

JOURNAL

PROJECT

OpenAgri - New Skills
for new Jobs in Peri-
urban Agriculture

📍 Milan, Italy

TOPIC

Jobs and skills in the
local economy

EDIT 08 FEBRUARY 2022
BY MIGUEL SOUSA UIA
EXPERT

The OpenAgri Project Journal N°6

See on UIA
website



The City government of Milan decided to set up an urban coalition with a series of partners (Universities, companies, associations) in order to apply for the first call of UIA Initiative (Urban Innovative Actions), with the desire to scale up this positioning in the peri-urban agricultural industry, setting up a stable growth and creating new jobs and skills. OpenAgri is mainly an urban policy experimentation that follows the place-based approach, focusing on new skills for new jobs in peri-urban agriculture. The project area can be defined as an “urban fringe”, representing the transition zone between the consolidated part of the City and the agricultural lands. The challenge is to locate here an innovative urban

service aimed at creating new jobs, skills, start-ups and innovation in agri-food sector (including production, processing and food waste) while increasing the level of resilience and sustainability of the City. With this in view, a series of selected partners have been engaged on using in the best possible way a public owned 30 hectares plot of land surrounding the south Milan Parco Sud boundaries. OpenAgri in 3 highlights: 1. Improving entrepreneurship by fostering the creation of new innovative firms and social enterprises focusing on sustainability in periurban agriculture and the agri-food sector 2. Contributing to the overall regeneration of a fringe area promoting a strong focus on social inclusion 3. Exploiting the potential of several food policy experiments within a single integrated An ‘Open Innovation Hub on Peri-Urban Agriculture’ to prototype disruptive and innovative solutions regenerating the concerned peri-urban zone of the city by making it an example of social inclusion and innovation.

OpenAgri was originally planned to last from 31.10.2016 to 30.04.2020. Due to some delays in the implementation of the project activities, it has been granted by the UIA Secretariat a 12-month extension and it formally closed on 30.04.2021. The sixth and final edition of OpenAgri Journal describes and analyses the progress of the project from November 2020 to December 2021. It will attempt to illustrate some of the findings of the project and to put on paper some lessons learned, in the spirit of the capitalisation and dissemination aim. The content is based on regular online meetings with OpenAgri team. Due to the pandemic situation experienced during this period, it was not possible to hold face-to-face meetings.

The format of this journal is rather different, being structured in 4 sections:

Section 1 - State of Play: reflects on the activity of the project from May to December 2021, after the formal end of the UIA project, showing some examples of activities in progress.

Section 2 - Upscaling & Knowledge Transfer: address the work developed on the NextAgri project, which is an URBACT and UIA pilot transfer project mechanism for completed UIA projects. The pilot project, begun in May 2021 and will finish in December 2022, intends to support the transfer of knowledge of OpenAgri, to 3 European medium-sized cities.

Section 3 - Sustainability: this section highlights the efforts in trying to ensure a long-term future to the project.

Section 4 - Conclusion: outlines addressed the culmination of three years pioneering activity from one of the first wave of UIA projects.

Section 1: State of Play

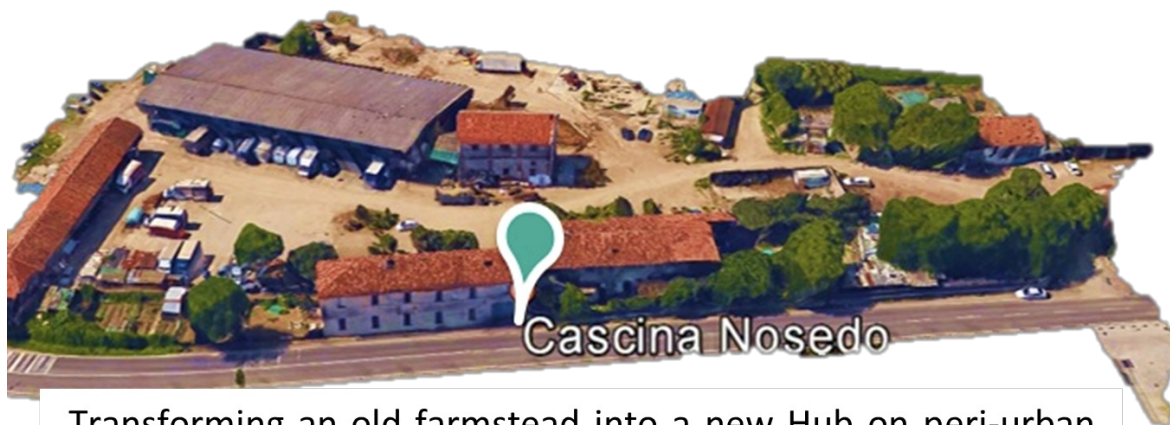
From a socio-economic perspective, there are many challenges facing European food and territorial policy, such as: increase in the unemployment rate and job losses in the primary sector, developing prospects for rural economies, setting up youngsters in business, improving social inclusion, reducing poverty, and improving territorial cohesion.

