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DOCUMENT SUMMARY

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**Authors: Cristina Micheloni**

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**Project coordinator:** The James Hutton Institute

ABSTRACT

**Demonstration of “system” topics, the case of organic farming in Friuli Venezia Giulia (IT)**

Succesfull organic farming implementation requires a system approach, so the case of demo activities organized by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Association for Organic Agriculture (AIAB-APROBIO FVG) gives the opportunity to understand how to engage farmers on topics of indirect application and long term effect, such as soil management. Each year the association organizes a on-farm demo day on “know your soil and how to manage it”. Each year the farm hosting the demo is different and in 2018 a subtopic on “how to mesure soil fertility” was added.

The case suggests the following recommendations:

1. the topic should be perceived as relevant by farmers
2. demo should be part of a broader learning strategy
3. number of participants is not, *per se*, an indication of success
4. even basic topics whose implementation evolves over time, can well fit into a yearly demo and, in the long term, it is possible to have it aknowldged as a sensitive issue and to monitor the real impact
5. the moment of the demo will never be the perfect one
6. presenters need soft skills besides good technical/scientific competence and farmers’ presentations are essential
7. the host farmer should be acknowledged by the community as a “good farmer”
8. even very complicated (system approach) topics can be faced in a peer-to-peer way and demo is a useful part of the whole strategy.

More infos: [www.aiab-aprobio.fvg.it](http://www.aiab-aprobio.fvg.it/); www.plaid-h2020.eu

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[1 Demo context 7](#_Toc511905505)

[1.1 The value chain 7](#_Toc511905506)

[1.2 Typical farm characteristics 7](#_Toc511905507)

[1.3 AKIS 7](#_Toc511905508)

[1.4 Sustainability challenges 8](#_Toc511905509)

[2 Demonstration summary 8](#_Toc511905510)

[3 Governance: set up and organisation 8](#_Toc511905511)

[3.1 Organiser(s) and history 9](#_Toc511905512)

[3.2 Funding 9](#_Toc511905513)

[3.3 Host(s) 9](#_Toc511905514)

[3.4 Gender 9](#_Toc511905515)

[3.5 Objective(s) 9](#_Toc511905516)

[3.6 Topic(s) 10](#_Toc511905517)

[3.7 Access 10](#_Toc511905518)

[4 Demonstration event 10](#_Toc511905519)

[4.1 Visitors 11](#_Toc511905520)

[4.2 Communication & Mediation 11](#_Toc511905521)

[4.3 Active participation 11](#_Toc511905522)

[4.4 Doing business 11](#_Toc511905523)

[4.5 Role of sustainability 11](#_Toc511905524)

[4.6 Unforeseen circumstances 11](#_Toc511905525)

[4.7 Plans vs. practice 11](#_Toc511905526)

[4.8 Participants feedback 12](#_Toc511905527)

[5 Motives, learning and networking 12](#_Toc511905528)

[5.1 Reasons to attend demos 12](#_Toc511905529)

[5.2 Forms of learning 13](#_Toc511905530)

[5.3 Content of learning 14](#_Toc511905531)

[5.4 Outcomes of learning 14](#_Toc511905532)

[5.5 Networking 14](#_Toc511905533)

[6 Anchoring: Application of demo lessons by participants 14](#_Toc511905534)

[6.1 Anchoring related to the present demo 15](#_Toc511905535)

[6.2 Stimulating anchoring 15](#_Toc511905536)

[6.3 Anchoring related to earlier demos 15](#_Toc511905537)

[7 Scaling: Application of demo lessons by the wider farming community 15](#_Toc511905538)

[7.1 Retrospective examples of scaling 16](#_Toc511905539)

[7.2 Prospective assessment of scaling: Impact pathways 16](#_Toc511905540)

[8 Case study reflection 17](#_Toc511905541)

[8.1 Facilitating and impeding factors for successful demonstrations 17](#_Toc511905542)

[8.2 Impact of demonstrations 18](#_Toc511905543)

[8.3 Key lessons from this case study 18](#_Toc511905544)

[9 Annexes 19](#_Toc511905545)

[9.1 Data sources 19](#_Toc511905546)

[9.2 Data collection methods 19](#_Toc511905547)

# Demo context

## The value chain

The organic sector in Italy is quite fragmented and relationship between farmers managing similar production systems are weak due to 1) the fact that usually they are located in distant places from each other and 2) often they do not know each other and 3) the large majority of organic farmers are small-medium farms and that means that the farmers and his/her family are directly engaged in all production phases and have rarely the time for training, up-dating and social relations with colleagues or interaction with researchers and advisers. It should be noted, nevertheless, that in the organic sector farms are, on average, larger that in conventional and in the last 10 years more and more larger farms enter the organic business.

Counteracting the above mentioned negative characteristics it is to be said that organic farmers are generally younger that their conventional colleagues and hold a higher education and that facilitates interaction, will to improve and learn and also the mood to move and travel in order to see other’s experiences.

