



Sustainability of thematic networks for agricultural and forestry innovation: recommendations from the EURAKNOS project

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The EURAKNOS project (www.euraknos.eu) deals with the future of innovation in European agriculture and forestry, based on the improved (digital) exchange of best practices between key actors in agricultural and forestry innovation from different sectors and EU member states.

Despite the continued funding of research projects at national and European level, the outcomes are often not integrated into agricultural and forestry practice, and innovative methods from practice are not captured and spread. Thematic networks (TNs) are remedying this. TNs are multi-actor projects which connect people with interests and expertise centred around one topic. They collect, summarise, share and present existing knowledge and best practices in easily understandable formats for end-users such as farmers, foresters, advisers, and others.

EURAKNOS has collaborated with TNs covering all kinds of agricultural and forestry-related themes to develop guidance for establishing and conducting

further TN projects which is presented in the EURAKNOS Explorer's Guide to Thematic Networks (EURAKNOS, 2020a). EURAKNOS is also developing a prototype agricultural knowledge platform as a precursor to a centralised system for long-term storage of TN outputs.

The role of TNs within the Agricultural European Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI) and Agricultural Knowledge Innovation Systems (AKIS)

TNs produce valuable outcomes that must be maintained for future use. TNs are

coordinated actions in funding schemes for agriculture and forestry innovation. The sustainability of these networks and their outputs—practice-oriented knowledge for farmers and foresters—is key to achieving long-term visibility, wider reach, and increased impact of funded outcomes. TNs have been a key success as part of the EIP-AGRI and of the AKIS in EU Member States (EIP-Agri, 2020).

Modernisation of national strategic plans for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will require a stronger collaboration between the researchers, advisers and CAP networks, and efforts in digitalisation. To build an EU AKIS, better connectivity and quicker circulation of information and knowledge sharing is needed. TNs can

play an important role in the exchange of information and knowledge between key actors in agricultural and forestry innovation at national and European levels. Maintaining the outcomes of TNs within the AKIS beyond the funded project period is always a challenge. EU TN projects are generally funded for three years; sustainability and legacy of projects is a challenge. Also, the results of TNs at the national level may get lost in a relatively short time, hence losing their impact on agricultural and forestry innovation.

Policy recommendations to enhance the sustainability and impact of TNs

This policy brief aims to provide policymakers with a set of recommendations to create an enabling environment for establishing TNs and ensuring their sustainability. TNs deliver material to build knowledge exchange events, on-farm demonstrations, training and education, and much more. Funding programmes and frameworks should be adapted to facilitate interaction between different actors and networks to address end-user needs better whilst supporting (digital) Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). This would ultimately make TNs more efficient and impactful at regional, national, and European levels.

The basis for this policy brief was developed in an interactive participatory and co-creative process with over 80 key actors in agricultural and forestry innovation. Discussions took place during the meeting of the Strategic Working Group of the EU Standing Committee of Agricultural Research on Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (SWG SCAR AKIS) in Kaunas, Lithuania (19–20 November 2019). The topics explored during the meeting were based upon previous results from an earlier EURAKNOS workshop in Budapest, Hungary (11–13 September 2019).

This resulted in six final recommendations which can be supported through adapted funding frameworks at EU, national and local level.

Policy recommendations

- 1. Funding schemes should provide extra financial incentives for farmers and foresters to participate in meetings or consultation rounds.** This will facilitate the engagement of farmers and foresters in a bottom-up approach during the **pre-funding phase and throughout project implementation** to ensure the TN effectively addresses the needs of end-users.
- 2. Funding schemes should allow TNs to be flexible and responsive to challenges that present themselves or develop over the project's lifetime.** The funding framework should enforce addressing current needs of farmers and foresters. **Flexibility** is helpful as social, economic, regulatory, and environmental needs may shift from those identified at the beginning of the funding phase.
- 3. Funding agencies should develop and promote standardised dissemination formats which appeal to different TN target groups.** The concept of the EIP-AGRI practice abstract should be expanded to incorporate more diverse outputs tailored to different user profiles. Including visual materials such as videos, presentations and infographics can increase the attractiveness, visibility and impact of TN results as they can be more easily applied by different users in different contexts (farmers and foresters in practice, and advisers and educators as key intermediaries).
- 4. Profit from long-term established networks: national, or regional and local governments should facilitate and financially support mapping of local networks and main information sources for farmers and foresters.** Identifying and collaborating with existing networks, information sources, connections and support mechanisms used by farmers and foresters allows TN outcomes to be transmitted by these trusted 'long-term established networks'. This increases the credibility of TNs, ensures a broader reach and uptake of their results, and thus increases impact.
- 5. Funding schemes should stimulate connection to digital training.** TNs should target 'analogue users' to increase their digital literacy via training and support. This would enable those users to access online information resources and communities for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. With support from key agricultural and forestry actors, local authorities should support TNs in linking with educational initiatives, training platforms, discussion groups, or face-to-face dissemination meetings through funding schemes.
- 6. National and/or regional government departments should help the sustainability of TN outcomes, through promoting the creation and maintenance of a common EU-wide agricultural knowledge platform.** TN structure, governance, and financing should be adapted to enhance the sustainability of TNs and their outcomes. A key element to support this aim is the development of a common, EU-wide, standardised and interoperable digital platform for agricultural and forestry knowledge. This platform would serve to connect different actors, initiatives and (CAP and other) networks at local, national or European levels with a view to combine the outputs of different projects in one, central website (EURAKNOS, 2020b). This would improve the sustainability of thematic networks and their results as they could be maintained on this common centralised platform. It would also mean that target users could easily find information in one place, resulting in higher web traffic compared to individual project websites. It is essential that the platform is well-maintained and adapts to end-user needs and expectations, including the use of local languages.



