



Agroecology for Europe (AE4EU)

Towards the development of agroecology in Europe

Deliverable report D4.2. – European Agroecology Exchange Network Knowledge Hub

Authors of the report	Natalia Rastorgueva, Alice Fasso, Paola Migliorini
Contributors to the report	
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organisation	DI. Hickander Wezer Idriki, Eyon, France
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Executive summary

The Agroecology for Europe Hub was designed as a virtual space as an internet-based platform where different stakeholders can share their experience with agroecology, find initiatives and/or people with similar interests, and get information and knowledge about agroecology with in multi-facets.

A three-years process of the Hub creation and improvement included numerous discussions with the external stakeholders and internal project partners, workshops, tests with collection of the feedback and following adjustments of the Hub.

The present report contains detailed information concerning the methodology for creation of the Hub, its structure, its online activation, series of the received feedbacks, and a process of their integration, and different events for dissemination and promotion. Furthermore, this report provides a further development of the Hub after the steps described in the Deliverable 4.1 "First version of the Agroecology Exchange Network Knowledge Hub", where its main features and objectives were provided.





1. Introduction

The University of Gastronomic Sciences (UNISG), Pollenzo, Italy have created the Hub, in collaboration with an external IT company which committed its technical development, within the AE4EU project.

The UNISG team in collaboration with project partners and the web developers improved the first version of the Hub that was submitted in April 2022. Many improvements were made in order to make the hub more interactive, user friendly, accessible and easy to use and to find information. The most important was a change of its name from Agroecology Exchange Network Knowledge Hub to Agroecology for Europe Hub.

As far as agroecology is defined as "a science, a practice and a movement", it engages a variety of stakeholders. They play different roles for agroecological transition and differently use agroecological knowledge, practices and principles, thereby providing different contributions to agroecology. That is why, the Hub initially was not focused only on one type of the stakeholders, but aimed at bringing them together and providing a space to all of them. Thus, the main feature of the target audience of the Hub is the stakeholders' involvement into agroecology rather than their activities.

As already presented in D4.1, the Hub was created for farmers, agricultural and food systems professionals, researchers, students, citizens, social movements & NGOs, policy makers, chefs and restaurants. In order to have an electronic tool with an interface and main options that would be user-friendly to all aforementioned stakeholders, a series of feedbacks were collected and further improvements were committed.





2. Concept and structure of the Hub

The main ambition for the Hub is its twofold role of a virtual place for connecting stakeholders and, at the same time, of a source of information for its users. Due to this role, the Hub was planned as a long-term digital instrument that will be implemented during the project, but continued to be operative after the project term. Further activities that provide the long-term life of the Hub included the following: a test phase, a period that consist of an internal launching of the Hub (engaging multi-stakeholder partners of AE4EU project) and improvements, and dissemination of the Hub to the stakeholders interested in agroecology (since a long time as well as just starting agroecological practice) (D4.1).

In other words, the Hub is a virtual space to connect all actors interested or involved in agroecology. The hub's target is to contribute to development of a European network on agroecology. This contribution will be provided through: encouraging networking and exchange of information, connecting digitally practitioners and experts, sharing knowledge, insights and best practices, learning from experiences and inspiring innovation and new ways of working in agroecology.

In the Hub, users can share content and information illustrating Living Labs, farming practices, but also funding and institutional instruments. Everything can be easily published and found online to create European-wide agroecological connections.

The Hub gathers different stakeholders (farmers integrated into territory, local food hubs, policymakers, food supplier and food producers, restaurants and chefs, NGOs, researchers, teachers, students in higher education institutes, citizens and other actors interested in agroecology) to facilitate exchanges in the Europe-wide network of agroecology organizations (linking academic and real-world actors).

The structure hub was designed in a user-friendly way, and it does not require technical skills in order to navigate it. In the Hub, after creating a personal account, it is possible to find or share different kinds of information and experiences about agroecology – at different levels, from farm stories to funding and research. As shown in Fig 1, the types of uploadable contents are: stories from the field, articles, news, files, resources (that means creating an external link), file or picture, event description.







