



BOOSTING RURAL BIOECONOMY NETWORKS FOLLOWING MULTI-ACTOR APPROACHES

NEWSLETTER

THE INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE BRANCHES PROJECT **n°7 | December | 2023**
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BRANCHES



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101000375

PARTNERS



The EU BRANCHES Project **final conference was hosted on 13-14 November** at FAO Headquarters in Rome

The Boosting RurAI Bioeconomy Networks following multi-actor approaches (BRANCHES) Project has selected and described innovative practices of a circular bioeconomy in rural areas that demonstrate a marked ability to be resilient to the climatic and economic challenges of our times and show the path for bioeconomy deployment.

The BRANCHES project has been funded by the European Union under the Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) of the Horizon 2020 Program. A total of 12 partners representing 5 European countries: Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain-have been involved in this three-year project

(2021-2023). In addition, 5 other associated countries-Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal and Slovakia-were also selected for specific knowledge transfer activities and sharing of achievements.

BRANCHES covers many green economy issues: from rural space management to the biobased industry, including bioenergy. BRANCHES supports the implementation of new cost-effective technologies and promotes innovative business opportunities in rural areas.

At the end of three years of activity, the main project achievements were: the selection and dissemination of 65 successful and concrete examples of bioeconomy (enterprises, governance, new products, technology, experimentation, etc.). The 65 collected examples were summarized in fact sheets designed to be easily handled, practical, clear, comprehensive and easy to understand.

In addition, in each of the partner countries was established a National Thematic Network through the involvement of relevant stakeholders such as: primary producers, enterprises, research organizations, professional associations, and public administrations. Overall, about 660 stakeholders were directly involved, which in turn spread the information to a larger audience.

The project's impact on the development of the circular bioeconomy can be measured through the materials produced and the dissemination activities undertaken, namely 40 thematic workshops





attended by more than 1,600 people; 10 technical visits with about 2,500 participants; 25 audiovisuals; the project outputs have been viewed and shared over 150,000 times on social media. Besides, the project yielded the "Bioenergy in a time of crisis", a factsheet based on a series of interviews with stakeholders, on how bioenergy business helped to cope with the impact of COVID and the Ukrainian crisis. Also Factsheet about Drivers and barriers of bioenergy has been published in project webpages.

The BRANCHES Final Conference will take stock of the results obtained, which will continue to be available for consultation and download from the project website for the next three years (www.branchesproject.eu). Furthermore, as a legacy of the project, BRANCHES aims to ensure the continuity of all the work carried out. In this regard, synergies were established with similar European Projects such as RuralBioUp and Biorural to ensure the transfer of the experience developed by the project to new working groups.

Show-case days

On 20 September, the Italian BRANCHES team (ITABIA and CNR IBE) organised a showcase day at the Vannucci Piante company, one of the largest and most important plant nurseries in Europe. Vannucci Piante operates under a double environmental and ethics certification scheme. That is very important for nurseries, which are intensive operations and use significant amounts of water and chemicals. In that regard, Vannucci has drastically reduced chemical inputs by replacing herbicides with chip mulch. Weed control is now obtained by applying a thick layer of microchips to the top of each pot to create a durable and effective mechanical barrier





against weed growth. With this measure alone, herbicide use has been reduced by over 50%, while creating a new market for local forest companies, such as Orlandini, a leading agroforestry business located just few kilometres away. Vannucci Piante currently uses 8000 m³ of bulk volume of microchips per year, but that this quantity is expanding rapidly, as the new weed control technique takes

hold: microchip is far superior in environmental, social...and financial terms!

During the showcase day, practitioners involved in the Vannucci production chain were interviewed and the descriptive video produced was later uploaded to the project website (Link video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG5oRLjdqiU&t=19s>)

Dissemination of BRANCHES Good Practices

GERMANY. On December 6th, 2023, the Horizon2020 project "BRANCHES - "Boosting Rural Bioeconomy Networks using Multi-Actor Approaches" St. Nicholas seminar took place in a cozy atmosphere at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. Here the German branch of the project presented the overall results to an interested public, online and in person. Actors from five European partner countries worked together in this project to collect and process innovations and practical knowledge from the bioeconomy sector and on international exchange. The results that have already been created, for example over 60 practical abstracts about innovative solutions, as well as future publications can be viewed and downloaded over the next three years on the project website <https://www.branchesproject.eu/>.



ROMANIA. The Clusters Meet Regions in Iasi, North-East Romania, held from 21 to 23 November 2023 marked a significant step towards improving regional innovation ecosystems through clusters across Europe. The event was organised by the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, in





partnership with the North-East Regional Development Agency of Romania and the Romanian Cluster Association - CLUSTERO. A total of 250 people from all over Europe attended the event across the two days. The final day began with parallel sessions on Bioeconomy, Textiles, and Cluster Financing in Regional Programmes. These sessions featured discussions on bio-economy value chains, sustainable textiles and funding schemes.

