Maximising Organic Production Systems (MOPS)

Irish organic farming Operational Group improves collective competitiveness of agri-food firms

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Athlone, Ireland
Programming period: 2014-2020
Priority: P2 - Competitiveness
Focus Area: Farm's performance, restructuring & modernisation
Measures: M16 – Cooperation
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Timeframe: 2018 to 2021
Project promoter: Maximising Organic Production Systems CLG (MOPS)
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Summary

The Irish organic food sector has experienced significant growth, but the strong demand for organic fruit and vegetables cannot be served by home production alone. Around 70% of the country's consumption relies on imports. Access to suitable land and labour, production costs, seasonality and weather pressures are common issues that hinder growers from maintaining a good level of continuity of supply throughout the year.

The EIP-AGRI 'Maximising Organic Production Systems' Operational Group sought to address these issues. Their project aimed to improve business opportunities for growers by supporting producer collaboration and to identify ways to optimise production to improve competitiveness and increase supply nationwide. The project focused on improving production methods, building the capacities of the growers and fostering farm-to-farm trade. Key activities included research, on-farm data collection, buyers' needs analysis, farm visits, identification of suitable crop varieties, designing cropping plans and advising on waste and cost reduction methods.

Project results

Positive market and supply developments included:

- 112% increase in total sales turnover by the participating growers from EUR 3.8 million to EUR 8.1 million between 2017 and 2020.
- 371% increase in trade in Irish organic produce amongst organic growers in other parts of the island, annually by 2021.

Improved land management and crop performance results were:

- More effective use of organic material, improved streamlining of crop selection, increased efficiencies through optimised production due to an increased specialisation, and improved trade and collaborative relationships.
- Green manure trials showed beneficial agronomic effects for successive cash crops over three years.

Key lessons and recommendations

- A pilot phase before full implementation of the project could have provided a more focused outcome on specific areas of interest.
- The Operational Group benefited from taking time to ensure that all signatories were fully aware of their legal responsibilities at the start of the project, which helped to build formal collaboration.
- The project implementation was flexible in responding to unforeseen challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Creative thinking and practical adjustments were required.

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Context

The Irish organic food sector has experienced significant growth over the course of the last decade, similar to other European countries. The sub-sector in commercial organic horticultural production is also developing. Its structure is characterised by holdings of varying size from small market garden enterprises to field-scale production (1-100 ha). In terms of marketing and selling, organic horticulture growers are engaged in a wide range of routes-to-market, including grocery retailers, supermarkets, wholesalers, farmer's markets, box schemes, farm shops and restaurants.

However, the strong demand for organic fruit and vegetables cannot be served by home production alone and, according to the Irish Food Board, about 70% of the country's consumption relies on imports. The Irish organic horticulture sector faces several challenges to grow and develop sustainably and in larger volumes. The issues range from securing access to suitable land, labour and minimising costs to respond to seasonality and weather pressures whilst maintaining a good continuity of supply throughout the year.

At the same time, there is growing interest among the Irish organic sector, the EU and national policymakers to increase the business opportunities for Irish-produced organic horticulture by supporting producer collaboration and improving competitiveness. To this end, in partnership with organic growers and other stakeholders, the Irish Organic Association sought to build grower-focused collaborative solutions to increase and optimise the supply of fresh Irish-grown organic horticultural produce nationwide. This was initiated through the development of an Operational Group under the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI). It became clear that production methods needed to be optimised and capacities across several areas could be built to achieve improvements in supply.

Objectives

The overall aim of the short supply chains project was to optimise production methods and improve the chains' continuity through grower collaboration, aligned to several specific objectives including:

- Developing and implementing individual organic cropping plans among growers.
- Conducting green manure trials to improve sustainable practices and reduce reliance on imported nutrients.
- Reducing surplus production.
- Establishing and stimulating new and existing organic horticulture market demands and requirements in the retail sector.
- Formalising trade and supply among growers.
- Building capacities among participating growers and the wider organic horticulture sector in Ireland.

