EIP-AGRI Operational groups
Turning your idea into innovation
When we talk about Operational Groups, we mean a group of people who come together to work on concrete, practical solutions to a problem or innovative opportunity and whose project is funded by the EU Rural Development policy. An Operational Group consists of several partners with a common interest in a specific, practical innovation project and the people involved in the Operational Group should be from a diverse combination of practical and scientific backgrounds. For example: farmers, a scientist, an agri-business and others!

Each group should consist of the partners that are needed to reach the specific objectives of the project, this means that the type of people involved can vary from Operational Group to Operational Group depending on the theme and objective of each project.

The partners in an Operational Group must be willing to co-operate with others and share the achieved results within the European network. In this way, other groups within the EIP-AGRI network can benefit from their work.

Operational Groups are action and result-oriented groups, where all the actors involved need to work together. All partners in the Operational Groups should have an active role in carrying out the innovative project and all tasks and responsibilities need to be clear. The setting up of these internal procedures will help make the Operational Group run smoothly. Furthermore, all the tasks and decision-making processes should be clear to all the partners so that situations of conflict of interest can be avoided.
Finding partners and forming a partnership. Maybe starting with a specific problem or opportunity. The whole process could look like this:

- Interested person or group.
- Operational Groups start on the initiative of an interested person or group. The whole process could look like this:
  - Preparing the project proposal and the application for funding.
  - Preparing the ‘roadmap’. The group needs to prepare a plan for their project, with clear objectives, available means, project plan, budget and division of responsibilities among partners.
  - Identifying funding requirements. The group should look into the funding available and collect the necessary information for a solid understanding about the conditions and criteria that need to be fulfilled to prepare the application for funding.
- Preparing the project proposal and the application for funding.
- Once the project is running or finished, the Operational Groups need to share and report all the results they achieved to stimulate innovation within the EIP-AGRI Network.

It may be difficult to find partners that have the necessary competencies (practical or scientific) and get an Operational Group project started. In some countries and regions, Innovation Support Services could help with this process by acting as a go-between, discovering innovative ideas and connecting partners. They may also help in finding funding sources and preparing project proposals (for more information, please read the fact sheet on Innovation Support Services).

• Starting with a specific problem or opportunity. One person or group of people who have a concrete problem that needs to be solved or have an innovative idea that they want to make a reality, can set up a group. Before beginning the process, the group should ensure that the problem that has to be solved, or the innovation that the group is going to work on is clearly identified.
• Developing the idea. The group needs to consider how they can turn the idea into an innovation and they will need to identify the needs they will have along the way.
• Finding partners and forming a partnership. Maybe it will be necessary to bring other partners on board.

Operational Groups: areas of action

The types of projects or areas of action for Operational Groups can be very broad, but the project must contribute to the EIP-AGRI objective of promoting agricultural innovation which is more resource efficient, productive, low emission, climate friendly, resilient and that operates in harmony with the essential natural resources on which farming depends. The project could target the development of new products, practices, processes and technologies in the agricultural, food and forestry sectors to the testing and adaptation of technologies and processes in specific geographical and environmental contexts; from pilot projects to joint work processes, short supply chains activities, initiatives dealing with climate change adaptation and mitigation, collective environmental projects, and more.

The EU does not set specific conditions about what the size, composition or specific actions of an Operational Group should be. However, some Managing Authorities (MA) of Rural Development Programmes may set specific conditions related to their priorities for Rural Development. Member States are free to focus support on certain types of Operational Groups or topics, so it is always worth checking with your MA to find out what kind of projects they have in mind.

Fact box: Please note that you can only receive funding for a new project - so no funding for existing projects.
Get inspired

The EIP-AGRI website: finding innovation everywhere

Many people have interesting and innovative ideas, but it is often quite difficult to find the right partners to set up a project. The EIP-AGRI Service Point can help with this and will provide platforms to connect you to other people via the EIP-AGRI website.

The EIP-AGRI website, online from May 2014, is a new interactive innovation platform that can bring people and ideas together on the web. Among other things, it enables Operational Groups to fulfill their reporting and sharing requirements using the e-forms. These e-forms can also be filled in by anyone who wants to share and exchange their information with others; you can provide information on operational groups, research projects, innovation actions and initiatives, research needs from practice and online sources of information.

