



Third Meeting of the Subgroup on Innovation and Knowledge Exchange (SolKE)

30 May 2023

Welcome and Introduction

Hugo Almeida, Deputy Head of Unit D1 'Rural areas and Networks', European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), welcomed SolKE members and presented the governance structure of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Network. He explained that SolKE is one of three permanent Subgroups working under the European CAP Network's Assembly. Hugo presented the legal basis for the SolKE, its composition (27 Managing Authorities, 27 National CAP Networks, 27 advisory or research organisations and 15 NGOs) and tasks, highlighting that the work of this subgroup is supported by the Support Facility for Innovation and Knowledge exchange including EIP-AGRI (EIP-AGRI SF). He also reminded the audience that SolKE replaced the Subgroup on Innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability (Sol) with the launch of the EU CAP Network in October 2022.

Following the applications from Member States and the selection proposed by DG AGRI, SolKE members confirmed that their delegates to the EU CAP Network Steering Group will be: the Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture (national CAP Network), the Italian Council for Agricultural Research and Economics (research body), the Cypriot Department of Agriculture (advisory service) and Euromontana (NGO).



Pacôme Elouna Eyenga, Team Leader of the EIP-AGRI Support Facility, introduced the EIP-AGRI SF as the successor of the EIP-AGRI Service Point and one of the four support facilities of the EU CAP Network. EIP-AGRI SF acts as a facilitator for enhancing communication and collaboration between actors with a keen interest in sharing knowledge and innovating in agriculture, forestry and rural areas. With this purpose, the EIP-AGRI SF organises various types of networking activities such as focus groups, workshops and seminars. EIP-AGRI SF also delivers analytical work, including project portfolio analysis. The former EIP-AGRI social media channels and website are no longer active. However, communication content related to innovation and knowledge exchange is now shared through the new EU CAP Network social media channels and website.

Session I: How is the EU CAP Network linking the CAP and the Horizon Programme?

Hugo Almeida explained that the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) was launched in 2012 by the European Commission in order to stimulate innovation, improve the exchange of knowledge and help bridge the gap between research and practice. He also highlighted that EIP-AGRI connects two policies: the Common Agricultural Policy and the EU research and innovation Horizon Programme. Today, more than 2 900 Operational Groups have been launched across Europe, and over 200 multi-actor projects under Horizon 2020. Meanwhile, for the period 2023-2027, Member States planned around 6 600 Operational Groups (OGs).

Orsolya Frizon Somogyi, Deputy Head of Unit F2 'Research and Innovation', DG AGRI, presented the new developments in Horizon Europe, specifically under Cluster 6 - Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture & Environment, which is most closely linked to EIP-AGRI. Also relevant within this context is the EU Soil Mission, one of the five EU Missions under Horizon Europe where the EU is dedicating a new Instrument and a significant budget to improve soil health. There are many synergies between Horizon and the CAP, aiming to bring research closer to the practice. For instance, under Horizon Europe, the multi-actor approach, living labs (experimentation sites), lighthouses (demonstration sites), and - under the CAP OGs and EIP-AGRI - networking events all engage with farmers, foresters and other relevant actors in the field.

Moreover, Horizon Europe supports projects that directly contribute to the building up of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) under the CAP, such as thematic networks, advisory networks and projects like [EU FARMBOOK](#) and [Climate Farm Demo](#), which are tools to disseminate relevant solutions to farmers and foresters. She highlighted the AGRI Research Conference that will take place on 31 May and 1 June, followed by a series of field visits near Brussels demonstrating to the conference participants how research and agricultural practice are bridged in EIP-AGRI OGs. For the conference, 15 factsheets have been prepared, providing an overview of Horizon projects, e.g. on animal health and welfare, on agroecology and AKIS¹.

The presentations were followed by a panel discussion entitled 'How is the EU CAP Network linking the CAP and the Horizon Programme?' Five panellists from DG AGRI, EIP-AGRI SF and long-term Subgroup members were invited to elaborate on the topic, as well as on their experiences with the EIP-AGRI and the SolKE.



Orsolya Frizon Somoggi highlighted that one of the added values of linking the CAP to the Horizon Europe is the opportunity it provides for the dissemination of research outcomes to the field.

Horizon and the CAP need to be brought together on a daily basis to support farmers' transition towards more sustainability as well as to achieve the EU's objectives and to bring new research solutions to farmers, foresters and rural communities.

Hugo Almeida stressed that the composition of SolKE is crucial to continuing to successfully bring these two policies together: the diversified background of SolKE members guarantees an effective exchange platform between Member States and organisations.

