



Promoting stakeholder engagement and public awareness
for a participative governance of the European bioeconomy



Proceedings of the living lab activities in the Stara Zagora region of Bulgaria

Phase II: October – November 2017



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KEY MESSAGES

This document summarises the discussions, outcomes and findings of the second phase of BioSTEP's living lab activities that took place between October and November 2017 in the Stara Zagora region of Bulgaria. The participants in this phase mainly worked on specifying the main directions for development of the bioeconomy in the region and on turning it into a strategic document for the region. Representatives of the district and municipal administration, professors and students from the Thracian University, scientists, representatives of non-governmental organisations and companies were included in this process. They all came together around the following directions of development:

- Increasing the production of organic plant crops - encouraging the farmers to grow organic plant crops, increasing the effectiveness of soils use, expanding the mixed agro-production systems, growing grass and tree plant species and animals;
- Production of bioproducts from staple and waste of cultivated plants, biomass from natural grasslands, waste from the forestry and wood processing industry, livestock waste;
- Introduction of innovative biotechnological solutions in production of foods, food additives and beverages, bioproducts for perfumery, cosmetics, etc.;
- Use of new technologies to reduce the harmful effects of the industry and environmental pollution with waste products, potential for recycling and utilization;
- Introducing technologies to protect the environment, reducing the pollution of ecosystems, mitigating the harmful effects of the global climate changes and the greenhouse effect.

Introduction: Living labs in the context of BioSTEP

As part of its stakeholder engagement activities, the BioSTEP project aimed to design and implement so-called "living labs" to test good practices at the regional level. A living lab is a kind of public-private (and people) partnership that promotes shared open innovation among stakeholders who work in the same geographical area. The living lab approach is an innovative concept, where citizens and end users take an active role in so-called user-driven processes of innovation that could range from new products/processes or services to concerted regional strategies or policies/legislative proposals. Living labs allow for interactive communication amongst actors in order to find innovative solutions to common needs. In this way, living labs can help to connect research and academia, centres for local development, organisations of the manufacturing sector like chambers of commerce, business clusters, trade associations, business incubators and experts as well as municipalities and other (local) government representatives.

Specifically, BioSTEP applied and tested tools for participative governance of the bioeconomy in two regional case studies in Italy (Veneto) and Bulgaria (Stara Zagora). In the context of the living labs, relevant stakeholders discussed alternative programmes of measures and their socio-economic and environmental impacts. The outcomes of the discussions are supposed to support the regions in formulating appropriate and effective programmes of measures to foster their regional bioeconomies.

The living lab activities in the Stara Zagora region of Bulgaria were split into two phases: the first phase focused on concept mapping and the second phase focused on the development and discussion of concrete (policy) measures to support the development of the bioeconomy in the region. The purpose of the first phase meetings was to listen to the views of all stakeholders responsible for the future prosperity of the region on the prospects for the development of the bioeconomy and on the current problems as well as to discuss measures and policies that would contribute to encouraging producers.

The second phase of the living lab in Stara Zagora included activities for specifying the measures for the development of the bioeconomy in the region in order to further develop the strategic document presented in the first phase and to bring together all stakeholders around these measures. Representatives of scientific communities, universities, local and regional authorities, companies and business organizations and high school students took part in the meetings.

Meeting 1: Development of an action plan

The first meeting of the second phase of the Stara Zagora living lab was held on 31 October 2017 and was attended by representatives of the regional and local authority in Stara Zagora and representatives of business organizations – a total of 10 people. The aim of this meeting was to develop an action plan to turn the developed document into a strategy for the development of the bioeconomy in the region. For this purpose, the developed document was first presented, the different directions for the development of the bioeconomy and the features and opportunities of the region were discussed, with special attention being paid to the use of new technologies to reduce the harmful impact of the industry on the environment. The region has serious problems with air and soil pollution from the nearby thermal power plants and all measures that can be taken to recultivate already contaminated soils are treated with particular care by local authorities.

Representatives of business organizations highlighted the need for a broad marketing campaign of organically grown products, as well as for pooling the individual producers and creating specific regional products. The meeting adopted an action plan foreseeing a discussion of the strategy with representatives of the scientific communities in the region with the aim to review and enrich the development areas included.

Meeting 2: Scientific potential of the Stara Zagora region

Several research institutes are located in the region of Stara Zagora, including the Institute of Roses, Essential and Medical Cultures, the Institute for Arable Crops (including cotton and durum wheat), and Thracian University.

This gives the region a number of advantages for further developing the bioeconomy and for the development of new technologies for utilization of the natural resources and waste from them. On 10 November 2017, a meeting was held with representatives of the above-mentioned scientific organizations. The aim of the meeting was to review existing developments in the field of production and processing of organic products, as well as guidelines in which new developments were foreseen. Here, a particular place was devoted to the importance of organically grown ethereal-oil crops, as well as durum wheat, products that are characteristic of the region. Another area that is underdeveloped at this stage is the production of foods and beverages, as well as food supplements and pharmaceutical products by adding herbs in which the region is particularly rich. Following the discussion held on the topics in which the individual organizations work, the individual participants agreed that, one should:

- work to biologically stimulate the growth, adaptability and resistance of plants in the field of organically grown fruits and vegetables;
- improve the variety composition;
- introduce combined systems;
- utilize wastes of plant-growing and forestry;
- introduce new biotechnological solutions.

The decisions of the meeting will be reflected in the strategic document for development of the bioeconomy in the Stara Zagora region (BioSTEP Deliverable 6.2).

Meeting 3: Strategy development

The final meeting of the second phase of the living lab in the Stara Zagora Region took place on 24 November 2017. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) and its regional structure – the Industrial Association of Stara Zagora, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Stara Zagora, the Stara Zagora Regional Development Agency, the Regional Directorate of Agriculture, the Thracia University, students and companies; a total of 26 people. The main topic of the meeting was a discussion of the latest version of the developed strategy for the development of the bioeconomy in the Stara Zagora region, which was distributed in advance to all participants. Prof. Pavlov held a presentation of the document followed by a lively discussion in which all participants took active part – most of the participants wanted to share the problems that they encounter in their daily work (business). The general conclusions around which the participants united were:

- The developed strategy clearly outlines the market opportunities.
- It is difficult to find financial resources for undertaking business ventures but it is more important to find understanding and engagement on a given topic.
- The municipal and district administration were absent from the final discussion, and although they were familiar with the initiative and supported the document, it was felt in the room that they often do not understand such complex issues and therefore it is important to make personal meetings with responsible officials for further clarification.
- There is a great need for good marketing and advertising of the achievements in the production of organic products and the full utilization of natural resources.
- It is difficult to reach young people and it is even more difficult to make them interested and engaged in changing their attitude towards waste and perceiving it as raw material for subsequent processes and products.