

# EIP-AGRI Workshop OPERATIONAL GROUPS: FIRST EXPERIENCES

FINAL REPORT 20-21 APRIL 2016



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#### 1. Introduction

After several years of preparation for implementation of the European Innovation Partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability (EIP-AGRI), the very first Operational Groups (OGs) are now established and they are running projects with funding from national and regional rural development programmes (RDPs).

As the first practical experiences of the OGs begin to accumulate, it was thought to be a good time to bring together a number of established OGs, plus other potential OGs and relevant stakeholders, to exchange ideas and learn from each other. On 20-21 April 2016, DG AGRI therefore organised a two-day workshop in the town of Legnaro in northern Italy to explore the initial experiences of setting up OGs and the early stages of project implementation.

The workshop was organised in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies, the Italian National Rural Network Programme, Veneto Region and Veneto Agricultura (the Regional Agency for Agriculture, Forestry and Agri-Food Sectors).

A very diverse group of people was invited to the workshop and this report gives a brief overview of the presentations and discussions that took place. More information on the workshop is available via the <a href="EIP-AGRI">EIP-AGRI</a> website. Links to the agenda, list of participants, presentations and supporting documents are also included in <a href="Section 7">Section 7</a> (Further Reading) of this report.

The implementation phase of the very first OG projects has just started and it is anticipated that the conclusions and lessons learnt from the workshop will help to facilitate the setting up of future OGs and the successful implementation of their projects.







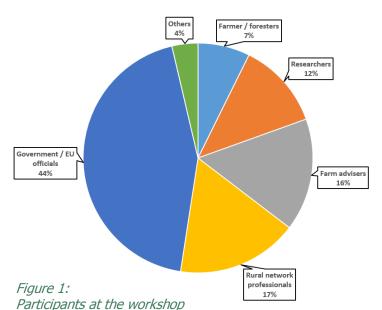


# 2. Purpose and format of the workshop

At the time of organising the workshop over 70 Operational Groups (OGs) were already established in several EU Member States and regions, and representatives from a total of 11 of these existing OGs were invited to the workshop to share their experiences. **Short descriptions of the participating OGs can be viewed here**.

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together a number of already established OGs, together with potential OG partners plus actors involved with creating the supporting environment for OGs, in order to:

- Exchange ideas and learn from the initial experiences of setting up OG partnerships and implementing their projects;
- Discuss the practical role of the various actors;
- Discuss what kind of supporting environment is most useful for OGs, including the identification of relevant good practices, and;
- Disseminate these first experiences in the EIP-AGRI network.



A total of 102 participants from 23 countries attended the workshop (see participants list).

Participants were from a diverse range of backgrounds and professions (see Figure 1) with 43% involved in the programming / selection of OGs; 25% involved in providing general innovation support services (including the networking of OGs), and; 23% involved as a partner in the operation or setting up of an OG.

The main focus of the workshop was on the practical experiences and needs of the OGs. The programme was designed to enable active participation, exchange and dialogue between the OGs and their supporting counterparts (MAs, NRNs, advisers and other innovation support services) in order to discuss challenges, good examples and further needs.

The **first day** of the workshop began with an update on the state-of-play with the EIP-AGRI and continued with the practical presentations of six OG projects which have already been established and approved in Austria, France and Germany (see links to the presentations in **Section 7: Further Reading**). These inspiring presentations were followed by two interactive sessions with discussions and exchange of experiences related to: i) setting up OG partnerships around a concrete project idea, and; ii) the development and early implementation of such OG projects.

Day 1 concluded with informal discussions (organised using the "Open Space" format) on a diversity of themes of interest / concern ranging from the profile and skills of a "perfect innovation broker" to the potential benefits of linking OGs to Horizon 2020 Thematic Networks and EIP-AGRI Focus Groups.

On the **second day** of the workshop, participants took a closer look at the supporting environment for OGs with presentations from Veneto region (Italy), Germany, Hungary and Wales (UK) and further in-depth interactive discussions. All of which was wrapped up with a final session on what the participants had learnt in their different roles as actors in OGs, advisers and innovation support services, National Rural Networks and Managing Authority officials – and what were their further needs.



# 3. Setting the scene

Times are changing and European agriculture is facing new and significant challenges. How to ensure the supply of healthy, safe and affordable food for all? How to keep the environment clean and attractive? How to create jobs and foster rural growth? How to achieve more and better from less?

