Report conclusivo

Progetto "START-UP MET BIO"

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START UP MET BIO Project
Summary

BACKGROUND

The "Maremma Etrusca e Monti della Tolfa Biodistrict "– MET, has been officially recognized in 2021. MET is in Central Italy (Lazio Region) and is made up of the territories of four municipalities: Tarquinia, Tolfa, Allumiere and Monte Romano. Its organically cultivated land is about 16% of the total UAA and consists of permanent grasslands, cereals, olive trees, vineyards, and vegetables. The territory has a long-time tradition of cattle breeding, mostly organic. Moreover, beekeeping plays a significant role.

The general development strategy of the Biodistrict MET is to pursue a progressive transformation of the local food system towards a higher level of sustainability through interventions and actions aimed at protecting and improving the health of people, animals and ecosystems.

Biodistrict MET was established because there was the need of an intermediate body capable of stimulating, supporting, and disseminating innovation initiatives from individuals or groups of operators who have already adopted agricultural and agri-food production methods that preserve and regenerate ecosystems, rejecting inputs for production that do not originate from biological processes.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The project START UP MET BIO was a one-year project funded by Lazio Region in 2022. Its primary main aim was to establish the foundations for the accreditation of the Biodistrict MET as a territorial management body that promotes a sustainable and inclusive development, social cohesion and awareness of the linkages between nutrition, health and environment through cultural, social and organizational change initiatives.

Specifically, the project aimed to:

- enhance the competitiveness of the local agricultural and agro-industrial sector;
- promote cultural and education activities to foster greater social cohesion among the local communities and raise awareness about the link between food, health and environment;
- organize trade and distribution of the local organic food products to improve access to healthy and organic food for the local population and reduce food waste;
- increase the sustainability of accommodation and tourism offer;
- promote and valorise the local cultural and landscape heritage;
- reconnect policies at local regional and national levels;

For the achievement of these aims, Biodistrict MET was engaged in the preparation of the Three-year Plan for the Biodistrict MET development and in the implementation of the activities planned for the first year of the Plan:

1. start-up of the Biodistrict MET;
2. web marketing;
3. improvement of the supply chains competitiveness;
4. shortening of the supply chains for human health.

METHODOLOGY

- Action-research to impact the organization of the relationships among private and public actors.
- Establish active supply chain groups.
- Collect and analyse scientific and grey literature
- Organize meetings, interviews and focus groups with local operators.
- "Collection and analysis of data on the level of childhood obesity.
- Implement food education activities.
- Facilitate networking with other biodistricts.
- Promote the visibility of the actions implemented in the territory through the organization of meetings/events.
- Implement sustainable food policies on the multi-level.

The adoption of this methodology was chosen because it facilitated the gathering of information and the stakeholders' perspectives needed to outline strategic sustainable development pathways for the most relevant supply chains of the Biodistrict MET.
Furthermore, this methodology was implemented within the framework of a mid, long-term vision (aligned with the Three-Year Plan) which necessitates an intervention strategy that considers:

a) the connection between the educational initiatives and the aggregation and organization of the supply chains within the regeneration of the territorial ecosystem (emphasizing the linkages between health and sustainability of the local agrifood system);
b) the direct participation of citizens/consumers, who take an active role in the decision-making processes of the companies and, by interacting with producers, contribute to the development of new practices and models of food management, addressing environmental impacts and, above all, enhancing the nutritional quality of food, thereby fostering a radical transformation of consumption and lifestyle patterns.

RESULTS

The Three-year Plan was developed by:

- gathering and analysing information and data on the socio-economic and territorial context from official sources;

- studying and analysing the policies and programmes of EU Green Deal and the associated strategies (Farm to Fork, Biodiversity strategy for 2023, Climate Action, Circular Economy Action Plan), as well as national programming lines, strategies for the sustainable development of Lazio Region;
- conducting meetings with representatives from local administrations, local supply chains, associations of entrepreneurs, cultural and environmental associations, to get the maximum collaboration with the Biodistrict MET partnership.

The following paragraphs are the description of the implementation of the activities planned for the first year of the Plan.

