

eip-agri
AGRICULTURE & INNOVATION



EIP-AGRI Seminar **'Moving EIP-AGRI** **implementation forward'**

FINAL REPORT
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Objectives, context and format of the seminar

On Wednesday 10 and Thursday 11 May 2017, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) organised a two half-day seminar dedicated to exploring the existing experiences with implementing the EIP-AGRI via Rural Development Programme (RDP) support. The event was held with the support of the Greek RDP Managing Authority – Network Support Unit of the National Rural Network. With over 230 Operational Groups (OGs) working on their projects and many more to come, the seminar focused on sharing current challenges that administrations are facing, and possible ways forward inspired by positive experiences [[Link to Seminar programme](#)].

According to the current budget estimations for the EU funding period 2014-2020, more than 3200 OGs are planned in 97 RDPs and 27 Member States. The seminar aimed at early sharing and learning about practical approaches to improve the EIP-AGRI's initial implementation approaches. Therefore it was a huge success that 150 participants from Managing Authorities (MA), Paying Agencies (PA) as well as National Rural Networks (NRN) and National Support Units (NSU) – coming from all 27 Member States that are implementing the EIP-AGRI – shared their experiences during the event [[Link to List of participants](#)].

Discussions covered the whole timeline of EIP-AGRI implementation, from the early phases of launching calls for OGs and selecting OG projects, with a look at project support, management of administrative and financial requirements, up until dissemination of results. Participants discussed what national and regional Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies can do to help the understanding of the interactive innovation approach within OG projects.

Thanks to the participants, **information on the state of play in the Member States** (MS) was collected during the registration process:

- ▶ According to the answers given by the MS, about 300 Operational Groups were up and running by the time of the seminar. Some countries had already organised more than 2 calls. Ireland and Sweden have their calls continuously open, and they make the selection with several cut-off dates each year. There were still 10 MS and regions that had not yet opened a first call: they intended to do so in autumn 2017 or by the end of the year.
- ▶ Most MS / regions provide funding for the "setting up" of (potential) Operational Groups ('step 1'), which means that a specific selection is organised to give aid for the preparation of the OG project plans. Success rates for this 'step 1' selection vary significantly, from 19 till 90%.
- ▶ Some MS / regions only support the OG projects. In these 'step 2' cases, fewer applications are received and fewer projects financed. In the majority of these cases, success rates that were reported lie below 50%. This is often due to a lack of finances and a great interest in the EIP-AGRI OG approach from the stakeholders. Some MS already shifted RD budgets from other measures to EIP-AGRI to solve this.
- ▶ Overall, the time of calls in the course of the year varies a lot. As a consequence, the organisation of cross-border OGs is hindered, even if many ideas for cross-border work seem to be in the air already.
- ▶ Half of the informants reported that innovation brokerage is being dealt with, e.g. by the NRN / NSU, by advisers, the Managing Authority or Paying Agency, by a contracted agency or by a specialised innovation broker. Some MS / regions which currently have no brokerage service mentioned that they are planning to organise it in the future.

The four **specific objectives** of the seminar were addressed by a mixture of presentations in plenary, and discussions both in breakout groups and in plenary:

- ▶ To exchange experiences and practices among MAs and PAs in rolling out RDP support to OGs along the whole delivery chain.
- ▶ To identify approaches and tools that are useful for MAs and PAs in accomplishing their tasks while considering the needs of OG partners.
- ▶ To understand the interaction within OG projects and how partners can be incentivised to co-create solutions that are ready to use for farmers and foresters.
- ▶ To increase the impact of OG projects by promoting the involvement of organisations and actors with the right competences, complementing each other.

Setting the Scene – Why are we here in the seminar?

The seminar started with a welcome from the host, Mr **Charalambos Kasimis** (Greek Secretary-General of Agricultural Policy and Management of European Funds) and from Mr Alexander Bartovič (Head of Unit F2, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission).

Mr Bartovic recalled that the EIP-AGRI already started in 2012, with a view to speed up innovation on the ground and foster a more competitive and sustainable agriculture. He said that now the time has come to start picking the fruit of the first interactive innovation projects. The first set of OGs can inspire further OGs to come, referring to the seminar's booklet with 9 inspiring OGs which presented their project in the seminar [[Link to booklet](#)]. He emphasised that under the EIP-AGRI, "innovation" means "an idea, put into practice, with success". By participating in OGs, farmers take co-ownership of the work, making the solutions more practical and ready to use, and more accepted by the sector. Developing bottom-up ideas and possible solutions coming from farmers is key. This is called the "interactive innovation approach". The same approach is also applied in Horizon 2020 "multi-actor projects", which connect with the Rural Development Operational Groups and vice versa. In the past 4 years, funding for such multi-actor projects already reached EUR 500 million, and many more are to come in the last 3 years of the H2020 period. Those linkages under the EIP-AGRI will further fuel the complementary between EU research projects and the RDP OGs, in particular now that a good number of OGs are up and running. Mr Bartovic closed by remembering that an EIP-AGRI Evaluation Study was concluded in February 2017. This study found the voluntary uptake of the EIP-AGRI by 27 MS "impressive", and the interactive innovation approach "truly distinctive and highly appreciated by stakeholders". He stressed that the EIP-AGRI helps to find knowledge which is not present in your region or country, while everybody knows that enabling quick application of knowledge and technology gives a competitive advantage.

