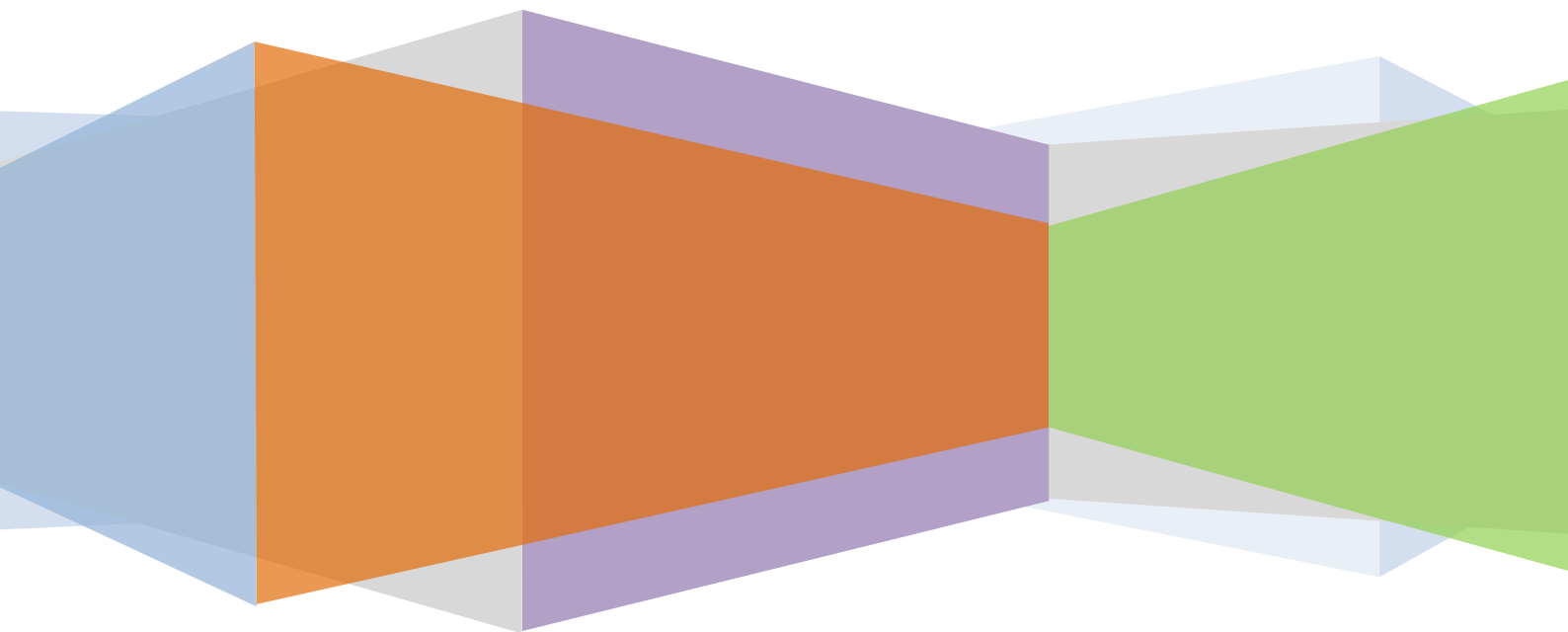




Focus Group Common European Report



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1. Project SITRA

The labour market is constantly changing, and so are the competencies and skills required. Agribusiness is no exception and, as a consequence, it demands new profiles of entrepreneurs and leaders who are capable of adapting to the new challenges of the economic environment. Among these required skills, soft skills are indispensable, as in any other sector.

The need to involve soft skills in the agribusiness sector is beginning to be recognized. Skills such as creativity, teamwork, critical thinking and effective communication are skills that can help considerably in solving problems and adapting to the constant changes of day-to-day life and the labour market. However, most workers in the agricultural sector are not trained in these skills. The knowledge that these professionals receive is merely focused on technical skills, so there is a great lack of soft skills among graduates in this type of studies, something that can negatively affect the productivity and effectiveness of the sector, especially in today's changing labour world.

Therefore, the main objective of our project is to help agribusiness entrepreneurs to overcome the most important difficulties in their day-by-day by detecting, developing and improving soft skills, building a training system in order to generate the skills and abilities demanded by the new labour context.

The project consortium is composed of five organisations from five different countries (FR, PO, IRL, SP and MK) and in this point of the project an analysis will be carried out by the five countries of the consortium to identify the importance of soft skills with respect to the new generations of agribusiness entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas. The objective will be to establish the current state and research routes that will allow explaining, contextualizing and better understanding the benefits of the development and mastery of these skills in the target group.

2. Background

The aim of the focus groups was to analyse with experts the results that were obtained in each partner country in the State of the Art. These results were included in the national reports and gathered in the common report. The main objective of the focus group was to investigate the experiences, attitudes, feelings, opinions and reactions of the participants about the concept of new skills demanded by the labour market in general, and in the agrobusiness sector in particular.

The following situations and issues affecting new generations of professionals in the agrobusiness sector, including flexibility and creativity especially after the negative effects of Covid-19 were addressed in the focus groups:

- Adaptability to the new situation.
- Development of new strategies for new challenges.
- Reactions to VUCA environments.
- Existing gap between actual training and needs.
- Soft skills and agri-business sector

Some other important aspects were mentioned as well:

- Culture and cognitive flexibility.
- Flexible companies and/or flexible employees.
- Emotional management in decision making.
- How to deal with uncertainty.

Some of the focus group sessions were held face-to-face with a moderator (SEDA) and other focus groups had online meetings (I&F, FACE and INDEPCIE), ADRIBS preferred to organize the focus group in two phases, the first one was preparation and briefing the group and then telephone calls to the participants one by one.

The Focus Group sessions carried out in the different countries followed the same steps. First the participants introduced themselves. After, the project SITRA was presented to them (the topic of the project, its objectives and the target groups addressed) as well as the results of previous activities. Then, they were asked the questions below and they were presented a list of skills that can be efficient to manage situations.

