EU CAP NETWORK

EU CAP NETWORK REPORT

Study on outcomes achieved by EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects under the CAP

Executive summary

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EU CAP NETWORK

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1. Objectives and scope

The study focuses on the analysis of the outcomes achieved by Operational Group (OG) projects in the context of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) approach during the 2014-2022 programming period and its objectives are:

1. To assess outcomes achieved by OG projects during the 2014-2022 programming period, acquire a better understanding of the process of co-creation and spreading of innovative solutions and identify pathways for further development of the implementation of the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) intervention.
2. To identify the main drivers and barriers in achieving EIP OG projects' outcomes, including the assessment of the extent to which communication and dissemination activities have contributed to the achievement of project outcomes.
3. To compare different approaches to EIP calls at Member State/regional level in order to assess the extent to which the calls have facilitated or, conversely, limited the achievement of outcomes.

2. Conceptual framework

EIP-AGRI was launched by DG AGRI in 2012 (COM (2012)79) with the aim to **strengthen innovation within the agricultural ecosystem** while **improving its connections with research** and **contributing to the necessary transition to a more competitive and sustainable agriculture and forestry sector** i.e. ensuring the supply of food, feed and biomaterials, and to ensure the sustainable management of essential natural resources on which farming and forestry depend on (Article 55 of Regulation (EU) no 1305/2013). EIP-AGRI operates within the broader Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS)[1].

EIP-AGRI applies what can be defined as an overarching 'open innovation' concept based on the **interactive innovation model** applied in CAP OG and Horizon 2020 multi-actor projects[2]. The basic approach and functional concept of the interactive model revolve around three main concepts: **(1) developing innovative solutions focusing on farmers/foresters needs; (2) collaboration between various actors to make best use of complementary types of knowledge (scientific, practical, organisational, etc.) targeted to project objectives; and (3) co-creation and diffusion of solutions/opportunities ready to implement in practice.**

OG interactive innovation projects are funded by national or regional Rural Development Programmes (RDP) through calls managed by the Managing Authority (MA).

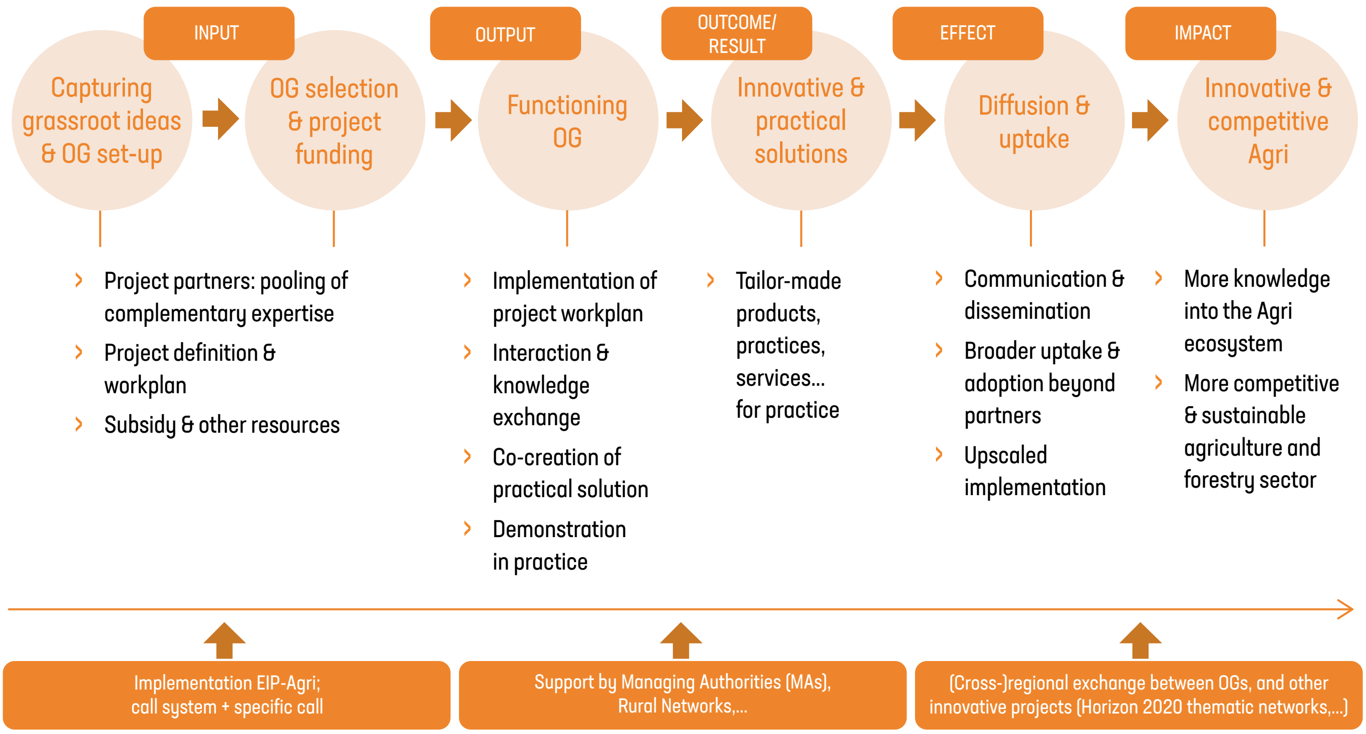
Concerning OGs, the specific features of this approach are summarised as follows:

