A two-track approach to implement measure 124 in Tuscany—Italy

Needs addressed
The Managing Authority of the regional RDP in Tuscany wished to significantly improve the rate of knowledge transfer and innovation creation in its rural areas by increasing the flexibility of its RDP in this regard. The majority of the region’s LAGs expressed their interest in being actively involved in the design and implementation of measure 124. The measure for promoting cooperation was the RDP’s main tool for fostering innovation in the 2007-2013 programming period.

Key elements of the approach
The Managing Authority of the Tuscany region decided to offer a two-track approach to implement measure 124 for encouraging local firms and innovation carriers to cooperate. Through “Public” calls for proposals, the Managing Authority addressed larger projects through joint funding from the measures 121, 122, 123, 124, and 311, as well as a “decentralised”, participatory track for addressing smaller projects managed by LAGs.

Objective
The main objective was to foster cooperation among the different actors of distinct agricultural value chains (e.g. livestock, forestry, agro-energy, orchards, etc.), and university/research centres for promoting the development of new products, new processes and technologies as to increase competitiveness.
**Main steps and features of the initiative or approach**

Initially the Managing Authority discussed and agreed with the LAGs of the region the procedures that needed to be applied and issued common guidelines for call for proposals that affected both the “public” and the “decentralised” approaches.

The “public” side of the measure is managed at the regional level by the Rural Development Department of the Managing Authority. The approach aims to foster cooperation between farmers’ organizations, consortia, single entrepreneurs and universities. The “public” approach received nearly 2/3 of the available funds and financed 32 projects and 153 distinct beneficiaries.

In the “decentralised” approach, the objective was to promote the setting up of innovative project proposals following a bottom-up approach. The LAGs designed and organised the calls for proposals on their own with the supervision of the MA according to commonly agreed guidelines. Each LAG operated independently and was free to launch calls on its own frequency and specific features. One of the LAGS, the LAG “START” - www.gal-start.it, was assigned to supervise the other LAGs. This included framing the scope of measure 124 at local level, clarifying administrative and management issues for all participating LAGs, establishing preliminary contacts with regional universities and research centres, and advising all LAGs in preparing the call for proposals.

The Managing Authority ensured coordination between the two funding tracks by organising meetings with all the involved LAGs at least once per year. The purpose of these meetings was to assess the LAGs progress and compare it with the advancements made with the “public” side of the measure.

The LAGs and the Managing Authority organised various dissemination events to promote the use of measure 124. Among the promotional activities were included medium and large scale workshops, and direct meetings with local actors interested in applying for support. Finally, the Managing Authority organised a major communication event at national level in September 2013. By that time the first projects were completed and this allowed examining how and if the implementation of the measure was meeting the expected goals. The event was attended by some 200 participants.

The combined use of measure 124 enabled to address more efficiently the various issues at stake in the value chain. The projects that were presented and financed, addressed economic, environmental and technological issues. This eased the full exploitation of the local human and technical resources in the LAGs’ territories and improved the functioning of the affected value chains.

**Main results and benefits**

5 of the 7 LAGs operating in the region were involved in the implementation of the “decentralised” approach. These were the LAG “START” (Florence-Prato area), the LAG Aretino, the LAG Siena, the LAG Maremma (Grosseto Province) and the LAG Garfagnana (Lucca Province).

The LAGs issued 8 calls for proposals between 2011 and 2013. 36 projects were awarded and funded in just two years. The greatest interest was recorded in agro-energy (9 projects), livestock (9 projects), and forestry/wood (6 projects).
Lessons learnt

- The success of implementing the measure revealed an unexpectedly large, submerged interest for introducing and testing a wide array of novelties in the farming sector.

- The use of measure 124 prompted not just the testing of such novelties in the farming sector, but also strengthened the long-term collaboration between the farm and the research sectors. This, as a consequence, fostered the set-up of positive links among such actors and with farm producers and processors, in a way and to an extent that had not been experienced before;

- The “decentralised” approach implemented by LAGs enabled to prepare project proposals that were better tuned with specific local needs.

- The implementation experience showed that some aspects of managing the measure must be improved in the future:
  - for example, it proved difficult to set a strict separation between strict “innovation” investments funded at a 70% rate and other investments that were nevertheless needed to properly implement the project and funded at a lesser rate;
  - in addition, some administrative burdens were highlighted, such as the need for reporting the costs undertaken separately for each partner involved and not for the whole project; the initial risk of having the project closed if just one partner withdraws from its implementation which was solved later on by allowing more flexibility from the Managing Authority.

- The public funding received via measure 124 played a key role for supporting the transfer and testing of new products, processes and technologies in a difficult socio-economic period for both the farm and the research sectors.

- The measure’s implementation greatly helped to improve the design of the new RDP for the 2014-2020 period.

Additional sources of information