



EU CAP Network conference EIP-AGRI Operational Groups: Innovation in practice

Final Report



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1. Introduction



The EU CAP Network conference 'EIP-AGRI Operational Groups: Innovation in practice' was organised by the EU CAP Network, with the support of the Support Facility for Innovation and Knowledge Exchange | EIP-AGRI, and in collaboration with the Portuguese CAP Network.

Since the launch of the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) in 2012, EU Member States have kept investing in innovation for agriculture,

forestry and rural areas through EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects. The 3 400 reported EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects (OGs) funded under the CAP programming period for 2014-2022 exceeded the number of projects that was initially planned for that period (3 200).

The conference was organised to celebrate and showcase these achievements, foster networking and knowledge exchange, support the next generation of OG projects and incentivise transnational/cross-border OGs, as well as showcase Horizon Europe funding opportunities and projects that can benefit the OGs.

This two-and-a-half-day conference took place in Estoril, Portugal, from Monday 6 May to Wednesday 8 May 2024 and was organised in conjunction with the 'EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards'.

The conference brought together the best of agricultural and rural innovation in Europe. The **main objective** of the conference was twofold: to highlight the successful implementation of the EIP-AGRI through OG projects as one of its main building blocks, and to learn from this experience for the implementation of projects under the CAP 2023-2027.

The **specific objectives** of the workshop were to:

- spotlight and celebrate the achievements of over 3 400 OG projects in the EU
- exchange and learn from the experiences of OG projects and increase possibilities to share promising knowledge and innovations developed by OGs
- discuss the potential, including funding opportunities, to further use and upscale OG outcomes in practice, including through Horizon Europe
- discuss challenges and identify good practices that can support the preparation and implementation of OG projects under the CAP 2023-2027
- foster further networking and cooperation for innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas, including the creation of transnational/cross-border OGs
- enhance the synergies between CAP and Horizon Europe for the benefit of the OGs

The conference programme included field visits, plenary sessions with keynote speakers, and interactive discussions that showcased tangible relatable stories from relevant OGs. It also included the awards ceremony for the EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards. The event celebrated the establishment of over 3 400 OG projects throughout the EU and created opportunities for networking and to further disseminate and upscale project results. In addition, the conference addressed universal issues that are relevant to the success of OGs, including Horizon Europe opportunities, while discussing challenges and identifying good practices. This helped build upon existing experiences to prepare the future generation of projects.

The conference started on Monday 6 May with field visits where participants had the chance to learn from the experiences of Portuguese OGs.

On Tuesday 7 May, the conference opened with a welcome session and a presentation that set the scene on EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects. Next in the programme, two panel sessions introduced guest speakers representing the voices of various relevant actors in the context of EIP-AGRI. The panellists were invited to look back

on the work completed so far, and to reflect on the path ahead. The first panel discussed the role of grassroots innovation for the future of agriculture, forestry and rural areas, while the second panel focused on effectively sharing, using and scaling up the outcomes of OGs, including through opportunities offered by the Horizon Europe programme.



As part of the conference, an exhibition area was set up where selected OGs and Horizon projects that involve OGs showcased their activities and results. In addition, Horizon funding opportunities, other relevant initiatives and some entities of prominence for the OGs were presented to the participants, such as DG AGRI, the EU CAP Network and the Portuguese CAP Network. The first day of the conference concluded with the ceremony of the EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards, recognising and rewarding outstanding EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects which have developed innovative practices, solutions, products and processes. The nominees for the six award categories were represented at the ceremony by a total of 30 OGs.

On Wednesday 8 May, after a welcome address and the presentation of the 'Study on outcomes achieved by EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects under the CAP', seven parallel interactive workshops took place. The workshops addressed transversal issues and solutions, including Horizon projects, that are relevant to the success of OGs, thus building upon existing experiences to prepare the future generation of projects.

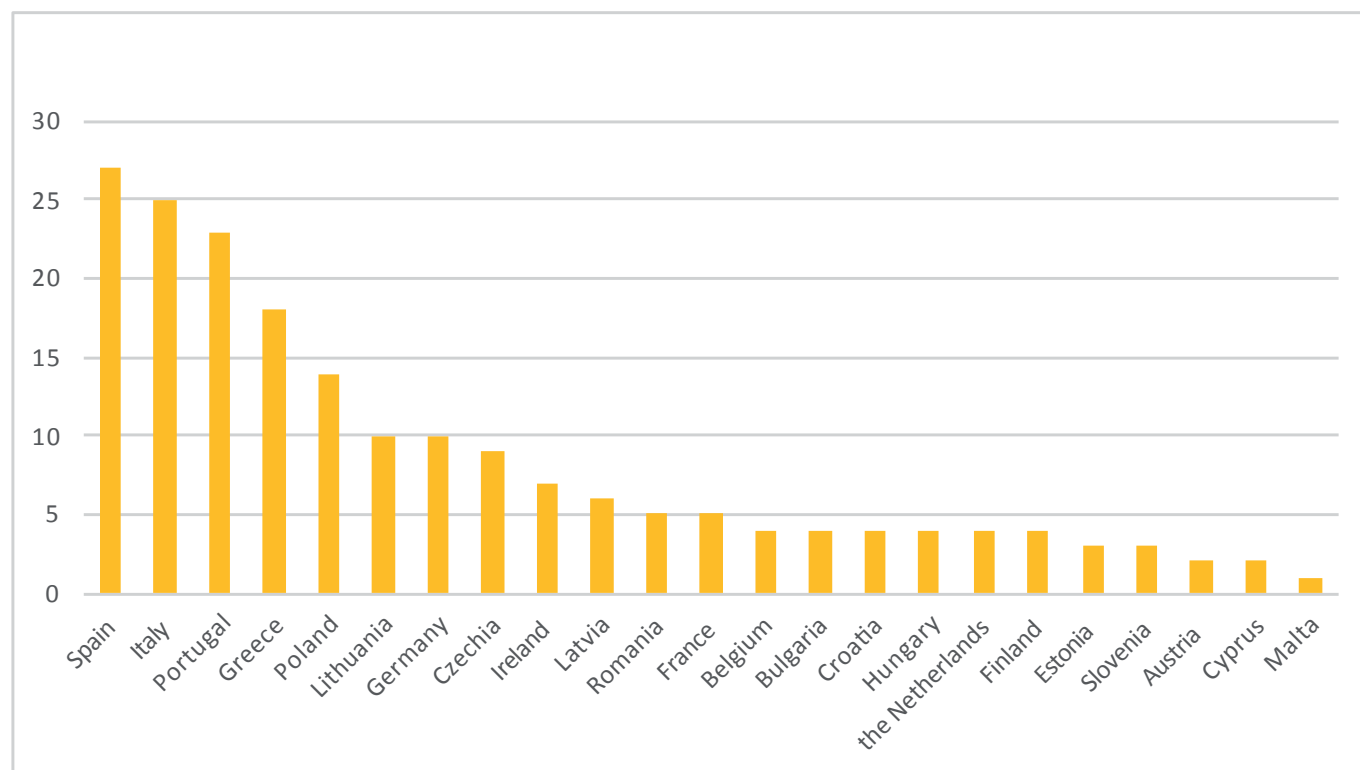
The detailed agenda of the conference is available [on the EU CAP network website](#).

There were plenty of opportunities for exchange and networking between the participants, and for inspiration by specific good practices.



More than 500 participants attended the event, representing all Member States, and many types of actors. Participants included farmers, foresters, innovation brokers, innovation support service providers, researchers, Horizon projects coordinators, policymakers, NGOs, Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks and Paying Agencies. Moreover, close to 200 EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects from 24 Member States were represented at the conference.

Fig. 1 – Number of EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects (OGs) represented at the conference, per Member State



2. Field visits

The conference started in the afternoon of Monday 6 May 2024 with field visits organised by the Portuguese CAP Network to four different locations. During these visits, participants had the opportunity to

learn from the experiences and the results of 10 Portuguese EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects, focussing on various thematic areas. The topics addressed at each location were the following:

- > **Group 1:** Fruit orchards – pollination, fertilisation and management
- > **Group 2:** Forestry – restoration of degraded areas, fertilisation
- > **Group 3:** Cereals and horticulture – animal and human health, soil health and water management
- > **Group 4:** Viticulture – nitrogen management and mechanical pruning



For more information on the field visits, please consult the document available [on the EU CAP Network website](#).



3. Welcome and opening session



After an introduction to the conference by the main moderator **Sasha Twining**, the Portuguese Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries opened the event.



Opening of the conference by José Manuel Fernandes, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Portugal

The Portuguese Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries highlighted Portugal's crucial role in promoting research and innovation in agriculture and its significant involvement in agricultural projects across the EU. Portugal has set up more than 100 EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects, with a total investment of €29 million. Notably, six of these Portuguese projects were nominated for the EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards.

The Minister also stressed the importance of addressing common challenges like climate change, soil quality, food security, and the growth of the global population. He emphasised the need for proactive evolution in agriculture to ensure food safety, environmental standards and affordability, highlighting the importance of research in agriculture, and advocating for continued investment in research and innovation, urging effective use of resources like Horizon Europe and InvestEU.

Minister José Manuel Fernandes advised against diverting funds from the CAP and highlighted the crucial role of the CAP in promoting agricultural sustainability and rural development. He called for a clear plan post-2027, aligning research and innovation funding with

agricultural needs while avoiding budget cuts. He emphasised the significance of CAP's budget to support citizens' quality of life and European autonomy.

Finally, he concluded by stressing the need for further collaboration and investment to overcome future challenges and ensure a prosperous future for European agriculture and its citizens.



Welcome video address by Janusz Wojciechowski, Commissioner for Agriculture, European Commission

The Commissioner highlighted that EIP-AGRI builds on the strengths of two policies – CAP and Horizon Europe working in synergy. He outlined the main EIP-AGRI's achievements in fostering collaboration between farmers, advisors, researchers, and policymakers, and stressed the importance of innovation in addressing challenges in agriculture. He praised EIP-AGRI's role in identifying and implementing groundbreaking solutions and highlighted the crucial role of this practice-oriented work for all stakeholders, with over 3 400 OG projects showcasing the programme's impact.



He outlined the Commission's commitment to support EIP-AGRI through improved funding conditions under the new CAP and stressed Horizon Europe's potential to elevate EIP-AGRI projects to promote collaboration and innovation and to further foster multi-actor cooperation. Additionally, Horizon-funded thematic and



advisory networks facilitate the sharing of knowledge, innovation and best practices across the EU. The conference is dedicated to commemorating all the success and the efforts that have been made so far and to seeking to be even better in the future, as over 6 600 projects have been planned in the Member States, with a total investment of €1 billion. The EC encourages all stakeholders to participate in this initiative, where the farmers are at the centre.

The Commissioner concluded by thanking all innovation actors for their innovative solutions, encouraging continued efforts towards a sustainable future for agriculture and rural communities, and inviting participants to leverage networking opportunities provided by the EU CAP Network and National CAP Networks.

Welcome by **Roberto Berutti**, Member of Cabinet of the Commissioner for Agriculture, European Commission

Roberto Berutti emphasised the pivotal role of EIP-AGRI in fostering innovation in agriculture and rural areas, bridging the gap between research and practice. He highlighted the success of OGs, which is reflected in the significant growth under the CAP 2023-2027, with over 6 600 projects planned in Member States, corresponding to over €1 billion in investment. Under the CAP 2023-2027, financing conditions for OG projects have improved, providing further incentives for innovation.

He highlighted the variety of topics addressed by OGs, many of which were participating in the conference, and encouraged networking among attendees of the conference to share ideas, experiences and good practices. Roberto Berutti also highlighted the importance

of transnational and cross-cutting projects to further develop and scale up innovative solutions, as well as the role of AKIS to facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation among stakeholders. He pointed out that simplifying administrative processes is crucial to further encourage innovation, as well as bridge the CAP and Horizon Programme.



Finally, he encouraged all stakeholders, and farmers in particular, to actively participate in innovation efforts. While there are many challenges to preserving the economic, social, and ecological pillars of sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge exchange are crucial in helping to achieve them.

4. Setting the scene

Interactive presentation 'EIP-AGRI and its Operational Group projects' – **Hugo Almeida**, Deputy Head of Unit D.1 'Rural areas and networks', DG AGRI, European Commission

Hugo Almeida congratulated EIP-AGRI Operational Groups on their successes, highlighting that over 3 400 OGs have been established, exceeding the initial goal of 3 200. He praised the pivotal role of innovation in addressing the evolving needs of agricultural and rural communities and in tackling contemporary challenges.