Advisory dedicated and specialized for organic farming is rarely available and often the advisers active in the organic sector are not specialized in specific production systems (i.e. not specialized in horticulture vs arable systems or in pig production vs laying hens, but mainly working on all “organic plant production” or “organic animal husbandry”). This is due to the limited training and education opportunity in organic farming and to the fact that, as organic farmers are scattered on the territory, the market for “organic advisers” is not allowing for specialization.

There is no public advisory for organic (nor for conventional) but the Regional Board for Agriculture supplies funds for associations or consortia or other groups to support some specific topics (i.e. IPM approach and meteo data collection and use) that since 3 years are granted also for the organic sector (so the integrated approach in arable, vegetable, fruit and olive production can be implemented within the organic systems) through the regional association for the development of organic farming (AIAB-APROBIO FVG). The advisers are all private (free lance or working for advisory companies) and often supply their services to associations and unions. Viticulture is a different sector, also in organic, as the large majority of advisory is supplied by private consultants directly to the farms, with a one-to-one business agreement.

Input providers are less relevant in the organic AKIS than in the conventional groups but in case of really “new” offers, in terms of machinery or plant protection products or varieties they easily attract the interest and the participation of farmers and advisers. Often the knowledge provided by input producers does not reach farmers directly but through the advisers or the associations.

Researchers are not so involved in organic as a system but mainly provide specific (on spot) knowledge. For example entomologists are consulted in case of new pests or in case of anomalous behaviour of pests on crops; soil scientists are consulted for new plantations etc. As a consequence their knowledge does not directy reach the farmers but it is mediated by advisers. This leads to the problem of very limited contact between farmers and researchers who risk to miss the opportunity to know farmers needs and to have a feed-back on their activity.

Consumers (both as individuals or in groups) are quite interactive with the organic farmers and have often the will to know in depth production processes and their impact on environment and product quality. It is not rare for consumers to participate to organic farmers days and also to organic technical events. Consumers who are members of buyers groups are, in general, more keen to participate and to report to farmers their requests. Consumers often cooperate or act together with NGOs, i.e. environmental NGOs are their share several goals.

Local public authorities (municipalities, healt authority, agriculture agency etc.) have more a regulatory and inspective role. With exceptions, they rarely participate to the AKIS even if, for specific topics, they are sometimes invited to farmers meetings and training events.

Buyers and market actors have a limited role in the AKIS, if not for the market companies who set up their own supply chains with private labels and/or standards.

## Typical farm characteristics

Organic agriculture in Friuli Venezia Giulia Region is practiced by different kinds of farms and farmers. They differ for:

* location, from steep Alpine areas to large plain, including hilly and sea-cost
* climatic conditions, depending on location but also on specific micro-climate
* soils, being an area where the majority of flat soil were originated by rivers and where the glaciers shaped the hills rows the soil characteristics and qualities vary greatly even within the same farm
* main production sector. Depending on the area main crops are wine-grape, apples, arable crops such as corn, soy-bean and wheat/barley and vegetables, mainly for direct marketing. Animal husbandry is quite limited in terms of number of farms and in size (with exceptions) and includes laying hens, dairy cows and to lesser extent beef cattle, broilers and pigs
* farm size varies greatly, from 1,5 ha in urban areas to hundreds in more extensive situations that converted to organic in the last 10 years
* professional skills can vary and it is not rare to have organic farmers with a totally different background
* farm structure. Even if family farming is the majority, in most recent years farms with employees, managers etc. join the sector. It is basically related to the involvement of larger farms.

## AKIS

Friuli Venezia Giulia is a small autonomous Italian Region (higher level of self-determination compared to regular regions), borders with Austria and Slovenia and hosts several linguistic minorities. These characteristics reflects also in the agricultural sector: AKIS is almost completely regionally based, with limited inputs from the National activities; farmers participating to the demo of the Regional organic association are mainly living and working in the region but, on specific topics where there is a high reputation of knowledge, participants come also from Veneto and Emilia Romagna and sometimes also from more distant Italian regions. There is no interchange with Austria and a limited exchange with Slovenia.

The farming community directly or indirectly involved is regionally based.

The most relevant feature is the diversity, of farm size and typology and of farmers background, training and market orientation.

## Sustainability challenges

**Environmental challenge**: organic farmers are quite sensitive to environmental issues and in the region main challenges are related to 1) soil fertility enhancement and maintenance; 2) plant protection in the changing climatic conditions; 3) genetic materials preservation and evolution.

**Economic challenges**: especially for medium size farm even in the organic sector is the possibility to grant a sufficient income to farmers (and family) with the string competition of supermarkets and products imported from distant and cheaper markets. This was not the case in organic till 2-4 years ago.