- **Pooling expertise** i.e. bringing together various AKIS actors (farmers, advisors, researchers, businesses, NGOs, etc.) in the OG projects to incentivise innovation processes and knowledge exchange. The chosen actors are those who can best contribute to the objectives of the project. As researchers are often involved as experts, OGs also help **build bridges between research and farming practice.**
- **Mixing different types of complementary knowledge and ensuring cross-fertilisation among practice and other expertise** (practical, scientific, technological, social, organisational, financial, managerial, etc.) in an interactive way.
- **Working together on innovative ideas and practical solutions** for specific issues or needs – tailor-made products, practices, services and processes adapted to the problem at hand and ready to use in practice.
- Creating a **solid joint work plan**, including **active communication and dissemination** of practical outcomes and results of OGs' work. The aim is to **stimulate the feasibility, uptake and sharing results of the project**.
- **Networking**: EIP-AGRI also encourages **the exchange of knowledge and information between all AKIS actors, including OGs and the cross-regional connection to other innovative projects,** Horizon 2020 thematic and advisory networks and multi-actor research projects.

[1] AKIS is defined in Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 as the "combined organisation and knowledge flows between persons, organisations and institutions who use and produce knowledge for agriculture and interrelated fields".

[2] European Commission, DG AGRI H.5., 'Guidelines on Programming for Innovation and the Implementation to the EIP for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability', Programming period 2014-2020 – Updated version, December 2014. Guidelines on programming for innovation and the implementation of the EIP for agricultural productivity and sustainability | EU CAP Network (europa.eu)

Figure 1: Logic framework of EIP-AGRI OGs



Source: EU CAP Network supported by the European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP (2024)

For the purpose of the study, OG project outcomes have been defined according to three levels, namely: **project outcomes**, referring to innovative solutions tested by the OG partnership; **wider uptake of innovative solutions** outside the initial OG partnership; and **community outcomes** related to the enlargement of EIP-AGRI communities and further development of collaboration.

3. Methodological approach

The geographical scope of the study is the EU-27, excluding the RDPs in Member States not programming or implementing EIP OG projects, i.e. Luxembourg and Denmark, but with the addition of the UK, which implemented the EIP measure until 2020.

The analysis is carried out at two levels. At the EU level, RDPs across the EU-27 are examined to illustrate the context and overall level of execution of the EIP-AGRI measure within the RDPs. The focus of analysis then moves to EIP OGs and their OG projects, which represent the core of the study, providing answers to the study questions. Second, the analysis is carried out at the case study level with 15 OG projects selected across different Member States/regions of the EU: Austria, Bulgaria, DE-Hessen, DE-Baden-Württemberg, ES-Cataluña, ES-Pais Vasco, FR-Bourgogne, Ireland, IT-Liguria, Lithuania, the Netherlands (two OG projects), Poland, Portugal and Sweden.

Data collection

The study employs a combination of primary and secondary data sources to investigate the implementation of the EIP-AGRI within RDPs from 2014 to 2022. Secondary data are primarily obtained through documentary research, including an analysis of RDPs, literature on EIP-AGRI OGs, and databases like the System for Fund Management (SFC) database for EIP OG projects and the Annual Implementation Report (AIR) database.