The discussion was encouraged taking as departure point this questionnaire consist of below listed questions:

- 1. What skills should the new agribusiness professional develop?**
- 2. What is the gap between current training and these needs?**
- 3. What is the place of soft skills in the training of agribusiness professionals?**
- 4. How necessary do you consider soft skills in this sector?**

- 5. *Our previous State of the Art identifies the absence of women and young people in the sector. How can these population groups be attracted?***
- 6. *How flexible are agribusiness professionals to face new challenges and do they find it difficult to vary their strategies and make new and different decisions?***
- 7. *How prepared is the sector and its professionals to manage VUCA environments?***

The participants were also presented a list of skills that can be efficient to manage situations in times of uncertainty.

- Problem-solving
- Effective communication skills
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Teamwork
- Dependability
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership
- Research
- Creativity
- Work ethic
- Integrity
- Resilience
- Service orientation
- Emotional management
- People management
- Self-motivation and motivate others
- Any others

3. Profile of participants

The focus group carried out by INDEPCIE was composed by 8 experts from various professions related to entrepreneurs, managers or CEOs of companies in different areas of agribusiness, human resource managers, career counsellors and trainers and facilitators.

The 8 participants in the focus group led by I&F included entrepreneurship (in direct contact with agribusiness), management and CEOs, human resources management, training and facilitation and career guidance. The 16 experts who participated in the focus group carried out by FACE were representatives of organizations or institutions of the agricultural sector that support and correspond with the main objective of the project.

SEDA and ADRIBS organized the focus group with 10 participants came from different professions related to agriculture, business, managers of agri and rural business, teachers from agribusiness school, agri and rural development advisors. There was gender balanced kept.

4. Analysis of results

- **What skills should the new agribusiness professional develop?**

The participants in INDEPCIE focus group indicated the following skills:

- Self-knowledge

In this sense, participants acknowledged that it is essential to start at the beginning and the beginning is yourself. You must be clear about who you are, what you are made of and what are the forces that move you in this complex world.

You have to be clear about your personality and principles, skills and competences, as well as your purposes and dreams.

- Communication

Participants stressed the importance of taking into the interests, concerns and motivations of your interlocutors in the preparation of communication, as well as in the choice of the negotiation method to be used. On the other hand, you must learn to use and maintain a good level of communication with a wide range of interlocutors, demonstrating ease and versatility in adapting messages to their individual needs.

- Proactivity and self-learning ability: According to participants, an engineer is no longer expected to just wait to be told what to do. They are expected to take proactive action to solve problems and, even more, to propose improvements, even if these are not urgent. For them, the need for a spirit of continuous improvement and excellence is fundamental. Similarly, participants stressed that self-learning to solve problems is a necessary characteristic, as it is no longer acceptable for a professional to simply sit back and do nothing because he or she does not know how to do something.

- Resilience: Participants highlighted that it is crucial to accept "defeats" and continue working towards the achievement of objectives, understanding that failing sometimes is also part of the experience.

- Adaptability: Most of participants agreed that those who can adapt continuously will be the people with the best opportunities.

- Social skills: The participants pointed out that technical skills are no longer enough to be a professional of excellence; they must be complemented by social skills, as only in this way can a person develop their full potential.

- Executive skills: For the participants, the executive skills are very necessary for insertion into the modern company with leadership, communication, team work and linking with the environment.

- Innovation: Most of participants highlighted the ability to innovate permanently, considering the added value that this entails and the sustainability of the environment in which it is inserted. In this, they must seek a balance between economic development, care for the environment and care for people, always with an eye to the future.

In Ireland, experts agreed with the Irish desk research report in the area of soft skills, with more emphasis on technical and productive skills than on soft skills training, and agreed that this was key to raising the profile of Irish professionals in agribusiness.

There was no agreement on a common list of soft skills, although there were many suggestions. Their main conclusion was that soft skills are needed and it was acknowledged that the lack of soft skills training is quite clear.

In North Macedonia, participants stated that the following competencies are necessary for the development of the agribusiness professional:

- Work ethic
- Perseverance
- Adaptability
- Planning and organizing
- Work motive
- Certain level of knowledge in the field
- Adaptation to the needs of the market
- Cooperation with experts
- IT skills
- Marketing skills
- Knowledge of the market and its characteristics
- Knowledge of the product process
- Project (strategic) planning
- Financial operations (accounting)
- Human resource organization
- Agricultural policy at the national and global level

- Willingness to take risks
- Desire to constantly learn and upgrade
- Willingness to change
- Business orientation
- Leadership
- Skills in the field of entrepreneurship
- Communication skills
- Skills in the field of knowledge and working with computers
- Research skills
- Technical knowledge in the field of agriculture
- Creativity
- Resourcefulness
- Knowledge on support for agricultural development at the state level
- Responsibility
- Courage
- Commitment
- Business management

The Polish participants pointed out that the most important competences are as follows:

- **Effective communication skills:** Participants underlined that the communication is the main and most important skill for agro business. Communication is necessary to all area of business execution (e.g., for negotiations which is also very important skill). Participants underlined
- also that there is big lack of the practical guides with real examples collected in one place how to effectively use communication in agribusiness.
- **Self-learning ability:** Participants underlined that this skill is essential to do the agribusiness. It is not enough to follow someone directions and do not develop own knowledge.
- **Creativity and adaptability:** Participants underlined that the creativity is one of the most important skill to have in agribusiness. In the rapidly changing world and economic circumstances it is absolutely necessary to be creative and have skills to adapt to changing market.
- **Service orientation:** The participants pointed out that service orientation is a first and as important as above-mentioned skills. If someone wants to develop business in rural areas, he/she must be correctly oriented on the service relevant to demands and also high quality of the providing services.

- Problem solving: For the participants, the problem-solving skills are important as well as other mentioned above skills. People doing business, not only in rural areas but generally are facing everyday various problems. So, to have skills helping solving different problems are crucial for business dealing.
- Innovation: As all above skills innovation skills are the same important for business according to the conclusions taken from the discussion. This skill is strictly connected to creativity and should be developed in details but with focusing on the practical aspects

ADRIBS France's participants states that careers in agriculture includes a variety of specialties such as management among others, science, engineering and finance. These specializations require many skills in the background, new skills such as analytical skills, interpersonal skills, management skills and technological skills, are required for 21st century professions. These were considered as the top skills that the focus group believed all professionals in agriculture should have for continued success:

- Problem-solving
- Effective communication skills
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Teamwork
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership
- Creativity
- Service orientation
- Emotional management
- People management
- Self-motivation and motivate others

Participants of focus group also emphasized that skill sets should be created, because the interaction of certain skills is essential for success.