He also highlighted EIP-AGRI's relevance in facilitating collaboration and knowledge exchange for sustainable agriculture, forestry, and rural communities. EIP-AGRI was launched by the European Commission in February 2012, driven by the imperative of enhancing agricultural sustainability while maximising productivity. While EIP-AGRI has been fostering innovation through knowledge exchange within the agricultural sector, it has a unique approach, as it places farmers at the heart of the innovation process. EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects are its main building block, and they have been tackling a spectrum of challenges, ranging from developing new technologies and practices to facilitating knowledge sharing. EIP-AGRI has evolved over time, and it now covers all nine CAP specific objectives, in addition to the cross-cutting objective of the new CAP.

Hugo Almeida emphasised the importance of the interactive innovation model, which involves a bottom-up approach, complementary expertise, and co-design/co-creation throughout

project implementation. This model ensures that projects align with the genuine needs of farmers and engages partners in the collaborative design and execution of the project.



He also highlighted that knowledge exchange, the co-creation of practical and innovative solutions as applied by farmers, and the integration of advisors within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) are crucial for the success of OGs. In conclusion, Hugo Almeida highlighted the goal of building a cohesive



agricultural community where knowledge dissemination enables the widespread adoption of innovative practices. He is confident that, through EIP-AGRI and its OGs, the agricultural sector can embark on a journey of continuous innovation and sustainable development.

- **Georgia Robbiati** (representing the OG *'Agroecological innovations to increase the resilience and sustainability of mountain livestock farms'*, Italy) discussed the bottom-up approach in her project. She explained that, from the beginning of the project, the importance of restoring balance between the environment and livestock activities was a shared vision among farmers involved in the OG. However, they lacked the tools and expertise to implement this vision. To address this, they organised discussions and small events on farms to build relationships based on mutual trust, leading to collaborative knowledge-sharing and innovation pathways and to the EIP-AGRI Operational Group project.
- **Lukas Ignasiak** (representing the OG *'An original method of supervising a bee hive with the use of automatic technical means improving the health condition of honey bees'*, Poland) shared insights into the existing complementary knowledge in his OG. He explained that, to converge the expertise needed for the project, there was a need to bring together researchers, engineers, agricultural advisors, and beekeepers. Regular

Reinforcing the presentation of Hugo Almeida, representatives of three EIP-AGRI Operational Groups were invited to share their specific experiences referring to the three main elements of the innovation interactive model:

meetings among this group led to innovative solutions, such as a hive control system to monitor the health of honeybees and to preserve their populations. Trust and cooperation were vital for bridging the gap between scientific, technical and practical knowledge. The successful outcome showcased the transformative potential of bringing together individuals with diverse expertise to solve common challenges.

- **Jean-Marc Gautier** (representing the OG *'ROBUSTAGNO'*, France) shared insights into his OG's journey and, in particular, the co-creation process in it. Formed in 2015, the OG pursued a bottom-up approach, drawing upon the expertise of farmers, researchers, advisors, veterinarians, and educators. They all shared their knowledge and worked together side by side. He highlighted that trust, a positive atmosphere, the supportive environment and a shared vision were essential for the success and sustainability of their partnership. Despite having faced challenges, he expressed his enthusiasm for the project and the bonds created among its members.



5. Panel discussions

Two panel sessions welcomed guest speakers who represented various voices of relevant actors in the context of EIP-AGRI. The panellists were invited to look back on the work that was completed so far, and to reflect on the path ahead. The first panel discussed the role of grassroots innovation for the future of agriculture, forestry and rural areas, while the second panel focused on effectively sharing, using and scaling up the outcomes of EIP-AGRI Operational

Group projects, including through opportunities offered by the Horizon Europe programme.

Panellists were invited as per the type of actor they represent or according to the organisation, initiative or project they are part of. The list of panellists was as follows:

Panel I – Reflecting on the role of grassroots innovations for the future of agriculture, forestry and rural areas:

- **Jacopo Goracci**, Tenuta di Paganico Farm, Italy
- **Maria Rosa Mosquera Losada**, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain
- **Donal Sheehan**, EIP-AGRI Operational Group 'BRIDE - Biodiversity Regeneration in a Dairying Environment', Ireland
- **Patrick Pasgang**, Boerenbond, Belgium
- **Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle**, Directorate AGRI.A 'Strategy and Policy Analysis', DG AGRI, European Commission
- **Eduardo Diniz**, 'Planning, Policies and General Administration Office', Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Portugal



Panel II – Discussion on effective sharing, use and scaling up of EIP-AGRI Operational Group project outcomes:

- **Gábor Vicze**, Horizon Thematic Network based on EIP-AGRI OGs SOIL-X-CHANGE
- **Leonie Göbel**, German CAP Network
- **Begoña Pérez Villareal**, EIT Food
- **Orsolya Frizon Somogyi**, Unit F.2 'Research and Innovation', DG AGRI, European Commission

PANEL I – Reflecting on the role of grassroots innovations for the future of agriculture, forestry and rural areas

During the 1st panel discussion, dedicated to the role of grassroots innovations for the future of agriculture, forestry and rural areas, speakers referred to the involvement of farmers in EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects, the bottom-up approach, involving different stakeholders along the value chain, and bridging the gap between scientific and farm knowledge, and reflected on the way forward. Each panellist added to the discussion according to his/her perspective and experience.

Jacopo Goracci (farmer, Italy) emphasised the importance of bringing together farmers and researchers to exchange data and ideas and to improve farming practices. OGs are crucial for farmers because they connect them to other farmers, interrupt usual daily routines, and provide knowledge and a broader vision of farming. OGs help to collect and analyse data, providing insights that farmers cannot achieve on their own. Jacopo noted that even though it is not easy to create collaborations between researchers and farmers, it is something that is important for farmers.



He also mentioned that many projects have a disproportionately low budget allocated to farmers, and that this needs to change. This shift is the key to fostering on-field work, further collaboration, and ultimately to developing research and innovation systems.

Jacopo also advocated for policies that support an extensive approach to farming, emphasising the need for practical solutions that are applicable to farmers. He highlighted that concepts such as low-input extensive farming, agroforestry, agroecology, and ecosystem services should be more included in policy regulations to achieve a real win-win situation.

Finally, Jacopo suggested that farmers can contribute to policy development with valuable practical insights that can help make policies more applicable and effective.



Maria Rosa Mosquera Losada (researcher, Spain) has been working in research for 30 years and always wanted to interact with companies and farmers, but it was not something that was valued back then. Therefore, she was pleased when EIP-AGRI introduced a way, with financial incentives, to facilitate this collaboration. She highlighted the need for cooperation between farmers and researchers to be able to effectively apply scientific knowledge in farming contexts, adapting research to farmers' real needs.

Maria Rosa highlighted the crucial role of advisors, as they have the trust of many farmers, so that they can be the link between farmers and researchers, and facilitate the knowledge exchange between science and practice.



According to Maria Rosa, data is essential for researchers to better understand farmers' needs and to meet their expectations. Farming is not only about producing food and being economically successful, as it also provides ecosystem services. Hence, it is quite a complex system where farmers must consider marketing, economics and the environment, as well as social and cultural aspects.

Maria Rosa also emphasised the importance of embracing holistic approaches in policymaking considering the entire value chain, and highlighted as a positive development that the current CAP Strategic Plans focus not only on individual farms but also consider the entire value chain and infrastructure development.

Patrick Pasgang (advisor, Belgium) highlighted the crucial role of advisors in bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and its practical application on farms. There is a big difference between the language from research and the language from practice. Advisors act as brokers between farmers, researchers and other actors. They speak farmers' language, are part of their community, and have their trust. Their role is to translate farmers' needs and challenges for researchers, and to translate and directly apply new knowledge. He highlighted the importance of independent advisors who disseminate research findings and help farmers to develop.

Patrick also highlighted that OGs are a very good tool for innovation and knowledge exchange, but advocated for more flexibility in setting them up so that they can respond to farmers' needs as soon as they arise, thus becoming an instrument for addressing farmers' challenges in real time. Farmers can face challenges and problems that often occur unexpectedly. However, the specific time periods during which calls for funding are open quite often do not align well with farmers' requirements for the outputs and deliverables of such projects which may offer particular solutions, with timing a limiting factor.

Donal Sheehan (farmer, Ireland) highlighted that, while researchers' scientific point of view is very different from the practical farming perspective, OGs help to translate scientific language into terms that farmers understand. Besides, since it is not always possible to apply results from the laboratory directly to a farm situation, they need to be adapted to fit farmers' needs, ensuring there is no economic loss. Therefore, EIP-AGRI acts as a 'translator' between research and practice.

Donal then referred to the importance of a one-on-one approach to extend technologies and innovation. In particular, advisors have to translate what is needed for each farmer, so that he/she can apply the innovation on the farm.

Donal also called for more targeted payments and incentives aimed at those who deliver results. The policy should be to identify and reward these farmers, without penalising others. He raised concerns about the pressure on small farmers to scale up, despite their potential to produce more. This expansion makes it difficult to provide other essential services, such as ecosystem maintenance. He expressed his worry that there are no incentives for small farmers to stay small, the only incentives seem to be to get bigger and bigger. There is a need for support that is tailored to different farm sizes and sectors.

Donal concluded by highlighting that farmers need to network with each other, since it is essential for farmers not to be isolated.





Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle (policy maker, European Union) referred to the approach in EIP-AGRI which aims to boost innovation by bringing together various types of stakeholders and fostering knowledge exchange. She emphasised the importance of combining research and farmers' knowledge and ensuring that there is knowledge exchange in both directions. When it comes to improving this process, besides funding, there needs to be engagement. The toolkit, available in CAP Strategic Plans, can be further improved, thereby ensuring that the EIP-AGRI approach contributes to the development of new solutions.



She also highlighted the importance of considering farmers' specific needs. All farmers share common challenges: producing food, being profitable, maintaining natural resources such as soil and water, and adapting to climate change while mitigating its effects. However, farmers also have specific needs that require specific solutions. She pointed out that EIP-AGRI embeds this approach, though more farmers need to be involved. Besides, it is important to make the process faster and to scale it up. Strategic dialogue is crucial to create applicable measures, ensuring that the voice of farmers is heard. She highlighted that policymakers have to recognise that innovation is not just technological but that it is also important to create an environment that facilitates farmers' access to the tools and the solutions that they need.

Initiatives like EIP-AGRI help to improve the image and reputation of farming as a continuously innovative sector. This innovative component is important to attract new farmers and crucial for generational renewal.

Finally, Catherine highlighted the importance of collaboration along the value chain, including academics and policymakers, to ensure that there is a better understanding and a shared vision for the EU farming sector for the next 20 years.

Eduardo Diniz (policy maker, Portugal) highlighted the existing diversity of farmers, ranging from those embracing innovative technologies to those resistant to change. He outlined four groups of farmers: the pioneers, or front-runners, who consistently seek innovation and cooperate with universities and research institutions without relying heavily on public support; traditional farmers who are not aware of, nor want to use, new technologies, and adopt innovations when legally required (and so need significant training and advice); farmers that engage, who need information and are willing to adopt new technologies and management systems on their farms but are not used to scientific language and data; and young and/or qualified farmers who have the potential to settle in rural areas but who don't see the social attractiveness or fulfilment for their professional future there. Eduardo stressed the importance of tailored approaches to meet the specific needs of these different groups of farmers.

He also advocated for strengthening the current model and increasing investments in coordination and knowledge flows within the agricultural sector.

Eduardo highlighted the need to focus more on the farmer. Within CAP Strategic Plans there are possibilities to integrate scientific and empirical knowledge, and to further empower farmers to contribute to innovation. According to him, the bottom-up approach, and concepts such as on-farm experimentation that enable the implementation of experimental setups within the farmer's own environment, are crucial in this regard.



PANEL II – Discussion on effective sharing, use and scaling up of EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects' outcomes

During the second panel discussion, the panellists gave insights into their approach to effective sharing, using, and scaling up of OG projects' outcomes, including through opportunities offered by the Horizon Europe programme. In this context, the panellists stressed the importance of accessibility to information, collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, and tailored bottom-up approaches to achieve sustainable agricultural practices.

Gábor Vicze (Horizon-funded Thematic Network '[SOIL-X-CHANGE](#)') emphasised that finding the right partner at the right moment is the key to getting the information needed to face specific challenges. He explained that the Soil-X-Change project serves as a collaborative platform involving 13 partners from 9 countries, including representatives from farmers, researchers, innovation brokers, and government bodies. Its primary goal is to gather and disseminate good practices on sustainable soil and farm management that have been identified by OGs. These practices are compiled in an online database and transformed into easily understandable information for farmers, foresters and other practitioners. Gábor highlighted the importance of accessing understandable information. Additionally, it is also important for farmers to have a reliable source of information, which is why Soil-X-Change identifies and communicates good practices through trustworthy channels.



