

BELGIUM

Fostering innovation,
cooperation and the
development of the
knowledge base in
rural areas

Location

Wallonia

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P1 - Knowledge Transfer and
Innovation

Measure

M20 – Technical assistance

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 125 000

EAFRD 50 000

National/regional 75 000

Project duration

2016 – 2018

Project promoter

Tr@me scrl (regional rural
network Wallonia)

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An educational peer-to-peer programme for farmers that are engaged into innovative practices, facilitated through participative techniques and scientific expertise.

Summary

The Innovation Route proposed by the Walloon rural development network is a 6 days' programme over a period of 18 months, meeting with farmers that engaged into innovative practice aiming at self-sufficiency at local level. This education journey is facilitated through participative techniques and scientific expertise, leading to a concluding European seminar on Innovation in Agriculture in 2018.

La Route de l'innovation du RwdR



Extensive media coverage of each of the six day-trips offers robust evidence on the triggering factors leading to change and innovation at farm level.

Results

50 participants attend on average each event while an increasing number of farmers is contributing to the exchanges.

The farmers hosting the field visit are happy to sit back and look at their activity within a friendly peer-to-peer and business-to-consumer context. It helps them to better grasp their strengths and weakness and to adjust their operational strategy for the future, if necessary. There is a general feedback showing that technical exchanges with other farmers in an open and friendly environment add value to their professional development.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ The originality of the approach is to consider the participants attending the day trip as the 'core group' of key stakeholders, defining their own needs and expectations of the outing.
- ❑ The media coverage, all day long, is another important feature of this programme: evidence gathering represents an important part of the work before and during the visit.
- ❑ Each farm is examined through a systemic approach, considering the various development steps – past, present and future

Context

One of the missions of the Walloon rural development network is to detect and share innovative practice with the wider audience. The functional aspects of innovation brokerage in rural development were included in the proposal made to the Managing Authority (MA) by Tr@me, the consultancy that won the service contract for delivering facilitation services to the Rural Development Network Assembly of the Walloon region.

In the workplan proposed by Tr@me to the Managing Authority, the network included a scientific board in its governance process, made of academic partners with a particular remit towards rural innovation and cooperation.

Concomitantly to the selection of the service contractor for networking services, the MA decided to withdraw the sub-measure 16.1 'Establishment and operation of operational groups of the EIP for agricultural productivity and sustainability' of its RDP.

During one of its first meetings however, the network Assembly explicitly required that the issue of innovation in agriculture is put as a priority in the daily tasks of the service provider and defined guidelines for the creation of the Innovation Route. In light of this preliminary injunction, the network unit gathered its scientific board and made a first sketch of an Innovation Route programme, based upon a bottom up approach and following an iterative process.

Objectives

The overall objective is educational, allowing the various stakeholders coming from different spheres (from the farmer to the consumer) to take part in the learning process, forward looking to co-designing tomorrow's farming systems.

The Innovation Route is meant to:

1. Endowing innovation with legitimacy: what are the consequences and the benefits observed? Can we reach autonomy through innovation?
2. Formalising the innovation process and practice: what can we learn about it?
3. Identify key issues that can change existing systems: what? with whom? how?

Activities

The Innovation route is a participatory method proposing

a step by step journey allowing for (i) the identification of innovative systems, (ii) performance assessment of these systems, (iii) analysis of the intervention logic and (iv) assessment of the outcomes.

To do so, a multi-stakeholder collective is set up, acting as a core group in order to:

- Better understand framing practice and its systemic impact;
- Formalising knowledge and understanding about it, focusing on innovative aspects;
- Identifying bottlenecks to innovation;
- Get a better grasp of the reality on the ground,
- Take up from the learning in order to better exchange with stakeholders of the innovation system.