- **What is the gap between current training and these needs?**

The participants in Spain emphasised the need for the professional and above all the engineer to learn or know how to socialise in any field, as sooner or later he or she is going to work with collaborators who need not a boss but a facilitator and who also knows how to treat these collaborators as people and not as individuals who often treat them as if they were machines.

The participants indicated that when the professional is able to learn and put learning into practice, he/she will be able to get his/her collaborators not only

involved, but also committed, forming work teams that can work without supervision.

In this sense, it was stressed that the training of an engineer requires the acquisition of competences to guarantee the highest level of professional excellence, combining technical and scientific knowledge with transversal competences (soft skills) such as teamwork, innovative attitude, decision-making capacity, entrepreneurship, communication, etc., which are essential to tackle the design and management of multidisciplinary projects innate in the engineering profession.

On the other hand, it was also indicated that it is essential to have a professional who is capable of facing engineering with a greater sense of inclusion, understanding this as the need to socialise the different aspects of the projects, contributing not only in the technical field, but also in the processes where the communities affected by these projects and the conditions of the environment are involved, providing effective responses to these conditions.

In Ireland, experts agreed that there is a massive gap in the training of soft skills and the needs of the agribusiness sector. Too many farmers, for example, depend on other professionals to solve their issues and problems arising in their own farms and companies, when they could be developing the skills and sorting the issues themselves.

In this regard, they pointed there is a clear need for soft skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, effective communication, leadership, people management, etc. In the case of North Macedonia, all of the participants agreed that there is a gap in the current education in the agricultural sector and the development needs of the agribusiness sector. The participants stated that the education and training system is on great scale based on the theoretical and technical knowledge and the education system lacks practical work in real environment where the professionals can develop more skills. The current education in RSM does not meet the market demands, but the participants stated that there is also a polarization of educational programs with almost exclusively vocational subjects and programs devoted to agro-management, including all the necessary skills but are lacking vocational subjects.

The participants also stated that especially the vocational education in the field of agriculture, cannot keep up with all of the rapid changes in technology, so it can be said that there is a disparity between current education and the needed

skills, but still VET introduces innovations that provide a basis for their further development. However, it should be noted that knowledge of the steps in entrepreneurship and doing business, is one of the key elements for implementing the idea that the person engaged in agribusiness, who needs to adapt to changes and innovations, to act quickly, to simultaneously learn and develop and practice modern methods in the field, which in turn will enable effective progress.

The participants of the Polish focus group agreed that there are many different trainings available for business and entrepreneurship in regard of soft skills. Nevertheless, there is limited number of the content referring to the soft skills for development of the business in the rural areas.

Participants underlined that in Poland is very high demand of the soft skills which lack is visible especially for young people who want to start their business and also it is big lack of young workers. As mentioned above the most important for all groups of beneficiaries (employees and employers) is communication skill. Agri sector and rural business sector are special ones and demands specialized knowledge which is very limited to find.

The focus group in France agreed that even though the pandemic conditions have put the agricultural sector in a rapid adaptation process, this gap still remains. It is necessary to raise awareness about the need for skills, especially workers of farms and their owners are not even aware that new skills are needed in the routine work environment and traditional businesses. The group underlined that the promotion and training of skills is very important, but first a tool is needed for self-assessment. In this way, awareness can be created and the person becomes ready for education. A person cannot decide to develop skills without being aware of them or without measuring his/her own skills. Unfortunately, there is no 'skill development' training in the standard trainings received by employers and employees operating in rural areas. The group finds this as one of the main reasons why the gap is still exist and large. That's why they find the standard education is not enough and it doesn't work for them to solve the problems of the new century. They need new skills to keep up with the new order and the new times.

- **What is the place of soft skills in the training of agribusiness professionals?**

The Spanish participants pointed out that in the agricultural sector in which they work, they tend to focus on technical-academic knowledge (hard skills), with a wealth of encyclopaedic information and tools to perform in their day-to-day work.

But there is a type of skills that has always been of great importance and in recent years has begun to be really valued, the Soft Skills. For them, these characteristics are nothing more than the implementation of aptitudes, personality traits, mixed knowledge and acquired values, which help them to generate skills in Communication, Personal Relationships, Creativity, Teamwork, Proactivity, Empathy and Innovation.

On the other hand, the participants agreed that this type of skills affects the way they deal with others because nowadays it is no longer enough to have only technical skills, but soft or social skills need to be polished to the maximum.

Participants underlined that knowledge is becoming more and more available, but at the same time, it has a faster and faster rate of obsolescence, so a culture of knowledge management needs to be developed. On the other hand, participants stressed that the market needs professionals who know how to perform in diverse and changing environments. They must have the necessary skills to adapt, reinvent themselves and lead in new scenarios.

In Ireland, experts pointed that there is more emphasis on technical and productive skills rather than on the training on soft skills. Therefore, it was recognized a need for soft skills training in the agribusiness sector which our project can help to solve or at least to raise awareness of the issue in the whole sector.

In North Macedonia, the participants stated that the soft skills are the base and foundation and are of particular importance in modern times and are of great importance both in the agricultural sector and in all other sectors. The participants pointed out that the soft skills should be common practice in the education and should be promoted more. Soft skills and training of entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector is a need in the form of non-formal education or short professional educational programs. The soft skills should be highly positioned from the very beginning of the professional development and should be present in the educational curricula.

It was mentioned that historically, the agricultural sector in North Macedonia had the task to generate a product (under the jurisdiction of MAFWE), and the Ministry of Economy was responsible for the placement and all the added value. This division is still reflected in the way farmers work, which unfortunately - for the most part - are not business-oriented. Among other things, precisely because they lack the soft skills that,

in conditions of planned production and reliable placement, they did not feel the need at all.

