



# modern **AKIS**

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## AKIS in action:

### Fostering knowledge flows and innovation: Aligning research with practice needs

Networking event on March 19, 2025 - Online

*How can research in the agricultural and agri-food sectors be directed toward meaningful impact?*

*Sergio Ponsa, Beta Technological Centre, Spain*

*Network "Focus on animal welfare"*

*Katja Brase, Network „Focus on animal welfare“, Germany*

*Bulgarian experience in designing the EIP-AGRI projects an involvement of farmers and advisors in the operational groups*

*Dimitar Vanev, National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAAS), Bulgaria*

**Moderation: Julia Eberharter, Austrian Chamber of Agriculture**

#### Question

Do you have all the necessary resources to engage with farmers? I agree that a tighter cooperation between researchers and practical farming is needed, but is this only the task of researchers?

#### **Sergio Ponsá**

This is a strategy at the center that we decided should be outside the current metrics and more focused. So then we developed our internal strategy. And in terms of resources, you need people who have this mindset.

We have invested a lot of effort in the past to change the mindset of the researchers because this is our strength—to have people who truly believe that by being outside the current scientific metrics, they can have a greater impact. And we have demonstrated that it is possible to have highly engaged and motivated people carrying out these tasks. Unfortunately, in terms of resources, there are no external resources supporting these previous tasks.

This is something that belongs to the internal strategy of the center. It is important to create multidisciplinary teams—having people with strong knowledge of agricultural practices, engineering, and related fields. But it is also essential to have experts in

polymaking, international relations, and other scientific fields that complement our tasks.

### Question

Is the Tierwohl network open to international contexts for receiving and sharing materials that are the results of international projects? Must the materials be in German, or is English an option?

### **Katja Brase**

The network is open, and English will be fine. So if you want to place your results on our platform, please just write me an email, and I will get back to you. We can then add a link to your website or your results in one of our traces, and that's no problem. It can be in English—that's not an issue. This should be open to everybody. We also have translations in our network, so you don't actually have to translate it yourself.

### Question

If an operational group was successful in the first stage of the EIP-AGRI application, to what extent is the group confident that the project will succeed and be funded after the second stage? Because they then enter into competition with projects that did not go through a first stage and submitted directly in the second stage.

### **Dimitar Vanev**

In the second stage, the evaluation criteria will include one criterion that awards additional points to operational groups that participated in the first stage. This means that most of the operational groups that participated in the first stage will receive an advantage in the second stage compared to those who applied directly in the second stage.

### Question

The roles of researchers are definitely evolving to include additional responsibilities such as network broker, facilitator, and knowledge translator, among others. As you mentioned, this requires researchers to develop new individual capacities and skills. However, researchers also work within broader institutional constraints, such as current academic metrics that are not conducive to co-creative approaches.

I was wondering if, in your institution or country, you have experiences with broader enabling conditions that incentivize researchers to engage in such meaningful multi-actor approaches.

## **Sergio Ponsá**

I can talk about the experience we have as a technological center. Right now, we are a group of 125 researchers working with this vision. It is not easy for a researcher with a specific mindset and vision of their societal role—focused on producing academic papers—to change their approach. But then first you need to provide them with a safe environment, meaning that you are not putting risk in their career because you are making them to have a different approach. This is what we have done in the center to keep this safety for the research in terms of career development.

In fact, we have demonstrated that having this kind of impact actually accelerates career development. Once this safety is in place, the mindset starts to change.

And then what we are trying to provide to the researchers to see significant stuff is some kind of training in order to understand a different kind of mindset. Because you need to understand how to communicate to policymakers. You need to understand how to communicate and how to understand the farmers or even the advisors.

So we are providing additional training or we are facilitating that they are participating in different kind of trainings or knowledge sharing actions in which they can integrate new skills that, of course, in the previous stage they do not have. But there is nothing official outside of the strategy of their own centers that are thinking that they have this role as we have. Of course, there is a lot to do outside.

I think that is something that the scientific world needs to change a bit this vision in order to provide these kind of capacities also for the scientific personnel in order to have this impact. I agree with that.

## **Question**

Regarding the nationwide Tierwohl network, have there been any issues of competition, such as some events being available only to members of certain organizations or restrictions on sharing participation lists?

## **Katja Brase**

We had some issues with competition in the beginning. But what we did was simply make the information available to everyone. We don't have exclusive groups for participation. If we hold events on farms, we invite people who are already involved in the network.

However, we ensure that the outcomes are available on our website, where they can be downloaded. So, I don't think competition is an issue. Regarding participation lists, due to data protection regulations, we cannot share lists of participants.

## **Question**

How can an international project share its results, materials, videos, and practice abstracts related to animal welfare with your network?

### **Katja Brase**

It's the same process—just write me an email, and we can place the materials on our website. We can either add a link to your website or upload your results directly.

If you want to participate in events, we can arrange field or farm visits. That shouldn't be a problem, but we would need to discuss it and connect you with the right people in our network. I'm just the coordinator—I help connect people—but I can put you in touch with those who organize the events related to these topics.

### **Question**

How do you encourage farmers to participate in on-farm demonstrations and events?

### **Dimitar Vanev**

We use different tools to encourage them. First, all demonstrations are free of charge for farmers. Second, our regional advisors actively explain the benefits of participating. We also select engaging demonstrators—experts from the field or researchers who can capture farmers' interest.

Every year, we evaluate our demonstrators, analysing which ones were most effective and engaging for farmers, and we prioritize them for future demonstrations. We also promote our events through AgriBG, a widely used agricultural website in Bulgaria, ensuring farmers can easily access information about upcoming demonstrations.

