SPECIAL REPORT 09/2026 **EN**

European innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy

A key tool for innovation in EU agriculture falling short of its full potential

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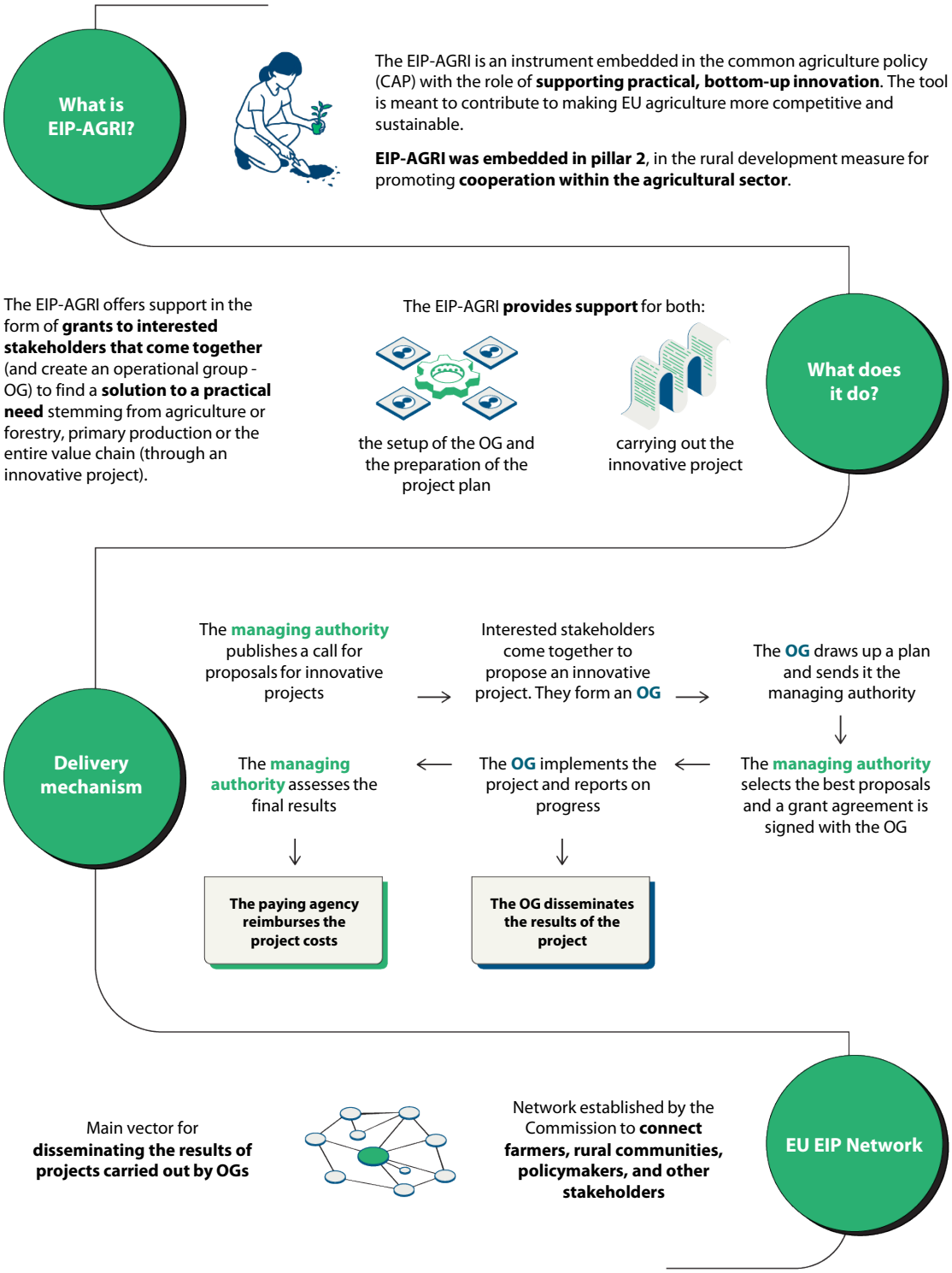
Main messages

Why this area is important

01 The European innovation partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability (EIP-AGRI) is a key policy tool to foster competitive and sustainable agriculture through collaborative innovation. It is financed by the common agricultural policy (CAP) and EU research and innovation policy (Horizon). Introduced for the first time in the 2014-2022 CAP, the EIP-AGRI supported more than 4 000 innovation projects, spending almost €1 billion of EU and national funds under the 2014-2022 CAP.

02 Member states use CAP rural development funds to co-finance innovation under the EIP-AGRI "projects". The projects must be proposed and carried out by "operational groups" (OGs) including interested stakeholders, such as farmers, foresters, researchers, advisors and agrifood businesses, which all have a stake in achieving project's objectives. The purpose of the EIP-AGRI approach is to encourage OG members to work together and develop innovative solutions to practical problems. To ensure that the EIP-AGRI brings benefits to the agricultural sector, OGs are required to disseminate the results of their projects. ***Figure 1*** summarises the EIP-AGRI in the CAP.

Figure 1 | European innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy



Source: ECA.

03 The Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) set up and manages the EIP-AGRI in the CAP at EU level, providing guidelines, monitoring implementation and evaluating its impact. DG AGRI is also responsible for creating and

managing the EU EIP Network to connect OGs and disseminate the results of their projects. Member states are responsible for integrating EIP-AGRI into their national CAP strategies, organising calls for projects, selecting suitable projects and assessing their results.

04 The contribution of the EIP-AGRI in the CAP in terms of innovation in agriculture largely depends on member states selecting and funding innovation projects and then disseminating their results, so that innovations can be applied more widely and the innovative capacity of the sector can develop over time. Commission guidelines[1] refer to a successful innovation as:

(1) a new idea, or an existing idea, which is used for the first time in a specific context;

(2) which is put into practice;

(3) proves to be useful; and

(4) which is widely adopted.

05 We carried out this audit because innovation is increasing in importance under the 2023-2027 CAP, while the results of the EIP-AGRI OG projects and their impact have only been partially evaluated. The Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food commits to providing continuing support to the EIP-AGRI as a cornerstone of member states' agricultural knowledge and innovation systems. The aim of our findings and recommendations is to contribute to improving the design and implementation of the EIP-AGRI.

06 The objective of our audit was to assess whether the EIP-AGRI in the CAP made an effective contribution to innovation in EU agriculture by funding innovation projects and disseminating their results. We assessed 70 OG projects in four member states with national and regional rural development programmes: Spain (at national level and at regional level – Andalusia and Catalonia), France (at regional level – Burgundy-Franche-Comté and Normandy), the Netherlands, and Poland (both at national level).

07 For all of the OG projects in our sample, we checked their relevance to agriculture, the innovativeness of the ideas tested, the extent to which these ideas were put into practice throughout the project, the usefulness of the project results to OG members and other stakeholders, and the potential for the results to be more widely adopted. We also

[1] Commission, Guidelines on programming for innovation and the implementation of the EIP for agricultural productivity and sustainability, 2014.

examined the arrangements for disseminating and using project results[2] to foster the wider application of the innovations created and to improve innovative capacity in EU agriculture. Further information and details of the audit scope and approach are presented in ***Annex I***.

What we found and recommend

08 The EIP-AGRI in the CAP has significant potential to foster innovation and productivity in EU agriculture. However, weaknesses in its implementation have limited its overall impact. Despite the creation of several valuable innovations, our audit shows that the contribution of the EIP-AGRI in the CAP to innovation in EU agriculture was reduced by:

— a lack of focus on farmers' needs (paragraphs ***18***-***33***);

— the selection of only around a quarter of projects with the potential to become successful innovations (paragraphs ***34***-***49***); and

— weak arrangements for disseminating project results (paragraphs ***50***-***63***).

09 We found that high-quality innovation resulted from projects that actively involved farmers, combined practical needs with research, and demonstrated at the planning stage that they had the potential to produce useful results (as required by the EIP-AGRI innovation model).

10 Although the EIP-AGRI is the key CAP tool for supporting innovation addressing farmers' practical needs, we found that more than a quarter of the 70 audited projects were either only indirectly linked to farmers' needs or not linked to their needs at all. Even among the agriculture-related projects, few were based on a practical farming need or actively involved farmers. A higher quality of innovation resulted from projects that did focus on farmers' needs (paragraphs ***18***-***26***).

11 Our review of the arrangements in the four member states covered by our audit highlighted two factors that reduced the focus of the EIP-AGRI in the CAP on farmers' innovation needs (paragraphs ***23***-***30***):

— member states did not set specific objectives or priorities to help determine the scope of calls for innovation projects; and

[2] Recital 45 and Article 57 (3) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

— member states relied on OGs to ensure that projects focused on farmers' needs, but provided no incentive for farmers to become members of the OG or play an active role in the project. When they did participate, farmers were rarely paid for their involvement – unlike other OG members, such as researchers or advisors.

12 Our analysis of the projects suggests that the active involvement of farmers in projects led to a higher quality of innovation, as did integrating research results into farming practice (paragraphs ***27***-***33***).

Recommendation 1

Improve the focus of the European innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy on farmers' innovation needs

The Commission should:

(a) work with member states to ensure that farmers' innovation needs are the primary focus of EIP-AGRI OG projects;

(b) include a specific support action for EIP-AGRI OGs within a CAP intervention for knowledge sharing and innovation in the post-2027 CAP;

(c) promote the role of farmers and other implementation partners in EIP-AGRI OG projects and share best practices on how to encourage their active participation.

Target implementation date: 2027 for (a), 2028 for (b) and 2027 for (c).

