

# Working Group BEANS Network - online meeting

Feb 25, 2026

## Summary

### **Formalizing Network Membership**

The meeting served as the first working group session of the Beans Action Plan, confirming the network's large geographic diversity across 16 countries and 48 unique institutions, with participation formalized via letters of intent to ensure a light commitment process.

### **Identifying Key Funding Opportunities**

A detailed presentation outlined strategic European funding opportunities, primarily in Horizon Europe for 2027, highlighting specific calls like Governance 05 (Knowledge Hubs) and Farm to Fork 05 (Diversified Cropping) as ideal fits for the network's multi-institutional and geographical scope.

### **Strategic Approach and Collaboration Interests**

The recommended strategy involves positioning the network as a knowledge hub, leveraging Twinning for capacity building, and clustering with existing EU projects to maximize impact; subsequently, various academic, private sector, and research institutions expressed strong interest and specific expertise for proposal participation, particularly in genetics, processing, and socioeconomic viability.

### **Items which needs further discussion**

- **Joining Horizon for Proteins Cluster Board.** The network should aim to join the stakeholder board of the Horizon for Proteins Cluster to align research priorities and enhance network visibility.
- **EIT Food Community Membership Exploration.** Exploring the possibility of joining the EIT Food community should be undertaken to combine opportunities in education, research, and entrepreneurship.

- **Project scope must be holistic.** Future projects should adopt a holistic approach by addressing socioeconomic aspects, mechanization, governance, culture and policy, beyond just genetics and agronomy.
- **Participant interest questionnaire.** A questionnaire should be organized to allow each participant to suggest their specific field of interest, facilitating better alignment with potential call proposals.

## Detailed minutes of the online meeting

- **Initial Meeting Welcome and Attendance:** The meeting opened with greetings following a brief introduction by Teodoro Miano. Participants were still joining, and attendance reached an encouraging total of 54 out of approximately 70 invited.
- **Geographic Diversity and Time Zones:** The conversation highlighted the geographical spread of the participants, with some joining from different continents, like USA & India.
- **Formalizing Network Participation:** Teodoro Miano announced that the meeting served as the first working group session, as one of the main steps of the Beans Action Plan. They discussed the process of formalizing participation in the network through the "letters of intent" to ensure a "simplified way" of joining BEANS without major financial, bureaucratic, or administrative commitments.
- **Network Membership Statistics and Geographic Spread:** The network, now referred to as a "membership," had reached 50 participants with a large geographic diversity and regional representation across 16 different countries. Italy had the highest representation with 26 participants, followed by Spain, France, Lebanon, Syria, Greece, Tunisia, Morocco, and a few others.
- **Working Group and Institutional Structure:** The Beans network working group is divided into three groups: Group 1 (International Organizations) with 16 members, Group 2 (National Institution Research and Academics) with 26 members, and Group 3 (Private Companies and Individual Experts) with 23 members. There are 48 unique institutions involved, including CIHEAM, ICARDA, Bioversity International, IRESA, ENEA, UpM, PRIMA PRIMA Foundation, among others.
- **Meeting Logistics and Transparency:** Teodoro Miano informed all participants that the meeting would be recorded, and a synthetic report would be produced and shared afterward to ensure transparency and prevent forgetting major points. The organizers noted that they are still waiting for confirmation from 23 people who had not yet formalized their membership.
- **Website and Agenda Overview:** Teodoro Miano reminded attendees about the established website ([beans.ciheam.org](http://beans.ciheam.org)), which is constantly

being improved and enriched. The agenda for the day included Teodoro Miano's introduction, a presentation by Virginia Belsanti on funding calls, an open discussion, planning for 2026/2027 proposals, next steps, and concluding remarks by Professor Hamzé.

