

CropCat

Upscaling minor crops with institutional catering

Interview with project coordinators Guillaume Martin & Clémentine Meunier (INRAe, France)

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CONTEXT AND GOALS

Which crops and farming systems do you work with, and what key challenges are you addressing?

The CropCat project aims to foster the development of agroecological farming by promoting minor crops, from production to consumption, particularly in collective catering. It addresses the challenges from farm to fork, i.e. related to cultivation, storage, processing, cooking and consumer acceptance.

The crops studied vary from country to country, depending on local contexts and existing dynamics around minor crops. For example, in Germany, researchers selected chickpea to continue working with a pre-existing network of farmers and may consider buckwheat in the project next stages. In France, the choice of minor crops was made in mutual agreement between the farmers and cooks involved in the project. Three crops were selected: chickpea, millet, and emmer.

The main challenge lies in maintaining long-term involvement of stakeholders. To address this, the research approach is action-oriented and grounded in stakeholders' needs, so that participants can perceive concrete and immediate benefits. Living lab meetings are very operational and always aim at making collective decisions regarding e.g. crop choices, crop management, the logistics of storage, sorting packing and delivery, etc. No decision is imposed by the project coordinators and living lab managers.

The grain produced in farmers' experimental fields is cooked and served in the canteens involved in the project, which strongly reinforces farmers' engagement.

Who are your main stakeholders, and how do their needs shape the project? How are farmers and local stakeholders involved?

The project gathers a large range of stakeholders: researchers from diverse disciplines (agronomists, economists, sociologists, food scientists), farmers, collective catering cooks, chambers of agriculture, agricultural high schools, certification bodies, municipalities, as well as other intermediary actors.



Living labs were created at the beginning of the project and progressively consolidate. Each country composes its Living Lab differently, with a different focus on the value chain. In Italy, for example, the work focuses on contractual arrangements and collective organisation, particularly around public procurement in the city of Rome. In France, in the Gers department, the focus starts from crop production and, beyond working on innovative agricultural practices, it also considers grain processing and cooking. The French Living Lab

mainly involves middle school canteens, with strong support from the departmental authority responsible for them. In other countries, such as Denmark, the canteens involved serve a wider range of audiences, from early childhood to nursing homes.

Most of the farms involved in the living labs are certified organic, although some conventional farms also participate.

METHODS AND INNOVATION

What new or creative approaches have you used to engage stakeholders and adapt to local conditions?

The methods used to engage actors vary across countries. In Germany, for example, the area of the territory and the related distance among farms makes in-person mobilisation more difficult, leading to greater use of online meetings. In France, actors meet several times a year, around trial result presentations, field visits, and tastings.

Particular attention is paid to the horizontal nature of exchanges, adaptation to participants' constraints, and conviviality. Meetings are not limited to presentations of technical and economic data: they also include shared meals, tastings, and culinary experiments. Caterers are invited to cook project products, such as a couscous made with millet, which was a discovery for many farmers who had never tasted a crop they nevertheless cultivate. These moments help create a climate of trust, facilitate open discussion, and strengthen group cohesion. Since the beginning of the project, the same actors have remained involved, with no dropouts.

What challenges have you faced so far, and how are you dealing with them?

One major difficulty is working with minor crops for which there is little or no ongoing breeding efforts. Accessing seeds on time is challenging. In France, the project notably faced a shortage of 600 kg of emmer seeds one week before sowing date in the Gers, requiring a high level of adaptability. In such an adaptive context, a key question is how to balance ensuring continuity in and relevance of on-farm trials with allowing everyone to test what they wish to explore. That demands flexibility in research methods.

Another challenge lies in the continuous engagement of actors across the project duration. In France, to guarantee farmers an outlet for their experimental crops in canteens despite the uncertainties of agricultural production, researchers anticipate additional market outlets, e.g. in municipal canteens of western Toulouse. This requires continuous work on coordination, outreach, and facilitation to adjust production volumes to the absorption capacities of canteens.



EARLY INSIGHTS

What early results or surprises have emerged since the project started?

The project is still at an early stage, but the first trial campaigns have already been carried out on chickpeas and millet, both in experimental stations in France and on commercial farms in Germany. Sister projects also provided promising insights on on-station emmer experiments. Another campaign just began, with crops sown on stations and on farms this autumn in France, Germany and Spain.

How are stakeholders responding?

In France, the momentum generated by the project has been such that the living lab managers have received requests from farmers wishing to join after the farmer group had already been constituted. Cooks have shown a strong interest in agronomic knowledge, allowing them to better understand the impacts of their recipe choices on the crops grown in the fields nearby and on the environment. That can inform their menu planning and their sourcing practices.

One of the project's main achievements at this stage is having established and maintained an ongoing dialogue between agricultural production and cooking, a link that is rarely so direct.

VISION AND ADVICE

What is your long-term vision for agroecology in your field?

One key challenge of agroecology is to reconnect production and consumption. Agroecological systems often produce less, with higher seed costs, so their viability depends on better-remunerated and well-anticipated market outlets. This means that agricultural sciences must engage more with consumption issues and that cooks should be made aware of agricultural challenges, a strategy that has proven effective. This is part of our mission and represents a way of working on agroecology from farm to fork.

What advice would you give to future project coordinators?

Prepare to be flexible.

Allow yourself to explore new ways of working that are more appropriate to Living Labs.

Remain attentive and find solutions to see things through to completion.

Rethink work habits and postures vis-à-vis other actors, accepting the risk of not always having an immediate solution and allowing one's legitimacy to be questioned.



CropCat

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

Project title: CropCat

Topic: Upscaling minor crops with institutional catering

Start date: 01/04/2025

Coordinator: National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE), France

Number of partners and Living Labs: consortium of 13 organisations, including 6 LLs

Project website:

<https://www.agroecologypartnership.eu/en/projects/cropcat>

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