At any given time, you can:
• search for partners;
• get information on ideas and projects that are being developed in different European countries and regions;
• get information on case studies that are in progress and on innovations that have been tried and tested;
• explore funding opportunities;
• share research needs from practice;
• get inspiration;
• fulfill your reporting requirements;

The EIP-AGRI Network

Should you need some more inspiration to set up an Operational Group, there are a lot of places you can look. Results of various workshops and seminars are published on the EIP-AGRI website. Every month the EIP-AGRI Service Point sends out a newsletter with information and various interesting case studies. You can subscribe on the EIP-AGRI website and be kept up to date on all the activities.

The EIP-AGRI also organises Focus Groups that share knowledge on concrete practical questions. Each group explores practical innovative solutions to problems or opportunities in the field, and draws on experience derived from related useful projects. The groups also make recommendations for practical projects that can be taken up by Operational Groups. So far the EIP-AGRI has organised Focus Groups on the following areas: Organic Farming, Protein Crops, Animal Husbandry, Genetic Resources, Soil organic matter content in Mediterranean regions. In the near future the EIP-AGRI will also launch other Focus Groups on High Nature Value farming, Mainstreaming Precision Farming, Profitability of Permanent Grassland and Fertiliser Efficiency in open-field Horticulture.

Operational Groups and research projects

Operational Groups who receive rural development funding are not supposed to be pure research projects; they need to have a clear and practical innovation angle. But Operational Groups can still benefit from research projects, since research can provide knowledge that is useful for developing a specific practical solution.

There are specific multi-actor projects under Horizon 2020 where farmers, organisations, businesses, advisors and end-users work together and where there is a clear focus on creating results that can more easily be used by farmers. Under Horizon 2020 there are also the Thematic Networks, which can provide interesting information for Operational Groups in their specific fields (for more information, please take a look at the fact sheet on Horizon 2020). The Rural Development Policy and the research framework “Horizon 2020” complement each other as the Rural Development Programmes are normally applied within a specific programme region, and research policy must go beyond this scale and involve at least three member states.

What can the EIP-AGRI network do?

An EU-wide EIP-AGRI network is being built to support EIP activities through communication, partnering, dissemination, knowledge flows and collecting practice needs for future projects and programming. The network activities are facilitated by the EIP-AGRI Service Point. The Service Point collects information from research and innovation projects and creates an effective flow of information via the EIP-AGRI website. People who are interested in finding funding, research experts or partners for their Operational Groups can do so easily using the online database. The EIP-AGRI Service Point will also organise seminars and workshops throughout the year to exchange information on innovative topics.
Strawberry farmers in the federal State of Brandenburg, (Germany) had serious problems with the disease *Verticillium dahliae* that infects the soil and causes severe damage to young plants. This disease, which can survive in soil for over 15 years, has a huge impact on the crop harvest and this can lead to negative economic results for farmers. A practical solution was not available: the farmers had to accept yield losses and to consider that there was a risk that whole strawberry fields would have to be taken out of production.

During the field days of the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF), the question was raised whether there was a quick solution to this very urgent problem. Dr. Peter Lenzch, a scientist from ZALF, started an investigation but had to admit that there was no quick fix available. At this point, the innovation broker agrathaer got up to speed and together with the research institute ZALF, three farmers and a SME company that specialises in the formulation of biological compounds, they developed a project proposal. The innovation broker identified the potential funding possibilities and finally the project was granted 200 000 euros of funding by the Landwirtschaftliche Rentenbank in 2011 for a period of 2 years. The innovation broker agrathaer & Zalf, EVI (Erdbeer Verticillium Impfung) project.

To keep all parties motivated, agrathaer used a set of communication methods: joint workshops between farmers and researchers, one to one interviews with a number of strawberry farmers, joint field surveys with the whole group, free of charge information days, presentations during the general meetings of the horticultural organisations of Brandenburg, and also the release of press articles in regional newspapers and in regional horticultural journals to raise awareness within the farming community. Because of these actions, there was continuous feedback from farmers and farmers’ organisations about the progress, problems and field trials, and of course the results of the tests.

The project was a success: there were two sides of innovation. On the one hand, a biological control agent (BCA) was invented: an immunisation for plants. On the other hand, a practical method for application was designed: the strawberry plant roots had to be immersed in an aqueous suspension before planting on the fields.

