
Balkan Agro Food Network

Support the opening of the European Research Area by developing
a sustainable network in agricultural and food sector in the Western Balkan

POSITION PAPER

Providing recommendations on agrifood research and industry as well as policy support tools for agrifood researchers and industrialists from the WBC

This position paper is part of a project called "Setting up of an agricultural & food research network in the Western Balkan countries", which has been awarded financial support by the European Commission through Contract no. 026361 under the Sixth Framework Programme for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration Activities (2002 to 2006), and its specific programme 'Integrating and Strengthening the European Research Area – Specific measures in support of international co-operation'.

This Position Paper summarizes the main findings of the synthesis report “Agrifood research in the Western Balkan Countries: Current situation and future needs”, produced under the framework of the “Setting up of an agricultural & food research network in the Western Balkan countries” EC funded project.

This Position Paper presents **scientific fields** considered as the priority areas for the agri-food sector in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYR of Macedonia and Serbia. It also indicates **support mechanisms** that could contribute towards tackling specific problems of research organisations in the WBC.

The WBCs covered present some common features regarding their economic and social characteristics. The area has the **lowest** Gross Domestic Products (**GDP**) in Europe, but also an **annual growth rate** that is higher than in the EU-27. **Agriculture** is very important for the economic structure of the all WBCs covered, while **unemployment rate** in these countries is very high.

A similar image is observed in research in the WBC. All the WBCs covered present very **low funding level of research** and insufficient **human** resources both in research and in research support. A need for **capacity building and better programming of the research policy** is identified for all the WBCs covered.

Within the research area, the **agrifood research community** in the all WBCs covered is small, comprised by approximately 47 research entities focused on the agrifood research, including 17 universities. It is estimated that there are between 3.450 and 3.650 researchers scattered into 325 research groups.

Within the framework of the BAFN project a large number of research groups engaged in the agrifood research were contacted. Their contribution allowed collecting information about the agrifood research activities, capacities and competencies. The main findings of this survey are given below:

- The **technological infrastructures** of the vast majority of the agri-food research units seem to be obsolete and outdated.
- In terms of **innovation performance**, Serbia and FYROM seem to be in a better position than Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- **Researcher mobility** is low
- The **ability to attract foreign researchers** is poor
- The **European Union** strongly **contributes** to the implementation of large research projects¹.

1 Large research project is defined as project with a total budget above 100.000 € in which the research organisations' share is at least 20.000 €.

In the light of the previously mentioned current situation, the BAFN expert panel meetings revealed some primary necessities:

1. Raise of the budget available for agrifood research (increase of salaries, purchase of equipment etc.)
2. Strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the scientific research area as well as strengthening relations with the industry
3. Stimulation of research mobility (education of young scientists abroad, stimulation for the return of scientists)
4. Stimulation of usage of ICT by scientific & research staff via life long learning training.

The BAFN expert panel meetings prioritized some supportive mechanisms which could answer to previously mentioned necessities. The mechanisms identified addressed two different needs of the WBCs, firstly the need to modernize the research infrastructure and secondly the need to motivate the human resources of the research area.

Support Measures for the Modernisation of Research Infrastructures

1. Tracing and registration of existing infrastructures / equipment.
2. Direct financing by the state through the co-financing of the purchase of new equipment.
3. Tax relief (exemption of VAT) on the price of the research equipment.
4. Encouragement of co-financing by the private sector (industry)

Support Measures for the Human Potential Motivation

1. Provision of financial support for the organisation of conferences and training courses
2. Stimulation of researchers' participation to conferences and training courses
3. Stimulation of young researchers' mobility via staff exchanges with foreign research organisations.
4. Facilitate the access to the principal European network of computers for research and education GEANT.
5. Facilitate the access to scientific journals and electronic databases (Science Direct, Web of Science, ISI databases and etc.).

The contribution of the scientific groups, via the BAFN survey, also shed light to the major research areas of the WBCs, in terms of number of researchers working in them. Although each country showed different research profiles, the areas that prevailed were common and are the following: the "Plant Production and Protection" followed by the "Food Technology" and "Management of natural and biological resources". "Animal health" was identified as a

priority only for Albania. The area of “economic, social and political aspects” was also presented as interesting for the WBCs covered by the survey.

The BAFN expert panel meeting activities validated the importance of the “**plant science**” and “**food technology**” scientific areas as traditionally important areas. “**Animal science**” has also been quoted as important area.

Apart from the traditionally addressed scientific areas the expert panel meetings identified scientific areas currently addressed. Research in “**food safety**” and “**Research related to the biodiversity with the preservation of indigenous species and traditional food products**” have been identified as a priority in all the WBCs covered by the BAFN project. Some country specific currently addressed issues were also identified, such as “fisheries” and “medical plants” for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The BAFN expert panel meeting activities also identified important scientific areas, currently not sufficiently addressed by current research. In this sense, the following areas are recommended for further development:

- Research in typical national food products, biodiversity conservation
- Research on zoonoses which have influence in human health and in animal production
- Quality systems on food technology
- Sources of food allergens
- Food safety: chemical contaminants in food, food allergens and toxins in food
- Dietary supplements

The consultation from NCP and members of the Programme Committee helped to identify the following areas as interesting for cooperation between WBC and the EU:

- Bio-diversity conservation & environmental protection
- Preserving national biological and genetic resources
- Animal husbandry, animal feed technology
- Food biotechnology, nutrition and dietetics
- Food biochemistry, microbiology, toxicology & biotechnology
- Sources of food allergens

SUMMARY: scientific fields recommended

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|------------------------|--|
| 1) Biodiversity: | conservation of genetic resources & indigenous species |
| 2) Food safety: | chemical contaminants in food, food allergens and toxins in food |
| 3) Animal science: | animal husbandry and zoonose |
| 4) Food biotechnology: | nutrition and dietetics |