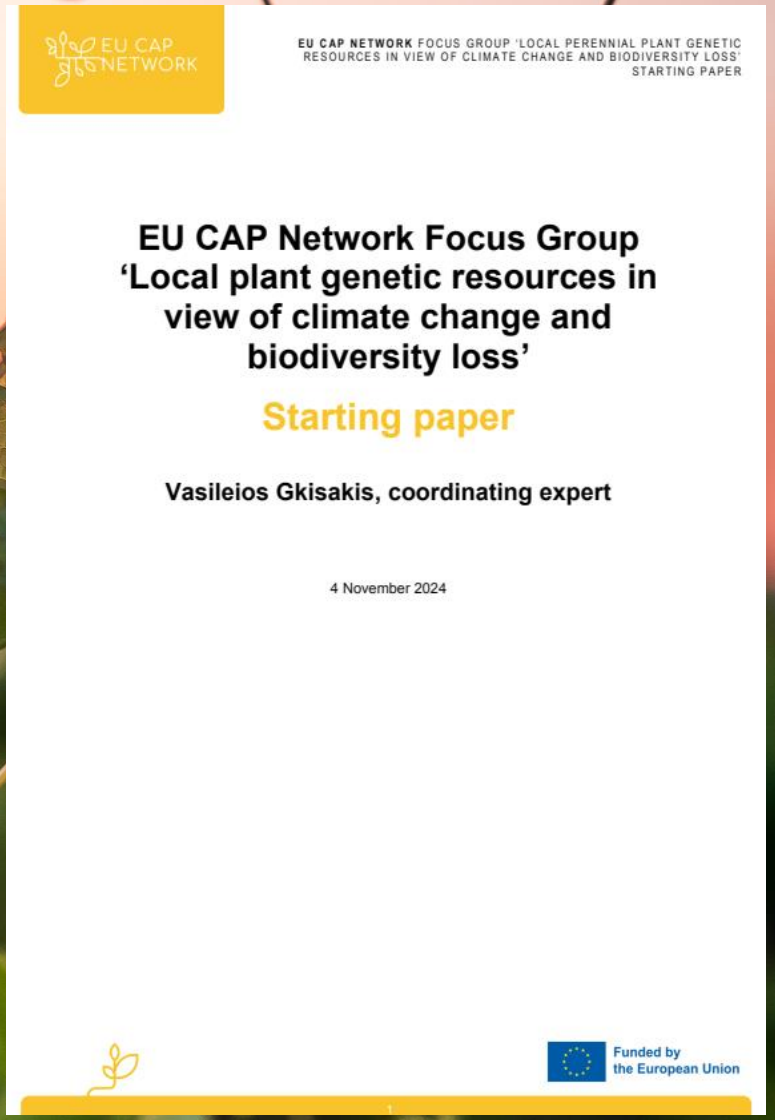
Focus Group ‘Local plant genetic resources in view of climate change and biodiversity loss’

Madrid, Spain
27-28 November 2024

Starting paper

Vasileios Gkisakis
Coordinating expert
EIP-AGRI support facility



Focus Group 'Local perennial plant genetic resources in view of climate change and biodiversity loss' 1st meeting | Madrid, Spain
27 November 2024

Purpose of the starting paper

Coordinating expert profile:

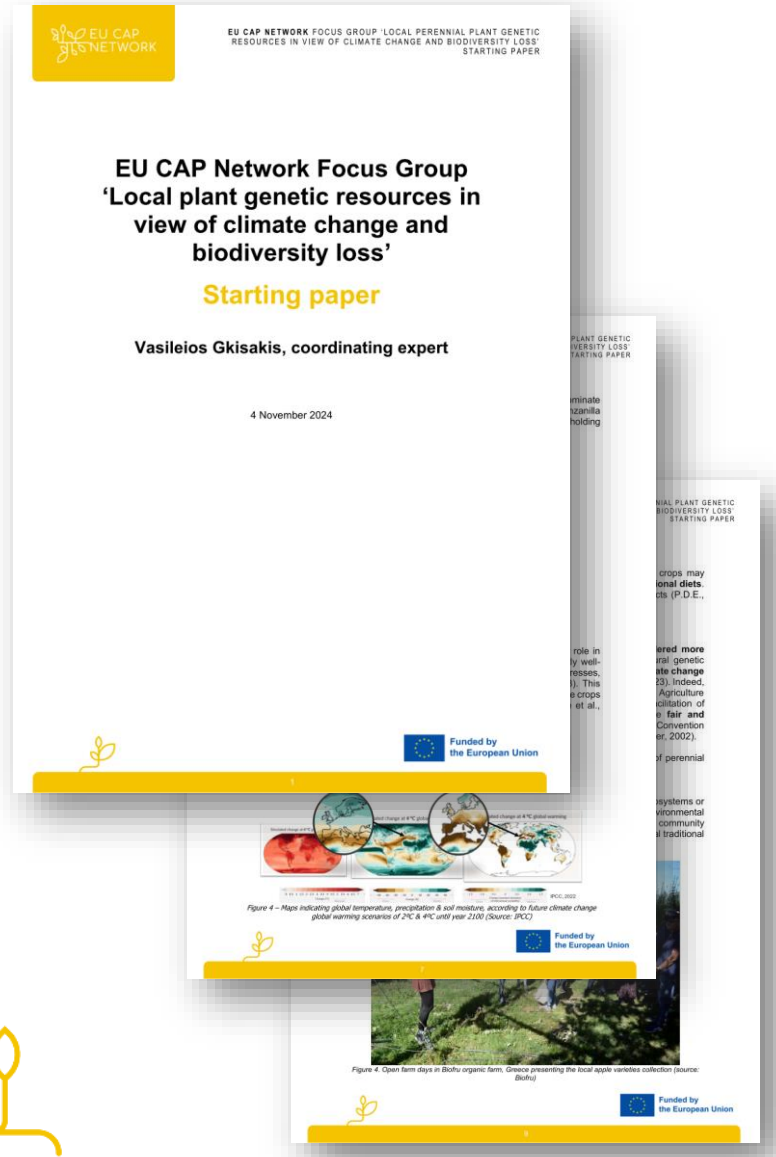
Dr. Vasileios Gkisakis

- **Researcher** (C') in Institute of Olive, subtropical crops & viticulture (**IOSV**), **ELGO – DIMITRA**, Kalamata, **Greece**.
  Topics: Olive & mediterranean tree crops, Agrobiodiversity, Sustainability, Agroecology
- Assigned member of Greek **national Technical Committee of Plant Propagating Material**
- Adjunct professor of **Agrobiodiversity** at **CIHEAM-MAICh** / MSc programme on **Sustainable agriculture**
- Board member of **Agroecology Europe Association,** moderator of **Greek Agroecological Network** & member of **ISHS Commission of Agroecology & Organic farming systems**

Purpose of the starting paper

- **Preparatory material, describing the state of the art from research & practice point of view**

  providing a general framework for the different tasks awaited to be accomplished by participating experts



Perennial crops in the EU's farming sector: Facts & figures

- **Most important role for European farming sector:**

  1.5 million holdings | **3.7** million ha | **€27.3** billion value

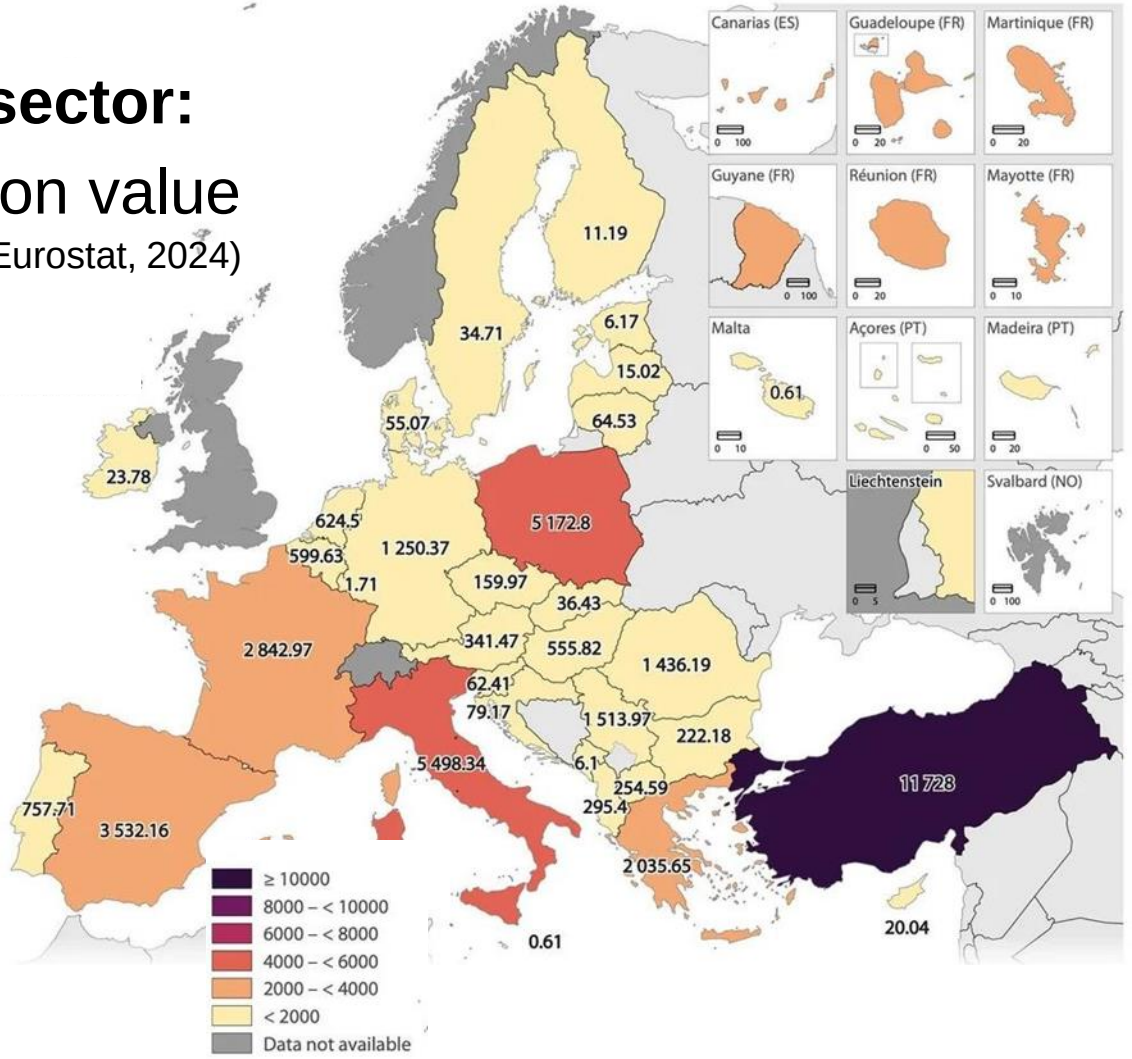
  (Eurostat, 2024)