Primary data collection involved various methods:

- **Two questionnaire-based surveys** respectively targeted OG project partners; and EIP/innovation stakeholders, not necessarily involved in OGs, to gather insights into project implementation and stakeholder perspectives.
- **Case studies** were used to gain an in-depth understanding of OGs, EIP OG projects, and the processes of co-creation and dissemination of innovative solutions. Data collection at the case study level included: documentary research of RDPs, EIP calls, evaluation reports and published information about case study OG projects; and in-depth interviews with RDP MAs and EIP OG project coordinators to assess implementation successes and future approaches; focus groups involving all OG partners based on the Method for Impact Assessment of Projects and Programs (MAPP) framework to evaluate various aspects of OG projects, including contexts, outcomes and influences on the achievement of outcomes (e.g. partnership composition, communication and dissemination activities, conditions of the calls, etc.).

- Additional **interviews with the Commission and EU CAP Network experts** explored lessons learned and changes in EIP-AGRI implementation, focusing on dissemination strategies, stakeholder roles and administrative challenges.

This comprehensive approach was used to provide detailed insights into the experiences and practices of OGs, facilitating a thorough understanding of their functioning and of the factors influencing the implementation of the EIP-AGRI instrument.

4. Main results

Survey results

The '**OG survey**' allowed the collection of **989 completed questionnaires** from 24 EU Member States and the UK, corresponding to **768 OG projects**. Notably, there were no responses from Member States not programming or not implementing the EIP measure. Therefore, the survey achieved broad coverage across EU Member States, with Italy and Spain being relatively more represented, aligning with their higher share of EIP OG projects.

Survey responses were quite evenly distributed between OG lead partners (458 respondents) and other OG partners (531 respondents). For most OG projects, the survey was completed only by one project partner. For about 20% of OG projects, responses were provided by two or more OG partners. The composition of the survey sample is clearly skewed towards the 'researcher' category (36.7% of responses). However, farmers/foresters seem to be well represented (18.2% of responses) and all other OG partnership categories (e.g. advisors, agricultural/forestry associations, innovation brokers, SMEs, NGOs and public authorities) are also included.

Most of the responses concern completed or nearly completed projects, with only 17.5% indicating ongoing projects. The survey primarily covered crop and animal production projects with other sectors (mixed agricultural production, forestry, supply chains, and rural) also represented, though less extensively.

The innovation '**Stakeholder survey**' collected a total of **233 completed questionnaires**. The aim was to corroborate the results obtained by the survey directed to OG projects' partners and provide a wider perspective. The survey includes responses from innovation stakeholders across all Member States except Cyprus, with Italy, Spain and Germany highly represented, possibly related to their size and number of regionalised RDPs. Like the OG survey, researchers/research organisations dominate the respondent categories (34.8% of respondents), but other categories such as advisors/advisory services, representatives of innovation support services, public authorities, National CAP Networks, and knowledge and innovation networks are also represented, albeit to a lesser extent.

Answers to study questions

The analysis was developed according to **three main study questions** aiming at fulfilling the objectives of the study.

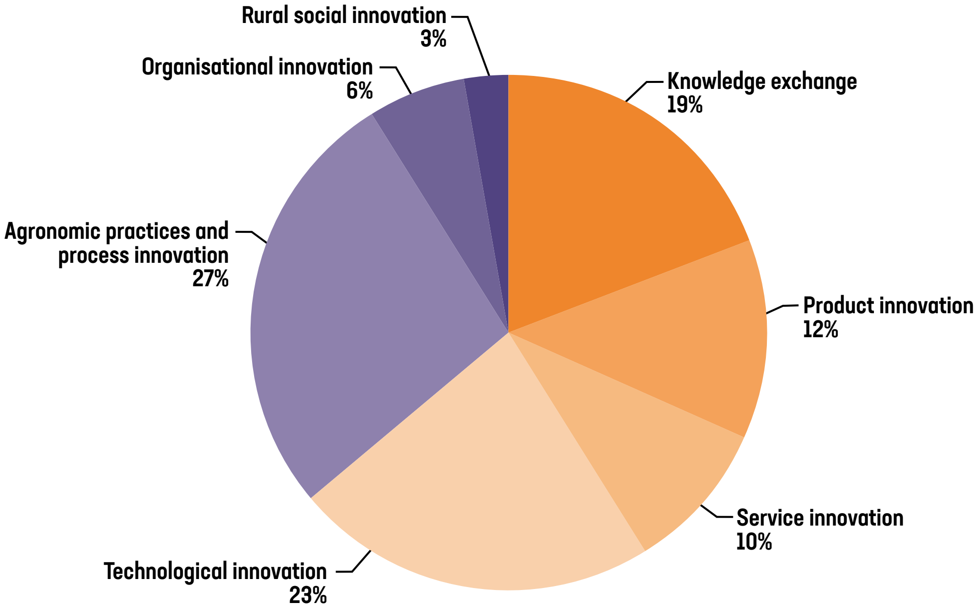
Under the first study question, the analysis focused on the **outcomes achieved by OG projects**. Subsequently, the second study question investigated the **main drivers behind the achievement of outcomes as well as the barriers that undermined the success of OG projects**. Under the third study question, the analysis adopted a governance perspective aimed at assessing the **extent to which national and regional approaches to OG calls and OG project implementation have favoured or limited the achievement of outcomes**.

