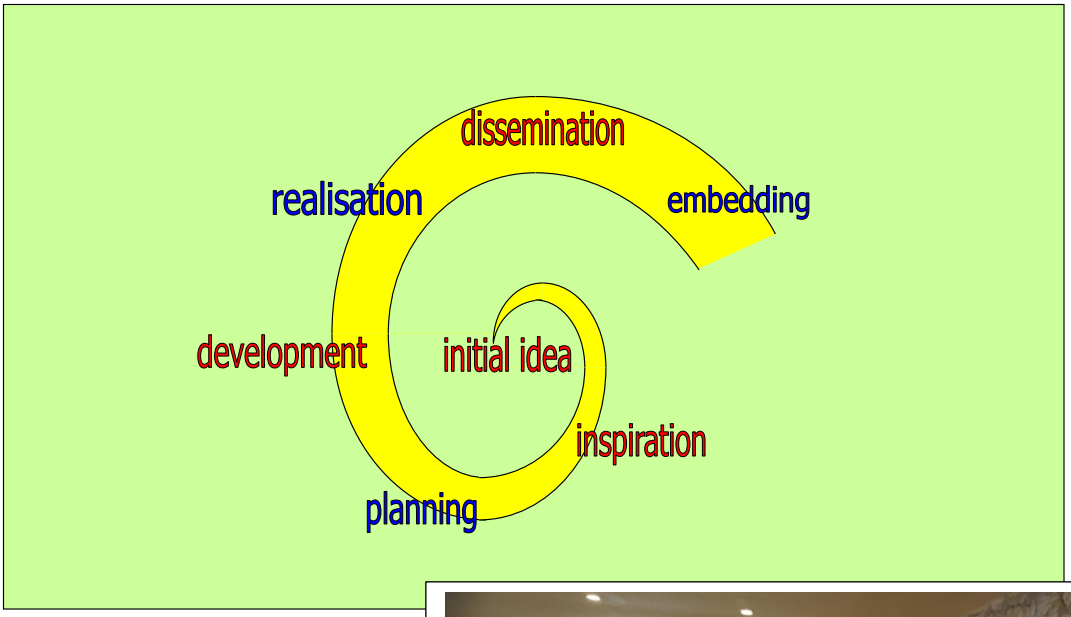
Workshop Innovation Spiral

Chania, 3 July 2017

Interactive session during the final seminar on the AgriSpin

On the 3rd of July 2017 the final seminar on the AgriSpin project took place at MAICH, Chania, Greece. During this seminar participants were invited to take part in an interactive session about the Spiral of Innovations: a model that turned out to be a useful tool during the cross visits in the project. The idea was to stimulate discussion between participants in the seminar and AgriSpin colleagues who had taken part in one or more cross visits about what had been observed. Meanwhile, the interactions could also generate more insights in what innovation processes are all about.

This paper reports about the harvest of this session.



Group work on five questions

The participants divided themselves over the seven stages that had been visualised on the floor. Each group concentrated on one stage in innovation processes. They told each other about their own experiences and what these experiences had taught them.

1. How do you recognise this stage?
2. What are the core actions in this stage?
3. Which actors should be involved in this stage?
4. What are typical pitfalls to avoid in this stage?
5. What must be achieved before entering into the next stage?

For each stage the answers are listed here, and a short discussion is added.

General remarks about the tool

The Spiral of Innovations is not a planning tool. It describes different stages most processes for change go through. It applies to innovation processes just as well as to any initiatives for change. The tool is equally indicated as the Spiral of Initiatives.

Sometimes a process enters a dead end street, and actors need to go back to an earlier stage. Often some stages are repeated several times before it has generated sufficient social capital and evidence that it can continue at a higher level. This is why it is presented as a spiral and not as a linear process.

