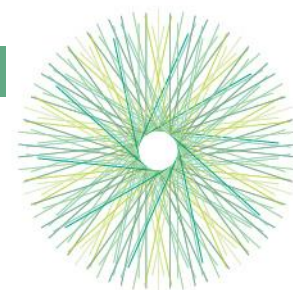


Workshop 'Establishing Operational Groups' – Tallinn, Estonia

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There is a strong tradition of both innovation and co-operation in the Nordic-Baltic States and this was reflected in the regional 'flavour' of the third DG Agriculture and Rural Development workshop on "Establishing Operational Groups under Rural Development Programmes (RDPs)" which was held in Tallinn, Estonia, on 2-3 April, 2014.

Following an opening presentation by [DG Agriculture and Rural Development](#), the workshop was introduced to the strategic approach of the [Estonian Ministry of Agriculture](#) to implementation of the European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI). As Toomas Kevvai, Deputy Secretary General for Food Safety, Research and Development, explained, *"We see the EIP-AGRI as part of the bigger picture of research and knowledge transfer in Estonia alongside a number of other instruments that we already have in place, including the National Programme for Applied Research and Development in Agriculture"*.

Animation of the EIP-AGRI in Estonia started in 2012, and after discussions in working groups and seminars, a clear vision emerged of a two-tier system whereby Operational Groups are established as long-term strategic partnerships that have an Action Plan which guides the prioritization and selection of shorter-term projects in response to the identified needs of stakeholders. These projects are then implemented by so-called Action Groups consisting of relevant members of the Operational Group.

"The main challenge is how to build the EIP-AGRI from the top-down whilst ensuring that real bottom-up initiatives still remain", continued Mr Kevvai, *"We see the Action Groups as responding to the specific needs of farmers and others from the bottom-up, whilst the Operational Groups have a more top-down strategic view. Very importantly, the longer-life and continuity of the Operational Groups will also ensure they can be effective partners at EU level in the EIP-AGRI network sharing relevant information with groups in other Member States"*. This very interesting perspective inspired many participants and was referred to several times in subsequent discussions.

Five contrasting case studies then followed beginning with three interactive innovation projects of relevance to future Operational Groups. Asta Sarkki from the [Forest Owners' Union of Southern Finland](#) presented the METKA project aimed at increasing the cost efficiency of the forest energy chain and the volume of the supply chain in Häme region in the south of Finland. From Estonia, Ene Tammsaar explained how the [Bio-Competence Centre of Healthy Dairy Products](#) has linked Universities and businesses to apply biotechnology to the needs of the agri-food sector, whilst Mati Koppel described how the [Estonian Crop Research Institute](#) has worked with farmers to develop the use of automatic weather stations and decision support systems for optimization of disease control in potatoes. All three projects had a strong focus upon partnership, enhanced productivity and the

broader social benefits of innovation and co-operation. As Mati Koppel explained, *“The scientific content of our work is difficult to explain, but the outcomes are easy to understand. With the help of the scientists it is possible for farmers to reduce the amount of chemicals they use and this is good for the environment and health of consumers”*.

The remaining case studies highlighted a number of other relevant practical experiences and lessons learnt from the Nordic-Baltic region. [Vreta Kluster](#) is a recently established ‘competence and development centre for food and agri-tech industries’ in southern Sweden and was presented to the workshop as an example of the type of innovation support service that might animate future Operational Groups. *“Networking is the key – let people meet, talk and discuss”*, concluded Elisabet Ström, *“One lesson we quickly learnt is do not waste too much time planning and building systems and big organisations - just start and build the plane as you fly!”*

Coming with a broad regional perspective on agricultural sustainability and the need to reduce nutrient losses into the Baltic Sea, Markku Järvenpää introduced [Baltic Manure](#) - a cross-border multi-stakeholder project involving 18 partners from the 8 EU Member States implementing the EU Baltic Sea Regional Strategy. *“Cross-border innovation projects are more complex than national projects, but then so are the problems we aim to address”*, explained Mr Järvenpää. *“There are many obstacles to successful project implementation, but also huge opportunities for co-operation at many levels, including with other cross-border projects in the same region”*.

Following the case study presentations, a combination of country-specific and thematic discussions allowed participants to work together to dig more deeply into the practicalities of setting-up Operational Groups according to their own specific context and / or interests.

According to Iman Boot from the European Commission, *“We took a slightly different approach with the organisation of this workshop to suit the needs and characteristics of the participants. The results were excellent and we are confident that people left the workshop with enthusiasm and a clearer understanding of the potential opportunities provided by the EIP-AGRI. The thematic discussions were inevitably diverse ranging from ‘Potato Cultivation’ to the ‘EIP-AGRI and Community-led Local Development’ and clearly indicated that the EIP-AGRI is inspiring many ideas and proposals for concrete practical actions”*.

The workshop was kindly hosted by the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture and the Estonian Rural Network. All presentations and other information from the Tallinn workshop are available [here](#).