

## **1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Mediterranean Macro-regional Network Cluster**

### **“Developing Mediterranean Quality Agricultural Products”**

Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012, Thessaloniki, Greece.

#### **Scope of the Meeting**

The National Rural Networks of Italy, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta agreed to meet in Thessaloniki on the 1st February 2012 in order to share experiences on the current implementation of RDP Axis 1 measures 123, 132 and 133 in order to debate on national experiences and future EU programming.

The objectives of the meeting where to:

- bring the Med. networks together to share experience (with the active participation of as many networks as possible) on EAFRD support for Mediterranean quality agricultural products;
- identify common problems / issues that would justify joint action at a macro-regional level;
- develop (if necessary) a clear vision and commitment for future activities, including agreement for the next meeting.

#### **Opening of the Meeting**

The meeting started with a welcome statement from Ms Ionna Tzika from the Greek National Rural Network, who kindly hosted the meeting, stating the importance of cooperation between the Mediterranean countries and explaining how in the Nordic-Baltic Region the Network Cluster is running effectively with very interesting and positive results. She explained that this cluster could contribute to the formation of an expert network supporting the set-up of a quality food Mediterranean platform.

#### **“RURURBAL Project”**

Profs. Olga Iokovidou from the University of Thessaloniki introduced this project through a short video clip (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxdzAu2gAVI>). She explained that Rururbal is a European cross-border co-operation project, developed within the framework of the MED Program (ERDF), which intends designing a governance strategy for the sustainable and balanced local development of peri-urban territories, by valuing, marketing and promoting the consumption of local agro-foodstuff resources.

The scope of this project is to create a “food conscience” by linking producers to consumers, transforming local products to gourmet dishes and raising of awareness through participation in food festivals and down town food tasting events.

### **“The Importance of local products in a consumer’s oriented market”**

This presentation focused on highlighting the perception of consumers when purchasing local products and the factors that influence such a choice. Prof. Efi Tsakiridou from the Department of Agricultural Economics within the University of Thessaloniki explained the findings of a survey conducted on approximately 400 inhabitants in Thessaloniki focusing on one particular product, the tomato.

The survey revealed that the majority of consumers are aware of certified quality food and local food production and that they prefer to buy locally produced and distributed food. In addition they stated that they are willing to pay a price premium for local certified food and that they consider local foods of higher quality, better taste, healthier and fresher. In conclusion Mrs Tsakiridou explained how the promotion of local food consumption is important because local food consumption can contribute to agricultural sustainability, to the decrease of food miles and its contribution to support the local rural economy.

### **“Mediterranean Diet”**

The focus of this presentation was on the cultural and historical importance of the Mediterranean diet and its attributes to modern times. Mrs Chryssoula Theodoridou from the Department of Agriculture Economics of Thessaloniki University explained how a joint initiative undertaken by Spain, Greece, Italy and Morocco led to the “Mediterranean Diet” being inscribed as a World Heritage List (Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity) by UNESCO.

She highlighted the importance of raising awareness to assure this “gold-standard” of eating patterns, promoting life-long good health, is known by as many people as possible in order to ensure that the Mediterranean Diet is protected and honoured.

The fact that UNESCO gave World Heritage recognition to the healthy, delicious and traditional Mediterranean Diet it is expected that this will trigger a greater international attention and notice to the health and cultural benefits of the traditional Mediterranean Diet. This is also important as government officials and nutrition experts in developed countries around the world acknowledge that the health and wellness of their citizens are declining, in large part due to unhealthy eating patterns.

With UNESCO World Heritage status, the Traditional Mediterranean Diet can become a Model for Healthy Eating, a way of eating that can guide individuals, families, healthcare professionals, agencies of various governments and NGOs to reach the goal of improved health and wellness for people around the world. The presentation closed by showing a video on the Mediterranean Diet - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gQ-zHsBt2k>

### **“State of Play of RDP Measures 123, 132 and 133”**

The Contact Point of the European Network for Rural Development presented an overview of the state of play of these 3 Axis 1 measures within the countries forming part of the Mediterranean Cluster but also provided a comparison on the progress of the other EU member states that have adopted these measures in their RDPs.

