



The future of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups: challenges, opportunities and existing support services

Collaboration in Action: Unlocking the Potential of OGs

14 May 2025 | Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYRxWTmr9uE&t=5s>

1 Introduction

The European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability ([EIP-AGRI](#)) promotes innovation in agriculture through the establishment of Operational Groups (OGs). These are multi-actor consortia addressing specific challenges in agriculture, including the recovery and valorisation of resources, soil protection, forestry systems and improving water use efficiency. Given the limited exchanges and connections between the groups, the need for better coordination and knowledge exchange has become increasingly evident. **Therefore, this workshop aimed to connect existing OGs engaged in resource recovery and the circular bioeconomy to explore how these could collaborate to establish a transnational network to strengthen innovation and overcome fragmentation in the sector.**

The workshop also focused on the identification of policy measures capable of improving the efficiency of the resource recovery sector, both at the local and European levels. **Participants analysed how agricultural and environmental policies could be better integrated and aligned to support the work of OGs in this strategic area, contributing to sustainability goals and the ecological transition.** (*Further details on the workshop provided [here](#)*)

2 Workshop structure

The workshop featured a series of thematic sessions and case studies, showcasing strategies, challenges, and lessons learned from across Europe. The topics introduced during these sessions will be further elaborated in the following section, “*Insights from Workshop Sessions*”, which presents a detailed analysis of the key contributions and insights shared throughout the workshop.

The opening session focused on OG engagement strategies, drawing on the experiences of five Thematic Networks (TN), i.e. multi-actor projects that collect existing knowledge and best practices on a given theme to make them available in easily understandable formats for end-users such as farmers, foresters, advisors and others. Experts from four of these TNs—Carmen Girón Domínguez (Munster Technological University, [BBioNets project](#)), Francesca Giannetti (University of Florence, [Forest4EU project](#)), Barbara Pápai (Innomine, [Soil-X-Change project](#)), and Anna Bagó Mas (BETA Technological Centre, [NUTRI KNOW project](#))—presented how multi-actor approaches and targeted communication facilitated stakeholder involvement (see section 3.1 for more details). The fifth TN, [AQUAGRI-KNOW project](#), was represented by its coordinator, Carla Febrer Sanglas (BETA Technological Centre), who later helped moderate the panel discussion.



This session was followed by case studies highlighting diverse experiences in OG formation and operation. Pedro da Silveira presented Portugal's [FERTIPINEA OG](#), Elena Maestri shared insights from the Italian [SMACS](#), [Faber](#), and [CLEAN-ER OGs](#), Alexandre Galí Serra discussed Spain's [RE-AQUA](#) and [Granges Terragrisa](#) OGs, while Tünde Gyarmati from Hungary introduced the OG experiences of [Discovery Living Lab](#). These examples illustrated both the richness of local initiatives, and the barriers frequently encountered, such as administrative complexities, regulatory fragmentation, and limited access to long-term funding. Margarida Ambar, representing the EU CAP Network's Support Facility for Innovation and Knowledge Exchange, provided a broader policy perspective on the evolution of OGs. Her contribution underscored the importance of a systemic approach to knowledge exchange within EU agricultural innovation ecosystems, particularly in addressing cross-border challenges (see sections 3.2 and 3.3 for more details).

A short interactive survey led by Barbara Pápai (Innomine) helped map the diversity and distribution of OGs active across Europe and captured participants' insights on recurring obstacles and unmet needs. (see section 3.4 for more details).

The subsequent panel discussion, moderated by Giacomo Mezzetti (ETA Florence Renewable Energies) and Carla Febrer Sanglas (BETA Technological Centre), centred on practical strategies to better support OGs through more coherent policy instruments, better funding alignment, and enhanced advisory mechanisms (see section 3.5 for more details).

