

connections and professional roles can lead to isolation and psychological challenges for retired farmers. Alongside this there is the issue that these farmers may want to stay connected to farming and not fully retire. Embracing this can also enhance farming through continuing engagement on farm bringing a generation of grounded expertise and knowledge. There is a need for creation of supports that support a more age-friendly farming environment. The west of Ireland confrontation points to work piloting this concept in the form of a social organisation addressing the needs of older farmers.

Integrated, longer-term farm succession policies

Alongside the specific measures outlined, the need for a wider, more integrated policy framework is another key finding that can be drawn from the confrontation reports. The need for policy that is integrated, that works to address multiple issues, actors and areas of traditional policy division is clear both from the promising practice succession case studies and their confrontation in new contexts. For example, from the successor perspective, a range of needs requiring policy intervention emerge. Those particularly highlighted here are supporting greater gender equality by directly supporting female successors and tackling the farm viability issue to ensure farming remains a rural livelihood option. The more logistical and technical aspects of succession (e.g. information and support on the legal aspects of farm transfer, succession planning) also need to be part of the policy measures, as shown in the case of ELIINA project in the west of Ireland context (SC5). Measures should be part of an integrated policy approach with attention to wider social and economic issues that come into play in the succession process.

These demands also call for a specific policy approach that sees multiple different types of organisations working together to address interlinked issues. This is clear for example from the ELIINA project in the west of Ireland context (SC5) where replicating ELINA in the Irish context is viewed to require a range of organisations and agencies, such as in the areas of enterprise development, agriculture, farming and education. The farm diversification at succession case in the Canary Islands context (SC1) also highlights the need for multiple actors to come together to overcome obstacles, such as collaborations involving citizens, public bodies and universities.

2.3 Lessons learned

As one of the focuses for this report, the RURALIZATION team has extracted the general lessons learned. Those lessons were patterns identified throughout the interactions with stakeholders. Furthermore this chapter documents and gives rich insights into the obstacles stakeholders face in the process of developing their projects, while following their dreams and struggling to implement innovative projects. We will discuss the three elements that were experienced by 80% of the researchers during the confrontations, that we consider as common lessons learned from the confrontation process.

Co-creating to achieve transferability

In general, the practices were not fully replicable. But the case studies are useful to transfer positive experiences to other contexts and support the development of rural areas' needs. Through this, the stakeholder might be able to make early steps and create the conditions for initiatives to happen on its own. Practices used in the confrontations were sometimes in place for more than 5, even more than 10 years, therefore it is important to put the success into the time perspective and find the beginning of the thread, if we want to start anew. Instead of establishing a top-down approach, the solution proposed in most of the confrontations was to establish broad principles and adapt them to the new context vision, considering the available resources and using a collaborative process to involve the stakeholders in the community and create their own narrative. In other words, some procedures of the best practices are transferable, but new initiatives need to be created from “bottom-up”.

The methodology used in the confrontations, which was presenting a practice to stakeholders of a different context, allowed to shed light on subjective elements that were not all evident from the initial practice research. The contextual differences identified and requiring adaptation were of different types: some confrontations were taken across national borders, others just took place in an intermediate area rather than a rural area, or vice-versa. Some were just within the same national boundaries but exploring a different geographic region with some different characteristics related to climate or urbanisation. No matter the degree of contextual diversity, differences in value systems were always present. This simple and obvious fact results in a natural barrier that can only be overcome with involvement of the participants. As it will be discussed later in this section, the collaboration of stakeholders of different types and at different levels is a critical factor to be able to re-create a path of success. Precisely, to combine presented initiatives with local specificity and resources seems to be the best way to design new plans with the stakeholders involved, to co-create innovations that a community needs and wants.

Let's take the opportunity to describe a bit more the contextual differences in need of attention, as well as the differences in value systems from members of the same community that require attention. Origin and age of the involved persons were often a reason for divergent opinions on the feasibility of certain initiatives. Preconceived ideas such as that rural newcomers are more individualistic than rural locals, and locals being less willing to work in collaboration is one example that could be expressed in the opposite way in another context. This means the tendency to collaborate cannot be solely expected from newcomers, but in some rural contexts it can be a specific characteristic of the local population. What the practices and the confrontations showed is that collaboration needs a base-ground of trust that needs to be constructed first. The differences in the collectivity spirit can be bridged by a facilitation and orchestration process led by a “seed planter”, the individual or collectivity with the leadership and pioneering skills so sought after.