- Fruit and Nut Trees

  (Olive, Citrus, apple & pears, nuts)
- Grapes
- Berries

  (Strawberries, raspberries, blueberries)
- Medicinal & aromatic plants
- Energy crops

  (Miscanthus & Switchgrass)

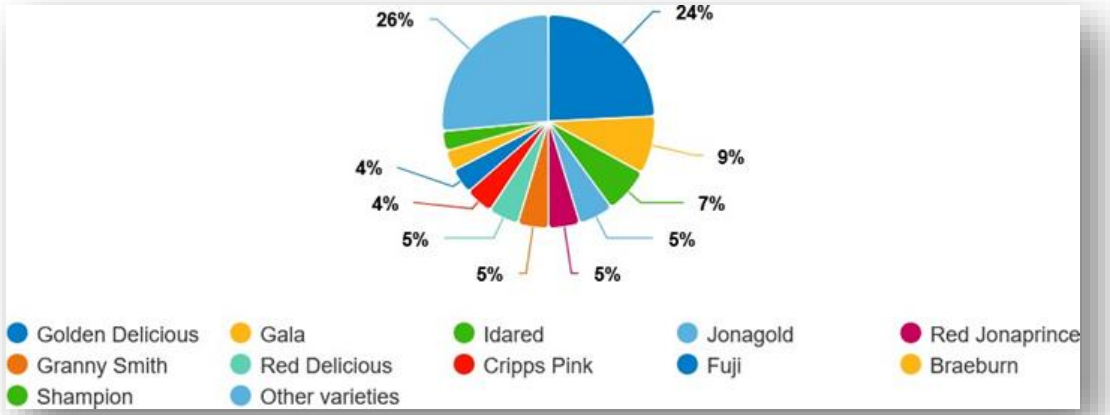


Production fruits, berries and nuts (in million tonnes) in EU for 2002 (source: Eurostat)

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

- Important yet **overlooked** resource promoting **agroecosystem services,** diversification, sustainability, food security and holding a **potential for climate change adaptation, resilience & mitigation**
- **Under-utilised** due to rise of **commercial, competitive cultivars**
- **Very small fraction** actively **commercialized**

Apples: 2000 R(EU)/38 C | **Pears** 2365 R(EU)/15 C | **Grapes**: 1271 R(WW)/ 15 C | **Olives**: 1237 R(EU)/8 C



Apple stock (n 1000 tonnes) in EU in 2021 (source: TasteAtlas)

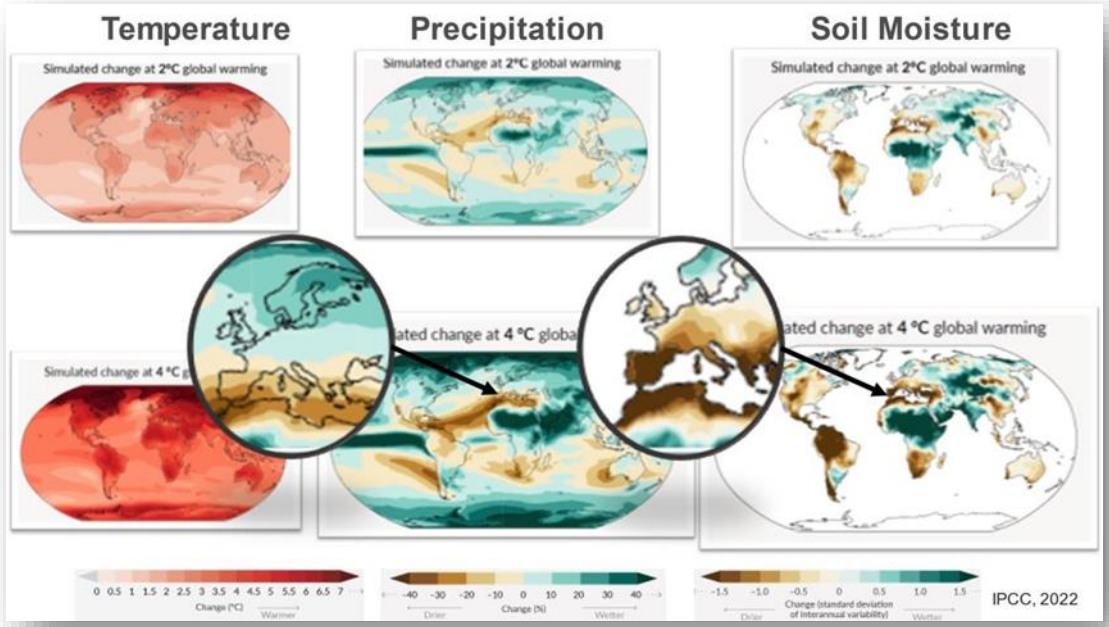
Local & under-utilised perennial crops

Importance & value

Main aspects:

› Climate change adaptation, resilience & mitigation

- Inherently **well-adjusted to local micro-climates**, becoming **resistant to environmental stresses** (drought, temperature fluctuations, pests)
- **Diversification** by inclusion of appropriate adapted varieties create **robust & well-functioning agroecosystem**, improving **resilience to climate stresses**
- **Sequestration** of greater **C fraction**
- **Lower input** requirements
- **Reduced soil disturbance**, improving soil health & enhancing carbon sequestration



Maps indicating global temperature, precipitation & soil moisture, according to future climate change global warming scenarios of 2ºC & 4ºC until year 2100 (Source: IPCC)