Leonie Göbel (German CAP Network) emphasised the crucial role of networking and good relationships within the scope of EIP-AGRI. With over 400 OGs in Germany, regional innovation brokers play a crucial role in the network. They know in detail all the OGs in their region, have extensive networks, and know how to connect people. As a general approach, the German Network leverages other relevant events instead of organising new ones. For example, Leonie referred to a major convention in Germany that is focused on agriculture and food startups, to which the German CAP Network invites OGs to apply to participate. This kind of event offers a steep learning curve, providing OGs with the most valuable knowledge and useful networking opportunities. The German CAP Network follows a bottom-up approach to engage OGs to participate in events, consulting with them beforehand to ensure that the event aligns with their needs and interests. It is essential that attendees perceive the event's usefulness for their own work.



Begoña Pérez Villareal (European Institute for Innovation & Technology ([EIT Food](#))) explained the role of EIT Food in bringing knowledge to the market and accelerating innovation. As one of the nine innovation communities established by the EIT to drive innovation and entrepreneurship across Europe, EIT Food collaborates with various actors in the food system having a focus on industry, research, and startups. Begoña highlighted the importance of startups in quickly bringing innovative solutions to the market. Their presence, combined with the role of science in solution validation, complements industry requests for more sustainable practices and novel ecosystem services. Startups often have comprehensive technological expertise and are disposed to leverage social media and other effective dissemination channels. As for opportunities to scale up results from OGs, Begoña explained that EIT Food trains farmers on-site and collaborates with practitioners to make agricultural production more sustainable.



Orsolya Frizon Somogyi (DG AGRI, European Commission) acknowledged that EIP-AGRI builds on the strengths of two policies, the CAP and Horizon, working in synergy with the aim of supporting innovation on farms, and in forests and rural communities. Orsolya highlighted the importance of the multi-actor approach, promoted by the CAP and Horizon, for innovation that responds to the real needs of the practitioners, aligning with the goal of modernising the sector under the CAP. Horizon funding, via living labs, also supports testing and the implementation of solutions in different contexts across the EU. The Horizon Europe programme offers opportunities for the EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and Horizon projects to share,



use and in the scaling up of their results. She gave several examples: Horizon-funded projects, such as advisory and thematic networks, support sharing of knowledge developed by the OGs and Horizon projects across the borders of the EU Member States, and ensure that research outcomes are translated into information that is ready to be used by farmers, foresters and advisors in practice. The '[EU-FarmBook](#)' focuses on creating an online platform, which will be a one-stop-shop to gather and disseminate practice-oriented results from OGs and Horizon projects to end users, bridging the gap between research and implementation. Finally, Orsolya also mentioned peer-to-peer learning as a crucial factor for widely sharing and using the results from OGs. Existing instruments in the Horizon Europe programme such as living labs, lighthouses and demonstration projects, such as [Climate Farm Demo](#), can effectively facilitate this goal. According to her, farmers are eager to learn from their peers and their first-hand experience about innovations that are effective and sustainable. This peer validation creates

confidence in the adoption of changes and innovations, ultimately driving successful scaling-up efforts.



6. Spotlighting and celebrating 3 400+ EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects - Innovation exhibition

The conference included an innovation exhibition. Its goals were to highlight the achievements of EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects (OGs), exchange and learn from their experiences, and boost possibilities to share their outcomes, while also fostering networking and collaboration.

As part of the conference's agenda, the exhibition area was accessible to the participants on 7 and 8 May, presenting the work and results of 73 OG projects and 8 Horizon projects. In addition to these projects, EIT Food was also represented for its role in creating connections and stimulating innovation across the food system. The Portuguese CAP Network, the Portuguese National Contact Point for Horizon Europe, and the EU CAP Network also presented their services at a stand in the exhibition. Furthermore, DG AGRI of the

European Commission had a stand to inform the participants about Horizon Europe funding opportunities and projects for sustainable agriculture, forestry and rural areas, including the Mission 'Soil Deal for Europe', which may be of interest to the OGs.

During the exhibition, the 30 EIP-AGRI Innovation Award nominee projects were put in the spotlight, with short introductions on stage, where they were given the opportunity to briefly present their projects before the Award ceremony.

A list, with access to further information on all projects represented in the innovation exhibition, can be found [on the EU CAP Network website](#).





7. Ceremony ‘EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards’

To celebrate the great variety of innovative OG projects and their achievements over the past eight years, the [EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards](#) for OG projects were organised. The main objective of the

awards was to recognise and reward outstanding EIP-AGRI OGs which have developed innovative practices, solutions, products and processes. OGs competed in six award categories:

- **Sustainable management of natural resources:** OG projects that demonstrate innovative practices in resource efficiency and management which support sustainable transitions in agricultural systems.
- **Business models in food supply chains:** OG projects that showcase innovative business models with a focus on short food supply chains, marketing and consumption initiatives which have the potential to improve farm incomes, promote sustainable farming systems and contribute to local economic development.
- **Animal welfare and husbandry:** OG projects that contribute to improving animal welfare and sustainability of animal farms through innovative practices related to cage-free practices, precision livestock farming, new commercial opportunities and so on.
- **Climate change mitigation and adaptation:** OG projects that strengthen the resilience of agriculture and rural areas through innovative initiatives and practices directly related to climate change mitigation and adaptation or related to efficient energy management.
- **Sustainable forest management:** OG projects that showcase innovative forest management approaches related to, for example: climate-smart forestry, pests and diseases management, nature restoration, forest ecosystem services, new technologies and circular bioeconomy.
- **Digitalisation:** OG projects that demonstrate how digitalisation has great potential to increase profitability, improve working conditions for farmers, foresters and others, as well as improve the environmental and climate impact of agriculture and forestry.

A seventh award was given to the ‘public favourite’ OG project, as voted on by the general public.

A call was launched and published [on the EU CAP Network website](#). In total, 240 applications were received through the call. Dedicated technical committees involving experts in the field selected the nominees in each category, adhering to the set selection criteria. There were 5 nominees selected in each category (30 nominees in total). The nominees created videos presenting their projects, which acted as the basis for the ‘public favourite’ voting, as well as being a key aspect of the final selection of winners per category. The winners in the six categories were selected by a dedicated jury,

composed of EIT Food, COPA-COGECA, EUFRAS, European Innovation Council (EIC), Agroecology Europe, EIP-AGRI Support Facility and the European Commission (DG AGRI).

The winners were announced during the Awards Ceremony on 7 May 2024 in Estoril, Portugal, as part of the overall conference. The ceremony was attended by the conference participants and was an opportunity for celebration for both winners and nominees.

The Awards ceremony was recorded, and a press article was published after the ceremony. Both can be found on the [event page](#) on the EU CAP Network website.



8. Welcome to Day 2

Welcome message by Mario Milouchev, Director for CAP Strategic Plans II, DG AGRI, European Commission

The day commenced with a welcome message by Mario Milouchev, Director for CAP Strategic Plans II at DG AGRI, European Commission. In this opening address, Milouchev highlighted the significance of EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects (OGs) in promoting innovation and bridging the gap between research and practice within the realms of agriculture, forestry and rural development. With 6 600 OGs anticipated for the new CAP funding period, this day's focus was on envisioning the future. Milouchev urged the audience to consider how this upcoming generation of OGs will tackle the challenges faced in EU agriculture, forestry and rural development, creating innovations tailored to local and regional contexts.

He concluded by outlining the day's sessions and emphasised that the conference outcome and insights were invaluable for DG AGRI, Member States, Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks, policymakers, advisors, researchers, farmers, farmers'

organisations, and all relevant stakeholders. As ambassadors of EIP-AGRI, these stakeholders can actively contribute to shaping the next generation of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups.



9. Lessons learnt from the past

Carlotta Valli from COGEA / Bip Group presented the main highlights from the 'Study on outcomes achieved by EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects under the CAP'. This presentation can be accessed [on the event webpage](#).

Key points included:

- Almost all OGs developed innovative solutions, contributing to innovation-oriented communities.
- The main drivers and barriers to OG outcomes are organisational and social aspects, communication, dissemination and support provided to OGs, alongside external factors.
- The composition of the project partnership, inclusion of farmers/foresters, and management skills are crucial for co-creation and innovative solutions.
- It is important to highlight solutions through peer-to-peer events and on-farm demonstrations.
- Open calls for OG partnerships align with a bottom-up approach.
- Administration burdens are a concern, though simplified cost options have improved the situation.
- Support from AKIS actors during application and implementation is crucial.



The study showed that the EIP-AGRI enabled new collaborations and spread innovative solutions beyond OG partnerships. For more information, the study is available [on the EU CAP Network website](#).



10. Preparing the next generation of Operational Groups

Seven parallel workshops were organised to support the next generation of EIP-AGRI OG's, focusing on key aspects such as transnational collaboration.

Each workshop had a keyword: START, FACILITATE, CO-CREATE, ENABLE, SHARE, COLLABORATE and TRANSNATIONAL. Participants chose workshops based on their interests and engaged in pre-conference networking via online documents.

Workshop highlights:

Workshop	Main focus
START	This workshop focused on capturing grassroots innovative ideas and developing them into OG project proposals. Key points included the importance of existing trusted relationships, visibility of advisors and innovation brokers, and the participatory approach in building partnerships.
FACILITATE	This workshop addressed ensuring smooth-running of OG projects by focusing on facilitation, trust, communication and reducing administrative burdens. Highlights included the importance of clear objectives, continuous communication, and training in facilitation.
CO-CREATE	This workshop involved farmers and foresters for better collaboration and their full integration from start to finish of the project, ensuring that practitioners and all end-users can fully benefit from their results.
ENABLE	This workshop focused on the support provided to OGs throughout the entire project by institutions and organisations such as Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks, innovation support services, advisors and Paying Agencies.
SHARE	This workshop emphasised sharing OG results for better uptake by practice, during and beyond the lifespan of the project.
COLLABORATE	This workshop fostered networking and collaboration between OGs and other innovative projects.
TRANSNATIONAL	This workshop prompted networking and collaboration across borders through the creation of trans-national OGs.

Upon registration, participants had the opportunity to choose their preferred topics and were assigned to one of the seven workshops. Additionally, prior to the conference, participants were encouraged to begin networking and sharing views and experiences on the topics through seven online documents, one for each topic.

This chapter includes the main outcomes of the seven interactive workshops, as well as the experiences and insights shared by participants directly in the seven online documents.

Brief description of processes in workshops

Each workshop was guided by a series of questions to steer discussions. The primary objective was to foster conversation and generative dialogue, allowing participants to identify and share solutions and views based on their experiences.

All workshops began with two presentations: one from an EIP-AGRI Operational Group and another from a Horizon project, setting the scene and inspiring the interactive discussions. The exception was the workshop on transnational OGs, which featured a single presentation from an OG. Following these presentations, participants engaged in individual reflection (using an experience curve, time-travel dynamic, or writing on Post-its – this varied by workshop), followed by pair conversations and small group discussions. The workshops concluded with a group discussion involving all participants sharing key success stories, recommendations and further insights. Each workshop had one or two spokespersons selected by participants who shared a story or the workshop's main conclusions in the conference plenary.

More detailed outcomes from each workshop theme are presented in the annexe, while the main highlights from each workshop are presented in the following chapters.

10.1 START - Starting from an innovative idea: developing it into an Operational Group project proposal

EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OGs) are multi-actor projects that unite various types of participants to collaborate and find innovative solutions to needs and opportunities identified by farmers and

foresters. The formation of an OG is, therefore, a crucial moment where initial ideas are transformed into potential innovative solutions to be tested in real practice.



This workshop focused on the preparatory phase: the aim was to understand how grassroots innovative ideas can best be captured and developed into OG project proposals.

Opening presentations:

- **Carmen Landuyt**, representing the OG **'From handyman to manufacturer: professionalisation of self-made mechanisation in Flanders'** (presentation accessible [on the event webpage](#)), shared the inspiring story of how this OG was born from a demonstration day combined with an innovation contest for farmers who build their own machinery.
- **Patrizia Proietti**, representing the Horizon project **'ATTRACTISS'** (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)), provided concrete examples of how innovation support services can help turn an innovative idea into a OG project application.



Leading questions in the workshop:

Q1. In your experience, how can grassroots innovative ideas from end-users be best captured? How are the needs and opportunities experienced by farmers and foresters turned into a project idea?

Q2. In the current situation (Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2022), where did ideas for Operational Groups come from – farmers, advisors, researchers, companies, etc.? So far, which

type(s) of actor(s) do you think have been most dominant in delivering project ideas in your country?

Q3. In your experience, are project partnerships built with the right partners, including the relevant complementary expertise to help achieve the project objective?

