



INCREDIBLE

A thematic network for social and participatory innovation around non-wood forest products in Mediterranean countries

by Eduard MAURI

INCREDIBLE is a theme-based network committed to social and participatory innovation in Mediterranean countries centred on five non-wood forest products: cork, resin, aromatic and medicinal plants, wild truffles and wild fruit and nuts. The network facilitates the exchange of knowledge and good methods between the various partners on the north and the south sides of the Mediterranean Rim.

Introduction

Innovation Networks of Cork, Resins and Edibles in the Mediterranean basin, which goes by the acronym "INCREDIBLE", is a thematic network open to all those involved or interested in creating economic, social and environmental value through improved production, collection, processing and marketing of Mediterranean non-wood forest products (NWFPs). INCREDIBLE is coordinated by the European Forest Institute (EFI) Mediterranean Facility, managed by 13 partners and funded by the EU Commission H2020 framework programme for the period from November 2017 to October 2020. The main objective of INCREDIBLE is to facilitate regional and trans-regional cooperation, knowledge exchange and innovation in five key NWFPs in seven Mediterranean countries (Table 1).

INCREDIBLE identifies, documents and delivers good practices, success cases and relevant knowledge to help address the most pressing needs and greatest opportunities along the value chains of the different products. It offers training and inspiration for innovative business development. It will also produce policy recommendations for better regulation of NWFPs at regional, national and EU levels.

	Cork	Resin	Aromatic and medicinal plants	Wild mushrooms & truffles	Wild nuts & berries
Portugal	☑	☑			☑
Spain	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
France	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
Italy	☑			☑	
Croatia			☑	☑	
Greece			☑	☑	
Tunisia	☑	☑	☑		☑

Table 1:
Non-wood forest products covered by INCREDIBLE and countries that belong to their respective innovation networks.

Innovation networks, or iNets, are the main tool of INCREDIBLE. iNets are NWFP-specific sub-networks, open to all stakeholders, which identify and mobilise knowledge on each of the five different categories of NWFPs. There is one coordinator and co-coordinator per iNet. Moreover, in order to bridge the language gap, each iNet has a local contact point: he or she is the most visible representative of INCREDIBLE for the stakeholders of a given NWFP in the same country.

The key roles of iNets are:

- 1.– to identify the necessary knowledge and practical experiences to be summarised and made available in a ready-to-implement way;
- 2.– to contextualise and guarantee the relevance of compiled knowledge;
- 3.– to identify persisting knowledge gaps and research priorities; and
- 4.– to highlight key innovation opportunities.

iNets organise international and local workshops and activities, connecting actors across scales to solve problems and tap into opportunities through innovative solutions. iNet members (or stakeholders) contribute with their knowledge to the identification of good practices, of success cases for replication and of lessons learnt from past experiences across the Mediterranean. iNet members are invited to cross-cutting activities to address common challenges with other iNets. In other words, INCREDIBLE wants to avoid the continual reinvention of the wheel: it is highly possible that a problem faced by one Mediterranean region has already been solved by someone else, somewhere else. INCREDIBLE's task is to bring people together and encourage them to exchange their knowledge to mutually progress towards a more vivid NWFP sector.

What challenges do the iNets address?

The first activity that INCREDIBLE proposed to the iNet members was to describe the current state across the whole value chain for each of the five NWFPs. To do so, INCREDIBLE partners organised a series of five scoping seminars, one per NWFP, which took place between late spring and early summer 2018. The main objective of these seminars was to set up a list of priority issues for each NWFP. This list is crucial, as it is being used, until the end of the thematic network, as guidelines to choose the topics of the upcoming events. In other words, the remaining events in the thematic network should focus on solving these priority issues or fostering inter-regional knowledge exchange to work toward a solution. The specific issues identified by each iNet were:

Cork:

- Evaluation of the ecosystem services provided by cork oak forests.
- Profitability of cork production.
- Climate change impact on cork oak forests.

Resin:

- Long-term resource availability in the context of climate change.
- Compatibility of resin harvesting with other forest uses and with forest health.
- Improvement of profitability of resin extraction and working conditions.
- Development of new resin derivative products.