13 We found that around a quarter (18 out of 70) of the projects in our sample displayed all four characteristics of a successful innovation project, at least to some extent (paragraphs ***34***-***35*** and ***Figure 2***). They:

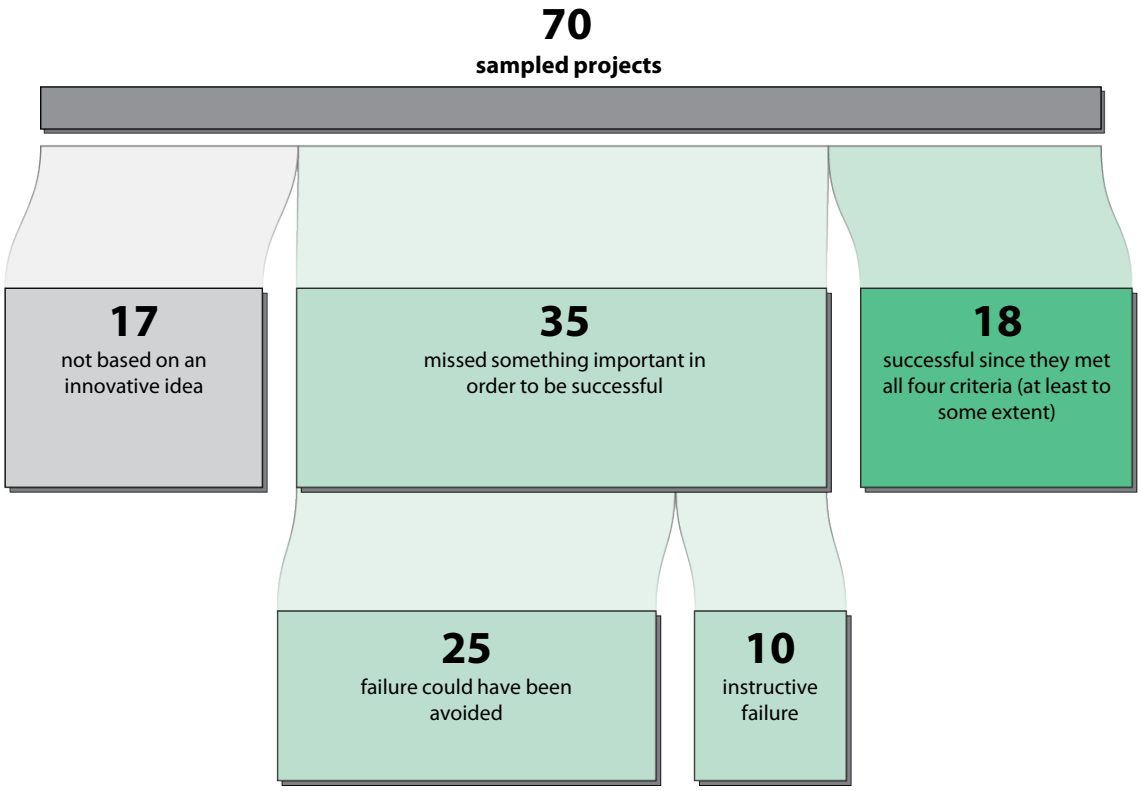
(1) worked on a new idea or an existing idea, used for the first time in a specific context (a new product, service, production process or a new way of organising things);

(2) put this idea into practice;

(3) proved that the idea could be useful; and

(4) ensured that the idea was widely adopted.

Figure 2 | Around a quarter of the projects led to a widely adopted innovation



Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

14 Of the remaining 52 projects, we identified 10 that followed all the steps but were still unable to deliver a practical, innovative solution – these represent examples of instructive failure. For 42 of the projects, it was clear from the planning stage that they were unlikely to lead to either a successful innovation or an instructive failure because they did not test an idea for an innovation (17 projects), were not focused on producing a practical outcome, or only addressed the OG participants' specific needs (25 projects). Our review of the arrangements in the four member states covered by the audit suggests that several factors contributed to the selection of projects with no or little innovation potential (paragraphs ***36-49***):

— the innovativeness of the project proposal was not a decisive criterion for selecting projects;

— the potential "usefulness of results" and "wider application" only played a minor role; and

— there was little competitive pressure between projects to obtain funding – some projects received support even when there were indications at the planning stage

that their outcomes would not display the four characteristics to be classified as a successful innovation.

Recommendation 2

Strengthen selection procedures for innovation projects

The Commission should:

(a) work with member states to ensure that the project's potential to lead to an innovation with useful results that can be widely adopted, play a determining role in member states' selection of EIP-AGRI OG projects;

(b) ensure the sharing of good practices between member states, including targeting practical outcomes, assessing the usefulness of proposed solutions, and taking into account knowledge already created.

Target implementation date: 2027.

15 Of the 70 sampled projects, 53 tested an idea for an innovation and therefore created valuable information that should be widely shared. While all the sampled projects communicated their activities, only around half of the 53 projects disseminated the key results and knowledge they had created. Of the 18 projects that succeeded in producing useful results, 6 led to an innovation that was widely adopted by 2025 (paragraphs ***50***-***51***).

16 Our review of arrangements at EU and member state level highlighted several factors that contributed to the lack of dissemination of project results. These factors included the following (paragraphs ***52***-***57***).

— A lack of clarity on the part of OGs as to what the "dissemination of results" included. Some OGs only communicated their activities and did not transfer the knowledge created by the project, including some cases where OG participants preferred to keep the results private to maintain a competitive advantage.

— Member states did not check whether OGs disseminated the project results or the knowledge created, and did not identify innovations in completed projects which had the potential to be more widely adopted. This occurred even when communication activities had been planned and the costs had been reimbursed. In fact, we found no link between member states paying for such communication activities and the effective dissemination of results.

17 The lack of dissemination of results hindered member states' ability to learn lessons about the types of project that generate innovation. The lack of reliable data, and the lack of information and indicators about the project results also undermined the Commission's capacity to evaluate the EIP-AGRI in the CAP and take action to improve it (paragraphs ***58***-***63***).

Recommendation 3

Improve the dissemination of results and promote widespread knowledge of innovations

The Commission should:

(a) clarify the obligation to disseminate results and work with member states to ensure that the key results and knowledge created are made publicly available, both for ongoing and future projects;

(b) provide ways to support the OGs in effectively disseminating the results of successful innovation projects with the potential for wider application.

Target implementation date: 2027 for (a) and 2028 for (b).

02

A closer look at our observations

The implementation of the European innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy was not sufficiently focused on farmers' innovation needs

18 The EIP-AGRI is intended to play an important role in the CAP as the key tool for supporting practical, bottom-up innovation at farm level. To achieve its objectives (paragraph ***04*** in ***Annex I***), the EIP-AGRI was required to promote faster and wider transposition of innovative solutions into farming practice, and bridge the gap between research and farming practice. We examined whether member states' EIP-AGRI operational group (OG) projects ("projects") contributed to the EIP-AGRI's overall objectives, while focusing on farmers' needs and effectively addressing the gaps between research and farming practice.

Almost a third of projects did not relate directly to farming

19 We examined the contribution that projects made to increasing agricultural productivity and sustainability. We found that while most projects related directly to farming (48 out of 70 projects) – growing crops, rearing animals, and producing unprocessed food and raw materials – a significant number did not (22 projects). Even though an impact on farming is clearly expected from the EIP-AGRI's rules and objectives, the EU framework allowed financing for agriculture and the wider food sector. In practice, member states interpreted this connection very broadly, and in some cases selected projects that were unlikely to have any impact on farming. ***Box 1*** provides examples of projects either with indirect links to farming or no links at all.

Box 1

Examples of projects with indirect links to farming or no links at all

The main objective of a project in Poland was to develop and implement technology to produce butter with a longer shelf life and that is easier to spread. The project was carried out by a large milk processing company and did not include any farmer participation. Had the project increased profits from butter sales, the innovation would have made a small contribution to the economic sustainability of around 2 500 dairy farmers even though it did not affect their farming activity.

The objective of a project in Spain (Catalonia) was to change the brand image of a supermarket chain and communicate the brand's values to consumers. Project activities included standard customer perception studies, market research and brand strategy development. We found no connection to farming in this project.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

20 In their project plans, OGs have to describe how the proposed innovation would contribute to the EIP-AGRI objective of enhancing productivity and promoting sustainable resource management[3]. However, neither the Commission nor the member states provided any guidelines on how this contribution should be assessed or measured. As a result, all 70 projects in our sample claimed to have an impact on agricultural productivity or sustainability, even though 22 projects had no link or only an indirect link to farming.

21 We found that the successful projects in our sample were those that responded to farmers' practical needs. Involving farmers and practitioners from the initial planning stage through to project completion ensured that innovations addressed farmers' real challenges, facilitated practical testing, and – when successful – promoted wider adoption among the farming community. ***Box 2*** provides an example of a project driven by farmers' needs.

Box 2

An example of a successful innovation driven by farmers' needs

Rice farmers in Spain's Ebro delta (Catalonia) carried out a project to develop and adapt dry-sowing techniques for rice. The goal was to optimise water consumption based on soil type, crop variety and crop management practices, and to assess the

[3] Article 57 (1) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

impact of dry sowing on the proliferation of snails that cause significant damage to rice sowed in wet conditions.

Farmers actively participated in every stage of the project. In collaboration with a research institute, they developed suitable dry-sowing techniques. Today, the dry sowing of rice is widely carried out in the Ebro delta, with 37 % of the rice-growing area using this method by 2024. The dry-sowing method was virtually unknown before the project started.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

22 For 12 out of the 70 projects in our sample, we found no evidence or indication that the needs addressed originated either from agricultural practice, or from the agri-food sector in general. Such projects were usually initiated by public authorities or researchers, mostly testing commercially available solutions. Out of these 12 projects, 6 produced results that were used after the project was completed, but only by researchers and for further scientific work. ***Box 3*** provides examples of projects that were not based on a need that originated from farming practice.

Box 3

Examples of projects not selected based on farmers' needs

The objective of a project in France (Burgundy-Franche-Comté) was to identify commercially available technical and digital innovations such as sensors, to facilitate the work of Charolais cattle breeders in the region. One of the project's activities was to identify the farmers' specific needs and see whether existing solutions would satisfy those needs. Most of the farmers were either already equipped with the sensors, or were not interested in digital solutions. The project helped the experimental farm that launched it to join a national network of digital farms.

The Netherlands launched a national call for projects to address the managing authority's need to test potential annual environmental and climate commitments with a view to introducing them in the 2023-2027 CAP. The objectives of the project we sampled from this call were pre-defined by the authorities for the public procurement without consulting farmers. The Dutch authorities could not demonstrate that they had used the project's results when planning CAP support for the new programming period.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Farmers' innovation needs were not prioritised

23 We identified several factors that led to 12 projects in our sample not focusing on farmers' needs for innovation. Firstly, the four EIP-AGRI objectives in the CAP were defined very broadly, without clarifying their contribution to achieving the overall aim of increasing productivity and sustainability in EU agriculture.

24 Secondly, in line with its bottom-up approach, the EIP-AGRI framework allowed member states considerable flexibility in identifying needs and setting their priorities for agricultural innovation. While member states could support a wide range of projects that were not directly linked to farming practice, they were required to describe the role of the EIP-AGRI in achieving the priorities of their 2014-2022 rural development programmes (RDPs). In the

event, none of the seven RDPs we reviewed in the four sampled member states included a description of their specific innovation needs or how the EIP-AGRI would address them.

25 Thirdly, member states and OGs missed an opportunity to use the work of groups of experts set up by the EU EIP Network ("focus groups") to identify the priority areas for EU agriculture and innovation needs that were to be addressed by projects in member states. In all, 55 focus groups had been set up by the end of 2024, and their findings and recommendations were published in final reports disseminated by the EU EIP Network. For the four member states we reviewed, we found a lack of general awareness about the activities of the focus groups, and no evidence that their work had been used by either the managing authorities or by the OGs.

26 Finally, in the absence of clear needs being identified at EU or member state level, ensuring that projects focused on farmers' needs for innovation was dependent on farmers participating in the OGs. Although EU rules did not require farmer participation in the OGs, the Commission guidelines and member states' RDPs underlined the importance of actively involving farmers in the projects. Of the four member states reviewed, the Netherlands and Poland made farmer participation in the OGs an eligibility requirement in their calls for projects. In practice, the concept of "participation" was broadly interpreted, allowing farmers to passively participate or participate through various representative organisations.