After the welcome, **Inge Van Oost** (DG Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission) informed the attendants in more detail on the general framework and the latest developments of the EIP-AGRI. She presented the bigger picture of the EIP-AGRI, including listing a number of EU research projects under H2020 that link to the EIP-AGRI. [[Link presentation](#)]

To show what the EIP-AGRI is about as concretely as possible, **five running Operational Groups presented their projects** and experiences:

- ▶ DE – Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Ulrich Knaus – Aquaponics, combining plant and fish production [[Link presentation](#)]
- ▶ SE – Samo Grasic – Innovative planning in reindeer herding [[Link presentation](#)]
- ▶ FR – Midi-Pyrénées, Christophe Durand – Triple performance for pig farming [[Link presentation](#)]
- ▶ IT – Emilia-Romagna, Matteo Gatti – Competitive and sustainable viticulture [[Link presentation](#)]
- ▶ BE – Flanders, Koen Mertens – Testing the potential of sensors for GPS technology on pilot farms [[Link presentation](#)]

On the one hand, the presentations illustrated the broad variety of themes addressed by the EIP-AGRI, and their potential value to improve farming practices and make agriculture more competitive. They also show that focusing on real farmers' needs and enabling "cross-fertilisation" through cooperation between complementary partners from the very planning of the project are essential building blocks for a good Operational Group. Dissemination and communication, especially through practice abstracts, are key in the framework of the EIP-AGRI, with examples of practice abstracts shown by all 5 Operational Groups.

"The **EIP-AGRI practice abstracts establish unique connections among RD OGs and with H2020 projects**. Linking knowledge partners at regional/national and EU level effectively requires discipline to deliver **simplified communication** in the form of practice abstracts."



- Inge Van Oost -

EIP-AGRI practice abstracts make a unique connection between RD OGs and H2020 projects. To this aim, they are collected **in a unique EU repository**. To enable knowledge exchange and the creation of links between Operational Groups and running projects under H2020, **it is key for an Operational Group to be visible in SFC as quickly as possible, as soon as the project starts**. This allows the partners who are preparing or running a European multi-actor project (or thematic network) to find the Operational Groups that are acting at regional / national level. Similarly, practice abstracts can help find other OGs on similar subjects, and in this way stimulate the exchange of knowledge and learning from each other during the project. More information about the presented OGs can be found in the [Operational Groups booklet 2017](#).

1st breakout session – 'Getting to know each other'

A first breakout session was organised to reflect on the presentations and to share impressions. Smaller groups were built according to the different functions of the participants (MA, PA, NSU). This was done in particular to discover people who have a similar function in another Member State or region, and to enable peer-to-peer discussions.



'Enabling cross-fertilisation and communication – How to facilitate good project applications

“The NSU should provide technical and / or professional support at all stages of the project life cycle. From the very beginning with an enabling environment until the end with the help in result dissemination, when the whole cycle starts again by inspiring others to engage in new projects.”

- Tímea Reszkető -

The second part of the seminar started with presentations from two Member States in the plenary session. Tímea Reszkető (Head of the RDI unit in the Hungarian Chamber of Agriculture) showed the Hungarian approach to support the EIP-AGRI [[Link presentation](#)]. The key topic she addressed was how EIP projects can be supported by the NSU. As an example, Tímea showed a set of instruments applied by the Hungarian NSU such as a training for advisers and a two-level consultation system run by county and central experts.

The second presentation was held by Jaume Sió (Deputy Director Innovation, Department of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food in the Generalitat of Catalonia) showing the support provided in Catalonia [[Link presentation](#)]. In addition to the points already raised by Tímea Reszkető, his message was that a good innovation ecosystem in which the EIP-AGRI is embedded is of the utmost importance (for instance connecting with the national / regional institutional framework). From his long experience in this type of cooperation projects, he found that, for projects to have a real impact, it is primordial to construct projects calls with a focus on bottom-up project proposals that cover the real needs of farmers and foresters.

“**Good ideas must be stimulated continuously throughout the year**, meeting points provided and potential OG partners mixed as much as possible. **A good innovation ecosystem provides good OG projects.**”

- Jaume Sió -

2nd breakout session – 'Application Forms and Partnership Agreements'

The two presentations from the Member States were followed by Inge Van Oost, introducing the second breakout group session on 'Application Forms and Partnership Agreements' [[Link presentation](#)]. She explained that some Member States had provided their (translated) 'real life' documents, which had been analysed in connection to the themes and questions of the breakout groups [[HU life cycle](#) – [IE application form](#) – [IE guidance doc](#) – [BE application form](#) – [RO application form](#) – [RO cooperation agreement](#) – [BE cooperation agreement](#) – [UK-W setting up](#)]. Although these documents are not Commission guidance documents, they have been extremely useful as examples of good practice and were used to kick off the six breakout groups. A summary of this analysis can be found in [Annex](#). For this breakout session, the functions in each group were now mixed to facilitate a mutual exchange between Member States and between MA, PA, NSU and OGs. The main results to the two questions from the six breakout groups can be summarised as follows:

Question 1: What should be included in the application form?

