

ARIMNet2 YOUNG RESEARCHERS SEMINAR

(29 May – 3 June 2016, Montpellier)

Perspectives of young researchers on stakeholder engagement and innovation promotion in agricultural research

Dr Ece Aksoy (Spain)

The ARIMNet2 Young Researchers Seminar was a very important initiative for the success of collaborative studies and projects in Mediterranean countries; this experience in Montpellier can indeed be understood as a first step to strengthen the network and friendship between the partners / stakeholders / scientists of the programme. Similarly, the key issue of stakeholders' engagement in research has been addressed, underlining the importance for them to feel part of the project, believe in it and especially on its expected outputs/outcomes. Discussions helped us to experience the possible issues which might be showing up when working with multiple partners and stakeholders, and the complexity that working with different disciplines, cultures and needs actually implies. The seminar was also very helpful to understand better the different problems faced in the north and south of the Mediterranean, and consequently to define more precisely research and innovation priorities and topics. The knowledge and experience of the researchers from the southern Mediterranean are very relevant for those of the northern countries because of the rapidly changing dynamics in the interactions between agriculture, land and climate; indeed, the challenges that the researchers from the south are already facing and addressing could be the future problems of northern Mediterranean and even European countries. Therefore, working collaboratively by embracing the differences in regional dynamics is already an innovation in itself. As young Mediterranean researchers, besides the need for more abundant and accessible research funding opportunities, we must be given the opportunity to build and keep alive stronger transnational networks, for example by taking part to this kind of interactive seminar and other networking activities. We also must benefit from capacity-building activities on state-of-the-art technologies and methodological approaches, to update, enrich and improve our knowledge/expertise of Mediterranean agro-socio-ecosystems, and find relevant solutions to real life problems.

Dr Adrian Bugeja Douglas (Malta)

I came to the ARIMNet2 Young Researchers Seminar in Montpellier with a confused idea of what really innovation is and what its effects on stakeholders actually are. However, by the second day, it became clear how important it is in the world of agricultural research. In essence, what I learnt was that it is not only important to have great ideas for agricultural research but that these ideas must be translated into innovative agriculture goods or systems. The effects of agricultural knowledge and research can produce innovative systems that should ensure that the global food systems can provide adequate supplies of high quality food and non-food agricultural products, in a sustainable way. Therefore, innovation involves the deliberate application of imagination, research information and initiative in deriving greater values from agriculture resource in a sustainable manner. Innovation cannot always be achieved through the work of one person or institute: researchers, agriculture research institutes, extension services and local authorities or governments must work together towards strengthening agricultural innovation systems and facilitating innovation adoption at the farm level. Although innovation is not easy to achieve, it is not something impossible to acquire through introspective analysis. As underlined by John Doerr and Kleiner Perkins, "*It is difficult to see the picture when you are inside the frame*"; thinking outside the box is thus clearly the base of innovation.

Dr Lamiae Ghaoui (Morocco)

Building a successful project is achieved by the coordinator following a methodical approach. The issue of the project comes out either by a “top-down” approach if the scientists are relying on their own experience and observations to formulate the needs of the end-users, or by a bottom-up approach if the need is expressed directly by the end-users to the researchers which are then acting through the project to meet the request. Even within both approaches, end-users can be effectively involved if they are taking part actively in the activities planned within the project. Their involvement is particularly very strong if they are partners of the project, since they receive funds and are therefore in charge of implementing the different activities and achieving the goals set by the consortium. In this case, they are responsible at the same level as any partner. Even without being “project’s partners”, they still can be considered as stakeholders, with a varying degree of involvement in the project’s activities; In this case, the implementation of an efficient participatory approach along the project activities can be very efficient in achieving the set objectives. The stage of involvement of the end-users differs from one project to another, and can be from the start and along the project or only take place near the end of the project. In some cases, end-users might influence the activities by raising new activities upon the expression of their needs during the project. The interaction between the end-users and other partners (such as researchers) does not only contribute to improve the knowledge of the end-users but can also have a positive impact on the methodology used by researchers when the expertise of the end-users is valorised. As to the innovation aspects, it concerns either the use of a new methodology or provision of new products. The transfer and adoption of the innovation depends on the quality of the dissemination activities (Seminars, workshops, field days, handbooks, flyers, etc.) and the involvement of the right stakeholders such as the extension services.

Dr Tziachris Panagiotis (Greece)

Discussing about the previous ARIMNet programme with the project coordinators was a very interesting experience. The inclusion of end-users in the research context can and should be an important parameter for the success of the project. After all, end-users are the ones that most of the time will use and benefit from the research. However, this is not an easy task, especially for the researchers. One core issue is that most of the time, dealing with the users demands a priori answers for a series of questions that might not be unambiguously answered, e.g. who are the end-users? (they could be multiple, quite different or unexpected), what are their needs? (again, their needs could be different, multiple or even unexpressed), what would be their role in this research? (a given user could have multiple/unknown roles or even roles that it cannot or won’t comply with). In order for the researchers to address this vagueness/uncertainty, they have to make their own choices/decisions and as a consequence, affect the context of the project. What they really do (intentionally or not) is that they inscribe their own assumptions about “reality” (their own worldview) in some of the project’s parameters, that sometimes just do not exist. This procedure could lead to scientifically high-quality research with potentially little to no usability, especially in the long run. The users fail to meet the expectations of the researchers and the researchers fail to prove the sustainability and the innovative nature of their work. Regarding innovation in research, the discussions with the coordinators were really enlightening. There was an obvious struggle and effort on their side to align multiple priorities in their projects: They try concurrently to be scientifically rational, provide real value for the users, be inventive, innovative, creative, and all these with the limited resources that they have at their disposal. This hard task could affect negatively the results of the projects, especially in the innovative and the user part. In order to innovate, it is important for all the different components of the innovation chain to be able to communicate and understand each other. For a possible future ARIMNet2 young researchers seminar, I suggest to focus more on innovation and users, by inviting some experts from the agricultural engineering and business world, in order for the young researchers to discuss and interact with them on practical aspects.

