

LINKING AGRIFOOD SMES TO INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS: THE ROLE OF MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACHES

WEBINAR OUTCOMES

KEY MESSAGES

- **Linking agri-food small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to innovation is key for a sustainable future of the Mediterranean food systems**, where SMEs and small-scale producers are empowered as economic actors and agents of change for a blue, green and circular food system transition.
- An **interactive innovation ecosystem** is based on a multi-stakeholder collaboration process that is open and inclusive, and where new knowledge, technologies and organizational processes are co-designed by all food systems actors. A participatory and user-driven approach to innovation is functional to connect farmers and SMEs with researchers, start-uppers and youth and to actively engage them in the co-creation of end-users innovative solutions.
- Innovative **capacity building and training programmes** are instrumental in developing the human capital necessary to address skills mismatch between graduates and employment demand from the agri-business sector, enhancing the innovation chain through new professional profiles.
- **Science diplomacy** is a powerful tool to ensure that scientific knowledge is effectively shared and adequately translated to be used by non-scientific stakeholders, such as policymakers and business actors, leveraging co-creation and win-win solutions through alliances that engage all shores of the Mediterranean on a level-playing field.
- There is a need to unlock **sustainable finance** and design new financial mechanisms to enhance SME access to affordable innovation and technology. Partnering with **business incubators, accelerators and innovation hubs** helps SMEs to embrace innovation by adopting new business models, matchmaking innovators with compatible profiles to create co-founder relationships, and providing inspiring examples and success stories through mentors.

SPEAKERS



Angelo Riccaboni
Co-Chair, [PRIMA Foundation](#)



Madhi Khomsi
Project Coordinator, [BusinessMED](#)



Kamel Sallam
Head of Development Finance, Commercial International Bank Egypt ([CIB](#))



Ayşegül Selışık
Assistant FAO Representative, [FAO Representation in Türkiye](#)



Giuseppe Provenzano
Project manager, Union for the Mediterranean ([UfM](#))



Paula Hafner
Project manager, [EIT Food](#)



Moderator:
Giovanni Stanghellini
Executive assistant, [PRIMA Foundation](#)



Arianna Giuliodori
Secretary General, World Farmers' Organization ([WFO](#))



Damiano Petruzzella
Scientific Administrator, [CIHEAM-Bari](#)



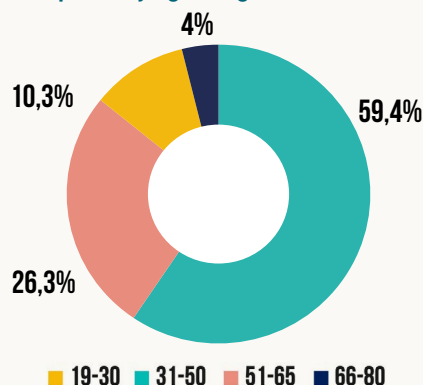
Laura De Matteis
Food Systems Expert, [FAO](#)

Participation statistics | 175 participants from 34 countries. Of which, 154 participants from 15 Mediterranean countries.

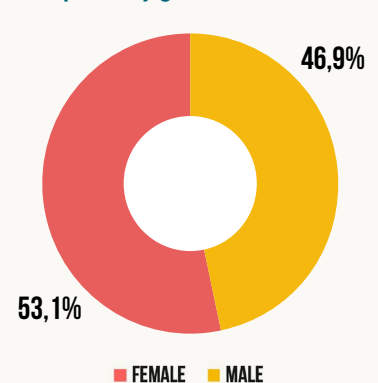
Number of participants by stakeholder group



Participants by age range



Participants by gender



MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACHES TO SCIENCE AND INNOVATION IN FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Opening remarks and technical background to the panel discussion were provided by:



[Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area \(PRIMA\)](#)

represented by Mr Angelo Riccaboni, Co-Chair

PRIMA Foundation implements a joint programme, promoted and cofounded by the European Commission and 19 Euro-Mediterranean States to build research and innovation capacities and to develop knowledge and innovation solutions for water, agriculture and food systems in the Mediterranean area. PRIMA research and innovation activities are underpinned by a strong commitment to national, regional, and international networking, and are open to collaboration and synergies among researchers, governmental agencies and private stakeholders. The strategic goal is strengthening innovation capacity, aligning national programmes and building a critical mass of actors in the MED region. PRIMA, entrusted with a total budget of almost 500 million, has already funded in its initial five years 200 projects amounting to a budget of about EUR 290 million in favour of around 2000 beneficiaries, connecting more than 10 000 researchers in the whole Mediterranean area.



[Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#)

[Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#)

represented by Ms Ayşegül Selışık, Assistant FAO Representative in Türkiye.

FAO is the United Nations specialized agency in food and agriculture, with a comprehensive mandate from its Members - 194 countries and the European Union - to work globally on all aspects of food and agriculture (including fisheries, forestry and natural resources' management), food security and nutrition across the humanitarian-development continuum. Within the framework of the FAO-Türkiye Partnership Programme on Food and Agriculture (FTPP), FAO Türkiye supports the government and stakeholders in the creation of policy and programmes primarily on food security and nutrition, as well as food safety, sustainable use of natural resources, enhancing institutional capacity within the public and private sector via technical assistance, and strengthening community resilience and livelihoods in emergency regions.

The opening remarks presented the technical background for this webinar, highlighting the key role played by the private sector, and, in particular, by farmers and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in the path towards more sustainable Mediterranean agrifood systems. **A focus on small-scale actors can facilitate the shift towards agrifood systems that are better connected to the needs of specific localities, more agile in response to market disruptions and changes in consumers' demands and lifestyle.** This is especially true in the Mediterranean region where a significant proportion of agrifood production, agricultural landholdings and source of income in rural areas belongs to and derives from SMEs and small-scale producers. A better integration of SMEs and small producers in food chains and regional economies would significantly improve food security, nutrition and livelihoods, with positive impacts on the sustainability of Mediterranean food systems.

There is a need to create a conducive environment to allow SMEs and small-scale producers to access to, and benefit from, science and innovation, as key enabling drivers to induce positive transformation of the agrifood system. Innovation in the agrifood system is the engine that can ensure profitability for agrifood companies and farmers, while providing adequate (available, safe, nutritious and affordable) food for all and a sustainable use of natural resources, promoting renewable energies and circularity practices. A wide range of approaches, technologies and practices exist that can contribute to transfor-

A FOCUS ON SMES CAN FACILITATE THE SHIFT TOWARDS MORE SUSTAINABLE AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

ming agrifood systems to nourish people, nurture the planet, advance equitable livelihoods and build resilient ecosystems. Mobilizing the capacity and resources of the private sector has the potential to accelerate food systems transformation, by participating in and driving multi-stakeholder initiatives. Through a comprehensive and diversified partnership programme, FAO Representation in Türkiye was successful in **leveraging partnerships with large private enterprises for engaging SMEs in food systems transformation** efforts. The signature of agreements with both public and private academic institutions and with umbrella organizations such as the Federation of Food & Drink Industry Associations of Türkiye (TGDF) was useful to create linkages between SMEs, large enterprises, and public authorities, and enhancing outreach opportunities for agri-business cooperatives. Moreover, partnership agreements between FAO and large-scale private actors such as Migros and Metro (see boxes below) were instrumental for opening communication channels within food environments, especially addressing consumers in relation to their behaviour and dietary patterns. The example of FAO Türkiye demonstrates how the engagement with various partners through the catalytic role of the private sector has allowed to enhance and improve services for farmers and consumers, and facilitate knowledge sharing among the key actors of the food systems.

FAO TÜRKIYE: COLLABORATING WITH LARGE-SCALE COMPANIES TO REACH CONSUMERS AND SMEs

EXPERIENCE / TÜRKIYE

Over the last few years, FAO has conducted solid collaborations with large-scale private companies to influence the national food systems and food environments, especially targeting consumer behaviour and diets, as well as small farmers and enterprises.

The collaboration with [Migros Ticaret A.Ş.](#), one of the largest fresh food retailers in Türkiye with exclusive expertise in fruits and vegetables, has resulted in initiatives such as the in-store installation of visual materials about the [International Year of Fruits and Vegetables \(IYFV\) 2021](#) to raise consumers' awareness on diversifying diets through fruits and vegetables, as well as the addition to food packaging of informative tags about seasonal food items ("Right on time" project). Migros have also taken an active role in the [Save Your Food](#) campaign led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and FAO, through Migros' [Respecting Food](#) project aimed at preventing food waste: in partnership with [Fazla Gıda](#) ("Whole Surplus"), a web-based donation platform, Migros redistributes food products not matching sales standards but still nutritious and suitable for consumption; in addition, close-to-expiry-date fruits and vegetables are sold in Migros stores at discounted prices. Finally, FAO is cooperating with the retailer to implement a food literacy project with the upcoming publication of a conscious shopping guide for consumers about food & nutrition literacy (i.e. how to read and understand labels).