The basic information in an **application form** should cover the project objectives, the details of the partners / applicants and their contribution / role, the work plan, the communication and dissemination plan as well as the budget required. The discussions have shown that there are various approaches taken in the Member States due to different reasons: one-step or two-step approaches, financial support for setting up an Operational Group or even no support, different application forms for step 1 (call for ideas) and step 2 (call for proposals).

Applications for step 1 (support for preparing the OG plan) are obviously much more simple than applications for step 2 (full project application). Countries and regions are quite divergent in the level of detail they are asking. The main points of discussion are how to secure sound financial management, for instance by asking to indicate a lead partner (or even by obliging to form a legal entity to get funded) and how to replace an OG project partner in case of weak or non-performance. A case was made that for EU research projects even beyond EUR 2 million, it is not needed to form a legal entity to ensure good financial management. Requiring Operational Groups to become a legal entity could be seen as an unnecessary administrative burden both for the administration as for the Operational Group, since the EU rules are not requiring this. There was a consensus that preparing a good cooperation agreement is the real key to successful financial management.

“There is a general tendency to make the application too complicated. An application form should deliver the answers that the evaluators need to assess the selection criteria. KISS: “Keep It Simple, Stupid”.

- seminar participants -

There is a general tendency to make the application too complicated. An application form should deliver the answers that the evaluators need to assess the selection criteria, so there should be a direct link between the selection criteria and project application content. A particular issue that hinders simplification and clarity is that some countries (e.g. SE, FI, PT, UK) use common application forms for several measures, which obliges applicants to provide a lot of information which is not at all relevant and which can even be confusing.

The main objective is to ask just enough information to allow picking the best projects, but not to ask too much in order not to put applicants off (especially farmers or newcomers). The **BE example** and **IE example** used for the discussion aim to address this and could be useful inspirational templates. Whether a potential solution will really become an innovation depends on many factors and is not predicable in advance. Since “innovation” or the “innovative potential” can never be assessed in advance (See Commission’s EIP guidelines), what effectively helps to assess the real innovative potential of the project proposal is to ask about the “state of the art” and all available knowledge on the subject that is relevant for the project objectives, as well as to ask about the complementarity beyond any existing initiatives. At the same time, this shows which applicants have prepared well and have thought their proposal through. The second key element is the quality of the partners and the combination of partners, including their roles.

Ideally, applicants have to reply to the questions within a limited number of characters, which should help to keep the answers focused on the essential elements and helps to limit the work for the administration. The application form used for step 1 and step 2 needs to be different: lighter in the first case, more detailed in the second. Asking the Operational Group for a summary of the project plan in the country’s language and in English is also very useful to make it easier to share this information (IT-Veneto). This is then ready-made information that can be delivered in SFC, as a first practice abstract in the EIP-AGRI common format. The overall key message from the participants was to “keep it simple”. External advice and expertise to assess the applications was also seen as very useful.

An **application form** for the OG project application (step 2) should in any case contain the basic info regarding:

- ▶ **Objective(s) of the project** – which problem will it solve / which opportunity will it tackle? Is this objective felt by farmers / foresters to be a real (urgent) need? These are key elements for judging on innovation because they determine the impact of the project. Expected results? Which focus areas does the project relate to? Etc.
- ▶ **Complementarity of partners:** who are they (type of partner (researcher, adviser, farmer, etc.)), what is their specific and complementary expertise which will help reaching the project objectives; what are their specific roles in the project? Are farmers / foresters also partners or at least thoroughly involved? Do they “co-decide” and “co-create” from the beginning, i.e. the planning of the project and further along all the project activities?
- ▶ **Coordinating partner** responsible for the managerial / financial issues: it may be helpful to split management / facilitation and the coordination of financial issues over two persons. Who will facilitate between the partners?
- ▶ **Budget** and timeline for the **activities** planned.

Question 2: What do you think a partnership agreement should cover?

Again, countries and regions are quite divergent in the level of detail they are asking regarding the partnership agreement. Some Managing Authorities provide a template, others don't, some oblige to use that template, others don't and just share it as an example. **Ideally, a draft partnership agreement forms part of the application form**, because it will help to understand the roles of the partners better and it is a good exercise when drafting a proposal to apply. Paying Agencies greatly appreciate seeing the partnership ready at the time of the application, reducing certain doubts they may have. Some Managing Authorities even use the partnership agreement as one of the criteria to assess the proposal. During the cooperation agreement preparation phase, there is a need to build a common understanding about the roles and expertise of partners with a view to increase cross-fertilisation later on. Avoid a passive role for the farmers: allocate budget and responsibilities to them.

In conclusion: a template for the partnership is useful and an interesting annex to the application form, but there is no need to make it overly complex. See examples given [[BE cooperation agreement](#) – [RO cooperation agreement](#)].

