

CERERE

Cereal Renaissance in Rural Europe: embedding diversity in organic and low-input food systems

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Guidelines to foster the creation of operational groups for cereal diversity in organic and low-input food systems

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CO: Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)

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1. Introduction – What is an Operational Group?

Operational Groups (OGs) **are groups of people who work together in an innovation project funded by Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).**

Operational Groups are the EIP-AGRI's main tool for turning innovative ideas into real solutions for the field. To set up and implement a successful Operational Group, it takes a good innovative idea, the right partners, a solid plan and effective ways of spreading results.

Operational Groups bring together partners with complementary knowledge. The composition of the group can vary according to the theme and specific objectives of each project. Farmers, advisers, scientists, businesses or other relevant partners work together to find practical solutions for specific problems facing people in the European farming and forestry sectors. Operational Groups also share the project results with the broader EIP-AGRI network so that others with similar challenges across Europe can benefit from the outcomes.

The EIP-AGRI brochure on Operational Groups gives an update on the information and support that is available, with examples from OG projects that have already started: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/publications/eip-agri-brochure-operational-groups-update-2016>.

2. Scope of this document and methodology

This document was written to foster the creation of Operational Groups from the extended network of the CERERE thematic network. In order to create these guidelines, we analysed information available from focus groups conducted by CERERE consortium, from the EIP-AGRI website (<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture>) and other documents available on the CERERE website (<http://cerere2020/eu>). Focus groups aimed at getting insights about goals and challenges of operational groups in low-input and organic food systems. Focus group participants had different backgrounds (farmers, millers, bakers, pasta makers, advisors and researchers) and were active in operational groups recruited by CERERE partners to take part in the second workshop on Operational Groups run in Galway in November 2018.

The remainder of this document is organised as follows:

- Section three will provide insights about the creation of operational groups giving examples related to low input and organic cereal systems.

- Sections four will contain information and tips on how to get started with an operational group.
- Section five will present a step by step guide to facilitate the formation of an operational group.
- Section six will provide insights on how to possible challenges that must be taken into account by stakeholders to accomplish the project successfully.
- Section seven will conclude with final remarks, while the appendix summarises key points to foster the creation of an operational group.

3. Getting insights about Operational Groups: who can apply and what they might do

Who can apply: Any group of stakeholders that has identified a problem or an innovative idea that will benefit a geographic area where cereal food systems can operate.

It must be a problem or an innovative idea which will benefit more than one actor in the cereal supply chain over a defined time period. To better understand who can apply and what operational groups do practically, potential applicants are advised to collect information about existing operational groups by registering themselves on the EIP Agri website (<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en>).

Existing operational groups are generally small groups consisting of different actors such as farmers, researchers, agricultural extensions services, advisors and other local actors such as small businesses. Prospective operational groups have to evaluate carefully the partnership structure which seems to be very much in line with one of the main objectives of CERERE and other thematic networks where stakeholders having different expertise attempt to bridge the gap between practice and research. The partnership structure of existing operational groups available shows that farmers are the engine of these groups of stakeholders as they are very likely to be included, in many cases with researchers, rural networks, advisors and other local actors that can help to work on the identified problem or innovative idea. This type of partnership structure is also confirmed by a report that assessed existing operational groups in all agro-food sectors (Knotter, Kretz and Zeqo, 2019). This study also highlights that in terms of leadership research institutes and farmers lead the majority of operational groups.

Examples of what two ongoing operational groups are doing for low input and organic cereal systems can be found in Tuscany. One focuses on the development of a low input agronomic system for the valorisation of renewed varieties/populations of maize and millet. More information about this operational group can be found at the following URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/find-connect/projects/valorizzazione-delle-colture-da-rinnovo-ambienti>. The other group is facilitating the adaptation to climatic change of populations of cereals in organic and low input farming systems in Tuscany (see <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/find-connect/projects/diversità-nei-cereali-l'adattamento-ai-cambiamenti> for more information on this second group).