The Bioeconomy session was hosted by the RuralBioUP Project with the participation of the BRANCHES, Hemp Club, Bio Rural, Mainstream BIO, SCALE-UP, CEE2ACT and BIOTRANSFORM projects. On this occasion, Vito Pignatelli (president of ITABIA) described the BRANCHES project and in particular spoke about the Practice Abstracts - archived on the project website - concerning examples of "good practices" of which 40 referable to the bioenergy field and 20 to other sectors of the bioeconomy. These kinds of initiatives are useful to valorise the work done by BRANCHES' partners and to lay the foundations for the Project's legacy.



Synergies between EU projects: **BRANCHES and RuralBioUp** **ITABIA, as a Partner of the Horizon Europe Project**



"RuralBioUp" Project proposed to establish a synergy with the BRANCHES project in order to give continuity to the latter beyond the 2023 deadline. The collaboration between the two projects was agreed at the BRANCHES Final Conference held in Rome at the FAO on 13 and 14 November 2023 when Chiara Pocaterra representing APRE (Agency for the Promotion of European Research), which coordinates the RuralBioUP Project, was invited to speak. This link will be very relevant to ensure continuity to the work activated with BRANCHES, which has many points in common with RuralBioUp in particular for the establishment of stakeholder

networks to facilitate the development of the bioeconomy in rural areas.

RuralBioUp main objective is to support innovators to scale-up inclusive and small-scale biobased solutions in rural areas, through the creation of a favourable ecosystem to be maintained within the empowered regions and transferred to other ones, in order to contribute to regional, urban and consumer-based transitions towards a sustainable, regenerative, inclusive and just circular economy and bioeconomy across all regions of Europe.

For that purpose, RuralBioUp will create a favourable and long-lasting ecosystem in 9 regions (intended as “demonstrators” to showcase the approach and make it transferable to other EU regions and rural areas) involving stakeholders in a multi-actor platform (Regional Hubs). Playing a central role in the project, Hubs will implement different activities and actions to ease the adoption of bio-based solutions in some (a.l. 2) value chains, selected according to the regional data on available biomass, business models, technologies, best practices and nutrient recycling matched & showed by a digital tool (“Rural Spot”): representing the most important resource to be enquired by Hubs, this tool will use data from previous projects results (the majority of them owned or co-owned by partners) and other scientific results. Stay updated and learn more about the project: <https://www.ruralbioup.eu/>

COP 28 in Dubai: lights and shadows

The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) closed (13 December 2023) with an agreement that signals the “beginning of the end” of the fossil fuel era by laying the ground for a swift, just and equitable transition, underpinned by deep emissions cuts and scaled-up finance.

In a demonstration of global solidarity, negotiators from nearly 200 Parties came together in Dubai with a decision on the world's first 'global stocktake' to ratchet up climate action before the end of the decade – with the overarching aim to keep the global temperature limit of 1.5°C within reach. In the end, the fate of fossil fuels will be a 'transitioning away', a transition from the current point, where fossil fuels remain crucial for global energy production, to a goal that has not been made explicit, but which is compatible with international carbon neutrality targets to 2050.

This is the compromise reached at COP28 in Dubai between the 100 most ambitious countries pushing for a 'phase out' and the other side - led by OPEC countries - opposing any restrictions on oil, gas and coal.



The global stocktake is considered the central outcome of COP28 – as it contains every element that was under negotiation and can now be used by countries to develop stronger climate action plans due by 2025.

The stocktake recognizes the science that indicates global greenhouse gas emissions need to be cut 43% by 2030, compared to 2019 levels, to limit global warming to 1.5°C. But it notes Parties are off track when it comes to meeting their Paris Agreement goals.

The stocktake calls on Parties to take actions towards achieving, at a global scale, a tripling of renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency improvements by 2030. The list also includes accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power, phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, and other measures that drive the transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, with developed countries continuing to take the lead. In the short-term, Parties are encouraged to come forward with ambitious, economy-wide emission reduction targets, covering all greenhouse gases, sectors and categories and aligned with the 1.5°C limit in their next round of climate action plans (known as nationally determined contributions) by 2025. The text also contains the concept of climate justice, recognising that "the financial needs for adaptation in developing countries are estimated at \$215-387 billion per year up to 2030", and that "an estimated \$4.3 trillion per year needs to be invested in clean energy up to 2030, increasing to \$5 trillion per year up to 2050, in order to achieve net zero emissions by 2050".

RED III Renewable Energy Directive: Target 42.5% by 2030

On 31 October, the new Renewable Energy Directive (RED III) was published in the Official Journal of the European Union. The legislation provides for the streamlining of procedures for the granting of permits for new RES plants or the retrofitting of existing ones. The stated goal is to increase the share of renewable energy in the EU's overall energy consumption to 42.5 per cent by 2030, with a further indicative increase of 2.5 per cent to reach the 45 per cent target. All Member States will contribute to the achievement of targets in the transport, industry, building and district heating and cooling sectors. For transport, a combined binding sub-target of 5.5% for advanced biofuels (generally derived from non-food feedstocks) and renewable fuels of non-biological origin (mainly renewable hydrogen and synthetic hydrogen fuels) in the share of renewable energy supplied to the transport sector.