Participants agreed in broad lines on the following elements to be taken up in the partnership agreement:

- ▶ **The role of partners in the project, their functions, tasks / responsibilities in relation to the objectives of the project:** Who is going to do what and when, financial responsibilities for each task (possibly use of their own resources). In exceptional cases reference may be needed to the sharing of intellectual property (IP) rights among the group. In principle, Operational Groups produce knowledge that should stay public and be shared. Other funding formats fit the production of intellectual property (e.g. SME funding) better.
- ▶ **Financial procedure** for payments, as well as procedure on the flow of the project: how regularly to meet and inform each other.
- ▶ **What to do in case of disagreement** and if things are not going as expected. Who intermediates the consensus (e.g. if a possible modification is needed) and how?



'Incentivising Innovation – How to select the best OGs'

In the afternoon of the first day, the question how to select the best OGs was the key topic. Liviu Popescu (Counsellor at the Romanian RDP Managing Authority, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) presented the Romanian two-step selection approach [[Link presentation](#)]. In the first step, expressions of interest from the potential OGs are evaluated by an internal joint committee. The selection criteria reflect the Romanian rural development framework and policies, as well as the needs, especially in the field of quality products or technology with high added value. In step 2, the potential OGs are invited to submit a full project proposal which is then evaluated by external evaluators and the Paying Agency. The selection criteria for step 2 enclose the ones from step 1 but they add the quality of the partnership structure according to the project's objectives, as well as the composition of the group (e.g. in Romania producer groups or cooperatives are to be included).

"We would like to see **advance payments** possible for Operational Groups, in order to enable smaller farmers to join. Currently, **state aid** rules limit the type and number of innovative solutions to be developed."

- Liviu Popescu -

The second presentation illustrated the implementation of the EIP-AGRI in Flanders. Els Lapage (Director of the Extension Service at the Flemish RDP Managing Authority, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries of the Flemish Government) [[Link presentation](#)] showed the experiences gained so far with the one-step approach. Interesting is that the call combines open and pre-fixed themes in one call, which allows all innovative ideas to come in, while at the same time drawing attention to seeking solutions to some topics of political relevance. The very broad communication of the calls, as well as a series of practical information sessions that are held in the countryside and that make use of inspiring examples, have greatly improved the involvement of farmers.

"Our call **combines open and pre-fixed themes in one call**, which allows all innovative ideas to come in, while drawing attention to some topics of political relevance. We keep application forms simple and value transparency very much. Therefore we publicly **share the distribution of points for each selection criterion** with all applicants"

- Els Lapage -

Moreover, all 40.000 Flemish farmers receiving EU payments have received an announcement of the call by e-mail. In addition, since advance payments are currently not allowed under EU rules, first payments are done early, six months after the start of the project, which helps farmers to join. Flanders insists on using easy-to-understand and easy-to-use application forms, that are as light as possible within the EU rules. This has contributed to a successful implementation. The **selection criteria** are clear for everybody and published on the website. They are composed of five key elements, following the interactive innovation model, and they attribute clear and appropriate weighting to each of the main criteria. Subcriteria which give guidance on the meaning of these main criteria were added to help the various evaluators in their assessment [[Link document selection criteria](#)]:

- ▶ Composition of the Operational Group (8 points)
- ▶ Objectives of the Operational Group (8 points)
- ▶ Quality of the work plan and proposed actions (4 points)
- ▶ Method of dissemination of results (4 points)
- ▶ Complementarity with existing initiatives (4 points)

The selection process has two phases: Phase 1 is conducted by 11 sectorial experts from the Ministry's Extension Service. Once they reach consensus, the decision is taken in phase 2, by a Selection Committee with 5 experts: 2 from outside the Ministry (impartial persons, e.g. innovative farmers) + 3 from the Ministry: 1 from the Extension service, 1 from the research side and 1 from the RDP investment department. After starting their project, OGs have a set of obligations for communication, dissemination and monitoring about which they learn from the moment they fill in the **application form** [[Link application form](#)].

3rd breakout session – 'Selection Process'

The third breakout session was introduced by Inge Van Oost [[Link Presentation](#)] showing the main ingredients for selection criteria, and linking the analysed Member States documents to the different approaches [Selection criteria [UK-Wales](#) – [BE-Flanders](#)].

Question 1. What selection criteria help to choose the best proposals? How to cover farmers' / foresters' needs and get the right mix of knowledge present in the project?

Participants found that clear criteria are fundamental to give more transparency to the selection process. Applicants need to clearly understand what is requested from them and how they will be evaluated (what is the meaning of the points assigned). In Veneto (IT) an annex to the application form explains how the scores will be applied, breaking down the selection criteria in subcomponents. In this way applicants can already make an auto-evaluation of their proposal. Clarity and transparency also mean a great deal to Paying Agencies (and selection criteria are amongst the items that the European Court of Auditors looks after). Guidelines should be very clear as well as division of tasks of evaluators (e.g. step 1 versus step 2). Feedback to applicants is very useful, in particular for improving proposals for next calls. Some MA do it already (IE, FI) but in general they find that this needs to be done carefully (e.g. only orally, or only if requested).