- **Funding Opportunities Overview by Virginia Belsanti:** Virginia Belsanti from CIHEAM Bari gave an overview of European funding opportunities, primarily focusing on Horizon Europe, the research and innovation framework program funded by the European Commission, as 2026 presents a very short window for action. The presentation was geared towards opportunities in 2027 to allow sufficient time for partnership development and concept design.
- **Beans Network's Unique Value for Horizon Europe:** Virginia Belsanti summarized the Beans network's unique value proposition for Horizon Europe, emphasizing its multi-institutional nature, broad geographical span (Europe, Mediterranean, Africa, Asia, Balkans), and expertise across the full legumes value chain from genetics to markets). Crucial elements include the capacity to approach system solutions, provide a North-South bridge, readiness for multi-actor engagement, and ability to transfer knowledge into practice.
- **Specific Funding Topic: Governance 05 (Knowledge Hubs):** Virginia Belsanti identified Horizon Governance 05 (2027) as an excellent fit for the network, as it aims to build thematic knowledge hubs, allowing for a focus on legumes or protein crops. This Coordination and Support Action (CSA) aims to provide impartial, tailored, practice-oriented knowledge to end-users like farmers and advisors, with two proposals to be funded at €3.5 million each.
- **Specific Funding Topic: Farm to Fork 05 (Diversified Cropping):** Another relevant opportunity is the Farm to Fork 05 topic for 2027, focusing on enhancing farmer profitability and resilience through innovations for diversified crops and value chains. This Innovation Action (IA) emphasizes resilient cropping systems, developing local value chains, and valorizing crop by-products, with two proposals funded for a total of €12 million.
- **Specific Funding Topic: Organic Intercropping and Low-Input Breeding:** Virginia Belsanti highlighted a Research and Innovation Action (RIA) opportunity, opening in April 2027, focused on organic intercropping

and low-input breeding, which is a "natural home for legumes". This topic aims to increase the efficiency and competitiveness of the organic crop breeding sector by providing breeders with tools to develop varieties adapted to intercropping and organic production.

- **Specific Funding Topic: FNSSA and Africa Focus (Two-Stage RIA):** A two-stage Research and Innovation Action (RIA) topic focused on the FNSSA (Food and Nutrition Security Sustainable Agriculture) policy and Africa was presented . This opportunity, where two proposals of €6 million will be funded, requires familiarity with the EU-African Union dialogue and could position the Beans network as a platform for "legume-enabled climate smart practices".
- **Strategic Funding Topic: Widening Participation (Twinning):** The "Widening" topics, specifically "Twinning," offer a critical opportunity to build capacity within the network, particularly for institutions in "widening countries" (those with lower research capacities). This action allows widening country institutions, such as those in Tunisia, Morocco, or Egypt, to coordinate and define activities that strengthen their research capacity in a specific area.
- **Strategic Approach: Positioning as a Knowledge Hub:** Virginia Belsanti recommended a three-step strategy for the network: first, positioning itself as a knowledge hub via the Governance 05 topic; second, building capacity and alliances via Twinning; and third, targeting Research and Innovation Actions. Ultimately, a smart combination of all actions is the recommended best solution.
- **Clustering with Existing EU Projects:** Virginia Belsanti suggested that the network should consider clustering or joining the stakeholder board of existing EU-funded projects focused on plant and legume proteins, noting that over €700 million has been invested in 125+ related projects across Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe. Joining existing clusters, such as the Horizon for Proteins Cluster, could align research priorities, increase visibility, and provide opportunities for publishing joint policy briefs or participating in conferences.
- **Exploration of EIT Food Membership:** Virginia Belsanti introduced EIT Food (European Institute of Innovation and Technology Food), a large community combining education, research, and business focused on food systems. While membership requires payment, it offers the possibility to

combine different institutions and design short courses, which could serve as a source of financing and alliance building for the network.