In order to set up an operational group, potential stakeholders must identify the topic to which they want to contribute, the thematic area linked to the particular topic, goals, actors involved, area of implementation and justify the relevance of the project (EIP-AGRI, 2013). The identification of these points can help potential operational groups to describe the action to be undertaken, the activities to be included, possible results and how findings can be replicated or scaled up. Examples of what operational groups can do in low input and organic cereal systems can also be found in the appendix of the 'EIP-AGRI Focus Groups on Organic Farming Recommendations and Outputs' publication (EIP-AGRI, 2013). The appendix summarises twenty-five case studies, three of which, whose titles are reported below, deal with organic cereal systems:

- Case 16 (*Protection and development of genetic heritage for conservation of rural bio-diversity*),
- Case 17 (*Precision farming in organic production – more efficient weed and fertiliser management for increased productivity*) and
- Case 20 (*Grain maize growing in organic farms in northern Poland*).

The CERERE booklet of collected solutions on farming practices, baking, pasta making, seed production and marketing of diversity-based products also offers insights to foster the development of operational groups in the organic and low-input cereal systems (<http://www.cerere2020.eu>). However, some specific problems which require urgent attention were highlighted by focus group participants:

- Seeds of ancient cereals and heritage varieties and landraces do not comply with current seeds legislation;

- Supplies of seeds of ancient cereals and heritage varieties and landraces are insufficient to meet demand;
- How to adapt machinery to produce small amounts of flour from a wide range of cereal species and varieties.

Finally, prospective operational groups of organic and low-input cereal food systems may also consult deliverable 5.3 of the CERERE project which contains a map of stakeholders identified by surveying all partners for contacts with organisations and individuals from across the organic and artisanal cereals value chains in their respective countries. Thus, this map reflects the current knowledge base of the CERERE partners institutions at local and regional levels and provide information about key characteristics (type of partners, organisations, sector and etc.) of identified stakeholders dislocated in eight EU countries (Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Spain, UK).

4. How to start

Usually, before the OG is started, farmers, millers, bakers and any other involved stakeholders must collate their issues and ideas of how to solve them either via a questionnaire or a meeting with notes. The notes should make clear how the specific topic was selected and how engaging with it could contribute towards meeting the actual needs and interests of each of the stakeholders involved.

The Operational Group application needs to contain a clear outline of the different stages of the project. Managing Authorities and innovation support services can give information and offer support with this and with completing the rest of the application.

It is emphasised that the formation of an operational group should take place on the initiative of all the actors involved. The Operational Group is recognised ("labelled") by the title of its project. In general terms, the operational group can develop and implement either:

- a new project from a new grouping of actors, or
- a new project from an existing grouping of actors.

EIP-AGRI aims at a flexible and open system for the bottom-up creation of operational groups, tackling the needs and opportunities of farming practice over a specific time period. No specific conditions are laid down by the EU regarding the composition or minimum size of an Operational Group (except that a minimum of two entities must be involved). A higher number or diversity of partners in an Operational Group may not however always be beneficial: the composition of the Operational Groups should be specifically targeted to making the best use of different types of knowledge (e.g. practical, scientific, technical, organisational, etc.) in an interactive way, benefiting the specific project and providing the best cost-benefit ratio. It is important to combine different skills and types of partners to get robust results that are also ready enough to be used in practice.

The Managing Authority will not set up Operational Groups, since they should originate from bottom-up ideas and needs. However, some Managing Authorities of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) may want to focus on specific themes related to their national, regional or thematic priorities for rural development. Also, some specific conditions for eligibility or selection of applications for Operational Groups may be set at national or regional level. Potential partners in Operational Groups should therefore always check the specific conditions in their respective RDP and in particular in the call for Operational Groups.

Please check with the national Managing Authority in your country or region for information on open calls to find out if there are specific, local requirements for building an Operational Group. Your country's National Rural Network (NRN) can also provide more detailed information on setting up Operational Groups and finding partners. It is also advisable to contact the Managing Authority to discuss possible topics.