The final session highlighted the range of existing support resources, including training materials, digital tools, and advisory services. Contributions by Patrizia Borsotto (Council for Agricultural Research and Economics, BBioNets project), Giacomo Mezzetti (ETA Florence Renewable Energies, Forest4EU project), Barbara Pápai (Innomine, Soil-X-Change project), and Anna Bagó Mas (BETA Technological Centre, NUTRI-KNOW project) emphasised the need to harmonise knowledge-sharing platforms and tailor resources to the specific needs of OGs working in resource recovery (see section 3.6 for more details).

3 Insights from Workshop Sessions

3.1 OG Engagement Strategies across Four Thematic Networks

In the first session, the following four thematic networks presented the strategies they adopted to attract, support, engage, and promote OGs: BBioNets, Forest4EU, Soil-X-Change and NUTRI-KNOW. They also shared their engagement experiences and the main outcomes achieved in terms of knowledge and accessible products for OGs. These networks, funded by the European Union, will be active for three-year periods between 2023 and 2028.

A common methodological approach emerged among the networks, starting with a **mapping phase** to collect innovations developed by OGs, considering the wide thematic diversity and geographical spread of these groups and their partnerships.

Following the mapping phase, another shared aspect is the emphasis on the **transfer of knowledge** and the creation of **stakeholder networks**. These networks are crucial to turning innovation into practice through effective dissemination. The creation of practical material, e.g., educational material, booklets, fact sheets, is adapted to the needs of stakeholders, considering economic, social, environmental and legal aspects, to promote the application of innovation in practice.

This focus is further supported by stakeholder preference analyses carried out by the networks, which highlight cooperation as the key success factor for OGs—and, by extension, for innovation itself.



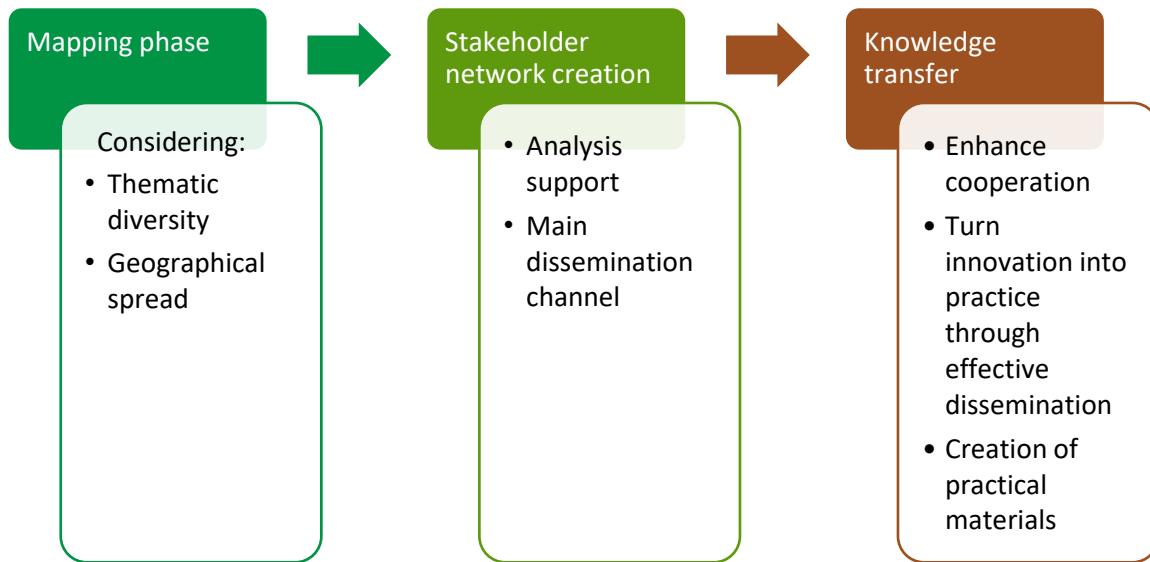


Figure 1. Common aspects of Thematic Network projects

3.2 Case studies: Experiences from OGs formation and Operation

The second session featured contributions from several OGs representatives across Europe, including RE-AQUA (Spain); SMACS, Faber, and CLEAN-ER (Italy); FERTIPINEA, (Portugal); and "Integrating Traditional and Digital Soil Monitoring" (Hungary).