Q4. In your experience, how are OG project proposals prepared? How do Operational Groups decide on the partner who takes the lead in the project? How did this affect the project proposals?

Main highlights from group discussions:

- When capturing innovative ideas from end-users, existing trusted relationships are beneficial, since farmers and foresters prefer to trust those they can approach to share and validate their ideas or needs. Therefore, those who have regular contact and good communication with farmers and foresters, such as advisors, are key actors. Additionally, it is important to speak the "language" of farmers and foresters to understand and translate their needs into project ideas.
- Advisors and innovation brokers need to be visible and easily accessible, so that farmers and foresters know whom to approach to discuss their needs or ideas.
- Stakeholders' groups and/or a networking space for organising meetings when specific challenges or ideas arise, where everyone feels comfortable to share needs and ideas, are crucial enablers for capturing grassroots ideas.
- When starting to prepare a project proposal, discussions among peers help to refine ideas that meet concrete needs from practitioners. Moreover, innovation needs should first be double-checked to see if a solution already exists.
- When finding partners and creating the partnership, trust is a key element. Most importantly, the project needs to be built through a participatory approach involving all partners.
- While developing the project idea, the role of each partner must be clearly identified, and a competent project coordinator should be chosen.



10.2 FACILITATE - Facilitating: ensuring a smooth-running Operational Group project

This workshop focused on ensuring the smooth operation of EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects by addressing key factors such as facilitation, trust, motivation, communication, administrative burden, and partnership agreements.

Opening presentations:

- **Lidia Moron-Morawska**, representing the **OG 'Cooperation for the creation of an innovative local market'** (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)), highlighted that the most crucial factor for ensuring the smooth functioning of the project is having an experienced leader responsible for continuous supervision over the correct and efficient execution of tasks. In the case of this OG, goals were achieved thanks to a series of regular online meetings, demonstrating the essential nature of continued communication. However, funding the project in tranches posed a significant challenge in maintaining financial liquidity for all partners to perform tasks on time as planned.
- **Sylvain Sturel**, representing the **Horizon project 'i2connect - interactive innovation'** (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)) referred to some tools and key outputs that i2connect can offer to OGs. He described the "Spiral of Initiative" that occurs over the course of a project, involving warm phases (people with ambitions meet, inspire others, experiment, etc.) and cold phases (people plan, organise, negotiate, struggle for acceptance, etc.), both requiring attention from facilitators. Facilitators play a crucial role in recognising interaction patterns and acting accordingly to promote negotiation and strengthen relationships between different actors in different phases.



The leading questions in the workshop:

- Q1.** What keeps partners in Operational Groups engaged from start to finish? What discourages them from actively participating in project decision-making and activities?
- Q2.** Is there a need for facilitation or training in facilitation for project partners? How can efficient communication be stimulated and trust among partners increased?
- Q3.** What needs to be included in the partnership agreement to help Operational Group projects run smoothly?

Q4. What support do project partners need to ensure smooth-running Operational Group projects?

Q5. Is the administrative burden for Operational Groups heavy? How could it possibly be lowered without compromising success, transparency, and cost-effectiveness?

Main highlights from group discussions:

- Timely definition of the project's main goals, early involvement of all partners, shared decision-making, and the development of a common, realistic, and economically viable vision contribute throughout the project's duration.
- Clarity on objectives, responsibilities and activities and having a shared vision are important for all partners to be committed to the project and feel appreciated. Identifying the strengths of partners and assigning roles accordingly helps to create successful and stable project teams.
- Continuous internal communication, trustful and respectful relationships, a 'common language' that is suitable for all project partners, regular face-to-face meetings, and shared feedback are crucial. Implementing a contact point may be useful for partners to clarify various project-related questions and concerns.
- Innovations that are relevant to practice, and have tangible and useful outputs for all partners, motivate the team.
- Not giving sufficient importance to soft skills can result in poor engagement and unsatisfactory results. Therefore, facilitation or training in facilitation is crucial, especially for coordinating partners.
- Including mechanisms for conflict resolution and regular evaluation of the project progression helps the project to adapt to changing conditions and needs.
- Allocating a budget for socialising and networking with project partners is important.
- Less bureaucracy, simplified procedures and administrative support are important. Small and medium-sized farmers/foresters and organisations sometimes reject participating due to bureaucracy.
- Advance payments can eliminate the need for bank guarantees, which is a significant challenge for some small and medium-sized farmers/foresters and organisations.
- Training and professional support is important and may include the correct use of digital platforms and communication tools as well as training facilitators and project coordinators to professionalise communication and coordination skills.



10.3 CO-CREATE - Involving farmers and foresters from start to finish: ensuring that end-users are benefitting

This workshop focused on the engagement of farmers and foresters in OGs, from the start to the end of the project, to ensure that end-users are actually benefitting from the project's results.

Opening presentations:

- **Raquel Arroyo**, representing the OG **'ECOPIONET - Innovation and bioeconomy in rural environment'** (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)) shared the experience of this project that successfully engaged farmers through an innovative knowledge exchange methodology, leading to 20 farmers successfully converting to organic farming.
- **Susanne von Münchhausen**, representing the **Horizon project 'PREMIERE'** (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)) highlighted the difference between 'interactive innovation' and 'co-creation for innovation', which correspond to different levels of engagement. She also explained that PREMIERE provides support for the preparation of successful co-creative proposal development. Finally, Susanne also referred to the **Horizon project 'LIAISON'** and its relevant results, which are freely available.

The leading questions of the workshop:

Q1. What attracts farmers and foresters to become partners in Operational Group projects or to participate in the project activities without being a formal partner? What are their expectations and what benefits can they gain from taking part?

Q2. What dissuades farmers and foresters from becoming partners in Operational Group projects or engaging in project activities without being a formal partner? What drives them away?

Q3. Besides being partners in Operational Groups, what are other ways to involve farmers and/or foresters in Operational Group projects? What are the most successful approaches, methods, and activities?

Q4. What roles can be attributed to farmers and/or foresters in Operational Group projects to ensure that project results benefit practice? What specific actions can be taken to incentivise the uptake of project results?

Main highlights from group discussions:

- Farmers and foresters are attracted to projects that offer concrete (financial) benefits and provide effective solutions for challenges that they face in practice. Projects that address 'real' problems and offer tangible improvements/solutions attract practitioners.
- Farmers/foresters must be recognised in project activities at the same level as all other partners.
- Innovative farmers and foresters value projects that foster communities of practice where they can discuss with peers and exchange knowledge. Being part of a group with a common goal and having the opportunity to share experiences and interact with others is a valuable experience and add-on.
- Miscommunication with project coordinators and the use of scientific language can lead to disengagement. Therefore, it is important to simplify the scientific language so everyone can contribute to and feel welcome in discussions and meetings.
- The calendar of meetings and project events should be adapted to the schedules and timings of farmers and foresters.
- It must be ensured that farmers' and foresters' time is not wasted.
- Field visits and on-site meetings are effective methods to engage farmers and foresters, allowing them to experience direct benefits and facilitating peer-to-peer learning.
- Involving farmers and foresters in co-deciding and implementing project activities ensures that the goals align with practical needs and fosters active participation.
- Reducing the administrative burden and simplifying procedures can increase the engagement of farmers, especially those less accustomed to participating in OGs and other EU-funded projects.



10.4 ENABLE - Creating an enabling environment to support Operational Groups throughout the project

This workshop focused on the support needed or beneficial to provide to OGs throughout their lifespan.

Opening presentations:

- **Anita Beblek**, representing the OG 'Development and testing of a conserving soil cultivation in ecological market gardening - BioStripPlant' (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)), presented reflections from their experience as lead partner in OGs and as innovation support service, sharing key takeaways for an enabling environment for OGs.
- **Elena-Teodora Miron**, representing the Horizon project 'modernAKIS' (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)) shared insights on how 'modernAKIS' is contributing to an enabling environment for OGs.

The leading questions of the workshop:

Q1. In your experience, was there a need for support from Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks/National Rural Networks, advisors and/or an innovation support service for Operational Group projects? If so, what were the key issues that required support, and which entity provided the best help?

Q2. In your experience, what support was/is received from Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks/National Rural Networks, advisors and/or an innovation support service in the different stages of an Operational Group project, if any?

Q3. In your experience, how can these entities improve their support for Operational Group projects at different stages? What are the key issues? What else is needed?

Main highlights from group discussions:

- There is a need to have a dedicated contact person(s) in the Managing Authority and Paying Agency who is available throughout all project stages (application, contracting, implementation, dissemination). This support is particularly relevant during the application phase, for administrative issues. Additionally, support provided for discussing pre-proposals can help improve the quality of the project.
- More funding for OGs is needed, as well as support for the preparatory phase.
- There is also a need for training in facilitation, particularly for project coordinators.
- Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks, advisors and innovation support services can play a significant role in enhancing the visibility of OGs and disseminating their results.
- The support provided to OGs so far has mainly focused on administrative and bureaucratic issues (often through a contact person in Managing Authorities), and networking and collaborating with other OG projects.



Main points for improvement in the support provided:

- Calls open for longer periods, faster decisions and reduced bureaucracy, particularly regarding project modifications and reporting;
- Stronger emphasis on the need for training in facilitation for project teams (to improve communication and knowledge transfer);
- Further networking and support in connecting OGs that are working on similar topics;
- Enhanced proactive dissemination of OGs and their results, including demonstration activities to showcase project results and encourage their adoption;
- Creation of a structure with the capacity to mainstream and scale up relevant OG results;
- New funding tools need to be developed to support ongoing innovations and the adoption of results after the OG project is finished.



10.5 SHARE - Sharing results for better uptake by practice, during and beyond the lifespan of the project

This workshop focused on the sharing of results of EIP-AGRI Operational Group projects (OGs), considering that concrete use by practice, replication and scaling up of innovations are overall objectives of OGs.

Opening presentations:

- **Guillermina Fernández-Villar**, representing the OG 'TERRACTIVA - supporting new entrants into agroecology' (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)) shared the experience with the project's dissemination activities. She recommended that the sharing of information and stakeholder engagement should focus not on all farmers/foresters, but on the specific target group within them according to the topic and objectives of the project.
- **Lisa van Dijk**, representing the Horizon project 'EU-FarmBook' (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)), explained that the purpose of this online platform is to support the sharing of practice-orientated knowledge with farmers, foresters, advisors and many other end-users, thus fostering better uptake by practice. She emphasised that project results can and should be shared during and beyond the lifespan of OG projects, and invited all participants to register.



The leading questions of the workshop:

- Q1.** Were there sufficient and particular attention and activities dedicated to the communication and dissemination of project activities/results throughout the project? Did the OG call require any obligations related to communication and dissemination activities? If so, what exactly?
- Q2.** What were the communication and dissemination activities most applied during Operational Group project(s)? What type of activities were used and when? Which were the target group(s)? Were the chosen communication/dissemination channels effective in reaching that target group of practitioners?
- Q3.** Were the communication and dissemination activities organised throughout the Operational Group project lifespan, or only at its end? Were there any further communication activities after the project was finished? If so, what were they and how were they funded?

Q4. Do you have clear examples of the uptake of results from the OG project by farmers, foresters, or other end-users? In particular, was the knowledge generated in the Operational Group projects taken up in advice and training?

Q5. Is there any financial or other support from any other entity or organisation to communicate and disseminate the Operational Group projects? If so, which entity provided this support and what was the support provided?

Q6. What most often happens after an Operational Group project is finished: Do former partners keep collaborating, or do they start a new project? Are there any efforts to make the outcomes more utilised (marketing, agricultural legislation or payments for voluntary commitments, guidelines, etc)?

Main highlights from group discussions:

- Dissemination activities are often carried out throughout the project's life cycle, primarily intensifying during the last year. In some cases, activities continued after the end of the project, but this was challenging. Continued communication efforts were sometimes funded by the lead partner's own resources, voluntary contributions from participants, or through other/new project funds. Target groups typically included farmers, advisors, researchers, and other stakeholders. The channels chosen, such as farm demonstrations and social media, were generally effective in reaching the target groups. Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and consulting were highlighted as particularly effective. Farmers and foresters can be disseminators and ambassadors, particularly to their peers.
- Common communication activities included information days, on-the-job training for farmers, farm demonstrations, open days, social media channels, dedicated webpages, newsletters, local press articles, interactive workshops, thematic events, and regional/national exhibitions. Press and agricultural media can play a role during and beyond the lifespan of the OG.
- Connecting and sharing knowledge with other OGs avoids duplicated work, errors and pitfalls, and creates the opportunity to learn from their experiences. Joint communication investments may also be a good opportunity to connect with other OGs.
- The burden on individual OG budgets for communication activities could be reduced through the creation of a dissemination network as part of national AKISs - Managing Authorities and National CAP Networks can play an active role in supporting OGs in sharing their results.
- It is important that OGs have a communication strategy from the beginning. In doing so, it must be remembered that different audiences and target groups require different outputs and that there should be a sufficient budget for communication activities.
- There is a need for more structured and continuous communication efforts in OGs. Supporting OGs in developing a communication strategy may be useful.