**social challenge**: to maintain farming in marginal areas such as mountains. It is not only an economic issue but it is also linked to the quality of life those areas can offer to families.

Another challenge is the generational passage, as many farmers are over 60 and often their sons have other professions and do not intend to switch to farming. At the same time there are young families or individuals who are interested in farming and would like to enter the sector but they do not have a farm (from the family) and to buy one is absolutely too expensive. To find a way to facilitate their access to farming could also give a help to the first problem.

# Demonstration summary

The main topics of the demo activity offered by AIAB-APROBIO FVG are:

* soil management (including machinery, test to assess/measure fertility, use of cover crops, crop rotations)
* pest & disease management (preventative measures and combined used of practices and products)
* new crops and new varieties (also variety mixtures, heritage varieties, evolutionary and participatory breeding).

The demo activities aim to offer examples of “good organic management” able to be alternative to conventional farming but also an improvement within the organic community.

They are more and more attracting also conventional farmers and that offers the opportunity of exchanges beyond the organic community and works in both senses.

In the specific case the demo day focused on soil quality and properties as a result of organic management.

The main objective of the demo was to increase farmers awareness on the fact that their management choices impact soil quality and fertility and, as a consequence, their productions.

Related objectives were:

* to explain how to assess soil characteristics with tools and knowledge available on farm (no need of labs or complementary to lab analysis)
* to share farming practices that help in a proper soil management strategy (0 plowing, sod seeding, green manures etc.)
* discuss more appropriate (from agronomic but also economic point of view) strategies in the different environments and farm situations.

Methods used: all the demo day was open air and included:

* in the field presentation of a geologist (interacting with farmers and advisers) who explained in practice and within holes digged in several parts of the farm, the origin of soils, how to assess soil characteristics and how to read the signs of management impact;
* semi-structured discussions
* lunch in the farm with informal discussions
* guided observation of soil micro-vertebrates (in different areas of the farm characterized by different management)
* guided observation of spontaneous flora as a indicator of soil characteristics and problems.

The event invitation and description is available here: http://www.aiab-aprobio.fvg.it/13-07-18-%E2%80%A2-seminario-sul-terreno/

# Governance: set up and organisation

## Organiser(s) and history

The demo was organized by AIAB-APROBIO FVG and specifically by the extension group within the association that usually organizes about 8 demo events per year, on different topics.

The demo on “soil management” is a recurring one as it was organized for the first time in 2008 and become a yearly event in 2016. It takes places in different farms year after year but always in farms managed by farmers acknowledged by colleagues as particularly skilled (avant-garde farmers).

The reason why it become a regular topic is related to the fact that farmers declare it as a main problem/interest in different cropping systems, from greenhouse to perennials, from arable to fodder and pasture. At the same time it is a topic appealing also conventional farmers and advisers.

Often also consumers/citizens are interested and participate as well as authorities, for example who in charge of soil protection or nitrate directive or water protection.

As it required a lot of practical experience and skills and not only theoretical knowledge it is a topic where demo perfectly fits.

Each year the association plans the demos in different farms, in 2018 the “soil demo” was planned for early June but due to weather conditions (heavy rain), that led to very few participants and limited program, it was repeated on July 13th.

Comparing to previous years the organizers:

* kept larger time for informal exchange
* choose the experts to guide the day considering not only their knowledge but also their skills in involving and “entertaining” participants
* include the lunch as a part of the program.

The previous events on soil management were:

* shorter (half a day or 2 hours)
* with one main presenter (instead of 3 in 2018)
* with less time and organized space for discussion.

## Funding

The demo day is totally supported by the association and participants only gave a contribution for the lunch.

It is possible to gather funds from private sponsors (input producers, machinery..) but the association prefers to maintain a neutral position as it may hamper credibility and could limit the possibility to express own opinions.

## Host(s)

The demo event was held in Azienda Agricola Pitton and Andrea Pitton, co-owner, is a farmer largely acknowledge in the community as a pioneer and as particularly skilled farmer. He used to be the association vice-president and has always being promoting demo events.

His farm is totally organic since 12 years and mainly producing vegetables (greenhouses and open-field) for direct marketing, but includes also arable crops to facilitate crop rotation.

The farm is also quite well-known among consumers/citizens as “good farmer” and the fact that almost all the products are directly sold facilitates the involvement of consumers also into demonstration events. As a consequence at the demo day also some consumers participated.

The “soil” topic is quite important for Andrea Pitton and when asked about his farming strategy he always refer to soil management. He always participated to previous editions and asked to be the guest he immediately accepted.

## Gender

The advisers organize the events and within the association they are relatively balanced (2 women and 4 men) and the overall coordinator is a women. This is quite better than standard agriculture of the area where men presence is clearly a majority and there are very few women in higher positions.

The farmer’s families are engaged in the holding of the demonstration and in this specific case the farmer wife had an active role in the on-site organization and participants orienting.