"The quality and **complementarity of the partnership** are key criteria for selection, as well as **whether the proposal really answers to farmers' needs**. Clear criteria are fundamental and they give more **transparency** to the selection process"

- seminar participants -

The focus of the selection criteria still varies a lot according to each country / region. In addition to the main ones already listed by Flanders, some countries / regions for instance add "relevance": whether the project results will make a difference to the farmers and the world; the quality of the partnership: whether farmers really believe in the project and if it will get new expertise in; whether the results will be easy to put into practice; whether the budget is realistic and balanced; if the project will contribute to the RDP strategy; if it answers to real farmer's needs; if it will impact the market or have an effect on environmental aspects etc.

Question 2. How to secure sufficient expertise for the selection process?

Various approaches are taken, from full involvement of external and even non-agricultural experts to experts only from the Managing Authority or Paying Agency. It is quite common in most countries and regions to make use of external experts, but the level of their impact varies quite substantially depending on whether they are only consulted or whether they really take part in the final decision. Participants mentioned that it is not always easy to find impartial assessors, and that they were reflecting on exchanging experts between countries / regions. This is not always the best solution as some local knowledge could be useful. Mixing the experts in a multifunctional group is a good approach to come to a balanced outcome.

Experts should be well briefed on the interactive innovation approach and the understanding of the selection criteria. Also, experts should not necessarily be the same for each call / project. They should have the dedicated expertise for the specific issue. The expert group is by preference mixed. As types of experts were listed: regional innovation centres, advisers, researchers (note that researchers sometimes have a different understanding of "innovation", still following the linear model), national level experts (in the case of regionalised countries), sector experts (e.g. from cooperatives or organisations), innovation experts.

The right choice of criteria and subcriteria, as well as the thorough briefing on the meaning of those criteria (even using examples), should make selection unbiased and should lead to informed decisions and equitable choices.

The main results of the third breakout session were summarised in the morning of second day of the seminar, as part of Inge Van Oost's 'Tips and Tricks from Day 1' presentation [[Link Presentation](#)]. She pointed out that the EIP guidelines mention that 'innovation' cannot be used as a criterion, but that it must be translated into precise operational criteria. The weighting of criteria is an essential part of the selection process: too many criteria dilute the weight of the key criteria. The most important criteria for interactive innovation are (1) that the objectives are focusing on farmers' needs and (2) that the partnership brings in complementary types of knowledge. The selection should be based on a good mix of experts in selection committees, not only coming from science but also including innovative farmers or innovation specialists from outside the sector.



'Calling for Innovation – bottom-up or thematic OG calls?'

Similar to Day 1, Day 2 started with three OG projects presenting their experiences to keep in mind what the EIP-AGRI is about. The three presentations again covered a broad range of OG projects and provided valuable information about OG work in practice:

- ▶ DE – Sachsen, Bernhard Jansen – innovative fertilisation and weed control in organic rapeseed [[Link presentation](#)]
- ▶ ES – Catalunya, Rosa Altisent – minimising pesticide use in stone fruit [[Link presentation](#)]
- ▶ DE – Niedersachsen und Bremen, Hubert Gerhardy – a learning factory to reduce antibiotic use in pig production [[Link presentation](#)]

More information about the Operational Groups can be found in the [Operational Groups booklet 2017](#).

'Calls for OG projects – bottom-up or thematic OG calls?'

Setting the scene for the last breakout session, Inge van Oost [[Link Presentation](#)] showed the links between the analysed documents from the Member States and the topic of the fourth breakout session [[HU life cycle – IE guidance document](#) – [UK-W setting up](#)]. In addition, she gave hints on how to combine targeted calls with bottom-up ideas, and on how to provide support to applicants.

"Ireland has created a 'family of measures': one open call for projects on competitiveness, one open call dedicated to environmental issues, one thematic call specifically to find solutions to develop a new agri-environmental measure to protect the hen harrier, and another thematic call to find solutions to protect the pearl mussel. Looking ahead, it is all about the next RDP."

- Ronan O'Flaherty -

The main thematic kick-off for Day 2 was done by Ronan O'Flaherty (Head of Division Agri-Environment (Organics and Locally-Led Schemes), Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine) presenting the experiences from Ireland with a special focus on OG calls [[Link presentation](#)]. He presented a mixed approach of two calls with pre-fixed themes (Hen Harrier and Pearl Mussel) which were tendered out in a public procurement process, and two open call projects with 'general' headings, one linked to RD priorities 2 & 3, and one linked to RD priorities 4 & 5. The open calls are recruited in a 3-step application process and are fully bottom-up EIP-AGRI projects. The process starts with a call of interest, based on a simple application to encourage participation (an extra step asking to explain the big idea, a rough cost estimate, and info on who may be a participant). After review by a selection committee (composed of experts from the Ministry and external persons) the chosen ideas are invited to develop a more detailed project plan including cost estimation (step 1, preparation of plans). In this 4-month-during step, the applicants receive help in workshops to make good and detailed project plans. The selection committee reviews the plans that have been received, and it then selects the projects to be funded for full implementation (step 2). For this step 2 application, workshops are again organised to help applicants on every detail of the project (outreach, education, PR, dissemination, audit and accountability). The selection committee stays the same for all steps. It consists of policy experts, environmental experts and external experts covering innovation, enterprise, third-level and local 'perspectives'. Innovation brokers and facilitators can be financed. The main lessons learnt are: to keep it simple, using professionals, having formal structures and offering support for the applicants in all stages through workshops and annual seminars, to make use of Art 35 flexibilities.