Examples: "**Assyrtiko**" grape variety;Santorini, Greece, highly resistant to drought and thriving in nutrient-poor soils now tested in other Mediterranean countries,
"**Rambour Franc**" apple variety; eastern France & Germany drought-tolerant & well-suited to warmer conditions, considered with high potential to support crop stability, especially in areas prone to water stress, under climate change conditions

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

a. Importance & value

Agroecosystem diversification

- Diversity at **gene, species & landscape** level to **maintain ecosystem functioning** as important **resilience strategy & toolkit**, for **reversing biodiversity loss**
- Contribution to enhancing **important agroecosystem services (**e.g pollination & pest control)

Low-input farming

- **Adapted** to conditions of **minimal agricultural inputs**. e.g. synthetic fertilizers or pesticides; particularly **attractive for agroecological farming systems**

Plant breeding

- **Critical resources for farmers & breeders** to develop new crop varieties with desirable traits and meet current & evolving challenges

Nutritional & health benefits

- **High** nutritional value & contain compounds **beneficial for human health**

Cultural & Economic Importance

- Special **cultural significance &** part of **traditional diets**

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

b. Conservation & sustainable use

- Critical for addressing issues of **biodiversity loss** & **climate change adaptation**, together with food insecurity, and poverty alleviation
- **ITPGRFA** prioritises, as a **legally binding instrument**, the **facilitation of conservation & sustainable use** of plant genetic resources and **fair & equitable sharing of benefits** derived, in harmony with **CBD**

Key approaches:

› On-farm (In Situ) conservation

- Maintenance **within natural ecosystems** or traditional farming landscapes, allowing to evolve alongside local **environmental & cultural changes**.
- Foreseeing **farming community involvement** as local farmers play a **crucial role** in conserving perennial traditional varieties & respective farming practices

Example: "Biofru" organic farm, Kastoria, Greece, part of the "**Aegilops**" network, conserving more than 100 hundred local & underutilised varieties of apples and 60 pear varieties, most of them endangered due to abandonment by commercial farmers

Open farm days in Biofru organic farm, Greece presenting the local apple varieties collection (source: Biofru)

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

b. Conservation & sustainable use

Ex-situ conservation

- Preservation **outside** natural environment: on-field collections (institutional or farm community level), botanical gardens, but also seed banks.

Breeding

- **Essential investment** in research on advantages of agronomic & physiological attributes
- **Participatory plant breeding (PPB)** integrating end users into varietal development process

Practical example: **“apfel:gut”** project specializing in organic on-farm breeding of **pome fruits** through collaborative approach & involving diverse group of practitioners, advisors, breeders &researchers within the organic fruit growing sector

Nutritional value

- Can boost consumer interest & support conservation efforts, due to **nutrient-density** related attributes and offer potential as functional foods

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

Valorisation & value chain creation

- Requiring multifaceted approaches, incorporating sustainable farming, economic incentives, consumer awareness, also policy support.

Main such **approaches**:

i) Promoting **local agricultural knowledge** & **traditional** practices

ii) Implementation of **sustainable farming practices** based on **agroecological principles**

iii) Economic aspects of **value-added production** taking advantage of **special attributes** of local genetic resources

iv) **Participatory approaches** in research, especially breeding

v) **Networking** & **collaboration**

Example: "**Mavrelia**" (or Mavrolia), a local & under-utilised olive-oil producing variety, as valorised by the **"Nileas" Farmers Group**, Chora Messinias, Greece (Poster)

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

Farmer-related collective initiatives

- Several initiatives across EU currently working to **conserve & promote the sustainable use** of local and under-utilized perennial crops.
- These are **non-institutional** networks & organizations, working in **direct collaboration with farmers & civic society**, focusing on conserving biodiversity, but **also promoting agroecological practices,** enhancing **food security**

Initiative example: **Let's Liberate Diversity! (LLD):** European Network established in 2005, collectively working on conservation and sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity through **farmer-led initiatives** & **participatory seed systems.** Connecting a wide range **of stakeholders**, including **farmers**, **researchers**, **breeders**, **civil society organizations**, and **policymakers**, to advocate recognition & protection of **farmers' rights** on biodiversity conservation & use. LLD's key activities include i) Hosting annual **forums** & **events**, ii) Supporting **community-level activities**, iii) **Advocating** for farmers' rights, iv) Encouraging **Participatory Plant Breeding**, and vi) Raising **awareness** & **training**.

List of representative initiatives at EU level, including details found in paper's Annex I


EU CAP NETWORK

EU CAP NETWORK FOCUS GROUP 'LOCAL PERENNIAL PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES IN VIEW OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS' STARTING PAPER

Annexes

I. Farmer-related initiatives

- **AEGILOPS – Network for Biodiversity & Ecology in Agriculture**

Country: Greece.
Focus: The organisation is dedicated to the conservation of agricultural biodiversity and the promotion of sustainable farming practices in Greece. It functions as network that collaborates with farmers to conserve and utilize local, traditional crop varieties, including perennial crops.
Key activities: Seed saving, participatory plant breeding, and sustainable farming practices.
Website: AEGILOPS

- **Arche Noah - Austria**

Focus: Conservation and sustainable use of plant biodiversity.
Description: A prominent organization in Austria dedicated to preserving heirloom and rare plant varieties, including local perennial crops such as traditional fruit trees and grapevines. It operates a seed bank, runs educational programs, and supports farmers in cultivating heritage varieties.
Key activities:
- Operation of seed bank & nursery conserving several traditional varieties of fruits, vegetables, and herbs.
- Collaboration with farmers to grow & market rare varieties of fruit and vegetable crops.
- Workshops & events on biodiversity, agroecology, and traditional farming practices.