In secondary education, which means in vocational education, the soft skills of students are taken into account and they are part of the curricula for certain professions. Which means that Business and Entrepreneurship are part of the curricula in secondary schools, with special emphasis on vocational education, because through the three-year and four-year occupations in the field of agriculture, the students are trained and they are the future bearers of the development of agriculture. This includes the basics given in general education subjects such as mother tongue, mathematics and foreign language. Soft skills are the basis and are very important for business people and it is desirable to acquire and establish them in order to have a more successful further development of agribusiness.

Only one person from the participants declared that soft skills do not have very significant place in the sector, for all other participants soft skills have an important place in the professional development of one person, because they complement and strengthen the acquired knowledge through formal education, for this reason, soft skills should have a significant place in education and training.

In Poland, experts agreed that the first what all professionals are learning in the schools and different trainings are hard skills. Of course, it is important to be high qualified specialist however the role of soft skills is omitted and most of the professionals are learning from their own experience. This approach is incorrect due to many problems which are appearing in the daily practice of the business work in rural areas.

The participants in France agreed that there is a need for skill training in the sector and the importance of this need is increasing day by day because as the sector grows, the problems and needs of the sector are constantly growing. In this regards, there is a clear need for new skills such as soft skills and transversal skills such as problem-solving, creativity, people management, adaptability, effective communication, leadership, etc.

- **How necessary do you consider soft skills in this sector?**

In Spain, most of the participants emphasized that over time the profile of the engineer has changed from handling only aspects of their speciality to being able to apply a series of more humanistic knowledge focused mainly on leadership and management.

Agricultural engineers not only have to develop and assert their commercial know-how, such as empathising with the target client, but they must also have presence, dynamism and strategic vision on the internet in agriculture.

In this sense, it was pointed out that the agronomist acts as a psychologist, getting to know the client and making use of the gift of communication, the approach to solutions, the organisation towards the sale and knowing how to curb commercial eagerness at the right moment.

In addition, in the development of his profession, the engineer has had to learn about the social aspects of the relationship with the communities. This represents greater challenges for the speciality, as it forces them to combine the technical with the social.

For the participants, it was essential that they have a humanistic outlook, that the person is able to focus more on interpersonal relationships and provide a more global vision when facing the day-to-day, which provides a fundamental added value for organisations.

It was stressed that characteristics such as these are even more important if the professional is in charge of a team, as it is essential that he or she has developed skills that include a certain degree of empathy with all members of the organisation, both horizontally and vertically. Participants also indicated that regardless of the position, people with leadership and management skills and problem-solving abilities are currently required.

The members of the Irish focus group acknowledged the need for soft skills training in the agribusiness sector for the progress and the good running of farms and businesses and professionals. However, farmers themselves may have the temptation to focus too much on the technical aspects and purchasing the latest machines to the detriment of skills that are key for the future of their businesses.

In North Macedonia, the majority of the participants agreed that the soft skills in the agricultural sector is very important and significant. The participants stated that the soft skills are one of the key factors for the development of this sector. But it can also be said that for any sector, these skills are necessary to possess all future entrepreneurs. Participants also stated that the agricultural sector is will have great issues in sustaining if the soft skills are not developed further. If the current generations of farmers still think they have enough knowledge of production and agricultural practices, based on an inherited tradition - they have no prior knowledge of these skills. What's even more devastating - they have no idea what gap they have and what needs to be filled.

Some of the participant thought that the soft skills should be given a priority, because the constant changes in the product market can be monitored through informal education that adapts to the needs and changes, and this cannot be achieved only with formal education.

One of the participants thought that the soft skill can be considered on some medium-high level in the agricultural sector, and one of the participants thought that soft skills are insufficiently relevant.

All Polish participants agreed that the soft skills are absolutely necessary nowadays in the business. Especially in the business in rural areas demands special adjusted soft skills. The training for farmers and business from rural areas must be prepared in the special way underlining the specific profession. The soft skills for agribusiness must be directed in the skills which can help those target group in successful executing their business.

According to those businessmen in rural areas must have knowledge of communication, negotiations and problem solving. Nevertheless, to be successful that person must be also creative and innovative.

Participants underlined that it is also important development of the content about teamwork. It is often that there are small or medium enterprises and skills should be available for owner but also for workers.

Participants in France considered soft skills as one of the solutions serve to the problems of the the agri-business sector of 21st century. They found the standard education is not enough to solve the problems of the current market functioning, it should be supported with new skill sets such as soft skills. They once again underlined the issue of awareness of the lack and existence of soft skills. They also stated that skill measurement tools are needed.

- **Our previous State of the Art identifies the absence of women and young people in the sector. How can these population groups be attracted?**

The Spanish participants agreed that the main problem in attracting women in this sector is based on stereotypes and prejudices, as this field is mostly associated with men. In order to solve this situation, the participants proposed activities such as presenting case studies of women in this field that could serve as a reference point, thus breaking their prejudices and stereotypes.

On the other hand, they also indicated that some faculties have also considered highlighting the usefulness and social necessity of these studies in order to seduce more women, as women tend to opt for what has a social application.

For the participants, these studies should "rethink" the research and engineering curricula to be more oriented towards social needs, thus moving towards gender equality in studies and making engineering better for all.

In their opinion, engineering should be more social from the outset, focused on the common good and common interest, over and above the participation of women, which is undoubtedly anomalous and worryingly low.

In this way trying to break the stereotypes associated with this field.

In relation to how to attract young people to this field, the participants pointed out that the use of new technologies will have a double advantage, on the one hand, it will advance the agri-food sector to be more efficient economically, socially and environmentally, and, on the other hand, it will attract these young people to a new modernised agriculture.

The participants indicated that young people are very attracted to digital professions and new technologies, so it is necessary to take advantage of and know how to transmit the improvements offered by the digital transformation, such as those related to welfare and working conditions in the agricultural sector by greater digitisation and connectivity with the aim of making this activity more attractive and profitable for the new generations.

In Ireland, the need of women and young people to get involved in the agribusiness was clearly seen as key for the future of farming, as depopulation in rural areas is happening at a fast pace.

