could you please introduce yourself and tell us how you learned about the project StayOn in the first place?

Parts III-V: General recommendations

Helpful probes include:

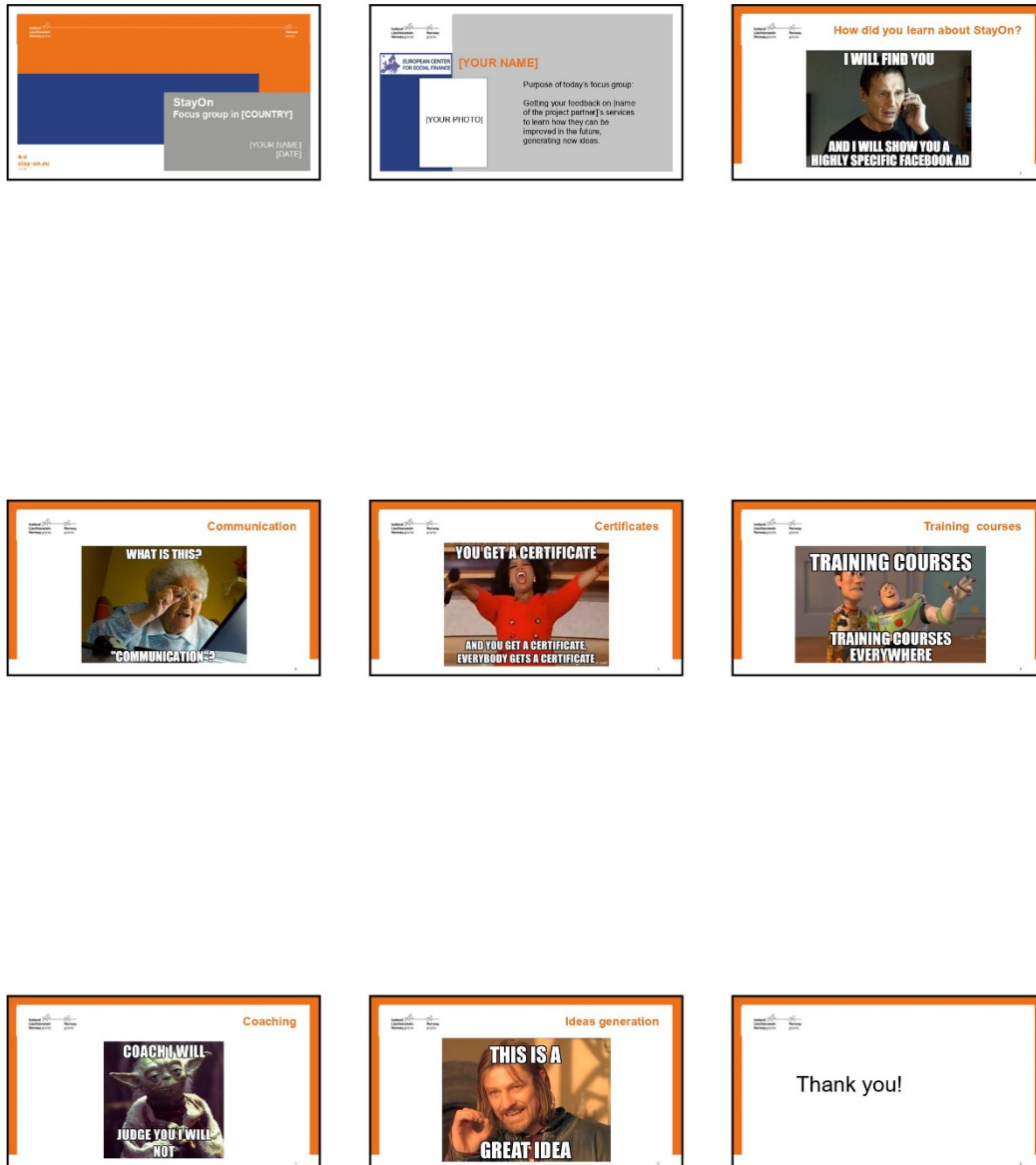
Can you talk about that more?, Could you help me understand what you mean?, Can you give an example?

Strategies to facilitate the discussion include:

- Summarize the main idea of the feedback at the end of each question.
- Reflect the main idea back to the group "Just so I understand, what you are saying is...?"
- Self-appointed experts: "Thank you. What do other people think?" Or "Does anybody else have a different thought/strategy?"
- The dominator: "Let's have some other comments." Stand behind the dominator while addressing the group to elicit participation from others.
- The shy participant: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.
- The participant who talks very quietly: Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.

- If the conversation gets off-topic, restate the purpose of the research.

APPENDIX D: Focus Group Slides for Moderation



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