Farmers' active involvement in projects increased the chances of success

27 Despite the emphasis on involving end users in creating innovations, we found that farmers did not actively participate in over half of the projects sampled (41 out of 70). In these projects, farmers were either not members of the OGs or their participation was limited to passively providing resources such as farms, land and machinery for other OG members to conduct their research.

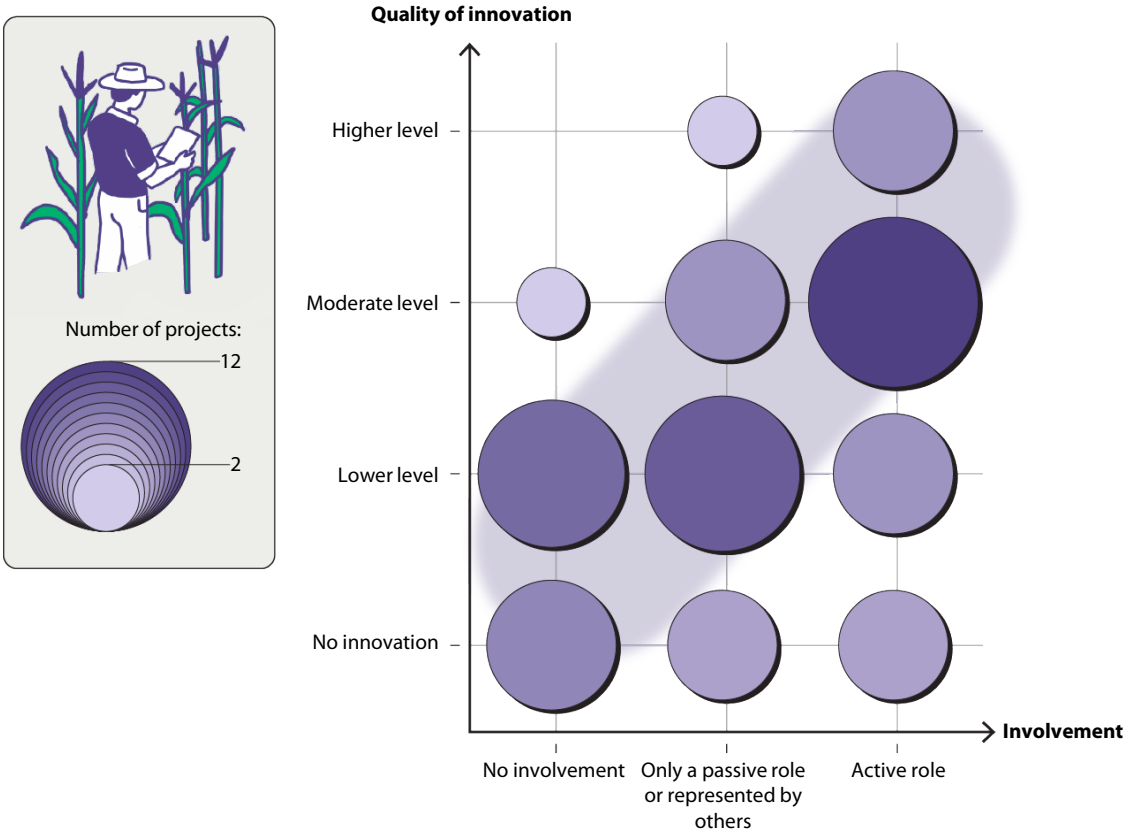
28 We found that farmers were often reluctant to participate in OG projects, a key reason being that their involvement was not remunerated. For instance, in France (Burgundy-Franche-Comté), although individual farmers or their organisations were OG members in 9 of the 10 projects we reviewed, they were actively involved in 3 of them. Farmers were the only OG members who did not receive any form of payment for their participation in any of these nine projects.

29 The issue of paying farmers for participating in projects was not covered by EU legislation, guidelines, or by the rules established by three of the four member states we reviewed.

Unlike scientists or advisors, farmers do not sign work contracts or receive pay-slips, and valuing their work can be challenging. Only the Netherlands had provisions for paying farmers and achieved the highest level of active farmer participation of the four member states sampled. In the Netherlands, farmers were allowed to declare the hours worked on a project as an in-kind contribution valued at €35 per hour, which was then paid out at a support rate of up to 70 %. Under the 2023-2027 CAP, the two regions in France that we covered in our audit also included the possibility of paying farmers for their participation in a project, with payments based on self-declarations and a pre-defined hourly rate.

30 Our analysis highlights the benefits of actively involving farmers in the projects in terms of the quality of innovation produced. The projects where farmers actively contributed to both the development and implementation of solutions were more successful than those where their involvement was passive or absent (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3 | Farmers' active involvement improves the quality of innovation



Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Fewer than half of projects aimed to link research to farming practice

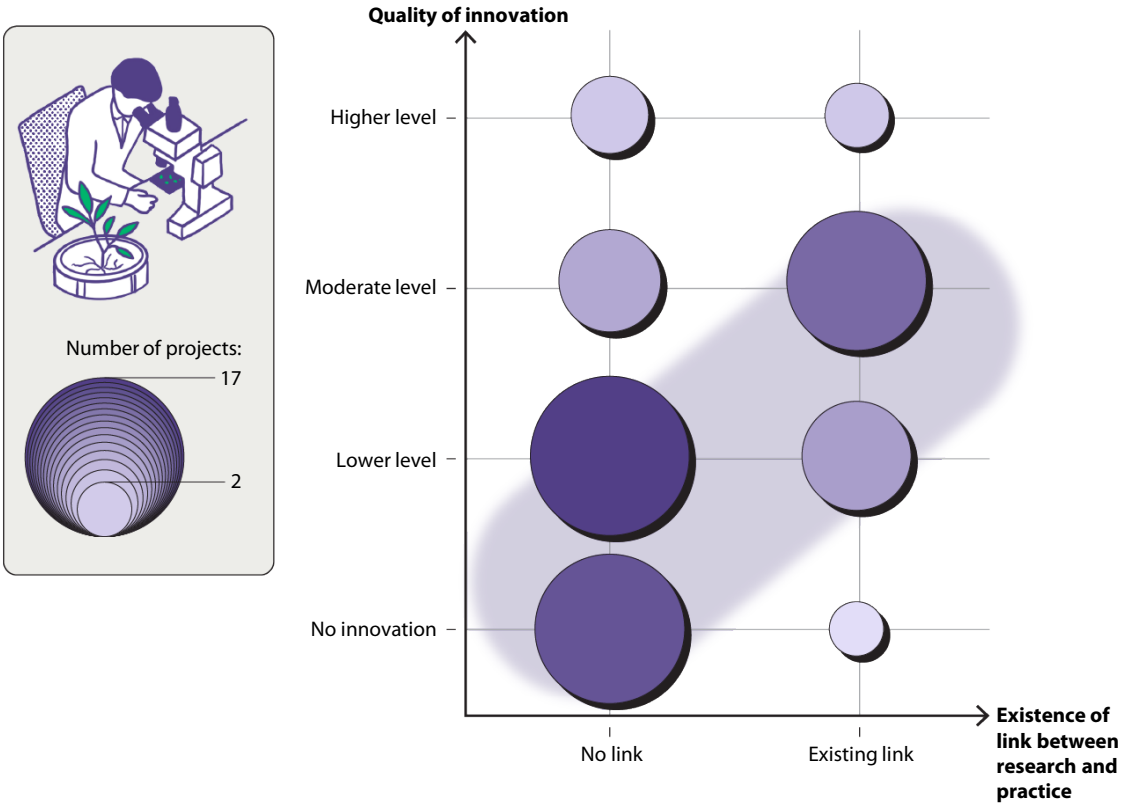
31 One of the four EIP-AGRI objectives in the CAP was to better link research to farming practice by "building bridges between cutting-edge knowledge and technology and farmers"[4]. Projects were not meant to conduct applied research, but rather to contribute to bridging research and practice through the bottom-up, co-creation and networking elements of the EIP-AGRI in the CAP. None of the four selected member states took any measures to promote projects that integrated existing or new research results into agricultural practices. In France (Normandy), the RDP even stressed that the projects' focus should be on conducting applied research. Overall, in our sample of 70 projects, we identified 7 which only focused on conducting applied research, rather than on putting this research into practice.

32 One potential source of inspiration for ideas for EIP-AGRI projects in the CAP was Horizon 2020, the EU's research and innovation programme, which allocated over €1.5 billion to agriculture and forestry research for the 2014-2020 period. We found that none of the sampled member states actively promoted the use of Horizon research results in EIP-AGRI projects in the CAP. None of the 70 projects in our sample used specific knowledge generated by the Horizon projects.

33 In the sampled projects, we examined the involvement of researchers and whether the projects were standalone research, where farmers and other practitioners were merely study subjects, or if the solutions were developed collaboratively. Of 70 sampled projects, we found 27 that were based on a bottom-up, co-creation process that put existing or new research into practice and they were of higher quality than those that did not (***Figure 4***). We identified a positive correlation between the integration of research with farming practice and the quality of innovation achieved (***Box 4***).

[4] Article 55 (1) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

Figure 4 | Linking research with practice improves innovation quality



Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Box 4

Case study on our sample of projects

We analysed our sample of 70 projects and carried out a correlation analysis. We found that the quality of innovation improved when practical needs were addressed, farmers were actively involved, practical links between research and farming were created, and the results were effectively disseminated. Furthermore, our case study indicates that there is a positive correlation between practical, relevant, well-communicated solutions that involved stakeholders and the quality of innovation. Our correlation analysis and the underlying data on the sample of 70 projects is available on the open data platform (***Annex III***).