Out of the 3 experts engaged in the guided demo one is a women with a peer role to her colleagues.

## Objective(s)

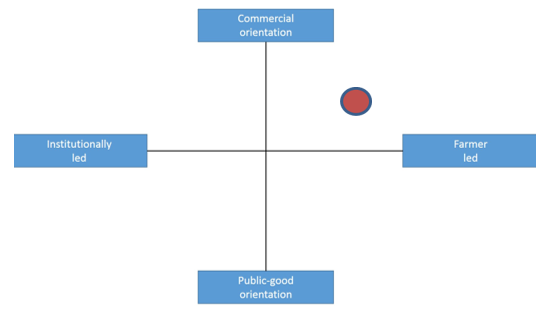
The association (organizer) is largely composed by farmers (besides advisers, consumers and local authorities) and with the demo events aims at 3 main objectives:

1. improve the skills of the organic farmers
2. propose the organic methodologies to conventional farmers
3. stimulate the exchange of experiences in general among farmers and between farmers and advisers.

There is no conflict among the objectives and as secondary goals the following can be identified:

* strengthen the image of the association as a knowledge hub, and appeal other members
* communicate to consumers and other non-farming actor what organic farming is
* test new training methodologies.

The farmer hosting the event shares the scope of the association he is member of and besides sees in the event an opportunity to improve his/her social image as well as to promote the image of the farm towards consumers.



What can be challenging for the association is the balance between public good orientation and commercial orientation because at farmers (and even more consumers) eyes often what has a commercial orientation can be bias. In other terms: if the organizer is payed by a company to organize the event it looses credibility.

Especially in organic farming the balance can be difficult to find and sometimes naive, as anyhow farmers have a commercial activity that should not affect the credibility of their practices or their skills.

## Topic(s)

The broad topic is “organic soil management” but each year, depending on the host farm, the techniques explained (and the outcomes) differ.

The topic is very relevant in organic farming and is very difficult, probably the most difficult, to explain to new-comers into organic. That’s reason why the topic is recurrent every year and why “good farmers” are very important to transmit it to others.

Besides, in unusual climatic years (that are more and more frequent) soil management is strategic to improve farms resilience in any farming system but especially in non irrigated crops.

Friuli Venezia Giulia Region used to be very rainy, so water availability and high temperatures in Summer have never been a problem. The situation changed significantly since 6 years ago and farmers face great difficulties in adapting their techniques and expectations.

That is why the association, after discussing it within their membership, decided to maintain the demo topic each year. Besides there are frequent innovation related to the topic, in terms of machinery, that can be shown.

## Access

Since several years attendance was good and so there was no special effort in increasing accessibility, if not towards new organic farmers. On the other hand it was decided not to increase too much the number of participants per demo event in order to facilitate interaction. In case the organizer prefers to repeat the event instead of enlarging it.

As the topic is so relevant the association decided not to request any payment to participants and to set the related expenses in its own yearly budget.

To increase attractivity 2 aspects were acknowledged as strategic:

1. choice of the farm (high reputation)
2. choice of the presenters, not only knowledgable but also real facilitators with skills in participatory management.

The event was disseminated only digitally through the association mailing lists and social media (and widely shared). It was also disseminated by a regional radio station and few newsletters.

# Demonstration event

## Visitors

The event was attended by 47 participants: 35 farmers, all from the Region; 6 advisers, 5 from the Region and 1 from Veneto Region; 6 other participants, consumers and citizens.

The farmers were 20 organic since more that 5 years, 5 newly converted and 5 conventional. The advisers were all involved totally or partly in organic farming.

The average age was about 48 years and it represent a “younger” set compared to the average farmer and adviser age. Women were a minority but still more than usually present in the farming community: 4 female farmers, 2 female advisers and 3 female citizens.

35 participants also participated to a previous event on “organic soil management” and 42 already participated to an event organized by the association.

## Communication & Mediation

The whole demo event was in the field with no posters or lectures, only the introduction to two phases (on microfauna and weeds) started with a short power point presentation (under a canopy). The non use of other means was decided by the organizers based on previous experiences. But for this kind of methodology the choice of the presenters is a key (see above) and also the role of the facilitation, supplied by the association advisers, is strategic.

## Active participation

The participants were asked to be active during the whole event and they were. They entered the “holes”, touch, smell and taste the soil an compare their impressions. They did their diagnosis of the soil status and propose managing solutions that were discussed with the host farmer, advisers and the other participants.

Of course with differences, but in general participants were very keen to actively contribute. The number of participants was influencing very much the possibility to interact and the will of participants to interact, probably a larger groups would have limited the interaction.

## Doing business

That was not the purpose. Nevertheless some participating farmers join the association afterwards, if this can be considered association business.

## Role of sustainability

The aspect of sustainability more debated was the environmental one, even is economic sustainability of the farms is its consequence.