To what extent have EIP OG projects produced the expected outcomes: project outcomes, wider uptake of innovation and community outcomes?

Findings suggest that **most OGs (88% of OG survey respondents) have successfully developed, tested and spread innovative solutions consistently with what was planned**. Indeed, 65% of OG survey respondents stated that their OG projects fully achieved the planned results and a further 23% considered results partially achieved. This result is overall confirmed by opinions gathered from innovation stakeholders participating in the dedicated survey. Additionally, 45% of OG survey respondents developed project outcomes, either fully or partially, beyond or different from what was initially planned.

As regards the types of innovative solutions, OG survey data shows that **most OG projects focus on agronomic practices and process innovations, related in particular to crop management and nature-oriented farming. Technological innovations**, mainly digital ones (e.g. apps, mobile and devices, data management, GPS) **are also frequent. Organisational, social and rural innovative solutions appear to be less represented** in the OG survey sample.

Figure 2: Types of innovative solutions developed by OG projects* (%)



Source: EU CAP Network supported by the Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP - OG survey data (N=458 survey responses - OG Lead partners)
**Multiple answers allowed.*

The **EIP OG approach has enabled new forms of collaboration between the different actors involved, particularly linking science and agricultural practice**. Farmers clearly benefited from cooperation and the analysis shows that their interest in innovation has increased. However, a **risk factor** has been identified in relation to the role of research institutes that may become too dominant, in contrast with the bottom-up, practice-oriented nature of the OG instrument and the principles of the interactive innovation model.

Innovative solutions have been spread to broader target groups beyond OG partnerships **and mostly in the immediate proximity of the partnerships**.

Communication of project activities, dissemination of results and the wider uptake of innovative solutions beyond the project itself remain an issue for further improvement. Case study findings show that the **call requirements in relation to communication and dissemination had a positive impact, but sometimes communication has been limited**, due to the lack of specialised skills within or in connection to the partnerships (e.g. training and advisory), the small scale of projects in some cases and the perceived absence of mechanisms to connect OGs with other OGs. Therefore, there seems to be potential to further spread innovations developed in OG projects and further strengthen the desired community effects. This would require a well organised AKIS for stimulating knowledge flows and specific AKIS staff to connect and support OG partners.

What are the main drivers and barriers to the achievement of EIP OG outcomes and what lessons can be learned?

Findings show that **the overarching factor contributing to the successful co-creation and scaling up of innovative solutions is how the OG partnership is set up**, including the partnership composition, approach to collaboration and process of project preparation and execution, involving both organisational and social elements.

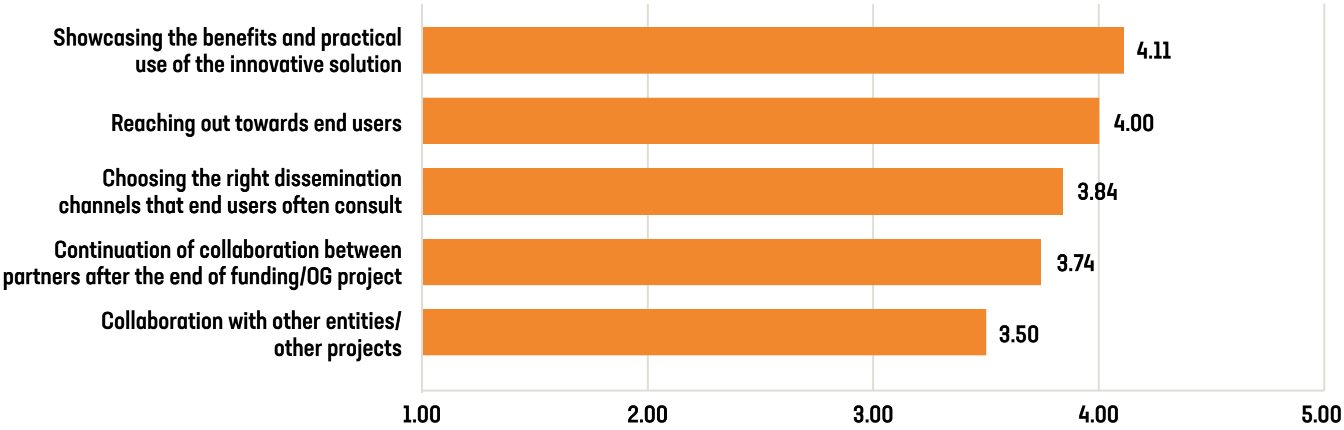
The **complementarity of partners** encompassing farmers/foresters, researchers, advisors and other relevant actors, such as NGOs, associations, SMEs and innovation brokers **ensures that the needed expertise to achieve project objectives is brought into the partnership**. The **experience and skills of partners, including thematic knowledge** on the topic covered by the OG, **experience from previous projects** and **management/organisational skills are also important drivers**.