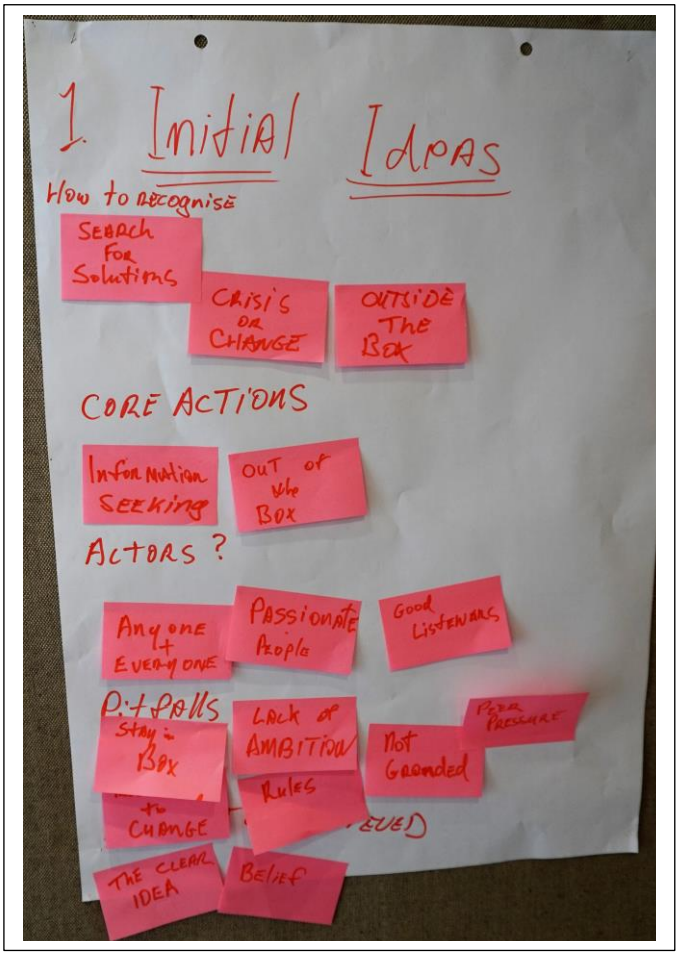
The Spiral helps to identify what is at stake in a certain moment in time. What needs to be done? Who should be connected? And what typical pitfalls should be avoided here? Answers to these questions are different for every stage.

It appears that participants easily recognise all these stages. However, in formal structures most attention goes to the later stages. An initiative is only taken seriously when it has been framed in a project proposal that fits the requirements for funding. Many good ideas never reach that stage. The early stages happen informally, often driven by initiators who are rowing upstream. For creating space for innovations assistance in these early stages is most helpful. To their own surprise, AgriSpin partners discovered in the cross visits that this was what they had been doing in the cases they showed to their visitors. They never took time to reflect on their work, and it was helpful that colleagues from abroad looked over their shoulder.

An important conclusion of the AgriSpin project is that this intermediate function should get more recognition.

Stage 1: initial idea

Someone has an idea for change.



Recognition

- Search for solutions
- Crisis for change
- Outside the box

Core actions

- Information seeking
- Outside of the box

Actors

- Anyone + everyone
- Passionate people
- Good listeners

Pitfalls

- Stay in the box
- Lack of ambition
- Not grounded
- Peer pressure
- Resistance to change
- Rules