Since 2021, FAO has also conducted a fruitful collaboration with [Metro Türkiye](#), a subsidiary of [METRO AG](#), a multinational wholesaler for customers in the hotel, restaurants and catering (HoReCa) industry, in the framework of the [Save Your Food](#) campaign. As part of its engagement in food loss and waste reduction, Metro published a "[Guide to combating food waste in hotels, restaurants and other mass consumption places](#)" in cooperation with FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

In addition to the above experiences, FAO Türkiye is also working on an engagement with [Pınar](#), a large-scale dairy company, facilitating the firm's engagement with young farmers for providing training and investment support to adhere to sustainable production practices.

Finally, FAO is collaborating with [Turkish Airlines](#) within the framework of an initiative to support national SMEs. The air carrier is providing its services to help 26 agricultural cooperatives of Syrian refugees and host communities involved in a FAO project to sell and deliver their products nationwide.

METRO TÜRKIYE'S "SMALL IN SCALE, BIG IN VALUE" TRAINING PROJECT

EXPERIENCE / TÜRKIYE

Within the scope of the [International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture \(IYAFA\) 2022](#), Metro [launched a project](#) to support small-scale trout producers in the Muğla province of Türkiye with the technical support of FAO fisheries and aquaculture experts from the Subregional Office for Central Asia (SEC). In June 2022, Metro delivered trainings on "Food Safety and Quality in Fish and Fishery Products" and "Social Compliance in Trout Value Chain" to small trout producers. As a result of this project, small-scale fish farms enhanced their knowledge and capacities to implement sustainable production methods, as well as their market connectivity, through better integration into national value chains since sustainably-raised trout from selected fish farms will be sold by Metro stores.

OUTCOMES OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION

The webinar aimed to address the following key question: **how can multi-stakeholder approaches accelerate the transition of agri-food SMEs towards more sustainable business practices?** The panel discussion allowed to provide elements from the experience of several groups of stakeholders.

FARMER-DRIVEN INNOVATION APPROACH

The perspective of farmers was presented by:



WORLD FARMERS' ORGANISATION

[World Farmers' Organization \(WFO\)](#)

represented by Ms Arianna Giuliadori, Secretary-General.

WFO is an international member-based organization, whose members are 78 national farmers' organizations from 55 countries and agricultural cooperatives all over the world, and has the mission to represent the farmers' voice and advocate on their behalf in all the relevant international processes affecting their present and their future, ranging from the global dialogue on agriculture to nutrition and sustainability.

According to [WFO's policy on innovation](#), adopted by the General Assembly in June 2022, farmers must be repositioned at the heart of the innovation process, and their voice and perspectives must be heard. A **farmer-driven approach to innovation** requires a conducive policy environment, which meets key pre-requirements:

- Access to basic infrastructures such as roads and broadband connection, which is still not available in many countries (both developing and developed).
- Political stability, which is crucial for farmers to be able to invest in the future.
- Empowerment of farmers' organizations to leverage their convening power to drive change in the agrifood sector, helping farmers improve their practices, approaches and mindset.

The only way to enable farmer-driven innovations is by adopting multi-stakeholder approaches characterized by the commitments of all actors involved, i.e. farmers, governments, academia and research institutions, the civil society, etc. The par-

tnership between farmers and researchers, especially when transposed into policy, has the potential to drive game-changing solutions to improve livelihoods and address the major food systems challenges.

While it is important to communicate scientific evidence and research outcomes to farmers in order to inform them about solutions to major food systems challenges, a **participatory approach connecting farmers and researchers** since the co-design of research strategies would be even more effective. The perspective of farmers must be considered in order for their needs and priorities to be thoroughly understood and addressed through science-based policy. Interactive and network-based technical assistance and extension services are needed, which, coupled with tailored finance and investments, can empower farmers' organizations to ensure that all farmers have access to science and innovation. With the right conducive environment, innovation in farming practices, technologies and business models might provide very interesting tools to rebalance power dynamics.