Aromatic & medicinal plants:

- Wild aromatic & medicinal plants management and biodiversity conservation.
- Access to the resource and legislative framework.
- Traceability, especially for small producers.
- Supporting production and marketing capacities.

Wild mushrooms & truffles:

- Sustainable harvesting of wild mushrooms & truffles.
- Domestication and sustainable production of wild mushrooms and cultivated truffles.
- Organisation of supply chains of mushrooms & truffles: improvement of supply security, product traceability and quality standards.
- Commercialisation and market development.

- Creation of value and territorial linkages.

Wild nuts & berries:

- Resource management, with emphasis on orchard-produced nuts & berries.
- Pests and diseases affecting nut & berry plants.
- Processing quality.
- Marketing, product innovation and consumer awareness.
- Organic food labels.

In addition to these NWFP-specific issues, transversal concerns were also identified:

- Better-focused research and improved knowledge flows.
- Improved and specific governance.
- More effective communication for greater social awareness.

Overall, all five NWFPs were characterised by: uncertainties in long-term availability and supply in a context of global change; lack of understanding of their sustainable harvest levels; insecure and irregular supply and low profitability (especially in the upstream positions of the value chain).

Moreover, the scoping seminars allowed each NWFP to draw a complete map of the value chain for its NWFP, to write a comprehensive narrative describing the sector and to increase the number of stakeholders registered in the iNet contact list. Of course, the number of registered stakeholders will continue to increase throughout the life of the thematic network (see picture 1).

Sharing knowledge and spreading innovation

The INCREDIBLE thematic network gives priority to face-to-face exchanges among stakeholders. For this reason, INCREDIBLE is currently organising two series of events, free of charge and open to all stakeholders: interregional workshops and science to practice events.

Interregional workshops are iNet-specific two- or three-day events, combining seminars, debates and field trips, and arranged in different locations within each iNet's geographical span. These multi-actor sessions are animated by the innovation facilitators and cover the identified priority issues detected at the scoping seminars. There will be three interregional workshops per iNet, with the presence of international speakers



Picture 1:

Scoping seminar on cork: session devoted to the improvement of the cork value chain map (July 2018).

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and attendees, as the objective is to share knowledge and debate at an inter-regional scale. For example, interregional workshops that have already taken place allowed stakeholders from several Mediterranean countries to be aware of how the new Italian taxation law on wild mushrooms and truffles is improving the product traceability and commercialisation; or how cork producers in Portugal earn a fair price for their product thanks to a standardised cork quality assessment method and a cork price observatory. Both the Italian policy and the Portuguese methodology can be adapted to be implemented in other Mediterranean countries: these successful and replicable approaches enjoyed enhanced international dissemination thanks to INCREDIBLE.

At a local scale, INCREDIBLE is also organising science to practice events: one-day events such as open days at research labs, farm-to-farm innovation transfer sessions, field trips, seminars, workshops, technology demonstrations, etc. Their objective is to transfer ready-to-implement knowledge in relation the most urgent gaps for NWFPs and to disseminate lessons learnt, success stories or good practices from local stakeholders. There will be at least 45 science to practice events, nine per iNet, before September 2020 (see picture 2).

All the knowledge exchanged and shared during these events, as well as any relevant information that would deserve broader dissemination to foster innovation in the NWFP sector, will be compiled in the Knowledge Repository for Non-Wood-Forest Products (repository.incredibleforest.net). In this online, open access, non-profit repository, INCREDIBLE partners will upload relevant information on NWFP innovations (research results, success stories, best practices, databases, technical reports and policies) that can be beneficial across the Mediterranean. With this repository, the



About EFIMED

The European Forest Institute Mediterranean Facility (EFIMED) promotes and conducts scientific research, provides policy advice and supports networks and knowledge exchange on Mediterranean forests, forestry and forest products. EFIMED has a strong focus on building capacity for key scientific priorities identified in the Mediterranean region, and brings a Mediterranean perspective to EFI's three strategic areas: bio-economy, resilience and governance.

