

Evaluation and lessons learnt from the implementation of the project “Farm to fork academy: V4 for sustainable agriculture in Albania”



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1. Why a "Farm to Fork Academy: V4 for Sustainable Agriculture" for Albania?

As climate change and environmental degradation have been a continuous existential threat, for years Europe has been in search of a new growth strategy that could transform the Union into a modern, resource efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases. In this view, methods to bring the agricultural sector and food production to climate neutrality have been continuously object of debate in the European Commission. This was not easy, because generally understood agriculture and agricultural production are "victims" of climate change, and at the same time have a significant share in the emission of greenhouse gases. To this purpose it was designed European Green Deal¹, the EU's sustainable and inclusive growth strategy that aims at boosting the economy, improve people's health and quality of life, and care for nature. The strategy is supposed to lead to better welfare of people and the planet, better profit for agricultural producers and production of safe food.

As part of this strategy, the European Commission has adopted the "Farm to Fork"² strategy to promote a healthy and environmentally friendly food system as well as a new strategy "For Biodiversity". Actually the European agriculture and food system, supported by the Common Agricultural Policy, is already a global standard in terms of safety, security of supply, nutrition and quality but now, it must also become the global standard for sustainability. A shift to a sustainable food system can bring environmental, health and social benefits, as well as offer fairer economic gains.

Referring to the Albanian context, losses in biodiversity, climate changes, weather extremities affecting Albanian horticulture (including fruit, berries, vegetable production), and abandonment of lands and its fragmentation negatively affect Albanian territory and the sustainability of its agricultural sector, especially in micro and small farming. In this view "Farm to Fork Academy: V4 for Sustainable Agriculture for Albania" project addresses issues of environment and sustainable development, along with European Green Deal postulates transferred to rural areas of Albania. It is a multidimensional initiative that tackles aspects mentioned in European Green Deal aiming to promote biodiversity and its protection on various levels. Its educational function consists of bringing the knowledge to the Albanian farmers chosen to take part in the project.

The project's goal is to popularize the cultivation of local plant varieties among the beneficiaries, therefore preventing the industrialization of landscape, while also encouraging farmers to take the leadership roles and make their market debut on the bigger scale, thus supporting micro and small farming. The target group is educated on the importance of biodiversity and how to ensure it on their croplands, they learn how to combine traditional knowledge with the innovative approach, resulting in increased effectiveness of food production, under the paradigm of sustainable growth.

As a result, farmers gain knowledge and also witness in-practice measures pertaining to the enhancement of sustainability of Albanian agriculture on small farms, environment preservation, soil management and prevention of further losses in biodiversity, by implementing accurate pilots and its practical development, through the Farm to Fork Academy trainings : an open-door, competitive, intensive capacity building training programme, run in a project incubator formula, targeting young Albanian farmers and leaders, conducted along with tutor-led solution project development and the execution of 3 pilot investment schemes. Further, the project trickles down the knowledge via demonstration workshops for a wider group of project beneficiaries.

¹ The European Green Deal https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

² Farm to Fork strategy https://ec.europa.eu/food/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en

2. Methodology of evaluation and lessons learned for Visegrad Funded project Farm to Fork implemented by Albanian Network for Rural Development

As the learning process occurs on every project, lessons learned is the learning gained from the process of performing the project (PMI, 2004, p. 363). **Lessons learnt develop out of the evaluation process**, take the form of describing what should or should not be done, the outcome of different processes and are used to improve future projects and future stages of current project.

To evaluate the Visegrad Funded project Farm to Fork implemented by Albanian Network for Rural Development V4 experts / engaged in rural development, representatives of NGO sector and agribusinesses, visited 2 of 3 the intervention zones evaluating the micro-granting action taken by ANRD. The third microgrant was presented on-line, due to long travel time (intervention in remote area). The comments were further presented during evaluation round table.

The evaluation round table was organized with the purpose of learning from project experience for future implementations, record the experiences in Albanian context and share it with other stakeholders, check the project progress, check whether the actions taken are what local people want or need, identify strengths and weaknesses in the project, create a basis for future planning, check the effectiveness of the actions taken as well as present the project achievements to the VF experts.

As regards the instruments of methodology used they regard signposts and milestones review: a check whether the objective are achieved, and whether they are achieved within allocated time and resources. The evaluation process is carried out answering the following evaluation questions: What problems is the project trying to solve? What would make change happen? What might have caused the problem? What needs to happen to make a difference? How do you contribute to make change happen? What can you do to solve the problem?

Goals of the evaluation meeting deal with breaking long-term goals down into short- and medium-term goals. The evaluation questions are related with the kind of actions executed to achieve these goals, existent resources, achieved results, project milestones, positive change, project indicators etc.