THE CLIMAKERS INITIATIVE

COLLABORATION /  GLOBAL

In 2018, WFO's General Assembly, adopted a new agenda to enhance the position of the farmers in the global political discussion on climate change creating a multi-stakeholder alliance with farmers, private sector, research institutes, NGOs, multi-stakeholder platforms and media partners. [The Climakers Initiative](#) was conceived to promote a completely reversed paradigm applying an authentic bottom-up approach, where farmers lead the global political process on climate change, through a renewed agenda that is farmers-driven, science-based and result-oriented. Solutions are gathered and have to be applicable at farm level. The goal is to influence the implementation of the nationally determined contributions (NDCs), calling on governments to base their national plans for the implementation of the Paris Agreement on the best practices that farmers are already implementing to mitigate and adapt to climate change, proving that farmers own an essential part of the solution.

The perspectives on business-academia cooperation were provided by:



Union of Mediterranean Confederations of Enterprises (BUSINESSMED)

represented by Mahdi Khomsi, Project Coordinator.



Union for the Mediterranean
Union pour la Méditerranée
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Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

represented by Mr Giuseppe Provenzano,
Project manager.

Created in 2002, BUSINESSMED is a platform for multilateral cooperation, promoting foreign direct investment, as well as dialogue and socio-economic integration in the Mediterranean. As one of the major economic development clusters mainly focused on the private sector, BUSINESSMED seeks to: increasing exchanges between the European Union and Mediterranean countries, enhance technological transfer and know-how toward countries in the Southern Mediterranean, increase foreign direct investment flows, implement a regulatory framework for investors, facilitate partnerships between the various business communities in the region, lobby and advocate for a wider participation of the private sector in policymaking to achieve a prosperous free trade area in the Mediterranean.

UfM is an intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean organisation which brings together all countries of the European Union and 15 countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. UfM's mission is to enhance regional cooperation, dialogue and the implementation of projects and initiatives with tangible impact on citizens, with an emphasis on young people and women, in order to address the three strategic objectives of the region: stability, human development and integration. UfM activities in the area of Higher Education and Research contribute to promoting regional cooperation in the fields of higher education, research and innovation, as well as in vocational training and mobility, to achieve a positive agenda for the youth in the Mediterranean by increasing employability, promoting intercultural dialogue and preventing extremism.

The recent COVID-19 crisis has shown a strong resilience of the Mediterranean agrifood sector at production and distribution level and has also contributed to raising awareness among stakeholders about the importance of this sector and the key role it plays in supporting regional food security and sustainability. The free exchange of ideas and data has pushed innovation to the top of the international agenda in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The current focus on food systems sustainability offers many opportunities to the agrifood sector, and **leveraging science and innovation for sustainability has the potential to accelerate agrifood systems transformation**, helping producers to provide safe, nutritious and healthy food through sustainable processes. Digitalization has also proven its relevance in the sector, being instrumental in terms of enhancing productivity, traceability, quality, and market access. FoodTech and AgTech start-ups raised nearly USD 20 billion in 2019.¹ However, there is a substantial gap in access to innovation between large-scale agrifood industries and the SMEs and small producers and, therefore, a need to implement strategies to **remove barriers to infrastructure** and market access, while also supporting farmers and small producers in performing more sustainably through new business models, investments and direct subsidies for **the uptake of renewable energies in food production and processing**. Additional resources and capacities should also be dedicated to **research and development services tailored to SMEs**.

Cooperation is key to bridge the science and knowledge gap of SMEs, and can also provide an opportunity for enhanced dialogue

between Northern and Southern/Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. European private agrifood companies, universities and research institutions in the Northern shores have the financial means and resources to share knowledge and innovation with their Southern counterparts, contributing to generating skills and capacities. **Stakeholders on both shores should collaborate based on equal footing and win-win partnerships, reversing the supplier-buyer paradigm**. An example of this kind of collaboration is represented by PRIMA, a EU-funded mechanism that provides financing to transform research & innovation in concrete actions, involving a plethora of stakeholders, including the private sector, across the Mediterranean.