You can find all contact details of Managing Authorities on the EIP-AGRI website:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/content/managing-authorities-contact-details>

5. Step by step guide

The following steps should be followed when setting up of an operational group:

1. Identify a problem of interest to a group of stakeholders

2. Organize a meeting of all interested stakeholders to discuss possible solutions, share ideas and challenges. Ensure notes are recorded and agreed and that these notes document agreed objectives or the desired solution for a common problem.
3. Define activities, who will do what and over what time period and how funds will be allocated to different activities.
4. Visit the operational group website <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/my-eip-agri/operational-groups> and search by word to check if a similar topic has already been addressed by other OGs in other countries.
5. Contact the Managing Authorities for your country (it can be a contact at national or at regional level); usually you will have a full name for contact, an address, telephone, email and website. Ask if they accept OG applications and the funding they have available to support them (<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/managing-authorities-contact-details?stakeholder=3394>).
6. Complete a template for an application, after contacting the management authority. Templates can be found at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/eip-agri-common-format>
7. Ultimately as the final outcome at the end of the project, all multi-actor projects and thematic networks will produce one or more practice abstracts to share the solutions found in the EIP "Common format". Detailed explanation of this format can be found on the following link: https://www.innovarurale.it/sites/default/files/pt_07_reporting_on_eip_operational_groups_in_sfc_-_presentation_rev.pdf.

If at any time you are not able to find the managing authority, call EIP-AGRI SERVICE POINT +322 543 73 48 or send an email to servicepoint@eip-agri.eu

A toolkit of relevant and useful information on OGs is available on the EIP-AGRI website in the 'My EIP-AGRI section'. The Operational Group toolkit makes use of the experiences, knowledge and skills that are constantly building up within the EIP-AGRI network.

The online toolkit offers you:

- Further, detailed information on how to set up Operational Groups, on supporting networks and on relevant EIP-AGRI seminars and workshops.
- Links to results and contact details of ongoing Operational Groups
- Information about innovation support services and materials to help you communicate your project and spread results

6. Suggestions on how to succeed

Operational group activities can be implemented in different ways. However, operational groups may face several challenges that must be considered to increase the possibility of a successful project.

A very important aspect of success that partners should consider is the participatory and knowledge-sharing activities that partners must plan during the life of the project. Deliverable 4.1 of the CERERE project (Hayland, Macken-Walsh and O'Mahony, 2018) offers insights to foster operational groups on participatory processes and innovation brokering, on successful group dynamics, techniques and evaluation processes that partners should consider and put in place to succeed as operational groups. Moreover, focus groups results conducted in Galway in November 2018 indicate that in order to increase chances of success operational groups must:

- Create a strong trust relationship among participants by ensuring clarity about rules of engagement and allowing them to speak openly and truthfully without feeling that what is said is irrelevant. Partners should also make clear who can receive funding and how it will be distributed according to costs and tasks. Regular meetings among operational group partners were also considered paramount to enhance trust by focus group participants. This aspect is also confirmed by Knotter, Kretz and Zeqo (2019) who found that bringing together all partners two times a year was considered a key trust component for an operational group working on cereal systems.
- Evaluate carefully all technical and economic aspects of the solution addressed by the project. Avoid disagreements about methods used to accomplish goals and planned activities by accepting diversity of approaches of the various participants.

Ideas and proposals of partners have to be discussed, respected and implemented if they add value to the project. This was also highlighted by Knotter, Kretz and Zeqo (2019) who analysing an operational group working on 'Control of additional water use in crop production - situational, site-specific and automated' (case study number six) and stated that 'if a farmer does not want to adopt an irrigation recommendation for a good reason, the researcher will accept this decision' (page 49).