Dr Branimir Urlić (Croatia)

The ARIMNet2 seminar appeared very useful, since it allowed me to get new insights and experiences in delivering research results to end-users and on how to plan new research topics taking care of farmers' specific needs. This seminar gathered participants with very distinct backgrounds, and not only of diverse geographic origins, but working with different aspects of agricultural and environmental challenges. Regarding these issues, I can highlight that all of us appeared to face similar problems when trying to involve different stakeholders in projects' proposals and later, in projects' implementation. It is important for all stakeholders to have a strong interest in the project and to be able to influence it by getting involved at different stages along the research process. We noted that farmers (and other types of organisations involved in primary production such as cooperatives and private agribusinesses) are the most important end-users in most of the projects that were presented at the seminar, and we noticed that they should probably be involved more in the evaluation of projects' results than in the design of projects' proposals. These participatory evaluations seem to be very good starting points for possible subsequent projects, because they allow researchers to discard outputs/findings that cannot be actually implemented in daily production schemes, especially when they demand abrupt changes in agricultural practices and increase production costs. This seminar fulfilled my expectation by giving me a wider perspective on the priority issues that should be addressed when engaging and collaborating with stakeholders and end-users in the frame of research activities. Also, this seminar was the opportunity to establish new contacts with Mediterranean colleagues working on my topics of interest and with disciplines similar or complementary to mine. As all project coordinators underlined, having and relying on core networks before establishing new projects/networks is of capital importance; thus I think that in future project calls, special attention should be paid to the involvement of "new" partners and young researchers so as to boost innovation and projects' impact.

Dr Maria Fantappiè (Italy)

Human relationships are at the very base of everything, therefore it is important to valorise each one's own competencies, attitudes and skills. At the same time, it is very important to share responsibilities and to build a complementary and interactive team, where everybody knows very well its role, and is valorised in that role. The role of stakeholders (or of the more specific "end-users") is not just to receive knowledge from researchers and advisers, as it was the case under the "Transfer Of Knowledge" paradigm; Indeed, there are key actors, as researchers are, and the best way to carry out excellent research is to involve them right from the project's beginning, starting from the definition of research's needs and questions. Therefore, the best choice is probably to involve the main actors of the project, including the main end-users, ideally as formal partners (as we learnt from the APMed project), so that they can also receive funding, equipment, as well as opportunities to get new skills and competencies. It is in fact important to ensure that the knowledge exchange will take place in two directions. Furthermore, it is very important to establish long-term collaborations with stakeholders, which should be based on friendship and mutual respect. For example, when involving farmers, it is very important to be introduced by somebody they already trust and with whom they have a good established relationship. An extension agent whom they already trust can be an excellent partner/intermediate in this sense. It was very interesting for me to learn how in the APMed project farmers were also involved in data collection activities, accepting the fact that there could be some errors in the data and that some may have to be finally discarded at some point: The error is human! Researchers also make mistakes during data collection and some of it is sometimes simply not usable. I really appreciated the kindness, discretion and humility of the APMed coordinator, especially when reporting the difficulties he faced when collaborating with some partners. This kind of mutual respect and valorisation is what I learnt especially from him. Well, about the innovation, this was a very difficult issue to analyse. In fact, the meaning that different people put behind this term was even different, and of course, it seems to depend a lot on the kind of research people are dealing with. So several questions are still open: what should/could be considered as an innovation? How can one judge if a project is proposing something really innovative? While the coordinator of the PoH-MED

project presented us as an innovation something which could lead to a new product (e.g. an olive extract for pathogen control), the APMed coordinator considered that innovation actually took place by the end of the project, materialised by a specific decision-support tool consisting in a procedure helping to decide the irrigation schedule based on measured edaphic and physiological parameters. I think that the principal factor that influenced the high efficiency in promoting innovation in APMed was the fact that end-users were involved during the whole project, so they were also owners of the new knowledge discovered. This is the most effective way to promote innovation, to innovate in a collaborative way. Young researchers would benefit from specific “young researchers calls”. Indeed, we are used to help our bosses in the writing of projects proposals, and in some cases, as in mine, we might have also experience in project coordination. Nonetheless, we hardly have the possibility to develop and present our own projects and ideas at an early stage of our research career. Moreover, another very welcome and useful activity could be a week seminar dedicated to write down a real joint project proposal, during which several Mediterranean stakeholders could be participating, so as to better understand their real needs, as well as young researchers with completely different but complementary research subjects such as economics and sociology. The project presentations that we prepared in Montpellier were just drafts, but many of us are trying to make them real.