1. Start-up of the Biodistrict MET

Two headquarters/offices were provided to the Biodistrict MET by the local administrations. The office in Tolfa was designed as the registered headquarters, while the one in Tarquinia serves as a territorial hub with multiple functions: housing of the Biodistrict secretariat; showcase of the Biodistrict; point of sale of the Biodistrict's products; information and consulting point.
Promotional materials have been created including naming, logo and brand along with a manual for their use.
Additionally, several activities have been conducted to promote the Biodistrict MET, engage citizens of the territory, increase membership. These included social media campaign, event to present MET and its services and opportunities, and participation in meetings, conventions and fairs. These initiatives successfully attracted two important cooperatives /organizations as new members: one operating as fruit and vegetable packing station with more than 120 members, and other that provides services such as cereal warehouse, local cereal products commercialization, cereal seed selection, with about 1,200 members.

2. Web marketing

A website (https://www.metbio.it/) for the Biodistrict MET was designed, developed and implemented using a software that allows for prompt updates and visibility for the Biodistrict partners and members. It is equipped with tools for booking, e-commerce, online payments, statistics, event organization.
Facebook and Instagram profiles have been created to contribute to the storytelling of local enterprises and cultural resources.

3. Improve supply chains competitiveness

The working hypothesis of this activity was aimed at identifying development strategies for the characteristic supply chains of the territorial area. The objective was to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of financing opportunities available at regional, national and European Community level for member farms and companies of the Biodistrict MET.
Three characteristic supply chains of the territorial area were selected: cereal, livestock and beekeeping.
In addition, a preliminary survey of the local tourist facilities was also conducted.

With the objective to provide a comprehensive overview of the selected supply chains at international, national, regional and, when possible, territorial level, existing development plans, secondary literature, sector studies, projects and best practices implemented in the area were collected and analysed.
In parallel, through the administration of a questionnaire, a survey was carried out to gather information and data from the members of Biodistrict MET, providing valuable insights for designing strategic lines for improving and developing the selected supply chains.
The questionnaire covered various topics including demographics, main activities, quality brands, production practices, markets, technical assistance and services, collaborations.
Then, following a participatory approach, meetings, interviews and focus groups were organized with Biodistrict MET actors and other stakeholders to identify critical issues and needs within the selected supply chains, performing a SWOT analysis for each one of them and outlining the strategic lines for their improvement and development.
These activities led to the establishment of territorial animation groups, composed of technicians and local producers, and coordinated by supply chain representatives. This initial aggregation of the supply chain actors serves as the foundation for creating the Supply Chain Tables, which will include local stakeholders and institutions, research and training bodies.
Thanks to these activities and aggregation, the priority needs to be satisfied to effectively combine sustainability, development and competitiveness of the three selected supply chains of the Biodistrict MET were individuated:

a) *Cereal*
   - aggregation among producers
   - income of farmers
   - infrastructural shortcomings
   - availability of suitable varieties for organic growers
   - adoption of a participatory approach involving farmers and stakeholders
   - availability of technical means
   - biodiversity and conservation of traditional agricultural habitats.

b) *Livestock*
   - organic meat production costs
   - increase of local inputs
   - availability of areas for wild breeding
   - water resources
   - organization of the local organic beef supply chain
   - brand and local sale channels
   - income for small farmers

c) *Beekeeping*
   - Income fluctuations due to adverse climatic conditions
   - competitiveness and aggregation among local beekeepers

- facilities to produce honey
- viruses, predators and parasites
- environmental sustainability and increase of nectariferous crops
- marketing of the productions
- professional development for operators
- preservation of bees' genetic heritage.