Anita Bebek, from Agrathaer says: “The Verticillium disease was widely known by farmers and farmer’s organisations but no systematic approach was taken to cure this problem. It would be very helpful to have a database where all the information about ongoing research and an efficient way to compare and exchange information.”

To find a solution, we set up what you could call an “Operational Group” type with a diverse mix of practice and science with 42 farmers, 10 cooperatives, 5 farmers’ organisations, 3 training and education centres, 3 research institutes and 2 chambers of agriculture.” says Françoise Monsallier, from the Cantal Chambre of Agriculture.

The group had to find out which factors influence the presence of good microbial flora and how to proceed in such a way that the good microbial flora could be preserved. Having the Cantal Chamber of Agriculture as an innovation broker and support service proved to be a great advantage as they have a high level of expertise in both research and development and farming practices. On top of that, they were able to encourage the farmers, cooperatives and research institutes to participate because of the good relations in the Fromages du terroir network.

Funding was available via CasDAR funds, French national funds dedicated to supporting innovation in agriculture. The group discovered that housing conditions affect the microbial flora and that the flora in milk evolves during the time between milking and putting it into the reservoir tanks. The project developed an advisory method in order to disseminate new good practices towards farmers about milk quality. To share the results and innovation, they created training courses for farmers to learn about the best methods. Seminars were also organised involving both farmers and scientists to explain the project. The group designed a whole toolbox to diagnose all different microbial flora. This resulted in other geographical areas such as the Alps and Jura being interested in applying the research results to their own unpasteurised milk cheeses; a sign that there is a strong interest in sharing results, knowledge and innovation in European agriculture.
Working together: the case of the Burren LIFE Project

The BurrenLIFE Project (BLP) is a “farming for conservation” project in Ireland. It operates in a unique European landscape: the Burren. Much of the Burren has been designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive. This landscape has been shaped by nature, but also by countless generations of farmers, but the Burren had come under threat due to a shift away from traditional farm management. This impacted in a negative way on the management of the Burren. The overall objective was to develop a new model for sustainable agriculture in the Burren in order to conserve the habitats of the region designated under the Habitats Directive. This goal required research and development of a new integrated system for agricultural management of the Burren.

Dr. Brendan Dunford used the results of his PhD study, The Impact of agricultural practices on the natural heritage of the Burren, to apply for funding for EU LIFE Nature. He personally contacted the National Parks and Wildlife Service, who then became the lead partner in this project, along with the Burren Irish Farmers Association and research authority Teagasc. Dr Dunford completed the application and managed the project from 2005 until 2010.

The Burren LIFE Project worked closely with farmers, drawing on their knowledge and skills. The project represented a strong partnership between the Irish Farmers Association and research authority Teagasc. Dr Dunford managed the project from 2005 until 2010.

The BurrenLIFE Project was accompanied by extensive scientific research on its impact. Environmental improvements were identified and quantified in terms of biodiversity indicators etc. The forage quality of different vegetation types on the Burren was examined and the data was used to design the BurrenLIFE concentrate feed. The feed, 25% of the costs of which was subsidised by the project, was used by 17 of the project farms and the satisfaction levels were high. All farms were visited regularly in order to advise, check compliance, carry out assessments and share information. This sharing of information ensured a good two-way flow of knowledge and refinement of the work programmes. The public awareness was significant, a great number of interactions between members of the project team and other interested individuals and organisations from Ireland and around the world ensured the wide dissemination of information concerning the project. A very strong media profile was built up through publication of a large number of general interest articles. Locally, the very successful Heritage Education Programme ensured the involvement of local schools and reached the wider community.

“We always saw farmers as a great resource rather than a threat. So we listened carefully to farmers, adopted a very hands-on practical approach to problem solving, a minimum of paper work and a fair system of payment.”

Dr. Brendan Dunford, BurrenLIFE manager.

Working together: assessment and mitigation of damage in fruit through new technologies in Portugal

In Montejunto, a western region of Portugal known for its fruit production, farmers had problems with a high amount of damaged fruit that represented 25% of the total production. Unfortunately, they were unable to identify the critical points of damage in different fruit throughout the harvest, transportation, calibration, storage and packaging operations.