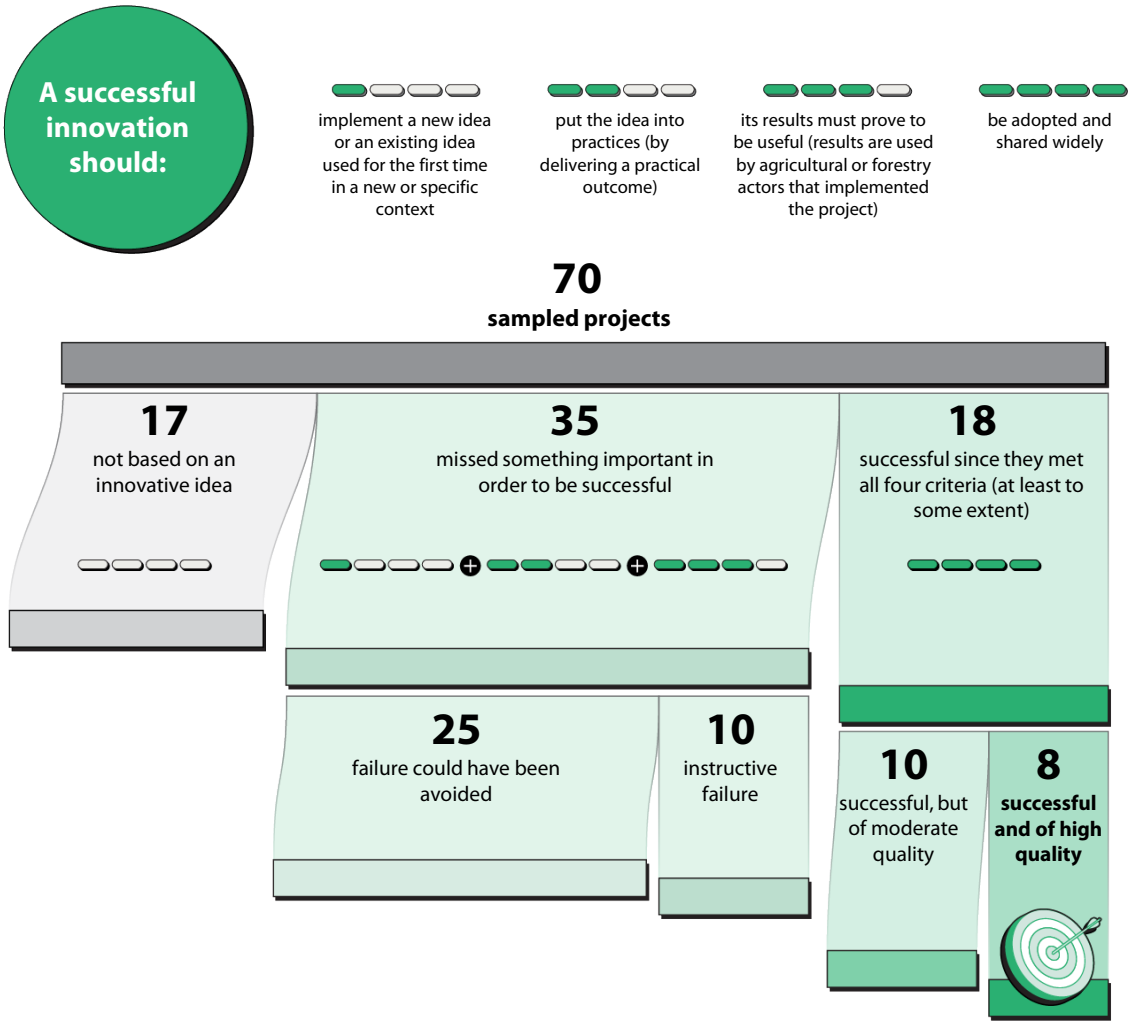
Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Over half of the projects fell short of generating successful innovations

Around a quarter of projects did not test a potential innovation

34 Commission guidelines on implementing OG projects characterise a successful innovation in agriculture as a new or existing idea, which is used for the first time in a specific context, put into practice, proves to be useful and is widely adopted. Based on these four characteristics, we assessed the quality of innovation of the 70 projects in our sample. The details of our assessment are presented in ***Annex II*** and are summarised in ***Figure 5***.

Figure 5 | Only about a quarter of projects demonstrated that they included, to a certain extent, all four characteristics which lead to a successful innovation



Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

35 We found 18 projects that – at least to some extent – displayed all four characteristics to be considered a successful innovation. Of these, eight projects produced an innovation of a high quality: the innovative ideas were implemented, the results continue to be used today, and were either multiplied or upscaled. Those projects were based on a well-identified need of having a wider interest, targeted practical outcomes and actively involved the end users of the intended solution. ***Box 5*** provides an example of a successful project with a high quality of innovation. Results from the remaining 10 projects that led to successful innovation are currently only used by project participants, but they were disseminated in a way that they could facilitate widespread use in the future.

Box 5

An example of a project producing a high-quality innovation

In Poland, university researchers found that the increasingly popular Polish wine sector still relied on outdated cultivation methods and manual wine bottling techniques. Together with 16 winemakers, they created a project to comprehensively improve the quality of the wine produced based on existing practices that had not previously been applied by local Polish winemakers. The project involved:

(a) field and laboratory testing to find the best grape varieties for each vineyard;

(b) creating a mobile bottling line (see below) with a standardised bottling process using nitrogen, and

(c) developing a common brand for the sale of local wine and identifying synergies in joint distribution and sales.

The project was implemented successfully. The winemakers increased their harvests, reduced their costs and, thanks to better quality and collaborative marketing, were able to conclude long-term contracts to supply large retail chains. These solutions were then also adopted by other small-scale wine producers across Poland.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

36 Of the 70 projects in our sample, 17 delivered no innovation because they were not based on an innovative idea.

- Eight projects were standard cooperation, demonstration or other rural development projects that could have been financed through other RDP measures, and their purpose was not to create an innovative solution.
- The remaining nine projects did not address an innovative idea (which means a new idea or an existing idea which is used for the first time in a specific context).

Box 6 provides an example of projects that did not test an idea for an innovation.

Box 6

Example of projects that were about cooperation but not innovation

In Poland, 2 of the 10 projects in our sample exclusively involved the creation of standard short supply chains, with project costs mainly covering the purchase of delivery vans. For these projects, no assessment of the innovativeness of the proposal was either required or carried out.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Around a third of the projects selected were unlikely to lead to innovations in practice

37 Of the 53 projects based on an innovative idea, 35 did not lead to a successful innovation because they missed at least one of the three remaining characteristics which would classify them as such: where an idea is put into practice, proves to be useful and is widely adopted. For 25 of these projects, it was already clear at the planning stage that they were unlikely to lead to innovations in practice for reasons including:

(a) the lack of a plan to produce a practical outcome;

(b) the fact that they did not target results that could be widely adopted; and

(c) the fact that they could not realistically have produced practical outcomes before the project ended.

These projects could have been excluded by better designed selection processes. The remaining 10 projects represent examples of instructive failure – they tested a valid idea but did not ultimately lead to an innovation, notably due to the inherent risks in such initiatives.

38 Of the 25 projects that did not lead to a successful innovation and were not an instructive failure, 6 did not have a practical outcome. These projects had planned from the beginning to conclude their work with the creation of a theoretical concept, model or plan for a future innovation. See ***Box 7*** for an example.

Box 7

Example of a project that did not plan to produce a practical outcome

The aim of a project in the Netherlands was to develop an action plan for sustainable agricultural practices in the peat colonies for the first time in that region, based on an analysis of the current situation. To support this action plan, the project also included the creation of project documentation for nine priority areas to be addressed by nine future EIP-AGRI implementation projects. No practical implementation was planned for the project.

Out of the nine identified priority areas, only five were developed into project plans or project descriptions. No project documentation was produced for the remaining four because the project was prematurely terminated due to the OG's lack of interest in continuing.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

39 We also found 13 out of 25 projects where the planned activities were defined so narrowly that the innovation created would only have been useful to the members of the OG because the project activities addressed the OG members' specialised or niche needs (***Box 8***).

Box 8

Examples of projects with specialised or niche needs

The objective of a project in the Netherlands was to formulate an innovative way of repurposing former agricultural buildings in cooperation with a farmer and a local municipality. The project's plans were tailored to the needs of the farmer involved,

and no part of the innovation developed within the project was easily transferable to other farmers.

In Spain (Andalusia), a project's objective was to improve the energy and water consumption of a goat milk processing factory and to promote the diversification of goat milk products. We found that the project helped the company to modernise its infrastructure and reduce its water and energy consumption. However, the tools and models produced were tailor-made to the facility's infrastructure and could not be used anywhere else. The project also failed to deliver new products from goat milk, as had been initially intended.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

40 For 7 of the 13 projects with a specialised or a niche need, it was clear from the beginning that the innovation was not likely to be adopted more widely. These cases all related to product innovations, and their project plans did not include any market testing or analysis. For example, they included developing:

- a new longer-lasting type of easier-to-spread butter and juice from red-fleshed apples with beneficial health properties (Poland); and
- a healthy fruit snack and new dairy products from goat milk (Spain).

The products developed in these projects were never commercialised or even given a market trial as it was clear that they could not be produced at a reasonable cost.

41 The two projects in Poland that addressed a niche need (paragraph ***40***) involved large investments in assets such as production lines and machinery, which the OG members benefited from in full after the project's completion. According to EU internal market rules, the eligible costs of such investments in research and development projects should be limited to the depreciation cost corresponding to the duration of the project. As the wrongful reimbursement of investments in assets originated from a rule applied at national level, we found that 8 of the 10 projects sampled in Poland received more funding than they should have (***Box 9***). Such cases represent an opportunity cost with respect to funding other, more innovative projects.

Box 9

Example of a project with funds spent largely on capital investment and not on innovation

A project in Poland concerned the implementation of an innovative water treatment technology within a closed irrigation system on a cranberry plantation. Of the project's costs, 92 % were investment costs of €1.5 million for the construction of a new plantation of cranberries with a public support rate of 50 %. The beneficiary was reimbursed for €750 000 of the investment costs.

Depreciation costs corresponding to the duration of the project were only €94 000, so the reimbursement should have been limited to €47 000. Around €700 000 of EU support was therefore paid for capital investment and not for innovation, which is in breach of the EU rules.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

42 We also found that 5 of the 13 specialised or niche projects would have been wholly or partly undertaken even without a grant (a situation known as "deadweight" – ***Box 10***). Such cases represent an opportunity cost with respect to funding more innovative projects.

Box 10

Examples of beneficiaries of specialised projects that used public funds for their own benefit

Such beneficiaries of EIP-AGRI-funded projects were found for example:

(a) in the Netherlands, where a cooperative and a global leader in the production of potato-based ingredients, reported annual revenue of up to €1 billion and a profit of millions of euros during the project period;

(b) in Spain, where a large producer of traditional Spanish sparkling wine, owned by an American private equity company reported annual profits of around €100 million during the project period; and

(c) in Poland, where a large multinational food company, reported annual profits of around €100 million during the project period.

The purpose of their projects was to provide modern solutions for one specific company that was already able to finance it from its own funds. None of these beneficiaries shared the project results. Public funds were therefore used to boost large, private companies, but did not benefit the wider sector.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

43 Finally, among 25 projects that were not successful and where the failure could have been avoided, we found 3 that did not last long enough for all the work to be done to create the innovation intended, as shown in ***Box 11***. These projects could not have delivered a successful innovation due to the misalignment of their planned objectives and the duration of the project.

Box 11

Examples of projects that did not align their objectives with the duration of the project

In Poland, we examined a two-year project to create a decision-making application, based on machine learning models using artificial intelligence called neural networks. The development process for such networks usually takes more than five years. Although the project was completed at the end of 2022, the application is currently still under development. Poland granted support for projects lasting up to three years, and in exceptional cases up to five years.

In Spain (Andalusia), two farmer organisations producing olive oil conducted a two-year project with the purpose of demonstrating that intensive olive groves are economically more viable than traditional olive groves, convincing farmers to intensify. Half of the cost of the project paid for the removal of 50 ha of traditional groves and a replacement intensive grove to be planted in their place. Considering that a newly planted grove would only provide its first, limited production, in four to five years, and only expand to full production in 10 years, the project provided return on investment and productivity calculations based on estimated data that was already available.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Lack of competition for funding and weak selection procedures reduced the potential for innovation

44 Based on our review of the national arrangements in the four member states we visited, we identified several reasons for more than half of the projects in our sample being unlikely to lead to innovations.