A new vision for **regional multi-stakeholder partnerships through science is fundamental to elaborate creative, innovative and crosscutting solutions** to common challenges in the Mediterranean. To this effect, science diplomacy is a powerful tool that leverages science-policy interfaces, which encompass relations between scientists and non-scientific actors in the policy process, to foster dialogue and exchanges functional to the joint construction of knowledge for enriching the decision-making process. **Science diplomacy** is key to create linkages between decision makers and the society on one hand, and scientists on the other to ensure that scientific knowledge and research outcomes are effectively shared and adequately translated for being used by non-scientific stakeholder such as policymakers and business actors. SMEs are an integral part of this **quadruple helix** where the worlds of academia, policy, civil society and business come to-

¹FoodTech is an emerging sector exploring how technology can be leveraged to create efficiency and sustainability in designing, producing, choosing, delivering and enjoying food. AgTech is the part of FoodTech which focuses on technologies that aim at increasing farming efficiency and sustainability. Source: AgFunder. 2019. Agri-FoodTech Investing Report – 2019. <https://agfunder.com/research/agfunder-agrifood-tech-investing-report-2019/>

gether to communicate and collaborate to find innovative solutions to major challenges.

UfM supports this kind of dialogue through **policy platforms** (see box below) where ministries, policy makers but also private

sector representatives come together to discuss and cooperate on pressing development topics, such as research and innovation on climate change, renewable energy and health.

UfM REGIONAL PLATFORM ON RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

COLLABORATION /  MEDITERRANEAN

The [UfM Regional Platform on Research and Innovation](#) has its origins in 1995 when a first Euro-Mediterranean Committee was created to promote and monitor cooperation in the fields of research, technology and development.

Today, under the coordination of the UfM Co-Presidency, the Platform brings together UfM Member States with the main objective of making recommendations for the joint implementation of research priorities while addressing issues concerning science, technology and innovation. Moreover, the policy dialogue benefits from the participation, as observers, of other regional organisations, such as the [Arab League](#), as well as relevant initiatives like [PRIMA](#) and [BLUEMED](#), among others. Climate change, renewable energies and health are priority areas for stronger regional collaboration in research and innovation for the coming years.

UfM is also supporting the quadruple helix approach with the publication of a handbook for academia, industry and policymakers ([Reinforcing the Innovation-Employability Nexus in the Mediterranean](#)) that includes Mediterranean best practices.

UfM FORUM ON GREEN INNOVATION AND CAREERS FOR EMPOWERING THE MEDITERRANEAN YOUTH: TRIPLE HELIX IN ACTION

COLLABORATION /  MEDITERRANEAN

The Forum was organized by UfM with the support of the German development agency (GIZ) in Amman, Jordan from 30 October to 1 November 2022, in the framework of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Conference "[Arab SMEs Summit: Opportunities Beyond Borders](#)". The Forum's sessions focused on innovation supporting green transition through research, and how to foster innovation, skills and employability to support Mediterranean citizens. The Forum was attended by high-level participants from several international organizations, academia, business confederations and accelerators and careers centers from Mediterranean countries.

FOSTERING HUMAN CAPITAL FOR INNOVATION

The perspectives of academia and research institutions were provided by:



[Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari \(CIHEAM Bari\)](#)

represented by Damiano Petruzzella, Scientific Administrator.

CIHEAM Bari is a centre for post-graduate training, applied scientific research and design of partnership actions within the framework of international research and cooperation programmes. Cooperation and research actions concern important issues such as food security, poverty alleviation, capacity building at institutional level, more efficient use of natural resources, improvement of agricultural production and productivity, promotion of organic farming, development of sustainable food systems, resilience to climate change, integrated management of coastal areas, gender empowerment, youth entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems. The synergy between training/education, applied scientific research and cooperation provides tangible answers to topical issues such as food safety/security and agricultural quality and innovation.

Specialized capacity and business development support is essential to develop the human capital to enable small-scale producers and SMEs to seize the opportunities offered by knowledge, technological and organizational innovation.

However, several challenges emerge, such as the gap between research and small agri-business (see paragraph above), the weakness of the innovation chain, and the skills mismatch between graduates and employment demand from the agri-business sector. To overcome this, capacity building and training institutions such as CIHEAM Bari are developing programmes aimed at supporting start-up creation and preparing **new professional profiles such as the innovation manager**, whose tasks are to improve innova-

tion processes within the company and to enhance the innovation chain. Fostering partnership with different organizations that support innovation processes across the Mediterranean (see box below for the MIP Network-Mediterranean Innovation Partnership) would be helpful in developing comprehensive training programmes, triggering change in every partner's mindset to achieve an **interactive innovation system**, where the generation of solutions is not limited to the science and academia sector, but is extended to the "quadruple helix" collaboration with practitioners from the civil society and the private sector, including SMEs, based on the **open innovation approach**. An example of this is the living lab approach to support co-creation processes.

