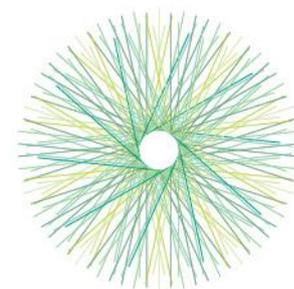


Workshop on “Establishing Operational Groups” - Paris

EIP-AGRI SERVICE POINT (22 MAY, 2014)



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AGRICULTURE & INNOVATION

ARTICLE

The fifth and final workshop organised by DG AGRI on the practical aspects of establishing Operational Groups under national and regional Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) was held in Paris on 22 May, 2014.

The workshop was kindly hosted by the French Ministry of Agriculture, Agrifood and Forestry (MAAF) and was attended by 84 participants from France, Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Luxemburg and Romania. All participants were representatives of active stakeholder organisations and were invited as potential “EIP multipliers” that could take home, disseminate and apply the knowledge, experience and ideas shared in the workshop.

Following an introductory presentation [with basic information on the EIP and operational groups](#) by Inge Van Oost of [DG Agriculture and Rural Development](#), Valérie Baduel and François Moreau gave an [overview of experience in France](#) to-date with the ‘RMT system’ (Mixed Technology Networks) and [proposals for implementation of the EIP-AGRI](#) across the 27 regional RDPs being finalised for 2014-2020. *“We have experimented with multi-actor networks or so-called Mixed Technology Networks for fostering innovation and addressing the fragmentation of research, education and agricultural development since 2006”,* explained Ms Baduel, *“This experience is very relevant to the establishment of Operational Groups and will be built upon to ensure the European dimension and the greater participation of farmers in the EIP-AGRI”.*

Four case studies then followed – two concrete examples of successful existing innovation support services and two interactive innovation projects of relevance to future Operational Groups.

Support for agricultural innovation is well-established in Flanders, Belgium, and Ilse Geyskens from the [Innovatiesteunpunt](#) (Innovation Support Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development) gave an overview of the experience gained from 15 years of fostering participatory approaches and multi-actor projects from the bottom-up. *“We are innovation brokers and our mission is two-fold: to inform and inspire farmers about new opportunities and to support the development and implementation of concrete projects”,* explained Ms Geyskens, *“Our team consists of 15 innovation consultants and most of our activities are project based. We permanently work on more than 30 European or nationally-funded innovation projects”.*

The Innovatiesteunpunt has a well-developed process in place for fostering innovation. This includes coaching farmers with the development of grassroots ideas and early innovation projects; providing answers to individual questions; supporting the implementation of partnerships, and; organizing study events and training sessions on social, strategic and technical innovation.

“Farmers must to be triggered and activated to try out their innovative ideas and specific efforts are needed to catch these ideas from the bottom-up. In 2014 we again have launched an Innovation Prize to stimulate farmers to think out-of-the-box”, continued Ms Geyskens. “It is important to understand that new ideas don’t always fit into a pre-determined theme. Also of course that innovation is not always a success story!”

Another European region with well-established support for the development and implementation of interactive innovation projects in the agricultural and rural sector is **Campania** in southern Italy. According to the presentation from Ines di Paolo from the National Institute of Agricultural Economics, the Campania region offers innovation support through the regional Agricultural Extension Services which consists of a central coordination centre, 5 provincial offices, 28 operational local centres and a regional experimental farm.

As Ms di Paolo explained, *“The Campania Agricultural Extension Services have been involved in promoting and/or implementing co-operation projects and other activities by public-private partnerships since the 1980s. They have a lot of experience in creating networks between different actors and are both committed to, and passionate about, the effectiveness of interactive projects for fostering innovation by farmers and other rural stakeholders”.*

According to the specific needs of farmers and other rural businesses, the advisers in Campania work with a number of different models for building efficient partnerships and effective projects. *“This flexibility combined with the personal motivation, passion and interest of the advisers, farmers and project partners are key success factors for rural innovation in Campania”, concluded Ms di Paolo, “However, despite the positive results achieved, there are still some bottlenecks. What is needed now is more detailed assessment of the sustainability and economic results of public support for innovation in the region”.*

After discussion of the principles and practice of innovation support in Flanders and Campania, came two presentations relevant to the setting-up and running of Operational Groups to address environmental issues – a high priority for actions under the EIP-AGRI.

Fundatia ADEPT is an environmental NGO that has been working for 10 years in the Tarnava Mare region of Southern Transylvania, Romania, to protect the unique farmed landscapes of the region, their biodiversity, and the farming communities who live within them. As Razvan Popa explained, *“This is a unique area of high biodiversity value with some 85,000 ha farmed by 5,000 families in 24 small-scale farming communities. The extensive mixed farming carried out in this region for over 800 years has created one of Europe’s finest remaining lowland high nature value (HNV) farmed landscapes. Innovative approaches are needed if these landscapes and communities are to survive in the 21st century”.*

Mr Popa presented one example of this approach in action – an **EU LIFE+ funded project** implemented from 2010-2013 with a comprehensive partnership of local farmers, researchers, NGOs, private sector companies and governmental institutions that worked together to develop an innovative database and 3D mapping system to predict the presence of important grassland habitats;

a novel walk-behind mechanical mower capable of cutting hay and clearing scrub on sloping terrain, and; several new agri-environment measures for the Târnava Mare area which were then also implemented at national level.

“Our imaginative approach is the most important innovation of all”, concluded Mr Popa, “We engage with local farmers from the bottom-up to solve the environmental, social and economic problems of these valuable pastoral ecosystems. The fact that we listen and respond immediately to farmers’ problems helps us build a relationship of trust. To do this we have to be active on the ground, communicating through our farm advisory team using the farmers’ language”.

The final presentation of the day dealt with a different environmental challenge in a different context: climate change and forests. Olivier Picard from the National Centre for Forest Ownership in France explained that due to climate change there is now a rapid change towards less favourable conditions for the growth of trees. *“Knowledge, preservation of the forest soils, and adapting the choice and the diversity of tree species are the main practical keys for increasing the resilience of our forest systems”, he said, “Several bottom-up local regional and initiatives have already been launched by forest owners and managers in their effort to make concrete forest management choices today that will be relevant in an increasingly uncertain future”.*

One such initiative is **‘Ecogeodyn’**. This was set-up as a partnership of forest owners, managers, cooperatives and technical experts in Lower Normandy with the objective of developing a model for the predictive mapping of climate change and tree-species vulnerability in the region which will then be used for developing a technical field guide and training sessions for local foresters.

“Despite the high costs and limited accuracy of available data, the partnership and joint processes between the scientists, extension and technical services, and forest owners and managers has produced some robust tools which have real practical value on the ground”, explained Mr Picard, “The financial and technical engagement of the forest owners has demonstrated their commitment to such a process. National and / or European funding could now help develop other tools”.

After all presentations were completed, time was given to country-specific discussions that allowed participants to dig more deeply into the grass-roots issues observed and / or experienced with setting-up Operational Groups in their own national or regional context.

According to Inge van Oost from the European Commission, *“This final workshop provided further concrete examples of innovation support services and interactive innovation projects that will complement the diversity of examples collected from other Member States during previous workshops. It’s important, for example, that we explore the relevance of the EIP-AGRI to pressing issues such as biodiversity conservation on HNV farmland and the adaptation of forest management to climate change. We are confident that participants left the workshop in Paris with enthusiasm and a clearer understanding of the potential opportunities provided by the EIP-AGRI”.*

All presentations and other information from the Paris workshop are available [here](#).