Seeking solutions to unemployment, the adverse impact on the environment of economic activity, adequate health and education for their inhabitants, the loss of identity and the need to offer quality of life to citizens, together with the decline of nearby rural areas, are on the agenda of all these cities. Food appears to be a common link related to each and every one of these sectoral policies.

The [Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration](#) builds on previous work by the [World Urban Forum Medellin](#), the [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#), the [C40 cities](#) and others with the aim of bringing food systems' transformation to COP26 as an integrated solution to the climate emergency. It promises to deliver co-benefits for biodiversity, ecosystem regeneration, circularity, access to sustainable and healthy diets for all, and the creation of resilient livelihoods for farm and food workers.

The original idea for OpenAgri was that of refurbishing Cascina Nosedo – an ancient farmhouse located in the urban fringe between the consolidated city and its agricultural surroundings – and reconvert it into an "Open Innovation Hub on Peri-Urban Agriculture".

The core challenge was therefore to activate a new kind of peri-urban living lab geared towards social inclusion, jobs and skills creation, and open innovation along the food supply chain; ultimately aiming at increasing the city's resilience and sustainability. Hence, OpenAgri aimed at engaging and accompanying SMEs and innovative start-ups towards the development of innovative projects and practices within the agro-food supply chain.



Transforming an old farmstead into a new Hub on peri-urban agriculture

The OpenAgri development process wasn't linear, and the partnership faced barriers that led with strong Leadership by the Minal team to the implementation of out-of-the-box activities, such as The Widespread Hub. The idea of The Widespread Hub was born in the mind of the OpenAgri partnership as a way to bring forward some of the most innovative and risky activities of the project. Before the hub at Cascina Nosedo was ready to receive those activities, the partnership believed that it was important to test and validate them, prototyping with the local community of OpenAgri in an open manner.

The State of Play of the project from May to December 2021, after the formal end of the UIA project, remained very active with several activities to be carried out.

A good example was the Pilot of an Innovative Approach of Symbiotic Farming, which start operation in the second semester of 2021 and brings up the concept of sustainable agriculture to the area.

Also, the agro-ecological and landscape design developed by the 30-hectare Masterplan was the inspiration for new proposal of external subjects and funding obtained for the Municipality of Milan:

Milano Porta Verde (Green Gate): proposal for a new agro-park made by the community that manages the 30 ha with the support of OpenAgri scientific partners (Unimi and PoliMi) in response to a call of project for rural innovation selected for Italy.

Environmental Reconstruction of the 30 hectares: two grants from the Lombardy Region Rural Development Plan for the environmental reconstruction of the 30ha through the planting of hedges and rows (30k euro) and the

construction of a wooded buffer strip along the Vettabbia canal (30k euro).



OpenAgri, Open Landscape, Masterplan
18X30



Symbiotic farm

The Research and Innovation on Agri-food continued after the end of the project in April 2021, by using food as the leverage to rethink the relationship between the city and its rural surroundings, in a way that reconnects these two spheres and activates collaborative development processes along the in-between territories of Milan's peri-urban agricultural fringe. More specifically, the Activation of Agricultural Districts as self-organized governance arrangements between neighboring farms and agri-food businesses, geared towards aggregating the offer of agricultural products on the short supply-chain and thereby enhancing their market positioning. The Launch of the Innovation Food Hubs as new physical spaces located in low-income areas of the city that, by collecting and redistributing edible food-waste, simultaneously provide inexpensive meals to those in need, as well as job opportunities in the operations of the hubs themselves. The Promotion of a Short Supply-Chain for Milan's public schools' canteens, as an integrated effort to bring together and mediate with stakeholders at all stages of the chain (farm to fork) geared towards developing sustainable business agreements and procedures to guarantee a locally-based food supply to schools. The Adoption of Green Procurement Tools to facilitate the acquisition by the Municipality of innovative and experimental goods and services. In this respect, the Municipality of Milan is testing new forms of public tenders with simplified and more flexible requirements that seek to stimulate businesses to develop innovative and unprecedented solutions to emerging challenges and needs. The successful development of a new product and solution then allows to set a new benchmark, which can ultimately be mainstreamed in the requirements of future tenders published following the traditional procedures.