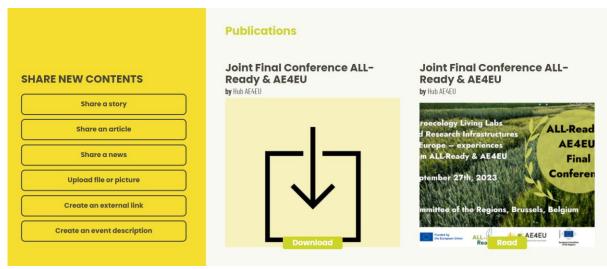


Figure 1. Types of the uploadable contents.

To enrich the shared content, users can add a title, keywords related to agroecology farming categories, agroecology principles, practices and pillars, but also types of stakeholders interested in the specific uploaded content.

Finally, on the homepage, there is an informative section (Fig. 2), called 'experience a growing network', the only hub section accessible without registration. In this homepage section, it is possible to find resources and information on agroecology. In the first section, called 'training and practicing', the definition of agroecology and its principles, guidelines for farmers' training, and the AE4EU project's understanding of living labs are defined. In the section called, 'sharing your skills and experience', examples of agroecological initiatives, living labs and academic resources are presented. While, in the last section, funding schemes for researchers, farmers and funded agroecological projects are provided.



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Figure 2. Section "Experience a growing network" of the website.

2.1. Methodology for building the hub

As was described in D4.1, the methodology for building the Hub has been created and included the following steps:

- a. Discussing with all partners core elements of the Hub (the core elements clustered in several directories: EU projects, Education & Training, Supporting Materials, How to Start Agroecology, Policies);
- b. Discussing the structure of the European Agroecology network, that will be hosted on the Hub and will embrace all European Agroecology stakeholders;
- c. Drafting the structure of the Hub based on the received results of WP1-3;
- d. Preparing the electronic version of the Hub;
- e. Trial of the Hub by the AE4EU partners and collecting their feedback;
- f. Preparing content base for the directories;
- g. Promoting the Hub in social networks and engaging stakeholders.

The first part of the methodology (points a, b, c, d) are described in D4.1. Whilst an advancement of the methodology (points e, f, g) is included in this deliverable (sections 2.2, 2.3, 2.4).





2.2. Feedback and improvements

To receive feedback and improve the structure and content of the hub, a survey, workshops and meetings were organized, coordinated and facilitated collecting opinions from AE4EU partners and from the Hub's external users during the last year of the project.

2.2.1. <u>Survey</u>

The survey was sent to potential hub users to strengthen the participatory development of the hub collecting their feedback, satisfaction, usefulness and clarity of the structure, and of the content of the online platform. The feedback was received only from few users, because of the first version having problems such as readability due to little contrast between the text and the background, and the use of Italian language, rather than English, in some parts of the text on the hub.

2.2.2. <u>Internal AE4EU workshop</u>

A workshop to test the hub was carried out during the AE4EU annual meeting in May 2023. The implementation of feedback in order to improve the hub content and structure is presented in this section.

Specifically, in order to carry out the step 'e' of the methodology "Trial of the Hub" a workshop with AE4EU partners was organized during the project Annual Meeting (22-23 of May 2023), to test the hub and receive feedback from the project partners on the usability of the Hub. The main feedback concerned the structure of the menu, the difficulty to find content on the Hub, the position of the informative section in the homepage and other detailed recommendations: improved backend structure of the Hub and personal profile.

<u>Improvements of the content of personal profile:</u>

- a drop-down menu to select the type of initiative in the personal profile with a few options
- one sentence description of the initiative or mission
- link to website and/or social media
- user's role at the initiative, i.e. title.

<u>Improvements of the structure of personal profile:</u>

- Add the option to view the own profile as others would see it
- Add the option to search for other people on the Hub: searching for a name who registered, it should come up





- Have the community of users that can be searched and viewed
- There is no opportunity to interact with others—create the option to publicly access people's profiles, for example adding LinkedIn profile, email, or WhatsApp to the personal profile.