Website: Arche Noah.

- **Association Quinta das Águias**

Country: Portugal.
Focus: This Portuguese organization focuses on sustainable agriculture, agroecology, and the conservation of local biodiversity, including perennial crops. They run a farm where they apply permaculture principles and cultivate traditional crop varieties.
Key activities: Biodiversity conservation, permaculture practices, and environmental education.
Website: Quinta das Águias

- **Dachverband Kulturpflanzen- und Nutztiervielfalt e. V.**

Country: Germany.
Focus: This organization advocates for the preservation of plant and livestock diversity in Germany. It supports the conservation and use of local, traditional varieties, including perennial crops like fruit trees.

Funded by the European Union

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Hungary by supporting the exchange of traditional seeds, including local perennial varieties. They encourage seed-saving practices among farmers and gardeners.

Funded by the European Union

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marker-assisted selection and other biotechnological tools to breed new apple and strawberry varieties. By involving breeders, farmers, and supply chain partners in the process, the project emphasized practical application & rapid uptake of results,

Funded by the European Union

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Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

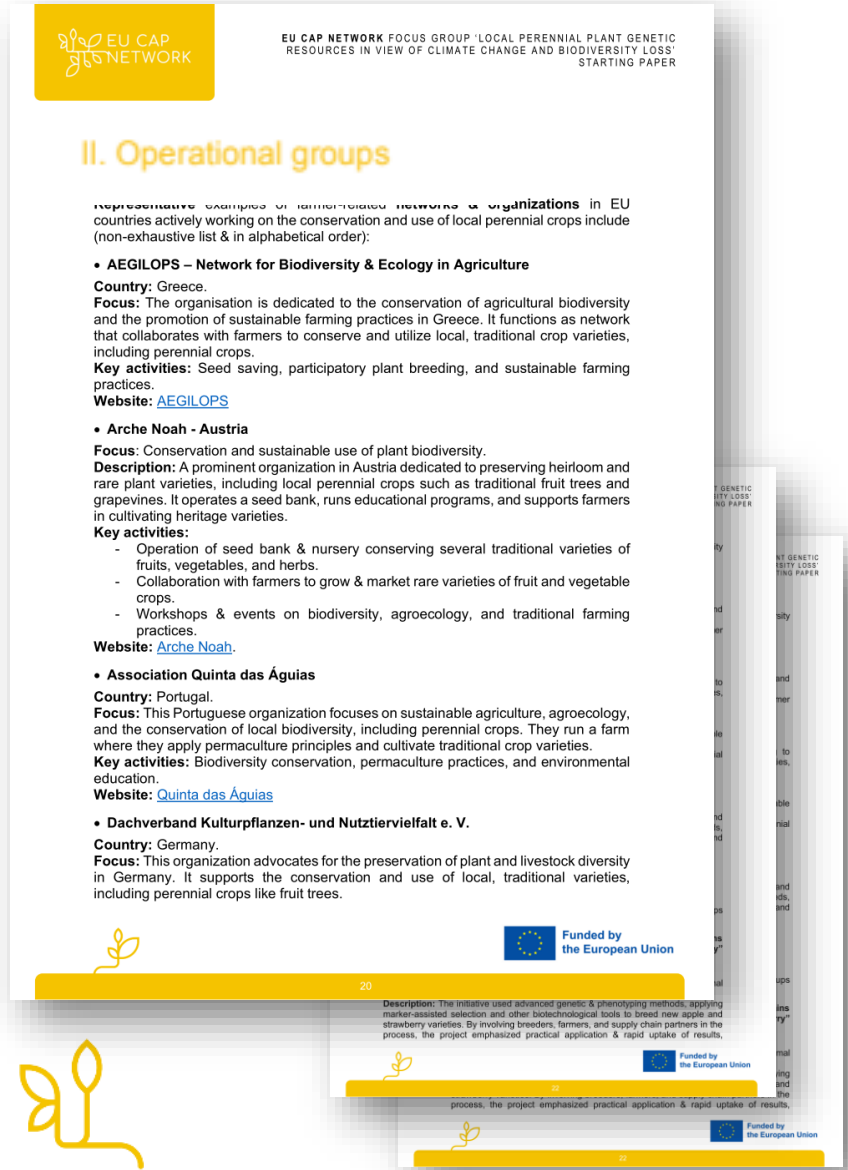
Innovative practice-oriented projects: Operational groups

- EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects (OGs): **groups of stakeholders** with complementary knowledge to **co-create practical solutions** for agriculture, forestry and rural communities in an innovation project.
- Several EU-funded OGs **dedicated to the topic** of conserving & using local and under-utilised perennial crops

OG example: Biodiversamente Castagno: **"Guidelines for the preservation and enhancement of biodiversity the chestnut in Emilia Romagna",** Italy (2017-2020). OG aimed to protect & promote diversity of chestnut varieties in Emilia Romagna region, targeting specifically varieties at risk of genetic erosion. Characterized chestnut groves' biodiversity & developed sustainable conservation practices. Also, involved mapping & genetic characterization of local chestnut varieties as well as studying soil biodiversity. Established guidelines to conserve chestnut germplasm & engaged local producers as biodiversity custodians, while supporting eco-friendly farming practices.