MASTER: OPEN INNOVATION & YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AGRIFOOD SECTOR

COLLABORATION /  MEDITERRANEAN

Developed by IAMB and the [University of Bari](#) in collaboration with the [Mediterranean Innovation Partnership \(MIP\)](#) and the technical support of several private sector players, this [Master course](#) is designed to empower younger generations and improve their employability opportunities by promoting their active involvement in the economic development of the region. The course aims to train a new generation of innovation managers to: enhance entrepreneurial culture; contribute to the design, development, and implementation of innovative projects within existing enterprises and organizations; launch new business initiatives (start-ups); provide consultancy services to promote knowledge transfer through innovation brokering. By applying a new mindset and new methodological approaches (such as design thinking and lean start-up), students are accompanied through the creation, prototype development, and enhancement of innovative entrepreneurship ideas (new products/services, adoption of new production processes, development of new markets) in the agri-food field, from production chain to food consumption, health aspects and circular economy. Training focuses on both technological innovation and social innovation and is based on a learning-by-doing approach, with strong interactions with start-ups and businesses.

MEDITERRANEAN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP (MIP) NETWORK

COLLABORATION /  MEDITERRANEAN

The [Mediterranean Innovation Partnership \(MIP\) Network for youth entrepreneurship and technology transfer in the agrifood sector](#) aims at favouring knowledge sharing, cogeneration and transfer for entrepreneurship, business creation and innovation. By creating a Mediterranean Innovation Ecosystem, MIP strives to enhance the collaboration among public institutions and Innovation Support Organizations (ISOs) to support the creation and innovation of agrifood enterprises of young entrepreneurs.

Established in 2016 and coordinated by CIHEAM Bari, it is the first Mediterranean Network for youth entrepreneurship and technology transfer in the agrifood sector among the following Mediterranean countries: Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and the International Intergovernmental Organization Standing Working Group in South Eastern Europe (SWG). Other international organizations that have joined the MIP network are: ICARDA (International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas), EMUNI (Euro-Mediterranean University) and LARI (Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute), BusinessMed, UNIMED and INSME.

ACCELERATING INNOVATION THROUGH FINANCIAL INNOVATION AND CREATIVE MINDSETS

The perspectives on how to fund and mainstream innovation were provided by:



[Commercial International Bank Egypt \(CIB\)](#)

represented by Kamal Sallem, Head of Development Finance.

CIB is Egypt's leading private-sector bank, offering a full range of financial products and services to enterprises of all sizes, institutions, households, and individuals. CIB's mission is to transform traditional financial services into simple and accessible solutions by investing in people, data and digitalization. The bank has been a pioneer in the financial services industry since inception 40 years ago as the first joint venture bank in Egypt; it strives to promote innovation as a core competitive advantage and to serve the millions of Egyptians who remain unbanked or underserved. As a local player that adheres to widely acclaimed international standards, CIB actively participates in select direct investment opportunities in Egypt and in the Mediterranean.



[European Institute of Innovation and Technology, Food Community \(EIT Food\)](#)

represented by Paula Hafner, Project manager.

EIT Food is Europe's leading food innovation initiative, working to make the food system more sustainable, healthy and trusted. EIT food promotes inclusive systems innovation, which enables all people and places to participate and benefit, as essential to a strong food system that is better for everyone. With teams on the ground across Europe, EIT Food aims at bridging the gap between countries and regions with low innovation capacity and those leading the way, putting consumers at the heart of their work, helping build trust by reconnecting them to the origins of their food, directly involving them in the innovation process, and working with the food sector to increase transparency.

Experience has shown that companies who invest more in innovation are more sustainable and develop at a faster pace. However, **finance is one of the main challenges in the agrifood sector.** In order to be sustainable, finance has to be unlocked at the right time (when food producers need it) and at the right price (af-

fordable for food producers). Banks are usually a bit hesitant to invest in the agrifood sector because of perceived high risks and low return on investment; therefore, funding to this sector mostly come from international donors such as development agencies and international organizations. Moreover, the financial sector in

the region is quite variegated and composed of many fragmented initiatives that need consolidation within a broader scope that considers the complexity of the food systems (not only the production stage), and the ecosystem of stakeholders that characterizes them. **Collaboration among different stakeholders is key to ensure that applicable research is leveraged to trigger also financial innovation, which is needed to overcome the challenges hindering small farmers and agri-business access to finance and their low bankability.** Innovative financial tools can be implemented, such as agricultural contracting, financial lease, factoring. There is also a need for innovative financial products to support farmers and the value chains they are part of:

for example, funding could target renewable energy providers who will help farmers transition towards sustainability.