Achieved

- The clear idea
- Belief

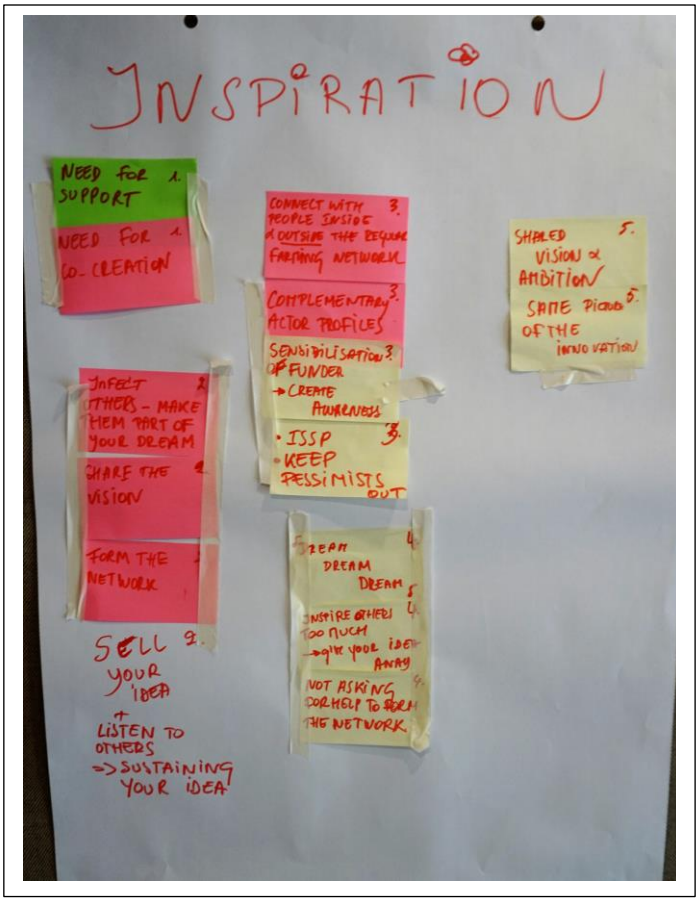
Discussion:

Good ideas can come from everywhere: farmers, researchers, policy makers, members of civil society. We have seen a wide variety of examples in the cases studied in AgriSpin. What matters is that a network of passionate people embrace the idea and have the ambition to bring it further.

Innovators are often persons who come from outside of the system or have been exposed to the world outside. Renewal occurs at the edges of an ecosystem, and not in the centre. There, peer pressure is highest.

To stimulate out of the box thinking it helps to expose people to different realities.

Stage 2: inspiration



Others become inspired and for a network of allies.

Recognition

- Need for support.
- Need for recognition.

Core actions

- Infect (contaminate) others, make them part of your dream.
- Share the vision.
- Form the network.
- Sell your idea and listen to others >> sustaining your idea.

Actors

- Connect with people inside and outside the regular farming network.
- Complementary actor profiles.
- Sensitisation of funder. Create awareness.
- ISSP (?)
- Keep pessimists out

Pitfalls

- Dream, dream, dream.
- Inspire others too much and give your idea away.
- Not asking for help to form your network

Achieved

- Shared vision and ambition.
- Same picture of the innovation

Discussion:

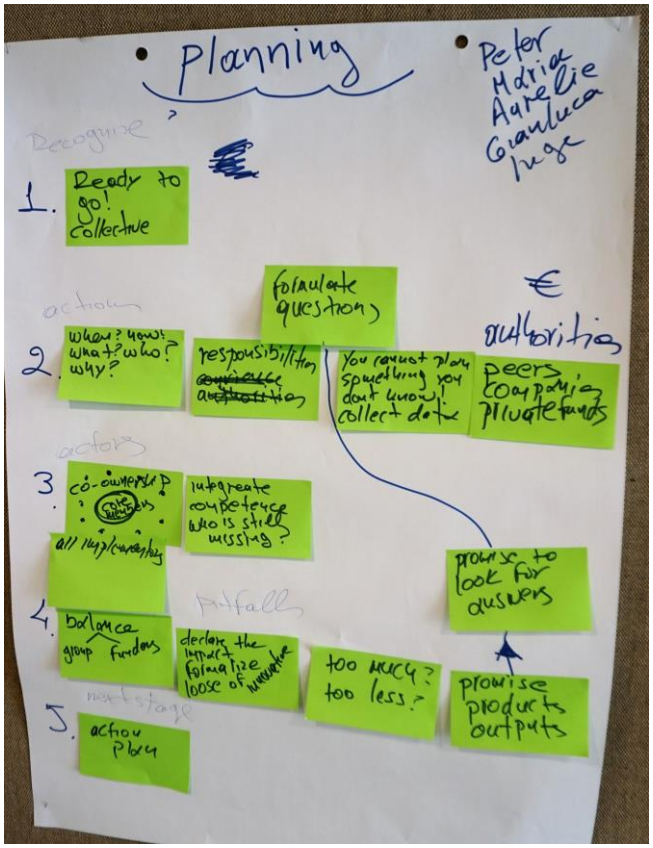
This is the period to build a warm network with people who are willing to help realising a dream. It is more likely that this happens at kitchen tables than at negotiation tables. Also be aware of public meetings where the critics are at the first row. The idea will be killed before it is born.