45 Firstly, we found that there was little competition between projects to obtain EIP-AGRI funding. For the EIP-AGRI, member states must follow a competitive process to select projects under which applications are evaluated against selection criteria and then ranked to identify the best proposals. In all four member states sampled, the calls for projects received a significant number of proposals. For example, only 5 of the 150 project proposals received during the 2014-2022 period in France (Normandy) were rejected during the selection process. Of these, four projects were in the first call for projects when the measure was new for both the applicants and the managing authority. In Spain, the Netherlands and Poland, the budget for the cooperation measure, which covered the EIP-AGRI in the 2014-2022 RDPs, was increased several times, because the managing authorities decided to ease the selection pressure.

46 Secondly, we found that the innovativeness of a project proposal, i.e. whether it tested a new idea or an existing idea in a new context, was not a decisive criterion for selecting projects in any of the four member states covered in our sample. Testing or buying new commercially available equipment or machinery counted as innovation, for example. This occurred even though the Commission's EIP-AGRI guidelines advised member states to exclude such actions from support. In the case of Poland, this also led to significant amounts of aid for capital investment being paid to the OGs, despite the fact that funding fixed asset costs above depreciation during the project breached EU rules.

47 Two of the four member states (France and Poland) opted to make the innovativeness of a project proposal an eligibility criterion. In Poland, the managing authority considered a

project idea as innovative if the potential beneficiary obtained a positive opinion on the innovative character of the project from a university or research institute. This process was not transparent and led to a conflict of interests; because the research institute charged for the certification there was little incentive to produce a negative opinion. Where member states included innovativeness as a selection criterion, it did not always have sufficient weight to ensure that projects with a marginal or low innovativeness would be excluded from funding, as shown in ***Box 12***.

Box 12

Examples of the innovativeness of a project proposal with only a minor role in the selection process

In Spain (national RDP), projects could score up to 10 out of 100 points for the "degree of innovation", out of which only 4 points could be given for innovativeness potential and 6 points for feasibility.

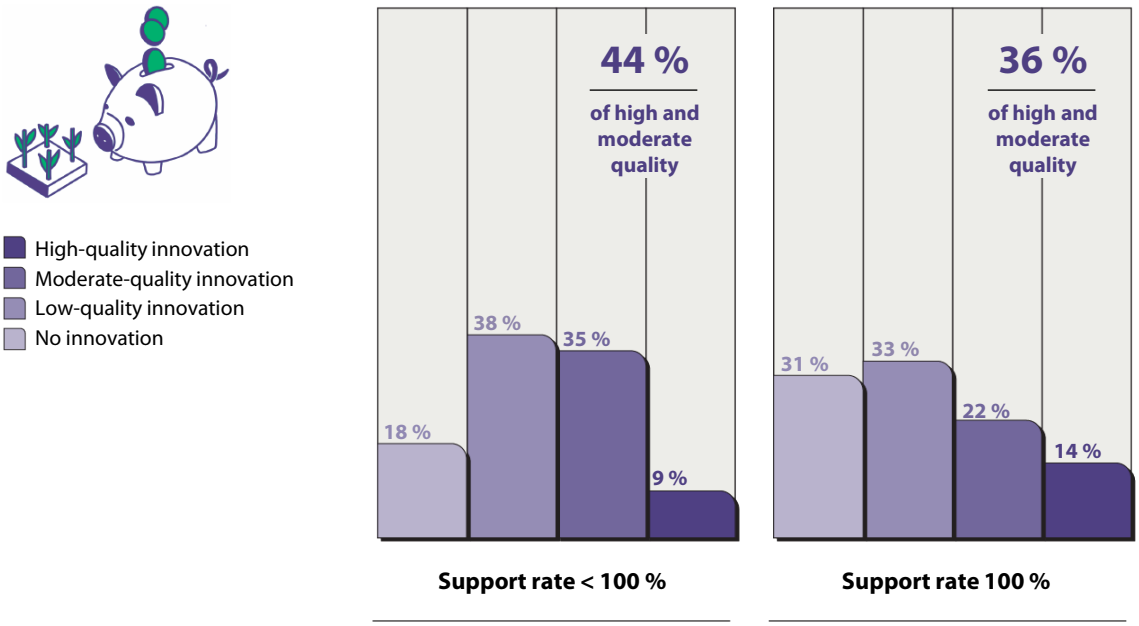
In France (Normandy), projects could score 30 out of 170 points for the "degree of innovation". This criterion separately tested whether the project proposal referred to a technical, thematic or organisational innovation, giving 10 points to each type of innovation. Projects were selected if they reached a minimum of 50 points, and if their innovative character was deemed sufficient, without however defining what "sufficient" meant or setting a minimum threshold for this criterion.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

48 Thirdly, where defined, selection criteria for the potential "usefulness of results" and "wider application" played only a minor role in project selection. In the four member states, we found that the selection process did not focus on assessing the potential to achieve practical outcomes that could lead to widely adopted innovations. For example, although France (Burgundy-Franche-Comté) included assessment criteria for "transferability of results to end users" and the "reproducibility of results", they were not sufficiently weighted to favour projects with potential for multiplication or upscaling.

49 Lastly, based on our analysis of Regulation (EU) 1305/2013, we found that unlike many other RDP measures, the cooperation measure did not exclude any cost categories at EU level, and member states could opt to request reimbursement of up to 100 % of the project costs. Of the 70 sampled projects, a total of 36 were fully reimbursed for their eligible costs (€322 000 on average), which meant that members of the OG did not have to bear any of the financial risk linked to the activities carried out. We found that providing the maximum rate of support did not generate more innovation (***Figure 6***).

Figure 6 | Higher support did not generate more innovation



Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Project results are often not disseminated or used

50 Creating a culture of innovation that leads to more competitive and sustainable agriculture requires effective mechanisms to disseminate project results and support the widespread adoption of successful solutions. We examined how the projects in our sample shared information about their innovations and how the Commission and the selected member states supported the dissemination of this knowledge within the framework of the CAP to benefit the sector as a whole.

The results from around half of the projects were disseminated

51 Of the 53 projects based on an innovative idea, 49 projects covered the costs of communication and dissemination activities, but only 28 published their results and shared the knowledge created. This included all 18 projects that covered the four characteristics leading to a successful innovation: 6 produced solutions that were widely adopted in the sector; 10 produced results that are still used by OG members and could be used by others; and 2 concluded that the new technology did not fit the profile of farms participating in the OG, but shared detailed knowledge about the farms that should consider using this new technology.

52 CAP provisions require the OGs to disseminate the results of their projects[5]. Despite the Commission stating in its guidelines to the member states that substantial results that could be of use to others must be disseminated, none of the sampled member states communicated clearly to the OGs exactly what needed to be disseminated or for what purpose. This meant that the OGs generally interpreted this requirement as representing an obligation to communicate about the project's activities and outcome, without detailing the results or the knowledge created. Had they done so, this would have allowed other interested stakeholders, such as farmers, advisors, researchers or public authorities to reuse them. ***Box 13*** provides examples of projects that kept the knowledge created private.

Box 13

Examples of projects that kept the knowledge created private

The aim of a project in the Netherlands was to develop new potato varieties using innovative breeding techniques, focusing on increasing their resistance to diseases and providing high yields. The project resulted in statistical models for selecting and breeding potatoes, created markers for predicting the properties of new varieties, and also developed six reference genomes. However, none of these results was made public. One member of the OG co-published a scientific paper including only limited information that would not have allowed other potato-breeding companies to benefit from the knowledge created.

A project in Spain concentrated on researching alternative commercial uses for avocado skins and stones. These represent around 40 % of the total weight of processed avocados and are considered as waste for incineration or landfill. The project produced knowledge about how to characterise, extract and check the quality of substances in the stone and the skin, and how to process these waste products to make animal feed or use them to make food supplements and active ingredients in cosmetics. None of the new knowledge created was made public.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

53 Another reason for the lack of meaningful dissemination of results was where projects were designed to benefit only the OG or even a single member of the OG, who intended to either use the solution internally or commercialise it after the project was completed. Those involved in these projects typically planned to withhold significant results from the outset to maintain a competitive edge in the case that the innovation succeeded (***Box 14***). Of 15 such projects, 6 would have been carried out even in the absence of public support

[5] Article 57 (3) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

because the results were so specific that they could not have been reused by anyone else even if they had been made public.

Box 14

Example of a project that withheld results in order to maintain its competitive advantage

In France (Normandy), an EIP-AGRI project developed a web platform that would connect farmers with agricultural service providers. Public funds were used to develop a database including all providers of agricultural services in the region, the services they provided, and the price. They also paid for a calculator that would allow farmers to decide whether it made more economic sense to buy a certain piece of equipment or pay for the agricultural service instead, thus addressing a wide-spread problem for French farmers with regard to high levels of debt and excessive amounts of equipment.

At the end of the project and due to commercial secrecy, the OG did not release any information about the programmes and functions that had been developed. Although the evaluator had already noted at the planning stage that the results of the project were intended for commercial use, the regional authorities did not take any measure to ensure that substantial results were disseminated. The region currently lacks a public reference for agricultural service providers and the services they offer.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

54 All four member states selected for this audit paid for communication and dissemination activities without drawing any distinction between the two. For some projects in our sample, communication and dissemination costs had already been reimbursed when the projects were at an early stage and had not yet produced any results. The costs reimbursed also included the development of project websites which were either discontinued at the end of the project or did not contain any information on the results achieved. In our sample of projects, we found that member states mostly focused on paying for communication activities throughout the project instead of the effective dissemination of results (***Box 15***).

Box 15

Example of support for dissemination that did not lead to the widespread availability of results

In Spain, all 10 projects we sampled from the national RDP received payments for dissemination activities that ranged from €40 000 to €79 000, representing up to 17 % of the total project cost. Supported activities included participating in events, organising open days and publishing articles (both in paper format and online). These activities were carried out during different stages of the project, mostly at a local or regional level. Although all projects communicated on their activities in final reports and other deliverables, we found that only six projects had disseminated substantial results for the use of others. Of these six projects, only one had been scaled up and the solutions produced are still in use for another two projects but exclusively by the OG members.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

Member states made little use of the project results or knowledge created

55 The dissemination of project results is essential for member states to learn which types of project are the most effective and adjust their implementation of the EIP-AGRI accordingly. These results are also crucial to assess the impact of the EIP-AGRI on the agricultural sector, particularly at regional level where the EIP-AGRI is a vital source of public funding. In France, the Netherlands and Poland, we noted a general lack of technical capacity in terms of correctly storing and processing project results. We found instances where managing authorities did not have access to substantial results of the project because the OGs had ceased to exist after the projects concluded. Since managing authorities did not always provide a sufficiently detailed definition of deliverables in the grant agreement, OGs were not required to provide deliverables at the end of the project and often did not provide them, even though they could have been useful (***Box 16***).