There was no agreement on a single solution. The idea is to attract women and young people to the profession by making it appealing and making it work for them. The work in this sector is tough and not always necessarily great in terms of income. Generally, family farms are under threat because of lifestyle choices.

There were suggestions to making farming more attractive and create a better lifestyle for young farmers. In order to do that we have to look at the ways we are supporting farming. One way of doing this was by bringing in farm relief workers so that young farmers could get away from the farm on holiday. However, co-operatives involved in providing farm relief services now had great difficulty finding people to work for them because of the unsocial hours.

One person in the focus group mentioned that the Minister for Agriculture has announced an advisory committee on the role of women in agriculture which will address education and training, the under-representation of women at political and organizational level, health and welfare, isolation and marginalization, personal finance and other economic and legal issues.

The participants of the North Macedonian focus group stated that the population groups can be attracted with greater direct support from the state and measures to stimulate

these two groups. On the other hand, participants agreed that the municipalities and the state should stimulate interest by introducing certain incentive measures for the development of agriculture and agribusiness, as well as with ideas and thoughts in the direction of greater interest and activity of these mentioned groups. Assistance is needed, especially in rural areas where most people are engaged in agriculture. Participants also indicated the importance of motivational factors for these population groups which would be mainly existential motives such as unemployment, low wages, stress at work and similar. In this case, they would have the opportunity to show their knowledge and skills, to have flexible working hours, to have control over their work and their own life, an opportunity for a solid income.

Additionally, stimulating for young people would be certain presentations of positive examples of young farmers who use new technologies and innovations in their own production, given how young people are more inclined to new technologies and innovations compared to older ones.

They pointed out that in rural areas women are pillars of the family but unfortunately in the labor market and in modern methods of production are not included or completely insignificant. Their involvement is possible by initiating and implementing appropriate educational programs and trainings. In this sense, soft skills training should be aimed at women in the community. Sharing information targeted at women. Sharing examples from the environment and the world, the profitability and opportunities offered by agriculture.

Other measures that were proposed include the following:

- Subsidies for ownership of an agricultural holding by female members or young members of the family.
- Through intervention among the generations that should leave agriculture as a legacy, not to exclude female heirs from the possibility.
- By disseminating information and direct involvement in the work.

One participant stated that there is no absence of women in the agricultural sector in North Macedonia, and the research tells that 35% are women, the highest percentage of the four countries taken as a representative sample and additionally, in just two years, the number of registered women in Macedonia has increased by just over 2000.

All Polish participants agreed that there is a big problem to encourage women for agro sector. To improve this disadvantage situation, there was proposal to include some good practices showing successful women from rural areas.

Participants underlined that this could be a good opportunity to encourage women from rural areas to develop their creativity. They could take an example from e.g., business

woman who developed rural tourism services. That special activity demands special soft skills however all above mentioned one are fitting perfectly this demands.

All participants in France have indicated that women's participation in the sector is low compared to that of men, as well as women's participation in other sectors. The participants thought that this sector is mostly associated with men. In rural areas of France the share of women in self-employment is about 38% when we asked the group how to increase this percentage their common answer is to let them discover their skills matching with the needs of the new agriculture environment in which there is no gender discrimination. Soft skills as a key tool for the success in the sector cannot be associated with only men or with only women.

It is a great opportunity for young people to increase their involvement in the sector through the digital transformation in agriculture. The group agreed on that this century provides great opportunity for young people to increase their involvement to agri-business sector because of the significant need of digitalization which they are very good at. Nowadays, skills are not only the topics of white-collared people in urban areas, participants agreed that the importance and need of soft skills and at the same time the awareness on this issue has already started to increase. Especially pandemic situation is one of the accelerators. The group agreed that the young people are faster and more flexible in skills development and open-minded so it is much more easier for them to catch this wind of change.

- **How flexible are agribusiness professionals to face new challenges and do they find it difficult to vary their strategies and make new and different decisions?**

The Spanish participants pointed out that agronomy is a profession characterised by the high level of complexity of the problems it deals with, a complexity that results from the very nature of the object with which it deals: agriculture. They indicated that hundreds of professionals have moved from traditional agriculture to modern agriculture, witnessing the overcoming of the main challenges of the sector.

Participants also indicated that professionals in this sector have to deal with problems such as competition, the market, management, etc., where uncertainty and conflict of interest are very often present when making decisions.

On the other hand, the majority agreed that the crisis in which the country's rural production finds itself, caused among other things by the new tendencies of the globalising economy, obliges the sector to seek new paths, new methods, new goals, orienting the necessary actions that allow it to insert itself into the renovating current.

In Ireland, this aspect was only discussed briefly by experts and the answers focused on the lack of flexibility in the sector. As the majority of the professionals are in the older bracket, the aspect of change was seen as a threat rather than a positive way to help and manage new ways of tackling issues in the sector.

In North Macedonia, the opinions of the participants of this question were divided. Some of the participants think that the agribusiness is not so flexible in facing new challenges they find it difficult to vary their strategies and make new and different decisions:

- They find it difficult to change habits, and they say they need to change or keep up with new developments. Unfortunately, most entrepreneurs in
- the agricultural sector are relatively rigid and do not show much flexibility. Entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector are quite conservative in this regard.
- It is difficult for them to change their habits, but it can be influenced by new programs for education and showing good practices from other entrepreneurs from more developed countries.
- Agribusiness professionals find it difficult to change habits, and they say they need to change or keep up with new developments and they show very little, almost insignificant flexibility.

Other reasons that the participants stated are:

- Very little flexibility and difficulties in changing strategies due to the sector in which there are legal restrictions, problems with product placement, exports, etc.
- They are flexible but the institutions do not follow them properly.
- Very difficult question. In a race against time and money and survival, it is most difficult to adapt because everything you want to do requires investment and finances. Much depends on the conditions, desire and capacity of the entrepreneurs themselves. Therefore, individual agriculture should be supported with such measures that will facilitate and pave the way for future entrepreneurs. And they also need to upgrade their knowledge and skills if they want to move forward with time and technology.
- Change is difficult, but there are still market opportunities that can simplify the process. Support and more people involved could be helpful
- Very little due to insufficient education and non-acceptance of changes that are constantly happening and directly affect the agricultural business.
- There is a traditionalism in the mentality in the agricultural sector, the older generations still run the farms, so there is no flexibility. But, there is a trend of changes where the younger members take over the business, and

analogously in that category there is an interest for learning, novelties, adaptation ...