Soil fertility is *per se* an environmental challenge and it was debated mainly in relation to climate change, water availability and organic matter needs. On turn it represent a challenge for economic sustainability, especially for small/medium size farms.

## Unforeseen circumstances

Originally the event was scheduled for June but extremely rainy events lead organizers to cancel it.

It was rescheduled for July 13th and no major obstacles were faced. In the period the very high temperatures could make difficult to stand the whole day in the field, but moments in the shade, lunch under a canopy and availability of water and drinks made it possible to go through the whole program.

## Plans vs. practice

In general plan and reality nicely overlapped, probably due to the fact that it is a recurrent event. Organizers were expected some more new-comers and less “usual participants”. The organizers have no explanation for that but probably it depends very much on other events going on in the same day and on the work load at each farm, accumulated during the bad weather weeks before the event.

## Participants feedback

In general participants gave a positive feed-back on the demo event in terms of

* interest for the topic
* knowledge gained
* inspiration for their farm and work
* atmosphere of exchange.

Some criticism was expressed on the moment the event was offered, but it was explained that it was originally planned for June (where farmers in theory could have more time available) but postponed due to weather conditions. Another criticism from few participants was the length (longer than previous editions), even if it was not compulsory to remain for the whole program. On the other hand other participants appreciated the length as it allowed for exchange and informal interaction.

# Motives, learning and networking

## Reasons to attend demos

**Attitudes and perceptions**

The participants declared to participate to the event because they want to learn something new or not completely clear to them, to be used in their farm management. This was the main declared reason both for new comers as well as for the participants who already attended the previous editions.

But besides this declared scope the relevance of networking was acknowledge as well. Also the idea of having a role in the development of organic farming in the region (especially the “older” organic farmers) was mentioned.

The participants often participate also to other demo events (on average they declared to participate to 2-3 demo events per year, on different topics).

As the majority of the participants were family farmers or farm managers they are the ones who participate to this kind of events, while other persons of the farm, workers, relatives not directly involved in decision-making etc. do not. There are few exceptions where within the family there is a division of tasks, for example one manages the field and one the animals, and in such case each person participate to related demos.

In general farmers perceive the attendance to demo events as a positive moment or a good investment of time, nevertheless, especially during busy periods, they feel they have to reduce to the minimum the time outside their farm and that’s why usually only one participates.

**Norms**

The participants reported the following:

* on the reasons for other farmers to participate they expect to share the same motivations, adding for new-comers the need to see in practice how they can work in their farm with a method they did not apply so far.
* Andrea Pitton is widely acknowledged as a good farmer, someone to learn from. This is due to his success in terms of quality of soils and products and is supported by the fact that often training courses ask him to host stagiares. Besides Andrea is a good communicator, very informal but very successful.
* They either directly know Andrea or have been told by colleagues about his farm and activities.
* there are other farmers working as Andrea but not too many and often they are not keen to share their knowledge. What is to be noted that several of these farmers do participate to demo events hosted by colleagues but are never offering their own farm for events.

**Practicalities**

The July event was a “second choice”, due to weather. Of course June would have been better fitting in the farmers agenda. Location is quite central in the Region and easy to reach. The open area and the shaded location can accommodate many people. No similar events were reported in 2018 and the previous year in the region.

Participants and also non-participants (due to time constraints) request to have the same event in more farms and several in their own farms.

All participants declared they will take into consideration what they learned in their daily work, even if it is more a system approach than a specific technique and it means it should be adapted on a site specific level. That explains why they would like to have the event in their farm to facilitate adaptation with the help of colleagues and experts. After the event organizers are usually contacted by several participating farmers to have guidance on how to apply what they learned in their specific system or to have a confirmation that what they do is correct.

## Forms of learning

The event was quite informal, even if structured in advance in some moments the control was not complete. Nevertheless spontaneity helped a lot in the exchange and in putting participants at ease and willing to share.

None of the participants claimed for the confusion that in few moments was potentially annoying, nor for some questions that remained open and could not find a 100% solution.

The learning style observed (not directly asked to the participants) were mainly verbal and physical, depending on the specific presenter, but those styles supported a later logical approach. For example the proposed sensorial assessment of soil (look, touch, smell, taste) initially proposed as a sort of game, was later explained rationally and contextualized. This approach was very appreciated and acknowledged as helpful (in the FG).

## Content of learning

As explained in the beginning of the demo event, the attempt was not to offer “ready for use” solutions but to 1) explain a system approach; 2) explain why the proposed approach is good; 3) offer tools for assessing own situation; 4) propose examples describing the practical implementation of the system approach.

A system approach is not easy to communicate and to have it accepted. Participants who came for the first time at the demo event, from time to time, tried to ask “OK, but in my specific case should I do this or that..” or tend to focus on a very specific aspect, neglecting the whole.