The world view differences between rural population and urban newcomers that were present in some contexts also requires flexibility and adaptation in the process of implementing initiatives. For instance the “working landscape” of conventional rural dwellers in some contexts requires a different approach than the romantic, idealised view that newcomers might have from the rural landscape. Rural inhabitants often described newcomers as those that “do not want farming buildings neighbouring their properties (especially animal farming)”. Bringing together these different world views can be challenging, but it can also be a source of creative power and serve as a means to spark curiosity and generate a constructive exchange of ideas, based on the common ground of same interests. Practices initially created in more urban areas had a tendency to generate more barriers when presented in rural communities. This could be partially explained by the fact that rural communities have a more conservative and sceptical attitude towards innovation. But it is important to highlight that the core idea of the innovative practice was always well received and started a creative process within the participating group.

Another form of expressing the necessity to reconstruct the case and co-create the process was less transactional and more narrative oriented. The confrontations showed that there is a need to localise, regionalize the narrative to adapt to the current context. Sometimes the need to overcome existing mistrust of collective initiatives is very strong. Finding an innovative solution that has a collective breath and respects the value systems of the involved persons is the first step. Involving relevant stakeholders and offering support to create solutions that reflect the reality of their context is crucial. For instance, industrial/ intensive farming cooperatives operate in terms of conservative values and ways that will mostly hinder their capacity to overcome barriers, to innovate and contribute to rural regeneration. Farm collectives nowadays have more horizontal management and are more agile in their decisions. Much work remains to be done to sensitise older farmers about the possibility of transferring their land to family outsiders and specifically to collectives. Collective farms are in some contexts negatively perceived by the rural and agricultural world. They are considered “non-productive”, “sectarian” or “hippy”. Therefore it is necessary to connect these different ways of work and perceptions, to create a bridge between the different minded groups. Without this step it will be more difficult or impossible to set free the potential of transformation and increase the opportunities for the affected groups to be trusted, and as a consequence be able to take over a farm or initiate a diversification process.

The change of scale between a successful individual case and a prescription for a global policy or dynamic to promote it in a broader way is a difficult and complex undertaking.

The timeline has to be evaluated and realistically planned, to take into consideration the time needed to work on and build human interactions. Scale up takes place over time, and the various actors have to become used to working together, form a system and develop a collective dynamic, to finally disseminate information and encourage others to follow.

All those statements relate to the fact that initiatives would be more successful if they are collectively generated or adapted by collective processes. Therefore even a recipe book will need to be rewritten to consider the locally available ingredients.

Once the seed is planted and the initiative starts to become a reality, it would be helpful to have systems in place to upscale sustainably in the future, ensuring organic growth and development of the context over years. As discussed in the previous topic, human capital is key, and so are the actors that initiate the innovation: identifying and supporting “early newcomers” that will pave the way for and attract others is a way to accelerate the “seeding of innovation”. Ensuring the first step of “re-activating” the community relationships, (re-)building a strong functional community requires qualified support and resources. This process we will discuss in the next topic.

Creating alliances and collaboration to jointly overcome obstacles

As already mentioned in connection with other topics on previous sections, collaboration is the core aspect of many solution approaches and proposals. Not one confrontation occurred without coming up with the requirement for some sort of coordinated interaction among different stakeholders. Although this topic was briefly introduced and mentioned in other sessions relating to human capital and to co-creation, we will now describe some of the examples that were explored. If vertical or horizontal, bottom-up or top-down, multi-stakeholder or just a network of same interests and like-minded people ... the breadth and depth of the proposed cooperation, networking, association or simple orchestration of efforts were very large and deep. Bottom-up collaboration relying on active participation by local citizens such as community centres run by volunteers for instance were among the most cited. Public-private collaboration was also presented in many forms and set as a requirement to generate strong and long-term impact. Stronger cooperation between diverse private organizations such as entrepreneurs, housing associations, sports associations, churches were mentioned as increasing the potential to create the level of engagement required in a community and make an initiative succeed.

Pooling efforts were not only meant on an individual basis. To expand the impact of limited resources the cooperation between neighbouring villages was also proposed as a means to facilitate the access to markets (for example for artisanal food, or art crafts) and to gain critical mass.

Considering the multi-stakeholder approach of our methodology, it is clear that collaboration struck over various types of actors also within the agricultural sector: among farmers, producers, retailers, consumers, authorities, entrepreneurs, and members of the farms’ surrounding community. Most of the time the primary objective was to build strong community relations, but sometimes the cooperation proposed strived for solving a specific problem. We have mentioned in other parts of this report the key aspect of building communities for the purpose of creating a sense of pertaining. Dedicating means to develop these relations within communities is one of the key measures to foster innovation, rural regeneration and development.