OpenAgri is part of a broader policy by the administration to promote the sustainability of agriculture and its urban food system. OpenAgri is an activator of local and metropolitan urban-rural networks that are activated through existing tools build new actions and projects that impact the resilience of peri-urban agricultural territories. The food policy activates policy tools in which cities can be the main players at an inter-institutional level among territorial actors.



Cascina Nosedo refurbishment - 2021

Section 2: Upscaling & Knowledge Transfer

When two European programs, Urban Innovative Action (UIA) and Urbact, comes together to upscale UIA projects good practices!

NextAgri ([NEXT AGR | URBACT](#)) is an URBACT and UIA pilot transfer project mechanism for completed UIA projects. The pilot project, begun in May 2021 and will finish in December 2022, intends to support the transfer of knowledge of OpenAgri, to 3 European medium-sized cities:

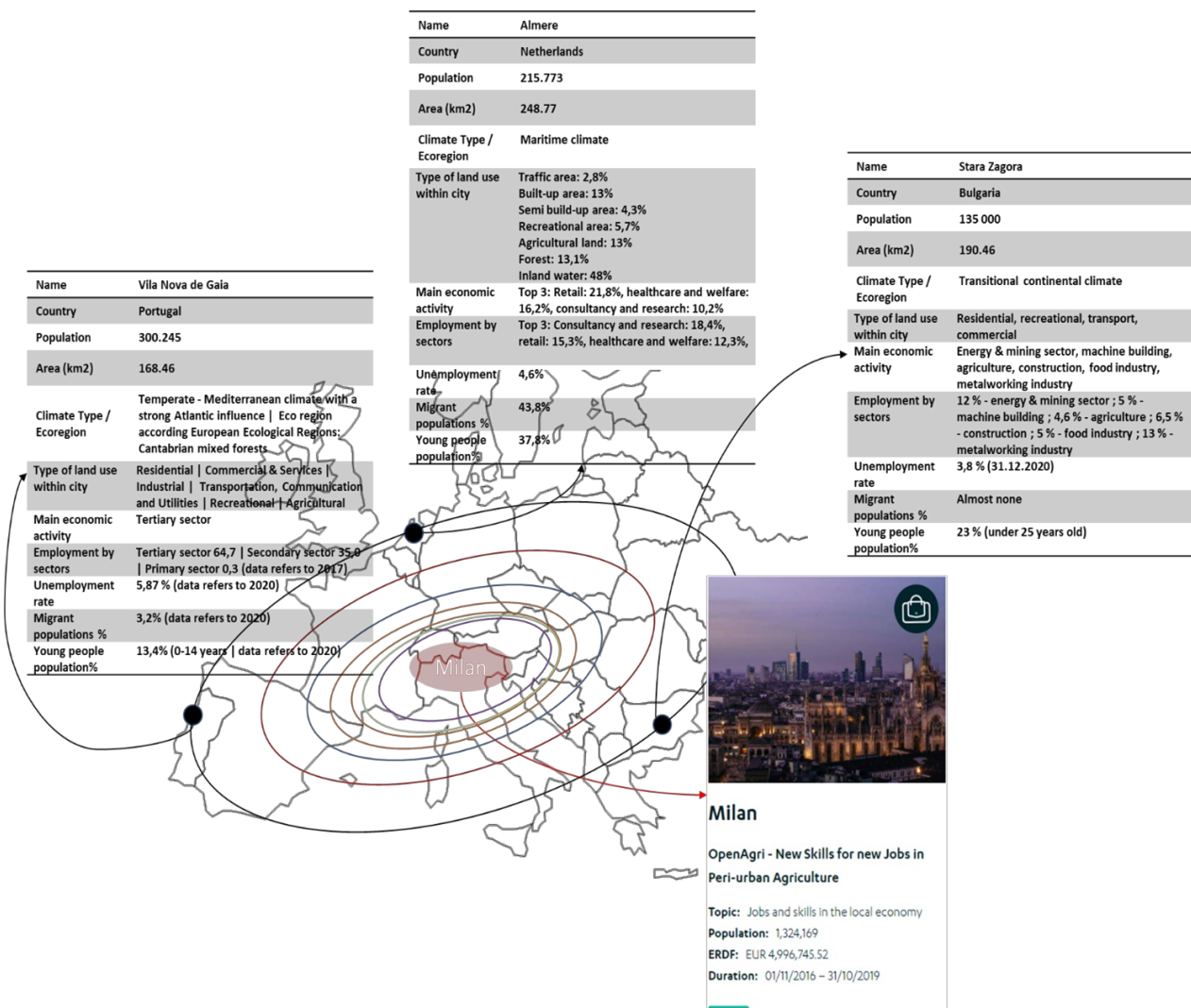
- Vila Nova de Gaia (PT); (Population: 302.295; Area: 168.46 km²) – Metropolitan Area of Porto (Population: 1.721.038; Area: 2.040.31 km²);

