


Editorial

Preface of the 17th International Conference of the Hellenic Association of Agricultural Economists (ETAGRO 2023) in Thessaloniki, Greece

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1. Conference Overview

The immense political, economic, social, and environmental challenges within which the global agri-food system is operating formulate a complicated context in which the system must discover the innovations and solutions that will ensure its adequate performance and sustainability. Some of these challenges already exist, while others have been reshaped or are brand-new. The primary challenge for most countries worldwide is to achieve food security, as political and economic disturbances cause uncertainty at the production level as well as in the operations of large supply chains. The energy crisis, as a new threat, jeopardizes the viability and competitiveness of farms and the agro-industry. This situation is exacerbated by the effects of the climate crisis, highlighting the need for environmentally sustainable production systems and approaches to reducing the environmental footprint of the agri-food sector—such as a circular economy.

In Europe, the policy framework established by the new CAP 2023-27 and the Farm-to-Fork strategy—in light of the European Green Deal—brings to the forefront, now more than ever, the need to reconcile the often-conflicting goals of strengthening the resilience of the agri-food sector, protecting natural resources, and promoting quality of life in rural areas. At the nexus of these challenges, the depopulation of rural areas is intensifying, leading to the further loosening of social ties and loss of cultural heritage. Farmers operate under the influence of new demands and are in dire need of advisory support and an operational Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) in order to achieve a balance within the changing structure of the farming sector. On the other hand, as a result of “eco-anxiety” and societal issues, society is increasingly looking for new dietary patterns and foods that meet criteria such as locality, the sustainable use of natural resources, and an interface with a healthy lifestyle. In this complex setting of requirements, challenges, and risks, but also opportunities, the need to connect research and innovation with the agri-food system and social expectations is calling for attention more than ever.

Some of the questions raised in this regard are as follows:

- How will the rural world be able to develop solutions and innovations to meet these challenges?
- How could science contribute to increasing the resilience of the agri-food system?
- What are the roles of new technologies, digitalization, and smart farming?
- What are the necessary synergies between farming and other activities in rural areas aiming to improve sustainability?
- What are the patterns of organization and cooperation among actors in the agri-food system with respect to ensuring sustainable development and social cohesion in rural areas?
- What are the social and economic sustainability aspects of alternative and environmentally friendly production systems, including—but not restricted to—agroecology and hydroponics?



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- What are the adoption patterns of innovative production methods, practices, and systems, and which policies and strategies could improve them?
- What are the evolving consumer profiles? Which agri-food production patterns and alternative products will fulfil their expectations, and what is the role of certification and labelling?
- What are the non-market values associated with environmentally friendly food production?

The Hellenic Association of Agricultural Economists (ETAGRO) invited contributors across the globe to attend the 17th International Conference of the Hellenic Association of Agricultural Economists (ETAGRO 2023) held in Thessaloniki from 2 to 3 November 2023. The main topic was “The agri-food system facing complex challenges: Responses towards economic, social, environmental sustainability”. It was organized under the auspices of the School of Agriculture of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and co-organized by the University of Western Macedonia and the International Hellenic University. The Conference was sponsored by Ergoplanning Ltd., Qlab, the Geotechnical Chamber of Greece, Harokopio University of Athens, AgroApps, the Agricultural University of Athens, and Ecodevelopment.

ETAGRO 2023 invited leaders, policymakers, academics, scientists, producers, and political bodies to attend and share their work experience and thoughts regarding various subjects related to the bio-economy, such as sustainable agri-food systems, sustainable food security, climate change mitigation, new technologies, and others.

The specific objective of this meeting was to serve as a bridge in terms of communication and collaboration between science and research as well as the bodies and the stakeholders in agriculture, thereby facilitating the transfer of research data and expertise. All interested scholars or representatives from governmental entities, institutions, industries, NGOs, etc., were invited to contribute up-to-date approaches to the meeting. Young scholars and highly motivated students were strongly encouraged to participate, presenting their most recent theoretical and empirical research.

During the two days of the on-site event, nearly 250 participants had a chance to listen to 43 talks from experts in their fields, as well as from early-career researchers. In addition, 51 posters were presented in electronic form during the conference.

The conference started with a welcome event and an award ceremony for Prof. Stamatias Aggelopoulos, Dean of the International Hellenic University, and a keynote speech by Prof. Karl Behrendt, Elizabeth Creak Chair of Agri-Tech Economic Modelling at Harper Adams University (UK), the founding Director of the Global Institute for Agri-Tech Economics (HAU), and Co-Director of the Centre for Effective Innovation in Agriculture (UK). Prof. Behrendt presented a talk titled “The potential for agri-tech and digitalisation to improve the sustainability of food production”.

The conference was divided in two parallel sessions per session, one in English and the other in Greek. There were five sessions in English and three sessions in Greek. The sessions were divided into categories such as “Farm advisory and agricultural higher education”, “Current trends in consumer habits and value chains”, “Innovation, digitalization and Cooperatives”, “Agricultural Industry and Cooperatives”, “Consumer behaviour”, “Agricultural economics and trade”, “Environment, bioeconomy and agroecology”, and “Agricultural counselling and training”.

The conference included three special sessions, two of which were round tables titled “Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan 2023-2027: Opportunities and challenges for the country’s rural economy” and “The future of Greek agriculture in a complex international environment: Challenges and prospects”, and one was an industry session titled “Innovation and entrepreneurship in Precision Agriculture in Greece”.

2. Committees

Each one of the following contributors played a role in the success of ETAGRO 2023; therefore, we would like to list them here for future reference.

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