



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

27 October 2023

## Welcome and Introduction

**Magdalena Mach, Unit D1 'Rural areas and networks', DG AGRI** welcomed SolKE members and shared the latest updates from the EIP-AGRI world starting with the news that the target for Operational Group (OG) projects planned for the programming period of the CAP 2014-2020 has been exceeded. To date 3 259 OGs have been notified to the European Commission, while many more are yet to be reported by Member States (MSs). This success is an occasion to celebrate, so DG AGRI in collaboration with the EIP-AGRI Support Facility are organising a conference to highlight the achievements of OG projects hitherto and support the new generation of OGs. The event will be accompanied by a competition for OGs with awards for the most innovative projects. During the conference, the results of a study on outcomes achieved by OG projects will be presented, which is currently being prepared by DG AGRI and the European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP. This study will provide insight into the outcomes, critical issues and opportunities for further development of innovation in rural areas.

The online OG projects database on the EU CAP Network website will be functional by the end of 2023. A subpage dedicated to Horizon Europe and a contact webpage for EU CAP Network staff members can already be found there.

The first meeting of the EU CAP Network Steering Group took place on 10 October 2023 in Brussels. The meeting included reflections on the role of the group and picking key topics for the next EU CAP Network Assembly meeting on 5 December 2023.

**Orsolya Frizon Somogyi, Unit F2 'Research and Innovation', DG AGRI** shared the latest updates in the Horizon Europe programme. The Horizon Europe Cluster 6 Calls 2024 have been open for applications since 17 October 2023. Funding opportunities under Horizon Europe for agriculture, forestry and rural areas can be found [in the brochure published on the EU CAP Network website](#).

The state of implementation of EU Mission Soil was presented. The budget of €300 million has been spread across several annual work programmes. Living labs (LL) and lighthouses are the key tool of the Mission and their number will be expanded gradually in the following years. Under WP 2023, the first LL call was open and received a

very high level of interest. In November 2023, the first European Mission Soil Week will be organised in Spain with the support of the Spanish Presidency of the EU Council. SolKE members were invited to join the Mission Soil Manifesto, which is a tool to commit to the Soil Mission and to soil health.

The Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025-2027 is under preparation; it will use the inputs collected during the AgriResearch Conference.

**Pacôme Elouna Eyenga, EIP-AGRI Support Facility** presented a videoclip illustrating the EIP-AGRI Support Facility Annual Work Programme 2023-2024. The audience was encouraged to subscribe to the newsletter in order to receive the most up-to-date information on all events and activities.

The first of the annual Workshops on National Networking for Innovation will take place from 30 November to 1 December 2023 in Tallinn, Estonia. The aim of these recurring workshops is to support reaching the 2023-27 target of 6 600 OGs in EU. The first edition will focus on the role of the National CAP Networks in AKIS. SolKE members are encouraged to register to participate in the workshop.



To celebrate the achievements of OGs and prepare for the next projects, a conference, competition and awards ceremony will be held from 7 to 8 May 2024 in Estoril, Portugal. This is organised in close collaboration with the Portuguese National CAP Network. Managing Authorities were invited to register for the event; however, most participants are expected to represent OGs. The call for participation will be open by the end of 2023. SolKE members are invited to share the call in their countries and to encourage OGs to apply.



### Session I: Guidelines for data on European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Operational Groups

**Elin Johnsson, Unit D1 'Rural areas and networks', DG AGRI,** presented the SFC Guidelines for data reporting on EIP-AGRI Operational Groups. The legal basis for data reporting is based on Article 127 (3) of the Regulation (EU) 2021/2115. This is almost identical to the period of 2014-2022; however, OGs have an additional obligation to disseminate a summary of their plans, which means the project needs to report from the outset. This ensures the projects' visibility from the start, enabling interlinkages with other OGs, Horizon Europe projects and other interested AKIS stakeholders.

The EIP-AGRI common format was developed to facilitate knowledge flow from the start until the end of the project. Based on the legal basis explained above, a few data elements for reporting have been adjusted in the new CAP 2023-2027 period. These include an extended list of choices for project partners and keywords, revised financing-related elements as well as three new compulsory elements: project contribution to the CAP specific objectives, cross-border/transnational OGs, and project contribution to Union strategies.

The data should be reported through the SFC reporting system with the use of assistant tools. These assistant tools are the guidelines for data on EIP OGs 2023-2027, the quick guide for MSs and the Excel template of the EIP-AGRI common format for OGs 2023-2027. MSs can decide on the data reporting approach, however it is recommended that OGs fill in the Excel template themselves. This can be submitted to the Managing Authorities, who are obliged to upload the data on OGs in the SFC database.

### Session II: EU CAP Network Cross-visits – new knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning possibilities for OGs

**Aleksandra Zlateva, EIP-AGRI Support Facility** presented the first cross-visit experiences under the EU CAP Network. The EU CAP Network cross-visits aim to enhance peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange, as well as to create opportunities for potential future collaborations and partnerships between OGs. Two cross-visits took place at the end of June 2023 in Italy. They covered the topics of circular and organic soil management, and organic supply and value chain optimisation.