### **Question**

How has the approach developed in your center changed the way you build consortia, shaping funding calls, and co-developing proposals for EU funding? What concrete actions or steps would you recommend to others introducing this approach?

### **Sergio Ponsá**

So, of course, as I said before, we already have the request from the funding programs for reshaping the right consortium. But it's not a matter of having farmers, advisors, policymakers, and associations in the consortium, it's to have the right ones, it's to have those entities that really see this project as the best tool to solve their day-to-day problems.

We know that farmers are extremely busy. Research is outside of their day-to-day interest because they have many responsibilities. The same applies to policymakers.

But if you have this kind of relationship where you provide solutions to their day-to-day problems, this is how they can change their perception of research. Research is not just something done by people funded by the government with public funds. It's not just that.

These are people working to solve the problems that they face in their daily operations on the farm. Once you build reliability and trust with them, so they become more

engaged in your projects. Farmers, policymakers and other entities then truly believe that this will be extremely useful for both current and future challenges. Moreover, this is the best way to build consortia because you have that entities that are not just making the check for the multi-actor approach.

It's the meaningful entities that will support you to have this meaningful impact. And additionally, what we are also requesting as much as possible is that these entities that are joining the consortium can support us in this peer-to-peer extension of information. Because it makes a difference.

When we, as researchers, try to reach farmers, it's completely different from when another farmer—who has been involved in the research and is fully committed—shares the results. If a farmer sees first hand that the outcomes are beneficial, their endorsement carries more weight. When farmers communicate research findings to other farmers, it makes a real difference because they share the same language, face the same challenges, and work toward the same goals. This is how we have created change.

So we are having the same approach but choosing much better the entities that are joining the consortium.

## Question

Your insights highlight the critical need for a common language to facilitate meaningful exchange among stakeholders. One of the major challenges in translating science into practice is the sheer diversity of research projects across the farm to fork spectrum. Instead of addressing individual projects in isolation, we need a more systemic approach, one that integrates research outputs to create a clearer, more cohesive focus for stakeholders across the research policy practice continuum.

## ***Sergio Ponsá***

I completely agree with that. For me, the opportunity to tackle that challenge is to use some of the well-known tools that we already have on the table.

So all the projects of the modern language, the thematic networks, all these are tools that are capable of aiming to have these systemic solutions. But the main challenge, in my opinion, is that they are based on an ex-post strategy. So I have the research done, then I'm trying to create the systemic solutions.

We need to start seeing in a previous state. So we need to integrate in these systemic solutions, the previous work, in order to have the right results. Then the systemic solutions will be able to put in place or to transfer.

But what we are doing, so I can talk in our experience, the thematic networks that we are coordinating are fantastic. So we are super happy with the impact that we have them. What we are missing in one stage is that we cannot modify or we cannot have any impact on the results that we have.

Even if we identify that the challenges that the farmers have are absolutely different and that research is not matching with what they need. But we cannot work on that. It's because it's an exposed ex-post strategy. We need to start before to create the systemic solution.



## Question

Do you as a network engage also in projects like EIP Operational Groups or are you there just as an intermediary?

### **Katja Brase**

We collaborate with EIP projects.

What we do is, if we have targets or information regarding animal welfare, we set up meetings. Sometimes it's through video conferences, and sometimes we meet in person to review the EIP projects and the results, which we then share on our platform and within our network. These results are passed on to the farmers. Sometimes people from the EIP projects present themselves, and other times they provide us with results that we can use to create printed materials, videos, or podcasts about the outcomes of their EIP project. So, yes, we are collaborating.

## Question

How was it decided that education in this area would be coordinated in this way? In the person's country, the Czech Republic, several initiatives are usually created, and they end up competing with each other.

### **Katja Brase**

Yes, actually, it was the large chambers of agriculture. They got together and said, 'What we need is someone to bring the knowledge to the farms, because we have so much knowledge about animal welfare, but it's not available to the farmers. Sometimes it's too complicated, and we don't have a platform that consolidates the knowledge.' Therefore, the chambers of agriculture got together, set up the project, and it was funded by the Ministry of Agriculture in Berlin.

We faced competition from the local advisors in different counties and regions. As I mentioned, this was one of the challenges we had at the beginning. We had to get them into the network. We managed to do that because we could fund their events. We could book the rooms, cover the costs for food, and pay for the speakers. It became a collaboration, and we tried to overcome the competition and bring people into the network. But this is a point we need to consider when we want to continue this network. If we are no longer funded by the Ministry, we will need to find a way to sustain it. At the moment, we've done a lot of work over the last five years, and we've created a huge database that should be used moving forward. People see that we have many skilled individuals who can organize events and bring the network together.

So, I believe it will continue after 2026, but we will see how it goes. We won't be funded by the Ministry anymore. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, but competition remains a major factor in its continuation, I suppose.

## Question

Could you comment on the role of social media in providing a more proactive approach to translating or transferring outputs from research and innovation projects using a community practice or a community groups?

### ***Sergio Ponsá***

Well, this is not an easy to respond question. Social media and social networks are important tools.

But if we are research entities and we will want to stay strong on the evidence-based information and the objective information, once you are on the social media, it's very difficult to control that. I mean, well, you need to use that social media as a tool, but it's difficult to control. So, I mean, we have had some good experiences and others that are not that good.

You need to use them if you would like to increase the impact and to go to a broader public. But still, you need to control very well what is published, what is then connected to that, and who is using this information partially or totally to have different meanings that the one that you would like to have. So, this is something that you need to take a special attention on.