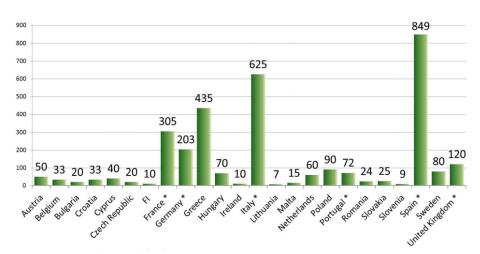
Innovation is crucial for addressing these questions, and for creating a competitive and sustainable farming sector that is fit for the future. Since innovations emerge from interaction between people with various different backgrounds and knowledge, the European Innovation Partnership for "Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability" (EIP-AGRI) is working to foster creative thinking and problem solving by bringing together farmers, advisers, scientists and other innovation actors in a new interactive, multi-actor approach to innovation.

Of course, having an idea is one thing - turning it into an innovation action is another. Fortunately, the EIP-AGRI brings together several different funding sources which can help get an agricultural innovation project started. EU rural development policy (through EC Regulation No. 1305/2013) supports **Operational Groups** (OGs) and **Innovation Support Services** within a country or region, whilst the EU's research and innovation programme, **Horizon 2020**, funds **multi-actor projects** and **thematic networks** involving partners from at least three EU countries. Other policies may offer additional opportunities.

The focus of this workshop was the first established Operational Group projects selected and operating in the Member States and Regions. **Operational Groups** are intended to bring together multiple actors such as farmers, researchers, advisers, businesses, environmental groups, consumer interests groups or other NGOs to advance innovation in the agricultural and forestry sector.

## State of play with EIP-AGRI Operational Groups

Figure 2: RDPs 2014-2020 — Number of planned EIP-AGRI Operational Groups



To date, a total of 3,205 OGs are planned in 94 Member States / regions with the funding available under Measure 16 of the 2014-2020 rural development programmes (see Figure 2). The vast majority (75%) of all OGs are planned in 5 Member States -Spain (849), Italy (625), Greece (435),France (305)and Germany (203).

At the time of organising the workshop (April 2016) the majority of rural development programmes (RDPs) were still in their starting-up phase and

most Member States and regions were therefore in the process of preparing the first calls for OGs. Nonetheless, over 70 OGs were already established in Member States / regions.



Two main steps are associated with the formation and functioning of OGs. Both of these steps are eligible for RDP funding.

- **Step 1** involves **setting up the OG** by bringing the most appropriate partners together around an initial idea and preparing a concrete project proposal for the OG. During this step, an intermediate "innovation broker" can help build the future OG project plan by reflecting with the partners about objectives and expected results of the project, the role and obligations of each partner and the funding needed for the activities planned. For this step, ideal is to work with a simplified cost system;
- **Step 2** involves **implementing the interactive innovation project** of the OG and **disseminating** the final results of the OG project. Here, a "facilitator" can be useful to help project implementation and communication between the various partners in practice.







# 4. Main outcomes from the interactive sessions: Practical experiences of the first Operational Groups

## **Setting up Operational Groups (OGs) around concrete projects**

#### How do you bring the right partners together around the idea for a project?

- The right partners in an Operational Group (OG) project are those with the **relevant knowledge** and the **motivation to participate**. The "right partners" will therefore vary according to the problem to be solved.
- A **highly relevant idea** is the key to a successful partnership! If a project idea is good and highly relevant, finding partners for an OG project is not difficult. The **practical relevance** of a topic is the main motivating factor for farmers. Other partners may have different motivations.
- Project ideas come from a need. It is **easier to find the right partners** (and for the OG project to be a success) if this need is **perceived / understood in the same way from all perspectives** (farmers, advisers, researchers etc.).
- Try to ensure a bottom-up approach as much as possible with **project ideas originating from farmers**. Be prepared to carefully nurture these ideas during the early stages of inception / development. Keep farmers involved all along the project and provide frequent feedback and interaction.
- It is **not obligatory** to include researchers as partners they can also be contracted as advisers. Don't be surprised if their first reaction is less than positive, they **will become more enthusiastic** when they fully understand the OG concept.
- It is common to find that **partners come together** based on **pre-existing networks**, **structures or affiliations**. It is easier to reach out to new partners when you already have a strong core group. Existing networks, structures and affiliations exist in many different forms ranging from occasional cooperation to formal organisations. Mutual trust between actors is of paramount importance.
- Innovation brokers / support services and other advisers can play a **key role in connecting people and bringing partners together**. There are numerous techniques and tools for animating / facilitating partnerships.
- Be aware that different groups have **different cooperation cultures** and it is possible that you will face difficulties attracting some relevant partners. For example, farmers work well with other farmers, and researchers are often experienced in cooperation with different partners. However, commercial companies may be more familiar with competition than cooperation and can be difficult to bring into an OG partnership.
- Consult with your Managing Authority to **get informal feedback on your project proposal**. This can be useful for highlighting and correcting any weaknesses in your partnership before formally submitting your project proposal.
- Don't forget that **OGs can work with individuals / organisations outside of their core partner group**. For example, specific key experts can be involved as contractors or service providers.