The programme of each cross-visit included two field visits, opportunities for networking and further discussions around the complementarities, synergies and points for collaboration between OGs. Several lessons were learnt from the first cross-visit experiences, including the importance of ensuring that participants have enough information about each other prior to the cross-visit to facilitate the identification of common ground between participating OGs, as well as the importance of practitioners participating. Additionally, the role of Managing Authorities and NSUs in supporting the successful organisation of the cross-visits was highlighted.

**Annemiek Canjels, Advisory Service Province Limburg,** the Netherlands, presented the Dutch-German cross-visit experience. In a test farm in Valthermond, the Netherlands, knowledge was exchanged between the Dutch regions Fryslan, Drenthe and Groningen, and the German Niedersachsen region. The programme of the cross-border exchange involved field visits, presentations and speed-dating opportunities between participants. The outcomes of the cross-visit included the creation of new contacts, knowledge exchange on OGs from the involved regions, as well as ideas for future collaboration.

Following the cross-visit, an agreement was made between participants, to create a joint project aiming to support networking activities for farmers and to facilitate cross-border cooperation. An application was submitted for Interreg funding, however with staff changes and the COVID-19 pandemic, the proposal fell through, and no further steps have been taken.



### Other cross-visit experiences

A cross-visit was also organised in Belgium, between Flanders, the Netherlands and Germany. Three Flemish OGs were visited by a group of OG representatives, advisers and Managing Authority representatives. A follow-up visit in Germany was planned, but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, as part of the i2connect project, a cross-visit between advisers from 5 EU MSs took place in Hungary.



### Session III A: Transnational and cross-border OGs – building up from different past experiences

**Magdalena Mach, Unit D1 'Rural areas and networks', DG AGRI**, presented the concept of transnational and cross-border cooperation and OGs, as based on article 127(3) from Regulation (EU) 2021/2115. Cross-border projects are those that occur within a regionalised MS, where two or more different regions work together. Transnational projects are those between different MSs, where one or more regions from one MS may work together with another MS.

The main difference between the past and new programming period is that in the past, transnational or cross-border project still meant two separate OGs working together, each one accountable to its own paying agency. All MSs were also responsible for encoding their own projects in the SFC database. In the new programming period one MS coordinates and encodes the project in the SFC database.

Key points to remember while preparing transnational and cross-border collaboration include planning common timelines, including cooperation between OGs in national network activities, as well as seeking practical approaches for OG calls to cooperate with other MSs and regions.

**Anke Wehmeyer, representative of The European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD), and the German LEADER Network** presented the LEADER experience with transnational cooperation. Transnational cooperation is important because it fosters collaboration, learning and bundling of knowledge across European rural areas.

To foster this collaboration, it is key to begin small-scale, as this allows space for testing how things work and the possibility for growth as the project progresses. It is important to consider the

possible partners, contacts and division of responsibilities for each task.

Several challenges for collaboration were highlighted, including language limitations, resources (time and money), different working cultures, structures and conditions, as well as the administrative rules that vary between MSs. A kick-off meeting with all the stakeholders involved is important to get everyone on board and to make the right connections.

**Tuija Kallio, National CAP Network, Finland and Jenny Taylor, Swedish Board of Agriculture** presented the 'Network to Innovate' partnership between Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Latvia, and reflected on the first experiences in transnational and cross-border OGs in their countries.

In 2017-2018, the first transnational collaboration took place between Estonia and Finland. During this period, Estonia identified the need for international expertise and a call for transnational cooperation was launched. The OG project calls were aligned between Estonia and Finland, and applicants from both countries were given the opportunity to discuss with each other and prepare Letters of Intent.

To support the collaboration from an administrative point of view, the Paying Agencies in each country provided information on eligible costs, as well as the regulatory and administration frameworks.

Since the beginning of 2023, further cooperation opportunities have been discussed between a wider group of Nordic-Baltic countries including Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Latvia. Following two initial meetings, the MSs conducted a survey to assess the possible future steps and joint calls within EIP-AGRI measures. Possible bottlenecks include the timing of calls, different national requirements and legislation, the lack of a joint budget and experience, as well as the need for a close collaboration between MAs and PAs. National Networks need to facilitate communication between the different stakeholders involved to make transnational calls feasible. Brokerage events are planned to aid the identification of possible transnational partners who could apply together for the upcoming calls.

The first synchronised call is planned to be published in 2025.



## Session III B: Transnational and cross-border OGs - what needs to be done to foster them?

In plenary, SolKE members discussed transnational and cross-border OG experiences in their own countries. In Germany, a cross-border OG was initiated in the previous programming period. One regional Managing Authority was responsible for the administrative management of the OG, even though the partners were from multiple regions. The possibility of transnational cooperation was explored by Managing Authorities in 12 regions; however, there was little interest if administrative responsibility was involved. In Spain, cross-regional OGs were supported by the national budget during the last programming period.

Several SolKE members highlighted the issue of funding and aligning collaboration opportunities with constraints in national legislation.

