

Policy Brief

Sustainability of Thematic Networks for Agricultural and Forestry Innovation: Recommendations from the EURAKNOS Project

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 are remedying this. Thematic Networks are multi-actor projects which connect actors with interests and expertise centred around one theme in agriculture and/or forestry, based on real needs of farmers and foresters. They collect, summarize, share and present existing knowledge and best practices in easily understandable formats for users such as farmers, foresters, advisors, and other key intermediaries. Thematic Networks co-develop, co-design and deliver materials to support knowledge exchange activities (e.g., events, on-farm demonstrations, training, and education) and feed into Operational Groups and other (user) networks.

EURAKNOS has collaborated with Thematic Networks covering all kinds of agricultural and forestry-related themes to develop guidance for establishing and conducting further Thematic Network projects¹. EURAKNOS is also developing a proof-of-concept for an agricultural knowledge platform as a precursor to a centralized system for long-term storage of Thematic Network outputs.

This Policy Brief provides a set of recommendations for policymakers, in particular decision-making and funding bodies; agricultural and rural development departments at national, regional, and local level; as well as CAP networks and advisory groups that may influence policy making, including lobbying organizations, expert groups, farmers, foresters and advisory organizations, and technology platform developers. The recommendations aim to contribute to the creation of an enabling environment for establishing and sustaining Thematic Networks.

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

The concept of Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) is used to describe how people and organizations join together to promote mutual learning to generate, share, and use agriculture-related knowledge and information. A great diversity of actors is involved in sharing and creating agricultural knowledge. Farmers, foresters, advisors, researchers, education and training providers, input suppliers, retailers, media services, ministries, and others, are all part of a national or regional AKIS since they all either need, produce or exchange knowledge. In the interactive innovation model, Thematic Networks produce valuable outcomes that must be maintained for future use. Thematic Networks are coordinated actions in

¹ [The EURAKNOS Explorer's Guide to Thematic Networks](#)



funding schemes designed to speed up the agriculture and forestry innovation process based on user needs and engagement. 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. Thematic Networks have been a key success as part of the EIP-AGRI and of the AKIS in countries, especially when connected to Operational Groups (OGs)².

Modernization of national strategic plans for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will require a stronger collaboration between researchers, advisors and CAP networks, and greater efforts in digitalization and education. To build a strong and well-functioning EU AKIS; better connectivity, quicker circulation of information, and intensive knowledge sharing is needed. Thematic Networks can play an important role in the exchange of information and knowledge between key actors in agricultural and forestry innovation at European, national and regional levels. Maintaining the outcomes of Thematic Networks within the AKIS beyond the funded project period, which is in general 3 years, is always a challenge. As the sustainability and legacy of Thematic Network projects is not guaranteed, the results of Thematic Networks may get lost at all levels in a relatively short time, hence losing their impact on agricultural and forestry innovation.

Policy recommendations to enhance the sustainability and impact of Thematic Networks

The basis for this Policy Brief was developed through an interactive participatory and co-creative process with over 80 key actors in agricultural and forestry innovation, including government representatives of at least 17 Member States (Lithuania, Spain, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Slovenia, France, Hungary, Belgium, Poland, Romania, Portugal, Italy, Latvia, Estonia and Ireland). Discussions took place during the meeting of the Strategic Working Group of the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research on Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (SWG SCAR AKIS) in Kaunas (19-20 November 2019). The ten recommendations explored during the meeting were based upon the summary of previous results from the EURAKNOS expert workshop in Budapest³ (11-13 September 2019).

This process resulted in six main recommendations which can be supported through adapted decision-making and funding frameworks at EU, national, regional, and local levels:

1. Funding schemes should provide extra financial incentives for farmers and foresters to participate in meetings, participatory activities, 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 Thematic Network effectively addresses the needs of the users. This funding should be flexible, to be used at any stage of the project, including the conceptualization stage. Claiming the funding must be simple with minimal administration required (e.g., vouchers or a lump sum covering the practitioner's time and/or direct expenses required to participate). In addition, to increase the involvement of farmers and/or foresters in TNs, strong links should be made with local networks and OGs. **Engagement of the user in the co-development, co-design, co-creation, and co-sharing phase is key for the success of Thematic Networks.**

² [EIP-Agri: 7 years of innovation in agriculture and forestry](#)

³ [EURAKNOS Deliverable 2.5](#) – WP2. Report of EURAKNOS Workshop 1



2. Funding schemes should be clear, simple and allow Thematic Networks to be flexible and responsive to challenges that present themselves or develop over the project's lifetime.

The funding framework should enforce addressing the *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.** In addition, funding schemes should allow for the combination of various types/sources of funding (e.g. within the Common Agricultural Policy, Horizon Europe and other schemes at regional and national level) to create synergy and strengthen projects' effectiveness and impact at social, economic and environmental levels. **Responding to real and pressing needs of farmers and foresters is the basis for Thematic Network outputs.**

3. Funding and intermediary agencies should develop and promote standardized dissemination formats which appeal to different Thematic Network target groups (farmers, foresters, advisors, educators in different agricultural and forestry sectors).