#### How do you appoint the lead partner?

- **Farmers should ideally be the lead partners**. Farmer-led projects have greater credibility in the eyes of other farmers (the peer-to-peer effect) and this is important for promoting the project, disseminating the results and generally ensuring a greater uptake of the innovation. However, be aware that the lead partner commonly carries the financial risk of the project and must have the capacity to run the planning and start the implementation with their own finances before the first payments are received.
- It is important that the lead partner has the **motivation and enthusiasm to "seize the idea" and "carry the project".** This implies that they have some leadership qualities and the ability to inspire others.
- It is **not necessary** for the lead partner to also be the project administrator / coordinator. In many cases it may be best to have a dedicated coordinator who has the necessary experience and project management skills.

#### How do you encourage a "healthy" partnership?

- Building **trust between partners is essential**, but be patient it takes some time.
- **Make a good partnership agreement!** Ensure 100% transparency and fair / democratic project management procedures. It should be clear to all partners: the objectives of the project; duration of the project; responsibilities of the individual partners; how funding is distributed and spent; the ownership of items purchased; conditions and procedures for modifying the partnership; etc.
- Agree in advance on the cooperation contract of the partnership and its legal form (if a legal entity has been made a compulsory condition for funding).
- **Manage expectations in the OG** encourage partners to be realistic, explain that results will not be immediate.
- Try to **ensure "co-ownership" of the project** by involving all partners as fully as possible in developing the project proposal. However, you will need time for this try to avoid preparing the project proposal at the last minute!
- Use an **experienced intermediate person to help you put together and manage the partnership,** for instance an innovation broker for setting up the OG project and/or a facilitator to organise effective interaction between partners during the project. Look for a neutral and experienced person in farming issues who is able to create trust between partners. This might be someone with specialist training on cooperation / OG projects if available.
- It is advisable to have **good contact with the Paying Agency** before and during the implementation to avoid unnecessary problems with the payment applications.
- Managing the partnership is easier if all partners are result-oriented and have a clear, common understanding of the purpose of the partnership and the project. Nonetheless, pay careful attention to communication between the partners and use "modern moderating" techniques.
- Keep the partners **focused on**, and **committed to**, the project goal. Organise frequent interaction between the partners to maintain their "drive".



- Communication between farmers and researchers is not an issue provided that at least one partner (ideally the project leader / coordinator) "speaks" the language of both practical agriculture and science, and can "translate" if necessary. This is important during the whole implementation phase of the project.
- Academic partners can be very "healthy" for a partnership, especially if they bring young people to the project. For example, PhD students are likely to be highly motivated participants with openness to new approaches, whilst agricultural schools / colleges will be interested to support the dissemination of practical results to their students.

# Development and early implementation of Operational Group (OG) projects

#### How to convert the project idea into a project proposal?

- Putting together a project proposal can be challenging, but the **necessary skills are quickly learnt**. Careful thought is needed in order to formulate things clearly and in a well-structured way. Allow as **much time as possible** for project preparation. Try to stay well informed about forthcoming calls and be prepared since the application period may sometimes be very short!
- If necessary, **seek professional assistance** from a specialist adviser / innovation support service to help focus ideas into a realistic and viable project proposal.
- Consult with the RDP Managing Authority / programme administrators. Maintain a positive dialogue remember that support for Operational Groups is still new and challenging for them too!
- It is the responsibility of the RDP Managing Authority to prepare clear rules and guidelines. **Ask if things** are not clear or logical for you.