Improvements of the Hub structure:

Most of the following feedback is being discussed with the new company that took over the development of the Hub from October 2023.

- creation of an easy link from the AE4EU website to the Hub
- The section "Experience a growing network" in the homepage is the most valuable part of the website. The content of this section should be accessible from the main menu as well.
- Restructuring the menu, i.e. rather than having a separate landing page for each content option, two landing pages should be developed: one for uploading materials and another for displacing the uploaded content. On both pages it should be possible to filter by content type. For that it is necessary a better tagging system: events, articles, stories, etc.
 - Same for uploading content, rather than having a separate page for uploading different types of content, it should be possible to tag the material with the specific type (article, story, etc.). Events could be an exception.
- Prioritize restructuring the menu to have access to different resources from the homepage directly: an inventory of people on the Hub, the community space where everything is shared by users, and the form to share it.

Content of the Hub

Some uploaded contents are too short and not clear. Guidance should be provided on what information people can upload thinking through the purpose of the Hub and how that affects the type of content. For example, events, resources, readings, stories from the field are really helpful. However, general discussion or time sensitive notes, news happen more on social media or on other websites.

2.2.3. Other feedback meetings and workshops

Besides the workshop with partners during the project Annual Meeting, other meetings and workshops were organized to trial the Hub by the AE4EU partners, including:

• Three meetings (between January and May 2023) were held with Agroecology Europe to align the development of the hub and the map;



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- A meeting with the ISARA team to receive feedback on the improvement of the Hub and to discuss the content of the informative section of the hub called Experience A Growing Network, where there were decided following:
- 1) To change contents and titles of some subsections,
- 2) To add an option for correcting the uploaded text and for adding a picture
- 3) To use different pictures for different types of the contents
- Meetings with web developers and with lawyers.

2.2.4. Technical advancement, functionality, and EU private policy issues

From January to August 2023 five meetings were held with the company that provided technically the Hub until October 2023. The objectives of these exchanges were to improve the back end of the hub and solve technical problems of the hub: i.e., automatic messages appeared both in Italian and in English, technical problems with registration (impossible to register for some users) occurred and drop down lists appeared as blank boxes to some users.



Figure 3. Information required for the personal profile.

Moreover, the meetings with the web developers enabled WP4 to accomplish many improvements of the Hub that were listed in the previous paragraphs of section 2.2: i.e. the personal profile was enriched with further information about the user such as information about the belonging initiative, initiative or mission statement and user's role in the initiative (Fig. 3).



During the last year of the project, the technical providers have transferred the Hub development to another company due to internal organizational changes. The collaboration with the new company started in October 2023. According to the received feedback from the project partners, the following options were added:

- 1) a menu button in each website's page,
- 2) "Experience a growing network" and its subsection in the menu.
- 3) rather than having a separate landing page for each content option, two landing pages should be developed: one for uploading materials and another for displacing the uploaded content. On both pages it should be possible to filter by content type. For that it is necessary a better tagging system: events, articles, stories, etc.
- 4) a section to find the hub's user
- 5) LinkedIn profile, email, or WhatsApp in the personal profile to interact with the other hub's users
- 6) options for changing contents and text (different fonts, links, pictures)
- 7) the backend in English.

EU Privacy policy issues

Two meetings with lawyers were organized in spring 2023, to be able to run the Hub according EU privacy policy. The documents were prepared by the Italian lawyers in Italian. Due to the future hosting the Hub by Agroecology Europe, all Italian privacy policy documents of the Hub were translated into English. The prepared documents included:

- 1. General Data Protection Regulation;
- 2. Cookies policy, which is needed to personalize content, to provide social media features, and to analyze used internet traffic. Besides, the cookies are important to memorize the preferences entered; to avoid re-entering the same information several times during the visit such as username and password; to analyze the use of the services and content provided in the Hub for optimizing the browsing experience and available services. There are different types of cookies: technical cookies, analytic/statistic cookies, third-party analytical cookies, preference cookies, marketing cookies, profiling cookies.
- 3. Agreement was set up of co-ownership between UNISG and Agroecology Europe to share responsibility and management of the 'Agroecology for Europe HUB' platform after the project ends.



