



greenchange



LIFE17 NAT/IT/00619 GREENCHANGE

Green infrastructures for increasing biodiversity in Agro Pontino and Maltese rural areas



PACT FOR AGROBIODIVERSITY FOR GOZO (MALTA)

Action C1 - Document of intents

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INTRODUCTION

Context and scope of the document

This document (Pact for Agrobiodiversity) has been drafted as a result of a number of meetings and discussions with relevant Maltese stakeholders – the Ministry for Gozo, the national Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) and agricultural holdings (Magro Group, Ta' Mena Enterprises Ltd, etc.).

The elaboration of the Pact has been influenced by the peculiar features of the Maltese agricultural system, that has forced the project team to fine-tune the initial scope and targets of the LIFE GREENCHANGE project for Malta.

More specifically, two main problems have been identified during the course of project implementation:

1. In Malta, structured farmers associations are lacking, so that it has been difficult for the project team to find representative spokespersons; this problem was worsened by the extreme fragmentation of agricultural land property;
2. On-site surveys of the target areas initially identified (Ghadira and Chadwick Lakes) showed an already pronounced wilderness, with non-intensive agricultural activity – interventions aimed at improving biodiversity have been therefore considered unnecessary in those areas.

Consequently, the project team found it more appropriate – for the achievement of the project objectives – to focus on the Island of Gozo as a more suitable area to promote the Pact for Biodiversity. Indeed, Gozo presents a much more intensive agricultural exploitation, along with farms of larger size that can be more easily involved in project activities, and where more significant interventions can be carried out. Moreover, in Gozo, the implementation of EU-funded Interreg MED projects like COASTING and WETNET led to the activation of multi-level governance instruments (coast and wetland contracts) that fostered the creation of a network of stakeholders already accustomed to work together within participatory processes.

This Pact for Agrobiodiversity is therefore targeted to Gozitan stakeholders, both public and private – as well as to national-level authorities in charge of agricultural and environmental issues.

FARMING & BIODIVERSITY IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

Critical aspects and the role of the Pact

Malta is subdivided into 6 districts and 68 localities, of which 6 are classified as rural. Rural areas account for 91% of the island's territory and for 64% of the total population¹.

Agriculture has significant economic importance in Malta: in 2012 the sector contributed 1.6% to the country's GDP and 1.3% to its GVA. Agriculture is also the largest land user on the islands, accounting for around 47% of total land surface, followed by developed land (29%), natural areas (around 23%) and woodland (less than 1%). The 2010 Agricultural Census for Malta recorded a total of 12 529 holdings (of which 2,792 in Gozo and Comino), with an average farm holding size around 0.9 ha. 73% of all farm holdings (just over 8 000) have less than one hectare of land. In 2010, 79% of the UAA was in arable land; 11% in permanent crops and the remaining 10% in kitchen gardens. In Gozo (and Comino) farm holdings occupy 2,829 ha, the majority of which are between 0 and 0.5 ha², and not necessarily in one parcel of land.

Key farm sectors in Malta include annual fruit and vegetable cropping; permanent cropping; indoor dairy, pig, poultry and rabbit production, and small-scale sheep and goat dairying; honey production, highly depending upon the rich flora of the Maltese garigue & maquis habitats.

The typical agricultural landscape in Malta is formed by very small parcels of land, frequently arranged in terraces, and surrounded by dry-stone ('rubble') fringed by a variety of wild flora. Prickly pear and other shrubs frequently grow along fields boundaries, and the landscape bears the marks of historic and current water management systems (rock-bounded channels for rainwater drainage, traditional subterranean rainwater reservoirs, etc.). There is also evidence of partial land abandonment, where former terraces are breaking down as the land has ceased to be farmed, and steppe vegetation re-establishes across the land surface where the soil is deep enough.

The natural environment includes different types of habitats such as coastal, sand dunes, and rocky habitats including the succession series of Steppe, Garrigue, Maquis and woodlands. A total of 67.6 sq. km (21.5% of land area) are protected areas - mainly designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

¹ Source: European Commission, Factsheet on 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme for Malta.

² Source: Ministry for Gozo, Eco Gozo – A vision for an eco-island

Maltese islands are characterized by a rich biodiversity, which also contributes significantly to genetic and functional diversity - including the delivery of ecosystems services and the island's attractiveness, also towards the tourism sector. Nonetheless, 36% of the species and 29% of the habitats listed in the Habitats Directive are still unknown, and 44% of species and 64% of habitats do not have a favourable conservation status³.

