

ITALY

Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector

Location

Tuscany

Programming period

2007 - 2013

Axis / Priority

Axis 1 – LEADER

Measure

M122, M123b, M124, M133

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 2.7 m

EAFRD 0.8 m

National/region. 08 m

Private 1.1

Project duration

2012 – 2015

Project promoter

Associazione per la valorizzazione della castagna del Monte Amiata

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An association used EAFRD funding to help preserve chestnut woods in Italy and boost growers' income by buying new equipment and coordinating the supply chain.

Summary

The project aimed to preserve chestnut production in Italy's Tuscany region, which had suffered from pests, disease, poor weather and the economic crisis. This led to increasing abandonment of land. The supply chain was also fractured and not well organised. New harvesting and forestry equipment was also needed.

The project used EAFRD funding to coordinate the different actors on the supply chain, restore abandoned chestnut production areas, purchase equipment for harvesting and forestry management.



Results

95 participants joined the project.

125ha of chestnut woods were recovered and their production potential increased.

New forests roads created in four holdings.

18 fences built.

62 pieces of small equipment purchased.

3 big forestry machines purchased.

5 facilities to dry chestnuts restored.

6 new storage rooms built.

9 machines/equipment used for processing, one for harvesting and two for drying purchased.

Lessons & Recommendations

- Keeping a wide variety of beneficiaries involved such as small foresters was difficult. Constant dialogue and developing trust was important.
- Close coordination was important to overcome the complexities in applying for funding with so many beneficiaries.
- Lessons were drawn on why the biomass project was unsuccessful for future initiatives.

Context

VACASTO is an integrated supply chain project (Progetto Integrato di Filiera) in Italy's chestnut sector. Chestnut production in Tuscany and nationally has faced major challenges over the last decade including the economic crisis, disease (chestnut blight and ink disease), pests (chestnut gall wasp) and bad weather conditions. The combination of these factors caused a severe drop in production and profits, with more areas subsequently abandoned.

In Tuscany, this sector has always been characterised by numerous but very small holdings with a low tendency to cooperate. This always prevented the creation of a strong and organised supply chain to improve economic performance and resolve difficulties. This had economic but also environmental and social consequences. The abandonment of extensively-managed forests harmed the environment, resulting in a greater risk of fires and disruption to water courses. Local traditions were also endangered since chestnut production is strongly linked to local culture, which was also a tourist attraction.

The association to promote the chestnut of the Amiata mountain (Associazione per la valorizzazione della castagna del Monte Amiata), certified in 2000 as a Protected Geographical Indication product, started in 2012 to enquire about how to implement an integrated project. The association contacted local authorities, municipalities and foresters to create a broad partnership to be involved in the project.



Objectives

The main aim of the project was to create a strong regional chestnut supply chain to support the economic performance of the sector, combat land abandonment and subsequent environmental and social issues.

Specific objectives of the project were:

- Increase the added-value of local chestnuts and improve the economic performance of forestry holdings.
- Boost cooperation between different actors in the sector and develop innovative solutions.
- Protect chestnut production and recover abandoned areas.
- Investigate viable possibilities to use forest by-

products to produce energy.

- Support the dissemination of information and the promotion of local products.

Activities

The project VACASTO started in 2012 and finished in March 2015. The association acted as lead partner of the project and succeeded in involving numerous partners from different areas of the region including Grosseto, Siena and Lucca. Companies and research institutes whose headquarters are situated in other provinces such as Firenze and Prato also participated. The area also covers production of another product certified with the Protected Designation of Origin, namely the Neccio della Grafagnana, a local chestnut variety.

The association was assisted in implementing the project by a company providing advisory services for agricultural and forestry projects (AGRICIS).

During the preliminary phase of the project, the main activities included:

- Organisation of activities at local level to raise awareness of the importance of joining the project.
- Definition of local actors' main needs to better tailor the projects' activities.

Four measures of the regional RDP were implemented within this integrated projects, namely M122 Improvement of the economic value of forests; M123b Adding value to agricultural and forestry products; M124 Cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies; M133 Information and promotion activities.