Moreover, an essential outcome of these meetings was the creation of two buttons on the hub with the following text to accomplish privacy policy requirements:

- For the researchers: "Apply to Scientific Research, read the policy here in order to give consent to share personal information with other hub users";
- For the personal accounts: "I give the consent to share my personal data (particularly my information contact email and phone number) with users of the hub". The user's consent is necessary, as the users provide their personal information available to the wide audience.

On the one hand, many improvements were realized after receiving feedback from partners and Hub users. Particularly, improvement of the personal profile structure and content were accomplished, the issues with languages of the Hub and all technical problems with registration and automatic messages were solved within the previous budget. On the other hand, more funds were allocated to update the Hub increasing its accessibility and user-friendly approach.

2.3. Content areas

In order to prepare basic contents for the directories (step f of the methodology to build the hub) the following materials were collected and described briefly here:

- description of agroecological initiatives which logged in the hub were created such as PermaFlor (Romania), GrandFarm (Austria), GREEN NETWORK OF ACTIVIST GROUPS (CROATIA);
- 2) content materials shared by project partners were uploaded (e.g. ECVC brochures and dissemination materials);
- 3) content created in WP4 of the project for the informative section of the Hub 'Experience a Growing Network' constitute of the following 3 sections and related subsections:
- a) Under area "Training and practicing":
- Agroecology overview (this section includes explanation of agroecology and its principles, and provides factsheets prepared by Agroecology Europe);
- Training sessions (the section contains materials created in Task 4.3 of the project)
- Our understanding of living labs (the section contains materials used for Task 4.2 of the project including types and definitions of living labs and steps of methodology applied for their creation).





- b) Sharing your skills and experience:
- Find Initiatives. In this subsection the agroecological initiatives registered on the hub are listed;
- Find Living Labs. In this subsection the agroecological living labs registered on the hub are listed;
- Academic Resources. Books and scientific papers were selected and discussed by the project partners. This section was created in order to shed light on the current state of agroecology in Europe, its main elements and transition processes.
- c) Funding Schemes (source: Deliverable 3.1)
- For researchers;
- For farmers.

2.4. <u>Hub Materials</u>: Users and Publications

2.4.1. Users of the Hub

In order to develop the network of the Hub, 350 stakeholders belonging to different agroecological networks in Europe (Agroecology Europe, European Network of Agroecology Food Systems (ENAF), master students from different universities) were contacted by email by the UNISG team. 114 actors have registered on the hub (see list of users in the Annex 2). from 18 countries: Kosovo; United Kingdom; Germany; Spain; Italy; The Netherlands; Croatia; Portugal; Sweden; France; Hungary; Slovenia; Cyprus; Romania; Austria; Belgium; Greece; Denmark.

The stakeholders registered on the Hub have the following types of initiatives: farm, CSA, living lab, extension services, political institution, HoReCa, university, research institute, vocational school, NGO, enterprise, project, other. Some specific agroecological initiatives participating in the online platform are Lifewatch, Agroecology Europe, All-Ready, CRA-W, PermaFLORA, Cooperative for Good Economy ZMAG, GRAND FARM, Soil Association, BioRio and UniPD, Environmental Management Trust, Maastricht university Zeleno savjetovanje Herner, Ammar Seeds, EC and FAO.





2.4.2. Publications on the hub

The main menu section, Publications, contains so far 30 materials including following types of the contents: Stories from the field (6), Articles (5), File (11), Resources (external links) (5), Events (3), shared by users from 18 countries.





3. Dissemination activity

3.1. Dissemination activity in 2022

The first trial of the Hub

The first online version of the Hub was introduced to the AE4EU project partners in the project annual meeting in Lugo (Spain) in May 2022. All participants tested different functions of the Hub and discussed it. Besides, the participants discussed lists of the keywords (farmers categories, agroecological practices) needed for quick search of the shared information.

