AgroLabs project aims to foster the production and distribution of innovative agro-food products of the Balkan-Med area by organizing local value chains, supporting SMEs and producers in their development projects and creating new markets for their products through an open procedure. In addition, specific objectives of AgroLabs will contribute to the inclusion of agro-food chains and creation of local clusters, foster entrepreneurship and innovation, increase the visibility and reputation of typical agro-food products, develop their commercialization, develop local capacity through open access of transnational exchanges and finally to set the basis so as to initiate the Route of Balkan-Med Agro-Food Products and integration with AgroFood Clusters in EU level. To achieve these aims towards the sustainable growth of the Agro-Food sector, all relevant actors should be engaged.
In the 3\textsuperscript{rd} AgroLabs Newsletter, we are presenting the findings of the 4 Diagnosis Studies of the AgroFood Value Chain in each of the 4 target areas of the AgroLabs Project, as well as, the events that were organized in the previous months, in the context of the AgroLabs Project.

The Diagnosis of the Agrofood Value chain aimed to map the local production and the people involved, identify problems, collect data that can be used as tools for solutions, describe potential alternatives and achieve knowledge exchange.

1. Diagnosis of the Agrofood value chain studies in Regional Unit of Imathia.

- The conclusions of the Diagnosis of the Agrofood value chain study in the Regional Unit of Imathia are: According to national and EU statistics, the Region of Central Macedonia (RMC) is one of the major agricultural producing regions in Greece with a high output of products both in area coverage and volume terms and a significant portion of population working in primary Agrofood production. The same applies to an even greater extend for the Regional Unit of Imathia.
- Imathia appears to be especially focused in stone fruit production (peaches, nectarines, cherries and others), two of which are registered Protected Geographical Indication products (Naoussa Peaches and Rodochorion Cherries).
The region is also heavily dependent on these products’ exports.

- The major issues/threats appear to be sales, pricing and financing, and more specifically: lack of protection from imported products, high levels of direct and indirect taxation, and the general lack of liquidity, financing and payment collection.
- There is a high interest of local stakeholders for the Agrolabs Cluster, which can be used in order to actively pursue the Opportunities of the Local Agrofood Sector, as identified in the Study, namely:
  - the development and subsequent use of the RMC’s and Imathia’s Regional Unit brand name for local products,
  - the placing of special emphasis into production of PDO and PGI products, that have achieved a high level of recognition, the focus on added value Agrofood products and new integrated and state-of-the-art approaches in product production, linked to new nutritional trends towards healthier eating.


The total agricultural area reported in the latest Census of Cypriot Agriculture amounted to 137,764 ha (Statistical Service, 2010). Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs), also known as herbs or spices, are plants used for flavoring foods and beverages, for medicines, cosmetics, dyes, and perfumes and for other household and economic uses.

The conclusions after the Diagnosis of the Agrofood value chain are:

- Significant the commercial problems (marketing, prices, delays in payments).
• Problems with post-harvest management of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants.
• Producers consider it important to train them on issues related to the cultivation and marketing of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants. SMEs are the main tools for the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants success as reputation, product quality and proximity to the market.
• Commercial problems, pricing, promotion and lack of infrastructure are considered important issues.

3. Diagnosis of the Agrofood Value Chain Studies in Fieri Region.
The area of Myzeqe in Fier is distinguished for high agricultural production, where grain cultivation, fruit trees, olive groves, vineyards and livestock have an important place. Recently, is reporting an increase of the area planted with vegetables (mainly watermelon and melon), fodder crops, viticulture and fruit trees, which is justified by the improvement of the road infrastructure connecting the villages with the city of Fier and increasing the demand of local residents for these products.

The conclusions after the Diagnosis of the Agrofood value chain are:

• The study results show that the authorities have a very good knowledge of situation of the agro-food sector in Fieri municipality.
• The difficulties of agro-food sector are related to inputs, storage conditions and product processing.
• It is estimated that knowledge is limited in terms of Good Agricultural Practices, legislation, marketing and trade issues.
• Authorities evaluate the need on training and have clearly
identified the most important topics.


