

ESTONIA

Green futures

Location

Nationwide

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P1 – Improving knowledge transfer and innovation in the agricultural and forestry sector and rural areas

Measure

M01 – Knowledge transfer & information actions

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 709 757.38

EAFRD 631 684.07

National/Regional 78 073.31

Project duration

2016 – 2020

Project promoter

Estonian University of Life Sciences (lead partner)

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www.maheklubi.ee

The long-term programme of knowledge transfer in organic farming was set up to improve the competitiveness of organic farming in Estonia and increase local organic food consumption.

Summary

Organic farming is expanding very rapidly in Estonia. Despite an increasing need for knowledge about efficient organic food production, there was a lack of regular and consistent training on organic farming.

The long-term knowledge transfer programme covered the whole organic farming value chain: organic plant and animal production, processing, catering and marketing.

Project Activities included trainings, study groups, field trips, demonstration events and conferences as well as providing printed and digital information materials and a quarterly magazine. All activities and materials were free of charge for the participants.

In addition to learning and knowledge sharing, all activities offered an opportunity to meet, discuss and network.



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Results

An average of 25 people per day participated in 300 days of activities covering all 15 Estonian counties. Half the activities were organised on farms and in research stations. For example, study groups were very popular among farmers and there was knowledge exchange from science to practice and vice versa.

In addition to the initial objectives to increase organic farming competitiveness and sustainability, the project with its training programme enhanced networking in the organic sector and provided valuable input for research activities and for policy making to develop the organic sector.

Farmers gained knowledge by learning from each other and by having access to up-to-date research. Scientists received direct feedback on the needs and expectations to help them plan future scientific cooperation with practitioners.

Lessons & Recommendations

- Involving farmers in the planning of knowledge transfer activities gives a valuable input into target group needs, guarantees the success of activities and supports the development of the organic sector.
- People new to the sector appreciate learning from experienced practitioners and this guarantees a high level of participation.
- Activities should offer the opportunity to create contacts and further networking between participants.
- If there is a lack of local knowledge, it becomes very useful to involve external international experts.

Context

In Estonia, the area under organic production has expanded 2.5 times over the last ten years and is now nearly 223 000 ha, or 22% of agricultural land.

Some vocational schools, as well as the Estonian University of Life Sciences (EULS), offer a few organic farming courses but there is no organic farming qualification. Organic advice is provided by the general advisory system and its availability is quite limited. There is no specialised organic farming advisory system.

Farmers applying for organic farming support must take part in a two-day basic training course during the first year. In addition, during the five-year support contract period they have to participate in two additional training days that cover organic production, processing and marketing.

Before 2015, organic producers were offered training courses provided by the Ministry of Rural Affairs. In addition, there were also private training courses organised. The courses were planned from year to year depending on financial recourses, with no long-term plans. Based on input from organic farmers, these did not cover all the required topics. To improve the training system, the Ministry of Rural Affairs initiated a long-term programme of organic farming knowledge transfer for 2016–2020, which was supported through the RDP.

Objectives

This project was based on objectives and activities in the Estonian Organic Farming Development Plan 2014-2020:

- i. Improving the competitiveness of organic farming and increasing local organic food consumption.
- ii. Providing knowledge-transfer activities for the organic sector.

Activities

The training programme project was financed through the RDP and implemented in cooperation with five partners: the Estonian University of Life Sciences, the Estonian Organic Farming Foundation, the Centre for Ecological Engineering, the Estonian Crop Research Institute and the Organic Research Centre of EULS.

In 2020, there were 2050 organic farmers and 192 processors, plus caterers (including public sector catering) in Estonia. All project activities were targeted at the organic food production chain: farmers (most of the activities), processors, caterers and marketers.



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In the period 2016 - 2020, knowledge-transfer activities included:

- 174 training days and demonstration visits with local and international experts. These covered plant production (arable crops, vegetables, fruits and berries), animal husbandry (dairy, beef, sheep, chicken and apiculture), processing, marketing, catering and cooperation.
- Demonstration trials and 30 field days which introduced farmers to agro-technology and varieties of cereal, berry and fruit production and alternative weed management in vegetable production.
- Four organic farming conferences.
- 18 study groups where farmers met four times a year with a tutor to discuss practical production aspects on the following topics: arable crops, vegetable, berries, fruit, beef and sheep production and apiculture.
- Six local study trips for producers to organic farms to view sheep and beef production, processing and agro-tourism.
- Three international study trips for producers to visit farms specialising in plant production (in the United Kingdom), poultry (in Germany) and vegetable production (in Denmark).

Information materials (printed and digital):

- 29 booklets on dairy cattle, beef cattle, sheep, poultry and apiculture, cereals and oil crops, berries, fruits, vegetables, composting, green manures, biodiversity and plant protection, seed production, berry and fruit varieties, marketing and an overview of organic farming in Estonia (also provided in English).
- electronic guidelines on small-scale processing of fruits, berries and vegetables and organic catering.
- quarterly organic farming magazine "Mahepõllumajanduse Leht" (18 issues).

All published materials are available on www.maheklubi.ee, which also provides information on events and other organic topics.

The programme was supervised by a Council, composed of producers, processors, advisors, officials, and research and development organisations.

Synergies with other EU policies

This project contributes to objectives under the European Green Deal, Biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies.

The project with its training programme increased experience and knowledge in the organic sector. This improves competitiveness and sustainability, contributing to the EU objective of a healthier and more sustainable EU food system.

Key lessons

In Estonia there is increasing interest in organic farming, with more land being converted into this type of agriculture. A lack of specialist qualifications for organic farming led to the establishment of this long-term programme of knowledge transfer covering the entire country.

Similar programmes of knowledge transfer and training are now also being implemented in the fields of CAP overall, horticulture, crop production, animal husbandry, food safety, economic cooperation and food promotion.

Cooperation with the organic sector was very important and activities were planned together with the Organic Farming Platform and other stakeholders. To ensure broad coverage and up-to-date information, project partners also cooperated with other research and development organisations in Estonia and abroad. Experts from Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Finland, United Kingdom, Poland and others travelled to Estonia to give lectures in this programme.



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Knowledge exchange with a broad selection of stakeholders gave results beyond the objectives of improving the competitiveness of organic farming and local organic food consumption. In study groups, practitioners learned from researchers and vice versa. Consequently, not only are farmers able to apply up to date knowledge, but future research will be adapted to cover farmers' needs and expectations.

For Estonian administration officials, networking also provided valuable input aiming to support policymaking to develop the organic sector. Better cooperation and networking within the sector is also one of the most important outputs of the programme.

In 2021, it is expected that the new training programme will streamline the current topics covered, continuing on the project results thus far.

'This knowledge transfer programme was very important and valuable for knowledge exchange and the development of organic farming in Estonia. Sharing skills and experiences, communication and networking are fundamental for sustainable development, especially for sustainable organic food production.' - Elen Peetsmann, programme manager

Additional sources of information

www.pikk.ee

* This project has been categorised under 'Green futures' by the nominating National Rural Network