

4.1.1 – Regional Focus Group Discussion Report

Spain – European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)

CLUSTER (C_A.3.1_0014)

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1. Summary

The Lead Beneficiary (LB)'s A4.1.1 Regional Focus Group took place on 30 June 2022 at European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)'s premises. Lasting for 2:30hrs, it brought together Catalan actors from the private sector and public and private TVET institutions with the goal of participating in an open discussion.

A Focus Group is a qualitative research technique used to collect data through group interaction. Through the use open-ended questions, the Focus Group contributed to the development of a trainee-oriented Catalogue of new curricula in the four Sustainable Economy sectors targeted by the project, namely Aquaponics, Hydroponics, Food Processing and Sustainable Food Security, thanks to the feedback received through this participatory process. The discussion highlighted the material strengths, and suggested areas of improvement as future opportunities for change.

This activity constituted the first stage of reviewing the final design of a trainee-oriented Catalogue, and will be followed by A4.1.2 Cross-border workshop, which will lead to the fine-tuning of an inclusive catalogue.

2. Methodology

The methodology chosen to engage the participants was that of using open-ended questions, to which flexible answers are possible, in an informal setting to make participants feel comfortable. PP5 provided a set of questions that were used during the Activity, which were integrated with new questions that arose based on the input of the participants.

The Programme Manager of the CLUSTER Project acted as moderator, managing the group discussion using a moderate style of involvement, to ensure that all desired topics were covered and that everyone took part in the discussion. The interaction was lively and fruitful, and every participant had the possibility of sharing their opinion.

A voice recorder along with mobile phones as back-up were used to track the record of all valuable interventions.

The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

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- Diversity (at least one representative for each type of sectors and stakeholders targeted by the Project - private sector, TVET institutions, education providers, public authorities and academia -, when possible)
- Gender balance
- Knowledge and experience in the project sector and targeted areas
- Level of participation in such activities

3. Participant demographics

A total of 11 participants took part in the Focus Group, of which seven representing external stakeholders, coming from different regions of Catalonia. In addition, many invitees could not attend the event, thus two of them (more specifically a researcher, and a public institution representative) sent their feedback by e-mail after receiving the catalogues.

No.	Full Name	Role	Affiliation
1	Roger Albinyana I Saigí	Managing Director	European Institute of the Mediterranean
2	Ricard Carreras Ubach	Coordinador de la Taula per a la Gestió Sostenible de la Ramaderia d'Osona	BETA Technological Center
3	Oriol Costa	Director	Ecoregió
4	Vanessa Daswani	Founder	SeaCircular
5	Virginia Dicuonzo	Management Officer, CLUSTER Project	European Institute of the Mediterranean
6	Karen Espíndola Sánchez	Tècnica Coordinadora Formació, Direcció d'Ocupabilitat Inclusiva i Formació	Barcelona Activa
7	Loic Le Goueff	CEO	Green in Blue
8	Giulia Maria Ferraresi	Junior Fellow of the Gender Equality Programme in the Mediterranean	European Institute of the Mediterranean
9	Karina Melkonian	Programme Manager, CLUSTER Project	European Institute of the Mediterranean
10	Joan Solé Díaz	Técnico Agricultura	Groots
11	Marta Vilaginés Romero	Cap d'Àrea d'Intermediació Laboral	Formació i Treball

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4. Key findings

The participants were asked three sets of open-ended questions.

- I. Firstly, they were asked about capacity-building programs, what characteristics they believe should be included in such programs in general, and how they usually evaluate them.

Concerning the knowledge and skills that the programs should build on, the participants agreed that it is important to consider the market demands and enterprises' needs, since those are the end point of the capacity building. Sometimes the market needs professional figures in sectors in which individuals do not want to work. For this reason, orientation and guidance in this sense is needed in such programs.

Moreover, both technical and transversal/soft skills should be taken into account. On the one hand, technical skills are those that trainees will need in the enterprise later to do their job, so it is important that they acquire them, considering however that they can also strengthen them in the workplace. In this context, it is important to collaborate with enterprises, since they possess the necessary technical knowledge to train professionals. On the other hand, transversal skills such as commitment, punctuality, teamwork are usually the reason for many problems during the job placement.

In addition, the issuing of a professional accreditation/qualification with a certain validity is a value added to such programs, in order to help undocumented workers who are relegated to the informal market.

Motivation also plays an important factor for young people and women to perform well in a working environment. Often, trainings and capacity building programmes are attended out of the need to find a job, without looking for something they care about and like.