- Flexibility in this sector is a weakness, but the younger generations have a desire for change, learning, adaptation.
- A special difficulty is adaptability in agriculture, primarily due to the existing property-legal relations (the ownership is with the older

members), due to which what is already known is considered more secure.

On the other hand, some of the participants stated that:

- There are various examples of flexibility in this sector. They also have good examples of flexible farmers who know how to adapt to the new situation at any moment, but unfortunately, they also have more traditional farmers who are not ready to innovate and change the already established products and production methods.
- The bigger agribusinesses are more flexible and adaptable to changing.
- Entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector are few in number and are mainly established in the field of processing. Primary agriculture, i.e., producers of fresh food products, are at the level of family or individual business. The last word may be overestimated because, as mentioned above, production is not sustainable without state subsidies which must not and cannot be a single income. Until those changes, and until the manufacturers really hit rock bottom - I do not

expect them to even start thinking about changing strategy or rethinking decisions.

In Poland, participants said that the soft skills, even if existing for a long time, people are aware of it from relatively short time. That's why much easier is to convince younger generation for increasing their knowledge in the soft skills subject than older generation. Nevertheless, all people who are dealing with own business in rural areas are quite flexible to learn about new skills. This fact comes from the fact, that they are coming from more socially difficult environments and they had to face problems of social exclusion many times. That's why their goals are to increase their social and soft skill as much as possible. Of course, there are people which are not possible to convince to anything. However, those people are minority. On the other hand, it is worth to underline that the content prepared for this kind of beneficiaries should be prepared in the relevant for them level.

The participants in France pointed out that the climate change, supply chain, inflation, imbalance in labor supply, rising costs, increased competition etc. are main difficult issues that professionals face with in recent years. The group agreed that has become imperative to develop some skills to cope with all these difficulties and one of them is adaptability / flexibility and they advised us to put a chapter about these skills.

All participants in have indicated that women's participation in the sector is low compared to that of men, as well as women's participation in other sectors. The participants thought that this sector is mostly associated with men. In rural areas of France the share of women in self-employment is about 38% when we asked the group how to increase this percentage their common answer is to let them discover their skills matching with the needs of the new agriculture environment in which there is no gender discrimination. Soft skills as a key tool for the success in the sector cannot be associated with only men or with only women.

It is a great opportunity for young people to increase their involvement in the sector through the digital transformation in agriculture. The group agreed on that this century provides great opportunity for young people to increase their involvement to agri-business sector because of the significant need of digitalization which they are very good at. Nowadays, skills are not only the topics of white-collared people in urban areas, participants agreed that the importance and need of soft skills and at the same time the awareness on this issue has already started to increase. Especially pandemic situation is one of the accelerators. The group agreed that the young people are faster and more flexible in skills development and open-minded so it is much more easier for them to catch this wind of change.

- **How prepared is the sector and its professionals to manage VUCA environments?**

The Spanish participants pointed out that nowadays agro-industrial companies are demanding new specialised profiles in a field full of technologies such as

SEO, SEM, social networks, digital advertising, online communication, drones, etc., framing this digital era within a VUCA environment, i.e., working environments where uncertainty reigns, given the speed of change, high competitiveness and constant innovation.

In this sense, the participants indicated that in this scenario, being an adaptable, flexible, creative and willing to accept challenges and changes, is the formula for success to be a reference in the professions of the future and that the training of engineers must be aligned to the ability to learn and adapt to new situations, without

forgetting the knowledge and technical skills, but focusing on what the professional really needs for their future, which according to them is the ability to learn what they need, according to the problems at hand. Only a few Irish people in the focus group actually knew what VUCA environments was. The group acknowledged that there is certainly a VUCA environment in the agribusiness sector. Specific solutions were left for politicians and governments to solve. There were suggestions along the lines of training on specific skills for the target groups identified, which is a long process but necessary for the betterment of the sector.

In North Macedonia, the majority of the participants agree that the agribusiness sector is not prepared for the VUCA environments. They believe that the sector has the potential but insufficient and inadequate knowledge and information to engage in such processes. The sectors readiness is low and there is still a lot of work to be done in that field. It is necessary to increase the volume of initiatives and educational programs for this target group.

The participants mentioned that there are some successful examples, but entrepreneurs need to upgrade in the area they develop daily with new ideas and challenges. The agro sector itself is an insufficiently stable and risky activity. The younger generations have a desire for adaptation, greater courage, risk-taking and so on. But it is a slow process that will take place gradually in the coming period. Agriculture is a risky, complex and uncertain activity, the so-called "Outdoor factory". Recently, however, especially among the younger generations, there is a willingness to overcome those conditions and adapt appropriately. According to the current conditions in the agro sector, these environments are one of the major factors influencing the activity, but entrepreneurs have a hard time dealing with them.

Polish participants of the focus group pointed out that VUCA environment exists in Poland from the long time. And in fact, there is no certainty about anything in Polish economy. This is becoming not only because of the trade changes but mostly because of unpredictability of the government. That's why flexibility, adaptability and creativity is so important in Polish circumstances. Entrepreneurs have those skills well developed however this is relevant to the older generation which had opportunity to get experience from their work before. Young generation of entrepreneurs is in much worse situation. And the content of the project in relation to VUCA should be devoted for them mostly.

After sharing this question with the group members in France it was found out that a few people in the focus group actually knew what VUCA environments was that is why

a part about VUCA was put in the training materials of SITRA. During the focus group VUCA was explained briefly.

