

### Bulgaria – innovation example 3

## FARMES ASSOCIATION “FOOD FROM THE MOUNTAIN”

Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP)

[www.step-bg.bg/en/](http://www.step-bg.bg/en/)

- **Location:** Western Stara Planina, Bulgaria
- **HNV system:** Extensive grazing, mainly sheep and goat on upland pastures, family gardens and orchards, extensive vineyards, forest fruits, honey, dairy cows
- **Scale of operation:** 9 farmers in 4 municipalities in WSP
- **Timespan:** Created in 2016, formal registration at the beginning of 2017
- **Keys to success:** Commitment of members, their enthusiasm to work together for establishing a regional brand, developing the region and helping each other. The forthcoming funding opportunities (RDP, LAG, etc.) also motivated the formal aspect of the establishment of an association.



Figure 1 Food from the mountain logo

### Problems addressed by this example

The main problem of people living and working in this HNV area is receiving fair payment for their high quality products and diversifying their business activities. The association is perceived as an entity which will facilitate both: i) helping producers to produce better quality, innovative products and selling them at a competitive price, and ii) diversifying the sources of income by developing tourist product «wine and food trail in Western Balkan mountain (WSP)», bringing families with children for on-the-farm experience.

### Story in a nutshell

The association of farmers and small business operators from WSP mountain region «Food from the mountain» was established in 2016. The association has 9 founding members with the following profiles: Farmer, raising Replyana local sheep, managing HNV pastures under agri-environment measures and producing sheep cheese and yogurt, lamb and sheep meat; the sheep are grazing April until December; Farmer raising cows in HNV grasslands area; extensive grazing; forthcoming production of hard cheese, cream and butter; Farmer raising goats, extensive grazing, HNV pastures management; production of pressed cheese caciota type and white Bulgarian cheese; Farmer raising sheep and cows – extensive grazing; production of cheese and yogurt; Farmer raising cows extensively; production of several types of kashkaval; Goat farmer; extensive grazing; production of pressed goat cheese French style; Honey producer – in conversion to organic honey; Producer of jams and marmalades from forest fruits; Wine producer; small quantities wine from own vineyards in the region;

The association aims to promote the region as an area of alternative tourism offering clean food, traditional products, food and wine tasting, guided tours, and to preserve natural resources on which their businesses depend. Currently the members of the association participate together in weekly farmers' market in Sofia, national fairs and events.



Figure 2 Milk from the mountain label



### What does farmers' association "Food from the mountain" achieve for HNV farming?

The association helps HNV farmers to receive fair income for their farming practices and to diversify their activities. Farmers participate as association in the open days and farmers markets – one or two farmers travel to the destination and sell the products of all farmers.

#### *Achievements*

The innovation has just started so it has not achieved a lot for HNV farming yet, but it has the potential to make HNV farming (livestock grazing in semi-natural pastures) more profitable and thus preserve it from extinction. It also promotes the ideas of pro-biodiversity businesses, sustainable community development and nature protection.

#### *Economics of HNV farming*

It is expected that the innovation will help achieving better prices and lower costs (economy of scale thanks to joint marketing efforts) of HNV farms. It also creates diversification in income, developing regional image as area for clean local food and wine tasting, alternative tourism, support to pro-biodiversity business which rely on good quality natural resources.

#### *Maintaining or improving HNV values*

Preserved nature is perceived as a main asset by the members of the association and its preservation is a focus of its activities.

