

Nurturing Skills for a Thriving and Sustainable Agricultural Sector

Thematic Group - 1st Meeting

The first Thematic Group (TG) meeting allowed members to get to know each other and to reach a common understanding about skill needs and gaps in the agricultural sector. With ample time devoted to group and panel discussions, members could exchange experiences and co-design the next steps of the TG.

Setting the scene

Thematic Group (TG) members were welcomed to their first meeting by the CAP Implementation Contact Point (CAPI CP) team. In the [opening presentation](#), Alessia Musumarra (CAPI CP) noted the TG's primary objectives and stressed that, with 41 members from 18 countries and EU stakeholders' representatives, the TG composition is bound to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and well-balanced outcomes.

An ice-breaking activity revealed that TG members consider crop and soil management, administration and finances, water management, and marketing & communication as the most useful skills for agricultural professionals. This provided a helpful starting point for further discussion during the day.



Agricultural economist Andrew Moxey (CAPI CP) set the scene with a [presentation](#) based on the [background paper](#) prepared ahead of the meeting. He emphasised the evolving demands for agricultural professionals, notably adaptability and key skills such as planning, communication and lifelong learning, alongside technical abilities. He noted that, with its 17 million workers, the EU's agricultural sector faces challenges like labour shortages and skill gaps, which affect farm productivity. Family farms may be particularly hindered by ingrained habits. EU strategies and policies, including the European Green Deal and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), aim – and can help – to boost skills and competitiveness in agriculture.



A lively discussion followed Andrew's presentation, allowing participants to share their insights.

There was general agreement on the importance of diversified skills in agriculture, addressing various aspects of the sector, farmers' tasks and challenges along the food supply chain. Additionally, participants noted the diversity among Member States concerning skills providers and support measures. Participants emphasised the role of agricultural education, advisory services, farm-to-farm and cross-border exchanges, practical experience combined with expert advice. They also expressed a need for support for smaller and organic farmers and for long-term training planning. These inputs were then taken on board during the interactive sessions.

Event Information

Date: 09 October 2023

Location: Virtual meeting

Organisers: CAP Implementation Contact Point (CAPI CP)

Participants: 54 participants from 18 EU Member States, including farmers and farmers' organisations, MAs, NNs, European organisations, the European Commission, national/regional stakeholder organisations and researchers.

Outcomes: Exchange of experiences and insights on skill needs in agriculture and tools for skill acquisition; outline of future activities of the Thematic Group.

Web page: [1st TG meeting on Nurturing Skills for a Thriving and Sustainable Agricultural Sector](#)

Interactive session



Participants were divided into three groups to discuss skill needs – and tools for skills acquisition – in relation to the [following topics](#): farm development and diversification, sustainable farming practices, and digital and technological literacy. The group discussions used the 'world café' methodology, with groups rotating from one topic to the next in three phases, building on each other's inputs.



In relation to **farm development and diversification**, participants stressed the need for key skills to enhance farming and income diversification, considering factors such as climate change, the bioeconomy, artificial intelligence and the role of farmers in the supply chain. A variety of skillsets were identified as crucial, among them time management skills as well as openness to self-development. Agricultural professionals can acquire these skills in various ways, including via digital tools and 'skills tailored roadmaps' that identify what skills are needed. Collaboration, informal advisory services where groups of farmers could assist each other, and European programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe can support diversification and align with macro-initiatives like the AKIS framework, EIP, and the EU Farm Book for enhanced growth.



The discussion on **sustainable farming practices** highlighted that essential skills for sustainable farming include crop and water management, digital proficiency, marketing and financial skills. The 'whole farm' approach, systemic thinking and practice evaluation were also noted as crucial. Participants stressed the importance of farmers' well-being, resilience and their role within the community. Effective methods to equip farmers with



skills for sustainable practices refer to four key areas: (i) networking and knowledge exchange (also fostering collaboration across generations and countries); (ii) mechanisms like Operational Groups as well as informal events (for learning and networking); (iii) sharing of examples (such as lighthouse and demo farms) for knowledge exchange; and (iv) reliable advice and online mentoring, along with accessible training for farmers, farm employees and family members. These methods can support sustainable practices, ensure profitability and maintain farm viability.



Considering **digital and technological literacy**, participants highlighted the importance of basic digital literacy, especially considering farmers' age diversity. They stressed the need to promote the benefits of technology and shared examples of emerging technologies. The discussion identified ways for agricultural professionals to stay up to date with emerging technologies: case studies and best practices made accessible on a single platform, peer-to-peer learning, cooperation, networking and Producer Organisations were highlighted. Trainers and suppliers play a key role and they must be flexible and well prepared. Important overarching aspects include bridging the gap between artificial intelligence and on-farm machines along with the use of social media for information dissemination and communication with and between farmers.

Panel discussion



A panel of experts selected from the TG members discussed lifelong learning perspectives to support skills development of the agri-food workforce.

- Iacopo Benedetti, EU agri-food training expert at OnProject, highlighted the potential of continuous learning culture and peer networking, stressing that support programmes like Erasmus can promote ongoing personal development.
- Diana Lenzi, farmer and agri-business expert, emphasised the economic benefits of investing in learning and the importance of promoting managerial and economic mindsets. She also noted that digital skills are crucial for a more inclusive sector.
- Ivan Ivanov, representing EU agri-food trade unions at EFFAT, stressed the need for inclusive measures to address skills gaps, equal access to training and validating on-the-job learning especially for farm workers.
- Carmel Finlay, from Ireland's agri-food advisory services Teagasc, highlighted client-oriented curriculum development, adapting to emerging priorities and using training incentives to motivate engagement.

In conclusion, the panel discussion underscored the vital role of motivation in shaping the future of agri-food workforce skills development and emphasised the importance of continuous learning, economic incentives, inclusivity and adaptability to evolving demands from society and the markets.

The panel prompted a fruitful discussion with the participants, who highlighted the importance of advisors and trainers demonstrating on-field knowledge and a solid professional background, as well as the need for training in farm safety and resilience. The conversation also explored the integration of primary production and agroindustry in training, aiming to foster a comprehensive understanding within the value chain. Additionally, participants discussed the development of a European Agricultural Competence Framework. Further points of concern were the challenge of motivating young people to engage in farming and the need for enhanced rural-urban connections.

Closing remarks and next steps



Closing remarks by Fabio Cossu (DG AGRI) highlighted the complexity and diversity of the agricultural sector and underlined the importance of a comprehensive approach to skills development to ensure farming's sustainability while also meeting societal demands. The meeting highlighted the importance of addressing the diverse landscape of farmers and farms, moving beyond a standardised perception, and the systemic nature of farming and skills acquisition. Collaboration, motivation, education, and trust in advisors and trainers were also recognised as pivotal. The CAP was acknowledged as a flexible framework for upskilling and reskilling farmers, with the effective utilisation of funds and integration of measures being equally crucial objectives.

The TG will continue with informal discussions among members, based on the outcomes of the first TG meeting, as well as wider networking and communication activities facilitated by the CAPI CP. All these elements combined will form the basis for the second and final TG meeting, scheduled for 16 January 2024.

