



4.1.1 – Regional Focus Group Discussion Report

Cyprus – Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI)

CLUSTER (C_A.3.1_0014)

Table of Contents

Contents

1. Summary	2
2. Methodology	2
3. Participant demographics.....	3
4. Key findings.....	4
5. Conclusion or recommendations.....	5

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1. Summary

In recent decades, the primary sector has shrunk as young people's interest in work has moved to professions related to technology, the internet, and services. The agricultural sector has shrunk more in the number of people engaged in it and less in the number of cultivated areas. The majority of those who are professionally engaged in land cultivation and food production in most countries of the world and especially in the Mediterranean, are elderly people, over 55 years old, with little to no education, and not much specialization in the subject they cultivate.

In the last 5 years, in many countries of Europe and especially the Mediterranean, there has been a tendency to give many incentives to young people to act as professional farmers in combination with technology and innovations in the agricultural sector. This was done because of many factors or problems that appeared. Firstly, the climate crisis and the lack of resources mainly for the Mediterranean countries. Reduced rainfall, high temperatures, damage to crops, competition from Third countries with cheaper products. In the northern countries, climate change occurs with floods and a prolonged winter. Finally, the coronavirus crisis. All this combined brought income losses, loss of work and a shift of the world towards the primary sector.

The CLUSTER Focus Group meeting was organised on Wednesday 6th July 2022, at the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce & Industry premises in Nicosia.

This meeting was held with the aim of evaluating a program of technical and vocational education and training of NEETs people who want to engage in agricultural professions. It aims to help young people both men and women to acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to properly meet the requirements of their agricultural activity. The team consisted of people experienced in adult education in agriculture.

Finally, it became clear that all participants had the opinion that education in the field of agriculture is necessary and important for everyone, at any stage of the production process they are active in. The training will help participants to acquire knowledge faster, avoid significant mistakes and apply innovative and green practices in their units.

2. Methodology

The evaluation process took place in the context of a meeting, in the form of a relaxed discussion. The meeting was video recorded after receiving all participants' consent.

The coordinator was responsible for recording the data, suggestions, and notes.

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The attendees were given indicative training programs for each branch of specialization and were asked to read them and then evaluate them, each in their field of specialization. They could add topics or chapters if needed or disagree on points that in their opinion were wrong or needed improvement.

The coordinator then submitted questions to everyone to record their views. All participants were knowledgeable in one or more disciplines.

3. Participant demographics

The Focus Group was attended by 6 people. Everyone had experience in one or more fields.

They were selected through research done, among the academic institutions of the country that offer education in the agricultural sector and among the agricultural organizations dealing with the agricultural sectors discussed.

The team consisted of:

- 2 teachers of higher education in organic farming, food processing, and hydroponics.
- 1 agronomist – researcher from the State Agricultural Research Institute with involvement in hydroponics.
- 1 ichthyologist – trainer in the field of aquaponics.
- 2 representatives of agricultural organizations engaged in organic farming.

	Full Name	Affiliation	Module
1	Dr. Demetris Tsaltas	Cyprus University of Technology, Department of Agricultural sciences, biotechnology and food science. Agronomist	Circular Economy / Soiless Hydroponic Module closed systems Blue Economy / Soiless Aquaponic Module Circular Economy / Food Processing Module
2	Dr. Dimitrios Sarris	Kes College, School of Environmental Studies, Technician for Production of Organic Products Biologist	Initiation to sustainable agriculture Circular Economy / Food Processing Module
3	Dr. Damianos Neokleous	Agriculture Research Institute, Agronomist	Circular Economy / Soiless Hydroponic Module closed systems

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4	Constantinos Georgiadis	Ichthyologist – trainer in the field of aquaponics	Blue Economy / Soiless Aquaponic Module
5	Christina Christodoulou	President of Cyprus Organic Farmers Association, Agronomist,	Initiation to sustainable agriculture Blue Economy / Soiless Aquaponic Module Circular Economy / Food Processing Module
6	Charis Christoforou	Secretary Pancyprian Organic Farmers Association	Initiation to sustainable agriculture Circular Economy / Food Processing Module

4. Key findings

There has been a common finding that it is necessary to set up education programs in the agricultural field, particularly for the unemployed and women. They also suggested that the age limit should be raised for over 30s, as it seems that unemployment is more pronounced at these ages, but at the same time people over the age of 30 seem to be more settled for the change of career path they want to do towards agriculture.

As for how education would be more effective, there was no disagreement that training in a presence and above all in an interactive way, is more effective. For example, visits to professional units dealing with the topics presented. Practical training in the field should also be considered necessary, as it is important for the trainee to get to know the subject, working on it and immediately facing any difficulties. In other words, they proposed an internship in the field or in the corresponding units.

Regarding online education, there was no negative position. It is also considered a good training technique that can be applied to a greater number of people. However, it should be done live, to have the possibility of questions and discussion between the trainer and the trainees.

The topics dealt with by the group were 4.

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1. Circular Economy / Soilless Hydroponic Module closed systems.

Hydroponics is a form of cultivation without the use of soil. Plants are placed on organic or inert substrates. In countries that are faced with water shortages, serious diseases in the soil with many enemies, hydroponics can be a solution. In Cyprus, cherry tomatoes, beans, strawberries, and peppers are usually grown in hydroponic systems. Mostly professional units are engaged in hydroponics. It is considered an innovative form of cultivation with significant savings in water and nutrients if it will be applied to closed systems.

2. Blue Economy / Soilless Aquaponic Module

Aquaponic is a form of cultivation without the use of soil. Plants are placed on organic or inert substrates. Water comes from tanks, in which fish are bred. Fish with their litter enrich the water with nutrients for plant growth. In Cyprus mainly small-scale non-professional units use aquaponic. It is also considered an innovative form of cultivation, with enough savings in water and nutrients.

3. Initiation to sustainable agriculture

Green crops, i.e., crops that reduce land stress, environmental pollution and can resist climate change, especially in the Mediterranean. Such form of agriculture is the Organic Farming. Especially when applied to crops that are adapted to the conditions of a specific region. Especially for the countries of Europe as an option, it is considered a one-way street as by 2030, organic land in the European Union should be 25% of crops.

4. Circular Economy / Food Processing Module

Food processing may not be a form of cultivation, but it is part of the agricultural production chain as it enables the creation of new products with a longer shelf life, greater added value and utilization of products that cannot be sold as fresh in the markets. It also enables people who are unable to work in the field to have a job. In food processing, all food production regulations in the workshop should be followed.

5. Conclusion or recommendations

All 4 sections seem to be quite interesting. But it is important to know the basic concepts, regulations, quality, and safety systems that must be put into practice. Education and training through this program will provide all the knowledge and information required.

Clear reference should be made to all programs for the existing regulations to be implemented such as:

- the use of pesticides and the permits required,

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- the use of nutrients in hydroponics depending on the requirements of each plant.
- the nutritional needs of fish in the hydroponic system
- the Regulation of Organic Farming that is in force in Europe and the formulations allowed
- the necessity of using Renewable Energy Sources in the facilities to promote sustainability
- the food quality standards applicable to food laboratories

A proposal was made by all the members of the meeting to increase the age group for over 30 years of age in the people who will be trained, especially women. Also, in case a potential trainee wishes to attend more than one thematic unit, he can do so.

Cyprus will implement the Organic Farming practical training, since the availability of agricultural farms is sufficient while there is growing interest among young people to focus on this sector.

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