On a contrary the participants who attended also previous editions of the demo event highlighted that they appreciate the concept and keep on participating because they need more knowledge to strengthen their capacity to implement it in their own farming system. They also appreciate the “examples” as sources of inspiration and as a way to help them to reach the practical implementation.

In general the participants received the informations as tools to be re-elaborated in their own situation and are aware of the need for their own engagement.

An important point was the explanation of “assessment” methods, that are not linked to a specific system but can be used broadly if the interpretation frame is clear. Only after showing the assessment tools the demo went into specific operations description.

## Outcomes of learning

All participants perceived the event as relevant for their farms and in general for a good farming approach.

Considering the questions proposed by participants there was a clear commitment to bring the techniques and the knowledge back to their own farms even if, in some moments, there were comments like “this cannot work in my soil” or “I cannot do it because...”. Even if it was highlighted that the system approach needs site/system specific adaptation and that the scope of the demo event was to empower participants to manage the approach within their own farm some request such “how should I do it in my soil..” came out during the event and also after the event. To communicate a system approach is much more difficult that a specific product or operation, but as the demo event is only a part of the organizers training offer, further support in the implementation is available through other tools (newsletter, seminars, direct farm advisory etc.). In this broader perspective the fact that the demo event maintains some questions open can be functional to the scope.

During the focus group farmers declared they brought home useful knowledge they already use or will make use of, or that they found confirmation of opinions/impressions they had already.

## Networking

This aspect was observed (and monitored) mainly during the on-farm lunch. Several participants declared they were happy to meet specific colleagues or to have the chance to get in touch with some new colleagues. But when asked if it was a reason to participate they declared it is more a “side” result and not a goal.

Nevertheless the level of engagement during the discussion and also the declarations expressed during the focus group seem to give higher relevance to the networking possibilities. The goal of networking can be different depending on the farmers: 1) exchange of technical experiences as they work on similar systems or in the same area; 2) exchange of ideas, approaches or opinions- not linked to geographic reasons; 3) commercial, in terms of products or services.

# Anchoring: Application of demo lessons by participants

## Anchoring related to the present demo

The question was proposed to a selected group of participants at the end of the event and at the focus group.

In terms of principle they all agreed that they will apply the learned/confirmed/improved system approach in the soil management. In general they were all enthusiast of the day and excited by the knowledge they gained.

But when asked for a preliminary plan of implementation (starting from which practices, what had to change, when they would seed green manures or change plough...) no clear planning (ideas for planning) was reported.

Different situation for some farmers who already participated to previous events, who already started to apply the approach and have already implemented some practices. They were also able to identify bottlenecks in the further improvement of their system, i.e. investments needed or contractors available etc.

The assessment tools were the part of the demo almost every participant declared will use immediately (previous events participants partly already do).

## Stimulating anchoring

Several tool for exchange of scientific and practical knowledge on the “soil” topic, specifically thought for organic farmers, area available (publications and videos are available on farmknowlegde.org) but their impact is not as efficient as a direct/personal exchange, such a as a demo day.

For next year the association plans to maintain the demo day on “organic soil management” implementing it in another farm and, if possible, to have another similar demo event in a different farming systems.

Besides, a new tool is under preparation by the association: a kit for monitoring soil microbial activity that the farmer can use by his/her own and compare the results with colleagues. It is a tool developed in Canada and USA and getting popular in EU as well, here is an example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vru12OYgU7I>

For 2019 and following years anchoring will be stimulating through the actions described above, what is still to be develop in detail is the strategy for connecting them in more impacting way. The FG highlighted the need for a broad strategy including more actions and tools in order to give continuity on the topic. It was commented that if farmers hear/see/read the same recommendations/topics recurrently, their sensitivity increases and potentially also awareness and the will to review working methods based on it.

## Anchoring related to earlier demos

The demo event is a recurring yearly event (see 4.1). 35 participants already addented previous editions and other 7 participated to previous demo organized by AIAB-APROBIO FVG on other topics. This allowed to assess anchoring of previous events and potential links to 2018 edition.

At the focus group meeting half of the participants (4) also participated to previous demo event on the same topic in the past. 3 of them reported that they implemented at least some elements of what they learned and are quite aware of what they can still do and why they did not so far (bottlenecks).

The other participant reported that even if he agrees in principle he is not yet fully convinced he can apply it in his specific farm and end declares the will to improve the knowledge about the topic in order to decide if to step into implementation or not.

All participants were male, two women invited could not participate to the FG but later, on the phone, they declared more or less the same opinions.

The adviser who participated to the FG reported a higher attention by several farmers, in the last 2 years, to the topic but it was not possible to attribute it directly to the demo activities. More realisticly it is a combination of events that enhances the interest and within it demo plays a role.

All FG participants report that soil assessment tools (stresses in 2018 demo but also proposed in previous editions) are known by farmers but not used.

