What is innovation?

Update: 30 September 2019
https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/what-innovation

Innovation in the agricultural and forestry sector is a broad subject, but in general terms can be described as “a new idea that proves successful in practice”. In other words, the introduction of something new (or renewed, a novel change) which turns into an economic, social or environmental benefit for rural practice.

Innovation under the EIP-AGRI may be technological, non-technological, organisational or social, and based on new or traditional practices. A new idea can be a new product, practice, service, production process or a new way of organising things, etc. Such a new idea turns into an innovation only if it is widely adopted and proves its usefulness in practice. This will depend not only on the new idea itself, but also on the market possibilities, the willingness of the sector to take it up, cost-effectiveness, knowledge and perceptions, accidental external factors etc.

Since it is impossible to predict how these factors work together to turn a new idea into an innovation, it is only possible afterwards to determine whether a new idea has led to a real innovation.

Given the impossibility of defining "innovation" in advance, it is not possible to support innovative actions by defining what is, or is not, “innovative”. Consequently the 2014-2020 RDPs can only offer financial support to activities which may be innovative, without making the innovative character of an operation an eligibility criterion for support.

However, innovation does not just happen by accident or because what is produced is novel to its environment. There are certain enabling conditions for new ideas to become a success and it is these enabling conditions that are promoted in EU rural development policy via support for the setting-up and running of so-called Operational Groups.

The Operational Group approach aims to make the best use of different types of knowledge (practical, scientific, technical, organisational, etc) in an interactive way by bringing together a targeted mix of specific actors (e.g. farmers, advisors, researchers, businesses, etc) to work together in multi-actor projects to build upon and test new ideas, find focussed solutions for specific issues or develop concrete opportunities that need the creative combination of scientific, practical and entrepreneurial skills. Each Operational Group is composed of those key actors that are in the best position not only to realise the project’s goals, but also to share experiences and to disseminate the outcomes widely go get the "ideas put into practice with success".

This approach goes far beyond simply speeding up the transfer from laboratory to practice (referred to as the "linear innovation model"), it is a dynamic, interactive approach that stimulates innovation, action, concrete results from all sides and – very importantly – co-ownership in multiple directions and dimensions. See the Information Box for more details on "Interactive" innovation under the
- Innovation in the 2014-2020 rural development regulation

Support for innovation has been a key priority for EU rural development for many years. Innovation objectives were stated in the Community Strategic Guidelines for rural development for 2007-2013 and were reinforced by the 2010 CAP Health Check. This trend towards increasing support for innovation was further reinforced within the CAP 2014-2020. The EAFRD Rural Development Regulation (No. 1305/2013) [1] deeply embeds innovation within 2014-2020 rural development policy by:

1. Introducing innovation as a cross-cutting objective that must be integrated into all priorities adopted by Member States in their rural development plans (RDPs);
2. Enshrining innovation within the “horizontal” Priority 1: Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry, and rural areas;
3. Including rural development policy as a key tool for supporting the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI), and;
4. Introducing a new aim for networking by national rural networks (NRNs), namely to “foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas”, including the specific obligation to implement activities “regarding partner search for the cooperation measure (Art. 35) and the provision of networking for advisors and innovation support services”.

All 2014-2020 RDPs must therefore address innovation and there are several measures in Regulation No. 1305/2013 that can be used to stimulate innovation. RDP managing authorities must effectively programme and implement these measures, and there is a particular emphasis upon ensuring a strategic approach to support for innovation. According to Article 8.1(c) of the regulation, all rural development programmes:

“... shall include a description of the strategy which demonstrates that:

iv) an appropriate approach towards innovation with a view to achieving the Union priorities for rural development, including the EIP for agricultural productivity and sustainability ... is integrated into the programme;

v) measures have been taken to ensure the availability of sufficient advisory capacity on ... actions related to innovation”

- Interactive innovation under the EIP-AGRI

Familiar concepts of innovation include one-way (“linear”) and “interactive” innovation. Linear innovation stands for a science and research driven approach, with new ideas resulting from research brought into practice through one-way (linear) knowledge transfer. Change and innovation are expected to be engineered, predictable and would be planned rationally. In “interactive” innovation, building blocks for innovations are expected to come from science and from practice and intermediaries, including farmers, advisors, NGOs, businesses, researchers, etc. as actors in a bottom-up process. Interactive innovation includes existing (sometimes tacit) knowledge which is not always scientific. The innovations generated with an interactive approach tend to deliver solutions that are well adapted to circumstances and which are easier to implement since the participatory process is favourable to speeding up the
introduction, dissemination, and acceptance of the new ideas. Multiplication of the results of interactive innovation projects in particular works through farmers’ peer to peer communication, or through the integration of the solutions into the day-to-day advice of advisors to their client-farmers. Often pioneer farmers are the first interested to test out new ideas, but they may also convince and show the way for the broader farmer community on the somewhat longer term.

Both innovation approaches are useful while having different programming implications. The linear approach is based on information actions, linear advising methods and training. The interactive model relies mainly on co-operation, sharing of knowledge and intermediating advisory methods. This approach fosters the development of first research results into practical applications and the creation of ideas via interaction between actors. The EIP-AGRI, as a bottom up instrument, mainly aims at supporting innovation following the interactive approach. Article 35 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 provides for stimulating interactive innovation as it supports the setting up or the project costs of an operational group project. Support may be used for testing out new ideas through projects which adapt existing techniques/practices to new geographical/environmental contexts.

Resources and Further Reading

- The European Commission has provided guidance to Member States and their regions on programming and implementation issues related to innovation and the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI). Section 3 explains what is innovation and the interactive innovation model. These guidelines are available for everyone with an interest in the EIP-AGRI to read and can be downloaded here [2].


- In June 2014, DG Agriculture and Rural Development published the first issue of Agrinnovation, a magazine that gives an overview of EIP-AGRI related issues with stories on interactive innovation projects, opportunities under rural development policy and Horizon 2020, ideas for dissemination of innovation and much more. Download the magazine here [4].

- Innovation is at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy and in May 2013, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) published an issue of the EU Rural Review dedicated to Knowledge Transfer and Innovation in Rural Development Policy. Download the magazine here [5].

Links