#### What practical problems / challenges have OGs faced so far?

- Depending upon the time of year, **there can be immediate problems with getting the partners to commit time**. Despite initial enthusiasm partners may find that they do not have time to engage with the project and it can be hard to find suitable time for meetings. Be realistic! Focus on the needs of the farmers and organise meetings on their farms. Plan to avoid meetings during the busiest periods in the farming calendar.
- If you don't have experience of project management it is **easy to let things drift**. Strictly follow your project plan. Organise all meetings and activities well in advance. Maintain regular feedback and communication about the state of play.
- Setting up and running an OG project is not easy. One of the main challenges is **keeping the motivation alive amongst all the partners**. Try to keep all partners engaged. Let them contribute and feel that their involvement / work is important.
- Don't forget to **encourage and support your project coordinator**, they have a key role during early project implementation keep them motivated too!
- Watch for misunderstandings or potential conflicts **mediate between the partners if necessary**.



# 5. Main outcomes from the interactive sessions: Building the supporting environment for Operational Groups

#### What do we understand by the "supporting environment"?

- The supporting environment for Operational Groups (OGs) operates at two levels: broad awareness-raising activities (meetings, general information materials etc.) are needed to explain and promote the EIP-AGRI concept to all interesting parties: farmers, researchers, advisers, businesses etc., whilst narrower, more focused support is needed for individuals and groups with ideas who intend to prepare a project proposal.
- The core of any "supporting environment" must be the **fostering / incubation of ideas** which need to be nurtured to the point of being a concrete project proposal with a partnership brought together around it. After approval of the project proposal, further external support may be needed to implement the project.
- Building the supporting environment is like building a house. You have to **work step-by-step and put everything in the right place at the right time**. This inevitably takes some time, but the goal is to ensure the long-term success of the EIP-AGRI.
- **RDP Managing Authorities have a key role** to play in building a solid supporting environment for OGs. Their responsibility begins with the preparation of clear and understandable legislation, administrative documents and procedures, including the clear definition of eligible costs.

#### What's working well with building the supporting environment?

- **Kick-off events, technical workshops, Help Desks** and **brokering events** have been successfully used for launching the first OG calls in several Member States / regions.
- The "partner-search" tools and activities that have been organised by NRNs are appreciated by the OGs. Several NRNs have set up web-based databases and online forums for putting potential OG partners in touch with each other, but these tools may not be as effective as the direct contact in "face-to-face" events which allows guicker and easier judgement of character and credibility.
- The **two-step application "model"** is appreciated by the OGs. Although it involves more work for everyone (administrators and applicants), the opportunity for RDP Managing Authorities to screen preliminary proposals and provide feedback (even some mentoring) to OGs is invaluable for the submission of good quality project proposals.



#### How does the supporting environment need to be improved / developed?

- The supporting environment is not yet well-developed in all Member States / regions.
- Care must always be taken to communicate the EIP-AGRI and OG concepts as clearly as possible.
   The use of easy-to-understand language will reach a larger mass of stakeholders and avoid any risk of confusion.
- There is still scope for **improvement of administrative procedures**. Transparent and clear selection criteria, eligibility criteria and reporting milestones (if useful) are needed. For example, some RDP Managing Authorities are annexing selection criteria / evaluation guidelines to application forms so that applicants are aware of the project evaluation procedures from the start.
- **Selection criteria must be defined before the first call**. The criteria should be clear, understandable and they must be visible to all potential applicants.
- The required content of the OG agreement should be clear to applicants. The agreement is important to avoid later confusion. The terms of joining or leaving the OG should be stated.
- The sharing of **good examples of partnership agreements** would be useful for OGs.
- The requirements for payment applications must be clear. Advice and assistance should be available from Paying Agencies during the full period of setting up an OG until the end of OG project implementation.
- The **bottom-up approach needs to be encouraged more**. Researchers have existing experience with projects and are consequently observed to be initiating the OGs. Farmers are not sufficiently aware of the possibilities and, even if they are, they are reluctant to start projects. More activation / animation of farmers is needed.
- Some of the first OG calls are reported to have had short deadlines that allowed little time for preparation
  of proposals. It must be stressed that stakeholders need sufficient time for the preparation of good
  quality applications. The time needed for setting up an Operational Group and preparing a project
  proposal depends on various factors, but an average period of 6 months for calls to be open is considered
  usual.
- The **active promotion of interaction** between potential OG partners is always very useful. Opportunities must continue to be created for people to **meet and connect** in order to apply for upcoming calls. Support for interaction should not stop after the application for setting up the OG has been made, it has to continue to support interaction during the Operational Group project.
- OGs **working on the same themes** would benefit from being connected and supporting each other. Thematic networking should be encouraged at all levels, including regional, national and international.
- Training and capacity building on various themes / skills is needed for all key players, including innovation brokers / support services and OG partners. One priority is training (basic and advanced) on project / group management.
- Some NRNs have experience of **interesting / effective approaches to fostering innovation and networking** (e.g. the Finnish Innovation Camps). Many of these approaches are linked with the LEADER methodology, but it would be useful to examine them in the context of networking for the EIP-AGRI.