- There are examples of OGs where their results have been effectively taken up by farmers and other end-users. The replication, uptake by practice, and mainstreaming of an innovation require continuity beyond the end of a project. The network generated by an OG can support this, through funding for maintaining the network/community of practice and further dissemination after the project completion is needed.
- Project results are not the only outcomes of the OG, but also the relationships established from networking and generated communities of practice, and these extend beyond the project. These long-lasting collaborative networks between farmers/foresters, researchers and other stakeholders are important to maintain and develop.
- Several entities have provided financial or other types of support for communication and dissemination. National CAP Networks and the EU CAP Network have been significant contributors. Farmers' cooperatives and associations have often advertised

events organised by OGs and supported their dissemination activities. Additional support came from Horizon projects and regional and national initiatives.



10.6 COLLABORATE - Inspiring Operational Groups to collaborate with other innovative projects

The objective of this workshop was to discuss the collaboration between EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and other projects, exploring opportunities, needs for support and how this collaboration be promoted.

Opening presentations:

- **Tamara Korošec**, representing the OG [‘The role of industrial hemp in adaptation to climate change and in protection of agricultural resources’](#) (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)) explained how a social enterprise connecting 160 hemp growers in Slovenia focused on collaborating with as many relevant institutions and projects as possible to reach their goals.
- **Ana Ventura**, representing the Horizon project [‘FOREST4EU - Connecting forestry and Agroforestry partnerships across Europe’](#) (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)), explained how this project supports the dissemination of OG results and promotes the networking of OGs dealing with forestry and agroforestry in the EU.

The leading questions of the workshop:

Q1. In your experience, did Operational Groups collaborate with other project(s) during their project? If so, with what type of project was this (another Operational Group, a Horizon project, another European or national/regional project, etc.)? Was that project from the same or a different country?

Q2. In your experience, if the Operational Group collaborated with other project(s), what kind of collaboration was this? What types of activities were organised together (an online meeting to share experiences, sharing project documents, a visit to a farm for a demonstration, a joint event, etc.)? Which activities were more beneficial and inspiring?

Q3. In your experience, if the Operational Group collaborated with other project(s), what were the benefits for the OG project, if any? In

general, do you have a view on how Operational Groups can benefit from cooperating with other projects?

Q4. Please share some interesting examples/experiences of collaboration between an Operational Group and other projects. How can OGs be supported and inspired to collaborate more effectively with other innovative projects? What can be done?

Main highlights from group discussions:

- Several OGs have collaborated with other projects including other OGs, Horizon projects, Interreg projects, ERANET, PRIMA, LEADER, and ERASMUS projects. These collaborations often involved projects from the same country, but also from different countries. Collaborations have been noted in countries such as Greece, Slovenia, Germany, Finland, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Lithuania, and Belgium.
- Collaborations included sharing documents and results, cross-visits, field visits, information days, online meetings, joint events, conferences, webinars, joint demonstrations, joint newsletters, and through Thematic Networks and Living labs.
- Activities that were more beneficial and inspiring included: field visits, cross-visits, joint demonstrations, and practical on-farm events. Online meetings and webinars were also effective for sharing knowledge and experiences and disseminating results broadly.
- Identified benefits from collaboration included the exchange of knowledge, increased visibility, inspiration and integration of new information/new ideas, and improved engagement of stakeholders and project partners. Additionally, collaboration facilitated quicker project progress, feedback, avoided duplication of work, and facilitated the adoption of innovations.
- Some examples/experiences of collaboration shared were: the OG [‘ROBUSTAGNEAU’](#) (France) organised cross-visits to five different EU countries and collaborated with the OG [‘Live Lambs Project’](#)



(UK); collaborations between Horizon Thematic Networks and OGs such as 'CONSEMI' (Veneto, Italy) and 'MIXWHEAT' (Sicily), and the OG 'FERTIRRIEGO' from Extremadura (Spain) collaborated with the OG 'REGACORK' from Alentejo (Portugal).

- Ideas on what can be done to support and inspire OGs to collaborate further included: increased collaboration between administrations in Member States to provide support for cross-border



and transnational collaborations, having OGs incorporate collaboration as part of their work plan from the start, increasing OG visibility through dissemination and promotional activities and complementary funding programmes, providing dedicated tools and platforms for OGs to connect with other projects, and encouraging cross-visits between OGs and the involvement of advisory networks to facilitate practical knowledge exchange.



10.7 TRANSNATIONAL - Fostering transnational Operational Groups

The seventh workshop had the main objective of reflecting on how transnational EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OGs) could look in the future.

The workshop started with a presentation from an OG:

- **Anri Timonen**, representing the OG 'SMART FEED - Smart measurements in cattle feeding and health' (presentation available [on the event webpage](#)), shared the concrete experience of working transnationally within the framework of an OG: this project has partners from Finland and Estonia.

The leading questions of the workshop:

Q1. In your view, what are the main benefits of cross-border/transnational Operational Group projects?

Q2. From your experience, how do you think the establishment of transnational or cross-border Operational Groups could most easily be done? What could these Operational Group projects possibly look like?

Q3. Based on your experience, what do you think is needed to generate transnational and cross-border Operational Group projects? What can help and what is missing (support, tools, etc.)?

Q4. Would you like to be involved in/start a transnational or cross-border Operational Group project? If so, what are the specific topics or project ideas that you would like to tackle?

Main highlights from group discussions:

Main benefits of cross-border/transnational OGs include:

- Knowledge and innovation sharing - these projects encourage the exchange of knowledge and innovative ideas and practices

across borders and facilitate cooperation that brings together local and global benefits.

- Addressing common challenges - they enable working on broader issues (such as climate change, water scarcity, or animal health) that are not restricted to borders and have a larger impact and/or are more complex.
- Synchronising efforts - by aligning calls and funding across Member States, they engage more diverse and multidisciplinary teams from various regions/countries, combining more diverse perspectives and resources and promoting collaboration across borders, thus contributing to a more interconnected agricultural ecosystem in the EU.
- Enhanced communication and networking: these projects enable the amplification of results' impact through their dissemination beyond borders.
- Resource efficiency: they can potentially facilitate more efficient resource management and avoid duplication of efforts, enhancing synergies among regions and countries.

Ideas for the establishment of transnational or cross-border OGs:

- Digital platforms and tools: develop digital platforms, databases and other tools to facilitate sharing project ideas, partner search and matchmaking. Digital platforms can also support online collaboration.
- Pilot projects: it might be a good approach to start with pilot projects to test and refine collaboration models, encouraging smaller initial projects to build experience and confidence.
- International meetings and events: organise international meetings and events (such as brokerage events and thematic



networking workshops) to connect stakeholders and share expertise.

- › Support and funding: provide small budgets to support the preparation of project proposals, and ensure agreement and financial support from regional and national authorities.
- › Structured approaches: implement a two-stage approach, and have initial ideas shared in events, followed by a proposal development phase.

What is missing:

- › Further support and networking: more networking events to strengthen collaboration, events organised by the EIP-AGRI Support Facility in collaboration with National CAP Networks and additional budget for attending EU or cross-border events.
- › Online platforms and coordination: an online platform to facilitate networking and information about calls.
- › Overcoming regulatory and bureaucratic barriers: reduction of bureaucracy and meetings between project proposal coordinators and administrations will help to overcome bureaucratic challenges and regulatory obstacles. Synchronisation of calls is needed.

Interest in being involved in/starting a transnational or cross-border OG:

- › Participants in the workshop expressed a keen interest in being involved in transnational/cross-border OG projects.
- › Specific topics included viticulture, olive trees, precision agriculture technologies, water scarcity, agroforestry, digital tools, carbon farming, social innovation in farming, organic agriculture, climate change mitigation and adaptation, beekeeping, biodiversity, circular systems, and food traceability.



Structure of transnational or cross-border OGs:

- › These projects could generally resemble national OGs, but with enhanced cross-border/transnational cooperation, and a focus on shared challenges.

The establishment of transnational or cross-border OGs could be facilitated through:

- › Synchronised calls for OGs across countries, and networking events to help find partners (even if online).
- › Organising online meetings after initial in-person meetings, also to further stimulate collaboration.
- › Providing support for finding partners and for navigating international cooperation.
- › Organising cross-visits to get to know each other, and to identify common problems in the field.



11. Reflecting on lessons learnt for the next generation of Operational Groups

The final plenary session of the conference was dedicated to short feedback from each parallel workshop, as the seven spokespersons shared one relevant experience or main highlight from group discussions using the storytelling method. These speeches were

interspersed with interactive exercises with the plenary - the audience was invited to interact with other participants on stage, to talk in pairs and to raise questions.

Short stories and reflections from the seven parallel workshops

Developing an innovative idea into an OG project proposal

Regarding the process of transforming innovative ideas into concrete proposals for OGs, a success story was selected by the participants in this workshop referring to a Belgium initiative called the 'Inspiration Academy'.

The so-called 'Academy' brings together farmers, researchers, and other stakeholders for a day-long tour (about 24 hours long), focused on a specific topic relevant to the participants. During this time, they travel together by bus and visit various sites related to the theme. All participants, regardless of their background, engage in discussions on an equal basis, sharing their insights and expertise. The visits inspire participants to consider new ideas and potential applications in their own contexts.

For example, a recent tour involved visiting farms in the Netherlands to explore innovative product-selling systems. Group discussions led to brainstorming on how to adapt and implement the automated store concept in Belgium. The idea evolved into a plan to start an OG to explore the feasibility and implementation of the concept.

The success of this approach is attributed to the equal participation of diverse stakeholders and the networking opportunities provided by the bus tour. Bringing together different viewpoints into a cohesive plan is crucial for developing successful OG project proposals.



Facilitating: ensuring a smooth-running OG project

Participants in this workshop identified numerous dos and don'ts from their experiences and presented a concrete example in plenary. They emphasised the importance of developing a realistic vision for an OG that is shared by all project partners.

For instance, potential solutions need to consider their economic viability from the farmers' and foresters' point of view. In a specific case, researchers recommended using a EUR 500 000 machine that only produced five litres of oil, which was far from being economically viable for farmers. A smooth-running OG requires a shared vision, ensuring that all partners are aligned. In this example, it was crucial to ensure that the solution would be sustainable and economically viable for farmers and foresters.



Involving farmers and foresters from start to finish: ensuring that end-users are benefitting

Participants in this workshop selected an example from Catalonia: a trip to Denmark was organised to explore the biogas sector, providing valuable knowledge and insights for farmers in Catalonia. Informal interactions during the trip were very impactful, fostering strong relationships beyond the project. Building strong relationships transforms the way researchers and advisors interact with farmers and foresters, enabling more effective communication and collaboration. Continuous engagement beyond a project's duration is essential, but becomes easier and more natural when there is a strong commitment from researchers and advisors to a given topic, region and/or project.

Creating an enabling environment to support OGs throughout the project

Within this topic, workshop participants decided to highlight that embracing a "dreamer" or "visionary" mindset is essential within the EIP-AGRI context, encouraging creative problem-solving and envisioning ideal scenarios. Due to the complexity of changing administration and bureaucratic procedures, the organisations that are part of the enabling environment face an even higher



challenge to implement changes or improvements, unless they creatively envision alternative possible scenarios. Participants in this workshop shared a narrative of an ideal scenario, where challenges are addressed swiftly, resources are allocated efficiently, and collaboration is fostered to support the success of OG projects. This proactive approach ensures that OGs can effectively overcome obstacles and maximise their impact.



Sharing results for better uptake by practice, during and beyond the lifespan of the OG project

Two main points were brought to plenary on this topic.

On one hand, effective communication and dissemination strategies should be integral to project proposals, potentially influencing project selection criteria. On the other hand, the steps needed for an adequate dissemination were highlighted:

1. organise pre-project joint meetings to properly develop the proposal;
2. include communication and dissemination strategy in the project proposal;
3. combine a mix of online and offline tools for dissemination, according to target groups;
4. plan dissemination from the start of the project, including peaks when results (intermediate and final) are achieved;
5. organise peer-to-peer cross-visits;
6. integrate project results into education systems;
7. create and maintain a lively network, which is also an outcome of an OG.

