



Pastoral School for Young Shepherds

An innovative training method with a strong emphasis on networking.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Pavia, Cuneo, Brescia (Italy)

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P1 - Knowledge transfer and innovation

Focus Area: Innovation and cooperation

Measures: M20 - Technical assistance

Funding:	Total budget	113 014.00 (EUR)
	EAFRD	23 917.00 (EUR)
	National/Regional	24 147.00 (EUR)
	Private/Own funds	64 950.00 (EUR)

Timeframe: 2022 to 2023

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Summary

The School for Young Shepherds is an action research project targeted at young people in rural areas in Italy. The project is being promoted by the Council for Agricultural Research and Economics (CREA) and the Association Riabitare l'Italia and supported by Fondazione Cariplo. The training focuses on shepherding skills, including animal breeding, dairy production, meat processing and fostering entrepreneurship.

The project combines training and networking involving local farmers, researchers and other stakeholders. The aim is to enhance the training experience and create new, lasting connections for all those involved. Through active participation in rural and social innovation, the project seeks to generate community empowerment.

Special project features include working in an integrated and systemic way, linking training to territorial specificities to maximise opportunities, peer education, mentoring and coaching. This serves to build relationships and give students a broader view of the reality in which they want to operate.

Project results

Quantitative results include:

- 15 participants empowered with relevant skills to fulfil their entrepreneurial projects, thereby supporting generational renewal.
- Although women are underrepresented in the profession, 60% of the project students were women.
- Two students were offered an internship in partner farms.
- All participants attained skills through hands-on experience in rational grazing, animal management, animal welfare, biodiversity conservation, meat processing, dairy production, business development and networking skills.

Qualitative benefits included:

- Successful involvement of nearly 50 stakeholders in training, mentoring and networking activities supporting the participants and their ambitions.
- The project represented an innovative and new approach of delivering training through peer education and the empowerment of local actors.
- Also innovative for the local context is the combination of development of youth entrepreneurship with active participation of local communities and networking.



Key lessons and recommendations

- Connecting the various project activities, such as mentoring, provision of bespoke training and entrepreneurial support, is a complex process. A long-term approach that accompanies the individual also after training is necessary to ensure the many challenges of running a business are overcome effectively.
- To support inclusion and entrepreneurship, it is necessary to take a multidisciplinary and networking approach. Knowing the local context and involving local actors in project activities is a successful approach in promoting inclusion and innovation in rural communities.
- Adopting an interdisciplinary approach and building an interdisciplinary team are recommended.



Context

A recent study promoted by the Association Riabitare L'Italia, in collaboration with the Council for Agricultural Research and Economics (CREA) and other partners, investigated young people's needs and motivations for staying in rural and mountainous areas.

The study shows that the majority (69%) of young people in rural areas are willing to stay there because of the better quality of life and human relationships. Furthermore, the study identified a growing interest in shepherding and agriculture, not only as a source of income but as a lifestyle choice (agroecological perspective). However, shepherding, a job which is embedded in the very cultural identity of marginal rural areas, is at risk.

In response to these trends and to help combat rural depopulation, more needs to be done to further encourage local rural projects to focus on young people. More investment in capacity building, training and assistance in line with the existing needs of young people is required.

The project leaders thought it particularly important to provide technical training that is aligned to local opportunities while also building on the existing skills, knowledge and experiences of young people. In addition, an improved provision of support for the creation and operation of (micro)enterprises was deemed crucial.

In this context the idea was born to create a 'School for Young Shepherds', offering specific training and programmes of participatory planning that would focus on extensive livestock farming in mountain areas and would be targeted at young people. Three areas in northern Italy were selected: Pavia, Cuneo, Brescia.

Objectives

The project aimed to:

- Increase job opportunities by providing access to training aimed at enhancing extensive livestock farming in marginal rural areas.
- Help young people design ecologically sound breeding farms and/or to improve the sustainability of their farm (for those who already had a farm) by transferring knowledge from local farmers as well as participating researchers.
- Provide space to interact, compare and share operational practice and knowledge useful for developing one's own project/s and thereby support the development of entrepreneurial ideas.
- Develop and pilot a tailor-made model in three pilot areas using peer education, participatory approaches and design to facilitate knowledge transfer between local farmers and young shepherds.
- Set up networks of local stakeholders in three pilot areas to address opportunities for young people (in terms of access to land, market opportunities, networks, and financing).