FINANCE IS ONE OF THE MAIN CHALLENGES IN THE AGRIFOOD SECTOR

inspiring examples and success stories from other SMEs, and to support them in thinking out of the box to adopt and promote open innovation approaches, demonstrating their concrete benefits.

Coupled with finance, agrifood players and businesses also need support to embrace an “innovation mindset”, moving away from silos approaches and embracing the spirit of multisectoral collaboration. To this effect, the role of **business incubators and accelerators** is paramount to connect and match innovators, link them with

EIT FOOD INITIATIVES FOR PROMOTING INNOVATION IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

EXPERIENCE /  EUROPEAN UNION

- [Challenge Labs](#) are creative workshops designed by EIT Food to find solutions to current and future challenges in the food and agriculture system by bringing together diverse groups of people: graduate and postgraduate students, technologists and scientists, experienced professionals, consumers and companies. Challenge Labs also build capacity among the participants to develop entrepreneurial skills such as problem solving, teamwork, design thinking and communication. Challenge Labs aim at sparking co-founder relationships, lead to the creation of new businesses and build links between industry, academia and start-ups. EIT Food has successfully carried out more than 20 Challenge Labs at the national level in Europe in the past three years with over 600 participants.
- The [Seedbed Incubator](#) Programme is delivered by top EIT Food partner universities and research and innovation organisations, providing their expertise in technology commercialisation and their vast connections with industry to support researchers, scientists and entrepreneurs launch or progress a commercially viable business based on market need. *Seedbed* is designed to produce independent, creative, and market-aware entrepreneurs with the necessary multi-disciplinary skillset to address not only key challenges in the agrifood sector but make important contributions to ensure our food systems are secure and trusted. The programme provides participants with world-class start-up training and coaching to identify their core business assumptions and the support to refine their business value propositions. Ultimately, the programme provides the opportunity to obtain a validated business model primed for access to follow-on EIT Food funding and support through the Start-up Launch Grant.
- The [TeamUp](#) project matches leading technologists with entrepreneurial business professionals and supports them on their journey to co-create truly impactful agrifood ventures. *TeamUp* is a 7-month programme that finds and matches up brilliant innovators with compatible and complementary profiles. It provides important tools and support to build a start-up, including expert guidance, world-class training, mentorship, networking and funding. These new teams will be nurtured to create strong co-founder relationships with aligned purpose and values.
- The [Water Scarcity in South](#) programme aims at enhancing knowledge and overcome current barriers to tackle water scarcity in Southern Europe through innovation, entrepreneurship, education and communication. This programme carries out a series of activities, from research to innovation and education, to joint efforts and effectively find the appropriate solutions to water shortages in Southern regions, for Europe to lead the way towards a more sustainable future. The long-term objective of the Water Scarcity programme is to ease the transition to a water saving economy across Southern Europe and contribute to reducing Europe’s water consumption and wastage by fostering innovation, creating a community of experts, and sharing knowledge to build capacities. Overall, the programme will strengthen local innovations and will contribute to the economic and social progress in modest and moderated innovation countries as sufficient and good-quality water supply is a prerequisite for socioeconomic development.

The primary goal of TÜGİP is to strengthen the SMEs and start-ups within the food sector through building their capacities for research and development and innovation activities, and furthermore, invigorating their competitive advantage in national and international markets. TÜGİP provides R&D, innovation, infrastructure, technology road maps, and network opportunities to its members. Nevertheless, becoming a member of TÜGİP is not limited only to SMEs and startups. Private sector companies, academia, and the various stakeholders of the food sector may become members of the Platform. The ultimate objective of TÜGİP is to reach an equal-participatory governance structure that covers all Türkiye. The mission is to improve regional competitiveness of food industry by enhancing SMEs' and start-ups' research, technology and innovation capacity, through a co-value creation approach by offering technology roadmaps, network opportunities and research and innovation facilities.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FORA FOR INCLUSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

represented by Ms Laura De Matteis, Food Systems Expert.

The FAO Food Systems and Food Safety Division provides strategic leadership in the development of more sustainable agrifood systems, working in close coordination with technical actors, striving to integrate FAO's scientific and economic analysis to provide improved policy guidance and targeted investment for the transformation to more sustainable agrifood systems.