It is important to build informal relations with people in positions where they can help opening doors in later stages. The key question is: "How can we make our common ambition possible by pooling our resources?"

In AgriSpin intermediate actors (such as innovation support agents) have often been observed as key players for connecting initiators with the right players in the system.

Stage 3: Planning

Initiators negotiate space for experimenting.



Recognition

- Ready to go. Collective [action]

Core actions

- When? How? What? Who? Why?
- Responsibilities.
- Formulate questions.
- You must plan for something you don't know. Collective data.
- [mobilise funds from] authorities, peers, companions, private funds.

Actors

- Co-ownership core actors. All implementers.
- Integrate competences. Who is still missing?

Pitfalls

- [Wrong] balance group <> funders.
- Declare the impact. Formalise, Loss of initiative.
- Too much? Too less?
- Promise product outputs.

Achieved

- Action plan.

Discussion:

The planning stage is usually poorly understood, especially by funding agencies. For developing innovations, actors need a safe space where they can learn, try, fail, try again, mobilise expertise when they need it and respond to what they discover. This is not possible when the project plan is rigid, with detailed steps, contracted suppliers and calculable results to be delivered. Such project agreements are comfortable for funders because they are easy to control, but nothing new can come out when the results are predefined.

For creating space the group should negotiate with funders and eventually other authorities about the questions that are to be answered at the end of the development stage, the way along which the group intends to look for these answers and the resources which are needed to do so.

In the AgriSpin cases, innovations often went through step by step processes of planning, developing, back to inspiration and new planning stages. Good results at small scale make it possible to scale up. In many feedback seminars at the end of cross visits complaints could be heard about strangulating funding requirements by regional authorities.

Stage 4: Development

In experiments a new practice is being developed.

Recognition

- Implementation of plan.

Core actions

- Budget and know-how allocation.
- Interaction of the actors.

Actors

- Relevant stakeholders.
- Actors involved in planning.
- Specific experts.

Pitfalls

- Time management.
- Communication (internal / external).
- Conflict management.

Achieved

- Reflection about goals achievement.
- Understand the role of several actors.
- Piloting.
- Evidence based proof that it works.

Discussion:

This is the stage of the discovery journey. There is space for experimenting in a relatively safe environment. This space should allow for trial and error, for 'clever' mistakes (learning from failure), for responding to what occurs, for involving expertise when this appears to be useful. The most common pitfall is rigid plans which do not allow for surprises or creativity.

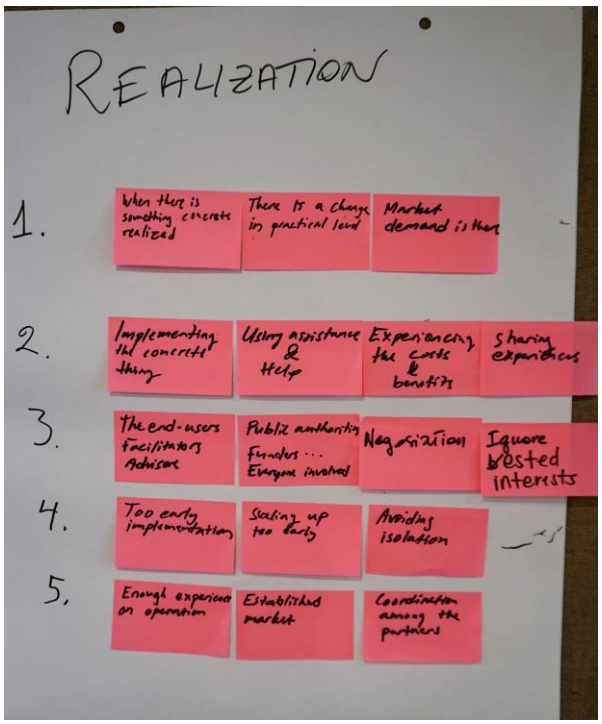
Reporting should be done differently as well. Actors in the 'enabling environment' should keep confidence in the process. 'Tick boxing' (checking forms and figures) is a poor way of maintaining confidence. Story telling (e.g. 'Learning Histories') can be a powerful tool for doing it better. Communication about small successes, but also showing how difficult it sometimes can be, is important.