- Stara Zagora (BG); (Population: 158.563; Area: 190.46 km²) – Province of Stara Zagora (Population: 333.325; Area: 5.151.000 km²);

- Almere (NL); (Population: 207.904; Area: 248.77 km²) – Province of Flevoland (Population: 423.021; Area: 2.412.00 km²)

When two European programs, Urban Innovative Action (UIA) and Urbact, comes together to upscale UIA projects good practices!

NextAgri's partnership is a good example of the ground shaking magnitude caused by the OpenAgri project. The 3 transfer partners are medium-sized cities from different climate type ecoregion and with different approaches to land use for agriculture. The development level of innovation and experimentation varies across the different cities. Nonetheless, there is a general recognition that NextAgri is a unique opportunity to explore new functionalities, as well as to review and improve their current functionalities considering different needs and contexts.



The OpenAgri good practice was organized into five transfer Modules that can be flexibly adapted to local contexts, according to transfer city's needs & objectives. These are presented as standalone Transfer Modules, however there are plenty of connections and linkages across them. Transfer Cities can grasp this knowledge and flexibly make use and re-adapt the concepts and findings of the five Transfer Modules to the specific needs and

objectives of their local contexts.

The transfer potential for the different modules is high, even if in some cases, due to the local context, some themes are not a priority for some cities. The Good Practice Transfer Potential is based on a deep understanding of the context in which the good practice has been and will be transferred. The assessment of the good practice relevance in the context of the transfer city partners is based on a correlation between NextAgri Transfer Modules and Relevance vs Maturity of each city to transfer the modules.

At this stage, the 3 cities are developing an Investment Plan based on the transfer of knowledge from OpenAgri and the city of Milan is developing a Springboard plan, understood as an opportunity to capitalize on the OpenAgri process and the results, support the establishment of sustainable management model and identify specific financing tools for the different functions of the hub.

In Annex to the Journal 6, I include the main project results, with “Title; Short Description; Weblink” to facilitate the access to the quality results developed by the project. Throughout its lifespan, OpenAgri has achieved the following results:

Issued the Masterplan “18 progettiX30 ettari” which includes:

- A context analysis of the area of Vaiano Valle from the landscaping, agro-ecological, and metabolic point of view;
- A management model for publicly owned agricultural land that integrates the dimensions of production, ecosystem services, and landscape design.
- Facilitated – through the incubation programme – the grounding of 4 new businesses and 1 “social promotion association”, which are currently interested to further invest in the area;
- Stimulated 4 existing businesses to experiment and activate new (innovative) branches of their activity;
- Issued and distributed 9 Open Badges to certificate the innovative skills and competencies acquired during the training and incubation phases;
- Implemented 1 analysis campaign for agri-food products developed within OpenAgri, whose results served to identify signs of soil contamination and therefore to activate the required decontamination procedures;
- Tested 1 prototype training course for adults with mental disabilities.

Throughout its lifespan, OpenAgri tested an innovative approach to integrated development of peri-urban agricultural contexts and in doing so it generated a rich wealth of knowledge, both from a technical and from an operational point of view. In particular, the challenges it faced and the solutions it deployed to implement and operationalize its concept in the real world provide valuable insights and teachings on whether and how such a policy approach may be replicated elsewhere.

