

ARIMNet2 YOUNG RESEARCHERS SEMINAR

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Perspectives of project coordinators on stakeholder engagement and innovation promotion in agricultural research

Dr Didier Andrivon – PoH-MED Project

The topic addressed during the seminar undoubtedly raised the interest of the young researchers, as evidenced by the number of questions they prepared prior to our discussion to deepen their knowledge of the PoH-MED project.

About half of the questions were related to the “innovation” side of the topic. Many of the young scientists touched upon the limitations of short-term research projects, competence aggregation within consortia, etc. Most of them seemed surprised that research projects do not usually (and even should not) end up with innovations (i.e. market-ready technologies or products), and wondered whether this is not due simply to projects’ strategies starting exclusively from knowledge acquisition and then going up the Technology Readiness Level (TRL) ladder (and stopping early in this climb). In my view, the problem lies elsewhere, notably in the competences and activities split between research, technological development/maturation and business development teams, but the exchange on this point was very lively and useful. Another set of questions tackled the problem consisting in meeting the request for innovation often expressed in the calls for research proposals, while being aware that the projects cannot achieve actual innovation but at best only inventions. This yielded another set of good exchanges as to the strategies (or lack thereof) of the funding bodies and the way to address them adequately when answering the calls.

The other half of the questions dealt with the “stakeholders” side of the issue. Many young scientists thought immediately of the growers as the stakeholders in the PoH-MED project, before realising that this group was much more diverse than just the growers. The main suggestion to me was to interact more with “end users” to refine and target our research objectives - a good idea indeed, even though it does not prevent the research team from formulating the relevant research question, and from ensuring that the innovation chain is in place.

A suggestion to ARIMNet / ARIMNet2 partners that arose from the discussions was to open two types of calls within these ERA-NETs, i.e. the standard “research calls”, as they exist now, but also specific “maturation calls” dedicated to bridge the “innovation valley of death” and which could be directed primarily towards R&D and extension teams (in tight connection with research teams of course), with the aim to bring inventions with innovation potential one or two steps further up the TRL ladder and thus make them attractive to the industry. This supposes that Intellectual Property (IP) issues are covered before the projects start, and that strong guidelines for implementation and exploitation of “mature inventions” are established beforehand. However, I feel this would expand the ARIMNet community outside its current boundaries, and would favour a higher rate of innovations effective in practice.

Dr Christina Ligda – DoMEsTic Project

Discussions raised the need to clarify the concepts of end-users and stakeholders which are sometime interchanged; while end-users are one category of stakeholders, stakeholders are not always end-users; this indeed depends on the type of project and its outputs. The approach followed to involve stakeholders (in the wider sense of the term) also depends on their type of interest, level of influence and willingness to commit in the research. For example, for stakeholders such as farmers/breeders, cooperatives, associations to promote specific projects (e.g. labelled products), they need to be convinced that the research activity is in coherence not only with their long-term objectives, but also with their short-term objectives - and without a longer-term vision, sustainability is not ensured. Regular communication with the actors of the sector helps to understand and develop a common language. In the short term, the fact that the objectives of the diverse stakeholders differ more or less may raise some difficulties, and in this aspect, research can play a significant role as the provider of new knowledge that could lead the different stakeholders to some level of compromise under common long-term objectives.

The issue on what is considered as innovation was also brought up. In DoMEsTic, as we produced methodological frameworks and ways to improve the social organisation and the interaction between different stakeholders, we discussed in the group what the innovative features of the project's findings are.

Considering the next steps needed for actually implementing such frameworks, the discussion brought up the need to enhance the link between research and governmental institutions (national / regional) that are responsible for rural development plans, through setting up an appropriate environment that will foster such close interaction. This aspect is relevant for the outputs that can be further generated by setting oriented development projects.

Researchers are part of the society and continuously receive feedback from it, which is then translated into specific research questions, after going through each researcher's own scientific background and expertise. If such research questions can ultimately lead to innovation is a different story. However, the continuously increasing demand for the researchers to produce measurable results, e.g. quantified in terms of a number of project proposals, publications, etc., creates an extremely antagonistic environment that overpasses the threshold, and turns what could be a beneficial environment inspiring researchers into an issue of productivity, where the positive impact and benefits for the society do not actually matter as much anymore.

