

# Coordination Committee Focus Group Knowledge Transfer & Innovation

Executive Summary of Phase 2 Report towards successful Innovation Brokerage  
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## Introduction

The objective of the ENRD Focus Group on 'knowledge transfer and innovation' (FG) is to look into current rural development practices in order to provide recommendations for improving the future generation of Rural Development Programmes (2014-2020). From June to December 2012, the FG looked into how Member States have been supporting knowledge transfer and innovation (KT&I) through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)<sup>1</sup>. The second phase of the FG analytical work focused on the collection and comprehensive analysis of study material on actors involved in innovation, in view of learning how to best support EIP Operational Groups and innovation brokering activities under the rural development programmes and in the context of the

new agricultural EIP<sup>2</sup>. Building on the experiences and study material provided by the FG members, the strand of investigation on innovation brokering aimed at:

- collecting study material on innovation support activities which may contribute to the understanding of the innovation brokering process;
- providing an insight of the different stages of the innovation brokering process;
- identifying criticalities and main factors for successful innovation brokering.

1 The reports presenting the findings of the Phase 1 & 2 of Focus Group on Knowledge Transfer & Innovation are available on the ENRD website: [http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/themes/research-and-innovation-gateway-development/en/research-and-innovation-gateway-development\\_en.cfm](http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/themes/research-and-innovation-gateway-development/en/research-and-innovation-gateway-development_en.cfm)

2 <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/>



The Focus Group collected relevant information about actors involved in supporting innovation, research and development as well as knowledge transfer, primarily but not exclusively in agriculture. In overall 17 questionnaires were provided by the FG members covering 8 EU Member States. Two examples from Norway were also provided, where the role of Innovation Broker is also known as a “Competence Broker”. Their practical experience and working methods in supporting innovation were used by the Focus Group to discuss the components of the innovation brokering process. Their views and suggestions were also helpful to derive relevant lessons and recommendations for successful innovation brokerage, consider what works well and less well, and what the necessary skill set of a successful innovation broker is. A full list of the study material can be found in Annex II of the main report “towards successful Innovation Brokerage”.

## The innovation brokering process

Howells (2006)<sup>3</sup> defines the **innovation broker** as “an agent or broker in any aspect of the innovation process between two or more parties. Such intermediary activities include: helping to provide information about potential collaborators; brokering a transaction between two or more parties; acting as a mediator, or go-between bodies or organizations that are already collaborating; and helping find advice, funding and support for the innovation outcomes of such collaborations.”

In the context of the agricultural EIP, the main task of the innovation broker is to help setting up a multiplicity of Operational Groups around concrete innovation projects. Raising awareness and animating the participation in innovative actions are very important for getting

innovation projects up and running. The broker is not necessarily involved in the actual innovation project: his core objective is to help the group in the elaboration of a well-designed project plan. Ideally, innovation brokers should have a good connection to and a thorough understanding of the agricultural world as well as well-developed communication skills for interfacing and animating. An important asset of an innovation broker should be to look cross-sectoral and connect across the existing institutes, disciplines, viewpoints etc.

If through the innovation brokering process a good innovation project plan is developed<sup>4</sup>, such a plan will have a better chance of passing a selection process to gain support from whatever funding source.

According to DG AGRI<sup>5</sup>, this **selection process for projects** can be based on:

- » the relevance of the project for actors and end-users aiming towards a self sustaining innovation (What elements of importance for end-users will the project develop and why would that result in a broadly applied innovation? Which problems/opportunities are tackled?);
- » the targeted composition of the partnership in view of co-creation for a particular project objective (Is the composition of the partnership well chosen and involving those key actors which have the necessary different types of knowledge to reach the project objectives and help diffusing its results into practice? Explanation on how the partners will enrich each others' competences);
- » the quality and quantity of knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation potential between different types of knowledge (scientific and practical) (Are sufficient qualitative knowledge exchange activities planned and how will these lead to a well developed result in which the different knowledge sources are merged?);
- » demonstrating competences of the partners on state of play in the field of the project's subject; avoiding repetition with existing projects; (concrete evidence on the former experiences of the partners linked to this project's objectives and on possible former projects related to this project);
- » easily understandable project summaries with a long-term communication effect to a broad group of possible end-users (including involving the most appropriate actors for such communication and finding the most pertinent communication channels).