### How does "Food from the mountain" association respond to the HNV LINK innovation themes?

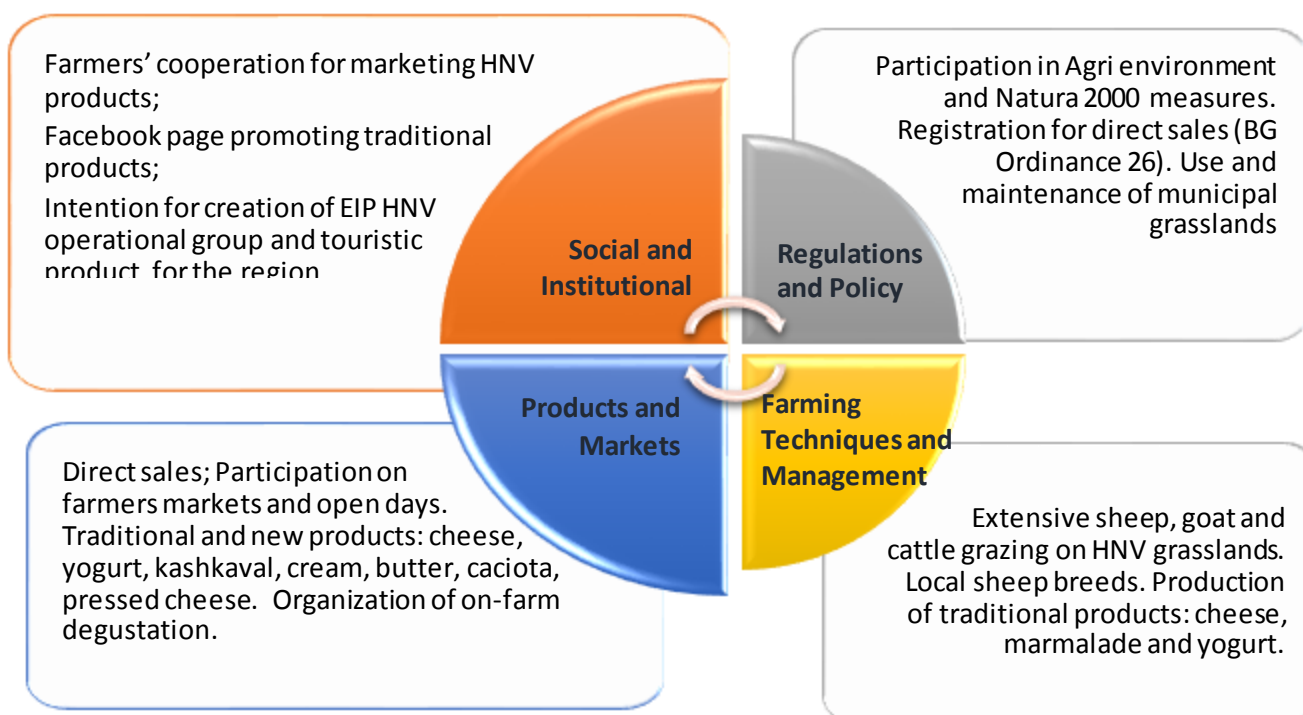


Figure 3 Shows how this innovation addresses the four themes of the HNV-Link innovation framework.

### The process that made it happen and critical factors for success

- The main driver of the innovation to happen was the 9 year work of Bulgarian society for protection of birds (BSPB) in the region aiming to support HNV farmers to add value to their products, close the production cycle and gain fair payment for their work, thus preventing them from ceasing their businesses.
- Mutual trust between farmers is a key factor for the success of the innovation.



Figure 4 Saturday farmers market in Sofia



Figure 5 Sheep herd of a member of the association

**Actors and roles:** Most of the members of the association have been supported by an NGO project « Linking nature protection with sustainable rural development», a BG-Swiss project. Based on mutual trust and common ideas for development, part of the project beneficiaries decided to create an association.

**Institutional context that made it possible:** The forthcoming funding opportunities (RDP, LAG, etc.) also motivated the formal aspect of the innovation, i.e. the establishment of an NGO (association).

**Resources: funding, staff etc.:** The transaction costs for establishing the association are within EUR 250 ; members volunteered to do the job associated with registration. In the near future a part time project manager will be required to organize all common activities. Funding will be sought from the RDP – measure 16.4 and other possible NGO funding sources. There is a LAG in the region, which could also provide funding for part of the ideas of the association.

**Processes:** There are 3 lead figures –sheep and goat farmers –who proposed to establish an association and 6 other farmers and small businesses were enthusiastic to join this common initiative. Several meetings took place, one of the farmers undertook the task to prepare all the documents.

**Critical factors for success:** The main enabling factor was the commitment of members, their enthusiasm to work together, establish a regional brand, develop the region where they live and work, and help each other in all possible ways. Mutual trust was built during the last four years of participation in common activities (BG-SWISS project), farmers markets, fairs and festivals.

**Limiting factors, actual/potential problems, and how could they be overcome:** An important limiting factor in achieving the goals of the association is shortage of funding. Access to NGO type of funding is not easily available, but the prospects that funding will be secured are good at least for some of the activities of the association. Funding will be raised also from commercial and marketing activities.

### Lessons learnt from this innovation example, and its potential replication

Mutual trust and knowledge of each other's products, production capacity and attitude towards quality have been essential for the association to happen. Unifying factors are:

- Similar size of business;
- Similar attitude towards nature, good farming practices , good production practices;
- Same level of understanding of what is a good quality product;
- Being proud of what they do and the quality of their product;
- Professional attitude towards their work;
- Cooperative, supportive and helping people.

#### *Overall lessons from this example, especially from point of view of HNV farming?*

Support to local farmers and small businesses – both technical and financial – have been very important for their development and sophistication. Study tours in Bulgaria and abroad in the framework of the BG-Swiss project have played important role in the development of the attitudes of each individual member of the association. Each member is proud of what he/she produces and does not compromise with hygiene and quality of production.

With positive results, more members could be attracted but after careful screening – members must share common understanding of the process of associating, to have the same goals for development, for sustainability, etc.

#### *Is the innovation unique to its territory and its characteristics, or is it replicable in other areas?*

The innovation is replicable to other HNV areas, but so far it is the only formal HNV farmers association in Bulgaria.

#### *Could it be rolled out on a bigger territorial scale? What would be needed to do this successfully?*

The innovation can be replicated in other areas of Bulgaria, but specific conditions will be required – some platform to help people to know each other in a positive way; of course not all people could work together, this is a bottom-up process and should not be forced down by a project, funding or any artificial means.



**Figures 6 & 7** HNV of the farms participating in the association

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