- **European Commission Perspective on Protein Crops Research:** Laurent Mercier of the European Commission's Director General for Agriculture (DG AGRI) found the presentation very interesting, noting that the topic of protein crops is covered by colleagues in their directorate, as well as those in other directorates). Mercier advised contacting the RTD directorate for information regarding the mechanisms of calls, such as whether they are annual, and offered to provide contact details for these persons, emphasizing that they cannot assist with project setup but can explain the mechanisms. The discussion referenced EU investment amounts for protein crops, which likely include projects not strictly linked to protein crops but that aim to reduce EU dependency on imported plant protein to feed livestock.
- **Reducing Dependency on Imported Plant Protein:** The EU is currently facing a significant issue with importing a large quantity of plant-based protein for livestock feed, leading to policy development aimed at reducing this dependency and increasing EU self-reliance. Laurent Mercier committed to sharing a link to a fact sheet detailing research initiatives, including multiple projects focusing on developing new plant varieties and programs linked to livestock that could help reduce dependency.
- **Open Discussion and Invitation for Proposal Participation:** Teodoro Miano opened the general discussion, focusing mainly on the availability and interest of participants to lead or join proposal submissions for the call mentioned by Virginia, as well as for other related initiatives. Miano also suggested that people who have previously run large Horizon projects on legumes, such as Professor Martinelli and Professor Papa, might offer relevant insights.
- **Horizon Project on Obesity and Lifestyle Boxes:** Piero Portincasa, a clinician from the University Hospital in Bari, discussed their involvement in a large, 9.5 million euro Horizon project called PAGRA, which focuses on finding ideal lifestyles to combat obesity, covering basic to clinical aspects. Additionally, Portincasa mentioned a PRiMA project involving Lebanon and Tunisia, which is creating "lifestyle boxes," including an app, to promote healthy food suggestions culturally appropriate for the

Mediterranean area, and expressed potential interest in giving input for congresses or other collaborations.

- **PRiMA-Funded Project on Legume Biodiversity and Agronomy:** Federico Martinelli of the University of Florence, a functional geneticist, detailed their experience as the coordinator of a PRiMA-funded project that ended in 2024, involving a consortium of seven institutions across seven Mediterranean countries. The project focused on valorizing chickpea and lentil biodiversity using integrated approaches, including agronomic, genomic, and phenomic evaluation, and included work on identifying specific rhizobia strains and sustainability-linked agronomic traits, as well as cost-benefit analysis and dissemination.
- **Strategic Importance of Legumes for the Mediterranean Region:** Lamiae Ghaouti INRA, head of INRA and a geneticist, voiced strong support for legumes, noting the beans initiative and the strategic importance of legumes for Morocco and the Mediterranean basin. INRA is willing to participate in projects across various aspects, including genetics, agronomy, socio-economy, and nutrition. A critical issue highlighted is not just the science of legumes, but the transfer, policy, and governance required to advocate for them, as they are often viewed as economically challenging for farmers.
- **Need for Holistic Projects Addressing Socioeconomic and Mechanization Aspects:** Lamiae Ghaouti INRA emphasized the necessity for projects to adopt a holistic approach, addressing constraints like the socioeconomic viability of legumes and mechanization, which currently make legumes an uneconomical choice for many farmers. They stressed the importance of policy aspects, such as creating incentives for best practices, and involving industry in transformation efforts, as the responsibility for adopting legumes should not fall solely on the farmer.
- **Processing, Technological Attitude, and Training Initiatives:** Reine Barbar, an associate professor at Institut Agro, highlighted their unit's expertise in processing, focusing on gaps between breeding and processing, specifically selecting legume varieties based on their technological attitude for transformation into flour and other products. Helene M-G., also an associate professor at Institut Agro, introduced an initiative, which started in 2025 and aims to develop academic training modules on legumes with a systemic approach for France and Africa,

showing interest in contributing to capacity building within the beans network.

- **Engagement with the Private Sector and Valorization of Local Varieties:** Teodoro Miano acknowledged the importance of the private sector, noting the participation of Rafael Raso and colleagues from a relevant food company with high technological expertise in producing gluten-free foods like pasta and snacks from legumes. Giuseppe De Mastro, an agronomist from the University of Bari, discussed work on collecting local varieties of legumes and valorization efforts beyond traditional products, including protein isolates. They also highlighted efforts to upgrade cultivation techniques using biofertilizers and biostimulants, and the need for improved, selected varieties and better seed quality certification.
- **Machine-Harvestable Varieties and Cost Reduction in Dryland Systems:** Fouad Maalouf from ICARDA noted that their work focuses on legume crops such as faba bean, chickpea, and lentil in dryland agriculture systems, which are affected by low precipitation, poor crop management, and poor mechanization. ICARDA has developed machine-harvestable lentil varieties being promoted across Mediterranean countries through a PRiMA project called Nostalgic, which aims to alleviate the high management cost that is a barrier for farmers despite their understanding of legumes' importance.
- **Role and Eligibility of the Private Sector in EU Programs:** Gianluigi Cardone asked about the specific role and involvement of the private sector in Horizon programs, prompting Virginia Belsanti to confirm that they are eligible, crucial actors, especially for innovation actions, and can receive between 70% and 100% of the required funding. The private sector must be part of the partnership for a proposal to be funded.
- **Interest in Field Trials and Knowledge Transfer:** Marta Goñi from INTIA, a public agriculture advisory and applied experimentation organization in the north of Spain, expressed strong interest in actively participating in upcoming proposals, specifically in roles related to coordinating field trials and demonstration activities. INTIA's direct connection with farmers and experience in advisory services is seen as critical for ensuring the effective implementation and knowledge transfer of project results.