The core task of an innovation broker is to make a good interactive innovation project plan. Taking into account the above, the actual **innovation brokering process** constitutes from the following steps.

3 Howells, J. (2006) Intermediation and the role of intermediaries in innovation, Research Policy, 35, pp. 715–728

4 [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/events/madrid-06-2013/van-oost\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/events/madrid-06-2013/van-oost_en.pdf)

5 See Guidelines on Programming for Innovation and the Implementation of the EIP for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (<http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/>)



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## The steps of the innovation brokering process

### 1. Finding innovative ideas

The starting point of the innovation brokering process is the broker to connect with the ground level actors, e.g. farmers, to identify and articulate their needs. In other words, at the very beginning of the brokering process the new idea has **“to find the innovation broker”**. In the majority of the case studies it was stated that ideas about a novelty commonly emerge from discussions between the farmers and the brokers. In two cases about LAGs in Finland and Greece it was emphasised that it is the continuous co-operation and exchange with local, grass-root stakeholders that makes their problems and needs visible. The broker should build upon a clear understanding of what is innovative and the capacity to discover or “unearth” good ideas.

The innovation brokers themselves can identify innovative ideas and solutions based on their experience and understanding of the sector.

**Different animating and networking approaches** are used for identifying or generating ideas in a participatory way before the actual brokering process (“matchmaking”) starts. These can include workshops, networking, brainstorming, exchange platforms, web online forums etc. The possibilities are shared with potential partners and refined through discussions in meetings and the local media. Website announcements or on-line discussions are also used as part of the process.

A case study highlighted the need to acknowledge that **only a proportion of initiatives may lead to a new project and eventually to an innovation**. A number of other possible pitfalls may hamper the innovation process at this stage. The **targeted analysis of the project plans** should help identify such possible pitfalls during the selection of projects. For instance, emphasis should be given at the relevance for end-users and at the justification of the usefulness of involving specific actors, meaning the targeted composition of the operational group in view of co-creation.



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## 2. Connecting the right partners

In the second step of the process, the innovation broker acts as a “matchmaker” by **helping partners to find each other**. The broker needs to identify suitable partners for the project and bring them together for preliminary discussions in view of a possible collaboration. **Ensuring complementarity and diversity in the composition of the partnership** is deemed very important as to facilitate the hybridization of knowledge. Nevertheless, not only actors who have complementary competences can be brought together. Even potential antagonistic partners could generate innovative ideas, if convinced to work together.

The identification of possible partners and the preparation of a partnership should not result from proposals imposed through a top-down approach. It needs to be the

outcome of a **common agreement fostering genuine ownership among the stakeholders**.

The identification of possible partners can happen in many different ways, often in informal contexts, and even random conversations. The broker can use various occasions such as business seminars, social events, existing clusters, networks as well as participatory approaches to make contacts, and to nurture and promote an innovation culture. Potentially this phase of innovation brokerage process could also profit from the **identification and dissemination among innovation brokers of successful techniques used for finding innovative ideas and partners**.

## 3. Articulate demands and expectations

**Face-to-face meetings** are considered in most of the cases to be the most effective approach for communicating with possible actors. At this step, the process of collecting and sharing information for a possible innovation project starts in a participatory way. At the same time, the process still remains “unofficial” in the form of **preliminary discussions with potential partners**.

**The broker is facilitating discussions while “translating” the local needs** for technology, knowledge and innovation into a “language” understood by the research sector and vice versa. For example, in the Netherlands a voucher system has been established through which half day meetings are funded in which farmers can meet the broker face to face and discuss new ideas.



## 4. Identifying the source of funding

An important part of the innovation brokering process is also the identification of funding sources. The mission of the broker at this phase is to **match the local needs and challenges with the available funding options**. However, very often finding accessing funds is a significant obstacle to be overcome in the innovation brokering process. In order to tackle the uncertainty of finding the necessary financial support, the broker should start **considering possible funding resources from the very first stages of the brokering process**.

The case studies commonly state that brokers use their knowledge and experience to locate various funding opportunities (EU, national, regional, etc.). In most of the cases examined, experienced staff is assigned to seek for funding opportunities and provide advice on how to access them. Web platforms are also a key tool for providing up to date information on funding opportunities.

