

Networking between innovation support organizations for the achievement of SDGs, with a focus on water resources and coastal-marine areas

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Abstract

Identification of the practice:

Empowering Innovation Support Organizations (ISOs) and their networking, through a Supervised Self-Assessment Practice built along a 3-month coaching practice for youth and women-led startups. The long-term goal is building/strengthening the innovation ecosystem at regional scale.

The practice takes place between August-October 2021 after a preparatory 6-month activity. It is held within the project “[WaterMedyin](#) – youth and Innovation for Sustainable management of Water and Marine Resources in the Mediterranean” funded by the Italian Cooperation, and executed by CIHEAM Bari in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia.

Purpose or utility of the practice:

The project idea of WaterMedyin was born from the exchange and the knowledge gained through the Mediterranean Innovation Partnership MIP, an initiative coordinated by CIHEAM Bari. MIP has been monitoring the state of ISOs of 8 Mediterranean countries, with a focus on the agri-food sector. The MIP yearly reports show a large diversity of expertise and standards within the region, calling to set a mechanism to facilitate the dialogue, as well as actions to build a shared understanding of the principles, standards and tools necessary for supporting innovation among youth, supporting entrepreneurial ideas coherent with the SDG principles.

WaterMedyin is a pilot project aiming at supporting this kind of exchange and dialogue, offering to the coaches and ISO managers not only training opportunities, but also the possibility

to discuss their mission with pairs at international scale. By mutually witnessing the coaching sessions, they can share views and best practices, based on real cases. The recurrent crises add a challenge, but they also trigger several need-based ideas pushing for innovation and making room for the expansion of good solutions (e.g., the production of fertilizer from urban and agricultural organic leftovers, and chicken farm waste, continental fish farming, treatment of algal blooms among many others).

Water and Marine Resources in the MED: a race against time, climate change and socio-political turbulences

The Mediterranean region is the home of 7% of the world’s total population with about 427M people living around the Basin. With resources unevenly distributed, each Mediterranean country does not have the same tools and capacity to mitigate water scarcity; which is even more complicated to handle in a context of socio-political problems, rapid urbanization on coasts and transboundary water management, especially for Eastern and Southern Mediterranean countries. 72% of water resources are North, while 23% and 5% are found in the East and the South but nobody's immune to droughts.

Climate change is increasing temperatures, reducing precipitation which exposes Mediterranean countries to soil aridity, exhaustion of water resources but also alters marine environment. Warming 20% faster than the rest of the globe, with hotspots expected to gain between 1,8° and 3,5° in the East and Spain by 2100,

the Mediterranean known for its oligotrophic aspect and high rates of endemism is endangered.

The Basin is home to a heterogeneous marine ecosystem making it one of the world's hotspots for marine biodiversity but is also one of the most impacted by anthropic pressure and conflicts. Even though around 227,000 jobs are concerned by the Fisheries sector, the overall management of marine resources is almost never sustainable which impacts the food web and food security of nations.

Preserving water and marine resources is essential for Mediterranean societies' future and to do so, betting on ISOs and innovation can allow smart, integrated and effective solutions to be spread and developed. Water is getting rarer by the minute, on land or at sea, it is urgent to act by supporting local stakeholders invested in sustainable and integrated practices.

Description of the practice:

Over 3 months about 300 coaching sessions cover a total 33 startups (15 of which were awarded with a grant and ready to attend an international brokerage event in Italy). This is the "playground" for 22 coaches to support them, based on their background and the individual approach of each ISO – as shaped by the country situation, the specific profile of each organization, the individual expertise and capacity. In addition, the project facilitates the access to a self-assessment online tool, allowing to review the coaching, together with an external observer and discussing with him/her after some "key"-coaching sessions. This observer can be an international expert, or a pair from an ISO of another country, which aims to fuel a lively cross-border exchange, and to strengthen the collaboration at regional scale.

Implementation of the practice:

Prior to launching the self-assessment dialogues, the project has offered two training rounds to the ISOs separately by country. It has also launched a call for startups, to select a few entrepreneurial ideas tackling issues within the agri-food value chain, water-related problems, as well as the need for a better integration between SDGs, innovation, and business development within the Mediterranean context. The 2 groups (ISOs and Startups) are then proposed to work together to refine the projects and boost them as much as possible - within the time limit of the action. The resources mobilized are mostly local experts and entrepreneurs, with the support of international outstanding ones, and the adoption of the self-assessment online tool developed by an external expert group.

Monitoring and evaluation:

So far, the action has been acknowledged for its innovative approach to the exchange at regional scale. It has helped strengthen the networking among ISOs, with about 40 stakeholders from 3 countries and beyond gathering twice-a-month to attend and animate a series of webinars. The ISOs are committed to improve their expertise, as well as to understand and support the work of other ISOs. The tools provided remain as permanent improvement methods, for the benefit of the innovation ecosystem, the startups and the local communities.

Collaborations among Innovation players have been arising through the coaching programme, which are likely to go on after the end of the action. Local institutions declare a high interest in continuing and expanding the activities. Investors are expected to boost the development of the best startup ideas.

Recommendation and advice to build the innovation ecosystem

- The conditions must be created to foster networking and collaboration at local and international level

- Institutions should make policies to encourage the commitment of stakeholders such as research institutes, universities, youth, and in particular the private sector
- The skills and capacity of the ISO experts (coaches, mentors, innovation brokers) must be permanently enhanced through dedicated initiatives

To stabilize the success of the practice made by WaterMedyin, a regional authoritative initiative should be planned, with the aim to coordinate a network of ISOs that undertake to adopt some common standards and are “certified” accordingly.

Enlarging the stakeholders’ group, by including the private sector on one side, and the sustainability experts on the other is also necessary to foster economic initiatives feasible under the present environmental, social, and economic challenges.

New alliances can also be envisaged at regional scale around specific initiatives and business ideas, tackling issues such as (among many others): innovation in using water for agriculture; strengthening local productions and value chains, especially with a social impact on local economies and communities; promoting agroecology, also as a mean to rely on local knowledge and resources, decreasing the dependence from external inputs – and therefore, price volatility.

CIHEAM and Water Forums, a year full of international encounters

Water has always been an international priority and is essential to life, agriculture and peace. Since 1997, every three years, the event is organized by the World Water Council and a host country to put forth different emergencies and help the 1.1 billion people worldwide lacking an access to proper water. The Arab Water Council founded in 2004 has the same dynamic and organizes a fora every three years to facilitate a common understanding and approach between Arab countries -with a majority already facing enormous water scarcity.

Sustainable water management can take many faces : energy-related issues, hydro-diplomacy and security, transboundary management of water sources, sharing and advantages to secure peace...

That is why CIHEAM participated in both forums on different matters. In September 2021, a delegation was sent to Dubai to participate in the 5th Arab Water Forum. The interventions were enriching and tackled the Water situation in the Mediterranean region and how sustainable practices can be favored in agriculture but also the engagement of youth in the water sector in the MENA region.

In March 2022 the CIHEAM participated in the International Water Forum hosted in Dakar - following the international meetings ‘on the road to Dakar’ in October 2021. Both directors from the Agronomic Institute of Montpellier and the one in Zaragoza led different roundtables tackling subjects such as ‘territorialization of policies: water and agroecology at the service of rural development’, ‘rural development to build resilience to global change’ and ‘capacity building to promote SDG 6: the example of the Ibero-American region cooperation’.

In a region with a high demographic growth and low precipitation, especially in the South and

East, the Mediterranean region has to address water management issues to prevent socio-economic and humanitarian collapse in the years to come.

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