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knowledge will travel beyond the country where it has been generated. Each piece of knowledge will be summarised in a 2- or 3-page factsheet in English and in several languages of Mediterranean countries so it can be easily understood by practitioners. The aim is to produce at least 250 factsheets by October 2020, and to store them in a long term. INCREDIBLE partners encourage any person with significant knowledge that could improve the NWFP sector to get in contact with his or her local contact point in order to evaluate the possibility of publishing a fact-sheet about it.

Solving problems and scaling-up through cross-sector fertilisation

It is widely known that, sometimes, the best innovative solutions and ideas come from outside a specific organisation or even industrial sector. Bringing in ideas and solutions from larger and more diverse communities, including analogous fields, is a valuable potential source of —sometimes radical— innovation: this is called “open innovation”. INCREDIBLE also addresses cross-sectoral issues and brings in relevant knowledge and practices beyond the NWFP sector that could have an impact and be applicable to solve the priority issues identified by the iNet members. To achieve this, three kinds of events are being developed.

The first one is a series of three cross-cutting seminars about transversal topics that

are of crucial relevance for the wider NWFP sector. The aim is to create cross-sectoral partnerships and support NWFP actors and practitioners in the development of innovative solutions. The transversal topics of these three seminars are:

- Integrating NWFPs in territorial marketing and ecosystem services value chains,
- Innovative business and entrepreneurship in the NWFP sector,
- ITC tools for improved NWFP value chains and market intelligence.

The first of the three cross-cutting seminars already took place and gathered representatives of wild mushrooms, wild berries and cork. Moreover, there were also people devoted to sectors not related to NWFPs, such as tourism development and local agro-food marketing. From this seminar, it emerged that NWFPs can become a driving force of the economy, contributing to broadening the touristic portfolio of a destination. The organisation and the coherence of a touristic destination are much more important than the specific product, while a label/trademark can contribute to raising awareness of local minor products. Some of these conclusions may not have been reached if the seminar had only been composed by representatives of the NWFP sector (see picture 3).

The second kind of event is a forum regarding NWFP policy: the Policy Forum on Governance of Wild Non-Wood Forest Products in Europe. The legal framework has a central role for NWFPs: an inappropriate policy can compromise an entire value chain. Therefore, NWFPs deserve appropriate—and even supportive—legislation to unleash their potential. Understanding the role and needs of each actor in the value chain is necessary in order to design laws that accommodate them all. To achieve this, INCREDIBLE partners and stakeholders will generate policy recommendations at the EU and national levels on improved governance of harvesting and commercialisation of edible (wild mushrooms & truffles, wild nuts & berries) and non-edible (resin, cork, aromatic & medicinal plants) NWFPs. Well-documented policy issues and barriers will be addressed in this cross-sectoral forum. These challenges include, for example, difficulties in the application of agricultural and food regulations to NWFPs (e.g. traceability from farm to fork), and issues about taxation and labour regulation in a sector where local and informal markets and non-professional operators dominate. The result will be a

Picture 2:
Technology demonstration during the science-to-practice event on advances in mechanisation of resin extraction in Spain (October 2018).
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white paper about the potential of wild NWFPs to enhance and promote rural bio-economies and forest conservation. The forum will be held in June 2020.

Finally, INCREDIBLE will adopt an active and problem-solving attitude by supporting, through tailored training materials, the transformation of innovative business ideas into products, processes and social innovations. In April 2019, INCREDIBLE launched an Open Innovation Challenge (OIC): a contest open to all, where candidates are asked to present innovative business ideas or commercial approaches to tackle the priority issues identified at the iNet scoping seminars. These ideas or approaches can be drawn from existing research, but they need to be transformed into concrete solutions capable of filling the knowledge gaps identified in the five different iNets. Candidates can apply until September 2019. The OIC will reward the five more promising proposals, one for each iNet, with an invitation to attend a business and social innovation acceleration service (AS), all expenses covered. The AS, offered by ETIFOR and created by an international team of NWFP experts, is a 10-day course where the business ideas of the winners will be boosted and further developed thanks to seminars, mentoring activity and targeted workshops. It will take place at the beginning of 2020.