Activities

Project planning started in autumn 2021 involving several partners, including the association Riabitare l'Italia, CREA and a wide network of public and private organisations. In line with the peer-education approach, the project involved local stakeholders, farmers and representatives in a variety of activities at different levels and in different ways from the training to the mentoring stages of the project.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) financed the design, planning and organisation of project activities.

The project attracted 50 applicants and 15 young people (28-year-olds on average) were selected, most of them women (60%).

The project contained three main interrelated actions: training, research, networking.

Training: A total of 16 learning sessions (120 hours) were delivered. This included 80 hours of in-person training (from September to October 2022) at livestock farms and dairy production laboratories focusing on extensive livestock farming and 40 hours of remote training (from November 2022 to April 2023) on specific topics. The topics for the remote training modules were designed in line with the needs of the beneficiaries. The training sessions offered the opportunity to compare and share operational practices and knowledge to inspire and generate ideas. Topics included: 'Circular Economy: new uses of waste and business cases'; 'organic goats, cheesemaking and direct sales'; 'Getting to know the territory, the Cuneo and Lombard provinces'; 'Agro-ecology of pastures in the Mediterranean environment'; 'Eco-systemic services'; 'Custody of land and natural landscapes'.

Research and in-depth study of the territories selected by the project: reducing information barriers is important for anyone planning to start a business in a new area. Thus, the participants studied the main features of each area (including the economy, demography, geography, environment) and identified the key stakeholders in each area.

Provision of support through networking with local actors: the participants were included in the project's exchange network and were directly involved in three interactive discussion sessions in the pilot areas at the end of the project (including face to face round tables and focus groups). The aim was to meet with local stakeholders and build collaborative and supporting relationships that would last beyond the project.

In the final phase, the project focused on the involvement of local stakeholders, both public and private, specialising in livestock and animal production. This aimed at addressing opportunities for young people (in terms of access to land, market opportunities, networks, financing.)

Main results

The project empowered 15 participants with skills to fulfil their projects supporting generational renewal. Although women are underrepresented in the profession, 60% of the project students were women.

Through hands-on involvement, all the participants attained skills in areas such as rational grazing, wild animal management, animal welfare, biodiversity conservation, meat processing, dairy production, business development and networking. Two students were offered an internship in partner farms.

In terms of qualitative benefits, the project successfully involved nearly 50 stakeholders in training, mentoring and networking activities, all focusing on supporting the participants and their ambitions. The project represented an innovative and new approach of delivering training through peer education and by empowering local actors. For example, during the 80 hours of in-person training, farmers served as teachers explaining and illustrating their profession's practices.

The project brought together professionals, researchers, breeders, students, representatives of associations, foundations and institutional actors, allowing for an incredibly valuable exchange of experiences and expertise, which created new and lasting connections.

Combining the development of youth entrepreneurship with the active involvement of local communities in the process of mentoring, training and support provision based on networking is considered an innovative method which was previously unavailable.

The proposed model can be replicated in different geographical areas and sectors. Following the project, CREA and Riabitare l'Italia are planning a second edition of the school in Sicily, southern Italy.



Key lessons and recommendations

Connecting the various project activities, such as mentoring, provision of bespoke training and entrepreneurial support, is a complex process. A long-term approach that accompanies the individual including after training is necessary to ensure that the many challenges of running a business are overcome effectively.

To support inclusion and entrepreneurship, it is necessary to take a multidisciplinary and networking approach. Knowing the local context and involving local actors in project activities is a successful approach in promoting inclusion and innovation in rural communities.

To experience the various kinds of exchanges between students, the involvement of professionals and local trainers was one of the most interesting elements of the project.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach and building an interdisciplinary team involving veterinarians, sociologists and economists are recommended. This makes it possible to deal with all the different aspects (social, technological, environmental) that contribute to a successful project.



Additional information:

Italian National Network website:

<https://www.reterurale.it/giovanipastori>

Italian National Network website:

<https://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/ID-Pagina/24938>

Youtube: <https://youtu.be/qEjpN93GDS8>