Inspiring OGs to collaborate with other innovative projects

While promoting collaboration between OGs and other innovative projects can be done through various actions, workshop participants decided to highlight the different possible formats of this collaboration. The identified collaboration formats were:

1. informal collaborations (e.g. farm visits, joint seminars, sharing good practices);
2. involvement in Horizon Europe or other types of projects where OGs can participate as case studies;

3. involvement in Horizon Thematic Networks (e.g. the [Soil-X-Change Project](#) focusing on sustainable soil and farm management);
4. engagement in pilot funding and other existing initiatives (OGs can benefit from Cascade funding pilots and from collaboration with Living Labs, digital innovation hubs, and similar projects);
5. within existing collaborations in rural communities, OGs collaborate with universities, research institutes and local programmes, spreading results and combining efforts with existing initiatives in the region.

Finally, workshop participants encouraged OGs to take the lead in initiating collaboration efforts, and reinforced that the time to start collaborating is now - collaboration is important and is urgent.

Fostering transnational OGs

The potential benefits of transnational OGs are significant, and were identified and discussed in this workshop. Participants advocated for the creation of transnational OGs to benefit local communities by tackling inter-regional, transnational and global challenges. By fostering collaboration, sharing knowledge and tools, and bringing together knowledge and partners from different countries, stakeholders can address a wide range of topics that go beyond borders, while keeping the needs of farmers and foresters at the forefront.



12. Closing words

Roberto Berutti delivered the closing remarks of the last day of the conference, expressing full support for EIP-AGRI and drawing insights from all the speakers, affirming that this was the right path. He emphasised the importance of co-creation, co-decision making, and tailored solutions, urging the celebration of successes and

recognition that everyone contributes as a winner. He encouraged maintaining the same level of enthusiasm and passion going forward. Gratitude was extended to all speakers and exhibitors, and particularly to the Portuguese CAP Network as event co-organiser for their efforts in making the conference a success.



Annexe



Introduction

This annexe gathers a collection of the outcomes from the seven parallel workshops organised on the last day of the conference. Workshops had different topics, diverse guiding questions and were

designed according to various facilitation processes. Main highlights from the workshops are integrated into the main body of this report. For more detailed information, please see below.

Workshop 1 - START

This workshop focused on the early stages of an EIP-AGRI Operational Group project (OG), while discussing issues such as grasping innovation needs from practice and turning them into project ideas, building partnerships, preparing project proposals, and the support provided along those phases.

Q1. In your experience, how can grassroots innovative ideas from end-users be best captured? How are the needs and opportunities experienced by farmers and foresters turned into a project idea? This is key information for the discussion, since innovation support services for capturing and developing grassroots innovative ideas now form a new obligation in the 2023-2027 CAP regulation.

Capturing innovative ideas from end-users:

Good practices

- Have advisors or researchers conduct regular visits to farms and collect needs for innovation. This may still be challenging for researchers who are not regularly working with practice, have different objectives and incentives, and use a different language.
- Existing trusted relationships are crucial in this context – farmers/foresters need to trust those whom they can address to share and validate their ideas or needs. Regular contact and good communication are key to building trust.
- Have advisors working as innovation brokers for OG projects.
- Make advisors and innovation brokers visible and accessible to everyone – farmers/foresters need to know whom to address to discuss their needs or ideas.
- Have innovation brokers, researchers, advisors, etc. practising active listening, so that challenges and innovative ideas are understood in depth.
- Establish a stakeholder group that organises meetings when specific challenges or ideas arise.
- Create a networking space where everyone feels comfortable, enabling end-users to come up with grassroots ideas.
- Foster enabling activities and tools to capture ideas, such as informal events/meetings for farmers (organised by farmers or advisors), and demo farms and open days. Also, online events for farmers/foresters. Information on needs for innovation can be collected by organising round tables with farmers/foresters, for instance. Participatory workshops and focus groups provide a supportive and collaborative environment. Informal conversations and on-farm visits are most relevant for observing first-hand the techniques, practices, and technologies farmers are already using, and what innovations are still needed.
- Continued work on a specific topic (such as within the context of a previous project) may lead to new project ideas, either as a follow-up or as part of the trial-and-error method.

Turning needs and opportunities into a project idea:

Good practices

- To capture and develop grassroots ideas from farmers/foresters it is important to speak their “language” to translate those needs into project ideas, facilitating the identification of potential solutions.
- Create or use trusted reference places (such as an ‘Innovation Centre’), organisations or persons whom end-users can address to further interact with other stakeholders (researchers, local authorities, NGOs, etc.) and discuss existing challenges in practice, and concrete ways to address them. A reference person can be an advisor or researcher who has a long-term and trusted relationship with farmers/foresters.
- Discussing an innovative idea with peers and other relevant actors will help to refine thinking and generate ideas with increased potential.
- Project ideas or innovation needs must be double-checked to see if the solution already exists. Sometimes solutions to problems from practice already exist but they are not well disseminated, available or ready to be used by farmers/foresters in a given context.
- Networks or other structures can facilitate and establish the connection between farmers/foresters and other types of innovation actors, helping them to find project partners. These support structures or networks require an independent facilitator with knowledge appropriate to collect existing needs from practice and who has trusted relationships with farmers/foresters.
- When finding partners and creating a partnership, trust is a key element. Partners need to bring the diverse knowledge that is needed to find the solution and to have a collaborative spirit. They need to have an open mind, and be practical and creative.
- Most importantly, the project concept should be built together involving all partners – project development should be based on a participatory approach.
- The role of all partners needs to be clearly identified, and a good project coordinator needs to be chosen – advisors can facilitate this process. The project coordinator does not need to be the partner with the stronger financial capacity, but needs to be the one with the actual capacity for such a role.
- When preparing the project proposal, it is good to also include, besides a business plan and a timetable, a contingency plan (or a ‘plan B’).



Q2. In the current situation (Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2022), where did ideas for Operational Groups come from – farmers, advisors, researchers, companies, etc? So far, which type(s) of actor(s) do you think have been most dominant in delivering project ideas in your country?

Key points:

- The vast majority of ideas came from group discussions involving people with different experiences, with particular relevance to advisors and researchers who are closely collaborating with farmers.
- However, a predominant source of ideas for OGs were researchers who closely followed up on fieldwork. While farmers/foresters remain fundamental stakeholders in bringing and shaping project ideas, so far there has been a dominance of research organisations, consultants and SMEs.
- Complex application processes, technical and bureaucratic requirements, and reporting obligations can deter farmers/foresters from engaging with the project.
- Advisors and family-owned farms/companies are frequently one-person or family-run businesses, which makes it difficult for them to be involved in project ideation.
- The influence of established institutions, such as universities, large farmers' organisations or industry, can sometimes overshadow the voices of individual farmers or smaller agricultural cooperatives.

Q3. In your experience, are project partnerships built with the right partners, including the relevant complementary expertise to help achieve the project objective?

Key points:

- One of the main prerequisites for partners is that they need to bring all the diverse types of knowledge that are needed to find

innovative solutions. Calls in some Member States stipulate specific types of partners, e.g. one of the partners must be an NGO, farmer/forester or a consultant, which may not always be in line with the project needs.

- Partnerships should involve stakeholders who have a vested interest in the project's success and can contribute actively throughout its lifecycle. Getting the right expertise on board and properly involving all partners needs to be carefully done; time and resources must be invested in this process.

4. In your experience, how are OG project proposals prepared? How do Operational Groups decide on the partner who takes the lead in the project? How did this affect the project proposals?

Key points:

- One parameter consistently taken into account is the managerial experience of the potential project coordinator. In practice, because administrative and reporting requirements are significant, in most cases the project leader is an organisation with the experience and staff to do so. Financial capacity is also a key parameter. Usually, it is a research institute that takes the leadership.
- In an ideal situation, the lead partner should be the farmer/forester or the project initiator if administrative, coordination and financial capacities are enabled. However, farmers/foresters or advisory organisations frequently do not have all these capacities.
- In general, the project coordinator should practice active listening and be able to co-define the project objectives without losing sight of the needs of farmers/foresters. Nevertheless, limitations in terms of depth of engagement with the agricultural community can result in project proposals that, while technically sound and feasible, may not fully capture the grassroots perspectives or address the specific needs and challenges faced by farmers/foresters.

Workshop 2 - FACILITATE

This workshop looked into the process management required for a smooth-running EIP-AGRI Operational Group project (OG) while keeping partners together, maintaining effective communication, and decreasing the administrative burden.

Q1. What keeps partners in Operational Groups engaged from start to end? What discourages them from actively participating in project decision-making and activities?

Encouraging and supportive factors:

- **Clear and shared vision, objectives and planning**
 - The organisation of a 'pre-project' workshop can help to elaborate a common vision and discuss different expectations. The timely definition of the main goals and the development of a common, realistic, and economically viable vision contribute to partners' commitment during the entire duration of the project.
 - Clarity on objectives, responsibilities and activities and having a shared vision is important so that all partners are committed

to the project and feel appreciated. Farmers should feel they are listened to, and researchers must empathise with non-scientific partners.

➤ Stable teams of equal partners

- The partnership needs to include all the right expertise, according to the topic and goals of the project.
- The professional background and expertise of partners should be shared to establish credibility.
- The strengths of partners should be identified and roles assigned accordingly, this will help to create successful and stable project teams.
- Clear responsibilities must be established and expectations managed to prevent partners from feeling unimportant or that they are wasting time.



› **Good coordination**

- › An experienced and committed project coordinator is crucial to realise a project successfully. The project coordinator is responsible for the continuous supervision of the progress but does not need to accumulate all coordination roles, facilitation roles, etc.
- › It may be useful to allocate the administrative processing/management to one contact person, other than the project coordinator.

› **Comprehensive communication throughout the project**

- › Continuous internal communication, trusting and respectful relationships, regular face-to-face meetings, and shared feedback are crucial. This also helps to create a safe space for sharing ideas, doubts and emotions.
- › It is important to find and use a common language that is suitable for all project partners – for farmers/foresters, as well as for researchers.
- › Continuous communication through meetings, emails, social media, and events helps to keep everyone informed and creates a sense of engagement.

› **Establishment of a contact/info point within the consortium**

- › A contact point will be useful for partners who are less familiar with the project procedures, as well as for the clarification of project-related questions and concerns.
- › Apart from coordination meetings with the whole project consortium, smaller and specific meetings can also be organised, and some meetings can take place on farms or in the fields (instead of inviting farmers/foresters to an office). Time for informal talks, as well as food and drinks, help to create a relaxed atmosphere.

› **Early involvement and usefulness**

- › Being involved from the start, thus having the opportunity to contribute to the project concept and design, motivates partners.
- › Identifying tangible benefits, whether economic, physical or psychological, motivates partners.
- › Fair compensation for contributions to the project also helps to encourage engagement.

› **Joint decision-making**

- › Being able to make joint decisions is important to ensure long-term satisfactory results. Therefore, not only the project coordinator but all partners should be involved in the co-creation process, having a shared vision, shared responsibilities and taking shared risks.

Discouraging Factors:

› **Authoritarian approaches**

- › Top-down management and lack of or weak communication may result in demotivation.

› **Too strong focus on research**

- › Projects that are more focused on research rather than on solving practical problems discourage farmers/foresters who need to see clear benefits for their work.

› **Excessive bureaucracy**

- › High levels of bureaucracy, administrative burden, advance payment requirements, and insufficient compensation can demotivate partners, particularly farmers/foresters and small or medium-sized organisations.

› **Unclear responsibilities and poor communication**

- › Ambiguous distribution of responsibilities, limited opportunities for input, resource constraints, and mismatched expectations can demotivate partners.

› **Partnership missing adequate skills**

- › When the project team lacks the range of expertise that is necessary to achieve the project goals, it can lead to frustration.
- › Partners should not be selected out of convenience. Sometimes partners are chosen for their strong credentials and administrative capabilities, but they may lack the time, expertise or motivation to fully engage with the project and contribute to achieving its objectives.

› **Disregard for soft skills**

- › Not giving sufficient importance to soft skills and aspects such as motivation, communication, facilitation, conflict prevention and management can result in poor engagement and unsatisfactory results.

Q2. Is there a need for facilitation or training in facilitation for project partners? How can efficient communication be stimulated and trust among partners increased?

Key points:

› **Importance of facilitation skills**

- › Facilitation or training in facilitation is crucial, especially for partners with a role in project coordination. OG coordinators should be trained in facilitation skills. Effective meetings that engage all partners require specific skills and participatory methodologies.
- › Facilitators should be experienced and trusted by the group.
- › Skilled facilitators can mediate between project partners, fostering a cooperative environment and ensuring an atmosphere of trust. Allocating part of the budget for training or contracting a facilitator can help.

› **Budget for socialisation**

- › Allocating a budget for socialising and networking with project partners is important. Regular meetings with time for socialisation funded by the project can help.



Q3. What needs to be included in the partnership agreement to help Operational Group projects run smoothly?