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Activities

Key project activities included:

- **Establishing cross-sector collaboration and buy-in**: The project team, led by the Irish Organic Association, included a lead agronomist, farm advisors and researchers. The team worked directly with 11 organic growers nationwide, ranging in size with experience of different routes-to-market. Other practitioners and experts across the value chain were engaged both directly and indirectly throughout the duration of the project.
- **Capturing baseline information:** At the start of the project, relevant baseline information was collected from the farms (production and market) to inform project development, implementation and for impact measurement purposes.
- **Undertaking research:**
  - Green manure trials (summer and winter) were carried out on one organic mixed farm over a three-year period (June 2018-August 2021), trialling various short-term mixes such as rye/phacelia and clover/ryegrass.
  - Market research on growth opportunities for the Irish organic vegetable sector and assessing the existing and future needs of growers to capitalise on the identified opportunities. The

research further explored issues with key buyers and other industry stakeholders relating to their needs in terms of scale, seasonality, continuity of supply, sustainable packaging and current and projected sales volumes of selected organic horticulture produce. Challenges for growers in meeting retail demand were also explored.

- **Keeping regular contact with participating farms:** Frequent consultations between the lead agronomist and individual growers took place and farms were visited twice a year. Issues covered included:
  - a review of current and historical crop planning
  - monitoring crops and production practices
  - soil and crop sampling
  - quality factors associated with horticulture production and handling.
- **Conducting monitoring visits:** A series of monitoring visits were also conducted on a regularly defined basis throughout the duration of the project. This included regular climate/weather monitoring of selected sites on the farms and the sampling and lab analysis of soil and organic material and crop leaf tissues as required. Preliminary results were used to inform crop planning for growers.
- **Producing communication and dissemination material:** Stakeholder materials were developed on a rolling basis throughout the project. This included magazine articles, short informational videos to promote different growing techniques and market development, and a Growers' Report documenting the project's practical findings.

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Main results

The following results were obtained:

At the project participant level: Improved land management and crop performance

- Participating growers use organic material more effectively. They have also improved the streamlining of their crop selection and achieved increased efficiencies through optimised production due to an increased specialisation. In addition, the trade and collaborative relationships between the growers have improved.
- Green manure trials showed beneficial agronomic effects for successive cash crops over three years, with higher soil nutrient concentrations, more beneficial insects, greater functional soil diversity, greater soil organic matter and better weed control.
- The participating farms benefited from a peer-to-peer learning exchange, including opportunities to increase business flexibility and resilience, e.g. by establishing new market routes due to COVID-19, proactively responding to the ongoing challenges of Brexit.

At the sector level: Positive market and supply development

- 112% increase in total sales turnover by the participating growers from EUR 3.8 million to EUR 8.1 million between 2017 and 2020.
- 11% increase in total sales of own-grown crops year-over-year by 2021.
- 40% increase in total crop production area between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.
- 62% increase in trade between the growers annually by 2021.
- 371% increase in trade in Irish organic produce amongst organic growers in other parts of the island, annually by 2021.

Key lessons and recommendations

- The project could have benefited from a pilot study prior to full implementation. By the time the project team had investigated exactly what it had to work with, the project was several months into its first year. A pilot phase would have provided a more focused outcome on specific areas of interest.
- The Operational Group benefited from taking time to ensure that all signatories were fully aware of their legal responsibilities at the start of the project, which helped to build formal collaboration. The appropriate selection of the group's legal structure (i.e. Company / Partnership) complemented the overall management of the project and avoided any potential disputes.
- The project implementation was flexible in responding to unforeseen challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic caused some disruption and, as a result, creative thinking and practical adjustments were required.

"Working with the agronomist on the cropping plan and managing it on a monthly basis has generated a lot of new information which is farm specific and really practical. We also operate a WhatsApp group, which is a great way to sell crops to other members of the project as it increases farm revenue and reduces waste."

Patrick Frankel

"We have enjoyed working with the crop agronomist and have revised our cropping plan based on this input. As we deal directly with the consumer, quality is hugely important to us, so using the refractometer and brix system has been very educational and improved our awareness about quality assurance, which is essential for our business."

Kenneth Keavy

Additional information:

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