Articulation, coordination and cooperation among independent regenerative actors was also a topic on the meta-level, being this interregional such as among different projects within a region, or within a country. International concerted effort, where existing organisations and stakeholders interested in promoting a topic - such as for example agroecological farming, support for successors, promotion of remote work in rural areas, or promotion of rural professions - would be connected and able to interchange knowledge and information.

The positive impact of collaboration can for instance be reflected on the size, diversity or improvement of the capacity to deal with increasing complexity of rural professions and increasingly global markets. The horizontal collaboration of various producers creates not only the obvious advantages of security and stability through pooled financial resources, but also a more attractive and broader offering for consumers. Concerted effort from across the agroecological food and farming movement is needed if the interested parties ought to lobby for changes in the agricultural and rural development planning system. A collaborative solution approach to create environmental and agricultural policy and subsidy frameworks which support and prioritise community/ collective farms and farming at small scale - as opposed to industrial agriculture - was expressed as a strong wish.

Create a counterpart to the industrial/ intensive agriculture lobby

One of the specific targets of collaboration was liaised to the need to support and promote agroecology in general. Agroecology methods of agriculture being one of the pillars of many discussed initiatives. The powerful position of the conventional agriculture lobby, the current applied subsidy schemes and incentives, as well as the lack of trained educators and teachers in organic farming was indicated as a barrier to agroecological development. The lack of territorial cohesion and the high competitiveness of the farm business, especially among the long-established farmers, was mentioned as a factor hindering the potential for collaboration. Also the specific power dynamics in rural areas, where newcomers may want to establish agro-ecological farms, was indicated as an obstacle. Therefore, a broad alliance of all alternative food systems movements was presented as a viable form to create a significant mass to counteract the power of industrial/ intensive agriculture and conventional food systems. Alternative food systems and movements with similar interests mentioned were regenerative agriculture, permaculture, Community-Supported Agriculture, organic / biodynamic, and vegan movement among others. Uniting these movements by creating a common denominator - for example ecological well being - would increase the strength of each singular movement and consolidate the intention around one voice. This would give the aggregated movement more power to face the establishment of industrial/ intensive agriculture. The direction of the pooled effort would not necessarily be confrontative, but would rather be constructive and striving for again identifying common interests, creating a common vision of what agriculture is and what are its objectives. To accelerate the takeup of agro-ecological forms of farming, strong benefits could be derived for dialogue and alliance of the industrial/ intensive and agroecological agriculture lobby. Involving the chamber of agriculture and other relevant political and governmental instances to jointly develop solutions would surely aggregate additional value. Specific measures were proposed, such as to organize workshops and

round tables with these groups of stakeholders, to promote creative concepts, innovation and collaboration across the above-mentioned organizations.

Building up strong communities

Having the network structure would not be enough, as from an existing network something dynamic has to emerge. It is important to create a mixture of stability and connection, to allow small conflicts to take place among members of the network and to create the necessary tension as an engine to ignite human relations.

In practical terms, it would be important for individuals participating at the start-up phase to first map all local actors that they judge necessary to be engaged. Identifying a way that they get to know each other is a starting point before the establishment of relationships and the construction of a trustful broad community.

Documenting the knowledge about and facilitating the know-how transfer of stakeholder engagement and community building initiatives would be at the core of a comprehensive set of measures to foster rural development initiatives. During the confrontations we were not able to explore the exact content of such a “community building” program, but among other important elements it was mentioned the “how to” define the problem, “how-to” identify the common denominator among different group views and “how to” make this common interest a central aspect. Allowing the expression of diverse territorial visions, to use prospective scenarios and enable actors to “project” themselves and identify their own responsibility in the future of the community were some of the methods presented. A platform on ‘how-to’ develop community initiatives was proposed as a solution to collect all the knowledge available and to present tools helping communities to start their process of community building.

Because the solutions are multi-faceted, involve actions on different levels and ask for coordination among different groups of stakeholders, dialogue between the groups is necessary. Meant is the dialogue between organic and conventional farmers, educators and traditional farming networks, and civil and public servants, between cereal farmers, market gardeners and other landowners, between the agricultural world and local elected officials, involving local authorities in the governance of a concrete agricultural project, etc. All those interactions require qualified and targeted facilitation and orchestration. Rural development consultants with all sets of skills previously discussed would be in the front, offering the necessary support to achieve this objective.