BIODIVERSAMENTE CASTAGNO

List of representative OGs at EU level, including details found in paper's Annex I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II. Operational groups

Representative examples of farmer-related networks & organizations in EU countries actively working on the conservation and use of local perennial crops include (non-exhaustive list & in alphabetical order):

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Funded by the European Union

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Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

Research

- EU **biodiversity strategy for 2030**: **Several research activities at EU-wide** aiming at halting further loss of genetic diversity & face important environmental **challenges generated by climate change**

Main focusing axes:

Enhancing diversity of crops & cropping systems

- Focus on advancing **monitoring, characterization, conservation & use** of perennial plant genetic resources, to promote crop improvement, sustainable farming & meet demands of food security & better nutrition.

Examples:
FRUITDIV: focusing on potential of diversity of fruit tree Crop Wild Relatives (CWR);
DiverIMPACTS: promoting diversification of cropping systems for improved productivity, ecosystem services & resource-efficient and sustainable value chains;
EUFORGEN program: focusing primarily on forest species but also on under- utilized perennial tree crops

List of representative Projects at EU level, including details found in paper's Annex I

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

Climate-resistant & resilient farming

- Focus on the **reality of increasing climate stresses** & respective need for perennial crops **capable of capturing resources more efficiently and being resilient** to abiotic & biotic stresses.
- **Main objective**: breeding of crops **adapted to the challenging growth conditions** to increase the use of genetic resources to broaden the genetic base of crops and create new breeding opportunities.

Examples:
BreedingValue: To improve the genetic diversity and breeding efficiency of berry crops;
CLIMED- FRUIT: Developing climate-resilient farming strategies for Mediterranean fruit trees,
DREAM4FRUIT: To improve resilience to climate change, functional biodiversity sustainability of small farming systems in the Mediterranean:
GEN4OLIVE: To enhance olive breeding for productivity, resilience, and climate change adaptation

List of representative Projects at EU level, including details found in paper's Annex I

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

Adaptation and boosting of low input & organic production

- Aiming to enhance the shift towards low-input & organic production systems, helping to boost organic farming in Europe through use of biodiversity

Examples:

Ecobreed: focusing on breeding under-utilized crops, including certain non-fruit perennials, for improved organic & low-input farming systems

InnObreed: aiming to foster organic crop breeding & improve performance of fruit sector, by enhancing innovative organic fruit breeding & uses

Sustainable value chain

- Focus on whole supply chain enhancement, emphasis given on value added by crop diversification along with new openings for regional, high-quality products & economic development

Examples:

BIOVALUE: Development of an agent-based simulation tool, analysing links among biodiversity, agri-food value chain, environment, consumer's preferences & health

Diversifood: Enhance description & evaluation of local varieties to increase performance, resilience and quality

RADIANT: Develop solutions & tools to promote under-utilised crops, agrobiodiversity, sustainable diets & dynamic value chains

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

c. Successful initiatives

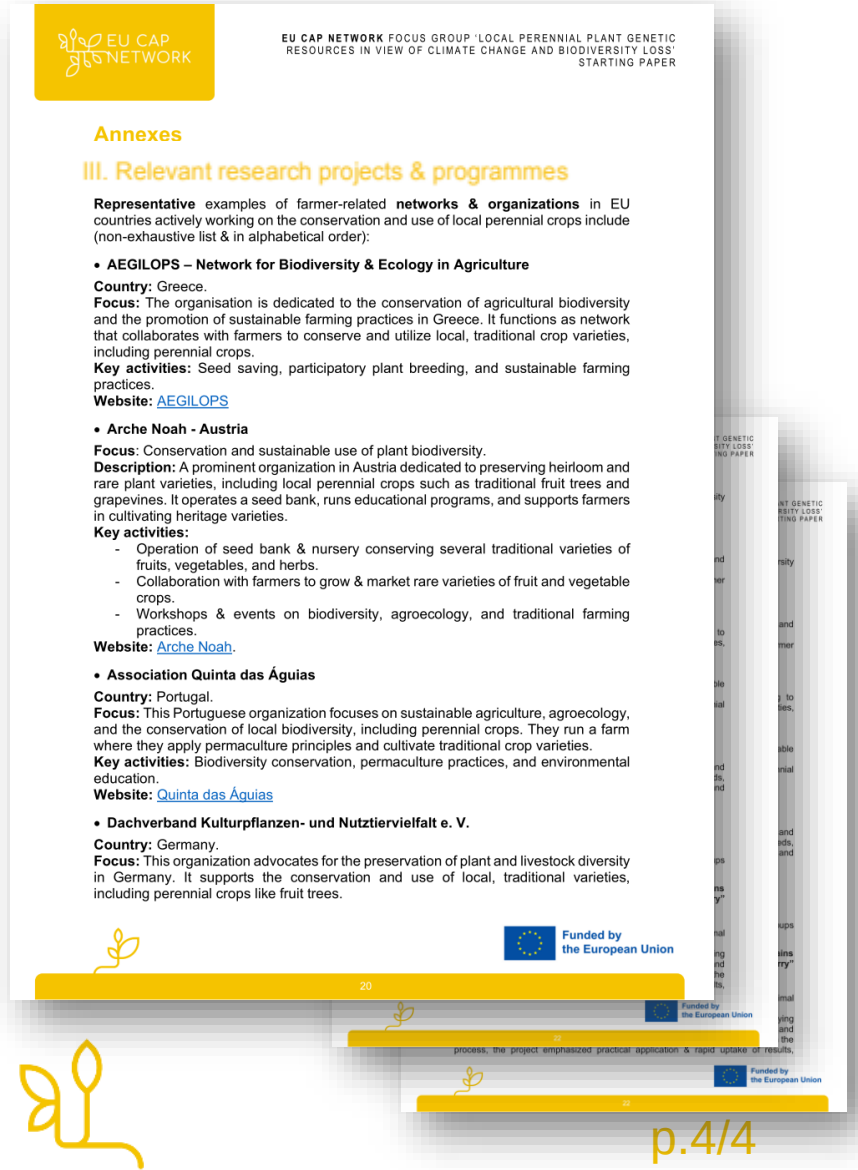
Capacity building for genetic resources conservation

- Formulation of **decentralised networks of stakeholders** to increase awareness, communication and competences regarding the conservation & sustainable use of crop genetic resources.