There is **momentum for multi-stakeholder cooperation to transform agrifood systems** in the Mediterranean and worldwide, as demonstrated by the collective engagement at recent global and regional fora, such as the 3rd World Conference on the Revitalization of the Mediterranean Diet organized by CIHEAM with the technical support of FAO, as well as the Mediterranean Pavilion hosted at CoP27. Mediterranean stakeholders engaged in [national and independent UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues](#) emphasized that food systems transformation requires inclusive and equitable governance, as well as recognizing power of agency and access to resources for small-scale food systems actors. To this effect, realities such as the SFS-MED Platform and the Black Sea Economic

Cooperation Centre for Sustainable Food Systems (BSEC-CSFS) are striving to provide an inclusive forum and enabling environment for food systems stakeholders to share of knowledge, experiences, and best practices for sustainability solutions. **Multi-stakeholder mechanisms of this kind are instrumental to facilitate linkages between actors at different scales within food systems, ensuring that small-scale stakeholders like producers and SMEs are well integrated in food systems and able to access the ecosystem of innovation to become the protagonists of a blue, green and circular transition of Mediterranean**, which is needed to make our food systems more sustainable and prosperous.

SFS-MED PLATFORM

The [SFS-MED Platform](#) is a multi-stakeholder initiative co-led by FAO, CIHEAM, UfM and PRIMA as an affiliated project of the One Planet Network's SFS Programme. The Platform is a **forum** for multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration, a **network** for strengthening knowledge sharing and capacity building, and a **catalyst** for regional cooperation on priority themes for sustainable food systems transformation in the Mediterranean. The SFS-MED Platform is open to all food systems stakeholders in the Mediterranean region and aims to create a community to leverage and share the knowledge, experience and skills of food systems actors across the Mediterranean region towards concerted action for the sustainable transformation of food systems.

Contact the [SFS-MED Platform's Coordination Desk](#) for further information about the modalities of engagement.

BLACK SEA ECONOMIC COOPERATION CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS (BSEC-CSFS)

The [BSEC-CSFS](#) was established in 2020 under the framework of the FAO-Türkiye Partnership Programme on Food and Agriculture (FTPP II) with a clear mandate, relevant institutional framework and technical capacity to enhance the sustainability of the whole food value chain from farm to fork among BSEC member states. The BSEC-CSFS provides BSEC member states with advice, guidance and information in the areas of sustainable food systems. It aims at strengthening regional cooperation among BSEC Member States in the areas of food security and safety, improving institutional capacities, poverty alleviation, and sustainable natural resource management.

In September 2022, the International Center for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) organized the [3rd World Conference on the Revitalization of the Mediterranean Diet](#) in Bari, Italy. With the technical support of FAO, this edition of the Conference revolved around the theme “*A change of route towards more sustainable and resilient food systems in Mediterranean countries*”. Thematic sessions offered a variety of perspectives about the Mediterranean diet as a lever for sustainability at both local and regional level, bridging sustainable food consumption and production. The conference featured also a Mediterranean Ministerial Dialogue about food security in the context of the ongoing crisis, convened and chaired by Stefano Gatti, Special Envoy for Food Security of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Together with the SFS-MED partners, FAO co-organized a high-level roundtable on the UN Food Systems Summit follow-up process with National Convenors of Summit dialogues from Mediterranean countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This webinar was designed within the framework of the SFS-MED initiative. Deep appreciation is due to the SFS-MED Platform’s Coordination Desk (CIHEAM, FAO, PRIMA, UfM), with a specific mention for the *ad hoc* team who curated the design of this webinar: Laura De Matteis (Food Systems and Food Safety Division – ESF, FAO), Tommaso Mattei (ESF, FAO), Damiano Petruzzella (CIHEAM), Jacopo Schürch (ESF, FAO), Giovanni Stanghellini (PRIMA), José Valls Bedeau (ESF, FAO).

The graphic layout is by Simone Mari.

RESOURCES

The recording of the webinar is available at this [link](#) and the agenda of the webinar is available at this [link](#)

Events

- CIHEAM Bari. *Third world conference on the revitalization of the Mediterranean diet. A change of route towards more sustainable and resilient food systems in the Mediterranean countries*. Bari, IAMB. <https://bit.ly/3EorVE9>

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The SFS-MED Platform is an affiliated project of the One Planet Network's Sustainable Food Systems Programme

This document was produced with financial assistance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of FAO and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Italian Government.



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