Partnerships that have been set up with a **bottom-up approach**, based on ideas emerging from farmers/foresters who are motivated and seek to address real and critical needs and are targeted to reach the objectives, is another key driver for success. Indeed, the **role of farmers/foresters and advisors** is central to the co-creation of innovative solutions. Farmers are natural innovators, seeking opportunities or solutions to their problems. Therefore, ideas should originate from them. Findings show that **advisors are also an important source of practical knowledge and important facilitators** as they are close to farmers and understand their needs.

The **interactive innovation model** contributes to a high-quality level of interactions among OG partners and their equal treatment in decision-making. The findings also show that the **quality of interactions is enhanced through good coordination mechanisms** (e.g. committees, working groups) **and frequent exchanges** (e.g. meetings, events).

As shown in the figure below, **various factors contribute to scaling up innovative solutions**, notably, **showcasing the benefits and practical use of the innovative solution, continuation of collaboration between partners after the end of the project** and the **trust** of farmers towards their cooperatives or associations, to use them as channels for scaling up among their members.

Figure 3: OG survey respondents' judgements about factors that contributed to the spreading of innovative solutions by the OG



Source: EU CAP Network supported by the Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP - OG survey data (988 survey responses) – (values on a scale: 1 not at all, 2 to a small extent, 3 to some extent, 4 to a large extent, 5 to a very large extent)

Support provided to OGs to capture the actual needs of farmers/ foresters and help transform such needs into practice and to prepare the application, **facilitates the creation and testing of innovative solutions. The providers of support contribute to different stages of OG projects**. For example, MA support mainly facilitates the application phase, innovation support services help find the right partners and National Rural Networks (NRNs) help OG partners connect with other AKIS actors and OGs within and outside their regions. This clearly indicates that the **role of advisors, rural networks, and innovation support services within an AKIS is essential**.

Case studies indicate that lack of relevant expertise, involvement or motivation of partners, effective coordination mechanisms or bottom-up approach can hinder the co-creation and scaling up of innovative solutions. **The study shows that OGs where partners were not involved in the design of the project or in the partnership from the beginning, were less committed and engaged to address common needs**.

Finally, **the size of partnerships can either be a facilitating or a hindering factor**. This is, for instance, the case for small partnerships failing to reach a wider audience, especially if their communication and dissemination are not well organised or well integrated into AKIS activities. In contract, large partnerships may be too difficult to manage.

Exogenous factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, **have caused some changes**, mainly to project duration, **but they do not seem to have negatively affected the achievement of final project outcomes** i.e. the co-creation and scaling up of innovative solutions.

To what extent have communication and dissemination activities contributed to the achievement of OG project outcomes?

Active communication throughout the project lifecycle and beyond, using the best dissemination channels and **seeking support from 'multipliers', contributes to the achievement of OG outcomes and, in particular, to scaling up innovative solutions**.

Key lessons can be drawn for the future so that OGs increase the use of relevant communication and dissemination activities for spreading and scaling up innovative solutions:

- The requirement of the calls for OGs to have a communication plan, including concrete and efficient activities, has been instrumental for OGs to adopt a more structured approach to communication and dissemination, such as an explicit obligation in the calls for communication and dissemination, through as many practice-oriented channels as possible and using any opportunity (e.g. fairs, other events not related to the project, NRN activities to showcase OGs, etc.)
- Despite the widespread use of traditional dissemination channels (website, leaflets, publications), **the most effective dissemination tools** for scaling up innovative solutions **are those involving interactions**. They include **peer-to-peer communication, showcasing project outcomes, and using 'champions' and 'multipliers'**. More specifically, 'champions' can be OG partners who set an example or, generally, people on the ground who set an example for others to follow. 'Multipliers' can be the National CAP Networks, advisors and ministries, including the MA, able to reach further than the OG to spread results through their own networks.
- **Communication and dissemination are most effective** in spreading OG project outcomes **when different tools and channels are combined**, incentivising direct contact with farmers and taking into account the typology of the target audience.