Section 3: Sustainability

OpenAgri’s experience and efforts in trying to ensure a long-term future to the project, relies on the following activities:

Operation; The Municipality decided to grant the management of the Hub in Cascina Nosedo to a 100% Municipality-owned company (MM S.p.A.), which is an operator with enough financial security/capacity to access financial resources to guarantee sustainability. In this scenario, MM will be entrusted surface rights on the Hub until 2037 and will implement an economic-financial plan capable of keeping Cascina Nosedo functions fully public while allowing a full return on the initial investment over the years.

A brief history of the process:

- In December 2019 MM S.p.A formalized its expression of interest for the creation of a new innovative Hub in Cascina Nosedo, focused on peri-urban agriculture and in synergy with the nearby wastewater treatment plant, to favor circular processes related to the water cycle and resource recovery (water, heat, materials). The object of the expression of interest is the request to transfer to MM S.p.A the buildings and the 30 ha plot of land surrounding Cascina Nosedo to develop the project;
- In 2020, the City of Milan modified and approved the annual programming document 2020-21 (DUP) in which it is described the operational steps to proceed with MM’s expression of interest;
- On October 30th, 2020, the City Council has signed the resolution n° 1221 on Political guidelines on the objectives and functions relating to enhancement, through concession in surface right, of Cascina Nosedo, which will have to be applied in a technical-economic feasibility study and legal, by MM S.p.A., for the creation of a New hub for the development of urban metabolism focusing on the water and food nexus;
- MM S.p.A elaborated the technical-economic feasibility plan as the first design step normed by the national procurement code. The technical plan and the financial plan were formally delivered in June 2021.

Participatory Approach; the continuous development and strengthening of relations and synergies with and among these stakeholders allowed to generate a local ecosystem of innovation. Some companies that started (or expanded their activity) thanks to OpenAgri's incubation programme have now reached maturity, consolidated their business, and extended their land lease on a long-term basis. This ecosystem may self-activate or be activated ad-hoc at variable geometries in the development of new business initiatives. By facilitating access to land and stimulated linkages and connections beyond traditional networking spheres, OpenAgri provided the conditions and fueled a fertile ground for a continuous experimentation and innovation capacity in the peri-urban agricultural areas around Milan.

Policy mainstreaming; incorporating OpenAgri's approach in the city's mainstream policies is essential to ensure long-term commitment of the Municipality towards innovative and sustainable rural and peri-urban development. There 2 examples that can be mentioned are: (1) The masterplan for the Agro-Ecologic Experimentation Park defined the land-use and development strategy for Vaiano Valle on the long run, thus ensuring the area's vocation of experimentation laboratory, where new ideas and solutions may be tested in a continuous innovation loop; (2) The multidimensional understanding of food and the consequent definition of priority fields by Milan Food Policy sets the Municipality's commitment towards re-knitting the consolidated urban areas of the city with its rural fringe from a physical, environmental, economic, social, and cultural point of view.

Section 4: Conclusion

Five years have passed since the implementation of the proposal. This timeframe is very short if compared to the "speed of reaction" of a city like Milan, i.e. the time needed to (re)define aims and priorities, find data and elaborate them, communicate results, find agreements, plan actions on a defined territory, realize initiatives and monitor their effects.

On the other hand, the same timeframe could appear too long if compared to new urban challenges (where quick answers are constantly needed), technological evolution in the field of new economy and local effects of global policy and events. These differences in the speed of the mentioned dynamics increase the level of complexity of the whole initiative and the risk that the scenarios evolving during the project can be different from those foreseeable during the preparation phase.

The trivial conclusion can be that if Milan wrote the proposal for UIA now, they would propose different WPs and results. However, the challenge of UIA projects is to accept the risk inherently connected to disruptive urban innovation actions and to explore how a city can manage the risk and react by creative solutions.

In this framework, we can explore and have a view of the project UIA-OpenAgri from within, underlining achieved and unachieved results, expected and unexpected results, main challenges and lessons learnt.

In this context, and looking to the future, the city will pursue the following objectives:

- Capitalize on the OpenAgri process and results in the new urban metabolism hub project of MM S.p.A;
- Supporting MM S.p.A in the development of the hub management model, also in relation to agricultural land spaces;
- Identify specific financing tools for the different functions of the hub and for specific soil phytoremediation/phytodepuration projects.

The city now has a tool for the public administration to ensure the public value of spaces and investments and to open up new project opportunities for public and private actors in the area (partners and stakeholders).



Jobs and skills in the local economy

See on UIA website