Mr Alexandros Papakonstantinou from the Contact Point explained how these measures are very important for the member states in the Med- Cluster and that over 50 % of the budget allocated for these measures across Europe was within the cluster. A walkthrough of the measures highlighted the diversity in the implementation between the 3 measures with measure 123 being the most popular and advanced both in terms of take up as well as financial roll-out. He explained that for measures 132 and 133 the situation was much more complicated with a low take up and disbursement in most of the countries.

### **“The State of Play in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Malta and Cyprus”.**

Representatives from these Member States delivered presentations and information on the country related implementing framework, progress achieved, challenges and outcomes of these three measures.

As a result of the information exchanged during the presentations the discussions focused on identifying the “common” issues as follows:

#### **“Measure 132”**

It was commonly pointed out that the framework of this measure fails to address the missing link between the production (both primary and transformation) and the marketing element of quality products.

Furthermore, there was a strong agreement that the measure should not be limited to individual farmers but it should have a wider range of beneficiaries such as farmer’s organisations, cooperatives and producer organisations for example. This would also address issues linked with the of economies of scale and the need to consolidate the supply of produce to make such schemes sustainable.

In general discussions touched technical aspects of the implementing regulations and articulated the need for simplified rules and more streamlined application processes.

Italy also explained how they could not make use of this measure when it came to organic farming as the certifying cost where included as part of the costs incurred under the agri-environmental measures and also that farmland in “conversion” could not benefit from support under this measure.

#### **“Measure 133”**

There was a general concern that this measure was missing from the new legislative proposals for the 2014-2020 period. In addition the measure had a limited impact as it could be used only be used address the “local focus”. The need to extend the range of eligible activities was also discussed as this was identified as a limiting factor linked to the low measure take up. Alike Measure 133 the discussions focused also on the technical aspects of the implementing regulations and articulated the need for simplified rules and more streamlined application processes together with the introduction of pilot projects as a very important element and that should be considered in terms of eligibility under this measure.

Italy mentioned how the smaller producers could not benefit from this measure because of the inhibitive costs associated with the co-funding element. They consider as very important the possibility to consider for example “in kind” elements such as food during fairs as a set off cost to the co-financing element.

### “Next Steps – Common Actions”

As a follow up to the discussions the Networks discussed the need to take action on the issues identified. It was agreed that this process will lead to the drafting of a “Common Paper” from all the Mediterranean Networks that through a common voice will articulate wider common and country specific issues and recommendations that can address the factors mentioned before but also build on some case studies and best practices that the networks can draw from the implementation of these measures in their respective countries.

A work plan was discussed and key actions and timeframes where agreed. The timeframe for these actions span over a period of four months starting from the end of February up till the end of June 2012. It was agreed between the members of the cluster that the coordination of the work plan will be split amongst the different Network representatives. The first coordinator and chair for upcoming phase (until May) will be Italy.

The following is an outline of the steps and milestones of this activity plan.

- Networks to contribute by providing specific write ups on the wider generic as well as country specific issues and these are to be sent to a “Coordinating Network” for which Italy has agreed to fulfil. (Mid-March)
- These contributions have to be formulated in consultation with the Implementing Authorities and Managing Authorities and should focus on addressing a set of common questions that the Coordinating Network will disseminate beforehand. (Mid-April)
- The Coordinator will then compile all the materials collected with the required editing in a draft paper, circulate it amongst the networks for agreement and consensus. (Mid-May)
- A Final draft will then be produced that will be disseminated to the various key players amongst which the European Commission. (End-June)

The meeting wrapped up by the Italian Network offering to host the next meeting in Rome in May 2012.

In conclusion, the ENRD Contact Point stressed that the networks themselves need to **a)** sustain the momentum of this first meeting and **b)** to build the foundations of their future regional co-operation.

## Annex 1: List of Participants

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