4th breakout session – ‘Calls for OG projects’

The guiding questions in the six parallel breakout groups were:

1. How can a call with open themes and / or pre-fixed themes ensure that you cover the needs and opportunities of farmers / foresters?

Participants found the following points relevant for successful calls (either closed or open):

- ▶ The timing of the call is important, e.g. winter time is easier for farmers to take time for meetings and preparation
- ▶ A good preparation is crucial: it needs time (at least 3 months for preparing a good application) and funding (funding for step 1 helps the preparation phase)
- ▶ A lump sum approach for preparation encourages farmers
- ▶ If the call is continuously open, the open call approach fits better (no pre-fixed themes)
- ▶ Communication (message + channels) is very important: provide guidance and support
- ▶ It is important to have many information / awareness activities (workshops, meetings, etc.), and events with farmers only, to create opportunities for knowledge exchange
- ▶ Search for and involve farmers actively, and share good practices and best examples: farmers need to understand that their direct involvement is for their own benefit
- ▶ It is important to have the support of local associations (such as Chambers of Agriculture), and advisory services
- ▶ It is crucial to have services that support the building of coherent and stronger applications and that help to look for the most competent partners

Politicians like the pre-fixed theme approach but often the theme still stays quite broad, e.g. referring to RD priorities. The more innovation-oriented, the more open calls will incentivise good applications. The Irish example presented in the plenary was somehow an “eye opener” on how flexible the system of calls can be envisaged, and how OG projects can be used to serve other CAP objectives and AECM measures.

“Open calls can more easily encourage farmers and foresters to come up with new ideas. Closed calls need more thorough preparation in order to cover the needs / problems of farmers, and to get them involved.”



- seminar participants -

Without funding for step 1, farmers and foresters are not eager to start the process, as it is time-consuming and there is a high risk not to get financed after making the plan. Some Managing Authorities prefer closed calls just to limit the number of applications to handle. If the OG calls are too successful, it could be more useful to rethink the distribution of the budget within the RDP and to provide sufficient staff within the Managing Authority. RDP modifications with a view to do extra OG calls are also a way in which receiving too many good applications can be managed within the planned budget.

In case of closed calls:

- ▶ Preparation is even more critical; it needs a good involvement of farmers / foresters
- ▶ Themes need to address current problems / needs of farmers
- ▶ Build a ‘supply chain’ to feed the Managing Authorities with ideas for themes: collect ideas / themes from farmers by intermediate persons / organisations or through a survey

2. Can you share good practices to help the call capture innovative ideas and reach the right partners at the right time?

To give information, organising (many) workshops, other events and providing press information at the local level is key. The information should be there well before the call opens, in an easy-to-understand, simple language, using different channels such as farmers' journals, teleconferences (Q&A sessions), conferences, websites, NRN activities, etc. An idea is to send info by e-mail to all the farmers that receive direct payments.

"The main challenge is **to inform farmers at an early stage**, they need to understand that their direct involvement is for their own benefit. **Start with communication at least a year before the call and use as many channels as possible** ."

- seminar participants -

It would be important that **all** farmers can be funded and that they all really know what is eligible. It is important to take care that the innovative farmers' communities are the main target of the information, not the so-called "usual suspects" (research and advisory bodies). Still too many ideas come from non-farmers. The call needs to be activated and prepared with all possible means in order to involve farmers.

Smart thinking – Is there room for simplification of procedures or forms?

This last part of the seminar dealt with the question of simplification and beyond in the current funding period. Inge Van Oost opened the session by pointing out the already presented examples from the Member States (ES Catalunya: a good ecosystem to promote good OG projects; RO, IE, BE Flanders: application form including SFC info on the OG, and as light as possible) as well as showing the relevant articles in EU regulations for simplified costs (unit costs, lump sum and flat rate) including calculation framework conditions [[Link Presentation](#)].

"**Simplified cost options have the potential to ease the administration for the applicant as well as for the administration and the Paying Agency**. The simplified cost needs to be set at a **realistic level**, otherwise other solutions will be used and simplification will not be attained. "

- Lena Lind -

After this introduction, Lena Lind (Deputy Director at the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation) showed the application of simplified cost options in the EIP-AGRI in Sweden, beginning with unit costs for several cost types (food, annual work time, reimbursing own labour, allowance and use of cars). She explained the application of flat rates and lump sums using the example of forming an innovation group (step 1 funding). Recently it was also explored that during the preparation phase (step 1), a group may discover, while looking up information, that a solution already exists, and that the project is not needed. In this case, step 1 will end sooner and less funding is needed. [[Link Presentation](#)].