Box 16

Example of a missed opportunity to scale up the project results

The objective of a project in the fruit-growing sector in Spain (Andalusia) was to find an alternative to paraffin-based candles which are used to combat frost in orchards. The aim of the project was to reduce the associated pollution and the creation of smoke clouds from the candles. The project resulted in the selection of more environmentally friendly heaters but also found a way to save 20 % on frost protection costs by optimising the way in which candles are distributed in the orchard. On a regional or national scale, this could lead to significant savings for all producers in one of Spain's key agricultural sectors. Both the managing authority and the paying agency received the project's final report detailing the algorithm used for the distribution of candles and the savings made, but they took no action to promote this solution to the relevant stakeholders.

Source: ECA, based on our sample of projects.

56 None of the four member states analysed the project results to promote the most promising innovations at regional or national level. Although the CAP provides member states with the option of using other rural development funds to pass on useful knowledge created in projects through training, educational material, or advisory services, member states rarely did so.

57 In the two French regions we visited, we found only three instances of OGs organising open-door and demonstration events using EU support after their projects had finished. This was despite the Commission's EIP-AGRI guidelines highlighting that peer-to-peer

communication among farmers and foresters, and incorporating innovations into regular advisory services are effective ways to multiply or scale up the results of successful projects.

The lack of dissemination of key results limited the Commission's ability to evaluate the effectiveness of the European innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy

58 OGs were required to send a final report to national or regional authorities, summarising the outcomes of their projects. The authorities were then required to forward the information to the Commission. However, member states did not systematically comply with this requirement. We found that France (Burgundy-Franche-Comté and Normandy) did not send the Commission any information about the results from the funded projects, while Spain, the Netherlands and Poland sent only partial information. Although all four member states set up a public database for the EIP-AGRI projects funded in their country, these databases did not provide information on project results either and, in some cases, provided incomplete information on the projects carried out.

59 As a result of the poor reporting of results, the quality of information on the projects in the EU EIP Network's database is poor. The EU EIP Network should include the outcomes of all projects funded through EIP-AGRI across the EU. The Commission encouraged member states to make project results available as quickly as possible[6]. However, we found that member states often report projects with significant delays, even up to a few years after the end of the project. For the 70 projects in our sample, we found that the database contained information on the project objectives and the expected outcomes, but the quality of the information varied. However, there was no information on the results achieved and no deliverables were included. At national and regional level, it is rare for member states to make project deliverables public, including final reports.

60 Comprehensive data is necessary to track the characteristics and achievements of the partnerships supported by the EIP-AGRI, and to determine which factors contributed to the best performance. For the 2014-2022 CAP, data reporting requirements for the EIP-AGRI were defined in the Commission's common monitoring and evaluation framework, which required member states to provide annual information on only two output indicators: the number of projects supported by the EIP-AGRI in the CAP, and the amount of public

[6] Commission, Guidelines for data on European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Operational Groups, October 2023.

support received. We found that this data was not reliable for two of the four member states in our sample: Spain (Catalonia) reported 778 projects when only 282 projects had been financed, and the Netherlands reported 493 projects instead of 437. The Commission was unaware of these reporting errors.

61 The common monitoring and evaluation framework did not include any result or impact indicators, despite such performance indicators being essential to assess achievements[7]. The lack of relevant and reliable data limited the Commission's ability to evaluate the EIP-AGRI.

62 The Commission uses evaluations of EU programmes and tools to learn about policy. However, for the EIP-AGRI, there has neither been any systematic assessment of the way in which OGs function, nor of the impact that projects in the 2014-2022 period had on the four EIP-AGRI objectives in the CAP. The only evaluation conducted was in 2016, at a time when no EIP-AGRI projects had yet been completed, and no results were available. Additional assessments on a small number of pre-selected case studies were carried out in 2018 and 2024. These assessments did not consider the projects' overall contribution to achieving the EIP-AGRI objectives.

63 Our findings are consistent with those in a 2023 OECD report on Policies for the Future of Farming and Food in the European Union, which highlighted a general lack of analysis of EIP-AGRI OG projects and stressed the need for more evidence. The report stated that for EIP-AGRI, "more evidence is needed to ensure an appropriate feedback loop, with information and analysis of the main drivers of innovation outcomes that could enhance policy learning and the application of the best set-ups and practices among OGs".

[7] Better regulation toolbox, Chapter 5.

This report was adopted by Chamber I, headed by Mrs Joëlle Elvinger, member of the Court of Auditors, in Luxembourg at its meeting of 28 January 2026.

For the Court of Auditors

Tony Murphy
President

Annexes

Annex I – About the audit

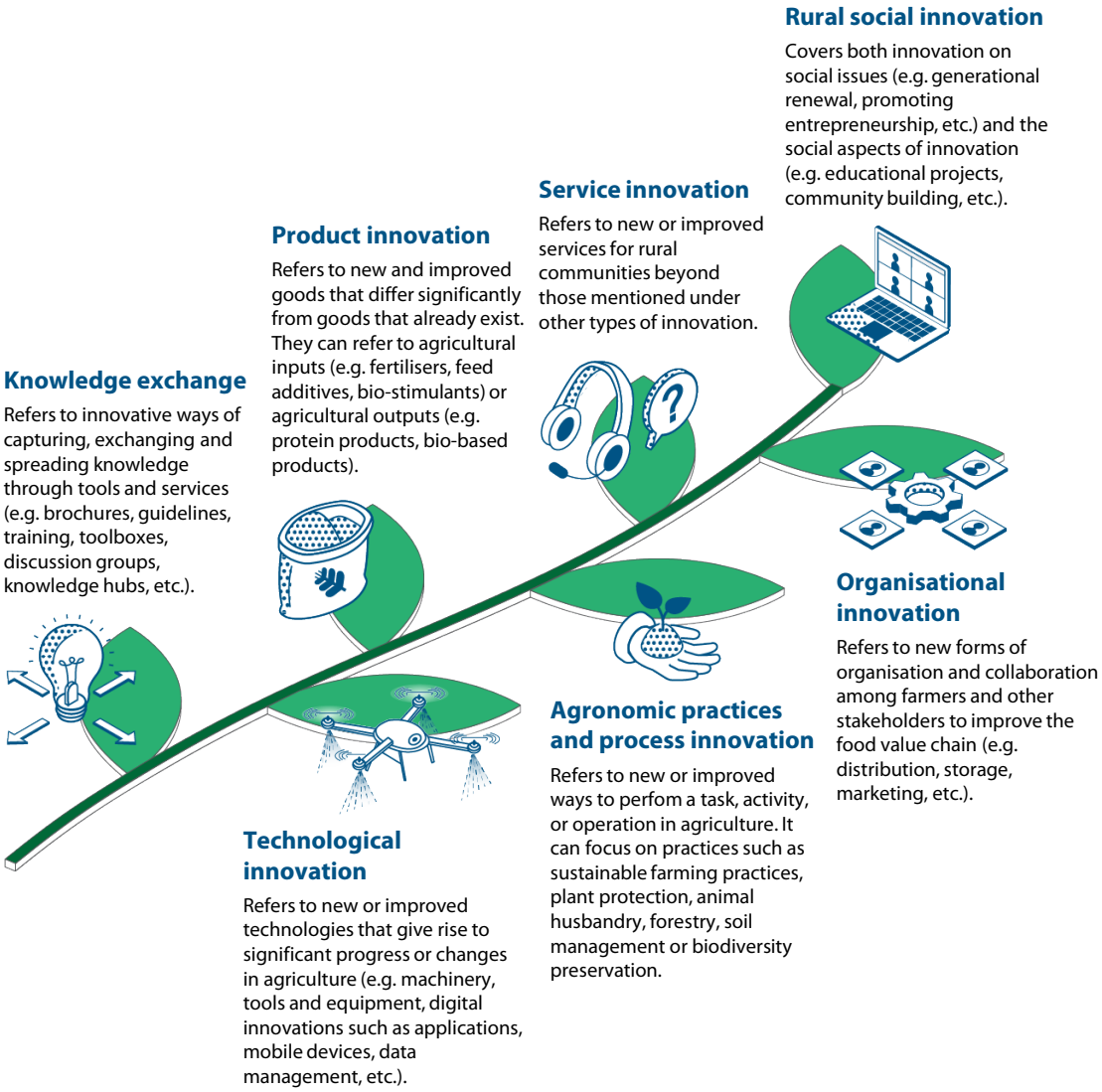
Innovation in agriculture

01 Innovation plays a prominent role in EU policies, acting as a key lever to achieve the environmental, economic and social sustainability of the agricultural sector. Unlike in other sectors, agricultural research and development are primarily financed from public sources[1]. The common agricultural policy (CAP) provides a significant source of EU funding for innovation in EU agriculture, with almost €1 billion of public funds spent in the 2014-2022 period.

02 The Commission does not have a formal definition for innovation but considers a successful innovation in agriculture to be an idea (a product, service, production process or a new way of organising things), which was put into practice, was proved to be useful, and was widely adopted. Innovation can involve entirely new practices or the application of existing practices in a new geographical or environmental context. Agricultural innovation covers a wide range of farming, forestry, or agri-food needs, as illustrated in ***Figure 1***.

[1] OECD, Policies for the Future of Farming and Food in the European Union, OECD Agriculture and Food Policy Reviews, 2023.

Figure 1 | Types of agricultural innovation



Source: ECA based on the classification proposed by the EU CAP Network in their 2024 study on outcomes achieved by EIP-AGRI projects carried out by OGs under the CAP.

The EIP for agricultural productivity and sustainability in the CAP

03 Since 2014, the European innovation partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability (EIP-AGRI) in the CAP has provided funding for practical, bottom-up innovation, that was meant to contribute to making EU agriculture more competitive and sustainable. The purpose of the EIP-AGRI was to address needs in agriculture and forestry, from primary production through the entire value chain.

04 The 2014-2022 CAP defined four broad objectives for the EIP-AGRI[2]:

(a) promote a resource-efficient, economically viable, productive, competitive, low emission, climate-friendly and resilient agricultural and forestry sector;

(b) help deliver a steady and sustainable supply of food, feed and biomaterials;

(c) improve processes to preserve the environment, adapt to and mitigate climate change; and

(d) build bridges between cutting-edge research knowledge and technology and farmers, forest managers, rural communities, businesses, non-governmental organisations and advisory services.

05 While addressing these four objectives, the EIP-AGRI in the CAP was also required to[3]:

- improve the adoption and effectiveness of innovation-related tools and improve the connections between them;
- promote the rapid and widespread implementation of innovative solutions; and
- better link research and farming practice to bridge the gap between the two areas, and inform the scientific community about research needs in farming.

The EIP-AGRI project-based delivery mechanism in the CAP

06 The 2014-2022 CAP created an EU-level framework for the EIP-AGRI that provided member states with significant flexibility in how to implement it. The EIP-AGRI was included in the rural development measure for promoting cooperation within the agricultural sector. The EIP-AGRI operated as follows.

(1) Interested stakeholders formed an operational group (OG) to carry out a project. They proposed a project plan to the national or regional authorities, outlining their innovative idea, the expected results, and the expected contributions to enhancing productivity and sustainable resource management.