Dr Pierre-Éric Lauri – APMed Project

While interacting with the young researchers, the terminology appeared to be an important point, and the meaning of the terms “stakeholder” and “end-user” was discussed.

First, to me, an end-user is a stakeholder, the last one in a given chain, such as the food chain in the case of the APMed project. Second, in a given chain, I can consider someone as an end-user who will not be an end-user for another chain; typically, for APMed, I considered that my end-user was the grower, directly or indirectly through an extension service that is in touch with him/her. But in fact, if we speak about fruit quality for example, the real end-user would be the consumer. Thus I do consider there is no “correct” end-user, and that we just have to precise what we consider our targeted end-user in a given context.

Many questions were asked concerning the stakeholders / end-users that were or should have been involved in the APMed project (Who? Why?). I insisted on the fact that it is preferable to involve people, researchers, technicians and extension agents with whom one already has contacts, and, even better, common works, so that there is a common will to work together in a given direction, towards shared goals.

During the discussions with the two groups of researchers, I realised how important it is to make a difference between, on the one hand, the circle of stakeholders we may all have around us in our regular work and that we consider as “automatically” involved in some way in the programme we develop, and on the other hand, the stakeholders which formally participate in a programme and receive money for that. This formal participation and associated funding are needed if we really want to involve effectively those stakeholders: they will thus be responsible and accountable for certain actions, in connection with the others of course. And to me, it is the right way forward if we defend the idea of connecting research outputs (i.e, inventions or discoveries depending on our paradigm) and more practical outputs (innovations).

Eventually, I appreciated the keynotes and some of our talks, in the idea to bring reflections about the necessary philosophical, historical, sociological, etc., background we should all have for preparing relevant projects and coordinating them properly. I think necessary to give the young (but not only) researchers knowledge on epistemology, philosophy and history of science, since it is a way to move away from classical concepts and fixed definitions of ideas and terms, and to be able to understand that we are always playing with various logics in our proximal contexts and even more so when we involve colleagues from other countries with all the unsaid things.

My hope behind these thoughts is to feed the common efforts deployed to progress towards more efficient collaborations within transnational research, innovation and development programmes.

Dr Luciano Pecetti – REFORMA Project

This seminar gave me (and our project) the opportunity to be confronted in a very lively and interesting way with young researchers from a multitude of Mediterranean countries, and this experience appeared to me much more profitable than I would have initially thought, and this feeling is most probably shared by the participants.

Several thoughts from this exchange of ideas with the participants are worth sharing.

At first, there was some misunderstanding on who “stakeholders” actually are: some thought that stakeholders are simply the project’s partners, while third-parties involved in the project were seen as the actual “end-users”. That point clarified, it became easier to identify the farmers as the most likely stakeholders (coincident in this case with end-users) in the projects discussed, REFORMA in this case. Nonetheless, following the seminar (discussions and presentations), I’m confident that YRs went home with the conviction that other stakeholders should be involved all along the chain (in particular, extension agents and policy-makers came out strongly in the discussions).

Another aspect that was discussed was the usually short duration of research projects, and the subsequent impossibility to also verify the impact, on the end-users, of any innovation (or we should probably say “invention” according to the shareable comments from Didier Andrivon – PoH-MED). We should not overlook the possibility that future ARIMNet2 (or more generally ERA-NET) programmes also include some sort of “follow-up” projects, where the main themes are related with verifying and valorising the outcomes (inventions or innovations ‘to-be’) of previous projects.

Finally, several questions concerned the formation of a successful project consortium, and there, I could not but replying based on our own experiences (successes and failures). It was emphasised that previous acquaintances and reciprocal knowledge of expertise (and available means, why not) were valuable criteria in the preliminary definition of a consortium. We should hope that the contacts and exchanges that the young researchers have had among them during the seminar will be useful for setting-up new partnerships and projects in the near future. If only one project were born out of this experience, that would be the greatest success of the initiative.