The directive also strengthens the sustainability criteria for the use of biomass for energy purposes. Woody biomass will have to be used according to its maximum economic and environmental added value by applying the principle of cascading utilisation, and subsidies for energy produced using valuable timber (saw logs, veneer logs, industrial quality round wood, etc.) will be prohibited. There will also be stricter rules on compliance with sustainability criteria, which in future will also apply to smaller plants (7.5 MW or more) instead of the 20 MW threshold, as stipulated in the current directive.

The European Environment Agency report on biomass

On 8 November, the European Environment

Agency (EEA) published the report 'The European biomass puzzle - Challenges, opportunities and trade-offs around biomass production and use in the EU'. By analysing data collected from 2000 to



**European
Environment
Agency**

2020, the report examines the role of biomass in protecting the environment on the one hand and the influence of climate change on agricultural and forestry biomass production on the other. The report emphasises the urgency of making decisions on biomass management, which, according to the EEA, is crucial for achieving environmental and climate goals in 2030 and 2050 in areas such as food and energy security, nature conservation, pollution reduction, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The Report states that in 2017, 1.2 billion tonnes of biomass were used in the EU in dry matter of which: 50 per cent was used for food and feed (food, animal feed and livestock bedding); 22 per cent for bioenergy and 28 per cent for biomaterials. According to the EEA, EU policy must stimulate a sustainable use of biomass by finding a balance between its full exploitation according to the European objectives defined by the Green Deal and the preservation of ecosystems.

BRANCHES NTNs workshop in Italy

As part of the GESTA Project (Sustainable Land Management in Abruzzo), the GESTA Association, in collaboration with ITABIA and CNR IBE, organised a forestry harvesting demonstration aimed at making biomass mobilisation more efficient. The idea was to design a working system in which modern mechanisation (processor and forwarder) was well integrated with traditional techniques such as the use of pack animals (horses and mules). To illustrate the innovative aspects, after a visit to the forestry site, we went to the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park, where a workshop was held in which the main stakeholders of the forestry sector (Region, Park, Carabinieri foresters, research bodies, forestry companies and forest management bodies) also participated. During the day, the BRANCHES project was described and participants were given the questionnaire used for the project's SWOT and TOWS analyses. This shows that mechanisation of forestry operations is the only way to restore financial and social sustainability to any silvicultural measures.



Aldo Spapperi

Aldo Spapperi, an Italian entrepreneur in the agricultural mechanisation sector, has recently developed a prototype machine to separate hemp fibre from the hemp stick (canapulo). This innovative machine is able to improve fibre quality and reduce the work involved in obtaining it. The idea stems from a desire to industrialise those manual techniques that Spapperi saw performed in the 1950s when he was a child. Spapperi claims (and we agree with him!) that: "to imagine the future, we must keep the past in mind".



Simon Stiell

Simon Stiell, UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, in his COP28 closing speech said: "Whilst we didn't turn the page on the fossil fuel era in Dubai, this outcome is the beginning of the end" he also added "Now all governments and businesses need to turn these pledges into real-economy outcomes, without delay".



International call to support the forestry sector in Ukraine - Donor conference

During the International Donors' Conference, held in Kiev on 14 December 2023, the conference participants, representing the main national and international organisations and institutions with an interest in the forestry sector, marked to FAO the specific priorities that need to be urgently addressed in Ukraine. At this end requested FAO to liaise with donor countries and funding organisations to support them operationally and financially and requested also FAO to provide technical support for their implementation.



The preliminary recommendations and follow-up activities were sent to conference participants to be acknowledged in the final statement of the workshop report. These included 10 points that will be reviewed by the participants and introduced in the final report as recommendations shared by all. The initial 10 points are given below.

Among the identified priorities, some require immediate action. They include:

- 1.** Prioritize central revision of forestry policies and regulations to be aligned with EU policies to capture recovery of the forestry sector.
- 2.** Establish a Forestry Advisory Network to support the alignment process of Ukraine with the EU forestry policies.
- 3.** Establish partnerships for basic and more incisive investments to unlock the forestry sector's capacity to build sustainable growth.
- 4.** Triggering demining operations and soil remediation in forests by showcasing examples in forestry/agroforestry lands including shelterbelts.

5. Strengthening forest and landscape restoration of degraded lands by the war by also strengthening logistic facilities including the establishment of scientific labs and forestry nurseries.
6. Supporting the strengthening of the forest management plan institute by supporting the rebuilding and widening its field of activities (damage and loss assessment, forest fire monitoring, wood tracking...)
7. Support the use of sustainable wood for a post-war green reconstruction.
8. Strengthening the assessment of damage and losses in the forestry sector affected by the war.
9. Strengthen the use of renewable biomass in circular bioeconomy.
10. Strengthening sustainable management of natural protected forests to strengthen resilience of natural forests to climate change.