Key points:

- **Elaborated project plan**
 - A detailed and well-thought-out project plan, involving all partners, is crucial, and the starting point for a sound partnership agreement.
- **Well-defined responsibilities**
 - The partnership agreement should clarify responsibilities and include procedures for withdrawals from the project. Clear guidelines for decision-making, partner inclusion, and handling project results are essential, but also on contribution to financial costs, time allocation and timeline, and shared potential risks that may arise during the project term.
- **Balanced consortium**
 - The agreement should ensure that partners contribute in a balanced way according to their role in the project, without predominance of individual interests. Transparency in financial management is of the essence, as well as effective communication and management of expectations.
- **Conflict resolution mechanisms**
 - Including mechanisms for conflict resolution and regular evaluation of the project development helps the project adapt to changing conditions and needs, and to resolve disagreements constructively and timely.
- **Shared risks**
 - During the lifespan of the project unexpected issues may occur, problems arising within the project itself or due to external factors. Potential risks and solutions should be integrated into the consortium agreement.

Q4. What support do project partners need to ensure smooth-running Operational Group projects?

Key points:

- **Reduced bureaucracy**
 - More support from the Paying Agencies is needed, as well as a decrease in bureaucratic procedures. Small or medium-sized

farms and organisations sometimes hesitate, or even reject participating due to bureaucracy, e.g. the need to present bank guarantees. Besides, more flexibility in project modifications and changes in budget allocation is important.

- Simplified procedures from the application phase to final project reporting are essential.
- **Project budget**
 - Advance budget allocations, especially for farmers/foresters, are important.
 - It is also relevant to develop a financial plan, including cash-flow projections, before the start of the project.
- **Training of project partners**
 - Training is frequently needed, ranging from support to partners on project management, to the use of digital platforms, and including communication skills and tools. It may also include the training of facilitators and project coordinators.
- **Innovation support services and administrative support**
 - Qualified innovation support services or advisors are necessary during the entire project period, helping with both content and procedural-related issues, including reporting and administrative-related issues, but sometimes they are missing.

Q5. Is the administrative burden for Operational Groups heavy? How could it possibly be lowered without compromising success, transparency, and cost-effectiveness?

Key points:

- The administrative burden related to applications, payments and project amendments is considerable. Procedures are bureaucratic and based on measures from Rural Development Programmes.
- Simplifying and reducing the number of required documents (timesheets, reports, invoices, etc.) is crucial, especially for small to medium-sized farmers and companies. Third-party support often becomes necessary due to this burden, leading to increased project costs.
- Several procedures, such as assessing applications, cost allocation/justification and project amendments, require professionals with broad competencies, including insights into practice.

Workshop 3 – CO-CREATE

The third workshop looked into the experience of involving farmers and foresters from the start to finish of an EIP-AGRI Operational Group project (OG), considering what is attractive to them, their expectations and the benefits of being involved in an OG. Additionally, discussions also considered the involvement of farmers and foresters who are not partners in the project.

Q1. What attracts farmers and foresters to become partners in Operational Group projects or to participate in the project activities

without being a formal partner? What are their expectations and what benefits can they gain from taking part?

Attracting/encouraging Factors:

- **Tangible solutions**
 - Farmers and foresters are attracted to projects that offer practical benefits and provide effective solutions for challenges they face in practice. Projects that address these



'real' problems from the ground and offer tangible /solutions attract practitioners.

› **Innovation and knowledge exchange**

- › Farmers/foresters appreciate being part of innovation processes, value opportunities to test innovations, new practices and methods, to be recognised as innovative, and having access to new knowledge. Besides, they benefit from peer-to-peer learning.

› **Community and interaction**

- › Being part of a group with a common goal and having the opportunity to share experiences and interact with others is a valuable experience and add-on.
- › Innovative farmers/foresters value projects that foster communities of practice, where they can discuss with their peers, share experiences, and find solutions together. This includes discussions, networking, and mutual support.
- › As with other stakeholders, farmers/foresters are drawn to projects where they feel heard and can work on an equal footing with researchers and other types of partners.

› **Financial support and recognition**

- › Having project costs covered through funding is crucial. Additionally, recognition for successful implementation and the chance to co-develop the project are motivating factors.

Q2. What dissuades farmers and foresters from becoming partners in Operational Group projects or engaging in project activities without being a formal partner? What drives them away?

Dissuading factors:

› **Financial constraints**

- › Financial challenges, such as the need to pay all project costs in advance, bank guarantees, and notarial acts, can deter potential partners from participating.

› **Administrative burden**

- › The additional workload for administration is a significant challenge. The complexity and time required to comply with project requirements can be overwhelming. Many farmers/foresters do not have the capacity to deal with additional bureaucratic procedures.

› **Communication issues**

- › Miscommunication with project coordinators and other partners, and the use of scientific language can lead to disengagement.

› **Lack of perceived value**

- › Farmers/foresters are less likely to participate if they do not see the potential for useful outcomes or question the value of their involvement.

› **Time constraints**

- › The time required for meetings and project activities can be daunting. Farmers/foresters may fear that committing to a project would destabilise their activities on the farm and increase their already high workload.

Q3. Besides being partners in Operational Groups, what are other ways to involve farmers and/or foresters in Operational Group projects? What are the most successful approaches, methods, and activities?

Successful approaches:

› **Field and farm visits**

- › Study trips, field visits, and on-site meetings are effective methods to engage farmers/foresters, creating opportunities to experience the direct benefits and outcomes of the project. These visits can be to farms but also to other locations that are of interest for transformation, commercialisation, training, or rural development aspects of the project.

› **Peer-to-peer learning and Communities of Practice**

- › Facilitating peer-to-peer learning through groups, platforms and events focused on topics of interest to farmers/foresters fosters connection, trust, and knowledge exchange, and encourages the adoption of new practices. Farmers/foresters value opportunities to share outcomes and provide feedback.

› **Tailored communication**

- › Tailored communication targeting their needs fosters the involvement of other farmers and/or foresters in OGs. Providing training on digital platforms also helps to involve them in these projects.

› **Funding to support participation in activities**

- › Covering costs for participation in events, field trips, etc., namely travel expenses, can also encourage their involvement.

Q4. What roles can be attributed to farmers and/or foresters in Operational Group projects to ensure that project results benefit practice? What specific actions can be taken to incentivise the uptake of project results?

Key points:

› **Co-decision making**

- › Involving farmers/foresters in co-deciding project activities ensures that the goals align with practical needs and fosters active participation.

› **Experimentation**

- › Farmers/foresters can conduct experiments under real farm conditions, and assist with monitoring, data collection and evaluation of the field trials and innovations. They can also contribute to the creative and reflective process of improving innovations and solutions.



› Demonstration and showcase

- › Farmers/foresters can act as demonstrators and highlight innovations, helping to disseminate successful outcomes and best practices to their peers.

› Feedback and communication

- › Providing feedback on project results and participating in communication and dissemination helps to ensure that the project remains relevant and practical.

› Peer-to-peer networking

- › Farmers can support peer-to-peer networking and mentoring, facilitating the adoption of new practices and technologies among their peers.

› Key roles

- › Farmers can take on key roles in the project, such as project coordinators, with appropriate support. This strengthens their commitment and ensures that the project is practice-oriented all the way through.

Workshop 4 - ENABLE

Participants in this workshop engaged in discussions on the enabling environment to support EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OG) along the various stages of the project, including the role of Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks, Paying Agencies, advisors and innovation support services.

Q1. In your experience, was there a need for support from Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks/National Rural Networks, advisors and/or an innovation support service to Operational Group projects? If so, what were the key issues that required support, and which entity is the best to help?

Key issues requiring support:

› Preparatory phase:

- › **Contact person:** there should be a dedicated contact person in the Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies who is available at all stages (application, contracting, implementation, dissemination) for continuous support. For example, in Austria, the Chamber of Agriculture provides this support. In particular, during the application phase, there is a need to have a contact who answers all **administrative questions**.
- › **Discussion of project pre-proposals:** having support from authorities in discussing pre-proposals can help improve the quality of the project in parameters such as the replication potential of project results, or the identification of obstacles and their solutions on various aspects (e.g., existing and future patents).
- › **Independent support:** There is a need for independent support during the application phase to help future partners navigate through administrative requirements and develop strong proposals. National CAP Networks (NN), and innovation support services can play vital roles here.
- › **Connecting potential partners:** Finding the right partners for a project proposal is often very challenging. Advisors and innovation brokers with a strong network and close ties to farmers/foresters can help connect relevant potential partners, translate needs or offers from the different actors, and help transform partners' ideas into one integrated project proposal. Authorities can also contribute to this goal.
- › **Funding:** There is a need for more funding for OGs. Not only OG projects can benefit from increased funding, but the possibility of having more OGs and open calls would be beneficial for concrete and applicable innovation solutions for farmers/

foresters and sustainable rural development. Additionally, it is relevant to be able to access smaller funding for preparation activities.

› Implementation phase:

- › **Facilitation support and training:** there is a need for training in facilitation, mainly for project coordinators and for researchers.
- › **Good communication and effective collaboration** between all stakeholders (including project partners, administration and other supporting actors) is needed - often OG projects face difficulties in their implementation due to poor communication, bad articulation with rules and legal compliance.
- › **Visibility to OGs and their results:** communication and dissemination activities usually imply plenty of resources and time that are always limited. National CAP Networks can give regional and national visibility to OGs and their results, and innovation support services can play a role in this respect.

Q2. In your experience, what was/is the support received from Managing Authorities, National CAP Networks/National Rural Networks, advisors and/or an innovation support service in the different stages of an Operational Group project, if any?

Support received:

› Preparatory phase:

- › **Overcoming the labyrinth of bureaucracy:** in some countries, Paying Agencies and regional institutions provide crucial assistance in navigating bureaucratic processes, such as helping in the eligibility of expenditures, or providing support to the preparation of project proposals.
- › **Contact point:** in some Member States there is a contact person who is available to provide support in all project stages, both online and presential.

› Implementation phase:

- › **Networking and collaboration:** EU CAP Network and National CAP Networks provide support in establishing connections with other OG projects and facilitating collaborations through the EU. Furthermore, there are webinars and other capacity-building events. Besides, some National Rural CAP Networks promote thematic groups involving OGs.



- › **Ongoing assistance:** in some countries there are contact persons in Managing Authorities who are available for continuous support throughout the project, attending meetings and providing guidance as needed. For instance, in Ireland, the Managing Authority provides full support (not just during the implementation phase), including a Steering Committee that monitors OGs and promotes problem-solving discussions.

Q3. In your experience, how can these entities improve their support to Operational Group projects in the different stages of the project? What are the key issues? What else is needed?

Key points for improvement:

- › **Reduced Bureaucracy:**
 - › **Simplify Procedures:** simplify administrative procedures regarding project modifications and reporting.
 - › **Faster decisions:** quicker decision-making processes are needed for the approval of applications and for project modifications.
- › **Enhanced communication and networking:**
 - › **Proactive dissemination:** Managing Authorities and National CAP Networks should establish digital platforms (websites, social media) to disseminate project results, reducing the individual burden of dissemination now needed for each OG.
 - › **Events:** organise more dissemination events, online meetings, field visits and networking activities to share good practices and lessons learned across OGs.
 - › **Continued support:** authorities should offer guidance on maintaining support beyond the project period to ensure the sustainability and further adoption of innovations.
 - › **Connecting OGs on the same topic:** there are OGs working on the same topic, either in the same region, country or beyond borders. Sharing challenges and solutions between OGs helps them to overcome barriers and find effective solutions - Managing Authorities, National CAP networks and innovation support services can effectively foster this knowledge exchange.

- › **Request good practices from OGs:**

- › **Ensure demonstrations:** some projects do not include demonstration activities on farms.
- › **Ensure facilitation:** projects should foresee time and resources for facilitation and meetings or work sessions where co-creation processes are facilitated.
- › **Publish results:** some projects do not publish their results with sufficient clarity and detail.

- › **Focused and effective training:**

- › **Facilitation training:** the need for training in facilitation for project teams needs to be emphasised, to improve communication and knowledge transfer.
- › **Demonstration activities:** increase the number of demonstration activities to display successful project results and encourage their adoption.

- › **Funding:**

- › **Calls open for longer periods: calls should be open for longer periods, enabling effective support and adequate time for the preparation of good quality project proposals.**
- › **Financial tools:** new funding tools should be developed to support ongoing innovation and the adoption of results after the project funding ends.

- › **Additional needs:**

- › **Inter-regional collaboration:** inter-regional projects need more emphasis, as they can put together activities with greater market impact.
- › **Scaling up:** after the innovation is tested in an OG, scaling up is still missing in most cases, and there is a need for a structure with the capacity to mainstream and scale up relevant innovations.