3. From the list, select the 12 more important soft skills for agricultural entrepreneurs and professionals.

The skills that most stand out among those mentioned by the Spanish participants are the following ones:

- Effective communication skills
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Teamwork
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership
- Creativity
- Resilience
- Service orientation
- Emotional management
- People management

The following skills have been chosen by the participants even though they were not on the list:

- Proactivity
- Interpersonal relationships

In Ireland, the group regarded the list as quite complete, although the experts agreed there were many other options such as:

- Innovation
Critical Thinking
- Analytical thinking
- Initiative
- Coordinating with others
- Decision making
- Negotiation
- Flexibility

In North Macedonia, the most following soft skills can be efficient to manage situations in times of uncertainty:

- Service orientation
- Problem-solving

- Research
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Self-motivation and motivate others
- Integrity
- Resilience
- Dependability
- People management
- Leadership
- Work ethic

For the rest of the skills that were proposed, the participants agreed that they are of huge importance as well and it is very hard to decide which one is more needed than other.

For all of the skills that were proposed on the list, the participants were confident and sure that the skills indeed are needed in the sector, except for the Emotional management skills, where some of the participants were not so sure that these skills can be used efficiently in the sector.

The participants mentioned some other skills that they believe that it is important for the development of entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector:

- Persistence and innovation
- Knowledge of foreign languages and IT technological tools
- Prediction based on research and experience
- Financial management
- Planning
- Consciousness (to merge the individual with the collective)
- Cooperation

In Poland, the skills that most stand out among those mentioned by the participants are the following ones:

- Effective communication skills
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Problem solution
- Creativity
- Service orientation
- Workers management
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Resilience

The following skills were chosen by the participants even though they were not on the list:

- Stress resistance
- Negotiations

Among the soft skills in the list presented to the group in France, the soft skills that received the most attention were: Problem-solving, creativity, people management, adaptability, effective communication, leadership.

5. National conclusions

These are the conclusions of the focus groups held in each country.

Spain

Participants in the focus group indicated the following skills that are needed in the development of agribusiness professional:

- Self-knowledge
- Communication
- Proactivity and self-learning ability
- Resilience
- Adaptability
- Social skills
- Executive skills
- Innovation

It was stressed that the training of an engineer requires the acquisition of competences to guarantee the highest level of professional excellence, combining technical and scientific knowledge with transversal competences (soft

skills) such as teamwork, innovative attitude, decision-making capacity, entrepreneurship, communication, etc., which are essential to tackle the design and management of multidisciplinary projects innate in the engineering profession.

The participants pointed out that in the agricultural sector in which they work, they tend to focus on technical-academic knowledge (hard skills). But there is a type of skills that has always been of great importance and in recent years has begun to be really valued, the Soft Skills. For them, these characteristics are nothing more than the implementation of aptitudes, personality traits, mixed knowledge and acquired values, which help them to generate skills in Communication, Personal Relationships, Creativity, Teamwork,

Proactivity, Empathy and Innovation. Most of the participants emphasised that over time the profile of the engineer has changed from handling only aspects of their speciality to being able to apply a series of more humanistic knowledge focused mainly on leadership and management.

In this sense, it was pointed out that the agronomist acts as a psychologist, getting to know the client and making use of the gift of communication, the approach to solutions, the organisation towards the sale and knowing how to curb commercial eagerness at the right moment.

The participants agreed that the main problem in attracting women in this sector is based on stereotypes and prejudices, as this field is mostly associated with men. In order to solve this situation, the participants proposed activities such as presenting case studies of women in this field, highlighting the usefulness and social necessity of these studies. On the other hand, in order to attract young people to this field, the participants pointed out the use of new technologies.

Participants indicated that professionals in this sector have to deal with problems such as competition, the market, management, etc., where uncertainty and conflict of interest are very often present when making decisions, obliging the sector to seek new paths, new methods, new goals, orienting the necessary actions that allow it to insert itself into the renovating current.

Participants indicated that in a VUCA scenario, being adaptable, flexible, creative and willing to accept challenges and changes, is the formula for success to be a reference in the professions of the future and that the training of engineers must be aligned to the ability to learn and adapt to new situations, without forgetting the knowledge and technical skills, but focusing on what the professional really needs for their future, which according to them is the ability to learn what they need, according to the problems at hand. The skills that most stand out among those mentioned by the participants are the following ones:

- Effective communication skills
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Teamwork
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership
- Creativity
- Resilience
- Service orientation
- Emotional management
- People management

The following skills have been chosen by the participants even though they were not on the list:

- Proactivity
- Interpersonal relationships

Ireland

There is a pressing need for soft skills training in formal and informal ways to get the agribusiness sector to another level and to attract women and young people to the sector.

Entrepreneurs involved in farming would welcome the training in soft skills to be able to solve problems and issues arising in their own farms, businesses and organizations.

There is a need for renewal in the sector and the training in soft skills, whatever the list may be, can greatly impact the future of agribusiness and the modern approach to welcome education and training, rather than focusing on technical aspects that can be of benefit but not have a big impact long term.

North Macedonia

The participants stated the following skills that are needed in the development of agribusiness professional:

- Work ethic
- Perseverance
- Adaptability
- Planning, organizing
- Work motive
- Certain level of knowledge in the field
- Adaptation to the needs of the market
- Cooperation with experts
- IT skills
- Marketing skills
- Knowledge of the market and its characteristics
- Knowledge of the product process
- Project (strategic) planning
- Financial operations (accounting)
- Human resource organization
- Agricultural policy at the national and global level

- Willingness to take risks
- Desire to constantly learn and upgrade
- Willingness to change
- Business orientation
- Leadership
- Skills in the field of entrepreneurship
- Communication skills
- Skills in the field of knowledge and working with computers
- Research skills
- Technical knowledge in the field of agriculture
- Creativity
- Resourcefulness
- Knowledge on support for agricultural development at the state level
- Responsibility
- Courage
- Commitment
- Business management

From the discussion it was evident that there are obvious differences in terms of the knowledge that the potential agribusiness professionals possess and the knowledge and skills that are essential for starting an agribusiness, and it is necessary to put more emphasis on the essential skills for activity in the agricultural sector.

The soft skills should be common practice in the education and should be promoted more. Soft skills and training of entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector is a need in the form of non-formal education or short professional educational programs. The soft skills should be highly positioned from the very beginning of the professional development and should be present in the educational curricula on multiple levels as well. The majority of the participants agreed that the soft skills in the agricultural sector are very important and significant and they are one of the key factors for the development of this sector.