Agricultural sector in Malta and Gozo shows a number of physical, environmental and management criticalities, among which it is worth mentioning:

- Fragmentation and small size of rural holdings having poor physical access
- Water-related issues, such as growing scarcity of water supply (also due to the progressive deterioration of traditional indigenous technologies for water harvesting), groundwater depletion (due i.e. to the diffusion of practices to boost production to the detriment of natural resources, in particular the use of electric pumps) and salinization, diffuse water pollution from agriculture (due i.e. to excessive use of fertilizers and pesticide and of non-degradable plastics in farming activities - the whole territory of Malta and Gozo is designated as nitrate vulnerable zone under the EU Nitrates Directive)
- Soil salinization, mainly due to irrigation using salt-rich groundwater
- Soil erosion on abandoned agricultural land, especially on hillsides, worsened by the collapse of rubble walls and retaining walls due to poor maintenance
- Lack of institutionalized advisory services and research and development
- Lack of structured bodies representing farmers in the institutional setting

The Pact for Biodiversity can contribute to mitigate these critical issues, since it aims to disseminate environmentally sustainable agricultural practices that increase biodiversity in the agro-ecosystems, and to foster collaboration among the main actors involved in the governance of the rural environment – the Ministry in charge of agriculture (as policy maker and as managing body of RDP measures), ERA (as regards the environmental aspects), the Municipalities, the farmers, and, for Gozo, the Ministry for Gozo and the Gozo Regional Council.

The Pact for Biodiversity recognizes the **importance of the Maltese agro-ecosystems for the provision of essential services**, and commits for their improvement, especially as regards:

- Agricultural crops
- Carbon storage

³ Source: Malta Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

- Conservation of habitats and species
- Pollination
- Cultural and recreational services for residents and tourists

ECOSYSTEMS IN MALTA

Objectives of the analysis

The action plan of the pact for Biodiversity exploits the knowledge gained during the LIFE GREENCHANGE project's preliminary actions. Indeed, it is based on an analysis of the territory, of its physical characteristics, and of the practices and uses therein implemented, that has been conducted with the following objectives:

- Highlighting the dynamics that influence the capacity of the territory to provide ecosystem services, that is, to supply food and raw materials, maintain natural cycles, provide opportunities for esthetical, recreational and cultural experiences
- Defining measures and practices that could help preserve and improve such capacity, with positive effects in terms of agricultural business management (costs limitation, resource conservation), of the management of environmental risks, of the conservation and improvement of rural landscape
- Identifying the opportunities offered by the Common Agricultural Policy (I and II Pillar) to the actors involved in the Pact to implement such measures and practices.

The 5 ecosystem services that GREENCHANGE means to map and evaluate in Gozo are:

1. Crop production
2. Carbon storage
3. Pollination
4. Conservation of habitats and species
5. Cultural services

WHAT IS THE PACT FOR AGROBIODIVERSITY?

The Pact is an open permanent discussion table where territorial actors can share and optimize the management modalities of rural areas that are able to increase the levels of agricultural functionality and ecological connectivity.

In particular, the Pact is:

- A **collaboration platform** for territorial actors, especially institutions and farmers
- A **learning environment** on the role of ecosystems in the management and productivity of the rural territory
- A place to **verify and systematize knowledge** around the management of agro-ecosystems
- A place to **harmonize and simplify procedures**, in order to improve the farms' performances as well as the effectiveness of institutional actions
- A place to **define and systematize the land ownership agreements** among territorial actors
- A place to **share and guide** the GREENCHANGE activities and results, and the territorial governance

WHAT DOES THE PACT FOR BIODIVERSITY ACTUALLY DO?

The Pact for Biodiversity is based on the ecological management of agro-ecosystems, as well as on the harmonization of competences, the activation of integrated planning and regulation areas, and the awareness-raising, training and involvement of citizens and farmers.

Through a triennial action plan, the Pact defines actions and tools to support the management of rural areas and of their agro-ecosystems.

For the period 2019/2022, the action plan focuses on the LIFE GREENCHANGE activities, promoting synergies with other initiatives that are ongoing in Malta.



ACTION PLAN 2019/2022

ACTION 1 – SUPPORTING FARMERS

ACTION 2 – SUPPORTING PUBLIC BODIES

ACTION 3 – PROMOTION OF LAND STEWARDSHIP AGREEMENTS



ACTION 1 – SUPPORTING FARMERS

The farmers' role in the conservation/improvement of agro-biodiversity is crucial, also in view of the funding opportunities provided under the Common Agricultural Policy and the national Rural Development Programme – which is still the main instrument for the conservation and enhancement of natural and landscape resources of agro-ecosystems.

Considering the essential role played by EU funding for rural development, the Pact intends to promote ways to support farmers in applying for dedicated funding, while contributing to the definition of future policies (also by proposing selection criteria for future policy instruments) in view of the next programming period 2021-2027.

This Action aims to strengthen the potential of agronomic practices in the management (also from the ecological point of view) of the rural territory.