Research day at UNISG in October 2022

A poster with description of WP4 of the AE4EU was introduced on Research Day, an annual event organized by the University of Gastronomic Sciences (Pollenzo, Italy) on the 5th of October 2022 for approximately 95 participants. Natalia Rastorgueva introduced the poster (Fig 4.) with activities of Work Package 4 carried out by UNISG including development of the Hub.



Figure 4. Poster with the Hub description presented on the Research Day 2022.

TerraMadre 2022

The Hub as a part of WP4 committed by UNISG was introduced by the researchers on the thematic conference within TerraMadre 2022¹ hold in Turin (Italy) on the 22nd of September 2022. About 50 people from different countries participated in the conference including

¹ https://2022.terramadresalonedelgusto.com/



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journalists, teachers, students and citizens. The conference included oral presentation with simultaneous translation, and following questions and answers (Fig 5.)



Figure 5. Presentation of the Hub on the Terra Madre conference.

Symposium in Turin 2022

The first Symposium Toward the International Society for Gastronomic Sciences and Studies² was held in Pollenzo and Turin (Italy) in September 2022. Within its thematic area "Climate change, agroecology and agroecological transition" the UNISG researchers introduced WP4 of the AE4EU project including the Hub to 22 participants of the session. The participants tested the Hub and provided their feedback.

The 3rd Workshop of the Italian living lab in Varaita Valley in November 2022

The 3rd Workshop was carried out in the Italian living lab created within the AE4EU project. The Workshop was organized and facilitated by the UNISG team in November 2022 in Brossasco (province of Cuneo, Piedmont region, Italy).

Due to appropriate communication (prepared and distributed flyers and posts on social media), 48 people with different backgrounds (9 students, 10 farmers, 2 advisors, 6 researchers, 2 chefs, 1 former and 3 relevant politicians, and 21 citizens with other backgrounds) from nearby valleys have participated in the workshop.

² https://www.gastronomicsociety.org/projects-2



The main objective of the workshop was the dissemination of the living lab experience; in fact, the agenda of the Workshop included the following tasks: (I) introduction of agroecology, its principles, the project activity including the Hub and the living lab experience; (II) discussion of four thematic tables with two questions for discussion (Which aspects need research activity? Which policies can be useful to realize these themes?); and (III) networking activity.

3.2. Dissemination strategy and stakeholders' engagement in 2023

The dissemination strategy and stakeholders' engagement activity for the hub included the following steps:

- 1) Promotion of the hub on the webpages of AE4EU, Agroecology Europe and to all institutions involved in the project, and requested to be linked to the ALL-Ready website (sister CSA project);
- 2) Creation of a slide presentation of the hub as a template sent to each partner in order to present the hub at other agroecological events;
- 3) Dissemination in social media including accounts of AE4EU and Agroecology Europe (Instagram, Facebook, Linkedin, Twitter/X);
- 4) Mailing lists aimed at stakeholders involved in agroecology in Europe (from farmers, to researchers and policy-makers):
- 350 contacts from the mapped initiatives;
- partners of other international research projects (RADIANT³, HUMUS⁴; GOODFOOD);
- members of agroecological networks (ENOAT, AEEU....).
- 5) AE4EU newsletter of April;
- 6) Presentation of the Hub in the national and international events listed below.

In addition to the above listed dissemination actions, the hub was presented in the following national and European events related to agroecology.

⁴ https://humus-project.eu/



³ https://www.radiantproject.eu/



Annual meeting of AE4EU in Pollenzo in May 2023

The annual project meeting of the project held in Pollenzo on the 22nd and 23rd of May. 28 Participants from all partner institutions took part in the meeting. The workshop for the Hub organised during the meeting was described in section 2.2.2.

Research Day at UNISG in June 2023

Two posters of AE4EU were introduced on Research Day, an annual event organized by the University of Gastronomic Sciences (Pollenzo, Italy) on the 5th of June 2023 for approximately 90 participants. Alice Fasso (Fig 6.) introduced a poster about activities of Work Package 4 carried out by UNISG including the Hub, its development, structure and link.



