

Agropol



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Agropol

Strategic cross-border
cooperation in
agriculture and food



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Contact and more information:

The Agropol project has also compiled a detailed blueprint on cross-border cooperation to stimulate agro-food value chains available upon request.

IDEA Consult

Joseph II straat 40 B1, B-1000 Brussels
www.ideaconsult.be

Metis GmbH

Marxergasse 25, A-1030 Vienna
www.metis-vienna.eu

Agropol

development of European cross-border agribusiness model regions



The project aims at providing and developing practical knowledge on how to strengthen value chains based on agriculture and food through cross-border cooperation. Working with partners across the border who deal with similar environmental and socio-economic challenges can offer innovative solutions and new business opportunities to entrepreneurs and farmers and, at the same time, it can make the agro-food sector more resilient and sustainable. Cross-border cooperation can therefore be an effective means to stimulate regional development and economic growth in Europe. For this reason, the Agropol project supported by the European Commission was launched in January 2016. The project aims at providing and developing practical knowledge on how to strengthen the agriculture and food sector through cross-border cooperation.

A research consortium including IDEA (Belgium), Metis GmbH (Austria) and the University of Ghent (Belgium) selected two case regions involved in ongoing cross-border cooperation initiatives in the agri-food-forestry sector:

- The EUROACE Euroregion between Portugal and Spain
- The cross-border region between Carinthia in the South of Austria and Slovenia

*EUROACE Alentejo/Centro/
Extremadura cross-border
Agropol meeting*



In close cooperation with regional authorities and local actors, the project partners conducted an in-depth study on existing cooperation activities and potential business areas where cross-border activities could be of mutual benefit. They also developed a common cross-border cooperation strategy for the agro-food sector in the case regions.

In a second step, the project team assisted relevant stakeholders in both pilot regions with the implementation of pilot cooperation projects. The projects looked beyond the confines of traditional industries and national borders to develop new forms of cooperation between the relevant stakeholders in order to increase their competitiveness.

*On-site visit,
Carinthia/Slovenia
cross-border
Agropol meeting*



A “learning-by-doing-approach” including different actors along the “value chains” based on agriculture and food was applied. The experiences from these pilot activities serve as a benchmark for a cross-border agro-food cooperation model which can be transferred to other regions in Europe.

The main findings and lessons learnt have been gathered and analysed in a blueprint which serves as guidance or as a collection of good practices for other border regions engaging in cross-border activities in agriculture and food. These findings and lessons learnt are summarised in this leaflet.

The EUROACE

Euroregion



Regions involved: Alentejo and Centro (PT); Extremadura (ES)

Main characteristics: Mainly rural regions with many nature parks and mountains

Surface: 92,500 km²

Population: Scarcely populated with 3.4 million inhabitants (only 36% live in cities)

Main business sectors: Agriculture, agro-food industry, fisheries, tourism, renewable energies

The Euroregion EUROACE was established in the year 2009. Cross-border cooperation between the regions had already started beforehand, in particular through the POCTEP Interreg programme between Spain and Portugal which also financed several joint projects in the agro-food sector. In 2010, the Euroregion drafted the EUROACE 2020 Strategy and explicitly referred to agriculture and agro-food as one of the main domains of cooperation.

Despite the long-standing contacts between the three regions, there have also been various obstacles to developing cross-border cooperation in the agricultural sector. For example, the agro-food industry currently lacks processing companies that are based in the region and the links between research institutes and agro-food businesses are not well-developed. In addition, entrepreneurs are not used to cooperating with their counterparts on the other side of the border.

KEY ASPECTS OF THE EUROACE CROSS-BORDER STRATEGY

The EUROACE agro-food strategy developed by more than 40 regional stakeholders mainly revolves around the fruit- and horticulture sector and two strategic objectives:

- 1) More knowledge transfer to small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs
- 2) More economic activities through innovative business development

The strategy identified **medicinal and aromatic plants (MAP)** as one of the main growth sectors. In particular in Extremadura it is a relatively new sector with a limited amount of actors and often very small companies. However, more and more young people and highly-educated entrepreneurs are interested in the MAP sector and are open to collaborate and innovate.



At present, the sector lacks local processors and distributors, therefore the herbs are often sold to foreign companies. Expertise and industrial infrastructure are required which are currently very scarce in the region. Nonetheless, some local producers have started to process their herbs into cosmetics and in the future the herbs could also be used for herbal medicines and food additives.

In Portugal an innovative support model for MAP businesses has been developed through the network project EPAM which focuses on intensive knowledge exchange rather than on the individual entrepreneur. A community of small entrepreneurs was set up who exchange experiences, but also information on distribution channels, processing facilities or clients/markets. The network constitutes a good practice which could also be transferred or expanded to Extremadura.

PILOT PROJECTS IN THE EUROACE CROSS-BORDER REGION

One of the first pilot activities within the Agropol project was a very successful networking and capacity building event for MAP stakeholders in the EUROACE region which was organised in September 2017. In addition, a joint cross-border MAP project was submitted to the POCTEP Interreg programme in March 2018 to further promote and foster innovative cooperation among MAP entrepreneurs and research institutes in the region.