# Scaling: Application of demo lessons by the wider farming community

## Retrospective examples of scaling

The issue was discussed by the focus group and two examples were identified:

**1) conservation farming**- huge amount of dissemination events and efforts and good economic support from RDP. But very few farms apply it in the region and even fewer in a proper way. The bottlenecks were identified in 1) lack of real will and commitment to implement a technique requiring a different approach and not only a change of machinery; 2) cost of machinery for small-medium farms; 3) age of conventional farmers, making them reluctant to invest and change approach;

**2) permanent green cover in vineyards** – strongly supported by local authorities but also already implemented by a small but good group of “vanguard” farmers. After few years it become mainstream, even before the economic support of RDP. The reasons for the success were identified in: 1) many farmers used to do it in the past or at least remind somebody who did it, so it was not so difficult to accept; 2) it was seen in “good farms” not only in the Region; 3) it was not requiring large investments; 4) it was applicable progressively, so increasing confidence and correcting/adapting the technique year after year.

In both cases demo had a role but it is difficult to assess how relevant it was. Anyhow a relevant impact was attributed in both cases to the possibility to see the innovation implemented by a farmer, especially if by a “high reputation farmer”.

## Prospective assessment of scaling: Impact pathways

The issue was discussed during the FG, with the organizers before and after the event and on the phone with the small group of non-participants to 2018 event.

In this case the main paths for scaling is P2P mainly at regional level but for more engaged farmers also at National and, in few cases European level. The occasion of of a meeting in the Region of a European project (OK-Net Arable), 2 years ago, was an efficient fuel for scaling, as it recall the attention of the broad farming community on the topics and on the fact that the meeting took place on-farm and had the participation of a large group of organic farmers from several countries.

In the sense social media and “normal” media can play an important role in scaling, but they need “big news” (like the European meeting mentioned above) to have impact and that is often not the case with local on-farm demonstration. Informal social media networks (for example farmers Facebook network or organic movement Facebook or Instagram networks) can be very efficient in spreading information, but that does not mean per se to increase impact in practical terms.

Advisers can play a big role, not only explaining the theory behind the innovation, but also using the farms where it is well implemented for demos and for training. Advisers can act as facilitators in two ways: 1) spreading and increasing the interest on an innovation among farmers; 2) building the link between farmers who applied the innovation and the ones who are interested, so making possible or faster the P2P process.

# Case study reflection

## Facilitating and impeding factors for successful demonstrations

The focus group debated a lot on “what is a successful demo event”, reaching the conclusion that number of participants, or dissemination (before and after) through media is not always so relevant.

What was acknowledge as an indication of success is:

* request to know more (by participants and by non-participants who knew of the event) to the organizers
* requests to advisers to have further infos
* degree of implementation of the proposed innovation (difficult to measure and requiring long time).

Discussing the positive factors influencing demo success the following list was produced and shared (no ranking so far but we can work on that):

* location easy to reach
* date… it is never perfect, so the idea is to identify, in the long run, some elements that with the specific group make the date “better” or “accessible” for a larger group. Weather conditions play an important role but cannot be controlled
* farmer host with high reputation, acknowledged by the community as a “good farmer”
* facilitators and presenters with capacity to involve participants and allow them to feel at ease. Besides technical/scientific competence soft skills are needed
* sufficient time to discuss and not only to listen, of course facilitation is needed in the “free time” otherwise there is the risk to waste time or to have overwhelming personalities taking over
* the topic should be felt as relevant by farmers, so a previous analyses by the organizer is essential.

The group identified also some negative factors affecting the success of demos:

* wrong period of the year, when farmers are busy. Nevertheless it is not easy to handle, because certain effects can be seen only during specific phases of the crop, so the time when to organize the demo is case specific. Besides if the topic involves different types of farmers (breeders, vegetable growers, arable farmers etc.) there is no way to escape the moments that are busy for at least one of the groups
* theoretical presentations or top down presentations risk to keep the participants too far from the topic and not involved. A balance between competence and skills is needed. Besides practical experience is always appreciated by farmer and advisers
* the topic not acknowledged as relevant, or not a priority by farmers. Sometimes the topic is relevant but the communication of the event is not highlighting the right aspects, so even if farmers can be interested they do not capture it
* repetitive topics. It is very welcome by farmers a package of events (and the demo can be part of it) and tools on a specific topic, but it should not be repetitive but different or in issues discussed or in methods or both.

## Impact of demonstrations

The post-event assessment with the organizers and the FG commented that the impact on the 5 themes listed below depends very much on the topic of the demo and not so much on the demo itself.