By implementing M122 and M123b beneficiaries could do the following activities:

- Recovery of abandoned chestnut areas including the protection of chestnut trees, removing other species not needed in these areas, maintaining chestnut trees in other cultivated areas or in arable land.
- Conserving chestnut wood land by pruning, grafting and cleaning brushwood areas.
- Maintaining or creating forest roads to improve access to woods and reducing fire risks.
- Building or restoring places to dry chestnuts after harvesting and for winter storage.
- Purchase of forest management equipment such as chain saws and brush cutters.
- Purchase of equipment for harvesting and the different stages of processing chestnuts.

The organisation of informative meetings and promotional activities targeting supermarkets and the preparation of dissemination materials to inform customers about local chestnuts were the main activities supported under M133.

Within M124 the BIOCASPO project was implemented. This project grouped numerous participants to the integrated project, and the main aim of it was to find innovative solutions to improve managing chestnuts areas.



Beneficiaries of this project were, together with forestry holders, the research institute CNR-IVALSA, the agricultural department of the University of Florence and the Roggi company, specialised in the creation of machineries. The main activities implemented within BIOCASPO focused on two main areas: 1) finding a solution to improve chestnuts trees pruning; and 2) finding viable solutions to use wood waste as biomass for energy production.

Within the first area, the following activities were implemented:

- analysis of the possibility to create a prototype to be used for pruning in the woodlands;
- creation of a prototype in cooperation with a company specialised in the production of similar machinery;
- analysis of the possibility to develop a remote control system to use the prototype;
- testing of the prototype with forestry holders beneficiaries of the project;
- improving the prototype after testing results, particularly in relation to the cutting system and the mobility of the machine within woods.

Within the second area, the main activities undertaken focused on:

- identification of the most efficient and economically sustainable system of wood waste collection, considering the small dimension of the majority of forestry holdings;
- creation of a list including all forestry entrepreneurs in the area and a precise estimate of the quantity of wood waste each of them produces;
- the creation of an on-line platform to facilitate demand-supply matching between entrepreneurs and biomass processors.

Main Results

95 participants joined the project (initially 130 participants signed up but some renounced at an early stage) including private and public forestry holdings, municipalities and other public authorities, the University of Florence (Department of agriculture) and research centres.

Brought different actors together, creating a will to cooperate that did not exist before.

125ha of chestnut woods were recovered and their production potential increased.

New forests roads created in four holdings.

18 fences, purchase of 62 pieces of small equipment and 3 big forestry machines, 5 facilities to dry chestnuts, 6 new storage rooms, 9 machines for processing, one for harvesting and two for drying;

Promotional activities in supermarkets and distribution of brochures, other materials and videos.

Under M124 a prototype machine for pruning, functioning with a remote control, was developed. The prototype can be used by all project partners. Advantages of the prototype are several, namely: it increases workers' security since they do not need to climb trees; it allows to promptly identify diseases; it enables to perform better cuts that enhance the productivity potential of trees.

Production of biomass for renewable energy was less successful as most of holdings are small and the distances to be covered to pick up wood waste made the collection inconvenient. The on-line platform did not solve this issue, mainly because most beneficiaries are not so familiar with the use of such tools.

Key lessons

- The project was overall considered successful, firstly because of the attitude toward cooperation that it developed within local actors which went beyond the end of this project.
- The initial focus on the organisation of animation activities was considered key for the success of the project. The lead partner pointed out how difficult it was to involve different actors, particularly small foresters, already in the first phase of the project and how difficult it proved to be to keep them involved.

- A strong effort of coordination among partners, the capacity to capture different needs raised, constant dialogue and the creation of trust feelings are crucial for success. Particularly when a project groups so many beneficiaries from different categories, which usually do not interact, such as small entrepreneurs with research institutes. Putting a strong focus on coordination and constant animation of beneficiaries is considered a success factor, without which the implementation of such a complex project would become more difficult.
- Another important element to be considered is the usual complexity of procedures to apply for funding. Things become even more complex when the same beneficiary applies to more than one measure. This complexity can discourage many potential beneficiaries. Coordination between partners and good relations between the project coordinator and the MA helps spreading information and finding solutions.
- It is also important to consider the possibility that some aspects of the project might not be successful, particularly when developing innovative solutions is an objective. The difficulty in implementing the part of the project related to biomass is a good example of it. The lead partner, though, did not consider it as a failure. On the contrary, findings of this part of the project represented an important lesson and were carefully considered in the phase of preparation of a new project proposal, VACASTO+, under the current programming period to develop some aspects of the project that could not be investigated during the first phase.



Additional sources of information

n/a