Examples:

FARMERS PRIDE: creating a network of stakeholders to conserve & utilize local plant diversity & promote the sustainable use of under-utilized perennial crops in local farming systems

DYNAVERSITY: building a network of stakeholders to facilitates exchange and integration of scientific as well as practical knowledge on how to best manage diversity in agriculture and in the entire food chain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Annexes

III. Relevant research projects & programmes

Representative examples of farmer-related **networks & organizations** in EU countries actively working on the conservation and use of local perennial crops include (non-exhaustive list & in alphabetical order):

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Funded by the European Union

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List of representative Projects and programs at EU level, including details found in paper's Annex III

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

d. Challenges & constraints

Innovative practice-oriented projects: Operational groups

- **Several challenges and constraints**, hindering their potential to contribute to climate resilience, biodiversity loss, and eventually food security.
- **Both technical & socio-economic;** Addressing them would require **integrated approaches involving farming, research, and market-related aspects**.

Main challenges & constraints :

Genetic erosion & diversity loss

- Local perennial crops often overlooked in breeding programs as **studies of yields, resilience, and market potential of local perennial crops are relatively rare**.
- Results to slow adoption by farmers who might otherwise benefit.
- Conservation efforts often neglected, particularly in **regions where financial and technical resources are scarce**.
- Global trend towards intensive monoculture and the use of uniform, high-yielding crop varieties

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

d. Challenges & constraints

Loss of Traditional Agricultural Knowledge (TAK) & lack of formal training

- Farmers' knowledge often neglected, due to **dominance of modern, industrialised farming practices** not fitting to non-competitive varieties generating under-utilisation of crops that have long provided resilience and sustainability in local farming systems
- Farmers frequently **lack access to formal agricultural training services** related to technical knowledge of conserving & using local perennial crops sustainably.

Research gaps

- Local perennial crops **rather not well-studied with regards to important aspects** and potentiality for promoting their sustainable use, like agronomic behaviour, nutritional profiles, pest resistance and adaptation to climatic stress.
- Conservation initiatives mostly **disjointed or project- based, with limited long-term funding or integration** into national agricultural development plans.

Condition of scarcity created for farmers for finding high-quality genetic material, limiting their attractiveness &integration into modern farming systems.

Local & under-utilised perennial crops

d. Challenges & constraints

Market & Economic Constraints

- Limited market demand due to **unfamiliarity among consumers & limited promotion**. Therefore, farmers may favour higher-productivity or more commercially viable varieties, due to their faster return.
- **Absence of infrastructure for processing or value-adding**, may limit economic viability of local perennial crops, reducing incentive for farmers to prefer them.

Main discussion points

key outputs expected for the FG is related to a **main question:**

*How can conservation & use of local under-utilised varieties of perennial crops be **attractive & profitable** for farmers & thereby **contribute to biodiversity-friendly sustainable farming under climate change**?*

A series of **escalated questions** related to FG's tasks to be addressed & debated:

- Which are the most **successful on-farm examples** of conservation & use practices, categorized per crop & pedo-climatic zones, in different EU countries?
  - How they are **valorised**, in terms of economic outcome & environmental benefit?
- Which are the **most effective practices of conservation & use**, f.i farming methods, promotion & commercialization of related products, as well collective efforts of farmers, networks, NGOs & scientists?
  - Which of the above **most feasible** to be adapted & widely mainstreamed?
- Which are **main barriers & challenges** in conserving & using local perennial crops? How can they be overcome?
  - Which are the main respective **opportunities**? How they could be succeeded?

Main discussion points

- What are the most important **tangible benefits & opportunitites** for agriculture & ecosystems regarding the use of conservation & use of local perennial crops?
- Which are better **valorised** regarding adaptation to climate stresses & for enhancing farming system diversification?

In the **long-term**, also the following topics will be addressed:

- Identify further **research needs** from practice, and possible gaps in **technical knowledge**?
- How could **research outcomes & traditional knowledge** on local, underutilized perennial crops be integrated into effective conservation & use strategies?
  Are there successful examples of **capacity building**, steaming from both academic & farmer community-based initiatives?