During the follow-up session are identified lessons learned and further joint actions to be taken, open calls, current needs of the final beneficiaries and finally a discussion about social / legal framework of the actions will be open.

A complete and deep lessons learned process is carried out through five steps (PMBOK® Guide): identify, document, analyze, store and retrieve and on the base of the process lay three basic questions:

1. What went right
2. What went wrong and
3. What needs to be improved

For our project, considering its scale, we are mostly focused on the first two phases: identification and documentation of the lessons learned.

The **lessons learned sessions** is conducted at the end of the project, and/or at the end of each phase and real time – when we learned the lesson. Part of the lessons learned sessions are the project manager, team members and leadership that participate in, review the lessons learned reports and

make decisions on how to use the knowledge gained. Sharing lessons learned among project team members prevents from repeating the same mistakes and also allows the organization to take advantage of best practices. Innovative approaches and good work practices will be shared with others. At the end of the project a meeting is organized where lessons learned are discussed and the input for the produce of a report summarizing the findings is collected. This report is then shared with the immediate project stakeholders.

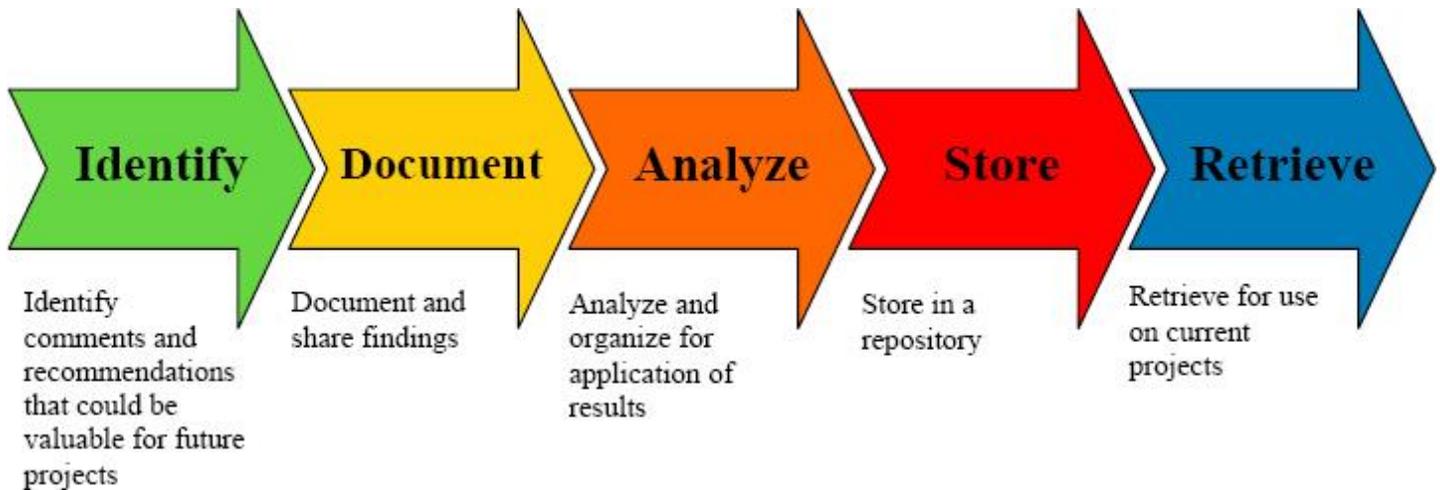


Fig. 1 Phases of lessons learned process

Identify Lessons Learned

During this step comments and recommendations that could be valuable for future projects are identified. Part of this process are preparation and conducting lessons learned session. This session is facilitated by one of the main Visegrad experts that conduct the presentaton of the good practices and lessons learned by partner Visegrad countries as well as discussions on Albanian Pilot investments and their implementation, drawing conclusions on the lessons learned and possibility for spill over and replication of the project. The lessons learned session follows the demonstation workshops cycle that served to the experts and applicants for on-the-ground check and evaluation of implementation and identification of issues for the three pilot investments. Also, prior the session the facilitator reviews key documents and then prepare a list of questions specific to the project. The facilitator uses lessons learned categories during the session to help focus the participants thinking. Other lessons learned input is brought to the table by the coach of the pilot investments and the applicants who explain their experience during implementation answering with the help of experts the three basic questions: what went right, what went wrong and what they think needs to be improved during future replication of the pilot investiments models.

Document and share findings of Lessons Learned

During this step findings are documented and shared. After lessons learned in stage 1 are captured, they are reported to project stakeholders. To this purpose, a lessons learned report is drafted that consists of the data captured during the lessons learned session and additional input from participants. The detailed lessons learned report is distributed to all project participants through e-mail and social media publication. The input captured also serves to produce different type of reports based on the audience.