- Be open minded and involve farmers actively. For example, organic cereal farmers participating in focus groups were concerned about the difficulty of convincing researchers and academic people to use less strictly conventional methods of analysis. Avoid this problem by being ready to co-create knowledge that can facilitate the synergistic combination of best practices and research results. Such an approach can help develop the idea or solve the problem and will give more shared results that can be disseminated more rapidly.
- Develop a clear communication plan to disseminate project activities during all phases of the project. Communication and dissemination activities are important to increase awareness of the results of the project and reduce transaction costs for stakeholders who want to implement the same innovation at local and beyond the local community. The importance of succeeding in these activities was also highlighted by Knotter, Kretz and Zeqo (2019) who summarise how the nine operational groups analysed use different disseminations methods such as publications, events and websites. Furthermore, international and national events organized by the CERERE thematic network (<http://www.cerere2020.eu>) suggest that there is an urgent need to raise awareness for biodiversity friendly farming. Thus, prospective operational groups dealing with organic and low input cereal systems should plan knowledge transfer meetings that help farmers implementing biodiversity-friendly farming practices and share their experiences with other farmers in order to disseminate identified best practices. The key issue will be to ensure that the message comes across clearly. There is a need to engage the intensive farmers because they have the biggest impact on biodiversity. The key to involving these farmers will be in helping them to understand the future wishes of consumers, namely to have agricultural products

that are not harmful but produced in harmony with the surrounding environment.

7. Conclusions

The strength of operational groups lies in the diversity of their partnership where farmers, researchers, advisory groups and other stakeholders are committed to work together in order to achieve a common goal. However, the formation of operational groups requires a high degree of adaptation not only to the agronomic or technical contexts, but also to the social and the environmental contexts in which stakeholders intend to develop an idea or solve a problem. Activities planned by operational groups must be assessed technically, economically and knowledge acquired shared with farmers and other stakeholders scaling up results rapidly.

References

IP-AGRI (2013). Focus Group - Organic Farming Optimising Arable Yields Recommendations and Outputs - Final report. European Commission, Brussels.

EIP-AGRI (2016) Operational Groups Turning your idea into innovation. European Commission, Brussels.

Hayland, J., Macken-Walsh, O and O'Mahony, D. (2018). Participatory Processes and Innovation Brokering: First Principles and Methods for the CERERE project (CERERE Training Concept). Deliverable 4.1, CERERE.

Knotter, S., Kretz, D. and Zeqo, K. (2019). Operational Groups Assessment 2018. Final report, EIP-AGRI Agriculture & Innovation, Brussels.

Operational Groups summary

What is an operational Group?

Operational Groups (OGs) are groups of people who work together in an innovation project funded by Rural Development. They bring together partners with complementary knowledge: *Farmers, advisers, NGOs, public body, scientists, businesses, Associations, or other relevant partners.*

They work together to find practical solutions for specific problems facing people in the European farming and forestry sectors Programmes (RDPs).

The emphasis of the Operational Groups is on creating **knowledge which is freely available**

Types of projects:

The types of projects or areas of action for Operational Groups can be very broad. Project must contribute objective of promoting agricultural innovation. This might range from projects that target:

- **Development of new products**
- **Practices, processes and technologies to testing and adapting of existing technologies and processes in novel geographical and environmental contexts.**
- **Field trials,**
- **pilot projects,**
- **joint working processes,**
- **short supply chain activities,**
- **initiatives for climate change adaptation**
- **mitigation, collective environmental projects**and many more activities might be involved.

How to create an operational Group:

- Identify a problem within a group of stakeholders
- Organize a meeting to discuss possible solutions, share ideas and challenges – ideally taking notes and creating objectives or the desired solution for a common problem.
- Complete a template for an application, after contacting the management authority. Template can be found at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/eip-agri-common-format>

Funding

Various types of Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding will help launch Operational Groups.

Contact the country managing authority:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/managing-authorities-contact-details?stakeholder=3394>

Who to contact:

Visit the operational group website :

<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/my-eip-agri/operational-groups>

search by word, if similar subjects is already part of

operational groups in other countries.

What will be the final outcome?

Operational Groups have an obligation to disseminate, which relates to substantial results that can be of use to others. A solution can potentially be found, a project funded by the managing authority and the results shared with many different audiences via the Operational Group portal and related sources.