(2) If the project was selected, the OG members carried out the project and disseminated the results, in particular through the EU EIP Network at EU level (paragraph ***09***).

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[2] Article 55 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

[3] Recital 44 and Article 55 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

OG projects had to be based on the interactive innovation model. OGs were required to include at least two members with complementary knowledge; the presence of practitioners such as farmers or foresters was not mandatory. OG members had to co-decide and co-create all along the project to develop innovative solutions to farmers' practical problems.

07 CAP funding for the EIP-AGRI under the cooperation measure covered both the setup of the OG and the implementation of the innovation projects. It provided for the reimbursement of all costs incurred, such as preparatory studies, drawing up the implementation plan, running the OG and promoting the project. Member states could either fund the EIP-AGRI solely through the cooperation measure, or combine it with other rural development measures (e.g. for purchasing or leasing new machinery and equipment, developing software applications, or developing farms and businesses).

08 Member states could choose whether or not to include the EIP-AGRI in their rural development programmes. They were encouraged to define specific objectives for the tool, focusing on their own agricultural and forestry innovation needs. Furthermore, they could decide either to limit the EIP-AGRI to specific national or regional priority topics, or to mostly fund initiatives developed at local level to meet local needs. Member states were responsible for selecting innovation projects, including determining the eligibility and selection criteria. They were also responsible for setting the level of public support, with support for up to 100 % of the eligible expenses.

Dissemination of project results – an essential part of the EIP-AGRI in the CAP

09 To ensure that the results of individual projects would benefit the entire agricultural sector, OGs had to disseminate their findings widely within the agricultural community, in particular through the EU EIP Network. Set up by the Commission in 2013, the network was to facilitate the wider adoption of innovations through a specific website, an EIP-AGRI project database, and the organisation of events. Member states could also establish EIP networks to improve the dissemination of EIP-AGRI results at national level.

10 The EU EIP Network was also responsible for informing stakeholders about innovation needs in agriculture and the latest research, and for supporting the composition of OGs. This was achieved mainly through:

(a) thematic events;

(b) communication material; and

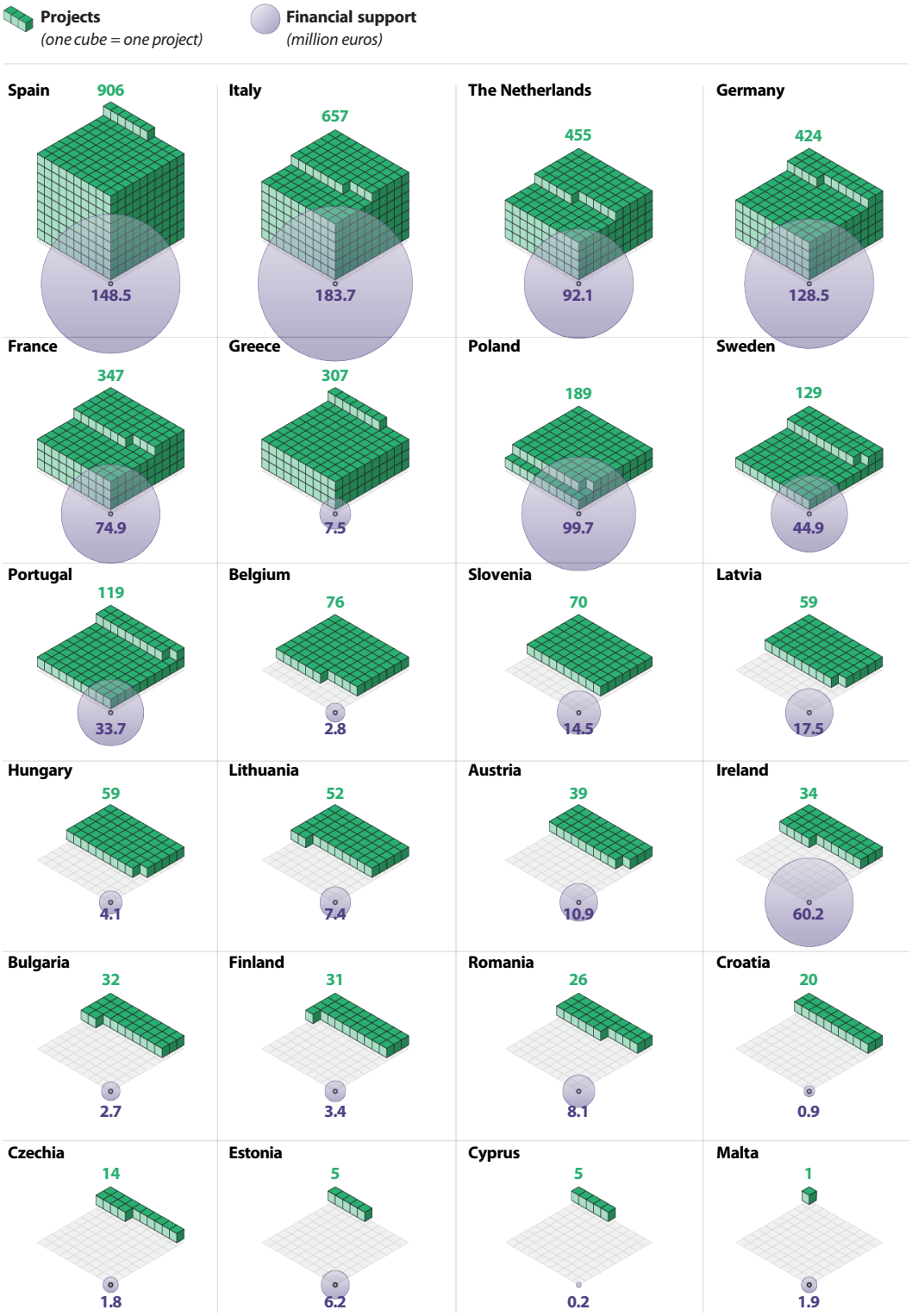
(c) focus groups including field experts from across the EU, which concentrated on specific priority areas (e.g. precision farming, agroecology, fertilisation, digitalisation).

By the end of 2024, 55 focus groups had been established.

The EIP-AGRI financing in the CAP

11 Under the 2014-2022 CAP, all member states except Luxembourg had programmed support for the EIP-AGRI in their countries. However, not all member states and regions implemented EIP-AGRI projects. By the end of 2024, 87 out of 114 rural development programmes (RDPs) provided financial support of €1 billion to OGs, co-financed by the European agricultural fund for rural development and national funds. ***Figure 2*** shows the public support and number of projects by member state.

Figure 2 | Public support and number of EIP-AGRI projects funded in the 2014-2022 period



Note: No expenditure was declared by Denmark or Slovakia by the end of 2024. Luxembourg did not include EIP-AGRI in its 2014-2022 RDP. Expenditure is as reported by the member states up to the end of 2024. Number of projects is as reported up to October 2025. Under the budgetary rules, projects selected under the 2014-2022 CAP may be implemented until 2025.

Source: ECA, based on the annual implementation reports for 2024.

12 Under the 2023-2027 CAP, promoting knowledge and innovation in agriculture became a cross-cutting objective. Member states have allocated €1.6 billion to OG projects in their CAP strategic plans. The previous four broad objectives of EIP-AGRI (paragraph ***04***) are integrated into the 10 key policy objectives of the 2023-2027 CAP. The EIP-AGRI delivery mechanism in the CAP remains broadly unchanged at EU level. However, some key features covered by the Commission guidelines in the 2014-2022 CAP were moved into the legal framework of the 2023-2027 CAP: the interactive innovation model; the emphasis on collaborative decision-making and co-creation among OG members; a stronger focus on farmers' needs; and the requirement for complementary knowledge within the OG. The EU EIP Network has been integrated into the wider EU CAP Network.

Roles and responsibilities

13 The Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) is responsible for setting up and managing the EIP-AGRI initiative at EU level. It provided guidelines for member states on how to programme the EIP-AGRI in their RDPs and CAP strategic plans, and is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of EIP-AGRI in the member states. DG AGRI defined the mandate of the EU EIP Network and is responsible for ensuring that its objectives are met.

14 Under shared management, member states are responsible for setting up and managing the EIP-AGRI in their national strategies for agriculture (the 2014-2022 RDPs and the 2023-2027 CAP strategic plans), in line with the innovation needs of their agricultural sectors. National or regional authorities organise calls for EIP-AGRI projects, select the projects for funding, monitor their implementation and assess their results.

15 The OGs are responsible for proposing and carrying out innovation projects in line with the approved project plan. They must disseminate the results of their projects (mainly through the EU EIP Network), including any knowledge created in the area covered[4].

Audit scope and approach

16 The aim of this audit was to assess whether the EIP-AGRI in the CAP made a significant contribution to innovation in EU agriculture through the implementation of OG projects. We examined whether:

(1) the projects funded were sufficiently focused on farmers' innovation needs;

(2) member states selected projects that produced innovations;

[4] Article 57(3) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

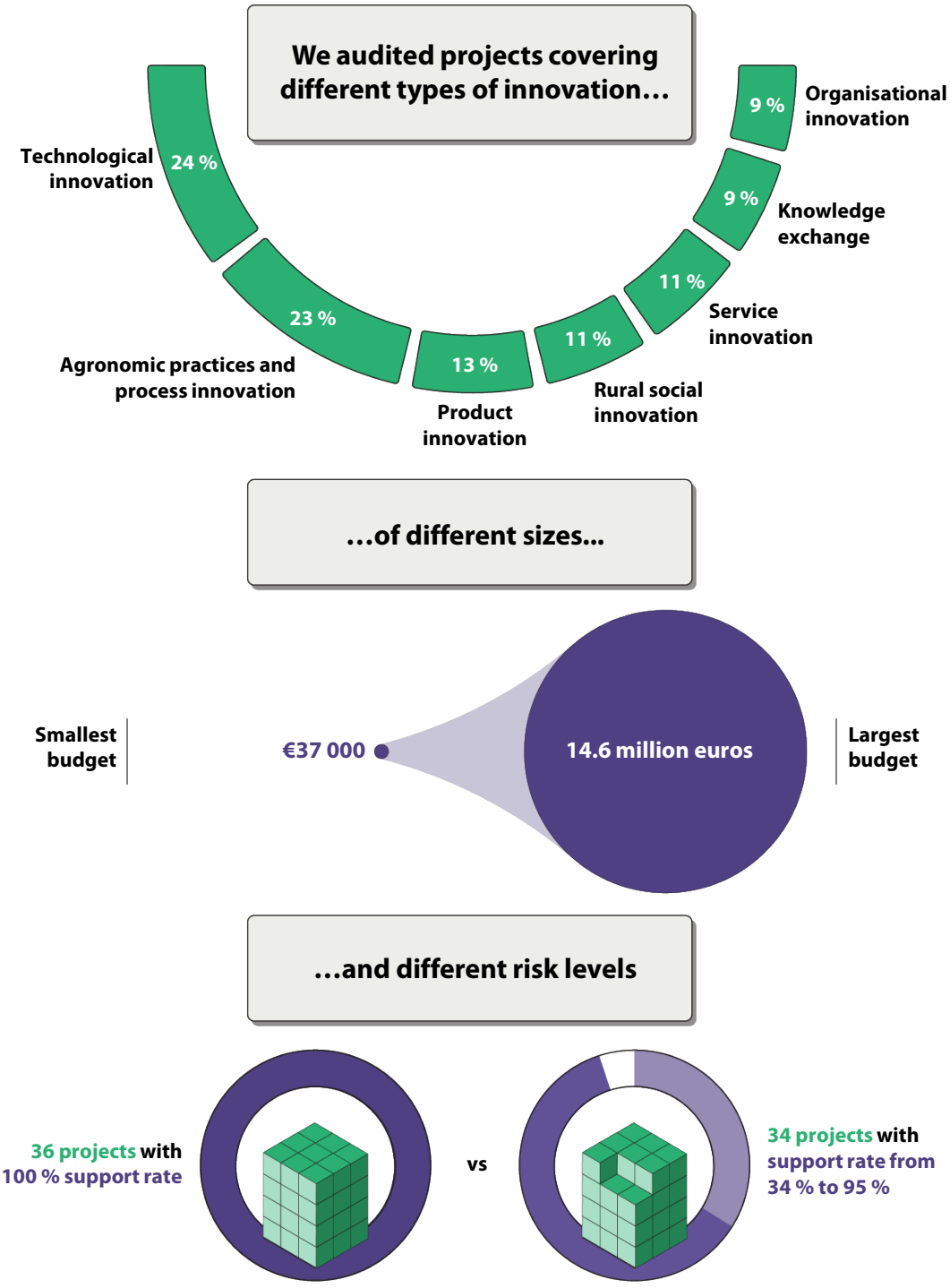
(3) project results were disseminated and used to promote the wider adoption of innovations and improve EIP-AGRI over time.