## 5. Setting up the project plan & the partnership

The final step of the innovation brokering process concerns the preparation of a sound project plan and the setting up of the partnership. The project idea should generate **win-win situations for all the parties involved**. This would be an important step for achieving appropriate working relationships among the stakeholders. In this phase the broker will need to organise the process, invites participation and helps the partners to get to know how to work together. **Transparency** is also crucial. The broker will need to clarify the framework and / or the conditions under which participation and collaboration will take place.

Nevertheless, as pointed out by an example of a Greek LAG, it can also be the case that although the needs are identified during the brokering process, more needs emerge later on along the project's implementation. These unexpected needs can create uncertainty and it is the most risky part of the innovation process. To address this constraint and as identified from the first phase of the FG work, the innovation broker could promote the adoption of a "step-wise" approach when elaborating the project plan. **A project plan well discussed and thought through before the project starts**, with clear milestones and embedded flexibility **would reduce the impact of unforeseen changes** and minimise the risks along the innovation process.

## Coordinating the project & communicating the project results (after the brokering process)

In case the project gets funded and if useful, the innovation broker consequently could possibly be involved in the project's implementation. However, this is not the core task of the innovation broker as previously described. Alongside the project and as soon as it ends, the broker may be involved in communicating and spreading the project results. At this stage a very broad range of dissemination activities could be undertaken. Promoting the novelty could be done through farmers' group meetings, advisers meetings, conferences, seminars, trade shows, local awards-winning farmers, etc.



# Success factors for innovation brokerage

## A. Necessary skillset of the innovation broker

The analysis of the study material allowed identifying four sets of qualities which are considered key to the success of an innovation broker:

i) **Knowledge in the specific field** that can be acquired through learning or experience. Knowledge and understanding of innovation processes of course is critical. Knowledge of and/or hands-on experience in the field or the specific industry may contribute to the success of the innovation broker. Also innovation brokers should be actively involved in knowledge networks in order to have access to the required information and be able to find actors useful in a specific partnership. Connections bring also the benefit of having an overview of the wider context, different realities and key actors, such as interesting firms and suppliers, as well as different funding opportunities.

ii) **Technical skills** that can be acquired through training. In several cases the desired skills for an innovation broker are expressed as a rather general “ability in innovation processes”. According to the suggestions provided by the study material it might be of help having a first-hand expertise, for example being directly involved as innovator in business or as business manager. The innovation broker will need to understand and use the “language” of different types of stakeholders. Facilitation, animation and moderation are recurring concepts that point towards the innovation broker’s capacity in facilitating cooperation among very different stakeholders while understanding their different interests.

iii) **Personality, attitude and style** not easily acquired through learning or training. A number of “soft skills” emerged as important for successful operations and therefore should be paid attention to. They can be summarised as follows:

- Real commitment to “change”: result and action orientation or “spirit of social entrepreneur”;
- Creative, positive and pro-active or ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking. But also critical reflection, vision and direction. Being “able to see simple solutions when faced with complex challenges” and to inspire a vision for the future and integrate it with short-term actions;
- Special attention is also given to ‘autonomy’, ‘self-motivation’, ‘empathy’, ‘listening’, social skills and, ‘social awareness’;

- The majority of the case studies insisted on brokers that can be perceived by all stakeholders as being “independent”, “neutral” or “impartial” and not be driven by a vested interest.

iv) **Working approach** meaning operational procedures that increase the effectiveness of the brokering process:

- » *Direct communication with stakeholders* is key before any successful innovation brokerage according to almost all of the cases examined. Face-to-face meetings with the different types of stakeholders e.g. farmers, researchers, advisers are very important as they provide an open space where everyone can bring his knowledge and discuss about common needs and solutions.
- » A fundamental element in innovation brokerage is *ensuring transparency* in the innovation process. The partners will need to be well aware in advance of their role and the elements which they will have to take into account during the implementation of the project.
- » *Acknowledging the context of different groups of actors* is also considered a necessity for successful innovation brokering. For instance, the participation of farmers can be challenging due to the farming year cycle and therefore actions could be done mainly in the period of low farming activity.
- » *Individual brokering approaches* may provide a stronger incentive for setting up and drafting concrete innovation projects proposals. For instance, some farmers will not easily speak in meetings but may nevertheless have creative ideas that deserve to be developed. Also, mainstream interests could hinder innovative front-runners in broad stakeholders’ meetings. In order to reach such a group of actors it would be important to develop an appropriate and more individual strategy.
- » Crucially the innovation broker should *drive and not dominate the process*. Initially the broker is the one to drive the initiative and support the formation of the partnership in its first and most ‘vulnerable’ steps. Gradually the responsibility should be shared by the participants around a commonly supported project plan with clear roles for each actor.