Interactive Session – ‘Simplification’

The aim of the interactive session was to look for good examples and SMART solutions regarding financial issues and beyond. Introduced by Sebastian Elbe (EIP-AGRI Service Point), the participants were asked to build ad hoc groups at each table. They were asked to discuss at least the following three areas and to document the main points on cards:

- ▶ Simplified cost options
- ▶ All kind of SMART solutions you apply in your country
- ▶ What you have learnt from this seminar

The collection of ideas for simplification took into account the steps in the lifetime of an Operational Group project. The main comments showed insufficient knowledge and understanding of the simplified cost options at Member State / regional level. It was not yet well understood that it is only the method, not the calculation itself that needs to be put in the RDP. Participants were happy with the Swedish examples shown, and they asked additional questions and more info and training on the subject. They found lump sum a particularly good approach for step 1. The participants also wondered if benchmarking between regions, and statistical analysis could support them in setting e.g. lump sum amounts or unit costs also in step 2.

Participants asked about ways to be able to use open calls, even when the budgets for the EIP-AGRI were programmed per focus area. Furthermore, even if this is currently not enabled in the RD regulation, they asked for the possibility to apply advance payments, as a sort of starter kit, similar to what is possible for Horizon 2020 projects and Leader. Advance payments are estimated particularly important to motivate smaller partners who have little or no budget for R&D, such as farmers and advisers.

In general there was a clear call for more simplification, and the will to apply the good approaches that were presented during the seminar and in the documents used in the breakout sessions. Using a good and simple template for the project application, plan and partnership agreement for instance, can help secure good projects and partnerships later on, while reducing discussions about payments and requests for project modifications. Adequate and timely information of applicants can help avoid a lot of audit problems, and reduces efforts from the administration with unclear project applications. Simplified cost options provide further possibilities for reducing the administrative burden.



Preparing to say goodbye for now

Participants reflecting on the event forms an integral part of all seminars. Tine Defour (EIP-AGRI Service Point) guided the participants through this exercise, asking a number of evaluation questions. The answers showed that 95% of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the organisation of the seminar, 99% found the presentations from OGs and of Member States useful or very useful, 94% felt they had enough opportunities to interact and 95% of the participants replied that they were taking home interesting elements.

Alberto D'Avino (DG Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission) closed the seminar, thanking all speakers and enthusiastic participants for their very active contributions and exchange, as well as the hosts and organisers for the great efforts to make the event a success. He also urged participants to quickly communicate on their OGs in SFC to speed up exchanges between Member States and regions. He expressed his hope that participants would go home with lots of inspiration and new friends to continue the exchanges later on, heading up to an "agriculture of knowledge" and many "ideas put into practice with success".

As European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development agriculture Phil Hogan once said: "The future agriculture will be an **agriculture of knowledge**. Not only research, but also advisory services, demonstration **farms, farmers' organisations and networks are at the heart of these changes**. But we need to make sure we **get it right**."

More information?



[You can download the presentations, and other documents on the event webpage on the EIP-AGRI website.](#)



Annex – Analysed documents from the Member States

Overview: background documents used in the breakout (BO) groups

	Documents	BO2	BO3	BO4
1	<u>HU life cycle</u>	x		x
2	<u>IE application form step 1</u> (project ideas to be developed)	x		
3	<u>IE guidance document for application</u>	x	x	x
4	<u>BE application form step 2</u> (project funding)	x		
5	<u>RO application form</u> (“expression of interest”)	x		
6	<u>RO cooperation agreement (“partnership agreement”)</u>	x		
7	<u>BE cooperation agreement – basic elements</u>	x		
8	<u>UK-W doc – for the setting up: innovation hub procedure (=pages 2+3)</u>	x		x
9	<u>BE selection criteria + eligibility conditions</u>		x	
8	<u>UK-W doc – for the selection criteria (= page 4)</u>		x	

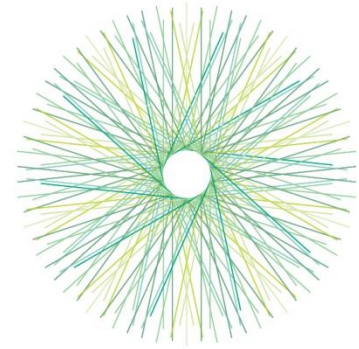
Interesting practices in the documents used in the breakout (BO) groups

(Main documents for each breakout session are indicated with **x**)

[This document is also available online.](#)