The majority of the participants have stated that the absence of women and young people in the sector can be increased with the stimulation of the interest by introducing certain incentive measures for the development of agriculture and agribusiness.

On the flexible are agribusiness professionals to face new challenges and do they find it difficult to vary their strategies and make new and different decisions, some of the participants think that the agribusiness are not so flexible in facing new challenges they find it difficult to vary their strategies and make new and different decisions, and some of them believe that with the appropriate methods and strategies, there is a great possibility that some of the larger agribusinesses and your entrepreneurs will be able to adjust properly.

For the VUCA environments, the majority of the participants agree that the agribusiness sector is not prepared for the VUCA environments. They believe that the sector has the potential but insufficient and inadequate knowledge and information to engage in such processes. The sectors readiness is low and there is still a lot of work to be done in that field. It is necessary to increase the volume of initiatives and educational programs for this target group.

Based on the answers of the participants, the most following soft skills can be efficient to manage situations in times of uncertainty:

- Service orientation
- Problem-solving
- Research
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Self-motivation and motivate others
- Integrity
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Resilience

- Dependability
- People management
- Leadership
- Work ethic

For the rest of the skills that were proposed, the participants agreed that they are of huge importance as well and it is very hard to decide which one is more needed than other.

Poland

Participants in the focus group indicated the following skills:

- Communication
- Self-learning ability
- Negotiations
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Creativity
- Innovation

Participants if the focus group discussed very much about necessity of the soft skills for agro and rural business. The discussion was focusing on the special needs and topics which should be elaborated in the project in reference to the real needs. Participants underlined necessity of elaboration as much practical content as possible with maximum possible practical exercises and examples. They pointed out that this is the best method

to interest beneficiaries to learn about soft skills. As a main soft skill, they considered communication. They were concluding that this is the skill which is crucial for business but also to develop other skills like negotiations, teamwork or management of the workers.

They underlined that in the VUCA environment, which is existing from many years in Poland it is extremely important to learn how efficiently and effectively use soft skills.

France

The pilot testing event showed once more the need for the SITRA project. The participants approved the problems and needs in the justification part of the project. It is obvious that standard education does not fully meet the needs of the sector and there is a need for out-of-school education. The need for training in skills that will meet the needs and solve the problems of the 21st century agriculture sector is clear. All participants stated that they are eagerly waiting for the outputs of the SITRA project. They stated that skills development will play a key role in increasing the participation of young people and women in the sector. They underlined the need for skill assessment at the beginning of the skill development process. Among the soft skills in the list presented to the group, the soft skills that received the most attention were: Problem-solving, creativity, people management, adaptability, effective communication, leadership.

6. Summing up

After analysing the results of the focus groups carried out by each partner, the following conclusions were reached:

1. Most of the participants underlined the importance of soft skills for the development of the agribusiness professional, including among others:
 - Self-awareness
 - Communication
 - Proactivity and self-learning
 - Adaptability
 - Perseverance
 - Creativity
 - Courage
 - Service orientation
 - Problem solving

2. All participants agreed that there is a gap between current training in the agricultural sector and the development needs of the agro-industrial sector. In this sense, the training of an engineer requires the acquisition of competences that guarantee the highest level of professional excellence, combining technical and scientific knowledge with soft skills such as teamwork, innovative attitude, decision-making capacity, entrepreneurial spirit, communication, etc,

However, there is a limited amount of content on soft skills for enterprise development in rural areas.

3. The experts pointed out that there is more emphasis on technical and productive skills than on soft skills training. Therefore, the need for soft skills training in the agribusiness sector was recognised. On the other hand, it was indicated that soft skills should be a common practice in education and should be promoted more by being very present from the beginning of professional development and in the curricula.
4. Participants agreed that soft skills are very important and significant for the progress and good functioning of farms and rural businesses. In this sense, it is essential that they have a humanistic vision, that the person

is able to focus more on interpersonal relationships and bring a more global vision when facing the day to day, which is a fundamental added value for organisations.

Moreover, it is striking that such characteristics are even more important if the professional is in charge of a team, as it is essential that he or she has developed skills that include a certain degree of empathy with all members of the organisation, both horizontally and vertically.

5. The experts stated that these population groups can be attracted with more direct support from the state and with measures that stimulate these two groups by stimulating their interest by introducing certain incentive measures for the development of agriculture and agro-industry.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the main problem in attracting women to this sector is based on stereotypes and prejudices, as this field is mostly associated with men. In order to solve this situation, activities such as the presentation of practical cases of women in this field that could serve as a reference, thus breaking their prejudices and stereotypes, were proposed.

In relation to how to attract young people to this field, the participants pointed out that the use of new technologies will have a double advantage: on the one hand, it will advance the agri-food sector to make it more efficient economically, socially and environmentally, and on the other hand, it will attract these young people to a new modernised agriculture, as young people are more inclined to new technologies and innovations compared to older people.

6. The opinions of the participants on this question were divided. Some of the participants thought that the agribusiness is not so flexible to face the new challenges that it is difficult to vary its strategies and make new and different decisions, especially the older generations, while others thought that the new trends of the globalising economy force the sector to look for new ways, new methods, new goals, orienting the necessary actions that will allow it to insert itself in the renovating current.
7. Most participants agree that the agri-food sector is an insufficiently stable and risky business and is not prepared for VUCA environments. They believe that the sector has the potential but insufficient and inadequate

knowledge and information to participate in these processes. In this sense, the participants indicated that in this scenario, being an adaptable, flexible, creative and willing to accept challenges and changes, is the formula for success to be a reference in the professions of the future and that the training of engineers must be aligned with the ability to learn and adapt to new situations, without forgetting technical knowledge and skills, but focusing on what the professional really needs for their future, which according to them is the ability to learn what they need, according to the problems that arise.

It was also underlined that among the younger generations, there is a willingness to overcome these conditions and adapt appropriately.

8. Based on the experts' responses, the 12 most important soft skills for agricultural entrepreneurs and professionals are as follows:

- Problem-solving
- Effective communication skills
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Teamwork
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership
- Creativity
- Service orientation
- Emotional management
- People management
- Self-motivation and motivate others
- Critical thinking