Survey results

Vasileios Gkisakis
Coordinating expert
EIP-AGRI support facility

Focus Group ‘Local perennial plant genetic resources in view of climate change and biodiversity loss’ 1st meeting | Madrid, Spain
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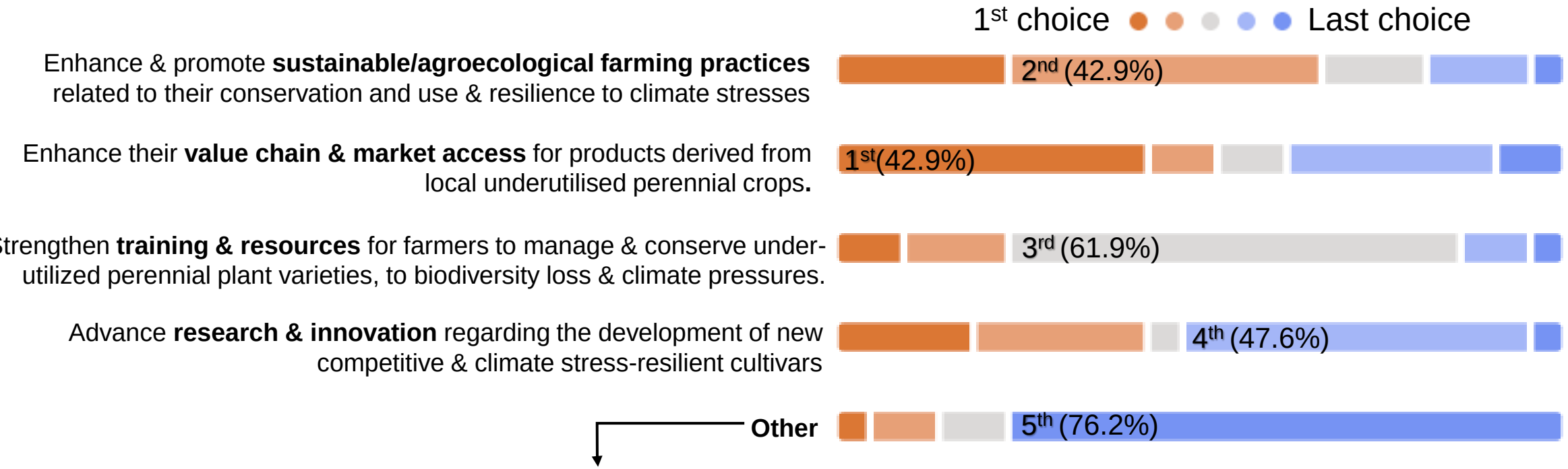
Most important **priorities** in terms of conservation & use of local perennial plant genetic resources, in view of climate change & biodiversity loss?



Improve **availability** for farmers; enhance **access** increasing capacity of germplasm banks & multiplication nurseries

Support **farmers' seed system**/not heavily regulated; Better measure for young farmers

farmers & research continuous **connection**

Consumer education

Technologies for integration in cropping systems

Promote **regional added value**: tourism & image building, **cultural identity**

Mapping of varieties

Use to enhance **landscape** & promote **green infrastructure**

develop profitable **valorization** through direct selling

Facilitate **free access** following Nagoya context

market access

Enhance **cooperation** for wider use of germplasm

Supportive **Policies** & **Institutional** Frameworks for farmers

Main issue to resolve so conservation & use of local & under-utilised perennial crops will be considered by farmers as an attractive & profitable option?

Connect with **market value specialists**

Bridge gap between economic incentives & long-term environmental benefits

Increase **profitability**; clear **market vision**

Testing in (different) regions under climatic stress

Economic convenience to match current & future environmental, market & consumers scenario

Direct **economic benefits** or further **entrepreneurial advantages** as positive regional marketing/communication and market differentiation.

Tolerant varieties to **reduce pesticides reliance**

Effective **communication** on quality & diversity added to value chain & highlight **market benefits**

Market **behavior;**

Demonstrate to farmers value of these crops

Small-scale farming; **agroecological** transition

Reverse **limited cooperation** between farmers & collections (gene banks)

Joint participation in research projects with an emphasis on **practical** applications

Strengthen farmers' **sales channels**

Commercialization enhancement & support by financing programms

Long-term stability of farming operation with **lower external resources input**

Enhance **overall knowledge** on benefits, use and respective cropping systems

Access to genetic material

Provide to farmers growing tools & market opportunities for valorization

Encourage market by linking to heritage, biodiversity, environmental resilience concepts

Good farming practices to enhance conservation & sustainable use of local, under-utilised varieties of perennial crops in view of climate change & biodiversity loss.?

- **Small plots** (minifundios)
- **Cover crops**
- Genotypes selection of **semi-domesticated** species
- Involve local farmers in **PBPs**
- **Involve farmers in conservation & evaluation of germplasm**
- **Flower strips**
- Agroecological practices: **polycultures, agroforestry**
- **Intercropping**
- **Dry farming**
- **Support Germplasm banks**
- **Farm hedges** formation using wild fruit trees
- Use of **non-crop** genetic resources, as rootstocks or as pollinators
- **Reduced tillage**
- Farm collections
- **Deficit irrigation**
- **Intercropping & polyculture**
- **Stone terraces**
- **Landscape architecture**
- Community germplasm banks
- **Agroforestry**
- On-farm conservation

FGs expectations & contributions by participants

Establish ideas for **financial programs** to support small farmers

Receive expertise in **innovation management**

Exchange examples of **good practices**, **valorization** & **branding**

Share the **experiences**

Exchange of **knowledge** & **answers**

To know **context** & **perception** from different countries & actors

Share **practical**, **research-backed** approaches

Examples from **personal experience**

To know the **problems** & **opinions** of other target groups

Play a role in developing **tangible strategies** that can be implemented across Europe

Foster a better understanding of **economic & ecological advantages**

Deliver knowledge & perspectives by collaborating & exchanging with other disciplines

Share **experiences**, **knowledge** & **insights** with a broad range on stakeholders

Expand **knowledge** & exchange/evolve **opinions** with experts & farmers

Create a set of clear **guidelines, opinions & advices**

Stronger **recognition & support** for local perennial crops

EU CAP Network Focus Group
‘Local plant genetic resources in view of climate change and biodiversity loss’

27-28 November 2024 | **Madrid, Spain**

All information on the Focus Group is available on the webpage:
https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/focus-group-local-perennial-plant-genetic-resources-view-climate-change-and-biodiversity-loss