The concept of the EIP-AGRI practice abstract should be expanded to incorporate more diverse outputs tailored to different user profiles. Visual materials such as videos presented by farmers or foresters in local languages, and well-designed presentations and infographics can increase the attractiveness, visibility and impact of Thematic Network results. When adapted to specific target groups they will be more easily applied by different user groups in different socio-economic and cultural contexts (farmers and foresters in practice, and advisors/innovation support services and educators as key intermediaries). Standards should be developed for Member States to improve digital interoperability between initiatives at national level; these standards should be applied for the whole knowledge chain from research to practice (i.e., Operational Groups). The standards should also consider aspects to enhance the user friendliness and accessibility of materials e.g., formats should be used that offer attractive design and aesthetic options whilst also being easily automatically translated into local languages. **Establishing a standard for user-friendly dissemination materials for successful uptake of results.**

4. National, or regional and local governments should facilitate and financially support mapping of local (user) networks and the 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 Thematic Network outcomes to be transmitted by these trusted 'long-term established networks'. Cross border interaction between local networks and/or Operational Groups should be strongly encouraged as Thematic Networks on specific topics that are based on the real needs of the participating farmers and foresters may arise. This increases the credibility of Thematic Networks, ensures a broader reach and uptake of their results, and thus increases impact. **Connection to long-term established networks will enhance Thematic Network integration within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) at macro- and micro-levels.**



5. Funding schemes should stimulate connection to (digital) training.

The COVID 19 pandemic has confronted us with unprecedented challenges, increased the need for digital training and simultaneously has spurred the digital innovation and improved digital standardization on many farms. However, to maximize the reach to the broad demographic of farmers and foresters, **Thematic Networks should target key intermediaries, such as advisors and innovation brokers, to help ‘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. Local authorities, with support from key agricultural and forestry actors, should stimulate Thematic Networks in linking with educational initiatives, training platforms, discussion groups, demonstrations, or face-to-face meetings through funding schemes. **Connection to education within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) will enhance the sustainability of Thematic Networks and their outputs.**

6. National and/or regional government departments should support the sustainability of Thematic Network outcomes by integrating them into a national or regional open access knowledge platform and by promoting the creation and maintenance of a common EU-wide agricultural knowledge platform according to the FAIR principles⁴.

Digital collaboration between Thematic Networks and Operational Groups and the different actors within the European AKIS should be enhanced. A key element to support this aim is the development of a common, EU-wide, standardized, and interoperable digital platform for co-sharing practice-oriented materials and other relevant knowledge for sustainable innovation in agriculture and forestry. This will strengthen the integration of Thematic Networks and Operational Groups within the AKIS and strengthen the AKIS at all levels (European, national, regional, and local). This platform would serve to connect different actors, initiatives and (CAP and other) networks at local, national, or European levels to combine the outputs of different projects⁵ and bridge the gap between research and practice. 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 user needs and expectations, including the use of local languages. Regional and national AKIS strategies need to be further developed to support digital knowledge reservoirs based on outputs from projects funded at the regional/national level to enhance knowledge sharing and link to the EU-wide platform. A digital platform should be combined with real life activities such as demonstration activities and face-to-face meetings, and link to trusted traditional channels such as agricultural magazines and local user networks. **Digitalization of Thematic Network Outputs in national and EU-wide open access platforms will enhance their connection to the (digital) Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).**

Thematic Networks strengthen the European Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) by creating synergy at European, national, regional, and local levels

These six recommendations can serve as guidelines for policy makers and funders at national and European levels to improve the form, function, and outputs of Thematic Networks and secure their sustainability, legacy, and impact beyond the funded project period. Ultimately, the structure, governance, and financing of Thematic Networks should be adapted to enhance the sustainability and impact of Thematic Networks and their outcomes.

⁴ [Turning FAIR into reality \(europa.eu\)](https://europe.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-agriculture)

⁵ [EURAKNOS Vision paper](#)



These six criteria and recommendations identified by key actors in the EU and national AKIS indicate that Thematic Network projects need greater support from the European Commission, as well as government departments and funding agencies at the national level. Thematic Networks and their outputs should also be more intensively used by national, regional, and local governments and aligned to other initiatives and networks to achieve greater sustainability and have a greater impact on agriculture and forestry innovation.

Thematic Networks, be it at the EU, national or regional level, are a key instrument to improve Member States' AKIS, as part of their Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) AKIS strategy⁶. To ensure sustainability Thematic Networks should make better use of national and other local networks to maximize the engagement of key AKIS actors in participatory activities related to specific thematic fields on the one hand and to maximize the dissemination and exploitation of outcomes on the other. Through the implementation of these recommendations, Thematic Network projects will also respond better to the needs of farmers and foresters, enhance uptake of results by a wider community of users over a longer timeframe, and be more sustainable, ultimately accelerating innovation in agriculture and forestry. Funding programmes and frameworks should be adapted to facilitate interaction between different actors and local (user) networks to better address user needs and stimulate the adaptation of new knowledge, innovative solution, and best practices in support of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS). This would ultimately make Thematic Networks more efficient and impactful at regional, national, and European levels.

To achieve this, policy makers 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. The budget should be diverted from the variety of project websites, which are often not sufficiently known, to a common standardized and interoperable digital platform that connects to multiple actors, including educational institutions. An enabling environment, supporting the digital AKIS and facilitating synergy, will make Thematic Networks more efficient, sustainable, and impactful, improving the information flow and sharing of knowledge between key actors in the AKIS at European and national levels.

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>

⁶ [SWG SCAR AKIS: Preparing for future AKIS in Europe. Page 29](#)

