



(En français ci-dessous)

Strengthening Local Innovation Ecosystems to build Young Entrepreneurs' future

7 July 2026

9:00-11:30

Tirana, Hotel Maritim Plaza

Concept

In recent years, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of programs, tools, and initiatives aimed at supporting startups in Mediterranean and Africa countries. However, this quantitative growth has not always translated into improved quality, coordination, or long-term impact. The challenge today is no longer just to support more startups, but to provide better, more qualified, and context-sensitive support capable of responding to the economic, social and environmental transformations affecting Mediterranean territories.

The goal is to shift from isolated interventions addressed to specific actors to an innovative ecosystemic approach!

This question has become increasingly strategic. Across the Mediterranean and the Western Balkans, young people continue to face persistent barriers to employment, skills development and access to economic opportunities. Youth unemployment remains particularly high in several parts of the wider region, while many rural and peri-urban areas are confronted with demographic decline, talent outflows and limited access to innovation services. At the same time, climate change is placing growing pressure on agriculture, water resources, food systems and local economies.

In this context, youth entrepreneurship encompasses a wide range of issues: it is a matter of economic development, regional resilience, the green transition, social cohesion and shared prosperity in the Mediterranean. With global warming accelerating at a faster rate than the global average and with mounting pressure on already fragile ecosystems, Mediterranean countries, whose economies and employment structures remain closely linked to

agriculture, food systems, natural resources and rural development, face an urgent need to support new generations of entrepreneurs capable of devising concrete, locally rooted and environmentally friendly solutions. Green entrepreneurship, eco-innovation, digital tools, circular approaches and sustainable services can thus become powerful drivers of decent employment, competitiveness and inclusive development.

Keynote speech

The innovation ecosystem development model in the Mediterranean Area

Damiano Petruzzella, CIHEAM Bari (**tbc**)

This keynote explores an experienced supporting model for youth entrepreneurship based on strengthening the local innovation ecosystem, developed by CIHEAM Bari and implemented in several Mediterranean and African countries. **This model aims to encourage young entrepreneurship, contributing to decent work and economic growth in local areas.**

At the heart of this strategy lies the Business Support Organization (BSOs) as a key enabler of an effective innovation ecosystem, strengthening collaboration between local innovation actors (researchers, start-ups, businesses, public administrations, etc.). By shifting from isolated actions toward a systemic strengthening of BSO competencies, we can unlock more inclusive local development pathways. Based on concrete applications and experiences in 11 Mediterranean and Africa countries, the discussion explores a dual-pronged evolution: elevating the professional standards of local ecosystems and establishing a rigorous qualification framework for BSOs to lead the transition toward a green economy thanks to the development of the eco-entrepreneurship.

These experiences highlight a crucial shift: in a context where startup support offers are increasingly abundant, the real added value lies in the quality, specialization, and relevance of public and private services provided. Initiatives like NET4GREEN emphasize complementarity, and foster niche expertise, such as green entrepreneurship within the broader support ecosystem.



Panel discussion

To this end, a discussion panel is being organised during the 159th meeting of the CIHEAM Governing Board, to explore an experienced supporting model for youth entrepreneurship based on strengthening the local innovation ecosystem, based on projects developed and implemented in several Mediterranean and African countries.

The panel will bring together perspectives from **policy, academia, public innovation agencies, business support organizations and entrepreneurs**, together with the experiences of the CIHEAM, fostering a multi-level dialogue on:

- How to **shift from quantity to quality** in startup support schemes
- How can we empower local innovation actors to collaborate and **co-design integrated pathways** for startup support
- How to better connect **youth capacity building and education with local innovation ecosystems**
- What it takes to **build trusted, competent, and future-oriented support infrastructures and services**
- How local experiences in the Western Balkans can contribute to a **broader Mediterranean agenda for youth entrepreneurship, innovation and sustainable development**

By bridging institutional, educational and entrepreneurial viewpoints, the panel aims to identify actionable insights and transferable lessons for designing next-generation innovation ecosystems across the Mediterranean. Particular attention will be given to the role of qualified intermediaries, youth participation, ecosystem governance and regional cooperation in unlocking local potential and supporting sustainable growth.

This discussion is fully aligned with the CIHEAM Strategic Plan 2030, in particular the Innovation 4th Pillar, which identifies innovation, youth empowerment and sustainable territorial development as key drivers for a more resilient and prosperous Mediterranean region.

Provisional Agenda

9:30-9:40	Introductory speech: Prof. Fatmir Guri , Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) of Albania
9:40-9:50	<i>Keynote speech: Mr Damiano Petruzzella</i> , CIHEAM Bari (tbc) - "The innovation ecosystem development model in the Mediterranean Area"
9:50-11:00	<p>Panel discussion: "Strengthening Local Innovation Ecosystems"</p> <p>Moderator: Mrs Yasmine Seghirate, Administrator, CIHEAM</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof. Fatbardh Sallaku, Rector, Agricultural University of Tirana • Mr Raul Compes, Director, CIHEAM Zaragoza • Mr Arjan Ymeri, Director General, Startup Albania • Mr Thierry Dupeuble, Director, CIHEAM Montpellier • Mr Sasa Ivanovic, Program Manager, Innovation Fund, Montenegro • Mr George Baourakis, Director, CIHEAM Chania • Mr Ljubica Zlojutro, Senior Expert, Smart Village Knežica, Bosnia Herzegovina • Mr. Biagio Di Terlizzi, Director, CIHEAM Bari • Mr Gezim Shuli, Executive Director, AlbNatyra, Albania
11:00-11:20	Discussion
11:20-11:30	Conclusion: Mr Teodoro Miano , Secretary General, CIHEAM