## B. Enabling working conditions

The following table summarises a number of identified enabling working conditions by typology, indicating who should be responsible for realising them (*numbers in the table refer to those used for identifying the case studies in Annex 2 to the main report towards successful innovation brokerage*).

Typology	Enabling conditions	Relevant study material	Who should address it
<b>Institutional</b>	Ensure impartiality and independency.	9, 15	EC; MAs
	Have a clear mandate to act as innovation broker and clarity on targets and possibilities for innovation action.	9, 2, 11	
<b>Procedural</b>	Have time for the process to unfold at its own speed.	2, 13, 9	MAs; Directors and heads of organisations; EIP Networks; NRNs
	Have sufficient sources or flexible funds to immediately address the needs of the actors when arising.	10, 11, 12, 13	
	Ensure local presence of the brokerage service in the midst of (farm) businesses and entrepreneurs with a 'one-stop-shop'.	15	
<b>Professional</b>	Opportunities for training and support and exchange visits. The training should include all aspects of the job.	2, 7, 11	Directors and head of organisations; EIP Networks; NRNs
	Availability of tools for communication, for facilitating work in teams, and for identification of possible relevant partners.	6, 2, 3	
	Being informed: timely updates on rules and regulations of the innovation programmes (MA and NRN and EIP-networks). Access to networks and exchange forums of innovation professionals.	2, 13	
<b>Organisational</b>	Allow sufficient room for creativity and flexibility (for example to interact with partners outside the normal actors in a network).	5, 12	Directors and head of organisations
<b>Operational</b> (related to the implementation of programmes)	Transnational Cooperation is a very important source for innovation.	6	EC; MAs; EIP Networks; NRNs; LAGs
	Funding should offer opportunities for cross-sectoral innovations.	16	
	Funding should be available to support innovation staff within specialist organisations and within SME's. This would help to develop a culture of innovation across the SME-community.	16	
	Consider the possibility to work with innovation vouchers	1	



## Enabling conditions offered by the policy environment at National and EU level

The success of innovation brokerage activities is also linked to an enabling policy environment. The FG study material attempted to identify some of the key policy conditions to be ensured in the future programming period, both generally and at rural development programmes' level. A number of considerations emerged and specific recommendations are mostly directed to national authorities, in order to possibly provide useful **guidance in the design and implementation of future RDPs**:

- Define a clear innovation policy (priorities, targets) at national level and provide timely information to the field about the programme, its priorities and its criteria for eligibility and selection.
- Ensure clarity about the expectations of innovation brokers in the RDP;
- Support an official mandate for innovation brokers. Ideally, innovation brokerage services would be available already during the time leading up to the call for proposals of innovation projects.
- Avoid narrow selection of brokering actors; allow open call for innovation brokers or innovation brokering project proposals;
- Ensure the possibility of co-funding innovation from other programmes like the European Regional Development Fund;
- Consider that there may be a need for legal protection of innovation and innovators, for example concerning registration and use of patents;
- Make clear what level of risk is accepted and how this will be handled in providing support.

A number of other suggestions emerged which relate more to the general policy environment:

- Ensure long-term programmes supporting interactive R&D which can foster the climate for innovations in companies and in farming sub-sectors;
- Build an 'innovation ecosystem' composed by government, social and industry partners, universities and training centres, advanced services (e.g. the Spanish 'Technology Platforms');
- Publicly recognise and award good performance amongst innovation brokers;
- Create a regional-scale support approach (like in the case of the Finnish NRN Network; the Norwegian case also suggests to link it with Research Councils);
- Simplify, be flexible to fit the innovation processes and ensure timely payments.

