SHORT GUIDE FOR TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION (TNC) PROJECTS FOR EIP-AGRI OPERATIONAL GROUPS

Disclaimer

This "Short Guide for Transnational Cooperation (TNC) projects for EIP-AGRI Operational Groups" is a non-binding complementary resource prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland to help EIP-AGRI Operational Groups plan their transnational cooperation activities.

The document is based on the "Leader Transnational Cooperation - A Practical Guide" that was published by the EU CAP Network to help LEADER Local Action Groups with their transnational cooperation activities in LEADER.

The information and views set out in this document do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission. The EU CAP Network is not responsible for the content of this document.

1. WHAT MAKES A GOOD TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION (TNC) PROJECT?

There are some common success factors that can help ensure good transnational cooperation (TNC) projects.

These include:

- **Having a strong and clear project idea which contributes to the realization of the objective(s)**. A general topic, even if adapted at a later stage with the partners, may fail to provide such a contribution. The key joint challenges should also be reflected in the choice of themes for TNC projects.
- **Identifying the right cooperation partners**. Even if the cooperating EIP Operational Groups (OG) come from different countries, they must share common objectives and a common vision of the results they are trying to achieve. There should also be some degree of similarity between the challenges they are hoping to solve with the aid of a TNC project.
- **Going beyond exchanges.** TNC projects ideally go beyond exchange. They should include common actions which create tangible results. Concrete and common actions (like joint development of a technology, joint experimentation/piloting, creation of common products, organizing of joint events etc.) are effective ways to find answers to the challenges of cooperating themes.
- **Planning properly for human resources.** The development, coordination, implementation and management of a TNC partnership and project can be demanding. Human resource requirements need to be carefully considered from the early stages of project development.
- **Building a strong partnership.** Throughout the life cycle of a TNC project, it is beneficial to:
  - define the profile of your desired partner(s) to make the partner search easier;
  - negotiate and distribute roles and responsibilities between the partners while developing the project (and include these in the partnership agreement);
  - maintain and manage the partnership during the implementation of the TNC project.

2. TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION PROJECT STEP BY STEP

Due to some additional steps in their overall life cycle and differences in implementation frameworks between Member States, TNC projects tend to be more complex than regular, national projects funded by the CAP Strategic Plan. The main steps in transnational cooperation projects are the following: getting ready to start cooperation, preparatory actions, implementing TNC projects, and evaluating and communicating their results.

2.1. GETTING READY TO START

An EIP Operational Group which is interested in starting a transnational cooperation project needs to:

- Make sure that the planned cooperation activity addresses needs, especially needs of farmers.
- Identify organizations and people who must be involved and speak the languages which are needed.
- Identify – at least tentatively – potential cooperation partners with whom the EIP OG could jointly explore the future transnational cooperation project through preparatory actions.

Finding the right partner is one of the key success factors of a TNC project. You may achieve this by:

- identifying the desired characteristics of your potential partner(s);
- preparing a 'cooperation advertisement/offer';
- using partner search methods and tools in the EIP-AGRI or, eventually, the national CAP Network website;
- responding to a cooperation offer from another EIP OG.

Before starting the partner search, remember…

- Your cooperation idea should be sufficiently specific to let others understand what you are looking for.
- You should take time to think about the profile of your 'ideal' partner.
- A partnership of only two partners might be risky because the project will end if one partner decides to quit. In that case you maybe have to make changes to the project and implement relevant parts of it nationally or the project cannot be implemented at all. Do not hesitate to contact more than one potential partner in order to increase your chances for success.

Contacting your National Network may be another useful way to seek advice regarding TNC opportunities and spread the message included in your TNC advert/partner search offer.

Participating in events or thematical conferences, e.g. organized by the EU CAP Network or your national CAP network is also a good way to meet potential partners.

Responding to a cooperation offer

If you are approached for the purpose of becoming a TNC project partner, you need to think about several elements before reaching a decision:

- Is the TNC idea relevant to your needs and cooperation objectives?
- Does the potential partner correspond to your partner profile?

Please be aware that eligibility criteria and funding requirements for TNC project actions may differ between Member States. Always check what kinds of activities and costs are eligible for support for TNC projects. Do this as early as possible in the project development process.

2.2. PREPARATORY ACTIONS FOR EIP TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION PROJECT

Preparing a TNC project represents a transitional step between the cooperation idea and the implementation of the project. When preparatory support is available to finance activities that can help EIP OGs develop a cooperation project, such support may cover activities such as meetings, study visits,

studies, expert support, etc. Rules and criteria related to the eligibility of preparatory actions may vary among Member States.

This step should aim to:

• Get to know partner(s) with whom you are going to implement your project.

• Meet and/or discuss with your potential partner(s) to agree on the project aims, actions and work packages.

• Prepare a detailed description of the EIP TNC project, including division of the tasks and responsibilities, through a strong dialogue with partners.

• Clarify the eligibility criteria/funding rules for both your own and your partners' member states concerning expenditure eligibility for different project actions, legal and other restrictions on types of applicant or partners, as well as the application process requirements, deadlines and paperwork.