17 We audited this area due to the growing importance of innovation in achieving a sustainable and competitive agricultural sector. This is the ECA's first audit on the EIP-AGRI's contribution to innovation in EU agriculture.

18 The audit focused on EIP-AGRI spending within the rural development measure for promoting cooperation in agriculture and forestry from 2014 to 2022. Our auditees were DG AGRI and four member states (Spain, France, the Netherlands and Poland). We reviewed seven RDPs in those four member states. The selection reflected the amount of EIP-AGRI spending, the number of innovation projects carried out, and the objective of covering both regional and national arrangements. Horizon 2020 is another important source of funding for innovation in agriculture. However, since it has a different financing mechanism, we did not cover it in this audit.

19 We reviewed 10 completed projects in each RDP, focusing on a variety of sizes and topics (***Figure 3***). To understand the current use of the results and the impact, we visited 41 projects on-site, held videoconferences for 26 projects, and performed desk reviews for the remaining 3 projects.

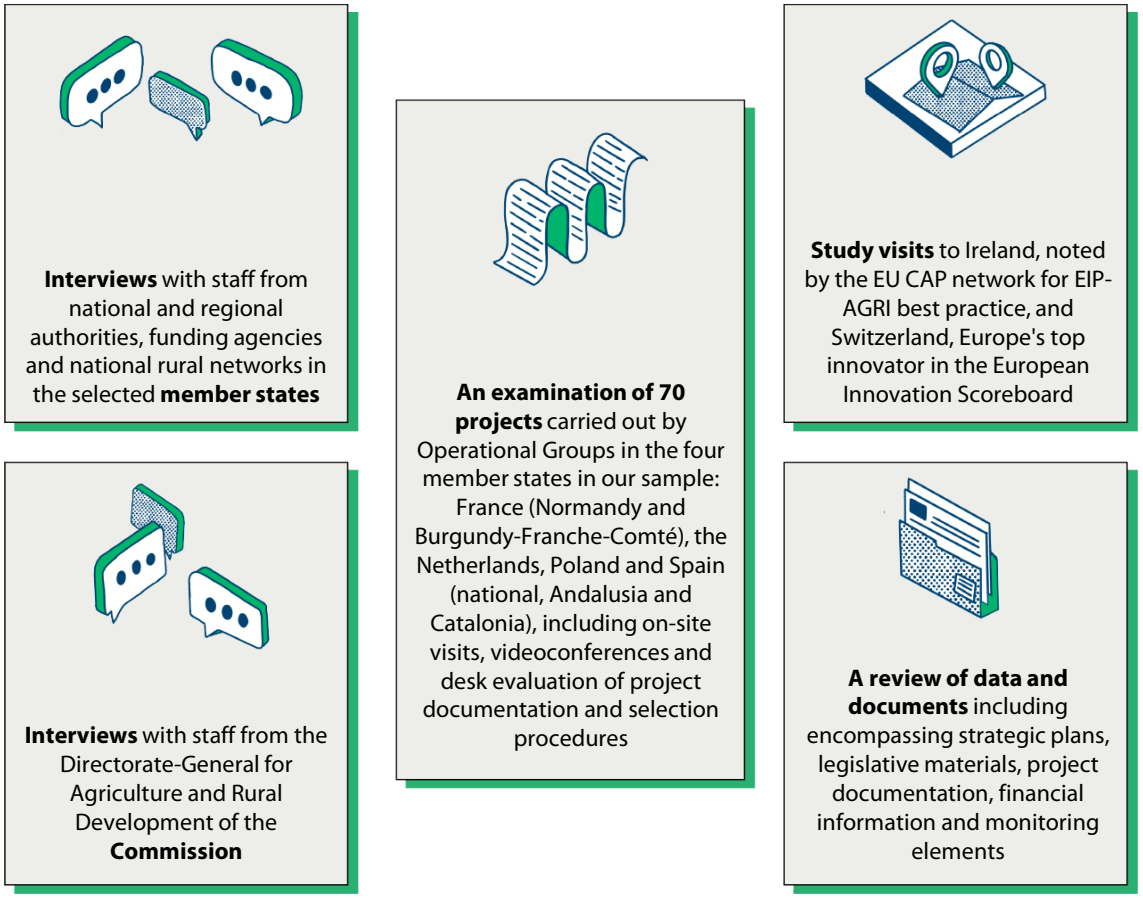
Figure 3 | A diverse portfolio of 70 EIP-AGRI projects in the selected member states



Source: ECA.

20 Our audit approach combined document review, data analysis and fieldwork. *Figure 4* shows how we obtained the evidence for our observations.

Figure 4 | Our audit approach: work carried out



Source: ECA.

Annex II – How we assessed whether projects produced innovation

Guiding definition: Innovation in agriculture is an idea (a new product, service, production process, or a new way of organising things) which is successfully put into practice, which proves to be useful, and which is widely adopted[1]. Based on this guiding definition we devised our assessment criteria as follows:

Criteria	Scoring
Was it a new idea or an existing idea used for the first time in a specific context?	**2** points if the project explored a genuinely new idea **1** point if the project explored an existing idea, but used it for the first time in a specific context **0** points if the project used an existing idea without adapting it to a new context
Was the idea put in practice?	**1** point for practical implementation of the idea within or as a result of the project **0** points if the project delivered only theoretical, and not practice-oriented solutions (scientific papers, theoretical models, etc.)
Did it prove to be useful?	**2** points if the innovation created in the project is in use today, and is at least used by the OG member(s) **1** point if the innovation is not in use today, but was further developed after the project ended to make it useful in the future **0** points if the results of the project are not used in any way today

[1] Commission, Guidelines for data on European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Operational Groups, October 2023.

Is it widely adopted?	**2** points if the innovation is in use today outside the OG **1** point if the innovation is not in use today, but the results were disseminated in a way that they may still be used in the future, e.g. lessons learnt **0** points if the innovation is not used outside the OG and the OG did not disseminate the substantial results of the project
Total score	**= (points received ÷ 7) × 100 %**

Based on the scoring system, our assessment distinguishes between four levels of innovation quality.

Below 25 %	25 % to 49 %	50 % to 75 %	Above 75 %
No/marginal innovation	Lower-level innovation	Moderate-level innovation	Higher-level innovation

Annex III – Link to details of the assessment of 70 sampled projects and the correlation analysis, available on the ECA's open data platform

This annex contains link(s) to the documents which are made available on the ECA's open data platform.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition/Explanation
CAP	Common agricultural policy
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
EIP-AGRI	European innovation partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OG	Operational group
RDP	Rural development programme

Glossary

Term	Definition/Explanation
Applied research	Original investigation to acquire new knowledge that will serve a specific, practical aim, such as solving a real-world problem or improving existing products, processes or systems.
Capital investment	Money spent on buildings, equipment or other tangible or intangible assets to advance longer-term operational objectives.
Deadweight	Situation where an EU-funded activity would have gone ahead even without receiving public aid.
EU EIP Network	EU structure put in place by the Commission for the 2014-2022 CAP to facilitate the networking of operational groups, advisory services and researchers, provide a help-desk function for EIP-AGRI, and disseminate the results of EIP-AGRI projects. Was merged into the EU CAP Network for the 2023-2027 CAP.
Operational group	Group formed by stakeholders in the agriculture and food sector, such as farmers, researchers, advisors and businesses, to achieve the EIP-AGRI objectives of promoting practical, bottom-up innovation by jointly planning and implementing an innovative project.
Rural development programme	Set of national or regional multiannual objectives and actions, approved by the Commission, for the implementation of EU rural development policy.

Replies of the Commission

https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/sr-2026-09

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Audit team

The ECA's special reports set out the results of its audits of EU policies and programmes, or of management-related topics from specific budgetary areas. The ECA selects and designs these audit tasks to be of maximum impact by considering the risks to performance or compliance, the level of income or spending involved, forthcoming developments and political and public interest.

This performance audit was carried out by Audit Chamber I – Sustainable use of natural resources, headed by ECA Member Joëlle Elvinger. The audit was led by ECA Member João Leão, supported by Paula Betencourt, Head of Private Office and Sofia Batalha, Private Office Attaché; James McQuade, Principal Manager; Grzegorz Grajdura, Head of Task; Mihaela Vacarasu, Deputy Head of Task; Jonas Kathage, Monika Gruszeczka-Jasińska, Di Hai, Marie Elgersma and Rafał Czarnecki, Auditors. Laura McMillan provided linguistic support. Alexandra Mazilu provided graphical support.

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European Court of Auditors, special report 09/2026 “European innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy – A key tool for innovation in EU agriculture falling short of its full potential”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026.

The European innovation partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability is a key policy tool intended to foster bottom-up, collaborative innovation. We assessed whether the innovation partnership in the common agricultural policy has effectively contributed to innovation in EU agriculture. We found that it is falling short of its full potential due to an insufficient focus on farmers' needs, a selection process that failed to prioritise projects with innovation potential, and weak dissemination of project results. To address these shortcomings, we recommend improving the partnership's focus on farmers' innovation needs, strengthening project selection procedures and enhancing the dissemination of results.

ECA special report pursuant to Article 287(4), second subparagraph, TFEU.

EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS

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