

This series of informative publications present examples collected by the ENRD Focus Group on Knowledge Transfer and Innovation. The case studies describe practices and approaches that EU Member States and regions have put in place to promote Knowledge Transfer and Innovation, mainly but not exclusively, through their Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) in the current period. These examples aim to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in supporting innovation during the 2007-2013 period and to draw some tentative lessons that can inform future improvements to the programmes.

Agro-Environmental Cooperatives in Flanders, Belgium

SUMMARY: In the southern area of Belgian Flanders, farmers play a key role in managing landscape, nature and water conservation through a coordinated implementation of agro-environmental measures, adapted to the local situation.

1. Why the approach has been put in place

In Flanders there is a clear need for landscape, nature and water conservation management to combat the decline of biodiversity (e.g. in plant species, meadow and farmland birds), to preserve certain landscape elements (e.g. hedgerows) and to sustain water availability.

Farmers play a vital role in realising agro-environmental targets as specific knowledge of local situations best determines the most effective strategy. For example, in certain areas of Flanders a high concentration of hollow ways

needs to be maintained in a more sustainable way, to tackle the decline of fauna and flora in the landscape.

To implement environmental measures, agro-environmental cooperatives were formed at the initiative of local farmers. This resulted in more effective landscape, nature and water conservation management, via a more site-specific approach and coordinated action at local level.

2. How it was achieved in practice

The environmental cooperatives concept was promoted by the Belgium farmers union Boerenbond, implementing the project [ECO²](#) in Flanders and is funded by the European Regional Development Fund. Among the partners included in this initiative are the Flemish Land Agency (VLM), the Agency of Nature and Forests (ANB) and the organisation Agro|Aanneming which does contracted work on farmland.

The initiative to set up agro-environmental cooperatives was conceived by local farmers. Farmers are grouped around landscape, nature or water conservation projects and they determine themselves how the management of an area should be undertaken. This might include individually or jointly implemented management options.

In this way they achieve more site-specific approaches with coordinated actions at

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landscape level for landscape, nature and water conservation management.

Although the initiative to form cooperatives rests with the local farmers, it is widely supported in many ways:

Knowledge exchange and collaboration is promoted with input from other stakeholders. Farmers, advisors and interest groups come together and discuss the approaches and how to implement them, as well as considering the results. For example exchanges between Flemish and Dutch farmers are organised to exchange best-practice.

Knowledge transfer between different participators is promoted through interactive

events. These events are designed to address the farmers' needs and promote a vision of a more sustainable agriculture, e.g. through demonstration events in farms.

Awareness raising and dissemination is ensured by engaging different networks, farmers' newspapers, farmer advisory groups, local advisor groups as well as farm business advisors of the VLM.

The involvement of the farmers in these cooperatives is rewarded and farmers are compensated for the execution of the agreed measures.

3. Lessons learnt for the future

- ⇒ Very often it can be difficult to convince farmers to work together as there are competing choices between individual and common interests.
- ⇒ However, the engagement of farmers in these groups increases the likelihood that agreements will be continued in the longer term.
- ⇒ The consultation and cooperation between different stakeholders helps to break-down barriers and creates confidence between all of the stakeholders.
- ⇒ A lot of attention has to be given to the proper functioning of the cooperatives. In this respect knowledge-sharing and collaboration play an important role.
- ⇒ In the 2007-2013 period, agro-environmental measures only targeted farmers who individually entered into contract with the government. This project is seen as an example of support to groups of farmers that could be implemented under the RDP 2014-2020.

Information in this publication is primarily sourced from the case studies carried out within the ENRD Focus Group on Knowledge Transfer & Innovation. It has been compiled by the ENRD Contact Point on the basis of the information collected in the EU Member States and regions and takes into account views expressed at the European, national and regional level. This notwithstanding, the content does not necessarily reflect the official position of the EU institutions and national authorities.