Workshop 5 - SHARE

This workshop focused on the need to share results from EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OG) for better uptake in practice, during and beyond the lifespan of the project, looking at aspects such as project activities on communication and dissemination, the actual use and impact of their results, as well as the situation after an OG is finished.

Q1. Were there sufficient and particular attention and activities dedicated to the communication and dissemination of project activities/results all along the project? Did the OG call require anything linked to communication and dissemination activities? What exactly?

- › **Attention to communication and dissemination:**
 - › There are varied situations. Several OGs gave significant emphasis to communication and dissemination activities throughout the project's lifespan. However, there were cases where the attention dedicated to communication was deemed

insufficient, suggesting a need for more structured and continuous communication efforts.

- › The OG calls sometimes included specific requirements for communication and dissemination activities. For example, Italy and Spain required communication activities while leaving some flexibility for projects on this matter. Lithuania had communication requirements with optional tools. Some countries, such as Ireland, required a strong focus on dissemination, significantly increasing the impact of projects. Other countries, such as Greece and Romania, differentiated between mandatory activities (such as creating a website), and optional ones (like education and training).



Q2. What were the communication and dissemination activities most applied during Operational Group project(s)? What type of activities were used and when? Which were the target group(s)? Were the chosen communication/dissemination channels the right ones to reach out to that target group of practitioners?

➤ **Most applied activities:**

- Common activities mentioned by participants included information days, on-the-job training for farmers, dedicated webpages, newsletters, and social media posts.
- Participants from France, Lithuania, Slovenia, Greece, Austria, Romania, and Italy mentioned the use of diverse communication methods such as local press, open days, farm demonstrations, (social) media channels (YouTube, TV shows, radio shows), interactive workshops, thematic events, and regional/national exhibitions.

➤ **Target groups and channels:**

- Target groups typically included farmers, advisors, researchers, and other stakeholders. The channels chosen, such as farm demonstrations and social media, were generally effective in reaching the target groups. Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and consulting were highlighted as particularly effective.

Q3. Were the communication and dissemination activities organised throughout the Operational Group project lifespan, or only at its end? Were there any further communication activities after the project was finished? If so, what were they and how were they funded?

➤ **Lifespan of communication activities:**

- Dissemination activities were often carried out throughout the project's life cycle, though intensifying during the last year and culminating in the final event. In some cases, activities continued after the end of the project, especially if the OG produced videos or other reusable content.
- After-project communication was sometimes a challenge, with ongoing efforts being limited to residual funds or voluntary contributions. In countries such as Italy and Germany, projects were disseminated, and their results were incorporated into education and advisory.

➤ **Funding for continued communication:**

- Continued communication efforts, after the project was finished, were sometimes funded by the lead partner's own resources, voluntary contributions from participants, or through other/new project funds. In Austria and Italy, communication activities after the project's end were supported by other available funds or company resources.

Q4. Do you have clear examples of the uptake of results from the OG project by farmers, foresters, or other end-users? In particular, was the knowledge generated in the Operational Group projects taken up in advice and training?

➤ **Uptake of results:**

- Several examples indicate that the results from OG projects were effectively taken up by farmers and other end-users. For instance, in Italy, results from OGs were incorporated into training activities and advisory services for farmers. Similarly, in France, Lithuania, Germany, and Austria, project outcomes were integrated into education and advisory initiatives.
- The knowledge generated in OG projects was often used in training courses, workshops, and field demonstrations.

Q5. Is there any financial or other support from any other entity or organisation to communicate and disseminate about the Operational Group project(s)? If so, which entity provided this support and what was the support provided?

➤ **Support from other entities:**

- Several entities provided financial or other type of support for communication and dissemination activities. National CAP Networks and the EU CAP network were significant contributors.
- Farmers' cooperatives and associations often advertised events and supported dissemination activities. For example, in Lithuania, the Agricultural Advisory Service played a key role in promoting project outcomes.
- Additional support came from related Horizon projects, regional initiatives, and national entities. Some regions, such as Italy, noted a lack of additional support for continued dissemination after the project ended.

Q6. What most often happens after an Operational Group project is finished? Do former partners keep collaborating, or do they start a new project? Are there any efforts to make the outcomes more used (marketing, agricultural legislation or payments for voluntary commitments, guidelines, etc), or other?

➤ **Post-project collaboration:**

- Typically, former partners keep in touch and sometimes apply for new OGs in subsequent calls. Previous collaboration in OGs often triggers new project ideas. For example, in Latvia, Slovenia, and Italy, former partners have successfully initiated new projects based on previous collaborations.
- New projects dedicated to further development of initial findings are common. For example, in France and Germany, OGs led to spin-off projects that expanded the scope of initial innovations.

➤ **Efforts to utilise outcomes:**

- The most common efforts to stimulate the use of project outcomes included marketing the results, incorporating them into agricultural legislation or guidelines, and seeking funding for further development.
- In some cases, successful OGs resulted in patenting new equipment or processes, as in the case of a German OG, where lavender harvesting equipment developed during the project was patented and marketed post-project.



Workshop 6 - COLLABORATE

During this workshop, participants were invited to share experiences and discuss opportunities and support needed to inspire EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OGs) to collaborate with other innovative projects at national and transnational levels.

Q1. Did Operational Groups collaborate with other project(s) during their project? If so, with what type of project was this (another Operational Group, a Horizon project, another European or national/regional project, etc.)? Was that project from the same or a different country?

> Collaborations:

- > There have been several OGs collaborating with other projects - these collaborations included other OGs, Horizon projects, Interreg projects, ERANET, PRIMA, LEADER, and ERASMUS projects. Examples of countries where such collaborations were noted include Greece, Slovenia, Germany, Finland, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Lithuania, and Belgium.
- > These collaborations often involved projects from the same country, but also included projects from different countries.

Q2. If the Operational Group collaborated with other project(s), what kind of collaboration was this? What types of activities were organised together (an online meeting to share experiences, sharing project documents, a visit to a farm for a demonstration, a joint event, etc.)? Which activities were more beneficial and inspiring?

> Types of Collaboration:

- > Collaborations included sharing documents and results, cross-visits, field visits, information days, online meetings, joint events, conferences, webinars, joint demonstrations joint newsletters, and through Thematic Networks and Living Labs.

> Beneficial and inspiring activities:

- > Field visits, cross-visits, joint demonstrations, and practical on-farm events were noted as particularly beneficial and inspiring - these types of activities facilitated direct knowledge exchange and practical application of results.
- > Online meetings and webinars were also effective for sharing knowledge and experiences and disseminating results broadly.

Q3. If the Operational Group collaborated with other project(s), what were the benefits for the OG project, if any? In general, how can Operational Groups benefit from cooperating with other projects?

> Benefits of Collaboration:

- > Collaborations led to the exchange of knowledge, increased visibility, inspiration and integration of new information / new ideas, and improved engagement of stakeholders and project partners.

- > Other benefits included quicker progress, more ideas and feedback, ensuring no duplication of work and receiving inspirational input.
- > Collaborations facilitated the adoption of innovations, provided opportunities to compare approaches with a wider audience, and allowed the sharing of knowledge, experiences and results across regions and countries.

Q4. Examples/experiences of collaboration between an Operational Group and other projects. How can OGs be supported and inspired to collaborate more and effectively with other innovative projects?

> Interesting Examples:

- > **France:** The OG '**ROBUSTAGNEAU**' organised cross-visits to five different EU countries and collaborated with the OG 'Live Lambs Project' (UK).
- > **Italy:** Collaborations included Horizon Thematic Networks and OGs such as **CONSEMI** (Veneto, Italy) and MIXWHEAT (Sicily). Additionally, the OGs collaborated with the **ALCOTRA** Interreg project in France.
- > **Spain and Portugal:** The OG '**FERTIRRIEGO**' from Extremadura (Spain) collaborated with the OG '**REGACORK**' from Alentejo (Portugal). This involved exchanging information and experiences on cork oak irrigation and fertilisation.

> Support and inspiration for collaboration:

- > Provide dedicated tools and platforms for OGs to connect to other projects and share information - there is a lack of information on what other OGs are doing.
- > Increase the visibility of OGs through dissemination and promotional activities, and complementary funding programmes.
- > OGs should incorporate collaboration as a part of their work plan from the beginning, including dedicated activities such as workshops and peer-to-peer interactions.
- > Identify projects with common challenges and solutions through Horizon Thematic Networks and Living Labs.
- > Encourage cross-visits and the use of advisory networks to facilitate practical knowledge exchange.
- > More collaboration between administrations in Member States to provide support for cross-border and transnational collaborations. Work with pioneer farmers and researchers involved in projects to look for collaborations and further develop and implement innovations.



Workshop 7 - TRANSNATIONAL

The seventh workshop focused on stimulating conversations aiming at fostering cross-border and transnational EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OGs), looking at needs for establishing them, and steps to take.

Q1. What are the main benefits of cross-border/transnational Operational Group projects?

- **Knowledge and innovation sharing:**
 - Encourage the exchange of knowledge and innovative ideas and practices across borders - these projects enable access to a more diverse and wider pool of expertise, knowledge, practices, experiences and solutions, which is particularly relevant to tackling more complex innovation needs or challenges that go beyond borders.
 - Facilitate cooperation that leverages local and global benefits.
- **Addressing common challenges:**
 - Enable work on common issues such as climate change, water scarcity, or animal health that are not restricted to borders and have a larger impact and/or are more complex.
- **Synchronising efforts:**
 - Align calls and funding across Member States.
 - Engage more diverse and multidisciplinary teams including farmers, researchers, advisors, industry, NGOs and others.
 - Combine diverse perspectives and resources from different regions and countries, promoting collaboration across borders and thus contributing to a more interconnected agricultural ecosystem in the EU.
- **Enhanced communication and networking:**
 - Amplify the impact of results through the dissemination of results and sharing of knowledge and innovations beyond borders.
- **Resource efficiency:**
 - Facilitate more efficient resource management and avoid duplication of efforts.
 - Enhance synergies among regions and countries.

Q2. How do you think the establishment of transnational or cross-border Operational Groups could most easily be done? What could these Operational Group projects possibly look like?

- **Digital platforms and tools:**
 - Develop online tools and databases to facilitate sharing project ideas and partner search and matchmaking.
 - Create digital platforms for virtual collaboration.

➤ **Pilot projects:**

- Start with pilot projects to test and refine collaboration models.
- Encourage smaller initial projects to build experience and confidence.

➤ **International meetings and events:**

- Organise international meetings to connect stakeholders and share expertise.
- Facilitate brokerage events and thematic networking workshops.

➤ **Support and funding:**

- Provide small budgets to support the preparation of project proposals.
- Ensure agreement and financial support from regional and national authorities.

➤ **Structured approaches:**

- Implement a two-stage approach where initial ideas would be shared in events, followed by proposal development phases.
- Separate technical from economic management to streamline processes.

Q3. What do you think is needed to generate transnational and cross-border Operational Group projects? What can help and what is missing (support, tools, etc.)?

What can help and is missing:

➤ **Support and networking:**

- Additional budget for attending EU or cross-border events dedicated to innovation and research.
- Events organised by the EIP-AGRI Support Facility in collaboration with National CAP Networks to discuss, collect, and analyse innovation needs from end-users.
- More networking events to strengthen collaboration.

➤ **Online platforms and coordination:**

- An online platform to facilitate networking and information about call-related events.
- Creation of networks on specific ideas to identify possible partners.

➤ **Overcoming regulatory and bureaucratic barriers:**

- Meetings between project coordinators and administrations to overcome regulatory obstacles.
- Synchronisation of calls, and reduction of bureaucracy.



Q4. Would you like to be involved/start a transnational or cross-border Operational Group project? If so, what are the specific topics or project ideas that you would like to tackle?

➤ **Interest in participation:**

- Participants expressed a keen interest in being involved in transnational or cross-border OG projects.

➤ **Specific topics:**

- Topics proposed included viticulture, olive trees, precision agriculture technologies, water scarcity, agroforestry, digital tools, carbon farming, social innovation in farming, organic agriculture, climate change mitigation and adaptation, bee-keeping, biodiversity, circular systems, and food traceability

Q5. What could these Operational Group projects possibly look like? How do you think the establishment of transnational or cross-border Operational Groups could most easily be done?

➤ **Project Structure:**

- Projects could resemble national ones, but with a focus on cross-border/transnational cooperation and shared challenges.
- Incorporate mutual recognition of rural development plans and related legislation.

➤ **Facilitating establishment:**

- Start with cross-visits to get to know each other and identify common problems in the field.
- Use online meetings after initial in-person meetings to maintain collaboration.
- Provide support for finding partners and for navigating through international cooperation complexities.
- Synchronise the calls across countries and organise networking events (even if online) to help find partners.



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