When we define stakeholders as actors with interests that might be at stake when the innovation becomes successful, it is useful to include in the learning process persons who are familiar with those stakeholders and who can 'prepare the soil'. If such stakeholders only hear about the new practice once it is ready, something has gone wrong, and problems can be expected in the realisation stage.

A typical pitfall which also should be mentioned here is staying in this stage too long, because it is relatively safe and there is always something to be further improved. On the other hand, without convincing evidence of the quality of the new practice it might not survive the next stage of realisation. Finding the right moment is an art.

Stage 5: Realisation

The new practice is implemented at full scale.



Recognition

- When there is something concrete realised.
- There is a change at practical level.
- Market demand is there.

Core actions

- Implementing the concrete thing.
- Using assistance and help.
- Experiencing the costs and benefits.
- Sharing experiences.

Actors

- The end users / facilitators / advisors.
- Public authorities / funders …. / everyone involved.
- Negotiation.
- Avoiding isolation.

Pitfalls

- Too early implementation.
- Starting up too early.
- Ignore vested interests.

Achieved

- Enough experiences on operation.
- Established market.
- Coordination among the partners.

Discussion:

In the realisation stage, the results of the experiments become a practice to be implemented. The partners leave their safe space and bring their child into the real world. Some stakeholders will embrace it, others will show resistance because their interests are at stake. Negotiation usually is a core activity here, which requires different actors such as mediators. It is helpful if they were involved in previous stages as well. The market is an important indicator for acceptance (depending on the type of innovation, of course).

Stage 6: Dissemination

Others adopt the new practice.

Recognition

- Dissemination should be embedded in all stages.
- Different types of info need to be disseminated in different stages.
- Information pitfall for dissemination.
- Co-creation / co-ownership.
- Positive infective virus (contamination).

Core actions

- Opportunities to see (observation).
- Dissemination strategies for different target groups.

Actors

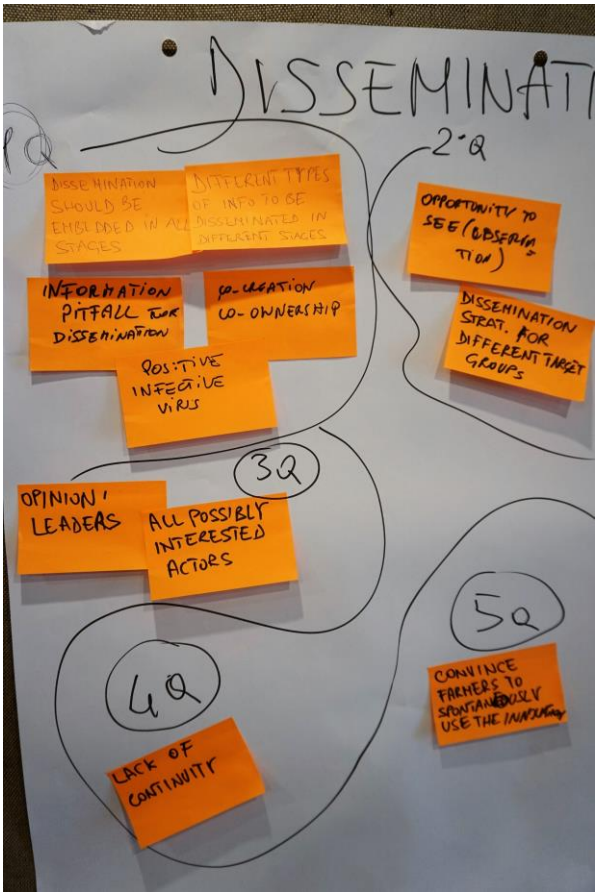
- Opinion leaders.
- All possibly interested actors.