Next steps

The INCREDIBLE thematic network is now progressing at its full speed and continuously recruiting more stakeholders as members of the iNets, with some of the iNets already counting on more than 300 members. Most of the activities are currently ongoing. Interregional workshops will last until November 2019. Science to practice events will continue to be held until September 2020, and the last cross-cutting seminar is expected to take place in April 2020, followed, in June, by the Policy Forum on Governance of Wild Non-Wood Forest Products in Europe. The Knowledge Repository for Non-Wood-Forest Products is open to the public for contributions until September 2020.

If you are interested in participating in any of these events, please, join the iNet or iNets of your interest through the contact form, which you can find in the INCREDIBLE website: incredibleforest.net. There, you

Flagship impacts

When the INCREDIBLE thematic network reached its halfway mark, the iNets could already identify which would be their main impacts in their respective value chains. Even if these targets would not be completely implemented during the life of INCREDIBLE, the thematic network will have laid their foundation stone:

Cork:

- Develop a pan-Mediterranean cork quality assessment method and cork price observatory.

Resin:

- Develop a supra-regional structure of the Mediterranean natural resin value chain actors.

Aromatic & medicinal plants:

- Publish a handbook for sustainable wild aromatic & medicinal plants harvesting in the Mediterranean basin.

Wild mushrooms & truffles:

- Implement, in other Mediterranean countries, adapted versions of the policies for mushroom picking and management in public forests of Castilla y León (Spain) and the Italian taxation system.

Wild nuts & berries:

- Establish connections between existing or developing networks around the different value chains: a “network of networks”.

can also check the calendar for the upcoming events, access the material produced by the thematic network, explore the Knowledge Repository for Non-Wood-Forest Products and subscribe to the newsletter. We welcome you to follow us on Twitter at @Incredibforest for interesting news and updates. The most relevant results of the thematic network will be presented in the final conference, to be held in September 2020.

Picture 3:

Field trip in the forest managed by the Consorzio Comunalie Parmensi (Parma region, Italy), where mushrooms represent the most valuable production, during the cross-cutting seminar on territorial marketing and ecosystem services value chains (May 2019). © INCREDIBLE thematic network.



Conclusions

The INCREDIBLE thematic network is certainly not inventing anything new: in fact, it is designed to avoid the reinvention of the wheel. Instead, it seeks to elevate and amplify existing knowledge, and create opportunities to invest resources in innovation, rather than reinvention. In this highly atomised sector, which lacks collaboration among actors along the different value chains, has a low level of vertical integration

and generates low added value in upstream chains, the possibilities for actors to meet, exchange and share are usually rare. Opportunities to meet with their international counterparts are even less frequent. For this reason, the creation of a platform where stakeholders from across the Mediterranean can share the solutions to their problems is already a success in itself.

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Summary

INCREDIBLE: a thematic network for social and participatory innovation around non-wood forest products in Mediterranean countries

The INCREDIBLE thematic network, active in seven Mediterranean countries, aims to facilitate regional and trans-regional cooperation, knowledge exchange and innovation among stakeholders in five non-wood forest products (NWFPs): cork, resin, aromatic & medicinal plants, wild mushrooms & truffles and wild nuts & berries. In 2018, five scoping seminars identified the priority issues of each NWFP. These issues are the main topics of the local and interregional knowledge exchange activities. Their objective is to share solutions among actors and to transfer them trans-regionally. This exchanged knowledge, as well as any information with the potential to improve NWFPs management that deserves broader dissemination, is collected in the online Knowledge Repository for NWFPs. INCREDIBLE also addresses cross-sectoral issues and brings in relevant knowledge and practices beyond NWFPs that could solve issues around territorial marketing, innovative business models and ICT tools. Adopting an active and problem-solving attitude, INCREDIBLE supports the transformation of business ideas into innovative products, processes and social innovations by offering tailored training courses. Finally, in 2020, the Policy Forum on Governance of Wild NWFPs in Europe will generate policy recommendations at the EU and national levels to improve the governance of NWFPs. Globally, INCREDIBLE is setting up a scenario where Mediterranean stakeholders can learn about solutions to their problems that have already been developed by other communities or actors.



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