In summary, there is no single factor acting as a main driver for the successful co-creation and scaling up of innovative solutions. What works best is the composition of partnerships ensuring the complementary expertise needed to meet the objectives of the project; project set-up based on a bottom-up approach and interactive management; engaging farmers/foresters and advisors from the design phase and throughout the project and incorporating a range of dissemination channels from the conception of the OG, favouring practice-oriented channels that involve interactions with potential end-users of the project outcomes.

To what extent did Member States/regions' approaches to EIP OG calls favour/limit the achievement of outcomes?

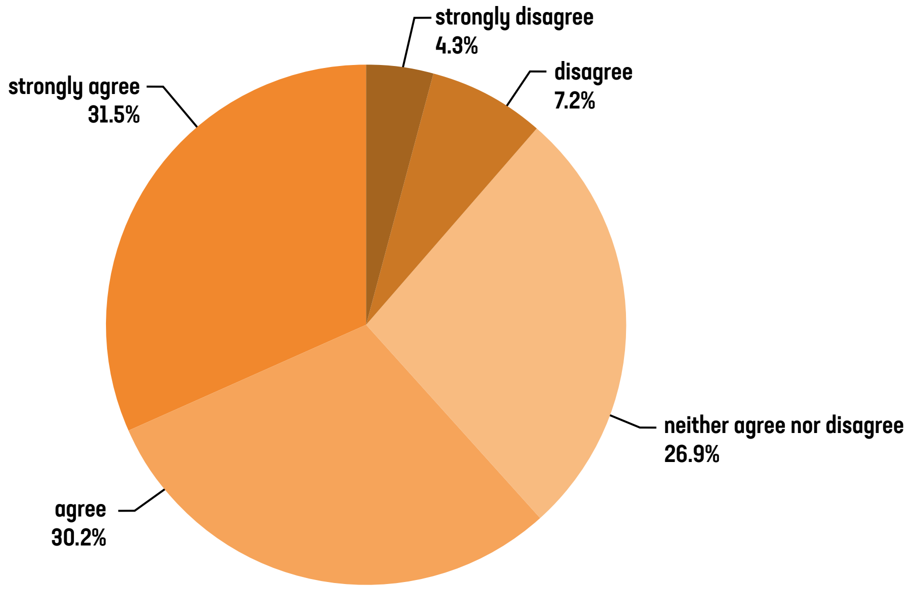
MAs, strongly supported by the Commission and networking actors at the EU and national level, have made significant efforts to implement the principles of the EIP OG instrument in a shared and consistent way, creating, in the words of an EU CAP Network representative, an "effective governance environment" that has allowed the **activation of over 3 400 OG projects throughout the 2014-2022 programming period.**

The value of careful preparation of OGs and OG projects has emerged as a decisive factor for successful implementation. The two-step selection procedure, applied in many EIP implementation models, has been positively assessed by MAs and OG representatives alike, with almost no exception.

As already pointed out in relation to drivers and barriers for the achievement of project outcomes, **the support provided by MAs, innovation support services, National Networks and other AKIS actors for the setting up of OGs and the application stage**, in terms of funds, tools and networking actions, **is highly valued by OGs**.

OG calls have addressed bottom-up needs through open calls (e.g. calls with no predefined theme) that have frequently been combined with thematic calls, with either a broader or a narrower scope. According to survey data and case studies, diverse and **flexible approaches**[3] **have generally succeeded in capturing the needs expressed by practitioners.** Nonetheless, a **few cases of overly restrictive targeting in the calls have also been reported in case studies**.

Figure 4: OG partners' opinions about the extent to which OG calls have addressed the concrete needs of practitioners



Source: EU CAP Network supported by the Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP – OG survey data (N=391 out of 458 survey responses – Lead partners)

OG calls have prioritised partnerships with a balanced mix of complementary expertise and favoured a democratic approach to cooperation with all partners being involved at an equal level. They were successful in most cases with around 75% of the respondents to the OG survey finding that calls succeeded in guaranteeing the complementarity of partnerships and 55% agreed that calls fostered equal participation of OG members. To achieve these objectives, OG calls' eligibility conditions and selection criteria were designed to ensure the participation of farmers and the inclusion of key figures, such as advisors or innovation brokers, and partners with relevant skills and experience. OG calls also required constant interaction among partners (e.g. through scheduled meetings and clear decision-making procedures) and active involvement of all OG members (tasks and budget assigned to each of them).