The work carried out was consistent with national and regional programming and aligning with the National Strategic Plan for the Common Agricultural Policy.
Co-planning with the operators continued to define the objectives and actions for the sustainable development of the organic supply chains in the Biodistrict MET, summarised as it follows:

- mitigate the effects caused by climate change through interventions addressed to a better management of water resources, improved quality of soils and pastures, also by increasing the areas cultivated with organic products, in collaboration with local institutions;
- improve farmers' income by reducing production costs through greater interaction between the various supply chains of the MET Biodistrict promoting biodiversity and conservation of natural habitats characteristic of the MET Biodistrict territory. This includes:
  - countering price volatility and increasing the added value of organic production;
  - encouraging the aggregation of producers to enhance the supply of local organic products, improving the integration between primary production, processing phases and marketing of products;
  - identifying and developing commercial routes;
  - promoting and enhancing local production through the creation of a MET Biodistrict brand and implementing consumer information and communication campaigns;
- identify and characterize varieties of plant species typical of the MET Biodistrict area, selecting those best suited for organic cultivation based in local soil and climate conditions, with inputs from research institutions and all actors in the supply chain, especially farmers;
- address infrastructural shortcomings of the supply chains (mostly concerning the initial processing phase) to ensure that intermediate and finished products meet the needs of the processing industry and consumer expectations.

The proposed actions for the development of the three supply chains, along with the cross-cutting focus on tourism, although based on the local reality, are nevertheless consistent with the national and regional planning for the development of agriculture. Furthermore, in the "National Plan for the development of the organic system" the need for greater structuring of organic supply chains is highlighted, also to enhance the role of national production. The Plan suggests the opportunity to implement initiatives to encourage aggregation among producers and stable relationships with other players in the supply chain, including transformation, distribution and trade.
The actions that have been outlined represent as many project lines that can be developed in the near future for participation in national and international project calls and other funding opportunities.

The project has pursued internal coherence envisioning interventions that align with the needs and critical aspects and challenges identified by supply chain stakeholders, facilitating co-design solutions.

d) A cross-cutting supply chain: Tourism

According to the data collected, referring to the year 2021 (accommodation capacity and different types of facilities), the Biodistrict MET, starting from the potential that has been initially identified, drafted a project called "METaTavola". It was prepared to explore the interest in developing a cooperative action that include the supply of organic and typical products from the MET area for integration into the menus, the implementation of a systematic territorial marketing action and finally, the improvement of the eco-sustainability of tourist facilities and catering.

4. Shortening the supply chains for human health.

This activity was composed of three parts.

i) The objective of this part of the activity was to strengthen short supply chains for the supply of school canteens in the Municipalities participating in the Biodistrict MET. In a first phase, the menus of the local public-school canteens for the 2022-2023 period were collected and local ingredients availability were assessed. The carbon footprint and water footprint of the menus were calculated to identify the recipes with the greatest impact. Ingredient or recipe substitutions were proposed to improve the environmental sustainability of the menus, also considering the use of local products, and always ensuring the nutritional balance of the menus. Subsequently, meetings were organized with school managers, local authorities of the National Health System and local institutions to share the results obtained, with the possibility of integrating them with other information from the various actors. The new menus were adopted in the school canteens of Tarquinia.

ii) At the same time, food education activities were carried out based on lessons and educational workshops to train teachers and increase the knowledge of students in schools in the Biodistrict MET area about nutrition habits. Although the sample on which the food education activity was conducted was small and fragmented by age, so much so as not to allow for precise statistical analysis, the results of the questionnaires nevertheless highlighted the main tendency, on the part of the students, proving the importance of starting collaborations with schools, which allow teachers to operate easily and effectively with classes. Finally, an educational manual consisting of a theoretical part and a practical part to be carried out with the students, was produced to increase children's curiosity. A training intervention was also carried out for the students through theoretical-practical sensory laboratories.

iii) Two surveys were designed: a first one aimed to explore eating habits, diet quality and physical activity in children, while the second report compiled data on the prevalence and incidence of non-communicable diseases for each of the municipalities of Tarquinia,

Monte Romano, Allumiere, and Tolfa, as well as the Biodistrict as a whole. These data will inform tailored and evidence-based intervention strategies, for the improvement of the quality of diets and the promotion and development of the Biodistrict MET territory. For this purpose, the use of validated and standardized methods and questionnaires was planned to have results comparable with those of national and international surveys. Additionally, the level of adherence to the Mediterranean Diet of the sample was evaluated, as higher adherence is associated with better nutritional quality and health benefits. The project facilitated an investigation into the eating habits and lifestyles of children in the Biodistrict MET, providing essential information for implementing and monitoring of effective actions to improve the quality of diet and lifestyle.