A local network of 32 fruit producers Frutus- Central Fruit Montejunto, which has an annual production of approximately 18 000 tons of fruit invited the Centre for Rapid and Sustainable Product Development, Institute Polytechnic of Leiria (IPL-CDRsp) and the National Operating Technological and Horticultural Centre (COTHN) to find a solution to this problem. They set up a group to work together to identify and reduce the damage caused by the mishandling of the fruit during the harvesting operations and transportation post harvest. By designing and manufacturing a new electronic fruit (electronic product), it was possible to measure the damage caused by impact and compression. They found out what the critical points in the processing line were and so by adjusting the processing machines, they were able to minimise the damage to the fruit. Because the fruit was less damaged, it was higher in quality ranking and was worth more on the market.

“Not only the Fructus’ farmers benefited from this innovation, also other agricultural companies and farmers operating in the fruit production could learn a lot from this project. The electronic fruit is easily adaptable to the measurement of damage in tomatoes, potatoes, oranges, cantaloupes and watermelons.” says Mario do Carmo Martins, from COTHN National Operating Technical and Horticultural Centre.
Managing Authorities

- Austria
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- Belgium
  Flemish Government-Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Departement Landbouw en Visserij
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- Bulgaria
  Ministry of Agriculture and Food
  Website: www.mvhbg.bg

- Croatia
  Directorate for Management of EU Funds for Rural Development, EU and International Cooperation
  Phone: 00385 1 6106 908
  Website: www.mps.hr

- Cyprus
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- Germany
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  Bundesministerium für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Verbraucherschutz, Ref. 304.2
  Website: www.bmelv.de

- Hungary
  Ministry of Agriculture for Hungary
  Website: www.agri.ee

- Italy
  National Agency for Food, Agriculture and Forestry
  Agency per la Vita del Paese, l’Agricoltura e l’Alimentazione
  Website: www.pam.it

- Japan
  Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
  Website: www.maff.go.jp

- Korea
  Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
  Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs
  Website: www.mafra.go.kr

- Lithuania
  Ministry of Agriculture
  Website: www.ama.lt

- Luxembourg
  Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Energy
  Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Energy
  Website: www.ademe.lu

- Malta
  Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
  Website: www.maf.fg.gov.mt

- Netherland
  Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
  Ministerie voor Landbouw, Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit
  Website: www.minagri.nl

- Norway
  Ministry of Agriculture and Food
  Ministeriet for Mat og Matvesen
  Website: www.mam.no

- Portugal
  Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Sea
  Ministério da Agricultura, Pescas e Alimentação
  Website: www.mapa.gov.pt

- Russia
  Ministry of Agriculture
  Website: www.minagro.gov.ru

- Slovenia
  Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food
  Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food
  Website: www.maf.gov.si

- Spain
  Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
  Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación
  Website: www.magrama.gob.es

- Sweden
  Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Affairs and Environment
  Länsstyrelsen för lantbruk, samhälle och miljö
  Website: www.lsm.se

- Switzerland
  Federal Office of Agriculture
  Bundesamt für Landwirtschaft
  Website: www.blw.admin.ch

- Turkey
  Ministry of Agriculture
  Website: www.mtes.gov.tr

- Ukraine
  Ministry of Agriculture and Food
  Website: www.minag.gov.ua

- United Kingdom
  Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
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More information

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Operational groups that are funded under Rural Development must submit key data to the EIP-AGRI network. The EIP-AGRI Service Point offers an online form where this information can be supplied. By filling this in, the Operational Groups will fulfill their legal obligation to report back. This information will be made public and available via the EIP network and the website.

Facilitating exchange of information concerning innovative initiatives in EU agriculture is an objective of the EIP-AGRI Service Point. We invite everyone to contribute to this work by sharing knowledge of on-going initiatives at EU, national, regional or local level. You can do this using the e-forms on our website. This includes the mapping of research and innovation actions, projects and initiatives undertaken by operational groups and relevant innovation networks and clusters in Member States. The database will be easy to use and therefore it will prove an excellent tool to facilitate the work of innovation support services and innovation brokering.

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Help us help you
HOW TO BUILD AN OPERATIONAL GROUP

1. IDENTIFY YOUR IDEA OR PROBLEM
2. DESIGN THE PROCES TO TEST THE IDEA OR SOLVE THE PROBLEM
3. FIND THE RIGHT PARTNERS TO MAKE IT WORK
4. BUILD A ROAD MAP WITH GOALS, TIMING BUDGET ETC.
5. FIND FUNDING & SEND IN THE APPLICATION
6. SPREAD THE RESULTS

How EIP can help? Via the website and the other tools