#### Lessons learnt and needs for the future

The EIP-AGRI is new and exciting for everyone involved, but it's also a challenge. A great variety of different approaches and procedures have been put in place to promote the EIP-AGRI concept and encourage Operational Groups (OGs) to set up and implement their project. Some things are working well, other things less well. But lessons are being learnt and there is the feeling of a growing EIP-AGRI community.

Overall, what the participants really enjoyed about this workshop was the presentation of practical examples, sharing of different experiences and best practices, abundance of new ideas and opportunity for face-to-face meeting with new contacts. Some more specific lessons learnt – plus further needs - are highlighted below.

## Operational Groups (OGs)

For the OG representatives in the workshop, the opportunity to share experiences with other OGs was greatly appreciated and found to be very valuable. Everyone agreed that it was useful to compare the experiences of different approaches, including what it is like to work with different partners.

The main lesson learnt was the importance of clear and timely communication, combined with good facilitation. Good communication channels must be established before building the OG - it is not so effective to "add" them afterwards. The importance of face-to-face communication during early project implementation was repeated many times, in particular the importance of meeting with farmers on their farms. It's all about having the right people in the right place at the right time.

The contrasting "language" of farmers and researchers

was discussed and it was concluded that it is not

necessarily a problem. You can put farmers, researchers and advisers together to make a successful project. However, it should be kept in mind that i) from the beginning someone must speak the language of everyone in the group, and ii) a common group language must also develop with time.

#### **Advisers**

The workshop had a strong focus on exploring the remaining challenges, and potential solutions, for implementation of the EIP-AGRI in the contrasting circumstances of the different Member States and This practical perspective was greatly appreciated by the advisers, as was the opportunity to consolidate their understanding of the basic EIP-AGRI principles.

Effective communication with stakeholders was a key topic of discussion and the advisers confirmed the importance of face-to-face interaction when working with OGs. New online tools can be very effective, but they can't fully replace face-to-face interaction.

#### **FURTHER NEEDS**

Basic training on project management etc. would be very useful for OG managers / coordinators, but there is also a specific need for more advanced training on innovative and effective tools for managing the Group during the full **period** of its lifespan.

Networking tools are needed for getting in touch with other OGs, plus advice is needed on the most appropriate tools for communication and dissemination, including the publishing of results.

A further EIP-AGRI activity dedicated to best practice in the implementation and management of interactive innovation projects was suggested.

#### **FURTHER NEEDS**

There are still some information gaps which need addressing in terms of both the availability and clarity of information. For example, eligibility rules and aid levels need to be made clearer, and more exchanges are needed on how Innovation Support Services may work across the EU. Relevant learning exchanges could involve visiting already established OGs and innovation networks.

And the key question asked by advisers was - how do we know when an OG is on the right path?

The advisers appreciated learning about the EIP-AGRI network and other innovation networks, plus the clear role they have to play facilitating the dissemination of OG project results.



#### **National Rural Networks (NRNs)**

NRN representatives found the workshop "really important and valuable" for getting practical examples, hearing about different experiences and having new ideas to pass to colleagues "back home".

They appreciated clarification of the role of NRNs in the EIP-AGRI, although it is obvious that there is a diversity of approaches, tools and obligations regarding interpretation of the EIP-AGRI in different Member States and regions.

They found it was useful to clarify various connections in the EIP-AGRI that were not previously obvious, such as the role of "other" networks and the importance of capitalising on existing structures, such as advisory services.

And very importantly, the NRN representatives appreciated learning more about the different forms and functions of "innovation brokers" and "innovation support services" that are emerging.