Afterwards SolKE members were distributed into four breakout groups and discussed the following questions:

1. In your view and experience, what may possibly be the main challenges to set up transnational, including cross-border OGs, in addition to those already presented by speakers in plenary?
2. What solutions may be provided to those challenges?
3. What could be the role of the SolKE to foster transnational, including cross-border OGs?

Participants acknowledged the challenges mentioned by speakers, namely:

- › Collaboration between Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies from different countries;
- › Countries or regions having different timings for OGs calls (main bottleneck to synchronise the calls across countries are the different timelines of Paying Agencies), difficulties in changing the financial plan once it is settled, and ensuring a budget for transnational OGs;
- › Project partners speaking different languages;
- › Sharing project costs among different regions or countries;
- › Difficulties in finding partners in other countries that are a match for existing project ideas and have the complementary knowledge needed;

Then, solutions to these challenges were discussed. It was mentioned that, when EIP-AGRI started in 2013, it also seemed very challenging and difficult to set up but then the first countries started, shared their experiences and others followed.

The importance of starting with small steps in the beginning was highlighted: maybe start with one single topic, involving two or very few MSs that have common challenges, possibly neighbouring countries. They might even speak similar languages and can easily communicate (like France and Alsace in Germany, or Portugal and Galicia in Spain).

A solution could also be to organise common calls for all countries.

Otherwise, MSs could open calls on a regular basis. Either way, strong cooperation between national networks is needed: they can jointly identify key topics relevant for actors in their regions and propose them to their Managing Authorities.

An idea to kick-off the process and foster cooperation between Managing Authorities from different countries could be to invite them to a cross-visit. Then identify common challenges and needs from practice, and discuss how to finance a joint project.

Existing networks and other structures of cooperation can already initiate the process (as in the cooperation in the Baltic region).

To help find partners across borders or in a different country, it was suggested to create or use an existing platform that would make it possible to share challenges from practice and project ideas across MSs. The EU CAP Network events could be a good platform for this (e.g. brokerage events, though their capacity is limited).



In respect to the potential role of SolKE in fostering transnational and cross-border OGs, several suggestions came up.

To start with, SolKE members can take relevant messages home and disseminate them among relevant national actors.

It was suggested to create a Task Force within SolKE, on voluntary basis, including colleagues who already have experience in transnational cooperation. Key tasks would be to prepare a concept note addressed firstly to MAs, indicating common (thematic) challenges, and concrete themes for potential calls for transnational OGs.

Other ideas included the identification of topics for cooperation in SolKE meetings. Prior to this, SolKE members could bring together the OGs from their country working on specific topics and collect their ideas.

## Session IV: News from the Member States and AOB

SolKE members were invited to share relevant news from their MSs.

### Calls for OG projects in MSs

In Spain, the call for OG projects opened in August 2023 where all selected projects will receive funding to implement the projects. However, with a budget of €88 million and 150 applications received, only 1/3 will be fully funded. The selection process is transparent and involves evaluators from different backgrounds. Several improvements have been made to the rules on financing of costs incurred by OGs, including a fixed ratio of the mobility expenses for supra- and trans-regional projects.

In the Netherlands, two national calls for OG projects opened in May 2023 (general call and field labs call). Another national call plus regional calls will open in 2024. A Working Group on EIP between national and regional authorities has been set up to provide an overview of knowledge measures and ensure consistencies.

In Finland, calls for OG projects will open in November-December 2023. To help the applicants, the application process has been digitalised and therefore automated.

### Other news from MSs

In Cyprus, a conference will be held on 16 November 2023 focusing on connecting research and practice. This conference is an opportunity for the formation of new OGs.

In Germany, a big conference for start-ups (1 000 participants) is being organised. Up to 10 highly motivated OG projects will have the chance to participate, to share and exchange ideas during the conference.

In Poland, the third national summit for OG projects will take place from 14 to 15 November 2023. The programme will include experience and knowledge exchanges between OGs, including discussions on how to use their experience in the context of Horizon Europe.

The Irish CAP Network has initiated an Innovation Hub to bridge the gap between science and policy through innovations in Ireland. [The first six-month pilot initiative in horticulture](#) is currently ongoing and looking for relevant research and projects from Ireland.

The 2023 edition of the Agroecology Europe Forum will take place in Hungary, from 16 to 18 November.

## Next steps and closing

**Magdalena Mach, Unit D1 'Rural areas and networks', DG AGRI**, closed the day by announcing that the next SolKE meeting on 5 March 2024 will focus on discussing and prioritising the topics for the next EIP-AGRI SF annual work programme. Magdalena also revealed that a survey on future networking activities would be sent to SolKE members after the meeting. Based on the input collected, a booklet with proposed topics will be prepared and shared with SolKE members before the next meeting.

Magdalena concluded by highlighting that even though experience and good practices in transnational and cross-border cooperation under EIP-AGRI for the moment are limited, the meeting and discussions constituted a significant step forward towards transnational OGs. The LEADER experience with transnational cooperation can serve as a source of inspiration and valuable help for all interested in such OGs.