The land resource in the Blagoevgrad region is limited. Despite the fact that the district is third in the country (after Bourgas and Sofia districts) the size of the arable land is very limited and is only 155091 decares or 13.2% of its total area and only 2.3% of the country's arable land.

The agro-food chain in the region, as part of the country's food industry, is represented by the production and processing of:

- products of plant origin
  - Cereal crops; Grain legumes - fodder peas - grain, beans; Technical cultures - tobacco - oriental; Forage crops - alfalfa, silage corn, forage peas; Fresh vegetables and fruits - potatoes, tomatoes; Orchards and vineyards - apples, pears, apricots, peaches and nectarines, plums and cherry plums, cherries, sour cherries, raspberries, wine varieties, dessert varieties;
  - products of animal origin - cattle, bulls, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, donkeys, mules, cats, laying hens, broilers, turkeys for fattening, quails, ostriches, apiaries, fishes - carp, trout; rabbit, californian worms, snails.

The conclusions after the Diagnosis of the agrofood value chain are:

- In the area of crop production in Blagoevgrad District, it is obvious that in all municipalities dominate farms. The reason is clear - fragmentation of the arable land, mainly due to the mountainous relief of the area.
- Low purchasing prices and insufficient production opportunities have negative influence on agricultural production;
- Lack of agro-business centers and technical centers to advise manufacturers on market conditions to conduct training to improve their agro-technical culture and market skills;
- Not using the opportunities of European agricultural development programs.

**Latest news:**

- The **AgroLabs Workshops in Greece** were successfully organized by the University of West Attica.

The 1st Workshop was held in Veria on Tuesday 12th February at the Imathia Chamber and the 2nd was held in Naoussa on Wednesday 13th February at the Cultural Center of Municipality of Naousa.

Local stakeholders and representatives of the local authorities attended
the Workshops, which focused on specific agro-food issues and the Value Chain Study findings in Imathia. The upcoming Imathia AgroLabs Cluster was also introduced to the participants by the organizers during the events. The Workshops were also attended by the representative of the Region of Central Macedonia (Partner 2 in the Project) that presented the implementation of the Smart Specialization Strategy in the Creation of Agro-Food Innovation Platforms in the Region of Central Macedonia.

- The **AgroLabs Workshops in Albania** were successfully organized by the Agricultural University of Tirana, Department of Agroenvironment and Ecology (PP5 in the Project) in collaboration with the Municipality of Fier (PP6 in the Project), at the “Fieri Hotel” in Fier, Albania.
on soil fertility in Fier, and more specifically on the balanced soil fertilization as a key factor for sustainable production, product quality and preserving the environment and also on agro-technological schemes based on the soil fertility and agro-climatic conditions. The 2nd Workshop was held on Thursday, 28th of February and focused on: key factors that influence the development of the agro-food sector in Fier, soil and plant health, the use of chemicals for plant nutrition, and the use of pesticides for plant protection.

- The AgroLabs Local Event in Razlog, Bulgaria. Municipality of Razlog organized the AgroLabs Local Event on 11th of April 2019 in the town of Razlog, Bulgaria. The event involved all the local stakeholders, representatives from the municipalities in the region Blagoevgrad, NGOs and agrofood SMEs.
During the event were presented the project AgroLabs, main objectives and aims, the Diagnosis of the agrofood value chain in the region of Blagoevgrad and the Draft version of the Local Action Plan. Also were presented best practices in the creation and operation of the
clusters in Bulgaria and abroad. All the participants/stakeholders expressed their interest in the creation of the AgroLabs cluster and shared their main problems and challenges.

**What’s next?**

- Local Action Plans (building joint strategy at regional level); Pilot Case Studies developed for AgroLab Cluster; AgroLabs Cluster developed.