The whole field of advancing rural human capital building also requires intensified collaboration among industrial/ intensive and agroecological agriculture schools, to develop an integrated, “ecologized” curriculum covering both farming approaches. We will address this topic and other types of “knowledge” and “how-to” platforms later in this section.

What was voiced was the general need for alliances, partnerships and collaboration from all stakeholders involved, leveraging available resources, overcoming potential rivalries and competition between specific groups in order to generate integrative approaches and to maximize the positive outcomes of a transformation.

Building human capital

Even though flexibility, improvisation and adaptation was a clear need from the stakeholders in the confrontation context, their thirst for information and know-how was as well an important desire that would lead to an efficient way of reaching success.

One-way knowledge transfer

The myriad of “how-tos” that were identified, provide important hints for the direction of the first-steps that support the replication of the initiatives: ‘How-to settle as a remote worker’; ‘How to communicate better’ (for farmers); ‘How-to’ for newbies in the countryside; ‘How-to’ for community based farming; ‘How-to’ for consumer-producer coop (“Consumer-Producer Cooperative Academy”); ‘How-to develop community initiatives’; ‘How-to go to market and establish a brand’; ‘How-to’ and methodology to develop collaboration between farmers; ‘How-to farm’ for people of all ages, ethnicities and experience levels; ‘How-to certify my product’. The list is non-exhaustive but very rich.

It was not the scope of the confrontations to explore the content of such knowledge-databases. Neither was it the scope to make a prioritisation that leads to the implementation of any of these suggestions. Nevertheless, this is clearly an interesting aspect to focus on in further research.

Peer-to-peer learning opportunities

In addition to knowledge databases there were many expressions leading to the creation of hubs, platforms and networks for learning, as well as the exchange of proposals and knowledge. For instance regional, national or European support to the creation of centres, offices or digital platforms for project initiators would be welcome. These platforms of peers would help change-makers more easily to find information and support for developing their ideas and implementing their projects. The platforms could make use of technology and cultivate opportunities to support participative learning, participative project planning, coordination of projects, knowledge exchange and networking among peers and within agricultural sector members. There could also be platforms for “wannabees” to establish networks of collective farms.

The mutualised knowledge and peer-to-peer support could have some impact reducing the need for business advisors and consultants. Specially the task to develop a business plan and request project funds, in a centralised, understandable, and informative way, can save a lot of time and effort for the project initiators and allow them to focus their resources on the more specialised tasks. The focus on knowledge exchange and sharing is especially important in farming. It provides for more effective learning and skills outcomes than one-way knowledge transfer.

The hubs could offer access to peers with experience in some critical areas. For instance a farmer that has successfully gone through the process of passing his farm over to the successors can be a highly valued mentor for other retiring farmers and their successors. Other topics that could benefit from peer-to-peer learning and knowledge transfer are the request for project funds and subsidies, applying for certification, developing a business plan for product diversification and the transition to organic agriculture practices, just to mention a few.

Different spaces of engagement for successors

One of the practices researched offered in itself the basic approach to solve some of the training aspects identified in other confrontations. It focuses on a combination of different types of training, such as small groups, study trips and some larger events. Farmers may take part in public, larger training events but then join smaller training groups for continuous learning⁷. This format could be further expanded by networking activities, such as group visits to farmers fairs to promote the intergenerational connection between the existing, older farming generation and the upcoming one. Potentially more informal 'spaces of engagement' could be added, such as the social place of farming and the family itself. Also schools could be a further space of engagement. Activity in schools would support the objective of making rural professions more visible and attractive, for instance by raising awareness and interest in farming as a profession, that could increase the attractiveness of the farming activity for the potential successor well before the time of transfer arrives.

The role of agroecological education

As mentioned in other sections, agroecological farming was at the core of many practices used during the confrontations. It is clear that the specific knowledge linked to the practice of agroecology is a critical factor to advance any type of initiative that relies on implementing a form of agroecological production. The demand for agroecological products, as well as the demand for the production of such goods is a positive trend (see 4.5 Trend Report). We have identified that lacking educational opportunities in this sector is a barrier in many European contexts. Because one of the many reasons for this was the scarcity of educators and teachers, there were proposals to solve this potential issue. Among them was the proposal to create a "train-the-trainer" program, in universities, schools and elsewhere, where the future educators are forming and emerging. It was also proposed to have a closer look in the curriculum of universities to systematically include agroecology and content that aligns environmental, economical and socio-cultural new realities. Attractive training and continuous education offerings for vocational school teachers in the conventional sector would also help overcome the current limitation.

⁷ Ruuska, P. (2021)