	Documents	B02	B03	B04	Interesting practice
1	HU life cycle	x			Gives an overview of all kind of activities to support setting up and project implementation (drafting project proposal, support with filling in application form and making cooperation agreement, etc.)
1				x	Support all along the project lifecycle, listing interesting actions in each step of the lifecycle
2	IE application form step 1 (project ideas to be developed)	x			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Asking who is lead applicant ▶ Asking which expertise each partner brings in ▶ Asking details of other funding to avoid double funding ▶ Asking in summary outline of proposal: which challenge is addressed, what are the objectives of the project, what is the proposed approach? ▶ Asking what are the benefits of the project envisaged ▶ Asking confirmation about the future cooperation for administration and inspection purposes ▶ No detailed funding requirements asked yet, only indicative, which is sufficient in step 1
3	IE guidance document for application	x			▶ Explains the details on how to fill in the application form for step 1 (document 2, see above)
3			x		▶ Info for applicants on the selection criteria + also including the weight of each selection criterion
3				x	▶ Info for applicants explaining the lifecycle of the application , from collecting ideas to step 1 and step 2
4	BE application form step 2 (project funding)	x			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Simple application form with all the basics: objectives of OG, workplan and activities as detailed as possible, etc. ▶ Asking for practice abstract in the application form for the project funding (step 2) => then the abstract is immediately ready for publication on own Ministry's website + for SFC once the projects are selected. Good communication: as from the start of the OG, all stakeholders are informed on what the OG will do. ▶ Asking what is the contribution and the added value of each partner in the Operational Group (= check: is there complementarity of knowledge?) ▶ All bottom-up subjects can come in + indication to which objectives of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) for productivity and sustainability in agriculture this OG contributes (reference to Art 55) ▶ Explicitly asking what the complementarity is with existing initiatives (avoiding repetition of similar activities done by other institutions or funding sources) ▶ Explicitly asking to illustrate if the OG did its "homework" when preparing the project (= did they check existing info on the subject which the OG is tackling): the application must mention the knowledge on the project's subject which is already available in experimental stations or other research institutes ▶ A lot of attention for the various ways to spread results, communication + dissemination of results + including short and long term (e.g. using existing dissemination channels for the long-term preservation of the knowledge generated) ▶ Interesting and detailed list of obligations at the end under "Monitoring provisions and commitments", helps to have lengthy discussions during the grant agreement phase and later on, including enabling extra dissemination by the Ministry itself

5	RO application form ("expression of interest")	x			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ All info ready for EIP common format + practice abstract ▶ Also in English, so enabling communication with projects / partners speaking other languages ▶ Asking details on role of partners (complementarity of partners' knowledge) ▶ Asking for "categories" (keywords) for the EIP-AGRI website ▶ Asking what problems / opportunities the project addresses for end users ▶ Explicitly asking replies regarding the selection criteria ▶ Asking about main activities (including investments), and who will become owner of assets if any ▶ Dissemination details asked ▶ Confirmation that the project is new ▶ Confirmation that the project is not research ▶ Confirmation respect the regulations + provide necessary document upon request ▶ Confirmation availability for monitoring and dissemination purposes
6	RO cooperation agreement ("partnership agreement")	x			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Clear cooperation agreement, without need for legal entity ▶ Regular consulting and reporting between partners (although without explicit detail) ▶ Conflicts must be solved among themselves otherwise funding may be stopped ▶ Procedure foreseen in case of need for replacement of a partner ▶ Asking confirmation to comply with deadlines and fulfil objectives ▶ Details on financial issues, roles and responsibilities ▶ Clear rule on how quickly to transfer payment from the lead partner to the other partners ▶ Clear obligation to disseminate
7	BE cooperation agreement – basic elements	x			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Simple because it refers to the project application (timing for each task of the partner) already set in the project application, avoids repetition ▶ Partners must commit to following "good partnership", which includes following guidelines of the programme, confirming they understand their role and agree with the budgets attributed, includes reporting, informing each other, and solving problems amongst each other ▶ Also commit to all the monitoring provisions and commitments <u>already</u> included in the project application (no repetition)
8	UK-W doc – for the setting up : innovation hub procedure (=pages 2+3)	x		x	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Nice flow for emerging ideas through an Innovation Hub which is bringing together advisory services + research ▶ Idea from farmer is accompanied. If the idea is fine for an OG, there is further support to find partners and more information. If easy to solve then info and advice are given. If too difficult, real research may be needed, so this procedure is at the same time capturing needs from practice for research. ▶ Support to draft the application
9	BE selection criteria + eligibility conditions		x		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Very nice and complete set of selection criteria, attention for results useful for farmers / foresters + complementarity of partners' knowledge + dissemination. These key criteria are given enough weight (accounting for 16 points of 28 = 57%)
8	UK-W doc – for the selection criteria (= page 4)		x		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Very nice and complete set of selection criteria, with attention for results useful for farmers / foresters + complementarity of partners' knowledge + dissemination (together those should normally account for at least 50% weight but here that info is missing – compare with IE guidance doc 3 where the weighting is 60%)



eip-agri
AGRICULTURE & INNOVATION

The European Innovation Partnership 'Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability' (EIP-AGRI) is one of five EIPs launched by the European Commission in a bid to promote rapid modernisation by stepping up innovation efforts.

The **EIP-AGRI** aims to catalyse the innovation process in the **agricultural and forestry sectors** by bringing **research and practice closer together** – in research and innovation projects as well as *through* the EIP-AGRI network.

EIPs aim to streamline, simplify and better coordinate existing instruments and initiatives and complement them with actions where necessary. Two specific funding sources are particularly important for the EIP-AGRI:

- ✓ the EU Research and Innovation framework, Horizon 2020,
- ✓ the EU Rural Development Policy.



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Join the EIP-AGRI Network & Register via www.eip-agri.eu

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