The Pact's approach and supporting actions for the agricultural sector are also in line with the idea of a new 'green' architecture for the 2021-2027 CAP – including concepts such as the wider-scale coordination of interventions in agricultural areas, the integration with the bodies in charge of territorial management and the achievement of measurable results, in synergy with environmental policies and with the regulatory framework, and the reinforcement of the reference baseline -, which underpins both the agro-climatic-environmental measures of the II Pillar and the Eco-schemes under the I Pillar.

This action will include the definition of the following tools:

- **Catalogue** collecting and describing selected agricultural practices, including their impacts on the economy, the production and the environment in the short and long term
- **Helpdesk** to advice and support farmers in the presentation of applications for financing, as regards: agronomic practices supporting biodiversity; access to financing sources and financial instruments (RDP, etc.); regulations to comply with.
- **ICT tool** to support farmers in the planning and assessment of the sustainability and efficiency of their enterprises, in agronomic, economic and ecological terms.
- **Guidelines** for farmers on applications for financing, to increase access to non-productive investments and agro-environmental measures. They provide indications for integrating environmental aspects into agricultural activities, and for best fulfilling the criteria of RDP calls, also in view of the next programming period 2021-2027.
- **Training modules** targeting farmers.

ACTION 2 – SUPPORTING PUBLIC BODIES

The Pact intends to foster a collaborative environment for the institutions that sign it, with a view to the systematization of the current regulatory framework.

This action also aims at simplifying and make explicit to local actors how to comply with such rules whilst best protecting their personal and corporate interests.

Within this action, the following tools are meant to be defined:

- **Location criteria** for non-productive investments and agro-environmental measures supported by the Maltese RDP and for the implementation of greening as foreseen by direct payments related to the CAP. These criteria aim at promoting a supra-enterprise logic in the implementation of interventions, to ensure the continuity of green infrastructure and realize the ecological network.
- **Reward criteria** for the ecological improvement of agricultural practices, aimed at guiding the implementation of the calls for structural interventions under the RDP, also for the programming period 2021-2027
- **Guidelines for the environmental management** of linear elements (wildflower strips along rubble walls). Guidelines aim at defining criteria for the maintenance of such elements, also through the engagement of the bodies/persons in charge of management. They will be oriented to the harmonization of interventions, in order to more effectively respond to extreme climate-related events, mitigate hydro-geological risks and improve the ecological connectivity and functionality.
- **Guidelines for the optimization of permits and prescriptions** in the procedures for the approval of farming productive interventions.

ACTION 3 – PROMOTING LAND STEWARDSHIP AGREEMENTS

Land stewardship aims at involving land owners and users with the purpose to hold them (and the public institutions) responsible as regards sustainable territorial management. The Pact for Biodiversity defines, in particular, the agreements between farmers and institutional actors, defining their mutual commitments:

For farmers

- Improve preservation, sustainable management and protection of natural heritage, in compliance with the existing ecological network
- Seize the EU financing opportunities (i.e. from the RDP) that are consistent with the objectives
- Establish monitoring procedures for fauna and flora in order to check the evolution of the site and of the species, and to evaluate the effects of the measures implemented on habitats and species
- Draft yearly reports on the activities implemented, and deliver it to the land stewardship organization.

For the land stewardship organization

- Provide advice and support to farmers for a sustainable management of species and habitats present in the site, in order to achieve the objectives of the management plan and of the other plans and programmes involving the site.
- Perform the monitoring activities

Within the framework of the Pact, it is intended to carry out the following activities:

1. Drafting and sharing a land stewardship model appropriate to the Maltese environmental, institutional and entrepreneurial context
2. Involving farmers and raising their awareness on the themes and potentials of land stewardship
3. Promoting the signature of land stewardship agreements with farmers by 2022

SIGNATORIES OF THE PACT FOR AGROBIODIVERSITY

MIEMA

Ministry for Gozo

Ministry for the Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change

Agriculture and Rural Payments Agency - ARPA

Environment and Resources Authority – ERA

Energy and Water Agency – EWA

Regulator for Energy and Water Services - REWS

Nature Trust Malta

Birdlife Malta

Gozo Regional Council

Fontana Local Council

Għajnsielem Local Council

Għarb Local Council

Għasri Local Council

Kerċem Local Council

Munxar Local Council

Nadur Local Council

Qala Local Council

San Lawrenz Local Council



The Pact for Agrobiodiversity for Gozo (Malta)

Sannat Local Council

Victoria (Rabat) Local Council

Xagħra Local Council

Xewkija Local Council

Żebbuġ Local Council

Magro Group

Ta' Mena Enterprises Ltd

Koperattiva Għawdxija Agrikola Gozitano Ltd