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TNs strengthen the EU AKIS by creating synergy at European, national and local levels

The sustainability and impact of TNs and their outcomes can be significantly enhanced by implementing these recommendations at several levels: local, national and European. The six recommendations mentioned above can serve as guidelines for policymakers and funders at national and European levels to improve the form, function and outputs of TNs and secure their sustainability, legacy and impact beyond the funded project period.

These six criteria identified by key actors in the EU and national AKIS indicate that TN projects need greater support from the European Commission. TNs and their outputs should also be more intensively used by national, regional and local governments to achieve greater sustainability and have a greater impact on agricultural innovation.

Thematic networks, be it at EU, national or regional level, are a key instrument to improve member states' AKIS, as part of their CAP AKIS strategy (SWG SCAR AKIS, 2019). Through the implementation of these recommendations, TN projects will respond better to farmers and foresters' needs, enhance uptake of results by a wider community of users over a longer time frame, be more sustainable, ultimately accelerating innovation in agriculture and forestry.

To achieve this, policymakers and decision-makers at all levels (EU, national/regional and local) should adapt the project structure

and funding requirements for calls to improve the interaction between different actors and networks. Budget should be diverted from the variety of project websites, which are often not sufficiently known, to a common standardised and interoperable platform that connects to multiple actors, including educational institutions. An enabling environment, supporting the digital AKIS and facilitating synergy, will make TNs more efficient, sustainable, and impactful, improving the information flow and sharing of knowledge between key actors in the AKIS at European and national levels.

Next steps

The EURAKNOS project will conclude in March 2021. If you are interested in learning more, [register here](#) for a brief presentation of key outputs from the project on 5 February 2021; or attend the [final conference](#) on 26 February for more comprehensive discussions and networking opportunities.

The EUREKA project (www.h2020eureka.eu) is building on the work of EURAKNOS to develop a functional online knowledge repository platform, FarmBook. This open source e-platform will present outputs from Agricultural and forestry-based EU multi-actor projects and offer an easy search function for end-users to find the resources they need.



EURAKNOS

PROJECT SUMMARY

EURAKNOS aims to strengthen the EU agricultural knowledge base by supporting Thematic Networks and exploring the feasibility of creating a data platform to house their outputs. The EURAKNOS Explorer's Guide (<https://t.co/yvXDtl77uT>) contains key insights and good practices for Thematic Networks to achieve high impact. Proof of concept for an EU-wide open source digital data platform will be ready early in 2021.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Ghent University aims to be a world player building innovative research and education, based on international excellence. It commits itself to spearheading scientific and social debates and training people who dare to think today about the challenges of tomorrow. The exciting work of EURAKNOS is being developed further by the EUREKA project (<https://h2020eureka.eu/>), also coordinated by Ghent University.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Agrolink Vlaanderen, Proefstation voor de Groenteteelt, Leap Forward, IFOAM Organics Europe, Grünland Zentrum, Agricultural University of Athens, International Centre for Research in Organic Food Systems (ICROFS), Nemzeti Agrárkutatási és Innovációs Központ, Nemzeti Agrárgazdasági Kamara, Pöllumajandusuuringute Keskuse, University of Santiago de Compostela, Les Instituts Techniques Agricoles (ACTA), Institut de l'Élevage, Institut Français de la Vigne, Innovation for Agriculture, Royal Agricultural University.

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<https://open.spotify.com/show/3c1tR3H0a5WLyXIN69H4OT>



FUNDING

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No.817863.



<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTOvLzwYhftUFFz8JFDg2bg>

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EURAKNOS (2020b) *Vision paper: Developing High Impact: The Future EU-wide Open Source Knowledge Reservoir for Agriculture and Forestry*. Available at: https://euraknos.fra1.digitaloceanspaces.com/production/deliverables/EURAKNOS-Vision_Paper.pdf (Accessed: 15 December 2020).

SWG SCAR AKIS (2019) *Preparing for future AKIS in Europe*. Page 29. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/key_policies/documents/report-preparing-for-future-akis-in-europe_en.pdf (Accessed 15 December 2020).

Recommended Reading

Thematic networks – Closing the research and innovation divide: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/about/thematic-networks-%E2%80%93-closing-research-and>

EIP-AGRI Brochure on Thematic Networks under Horizon 2020: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/publications/eip-agri-brochure-thematic-networks-under-horizon>

EIP-AGRI Seminar' CAP Strategic Plans: the key role of AKIS in Member States: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/event/eip-agri-seminar-cap-strategic-plans-key-role-akis>

The agricultural European Innovation Partnership <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/>

SCAR Strategic Working Group on Agricultural Innovation and Knowledge Systems (AKIS) <https://scar-europe.org/index.php/akis>