

Programming Innovation in Rural Development – Linking Science and Practice

by Mark Redman

The European Innovation Partnership (EIP) on Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability is gearing up for 2014-2020, creating a new working interface between farmers, researchers, farm advisors, consumers and other rural stakeholders at EU, national and regional level.

Following the successful technical seminar in Madrid in June 2013 about how to use the 2014-2020 Rural Development Policy tool-kit most effectively for the programming and implementation of the EIP, a second seminar was organised in Berlin on 25-26 November to discuss in more concrete terms how research, rural development policy and practice can be linked in the Member States and regions.

The seminar was organised by DG Agriculture and Rural Development and hosted by the German Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection. Around 140 people from national and regional Managing Authorities, together with members of the AKIS Working Group¹, participated in a diverse programme of presentations, workshops and open discussion.

On the first day, the programme began with a series of presentations to introduce the opportunities that exist for enhancing the linkages and promoting the synergies between research activities supported under Horizon 2020 and projects funded by Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), in particular the EIP operational groups.

As Dr. Seegers, Director-General for Rural Development and Agricultural Markets at the German Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection, reminded participants in his opening speech, "If we want to address the various challenges of a sustainable and competitive agricultural and forestry sector, and to have a sector which makes an important contribution to the development of rural areas, then we need to break new ground. One of the ways forward is the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability".

Mike Mackenzie from DG Agriculture and Rural Development promised the audience that rural development policy for the period 2014-2020 will achieve "full lift-off" in the coming weeks and months and EIP Operational Groups can begin planning to use the various rural development measures available, including the very useful and flexible Co-operation measure (Art. 36). Inge Van Oost added further details to this picture, explaining how Horizon 2020 could also offer funding to the EIP. She also stressed that assistance from

¹ Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) Working Group of the DG AGRI Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR)

innovation support services will be essential in bringing the Operational Group and their projects to life – just as the EIP network will play a pivotal role in keeping Operational Groups in touch with each other's work, as well as with research which could be of interest.

Krijn Poppe from Wageningen University in the Netherlands welcomed the efforts made through the EIP to link innovation to research, as the work of researchers does not automatically flow through to delivering practical benefits. He explained the important functions of multi-actor projects and the thematic networks as practice-oriented actions funded under Horizon 2020. Furthermore, he underlined the role of national and regional governments in helping this process, including by offering financial support through the various policy tools available. They can also stimulate innovation by other means, including education, fiscal measures, "prizes" etc.

To give participants of the workshop a better idea on how interaction between science and practice could look like in practice Prof. Hessel from Georg-August-University of Göttingen presented her project "pig wise" which involved actors from various, not necessarily related, sectors, e.g. IT specialists and farmers.

Four parallel workshops followed on the wide-ranging practical themes of:

- How to motivate actors to set-up Operational Groups?
- How to stimulate practice-science links through EIP programming in Rural Development Policy and Horizon 2020?
- Is there an optimum format for Operational Groups?
- How to encourage and manage cross regional/border co-operation?

Some discussions were picked-up and further elaborated from the Madrid seminar in June 2013. But many new questions were raised, and experiences / ideas shared, about the practical aspects of setting-up Operational Groups; provision of innovation support services; the most appropriate techniques for fostering partnership, and the various challenges of developing meaningful dialogue between rural stakeholders and scientists.

One new theme for discussion was how to use RDP funding to encourage and facilitate projects and knowledge sharing through cross-border and inter-regional co-operation.

The second day of the seminar kicked-off with presentations on the state-of-play of EIP programming at regional level in Scotland, Baden Württemberg and France (now with a new regional structure and 27 RDPs under preparation). These practical insights were appreciated by the participants and provided them with helpful ideas on how to implement the EIP in their national/regional programmes.

After these practical examples of envisaged EIP implementation, the participants were invited to actively engage in a session of interactive "open discussion". It was clear that many people would come to Berlin with specific technical questions and dedicated time was needed in the seminar for this.

A total of 10 “open discussions” were initiated on a diverse range of topical issues including innovation as a cross-cutting theme, selection criteria for Operational Groups, eligible expenditure for Operational Groups, state aid and the EIP, and the persistent (and clearly important) question of “freedom to innovate *versus* the need to control”.

The seminar demonstrated that the EIP is increasingly well embedded in rural development programmes at national and regional level and that stakeholders have high expectations as regards the practice-oriented projects funded under Horizon 2020. In his closing speech, Dr. Eiden, President of the German Federal office for Agriculture and Food (BLE), stressed the importance of now engaging with the mechanisms and structures needed to initiate innovative projects. “The coming year of 2014 will be crucial for the implementation of the EIP, both in the context of rural development policy as well as the research and innovation framework Horizon 2020. We must make more use of the innovative potential of cooperation. EIP means *innovation partnership* and we must focus on this”.