Annemiek Canjels, Advisory Service Province Limburg, Netherlands, reflected on the opportunities and responsibilities that come with Subgroup membership. Opportunities are linked to increased knowledge exchange possibilities and an expanded list of contacts. Responsibilities refer to the urgent need to transform

agricultural systems and speed up progress. At national level and as a former National Contact Point for EIP-AGRI, her membership in the Subgroup has helped her to have an overview of all aspects related to innovation in the Dutch CAP Strategic Plan, as well as to encourage Dutch experts to join EIP-AGRI Focus Groups, for instance. The Subgroup has been a good forum to give advisors a voice when shaping the EU innovation agenda.

Helena Pärenson, Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture, Estonia, explained that participating in the Subgroup has been useful for her work at national level. It gives her an opportunity to share at EU level what is going on in her country. Moreover, information from the European Commission (EC) and other Member States can be taken up and disseminated back home. The informal networking moments are useful to gain insight into how other actors and countries are tackling problems. Furthermore, Subgroup meetings strengthen the connection to the larger AKIS dimension and give inspiration on a personal level. Becoming part of the Subgroup encouraged Estonia to set up OGs at the outset and now also to establish cross-border cooperation between OGs.

Pacôme Eyenga highlighted the role that SolKE plays in bringing together the two EU policies by contributing to the annual work programmes of the EIP-AGRI SF. This annual work programme is a combination of research and innovation priorities coming from the Horizon Europe Programme and CAP objectives. For instance, networking activities tackle topics related to research and to the CAP. Then, during these activities, research needs from practice are collected and can later be translated into research questions.

Following the panel discussion, **Pacôme Elouana Eyenga** presented the EIP-AGRI SF activities for the period between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2023, highlighting again that the topics for EIP-AGRI SF networking activities are always discussed during SolKE meetings. Two new types of networking activities were mentioned in particular: the cross-visits aimed at fostering cross-border cooperation between OGs, plus the ad hoc national expert meetings that have been created to finetune topics for networking activities and to ensure that they reflect the situation and challenges in Member States.



¹ The 2023 EU AgriResearch Conference (europa.eu)

Session II: What does EIP-AGRI look like in practice?

Marcella Fernandes De Souza, University of Ghent, Belgium, presented the Operational Group '[Grass2Algae](#)'. This OG focused on creating a value chain around the CO₂ produced on a circular dairy farm in Belgium. The project brought together farmers, researchers and advisors to find a profitable and replicable solution. As a result, they transformed low-quality grass from farm field edges into juice for microalgae growth: the resulting algae were then used to produce food (cheese, ice cream, tea). The collaboration between farmers and researchers has created a win-win situation, as the OG had relevant results for both research and practice.

Ambra De Simone, R&I officer at IFOAM, presented two examples of Horizon Thematic Networks involving OGs: [OK-NET EcoFeed](#) (organic knowledge thematic network on monogastric animal feed) and [BIOFRUITNET](#) (thematic network boosting innovation in organic fruit production through strong knowledge networks). The OK-NET EcoFeed project outcomes were published in the EIP-AGRI newsletter and were disseminated to OGs at national level. Results from BIOFRUITNET were published, translated and disseminated in the form of practice abstracts, videos, podcasts, e-learning and field days.



Sylvie Rockel, Landcare Europe coordinator, presented [Landcare Europe](#) and its common points with EIP-AGRI. Landcare Europe is a network that brings together agriculture, nature conservation and politics. It is acting 'from the ground, up', and Landcare associations work cooperatively, voluntarily, regionally, in an interdisciplinary manner and independently. The approach of Landcare Europe is very similar to that of EIP-AGRI: importance is given to connecting different types of stakeholders, exchanging knowledge and forming regional expert groups similar to OGs. Additionally, farmers are at the centre of the Landcare Europe network. Landcare Europe aims to change the public perception of farmers, so they are seen as an important driver for preserving landscapes and preventing ecosystem degradation.

Inge Van Oost, Unit D1 'Rural areas and Networks', DG AGRI introduced the video '[EIP AGRI: Ireland's Operational Groups: Use of OGs for testing out new CAP measures](#)', which presents how Ireland applies the result-based and locally-led approach promoted by both EIP-AGRI and Landcare Europe. The video illustrated how OGs can bring ideas forward to prepare for the new CAP measures.

Session III: Teambuilding and get-to-know activity: Who are my fellow SolKE colleagues?

Through different get-to-know and team-building activities, this session provided opportunities to participants to introduce themselves to other SolKE members.

Session IV: Identifying and exchanging on shared interests: what are shared issues amongst SolKE members?