The participants shared their experiences from a more applied and site-specific perspective.

In general, all the projects embraced principles of circularity, working to enhance and/or optimise resource use to implement technologies that are both efficient and environmentally sustainable.

Some common barriers and the strategies adopted to overcome them are presented in the following table.

Table 1: Barriers and Strategies.

Barrier	Strategy to overcome
Significant upfront investment	Use financial assistance such as subsidies and collaborative funding arrangements
Lack of understanding or awareness	Provide easy-to-follow, visually guided instructions focusing on practical steps rather than theoretical explanations
Challenges in technical implementation	Expand access to expert advisory and support services
Inconsistent outcomes	Design customised, location-specific strategies instead of relying on generic, uniform methods

3.3 The Evolution of OGs – Current Challenges and Opportunities

Margarida Ambar, representing the European Commission, provided further insights into the current state of Operational Groups across Europe. She outlined the evolution of the EIP-AGRI initiative, emphasising the new elements introduced in the current programming period compared to the previous one.

EIP-AGRI was launched by the European Commission in 2012 to foster innovation and improve knowledge exchange through a multi-actor, interactive model. It serves as a bridge aligning innovation goals between the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Horizon programmes.

While the core objectives of EIP-AGRI have remained largely the same, several new features have been introduced:

1. A stronger emphasis on the adoption of the AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems) model. The idea behind AKIS is to break down silos and encourage more collaborative, interactive, and efficient knowledge exchange throughout the agricultural sector.
2. A broader range of OG topics: EIP-AGRI contributes to both specific and cross-cutting CAP objectives.
3. The promotion of faster and wider uptake of innovative solutions, including farmer-to-farmer exchanges.
4. The possibility for OGs to operate at transnational and cross-border levels.
5. A requirement for OGs to disseminate their plans and results through European thematic networks.

The European Commission views this broader scope as a significant opportunity for OGs, which must be supported by effective dissemination and communication strategies.

Another key area of focus is the simplification of administrative procedures. A recent study conducted by the Commission on the main barriers and drivers for OGs identified administrative burden as the most significant obstacle to both their establishment and sustainability.

Below is a summary table of the main challenges and opportunities related to EIP-AGRI in the current CAP regulation.

Table 2: Challenges and opportunities related to EIP-Agri in the current CAP regulation.

Challenges	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dissemination and uptake by practice of OG solutions• Organisation of transnational and cross-border OGs- administrative and legal issues, organisations of calls, finding partners• Administrative burdens for final beneficiaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Existing experiences from the previous CAP programming period• Broader scope of EIP-AGRI• New role for advisors• Involvement of practitioners as partners in OGs• Possibility to organise transnational and cross-border OGs• Amount of already existing OGs solutions with potential of transferability and upscaling

3.4 Short survey on OGs across Europe

At this stage, Barbara Pápai presented the results of a survey conducted to provide an overview of the experiences of Operational Groups across Europe, to identify key challenges and opportunities.

Specifically, 152 responses were collected from 12 countries (Slovenia, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Italy, Austria, Slovakia, Germany, Cyprus, Ireland, Bulgaria, and Greece).

Firstly, respondents were asked **how complex they found the application process for establishing an OG**. The results show that many respondents perceived the application process as **very complex**. Subsequently, respondents were asked **how difficult it was to define the specific problem to be addressed** by the project, set up the partnership, and build trust among partners. Among these three aspects, **establishing the**



partnership emerged as the most challenging. Regarding the main barriers encountered during the operational phase, the key challenges that emerged were:

- **Understanding the needs of the different actors**
- **Lack of funding dedicated to partner exchanges or meetings**
- **Limited or no participation of some partners in the activities**

The most frequently mentioned **benefit the respondents gained from participating in an Operational Group was the opportunity to acquire new skills.**

Finally, future opportunities were explored by asking respondents whether participating in an Operational Group improves the performance of their businesses and whether they would recommend that others take part in a call for OGs. **In both cases, the majority of respondents gave a positive response.**

3.5 Panel discussion: How to better support OGs?

In this session, Giacomo Mezzetti and Carla Febrer Sanglas facilitated an open discussion with OG representatives aimed at gathering direct feedback from practitioners involved in the projects. Several key points emerged from this exchange.

