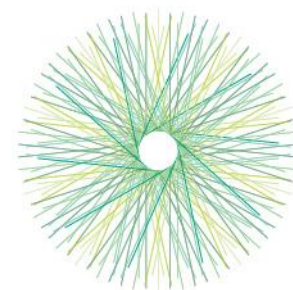


Workshop on “Establishing Operational Groups” - Prague

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The fourth workshop organised by DG AGRI on the practical aspects of establishing Operational Groups under national and regional Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) was held in Prague on 7 May, 2014.

The workshop was kindly hosted by the Managing Authority for Rural Development of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic and was attended by 83 participants from the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. 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](#), Mr Josef Tabery, Director of the [Managing Authority for Rural Development](#), gave an overview of plans to implement the EIP-AGRI in the Czech Republic. *“The Czech agri-food sector suffers from low competitiveness”, explained Mr Tabery, “but we had some positive experiences with support for the development of new products, processes and technologies in the 2007-2013 programme and we now have high expectations for the EIP-AGRI in 2014-2020”.* One important aspect of increased support for innovation in the Czech RDP will be the strengthened role of the National Rural Network, including a significant expansion of the network to include universities and research institutes and the establishment of a permanent Thematic Working Group for Innovation to bring relevant stakeholders together.

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

Kate Pressland kicked-off with a presentation of the [Duchy Originals Future Farming Programme](#) – an inspiring farmer-led research programme in the UK that aims to identify and develop innovative techniques and best practice for improving productivity, quality and environmental performance in organic and low-input agriculture. As Ms Pressland explained, *“At the heart of our programme are ‘field labs’. These are practical events where farmers and growers devise real world, on-farm experiments to test new approaches, share existing best practice and sharpen their problem-solving skills”.*

The programme is funded by the Prince of Wales’s Charitable Foundation and is delivered by the Soil Association, a not-for-profit organisation campaigning for sustainable food, farming and land use, in

partnership with the Waitrose supermarket chain and the Organic Research Centre (ORC). A total of 22 topics have been covered by field labs since 2012 with over 450 farmers actively engaged. In 2013, a dedicated research fund was also launched with calls for project proposals according to priority themes agreed in consultation with farmers and growers. This fund has so far awarded grants worth around EUR 130,000 to 7 practical, farmer-led research projects.

“Farmers are innovators by tradition”, concluded Ms Pressland, “We want to showcase a practical approach to R&D that inspires larger research funders to engage more directly with farmers in joint learning processes. Regarding the EIP-AGRI we recommend a large number of small Operational Groups supported by active Innovation Support Service providers”.

Herman Schoorlemmer from the Applied Plant Research of Wageningen University continued the theme of joint learning processes and co-innovation by farmers and researchers with his presentation on the [KANON Knowledge Centre](#) – an informal organisation which is located on an experimental farm in the north-east of the Netherlands.

“The KANON centre provides a comprehensive innovation support service for local farmers”, explained Mr Schoorlemmer, “Currently there are 61 project groups working on new strategies for crop protection, yield optimization, precision farming, storage etc. All participating farmers, researchers and advisers have a shared sense of urgency to innovate. The role of KANON is to help guide the innovation process with a clear agenda and roadmap, we aim to put together the right combinations of knowledge and service providers with farmers and then facilitate the right discussion at the right time”.

In contrast to the intensive agricultural landscapes of the Netherlands, the Burren is an area of limestone karst on the Atlantic coast of Ireland which has been shaped by a unique combination of natural forces and 6,000 years of agriculture to create a place of great beauty and one of Ireland’s most important regions for flora and fauna. According to Tom Kelly, Director of Knowledge Transfer at the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority (Teagasc), *“The biodiversity value of the Burren depends upon the maintenance of extensive farming practices, but in recent years these farming practices have changed for a number of reasons. The BurrenLIFE project was therefore initiated in 2004 with the objective of developing a new model for sustainable agriculture in the region”.*

The first phase of the [BurrenLIFE project](#) (2005-2009) was financed by the EU LIFE-Nature programme and built a strong partnership between 20 local farmers, researchers and nature conservation organisations. The partnership had a structure and function similar to that proposed for EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and developed numerous simple nature conservation measures based upon traditional farm management practices that are beneficial to both the habitats and farmers. All of the locally-developed conservation measures were tried and tested by the 20 pilot farmers and then disseminated more widely via a series of best practice guides on grazing, feeding, scrub control and farming for conservation. Some practices have also been incorporated into a revision of the agri-environment scheme operating in the region.

“Innovation is proving to be critical for the long-term conservation of the rich heritage of the Burren’s landscape”, concluded Mr Kelly, “The BurrenLIFE project recognised the knowledge and expertise of local farmers and connected them with researchers to help develop and promote targeted actions for nature conservation. This proactive approach is now delivering real benefits for farmers and nature, and is helping to put the pride back into farming this unique area”.

The final example of a successful interactive innovation project was provided by Tomáš Ratinger from the Technology Centre ASCR in Prague. He introduced the experiences of the [Jesinek Agricultural Cooperative](#) in the Czech Republic. The Cooperative produces a sheep milk cheese and recently wanted to increase its production to take advantage of growing demand for this specific type of cheese, especially from restaurants. However, in order to supply the restaurants they needed to improve the quality of the cheese – the problem was, they did not know how!

The cheese-makers approached their nearby Research Institute for Cattle Breeding, but were initially disappointed since the language of the researchers was different and seemed far from their practical needs. As Mr Ratinger says, *“A major bottleneck was that farmers are used to buying technology, but not to buying knowledge or advice. No-one anticipated the problems of finding a common language for the farmers to express what they thought they wanted to solve, and for the researchers to identify what actually should be solved. However, they persisted. Trust was built and the communication improved”.* Consequently, with funding from Measure 124 (Cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies) the final collaboration was very successful and a much improved and re-branded product was launched on the market.

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, *“The concrete examples of innovation support services and interactive innovation projects presented were diverse and provoked much discussion. There is clearly a lot of existing experience which is very relevant and we are confident that people left the workshop with enthusiasm and a clearer understanding of the potential opportunities provided by the EIP-AGRI”.*

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