The following impact were identified:

* on Productivity & profitability – difficult to assess as the topic of the demo (soil management) requires more years to impact production. But the sub- topic introduced in 2018, tools to assess soil health, can supply good indications for the choice of crops or management techniques that can show their impact within the year. It could be good strategy to include in the demo of approaches whose impact is evident in the long term, some shorter term effect techniques as this may facilitate taken up;
* on Resilience – soil management can have a great impact on resilience and Summer 2018 gave a clear evidence as well managed soils suffered much less the heat and the draught. The demo was explaining also these aspects and the farmers who applied already the proposed systems (as the host) could witness it.
* on Sustainability – similarly to resilience, the topic of the demo is key element of sustainability, as it deals with soil biodiversity preservation, organic matter increase and carbon storage, reduced use of external fertilizers and reduced leaching and run-off. The demo mentioned all these aspects.
* on Quality of life – not so relevant.
* on Empowerment – the approach aims at empowering farmers in self monitoring their soils and decide autonomously on their fertilization plans. Especially the soil fertility self-assessment tools can grant farmers the capacity to assess their soil status and decide autonomously.

This kind of “approach demos” are organized only by independent organizations as there is no possibility to “sell” products or services, so companies are not interested or, are even against it. Also advisers are often opposing such empowering processes as they put in discussion, or even reduce, the need for advisory.

On the other hand the broad implementation of this kind of approaches is benefiting the community as a whole, so it should be promoted/supported by public authorities, but it is rarely the case.

## Key lessons from this case study

The analysis of the case offered the following recommendations for the actors involved in demo set up, funding, organization and management:

1. Topic should be perceived as relevant by farmers, and should be communicated clearly
2. demo should be part of a broader learning strategy, not stand alone activity
3. number of participants are not, *per se*, an indication of success. On the contrary on certain topics, especially if linked to an approach and not to a technique, can be better discussed in limited groups
4. certain basic topics (e.i.soil management, biodiversity preservation etc.) whose implementation evolves and changes over time, can well fit into a yearly demo and, year after year, it is possible on one hand to have a sensitive issue and, on the other hand, to monitor the real impact
5. the moment of the demo will never be perfect, so better not to waste time discussing when the moment is the good one
6. presenters need soft skills besides good technical/scientific competence and it is preferable that at least part of the presentations are offered by a farmer (the host farmer)
7. presentations should be short, better if done by more that a presenterion
8. the farmer who hosts the demo should be acknowledged as a “good farmer”
9. even very complicated (system approach) topics can be faced in a peer-to-peer way and demo is a useful part of the whole strategy.

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# Annexes

## Data sources

The demo activity organized by AIAB-APROBIO FVG is well-known by Vinidea researchers and several interactions occur since about 5 years within the organization, so it was not difficult to interact with the organizers and also with the participants.

Sources of information:

* AIAB-APROBIO FVG newsletters on technical advice in vegetable production <http://www.aiab-aprobio.fvg.it/produttori/bollettini-lotta-guidata/orticoltura/>
* AIAB-APROBIO FVG newsletters on technical advice in arable crops <http://www.aiab-aprobio.fvg.it/produttori/bollettini-lotta-guidata/seminativi/>
* AIAB-APROBIO FVG technical meetings and special events <http://www.aiab-aprobio.fvg.it/produttori/bollettini-lotta-guidata/incontri-tecnici/>
* OK- Net Arable 3.2 deliverable <http://www.ok-net-arable.eu/images/OK_Net_WP3_D3.2_final.pdf>

## Data collection methods

The organization was already known by Vinidea and the event was already organized yearly since 2015, so there is a previous knowledge that was used, as well as the knowledge gathered for the specific scope.

Data were collected as follows:

data on the organization of the event

* 2 meetings with the organizers before the event, interviews and open discussion. 4 participants in the first meeting and 3 participants on the second. Topics of the meetings were:
  + how the topic was selected
  + how the location and the presenters were selected
  + previous years organization, outcome and assessment
  + previous editions participation, what was changed since the first editions and why
  + expectations from the 2018 event (number of participants, participants profile, kind of interaction, requests and questions..)
  + dissemination strategy and means

Above points were included in the meetings guidelines.

data on the dissemination of the event

besides the interview to organizers

* analysis of social media spreading of the announcement
* mail to a group of potential participants (20) in order to know if they got the information and, if so, how.

data on the event

2 Vinidea staff participated to the event, so implementing the following actions

* observation of the event and participants interaction, feed-back etc.
* short talk with participants (during and at the end of the event)

data on participants assessment

* besides the short assessment at the end of the event a Focus Group was organized 10 days later. Invited to the FG: 15 persons, 12 participated and were partly persons who participate to 2018 event and also to previous editions (4), while the others participated only to the 2018 event.
* Question guide for the FG included:
  + was the event useful
  + more or less useful compared to previous editions? Why?
  + suggestions for 2019 editions
  + what was not appreciated
  + how to measure the success of demo activity
* 4 phone calls where done to non participants to 2018 event who participated to previous editions.

data on organizers assessment of the event

a meeting with organizers (2 persons) was held after the FG meeting to ask for their assessment of the demo-day and also of the FG outcome.