

## Masters in Agricultural Innovation Support (MAIS) 2023

### PROJECT SUMMARY

#### 1. Project Details

**Project title**

**Understanding the role of extension and training in supporting the development of organic farms.**

#### 2. Project background

Ambitious EU *Farm to Fork* strategy targets aim to have 25% of farmland in organic production by 2030, with Irish targets of 7.5% by 2027 (from a base of 2% in 2021). With an influx of 4,000 applications for the latest Organic Farming Scheme (OFS), and a problem with ‘leakage’ of organic animals into the conventional value chain, there is a time-critical communication challenge to effectively meet the knowledge needs of two discrete cohorts of farmers: farmers seeking information on the economic and environmental implications of conversion and the farm practice changes required for organic compliance, and post-conversion farmers who require more tailored extension and training supports to build farm resilience and sustainability.

This project evaluates existing and new extension mechanisms within the context of the wider the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) that relates to organic food production. The need for this work was identified in *LIFT H2020* and will be part of the wider Teagasc *Organic Research Programme* led by Kevin Kilcline (AEFS Researcher) and Joe Kelleher (Dairy Organic Specialist). Outputs will feed into the NET FarmINN Horizon Europe application, which builds a network of extension material and supports across Europe.

#### 3. Project aims and objectives

As the organic sector in Ireland is in the early stages of development, reaching the organic targets depends on developing and enhancing communication and extension capacity of advisers. Teagasc plays a key role within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System that influences farmer decisions in relation to the uptake of and continued participation in organic farming. In this regard, the brokerage role of specialists and advisers to facilitate engagement with the wider value chain is deemed to be critical due to the close dependence of organic producers on processors and market outlets.

In this context, the aims of this project are twofold:

- To critically evaluate selected (important) organic KT tools.
- To assess the structure and functions of the Organic AKIS in Ireland.

The findings of both of these elements will be useful to: Policy makers; Teagasc KT; Organic processing and market stakeholders; and Organic farmers

#### 4. Suggestions for methodology

Taking an overarching innovation systems perspective, which recognises the complexity of innovation processes, we develop a theory of change (ToC) evaluation framework to study capacity building for farmer conversion to organics and for post-conversion farmers who need to improve sustainability and resilience for long-term organic production.

This “complexity-aware” ToC framework guides an ex-poste evaluation of extension interventions through a description of pathways towards long-term impact and analysis of indicators of intermediate outcomes. Longitudinal follow-up of participants determines the achievement of stated management actions, identifying the intention-action gap and providing evidence of longer-term capacity development and practice innovation associated with organic conversion.

Analysis of the wider AKIS that underpins the organic sector innovation system will be undertaken through stakeholder consultation and mapping of farmer engagement with the range of stakeholders from DAFM regulators, Organic Certification Bodies, Teagasc Research and KT, along with the wider value chain including Processors and Markets.

#### 5. How this project links to the Teagasc KT Programme objectives and best practice in innovation support, advisory and education

The project evaluates selected communication/dissemination tools to facilitate the uptake of and retention within organic farming, namely: the 25 hour QQI course (Principles of Organic Farming) and peer learning (Knowledge Exchange) from Organic KT Discussion groups will be evaluated in conjunction with the development of ‘Organic Hot Topics’ Factsheets and Video Clips.

To provide evidence of practice innovation, farmer’s information needs in advance of engagement with the dissemination tools, and their learning outcomes in terms of conversion and management intentions will be ascertained through pre-and post-test questionnaires following engagement with the selected KT interventions.

Results will contribute to the evaluation of organic extension tools through a systemic analysis of the resulting change to knowledge, skills, attitudes, norms, plans and consequential impacts on practice change and the effectiveness of these critical tools in achieving knowledge transfer/exchange objectives while providing recommendations to better target participants’ needs and increase impact.