Participants confirmed that the persistence of administrative burdens remains a major challenge, and noted the difficulty of organising in-person events, not only due to COVID-19 in the recent past, but also to the **general challenge of engaging practitioners face-to-face**. Furthermore, **language barriers** were highlighted as a significant issue, especially in the context of **cross-national initiatives**. Some participants suggested that **technical trade journals** could serve as effective channels to reach practitioners more directly. Another important insight was the **limited documentation on the link between technological innovation and actual economic benefits**.

3.6 Available resources for OGs: information and training material, support tools and advisory services

All speakers in this session – Patrizia Borsotto, Giacomo Mezzetti, Barbara Pápai, and Anna Bagó Mas – highlighted the importance of providing accessible resources, training materials, support tools, and advisory services to OGs in order to enhance the effectiveness and scalability of innovation in the agricultural and bioeconomy sectors.

Patrizia Borsotto presented the **BBioNets project** and its online platform, which gathers extensive information on the use of biomass. The online platform includes:

- An **inventory section** maps OGs and projects related to bio-based technologies (BBTs).
- An **assessment tool** evaluates BBTs and identifies the top 20 BBTs per country.
- A **regional dynamics** section that summarises the needs and available resources in each country.
- A **knowledge transfer section** that provides roadmaps combining insights from the assessment tool and regional dynamics to identify the 5 most suitable BBTs per country.

This platform is designed to support stakeholders interested in entering or expanding within the bioeconomy sector.



Giacomo Mezzetti introduced the **Forest4EU project website**, which aims to assist stakeholders in understanding and disseminating project themes within national contexts. The site offers videos, technical reports, analyses of regional dynamics, existing good practices, and guidelines on how to adopt them.

Barbara Pápai described the **support tools developed by the Soil-X-Change project**, which include:

- 30 webinars (in English and national languages).
- 30 workshops on soil conservation and management, climate adaptation, and digital solutions.
- Identification of 18 best practices related to climate change resilience, adaptability, and soil health improvement.
- A wide range of dissemination materials such as audiovisual content, factsheets, and practice abstracts.

Finally, Anna Bagó Mas presented a **meta-database on nutrient management**, created within the NUTRI-KNOW project, which contains outcomes from 12 OGs and maps their alignment with farmers' needs. In addition to the database, an **inventory of practices** beyond the OGs involved in the NUTRI-KNOW project has been created, contributing to a broader understanding of effective nutrient management strategies.

4 Future Perspectives and Policy Implications

The workshop discussions pointed to several actionable recommendations for policy design at both the national and EU levels:

- **Simplify administrative procedures.** Streamlining the OG application and reporting processes remains a critical need, particularly for small actors with limited administrative capacity. A harmonised, user-friendly application template for transnational OGs could reduce entry barriers.
- **Strengthen funding schemes for knowledge exchange.** Participants emphasised the lack of dedicated funding to support peer learning, OG-to-OG exchanges, and face-to-face networking activities that are essential for practical innovation uptake.
- **Ensure long-term support mechanisms.** Many OGs struggle to maintain momentum after the project ends. Policy frameworks should allow for phased or follow-up funding to scale successful innovations and maintain dynamic stakeholder networks.
- **Promote inclusive and multilingual communication tools.** Given the language and accessibility barriers in cross-border cooperation, the development of multilingual communication materials and targeted dissemination strategies (e.g., technical journals, practitioner videos) should be encouraged.
- **Recognise the role of Thematic Networks as knowledge brokers.** Thematic Networks play a key role in bridging top-down policy objectives with bottom-up innovation. Their experience in mapping OGs, facilitating engagement, and repackaging knowledge into accessible formats should be better supported and integrated into future CAP implementation strategies.



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