Key points to preparing a TNC project:

- Meeting your partner(s) and agreeing to cooperate.
- Preparing a TNC application for funding.
- Negotiating the financial aspects of a cooperation project.
- Bringing together the required resources (knowledge and technical).
- Getting the financial, legal and administrative structures right.

Please be aware that:

- You may need to develop your TNC project and partnership in a series of meetings. In this case, the agenda of the meetings should be adapted to the specific stage you are at in your project development process.
- The costs of preparatory meetings could be covered by preparatory support to cooperation projects (depending on relevant rules in Member States). Whether you are using such support or other funding, be clear about who pays for what.
- You should discuss and agree with your partner(s) about the sharing of travel costs, accommodation, catering, interpretation, etc., prior to the meeting. This will avoid any misunderstandings

Confirm the partnership

It is important to conclude this stage at the end of the initial meeting/visit. Preparing a written report indicating the partners' initial commitments provides a useful means to confirm whether the partners can proceed with further work on the joint project. Such a document can also indicate who will be the lead partner (main coordinator of the project) and who will coordinate the writing of the TNC application.

Partnerships may produce **a memorandum of understanding (MoU)** to formalise and make explicit important agreements between partners. If required by the relevant national rules, **such an MoU, or a draft cooperation agreement** (which will enter into force when the project is approved) **can be an attachment to the application for funding.**

Preparing a transnational cooperation application for funding

Following confirmation of the partners' willingness to develop a joint project, the next step involves applying for project funding. EIP OGs will most often apply for their own funding to the Managing Authority of their country.

Before starting to prepare your application, it is extremely important to agree with your partners about what your project will achieve and how you will measure it.

You must keep in mind the following:

- All applications require details about the intended outputs and results – most ask for these to be quantified in terms of targets.
- It is essential that these are agreed upon and established from the start of the project to track the full impact of all project actions. One of the main success factors in drafting TNC funding

applications is your understanding of the Member State specific rules/procedures about cooperation. It is advisable to know about the rules in both your own and your partners' Member State. You should discuss this with your potential partners. In some cases the national CAP networks may provide English translations of the most important rules and requirements of their country.

Another success factor is making **a clear presentation of your project proposal**. An indicative list of **important elements** of this is presented below:

- Presentation of the structure and organization of the partnership.
- Common and individual objectives.
- Planned actions – transnational actions and, when relevant, national actions which will also be part of (and be financed by) the project.
- Expected results and added value offered.
- Monitoring and evaluation framework (including indicators).
- Calendar and timetable.
- Roles of the different partners.
- Project management structure (including reference to human resources and their experience).
- Financial aspects covering costs and resource requirements. Differentiate between costs borne individually by partners and common costs which cannot be attributed to a single partner only (such as a joint event or website). Clarify different partners' budget allocations. Plan your TNC project-related expenditures to enable the smooth delivery of your project-related tasks. Consider contingencies, e.g. if different/non-fixed currency exchange rates are involved.
- The communication strategy (targeting both internal and external groups)

It is advisable to work together with your partner(s) on the content of the application form(s) and agree on the final content with all partners before submission for project selection by the EIP OGs. Such a procedure helps to ensure ownership of the project by all partners and encourages consistency across the partners' different funding applications. Endorsement of the lead application by all partners may require translations of the text, which should be budgeted for.

Complementary documents and adaptations might also be required (i.e. letters of intent and/or commitment of the different partners, etc.), so make sure to attach all the required elements when submitting your application form.

A signed **letter of intent** or a (draft) **partnership agreement** may also be required at this stage. In such cases, all the partners may need to prepare and sign it before submitting the application.

You should ensure and allocate sufficient time to produce/complete your application form – do not wait until the last moment! **TNC applications take time to complete since they need to be written and then approved by your partner(s).** Consider not only the time needed for relevant national authorities to approve the projects (information on this can be obtained from the relevant authorities or CAP Networks).

Negotiating the financial aspects of a cooperation project

Financial aspects of EIP TNC projects are quite unique since these projects combine different:

- budgets from partners located in different Member States where legal requirements may not all be the same (or even the currency);
- levels of local expenses incurred by each partner as well as contributions to shared expenditures related to the whole partnership.

Clarifying financial issues at the beginning of a project and involving financial partners early enables the partners to anticipate difficulties and find ways to overcome them in advance.

The first questions to be answered are:

- What is the total budget of the TNC project and what is the budget for each partner?
- What part of the budget is for national activities and what part is devoted to common activities (joint actions)?
- How is the project budget split between the different activities?

This information should be in your application form. You might have to reorganise your own versions of this information to fit the application form requirements. Reaching common agreements about the project budget is an important step in the preparatory phases and will help ensure transparency throughout the project implementation phase.

2.3. IMPLEMENTING TNC PROJECTS

Setting up and managing the cooperation partnership

Organizing the partnership for TNC can sometimes be complex due to cultural differences and/or the number of partners involved. It is, therefore, of crucial importance to have a highly competent project coordinator (lead partner) and clear rules for joint decision-making.