Prior to the meeting, SolKE members had been invited to propose topics that they would like to discuss. Further suggestions could also be made at the meeting. Participants were then able to join the group of their choice and discuss one of the topics below:

1. How can we link Operational Groups from more than one MS working on the same topic?
2. What are the perspectives for OGs once funding ends?
3. How can EIP-AGRI OGs and Horizon projects be further interlinked?
4. How can different actors (especially the youth) be encouraged to participate in networking activities?
5. What are practical ideas and examples of networking activities in relation to the role of NNs within AKIS?
6. What are the first experiences with AKIS implementation?
7. How is training of advisors being organised in MSs?

Main highlights from topic 1: How can we link Operational Groups (OGs) from more than one MS working on the same topic?

Participants focused their discussion on cross-border and transnational OGs, and mentioned several related challenges. They noted the lack of clarity on project funding. One major barrier mentioned was the diversity of approaches and timelines in CAP SPs, as well as the variety of legal, financial and evaluation systems in Member States. Another challenge is the limited availability of information on existing and newly set-up OGs. Several solutions to these challenges were proposed. The limited availability of information challenge could be tackled through the innovation newsletter, where a section dedicated to updates on OGs could be created. EIP-AGRI project database could be complemented with information from OGs being set up with an "interested to collaborate" option. The LEADER experience with transnational and cross-border cooperation could also be used as a learning source. Finally, it was highlighted that networking activities organised by the EIP-AGRI SF are already providing collaboration opportunities for OGs.

Main highlights from topic 2: What are the perspectives for OGs once funding ends?

Several options were discussed around the fate of OGs once EU funding is finished. OGs may seek another funding source, such as national, regional or private funding, or from a partner organisation's own funds. OGs may also follow up with a new application for another OG project, or a spin-off from that OG, or seek to participate in a transnational project. Living Labs and Soil Lighthouses established under the EU Soil Mission might use the results from OGs for their activities.

Main highlights from topic 3: How can EIP-AGRI OGs and Horizon projects be further interlinked?

There are several approaches to further interlinking EIP-AGRI OGs and Horizon projects, such as those applied by the National CAP Networks, which facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges through the organisation of meetings between both types of projects. At EU level, OGs and Horizon projects can be brought together in networking events too. However, there are still some constraints to these approaches, such as language barriers (for cross-border/transnational cooperation), gaps between research and practice, and the value that practitioners/potential partners attribute to the participation in such projects. Advisory services could play an important role in overcoming these constraints.

Main highlights from topic 4: How can different actors (especially the youth) be encouraged to participate in networking activities?

Several aspects were discussed regarding the participation of different actors, particularly youth, in networking activities. Firstly, it is important to consider why networking for youth is valuable, and what forms of networking could increase their engagement (social media, hybrid platforms, training programmes or study visits). For example, there are some successful youth networking initiatives within the scope of the rural youth parliament, CEJA – European Council of Young Farmers and Smart villages. Understanding the importance of involving youth is key for setting the right objectives for the activity and determining the form of networking. Moreover, networking should be targeted to more specific groups, as ‘young people’ is too general and broad as a category. Overall, there are relevant initiatives going on, but isolated from each other. The challenge is to bring them together, which will call for more collaboration and more “networking of the networks”.

Main highlights from topic 5: What are practical ideas and examples of networking activities in relation to the role of NNs within AKIS?

There are many examples of such networking activities in Member States. For instance workshops, conferences, annual meetings and other events targeting OGs as key AKIS actors, facilitating knowledge sharing and promoting potential future collaborations. Furthermore, in many countries efforts are being made by the National CAP Networks to connect Horizon projects and OGs. In some Member States, the links between the AKIS Coordination Body and the National CAP Network still need to be clarified, so that synergies in their work can be maximised. There are still some countries where the AKIS Coordination Body has not yet been fully set up, leading to uncertainties and unclear division of tasks.

Main highlights from topic 6: What are the first experiences with AKIS implementation?

Many Member States have already established AKIS coordination bodies. Several national conferences to discuss different support schemes and collaboration opportunities between farmers, researchers and advisors have been organised. Some Member States have also started to collect research needs from practice, analyses of good practices, and have set up the priorities for the next OG calls. In some cases, structures like Working Groups including different stakeholders have been created to support the work of AKIS Coordination Bodies. However, uncertainty about the concept of AKIS still remains, which may act as a constraint to its full implementation.

Main highlights from topic 7: How is training of advisors being organised in MS?

There is a diversity of approaches to organising training for advisors in Member States. In some cases, the training is available mainly for registered advisors and includes special courses, operated mostly by universities and research projects. In other countries, training sessions are provided by advisory organisations and supplemented with practical knowledge and skills gained at demonstration farms.

Next steps and closing

Hugo Almeida, Deputy-Head of Unit D1 ‘Rural areas and networks’, concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for their participation. He encouraged SolKE members to take home inspiration from the discussions and presentations, as projects such as the Operational Group ‘Grass2Algae’ have the potential to change the lives of farmers and rural communities.