- **Value Chain Management and Business Model Innovation:** Paolo Prosperi of the CIHEAM Montpellier discussed their work in agriculture and food economics, focusing on the sustainability of food systems, and offered to contribute expertise in social sciences and nutritional sciences. The Institute is interested in initiatives on legumes and can specifically contribute by focusing on the management of value chains, co-creation of knowledge, and bioeconomic modeling to optimize resource use, emphasizing the critical need to innovate business models to support the integration and consumption of legumes.
- **Contribution of ICARDA in Genetics, Agronomy, and Knowledge:** Shiv Agrawal from ICARDA affirmed their organization's ability to contribute to project success through three components: genetic innovations, agronomic innovations, and serving as knowledge partners. ICARDA is already working on organic crop breeding and has material available for deployment, and their experience with diversified cropping systems, including using legumes as intercrops to benefit subsequent crops, provides strong supporting data for project development.
- **Agri-Food Business Cluster and Contract Farming:** Marc Bou Zeidan of QOOT, a business cluster of more than 130 agricultural and agri-food businesses in Lebanon, highlighted their members' work with pulses, particularly chickpea-based products, ranging from canned goods to innovative niche foods. Bou Zeidan expressed confidence in contract farming as an effective linkage between farmers and SMEs, especially for food security-related products, and is seeking ways to collaborate and contribute to the call.
- **Faba Bean Breeding and New Disease Challenges:** Walid Elrodeny from ARC Egypt highlighted their pioneering work in breeding faba beans for *Orobanche* resistance, being the first country to register a resistant cultivar. They are seeking collaboration to increase the yield potential and nutritional value of faba beans, noting that Egypt is the largest importer and consumer of faba beans for human consumption. Elrodeny also raised concern about the emergence of a new disease, phytoplasma, and is looking to extend research on disease resistance with interested partners.
- **Specialization in Fermentation and Agroprocessing:** Ramy Boujawdeh, a managing partner at FERMENDOM, a French private sector research and consultancy firm, introduced their company, which

specializes in fermentation, agroprocessing, agriculture, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the green economy. They have teams in France and Lebanon and are excited to be part of the group to contribute their expertise and collaborate with the existing network of researchers and experts.

- **Reinforcing Cooperation and Future Network Activities:** Professor Mouïn Hamzé concluded the meeting by reiterating that the webinar's purpose was to open pathways for concrete partnerships, stressing that strengthening cooperation is key to developing resilient and sustainable Mediterranean food systems. The beans network is committed to ongoing support, including identifying funding opportunities, disseminating proposals, and organizing future activities, such as thematic sessions, and a large international event on legumes scheduled soon.

### **Suggested Next Steps**

- **Virginia Belsanti** will add a slide outlining the Horizon Europe Protein Cluster and share the link to the EIT Food initiative via the chat.
- **Laurent Mercier** will provide contact details for R&I officials to clarify RTD Directorate mechanisms. He will also share the European Commission's webpage on EU protein supply and demand, which details food and feed data, CAP interventions to reduce the plant protein deficit, and national policy initiatives:  
[https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/crop-productions-and-plant-based-products/cereals/reducing-plant-protein-deficit-eu\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/crop-productions-and-plant-based-products/cereals/reducing-plant-protein-deficit-eu_en)
- **BEANS** should organize 2 to 3 thematic sessions (April–June) to evaluate partners' interest in leading Horizon Europe clusters (2027 calls) and identify potential collaborators.
- **BEANS** will initiate consultations with complementary programmes, including PRIMA, to reinforce the focus on legumes in forthcoming calls.