Figure 6. Poster presented on the Research Day 2023.

Summer School of the Good Food project (July 2023)

The Hub was presented to the participants of the Summer School organized by the UNISG within the framework of the GoodFood project in July 2023 in Melle (Piedmont, Italy). The participants, thirty students and professors, came from 6 universities including Münster University of Applied Sciences MUAS, Germany; ISARA, Lyon, France; UNISG, Italy; Warsaw University of Life Sciences WULS, Poland; Agricultural University of Plovdiv AUP, Bulgaria; University of Oradea UO, Romania.





GfÖ conference in Germany in September 2023

Poster (Annex 2) with description of the Hub, link and QR code was presented on the poster session (Fig. 7) in the 52nd Meeting of the Ecological Society of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. GfÖ - The future of biodiversity Overcoming barriers of taxa, realms and scales, 12–16 September 2023, Leipzig, Germany. 1200 people with different backgrounds participated in the conference and in the poster session.



Figure. 7 Poster session of the GfÖ conference.

ALL-Ready and AE4EU joint conference in Brussels

On the 27th of September 2023 UNISG participated in the joint conference organized by ALL-Ready and AE4EU projects in Brussels. Three participants from the UNISG including a representative of the Varaita Valley living lab took part in the conference. The conference activities included moderating the panel session, participating in the shared discussion of the LL experience and followed the market place with poster sessions. The Hub was briefly explained during the conference.

Let's liberate biodiversity Forum in Ireland, October 2023

Flyers with the main information of the Hub (Fig. 8) were disseminated among all 160 participants of the Let's liberate Biodiversity Forum carried out in Trinity College in Dublin (Ireland) on 26-28th of October 2023.









Figure 8. Flyer for the Hub dissemination (both sides).

Agroecology Europe Forum 2023 and poster presentation

For the Agroecology Europe Forum held in November 2023 in Hungary, the UNISG team presented posters with QR code about the HUB (Annex 1) and flyers for distribution and dissemination of the Hub (Fig. 8).

ENAF launching event

On January 26th, AE4EU launched the European Network for Agroecological Food Systems (ENAF), along with more than 40 esteemed colleagues and fellow associations from Europe. The participants discussed activating the combined potential and capabilities of existing national and European networks to be able to contribute more effectively across sectors to agroecological transformations of farming and food systems in Europe, in a way that is bottom-up, transdisciplinary, and embraces all agroecological elements and principles. The Hub was introduced as one of the tools for networking activities.





4. Conclusion

During the three years of the project, the hub was designed, created, implemented, disseminated, and improved according to the received users' feedback. In the future, the Agroecology for Europe Hub is expected to strengthen its role as an essential tool to connect agroecological stakeholders belonging to different groups such as ENAF, TPP international, Agroecology coalition, SCAR-AE, EU Agroecology partnership.

In fact, due to the last improvements made in November 2023, i.e. the restructuring of the menu, the new section to find the other hub's users and the addition of contact details on the personal profile, the Hub will allow more easy searching relevant information and actors involved in agroecology in Europe at different scales and in different activities (from farmers to researchers and policy-makers).

From 2024 the Hub will be hosted by Agroecology Europe which will create a direct link between the existing Agroecology Europe Website and the Hub developed under AE4EU.

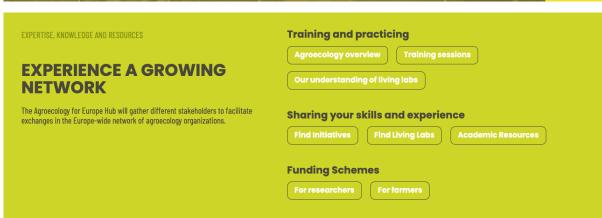




Annex 1. The design of the Homepage and Content Menu











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Annex 2. Poster of the Hub presented on the GfÖ Conference