Pitfalls

- Lack of continuity.

Achieved

- Convince farmers to spontaneously use the innovation.



Discussion:

Good innovations spread by themselves. To put it more precisely: good new practices (novelties) become innovations without much effort. It can be speeded up when potential users can easily learn about them.

A typical pitfall to be added here is the approach of "I know what is good for you". Many people want change but nobody wants to be changed. The essential element of dissemination is the connection between what potential users want and the contribution of the new practice to those desires.

This is not the same as 'demand driven'. As Henri Ford once put it: "If I had asked my clients what they wanted, they would have said: faster horses!"

Many new practices or are not just copied, but used as building bricks for innovation processes elsewhere. What has developed for certain circumstances should be adapted in a different environment.

Stage 7: Embedding

Structures adapt to the new practice.

Recognition

- Innovation > mainstream.

Core actions

- Create an enabling environment for change.
- Advocacy tools.
- Training.

Actors

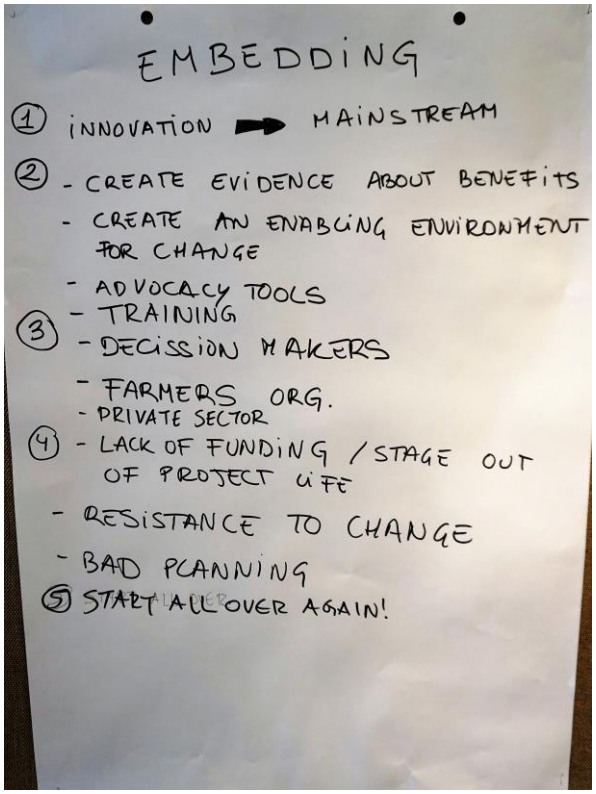
- Decision makers.
- Farmers organisations.
- Private sector.

Pitfalls

- Lack of funding / stage out of project life.
- Resistance to change.
- Bad planning.

Achieved

- Start all over again.



Discussion:

Embedding means that the enabling environment accepts the new practice and adapts its structures so that it can become mainstream. And then, indeed, there will be people again with good ideas for change, and a new spiral can start.

A difficulty to overcome is that practitioners at one side and decision makers at the other often live in different 'bubbles' of society, each with their own rules, games, tensions and images of reality. For example: how do managers recognise the importance of facilitators with the proper skills for multi actor innovation processes as long as they do not experience the need themselves?

EIP has created a range of new possibilities for stimulating innovations in bottom up multi actor processes. It means a paradigm shift from the Transfer of Technology model to the assumption that innovations emerge from interaction between relevant actors. As long as regional decision makers in their capacity of managing authorities have not made this paradigm shift themselves, they will not make use of these opportunities for creating a conducive enabling environment for innovations.

The challenge is to amplify the good examples that are being created at present, and to create opportunities for dialogue.