



INNOVATION

Mountain innovation

Innovation is one of the main priorities for Europe in the new programming period and **mountain supply chains have a significant contribution to make to the innovation agenda.** On-going innovation in mountain food supply chains takes a variety of forms: new farming practices to improve competitiveness or sustainability or both, new products, new processes, new services, new forms of organisation...



Developing high quality specific products through innovation is a way to compensate for handicaps, invest new sectors and new markets **and maintain a vibrant mountain economy.**

Assessment of the current situation:

Innovation is taking place across mountain areas, in a wide range of business sectors, including agriculture, and is sometimes being implemented by individual farmers or businesses, sometimes by collaborative groups.

Innovation is recognised as one of the main drivers of sustaining and growing a business. Mountain people are innovative – they have to be to overcome the challenges of geography and climate, communication (physical and virtual) and distance from markets and services. However, many mountain innovators would not recognise what they do as “innovation”.

The reasons of why innovation happens include:

- **Need to be more competitive** in a globalised market– mountain agricultural production has to face higher costs and difficulties due to geographical and climatic conditions. In this sense, there is a need to differentiate their products and to innovate to be competitive.
- **Opportunity** – there may be an opportunity to use local resources in a different way; a new market opportunity may be identified. New ideas or new technology may be an opportunity to revive traditional practices. Young people with training and innovative ideas has a mayor role in renewing and innovating the production systems and organisational models in mountain areas.
- **Crisis** – unprofitability and business failures push mountain actors to find new markets and develop new products. At the same time, socio economic decline and higher unemployment rates due to the current economic crisis, may force mountain actors to seek new opportunities for employment and income. Finding mechanisms for young people who, otherwise, may leave the region is also a driver to innovate.
- **Co-operation and collaboration** – this can be the catalyst for innovation, bringing together a wide range of ideas. Particular mention was made of the benefit of inter- generational projects, bringing together new ideas and traditional practices. Collaboration can create scale which opens up new opportunities through, for example, shared investment, increased capacity, co-ordination within a local supply chain; wider range of skills and abilities.

In summary, mountain actors innovate in response to a need, to search business opportunities and or adapt to new threats. Therefore, mountain innovation is coming directly from the stakeholders, bottom-up, as a matter of necessity. There is a huge potential for innovation in mountain areas that should be better explored and developed.



Recommendations



Recommendations: to better support innovation in mountain areas:

Policies to support innovation should address the following main topics in order to boost effective innovation in mountain areas:

- **Availability of finance:** innovation can be costly and the benefits uncertain (although potentially significant). There was a widespread feeling that being able to secure funding at the right time was an issue, rather than a lack of funding overall. This suggests that better knowledge of existing funding sources, together with access to expertise in accessing these funds is more of a priority than creating new funding sources.
- **Skills and education:** this includes support to develop entrepreneurial skills and mindset in mountain actors. As well as the acquisition of technical and research skills that are necessary to scope and develop new ideas. Together with the practical skills required to add value to local resource.
- **Collaboration:** specific measures to encourage collaboration between mountain actors should be developed by policy makers at national and regional levels. This measure should create an appropriate environment for the creation of structures; for advice, support and exchange between mountain actors. At the same time funding targeted on collaborative ventures should be envisaged by managing authorities at regional and local levels especially. Collaboration between researchers and stakeholders and between stakeholders and policy makers was highlighted of special importance.
- **Access to information / expertise / experience:** to provide ideas and motivation; practical support to build the capability and capacity to develop and implement new ideas should be given to mountain actors.

Action plan for Euromontana

Action 1: Dissemination of information. Euromontana is well placed to point mountain actors in the direction of information and expertise, particularly that available at European level. A member of secretariat (with Board support) with specific responsibility for the innovation agenda will take this forward.

Timetable: On-going

Action 2: Enabling more effective knowledge and experience sharing by mountain actors: mountain actors across Euromontana's membership can be a rich source of learning for others (although recognising that innovation is likely to have regional specificities – building on regional assets and traditions). Currently, our collective expertise in innovation – how mountain actors have taken opportunities or have responded to challenges – is underused. We need to find ways to support mountain actors learn from each other. Euromontana secretariat together with the support of the Board of Directors, will try to find the best way to support exchanges, graduate placements and more effective networking among its members.

Timetable: In case Mountagrinnnet is approved this work will be developed under the project starting in 2015. If the project is not approved, the Euromontana secretariat will seek for other options to develop this action.

Action 3: Partnering in collaboration projects. Euromontana will continue and strength its role on promoting, supporting and participating in innovative projects at European level. Both between members and also involving the secretariat directly. Having in this last case the added benefit of attracting funding to the organisation.

Timetable: On-going



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