Registration to each event is open to anyone and free of charge. The core group is thus enriched by newcomers representing the various strands of rural society – whether farmers, other professionals or simple dwellers – that are able to express their own needs and objectives of the event. For example, the Day 4 event of the Innovation Route is about 'feed autonomy'. People willing to attend are asked to answer the following questions:

- According to my experience, the most important thing about on-farm feed autonomy is...
- According to my experience, what farmers need most in order to innovate is...

The journey to innovation systems is therefore designed according to the needs and priorities identified by the core group and the registered participants. It takes the shape of a one-day field visit combined with workshops and facilitated by the networking unit's team.

The route includes journeys into 6 farms of Wallonia, selected for their innovative approaches :

- Day 1: Ferme du Buis - 3 November 2016
- Day 2: Ferme de Jambjoule - 3 March 2017
- Day 3: Ferme des Noyers - 13 June 2017
- Day 4: Ferme de Champignol - 12 October 2017

Each day is carefully prepared with the farmers hosting the participants, in close partnership with the scientific board. All in all, around 10 days of work are needed for each event, split along the following tasks: preparation (background documentation, registrations), logistics and catering, facilitation, follow up (reporting, communication, dissemination, etc.).

In some instances, these scientific advisors are invited to facilitate some of the workshops. During Day 2 for example, the visited farm was analysed with the 'social business model canvas' under the supervision of a scientific advisor. Components of the farms' development over time were scrutinized in sub-groups and then 'reconstructed' into a logical frame, determining key resources, key activities, key partners and stakeholders, the value proposition, distribution channels, cost structure, etc.

Each participant is asked to systematically report on the striking and most significant aspects of the visit, based upon his/her personal feeling and experience. All these elements are gathered during a mapping exercise. An example illustrating the result of this collaborative process is shown below.

Another form of collaborative working is the 'Agricafé', inspired by the 'World café' method.

During Day 3 for instance, 7 farmers were invited to sit at a table with a specific issue related to conservation agriculture techniques. Participants were divided in groups of 8 and allowed to switch tables 4 times in 2 hours. The 4 sequences corresponded to the following tasks: (i) Deepening and reformulating the issue in order to find innovative solutions; (ii) Brainwriting 'If I were there...'; (iii) Identifying bottlenecks and innovative practice; (iv) Describing in detail the chosen solution with the following canvas: Who? What? Where? When? How? How much? Why?

At each table, a member of staff is in charge of facilitating exchanges and summarizes the discussion on a paperboard. The following issues were raised by the farmers:

- How to communicate positively to the wider public about what farmers do?
- What business model for the distribution of farm products (i.e. franchise farmers)?
- How to reach feed autonomy in order to become more independent from the agri-business industry?
- How to quickly access information that is useful to the farm with such a variety of skills and activities?
- How to get neutral and trustful advice on phytosanitary management, with clear and complete information?

- Green manure: economically viable or simple biological interest?
- How to revive biological activity of the soil, the starting point to sustainable farming reflections?

A few days after the event, a written synthesis of each Agricafé's discussion is published online and available for download (<http://www.reseau-pwdr.be/news/route-de-linnovation>).

In the follow up of the 6 days, a major European event for sharing the outputs with a wider audience is planned in 2018.

Main Results

Every event is well attended, with an average of 50 participants and an increasing number of farmers contributing to the exchanges.

The farmers hosting the field visit are happy to sit back and look at their activity within a friendly peer-to-peer and business-to-consumer context. It helps them to better grasp their strengths and weakness and to adjust their operational strategy for the future, if necessary. There is a general feedback showing that technical exchanges with other farmers in an open and friendly environment add value to their professional development.

Key lessons

- The originality of the approach is to consider the participants attending the day trip as the 'core group' of key stakeholders, defining their own needs and expectations of the outing.
- The media coverage, all day long, is another important feature of this programme: evidence gathering represents an important part of the work before and during the visit.
- Each farm is examined through a systemic approach, considering the various development steps – past, present and future.

Additional sources of information

n/a