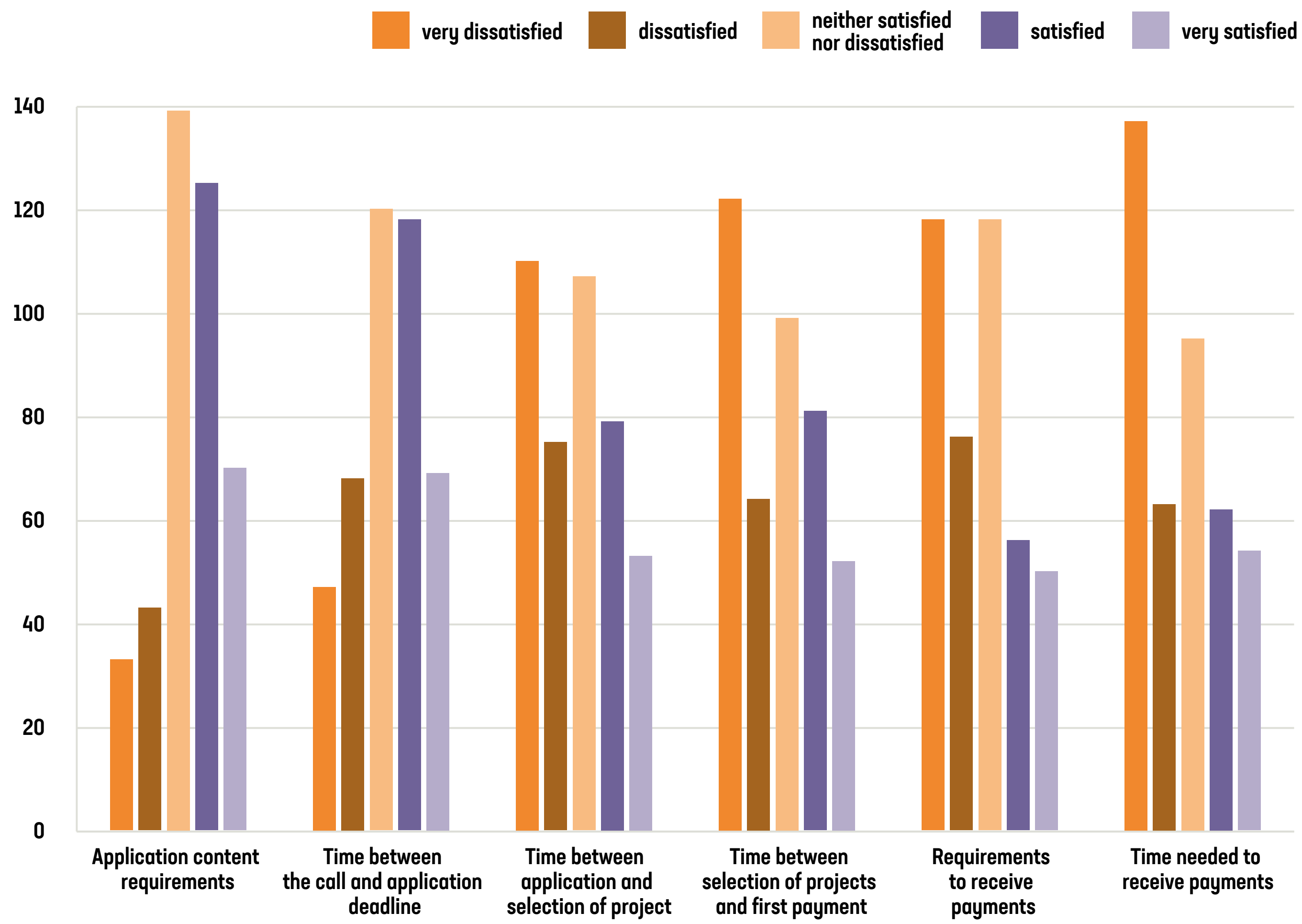
In some cases, **requirements that were too strict have undermined the balance of OG partnerships and altered cooperation mechanisms**. For instance, the mandatory inclusion of more partners than those essential to the project or, conversely, the exclusion of types of partners that could have been useful in the project. In other cases, OG stakeholders and authorities did not feel that calls' provisions were particularly relevant in relation to the composition of the OGs or the success of OG projects.