"It has been a very interesting experience in taking cooperation beyond the institutional level to the practical level on the ground. It is very challenging to engage businesses and farmers, but through Agropol we were able to lay the groundwork for sustained cooperation with mutual benefit at the business level."

Paulo Silva / CCCR Alentejo

The Carinthia Slovenia

cross-border region



Regions involved: Carinthia (AT); Slovenia

Main characteristics: Mountainous region with many forests (in particular on the Austrian side of the border)

Surface: 29,273 km²

Population: 2.6 million inhabitants

Main business sectors: Agriculture (beef), milk production, forestry, rural tourism

Cross-border cooperation in the agro-food sector between Carinthia and Slovenia started in 1978. With the Agropol project the actors involved wanted to make the cooperation more strategic.

KEY ASPECTS OF THE CARINTHIA/SLOVENIA CROSS-BORDER STRATEGY

The strategy identified three main areas for cross-border cooperation activities:

- 1) Cooperation in dairy farming
- 2) Cooperation in education and advisory services
- 3) Cooperation in the timber and forestry industry

*Meeting at Mlekarna
Krepko dairy, Slovenia*



The local dairy sector which includes many small family businesses is the main focus of the strategy. The entrepreneurs on both sides of the border deal with common challenges in the cross-border region. They are experiencing heavy competition with large multinational players and have difficulties to be competitive due to their remote and mountainous location.

Therefore, the sector has started to focus on high-quality organic milk products which are mainly sold locally.

The strategy is structured along four operational objectives linked to sustainable dairy production:

- 1) Development of alternative (online) marketing strategies for dairy products from the mountainous regions
- 2) Cooperation between dairies in the field of supply management (e.g. packaging or ingredients)
- 3) Development of quality products including a certification system and advisory services
- 4) Awareness-raising on the difficult production conditions in the mountains and the role of farmers to preserve the natural landscape and cultural heritage

PILOT PROJECTS BETWEEN CARINTHIA AND SLOVENIA

Various pilot activities were implemented in the cross-border region. In the forestry sector, a cross-border workshop was organised and the status quo of cooperation as well as potential fields of cooperation were identified. In the educational sector, a joint brochure on agricultural schools and vocational training institutions was produced with the aim of making pupils and other players aware of the possibilities for exchange and placements on both sides of the border. Austrian agricultural advisors were also invited to join a one-day conference for agricultural advisors in Slovenia to exchange experience with their Slovenian colleagues.

"I am pleased that this project has implemented the idea of a first cross-border advisory conference. This is the beginning of an important strategic cooperation for the future!"

Hans Mikl / Director of the Chamber of Agriculture, Carinthia

*Grenzenlos Guuut
cheese box*



In the dairy sector, the **Alpe Adria cheese box** was developed including organic cheese from Carinthia and Slovenia, wrapped up in a joint packaging under one cross-border brand. The production costs are shared by one Carinthian and one Slovenian dairy and the boxes will be sold online or through traditional distribution channels.

Three phases

of cross-border cooperation

The experiences in the Agropol pilot regions resulted in a number of important lessons learned on how to set-up and perform cross-border cooperation in the agro-food sector. We identified the following three main phases:

1. EXPLORING AND INITIATING COOPERATION

Identification of common needs, challenges and benefits of cooperation in the cross-border region including the various institutional and social actors involved. Analysis of the mutual interests or themes that can be worked on.

Meeting of farmers organised by KIS, Carinthia, Austria



At this stage, it is important to build trust among all the stakeholders and to get to know each other – sometimes entrepreneurs see each other as competitors, so it is crucial to invest enough time in meetings and exchanges.

ATTENTION POINTS

- Cultural differences and language barriers are less present in border regions; nevertheless, they can form a substantial obstacle to the cross-border cooperation.