Coordinating a project requires important competencies.

A 'good' lead partner will preferably have:

- Language skills to communicate directly with the partners.
- Previous experience in cooperation project management or working with external partners.
- Good project management capacities.
- Good communication, diplomacy and negotiation skills.

Set up the decision-making process

Decision-making processes in the transnational cooperation project should be clearly defined and described in a document validated by all partners (in the application form and in the cooperation agreement) to ensure transparency and to avoid any misunderstanding. This document should also refer to relevant legally binding conditions set by the managing authority in relation to the CAP Strategic Plan funding.

The cooperation agreement

The cooperation agreement is usually the main tool to specify the commitments and roles of each partner in a TNC project. A formal project cooperation agreement can be prepared and signed once the project details are clear, and the partner roles, roadmap and timetable have been approved. The cooperation agreement can also be signed immediately after each of the partners have received a formal approval for funding from their national authorities. This document is the 'contract' in which partners formally commit themselves to implement the planned actions within the defined deadlines. This cooperation agreement is a legally binding agreement that also helps give the partnership a more official status.

Please sign a document at an early stage. The idea is to formalize commitment and not to explain what has happened. A formal document can be signed as soon as the project, its content and its rules of implementation are clear. The cooperation agreement might avoid future problems. The cooperation agreement can contribute to solving remaining questions and/or ambiguities and clarifying missing elements.

Annex 4 of the DG AGRI Guidance for implementation of LEADER Cooperation activities in 2014-2020 Rural Development Programmes includes a generic template for a cooperation agreement, which provides a good outline of the main components/contents of such an agreement.

A cooperation agreement can take many forms:

- An exchange of detailed letters where the roles, obligations and commitments of each partner are expressed. This is a simple solution but is difficult to make legally binding in case of problems.

- A cooperation protocol which should cover the same aspects as above.
- A cooperation agreement under national law (normally of the country of the lead partner).

Write a roadmap for the cooperation project

A common work program, often called a 'road map', should be defined and validated. This agreed content can help ensure a smooth implementation of the project actions and provide a tool to support the relationship between partners. The coordinators should use this road map as a key tool for monitoring project progress and tracking achievements. It can also be used to highlight actions that are falling behind and encourage partners to rectify such slippage.

The roadmap should identify:

- The different components and steps of the transnational cooperation project.
- The actions to be carried out for each step.
- The responsible partners, targets and indicators for each step.

Please be aware that transnational cooperation takes time. You should keep in mind, when writing the timetable, that transnational cooperation activities often take longer than national ones. Therefore, be realistic and do not hesitate to slightly overestimate the time required for the duration of some phases of the TNC project to stay on the target as much as possible and avoid disappointment.

Writing the road map at an early stage helps to allow for some flexibility by planning only major steps and not every small step that makes up these major steps.

The road map should be updated, if required, to fit with any new realities that arise during the implementation phase. The consequence of each change should be well identified. Changes should be kept to a minimum to assist the road map's monitoring functions.

Take into account the cultural aspects of the project of each partner

Beneficial progress can be made by embracing cultural diversity as a project strength and harnessing it as an engine of creativity to stimulate different ideas. Problems can be transformed into opportunities by promoting open dialogue on different perspectives to common constraints.

Ensure the continuous commitment of partners to the transnational cooperation project

All partners should be interested in the TNC project and remain committed to participating, as established in the cooperation agreement. Further to this 'obligatory' commitment, it is useful to make the project a dynamic partnership for all participants to feel ownership, involvement, contributions and benefits from the project. This can be achieved through programmed communication actions such as organising informal (online) events on a regular basis and developing common communication tools and documents.

Actions that help ease potential partnership burdens are also effective in encouraging greater participation. Agreeing to standardized operating procedures and producing associated guidance (such as manuals and reporting templates) helps reduce potential misunderstandings, conflicts and inefficiencies.

Please be aware that **cooperation is both transnational AND national**.

At transnational level, implementation means following the different actions, managing the whole TNC project and the financial issues, evaluating the results of the TNC project, etc.

At national level, implementation means carrying out the national actions which will feed in the transnational cooperation project.

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2.4. COMMUNICATION

You should ensure that the benefits of your EIP TNC project do not stay only with those who were involved in its implementation. **The results should be disseminated as widely as possible across your member states as well as the EU for inspiration to others**. You must also make sure that information about your project reaches broader audiences. For this, you need a wide range of dissemination and communication tools.

Remember that the National CAP Networks and, at the EU level, the EU CAP Network can also help with the capitalisation of EIP TNC project results and disseminate them to the relevant audiences.

Many National CAP Networks and the EU CAP Network are on the lookout for interesting examples of successful cooperation projects. Don't forget to tell them about your project. **All actions co-financed by EU funds must be published.**

- Foresee a communication plan in your application form, including a description of target groups, aims and tools/actions/timing.
- Keep your TNC project factsheet/practical abstract short, though understandable and precise.
- Adapt messages for dissemination to the target group.