Overall, OG calls have fostered communication and dissemination by requiring specific activities (eligibility conditions) to be carried out and rewarding more active and structured communication and dissemination by means of selection criteria. **The analysis has shown a clear influence of calls in this respect, as many OGs have focused on communication and dissemination precisely because it was required by the call**. This finding suggests that OGs' awareness of the crucial role played by communication and dissemination in the context of the EIP OG instrument should be further improved. This could help boost greater participation of actors with communication and dissemination skills within OGs. However, the study has also illustrated **the positive effect of more intense activity by some institutional actors (MAs and NRNs) in communicating about OGs and disseminating OG project results**, as clearly exemplified by the work of the Irish NRN, which created an interactive database, an online platform showcasing OGs and a video blog among the products.

[3] I.e. the diversity of approaches that can be used and the various ways of combining open and thematic calls and the narrower or broader definition of topics.

For most OGs, **administrative burden represents a concern**. For more than 55% of OG survey respondents, OG calls did not sufficiently simplify implementation. In particular, OGs refer **to reporting obligations and procedures, long payment times, funding limitations** (e.g. no compensation was foreseen for the time farmers spent working on an OG project) **and poor flexibility** (e.g. impossibility to make changes to a project following unexpected events) within the overall implementation process. Surveyed OG partners express higher satisfaction with requirements linked to aid application and the time allowed for submission. It should be noted, however, that the analysis at the case study level shows that administrative burden did not generally prevent OGs from achieving their project results.

Figure 5: Degree of satisfaction with administrative aspects



Source: EU CAP Network supported by the Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP – OG survey data (N=458 survey responses – Lead partners)

In parallel, MAs have been actively engaged in addressing administrative burdens during the 2014-2022 RDP implementation period and introduced simplification measures for the 2023-2027 programming period (also based on new CAP provisions, e.g. use of advance payments for OG projects).

The way forward: further development and improvement

The first element emerging from the study's findings is the importance of OG partnerships' composition in ensuring a balanced mix of relevant and complementary expertise targeted to project objectives, as well as the importance of partners' motivation and engagement at all project stages. Linked to this, evidence from the study indicates that support provided for the preparation of OG projects facilitates the creation and testing of innovative solutions, as actual needs of farmers/foresters are more effectively identified and then translated into practice and disseminated.

Support for the preparation of OGs and their projects by MAs could be further strengthened while the **complementarity of expertise within OG partnerships should always be ensured**. At the same time, **support provided by advisors, National CAP Networks, innovation support services and innovation brokers within an AKIS system should be ensured at different stages of OG projects** to facilitate the creation of innovative solutions, their dissemination and scaling-up. **A well-functioning AKIS is also key for stimulating knowledge flows to improve wider community effects**.

The findings overall suggest that project activity communication, dissemination of results and the wider uptake of innovative solutions could be further improved. The most effective tools involve concrete interactions with targeted end users, such as peer-to-peer communication and hands-on demonstrations. Evidence from the study also shows that communication and dissemination are most effective in spreading OG project outcomes when different tools are combined.

It is important to ensure that supporting AKIS actions are organised to further develop and improve communication and dissemination, including the valuable actions of 'multipliers' such as National CAP Networks. AKIS actions dedicated to sharing OG outcomes **should be undertaken across the board.**

A large proportion of surveyed OGs believe that calls requiring structured planning and execution of communication and dissemination activities had a positive effect on project preparation and, later, the achievement of project outcomes.

Call requirements for more structured communication and dissemination activities could be further adopted and applied more systematically. Moreover, further improvements could be achieved by **strengthening call requirements regarding a more frequent use of practice-oriented channels**. The presence of communication expertise in the OG – for instance, from advisors – and/or the presence of specific AKIS staff in National CAP Networks could also be beneficial for the broader sharing of OG project outcomes.

The study clearly demonstrates the need to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries and administrations. The analysis also shows that certain administrative procedures related to project execution, payments and reporting (e.g. complex rules, slow-paying times and project amendment procedures) are regarded by OGs as particularly challenging.

A **larger use of Simplified Cost Options, particularly lump sums and unit costs** is being reported and **should be further developed to effectively reduce administrative burdens** both on beneficiaries and administrations.

Further efforts are also needed to simplify reporting, ensure swift payment procedures and allow flexibility to make changes to the project proposal if necessary. Additionally, foreseeing procedures to pay farmers for the time they spend working on the OG project is likely to increase practitioners' active participation.

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