Regarding the training methodology, dual trainings are deemed effective, combining equally theory and practice. When it comes to the theory, interactive trainings should include digital media, with teachers capable of using them, and that have the means to apply the theory to practice in the teaching room. The length of the theoretical part should also be kept moderate to maintain the interest high.

- II. A second set of questions concerned their opinion on new employees and trainees in their institutions.

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With respect to who should be responsible for the development of employability skills of young people and women, it was said that mostly enterprises play a role, although often SMEs cannot afford to select people who are not already capable of doing the job. Moreover, it was specified that trainers should not necessarily be university graduates, but can also be non-graduates.

In this context, it is important that trainers have crucial soft skills such as the ability of speaking the language of young people, who can be reached through social media information campaigns.

Keeping young people motivated remains a significant challenge in this context. For this reason, it is important that they feel part of a collective effort, a community, and more in general of a bigger project in the framework of the organisations that provide the trainings, while keeping the trainings interesting and inspiring. In this sense, three-month traineeships were deemed too short to create this feeling of belonging.

- III. Lastly, questions specific to the draft Catalogue material of new trainee-oriented Curricula were discussed.

According to the participants, too much theory was included in the Curricula. While some basic theory is important, practice on the field is the main mean learning tool. For instance, if trainings are held online, it could be interesting to have virtual live visits to the field. In addition, devoting time to show practical examples where trainees can actually monitor and compare organic and conventional practices would also be interesting. Based on this, it's important that the trainees can reconnect with nature, for them to fully grasp the concept of sustainability and its urgency.

Considering the panorama of the Catalan market, the participants suggested some training topics to integrate:

- Standard agricultural practices with focus on sustainability
- Soil regeneration/regenerative agriculture
- Vineyard cultivation
- Permaculture
- Irrigation and water conservation techniques like water harvesting, specially considering the water scarcity of the Mediterranean region

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- Marketing and commercialization modules, including e-commerce techniques, particularly considering that the market is growing faster than the offers for organic products.

Aquaponics and Hydroponics are subsectors that are not commercially developed in Catalonia, but that may have high potential in certain local markets. From a curricula point of view, contents related to hydroponics are mostly detected, and fewer related to aquaculture (aquaculture farming systems, aquaculture equipment and facilities, fish species suitable for aquaponics, fish to vegetables ratio, pathologies in fish farming, etc.) In order to promote entrepreneurial and inclusive projects in Catalonia with a low initial investment, in the context of rural/natural areas (such as the Ebro Delta), it would be convenient to combine notions on business models where aquaponics is combined with environmental education, in a context of ecological tourism, rather than that of large-scale production.

Regarding the appropriacy and variety of teaching and learning methods used, other recommendations were made:

- Provide trainees with the necessary means to follow them in case they don't already own them (laptop, Wi-Fi, etc.)
- Coordinate with women who have kids on the appropriate timings and settings to do the trainings. In this context, it was suggested to deliver trainings in groups with similar profiles (women, youth, disabled), in order to accommodate the different needs and concerns.

Finally, in order to reduce the mismatch between skills and market needs, it was suggested to involve SMEs during the whole process of design and implementation of such capacity-building programmes, in order to value their needs and motivate them too in the process, while taking into account the opportunities they can offer.

5. Conclusion or recommendations

In summary, based on the feedback collected during the Focus Group discussion, and the aspects on which an overall consensus of the participants was reached, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Soft/transversal skills were deemed crucial for the trainees to develop professional skills before reaching the job place. For this reason, it is convenient that a Curriculum on such skills was developed, to be taught transversally to all trainees.

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2. A high degree of practical experience is necessary. Therefore, even when doing online trainings, it is recommended that teachers have the means to demonstrate practical examples, and that visits to the field (even virtually) are organised.
3. From the stage of finalising the design of the Curricula, until the final traineeships in enterprises and SMEs, it is essential to involve the collaborating entities of the private sector in all steps. Given the limited duration of CLUSTER Project, this approach will not completely be feasible, however it is desirable to maintain a high degree of enterprises/SMEs involvement in all activities.
4. Given the challenge of keeping young trainees motivated, it is suggested to include in the Catalogues a message highlighting the importance of sustainable economy for the planet, for them feel inspired, part of a collective effort and a bigger project, while also creating, once the trainings start, a sense community with the organisations that are offering them.
5. Once the stage of logistically organising the trainings start, it is advisable to adapt the timings and settings with the trainees, who may have particular needs based on their profiles.

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