#### **FURTHER NEEDS**

There is a clear need to improve communication and coordination between the NRNs regarding the EIP-AGRI. More dialogue is needed about the role of the NRNs in supporting the EIP-AGRI, including the sharing of information about planned network activities; the identification of common needs; the development of common approaches (e.g. the creation of NRN clusters around specific EIP-AGRI themes), and; generally making better use of the EIP-AGRI website. The identification and sharing of best practices in countries with regionalised RDPs is a particular priority.

NRNs also need to work more closely with their own Managing Authorities in order to enhance their support to OGs. Other issues that need further exploration are the H2020 / Focus Group linkages, state aid and how to link LEADER LAGs with the EIP-AGRI.

#### **RDP Managing Authorities (MAs)**

The EIP-AGRI concept has continued to evolve since its original inception and many MAs have proceeded cautiously with launching M16.1, preferring instead to wait for greater clarity about some practical implementation issues.

The MA representatives at the workshop expressed confidence that they are increasingly well placed to deliver EIP-AGRI measures which are fit for purpose and with greater likelihood of success. However, they also agreed that they have an ongoing need for the sharing of best practice arising from the diverse interpretation of the principles and practice of EIP-AGRI implementation in different Member States and regions.

In this respect, the MAs have high expectations of the EIP-AGRI Network to help ensure greater consistency and effectiveness in the future implementation of the EIP-AGRI, and it was suggested that Managing Authorities should keep the EIP-AGRI Service Point upto-date with information about all calls for OGs.

#### **FURTHER NEEDS**

The MA representatives in the workshop expressed several clear needs:

- Specific guidance is needed on the preparation of OG Cooperation / Partnership Agreements.
   This will help exchange of experiences across Member States.
- Measure 16.1 is a significant challenge for the Paying Agencies. More guidance and exchange of experience is needed to improve understanding of relevant procedures.
- The sharing of best practice needs to be facilitated via the EIP-AGRI Network. A standard template for Managing Authorities to submit information about their EIP-related measures and procedures would be very useful.
- The MAs also highlighted the need for more online tools to support OGs.



# 7. Further reading

#### **Presentations 20 April**

- **EIP-AGRI Programming** Inge Van Oost (DG AGRI)
- Organic dock control: development and implementation with clearwing moths Patrick Hann (Austria)
- Robust lamb Sophie Huby and Jean-Marc Gautier (Midi-Pyrénées, France)
- <u>Winter Harvest: Seasonal, energy-extensive and innovative vegetable production</u> Veronika Haslinger and Alexandra Depisch (Austria)
- <u>Population Management</u> Stefanie Klingel, Sowah Addo, Ulrike Duchâteau and Kay Poggensee (Schleswig-Holstein, Germany)
- Zero herbicides in Mediterranean perennial crops Xavier Delpuech (Languedoc-Roussillon, France)
- Establishment of a sustainable and environmentally friendly wheat-value chain (OG ENU-Wheat) Ludger Linnemann (Hessen, Germany)

#### **Presentations 21 April**

- The Veneto Region case Giorgio Trentin
- German Rural Support Unit Natascha Orthen
- Agri-innovation network for Hungary Livia Kranitz
- EIP Wales: Operational Group Development and Support Dorian Davies

## **Workshop documents**

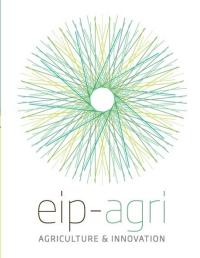
- Final programme
- Participants list
- Speaker CVs
- Leaflet about 'Operational Groups represented at the workshop'

#### More information

All publications available at the seminar are also downloadable from the EIP-AGRI website.

- EIP-AGRI brochures
- EIP-AGRI factsheets





















The **EIP-AGRI** aims to catalyse the innovation process in the **agricultural and forestry sectors** by bringing **research and practice closer together** – in research and innovation projects as well as *through* the EIP-AGRI network.

**EIPs aim** to streamline, simplify and better coordinate existing instruments and initiatives and complement them with actions where necessary. Two specific funding sources are particularly important for the EIP-AGRI:

- ✓ the EU Research and Innovation framework, Horizon 2020,
- ✓ the EU Rural Development Policy.



Join the EIP-AGRI Network & Register via www.eip-agri.eu

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