Interpretation to go at dairy in Slovenia



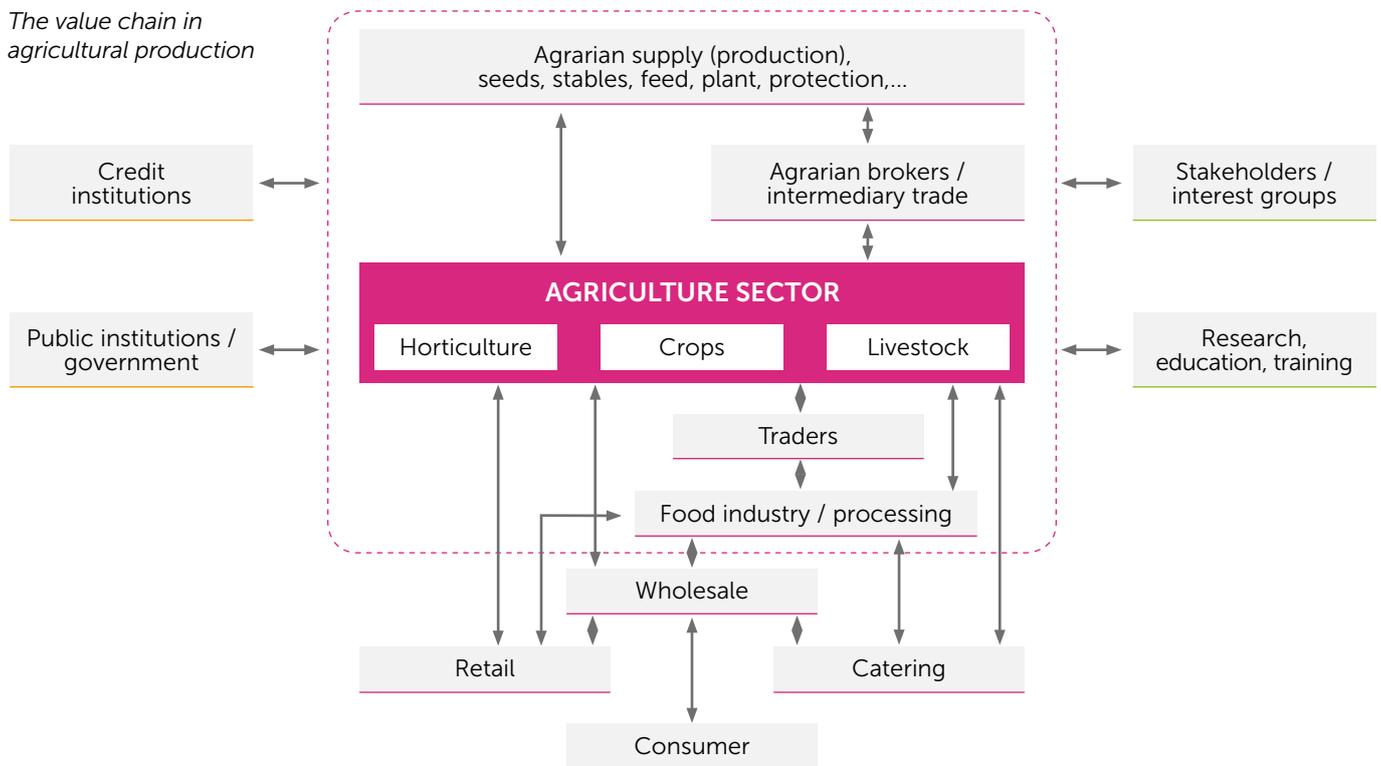
Therefore, intercultural communication should be taken seriously and it may be useful to offer interpretation during the meetings, so that all the participants feel at ease expressing their needs and ideas.

2. SETTING UP AND STRUCTURING COOPERATION

Development of a cooperation strategy by involving all the different stakeholders concerned (from the public/private sector, academia...). The entire value chain should be considered to identify potential areas for growth and cooperation.

A value chain can be described as a *sequence of activities during which value is added to a (new) product or service as it makes its way from invention to final distribution*, covering all the functional relationships between the actors and activities required to design, produce and promote or sell/distribute a certain product or service. The figure below visualises this chain and includes the broader ecosystem such as credit institutions, governmental agencies, researchers or educational institutions.

The value chain in agricultural production



Identify the role of the local players in each region and try to identify new business models and new value chains across the border. The private sector should play a strong role – this can be the most important success factor and also one of the major challenges in the cross-border cooperation.

ATTENTION POINTS

- Consider a value chain perspective rather than a traditional sectoral approach. Focus on (re-)valorising the resources and competences of the regions and stimulate cross-sectoral links, new business models and new value chains.
- Clarify how the agro-food activities are linked to culture, industrial sectors and technologies.
- Organise study visits and job-shadowing exchanges to get a better insight into the role and position of the regional actors.

3. IMPLEMENTING COOPERATION

A strong and successful partnership is based on a participatory process involving all relevant stakeholders. The more stable the relationships between these actors, the more sustainable the cooperation will be. It is also important to clearly divide tasks and responsibilities and to formulate concise common objectives linked to tangible results.

Agropol workshop, Oeiras, Lisbon, October 2017



The cooperation should build on existing cluster initiatives or cross-border structures such as a Euroregion or European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).

ATTENTION POINTS

- Make sure that there is a clear division of tasks and responsibilities including a wide range of partners.
- Continuous institutional cooperation requires sufficient resources and in addition to public resources, project-based financing can be a good complement.

All lessons learnt from the experiences in the Agropol pilot regions are extensively described in the Blueprint for strategic cross-border cooperation in agriculture and food. The blueprint aims at providing realistic insight into the potential and feasibility of cross-border cooperation in agriculture and food, and offers practical attention points on how to set-up and organise such cooperation for actors in rural regions throughout Europe.

The full blueprint is available on the Agropol website: www.agropol-events.eu

The cross-border region between Portugal and Spain
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More information:

The Agropol project has also compiled a detailed blueprint on cross-border cooperation in the agribusiness sector available upon request from:

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Metis GmbH

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www.metis-vienna.eu, office@metis-vienna.eu

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