3.Lesson learned

What went well, according to the project planning

- Although the project „Farm to fork academy: V4 for sustainable agriculture in Albania” was a short term project, it delivered important results serving as a good practice to further support micro and small farming sustainably debuting on the bigger scale.
- The project was e new bridge between ANRD and Green Deal philosophy, instruments and resources.
- Small farmers from the whole Albania were engaged at different levels of participation in the project activities and the project outreach was good.
- The three entrepreneurial ideas have been implemented succesfully and are now operational.
- Following up training sessions and mentoring the farmers - members of Farm to fork academy delivered 12 innovative entrepreneurial ideas, 3 of which were succesfully implemented.
- The selection process and presentation of New Green Deal for Albanian Farmers through **Pitching Session** was transparent and fair, building trust in the process and confidence of the participants. Assistance of V4 experts and delievery of their know how was crucial for the process.
- During **Implementation phase**, beneficiaries carried out pilot investments before the deadline set by the Contracting Authority, in compliance with the business plan approved by the project.
- The project raised great interest of the beneficiaries in gaining knowledge on the implementation of entrepreneurial ideas, demonstrated through numerous questions directed to the experts during the training sessions and workshops as well as the requests for a follow up.
- During **Demonstration workshops**, it was evident the interest of the beneficiaries in achieving the project goals and enhancing the visibility of their V4 investments.
- Exchange possibilities were identified between Albanian farmers & ANRD and V4 countries expertise & funds.
- Transfer and exchange of know how took place naturally through warm interpersonal communication and mutual appreciation of best practices.
- The investments and related demonstration workshops generated the interest of many local youth and women that considered diversification and sustainable rural development as an important instrument for their socio-economic empowerment and wellbeing of their rural communities.
- Along the whole project implementation and especially during **Evaluation and Lessons Learned Round Table** new farmers were keen to gain new know how and experience on the Green Deal and Farm to fork models of sustainable business.

What went wrong and/or needs to be improved

- The Farm to fork academy model is a new experience in Albania, therefore its first application needed additional efforts to get to know better V4 countries experience and Farm to Fork Academy model.
- V4 competitive grants as a completely new experience for the beneficiaries positively showcased the importance and the role of the mentoring for offering guidance and suggestions to successfully proceed with all phases of the implementation of the pilot investment and financial implementation of the grant.

- During project management, considering the difficulty encountered by applicants in the management of expenditures and procedures (especially as regards purchase invoices, based on demand - market supply) it was evident the urgent need for administrative and financial management training.
- Drafting of the financial and narrative reports according to the terms of the contract (although very simple) presented significant difficulties for the beneficiaries implying continuous assistance and mentoring.

Final words: The outcome of the funded entrepreneurial ideas looks quite positive: all the beneficiaries showcased their interest to further develop the pilot investments with the final goal of formalizing them as a legal business entity. To this purpose it is necessary that the beneficiaries are continuously trained in terms of entrepreneurial skills and doing business.

Reccomendations from the V4 experts on the V4 pilot investments in Albania and the way forward

- Collaboration between local authorities, Civil Society Organizations and farmers is crucial for contributing in the development of sustainable agriculture and tourism.
- It is of great importance for rural economies the set up and empowerment of Cooperatives that can be achieved not only through capacity building actions but also through investments in professional agricultural schools that should be supported by grants.
- The agritourism entrepreneurs should not only tend to increase the number and reach of Albanian or foreign tourists, but they should also boost the promotion of traditional techniques (mostly green) attractive for the tourists as well as have an authentic design of them.
- Use of innovation in the agriculture practices should be accompanied by an interesting narrative to attract interest from the potential tourists such as children, visitors from the city etc.
- Cultivaton and processing of the agriculture products should be accompanied with green and recyclable packages to give added value.
- Diversification of agricultural and family farms products and services as well as introduction of innovative and social traits in the rural economies guarantees their sustainability and the prosperity of hosting communities.
- Tripartite partnerships such as LAG's help in empowerment of rural vulnerable people through assistance in development and marketing of local products and tourism and local community values.

Practical lessons on pilot investments' presentation by V4 experts

- It is crucial for the beneficiary to present the grant aquired in the most transparent way through clearly displaying the donor of grant, its value and "the result" of the investment following up visibility rules.
- When presenting the implemented idea, the focus should be on the added value it brings to the table as well as the neutral narrative.
- Originality and authenticity of agritourist offer and its story attracts tourist's curiosity. Any agri tourism activity should have as its main attraction a proper story to share with the visitors.
- The usage of small products with affordable package cost, with clear information about the product and visible logos should be in local producers' consideration.

- Any agritourism entrepreneur should aim at enhancing the time a tourist stays at and the value of products purchased on the farm to help business and the community grow faster. Culinary tourism as part of the luxury tourism, contributes to this purpose.