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The Urban Lab of Europe !

The OpenAgri project Journal N° 5

Project led by the City of Milan



**JOBS & SKILLS
IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY**

OPENAGRI



The OpenAgri project

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.

Partnership:

- Comune di Milano
- Camera di Commercio, Industria, Agricoltura e Artigianato - Chamber of commerce
- Fondazione Politecnico di Milano - Research Centre
- Fondazione Parco Tecnologico Padano - Incubator dedicated to technological companies and startups
- Università degli studi di Milano - University
- Politecnico di Milano - University
- Avanzi - Think Thank
- Cineca - Research Centre
- FUTURE FOOD INSTITUTE Trust (FFI) - Research Centre
- ImpattoZero Srl - Private Company
- La Strada Società Cooperativa Sociale - NGO
- Sunugal - NGO
- Poliedra - Centro di servizio e consulenza del Politecnico di Milano - Research Centre
- IFOA – Istituto Formazione Operatori Aziendali - Training Centre
- Mare s.r.l. impresa sociale - NGOFOOD PARTNERS SRL - Private Company



Telling OpenAgri stories

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last year of OpenAgri wasn't an easy one. After more than three years, the project is coming to an end, and it is time to celebrate its results and reflect on this experience. The fifth edition of *OpenAgri* Journal describes and analyses the progress of the project from August 2019 to October 2020 and prepare for the future beyond the project, 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 my site visit to Milan that took place on January 2020 and on regular online meetings with the *OpenAgri* team.

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

Section 1: *OpenAgri - The legacy*: reflects on project Legacy now that the implementation period is reaching an end.

Section 2 – *Main Implementation Challenges*: outlines the response of OpenAgri to the seven UIA challenges.

Section 3 – *Key Learning Points*: highlights the learning points of the period and how can those learning points can be used by other cities.

Section 4 – *Conclusion... by now*: addressed the culmination of three years pioneering activity from one of the first wave of UIA projects.



OpenAgri Lab

SECTION 1: OPENAGRI – THE LEGACY

Now that *OpenAgri* is reaching an end under UIA funding period, is time to reflect and build on the project *Legacy*, that must represent the culmination of three years pioneering activity

Local Matters

The peri-urban transformation of Milano changed due to *OpenAgri* capacity to create strong, mutually supportive linkages between **rural and urban** areas.

OpenAgri integrated research and practice creating sustainable synergies. As mentioned by Professor Antonio Longo, Politecnico Milano; “... that means we are not just talking about abstract academic theories and we’re not limited to standalone local projects, either. Our actions bring together policymakers, researchers,

from one of the first wave of UIA projects and must be about learning from the past, living the present and building for the future.

businesses, service providers, citizens and other stakeholders as economic engines, forging ahead through agglomeration, industry, creative capital, and innovation”.

Antonio was talking about the co-creation method followed by the project. Rossana Torri, *OpenAgri* project manager, clarified; “...take, for example, the agriculture and food value chain. In the traditional model, each link in that chain is essentially transactional: At every stage of production and distribution—from selling seeds



Milano view

to retailing packaged foods—the interaction between participants remains limited to the buying and selling of products or services, and the role of each participant stays within well-defined boundaries. In the past 15 years, however, some of these participants have developed new forms of interaction that blur the boundaries between them and turn a transactional process into an interdependent ecosystem. In doing so, they are following the path of co-creation”. **OpenAgri**, in fact, have taken that path as a matter of deliberate strategy.

The agro-ecological and landscape design developed by the 30-hectare Masterplan created a new locality for the city. This means designing for shared access to systems and services, planning functional infrastructures and activating networks between people, places and products.

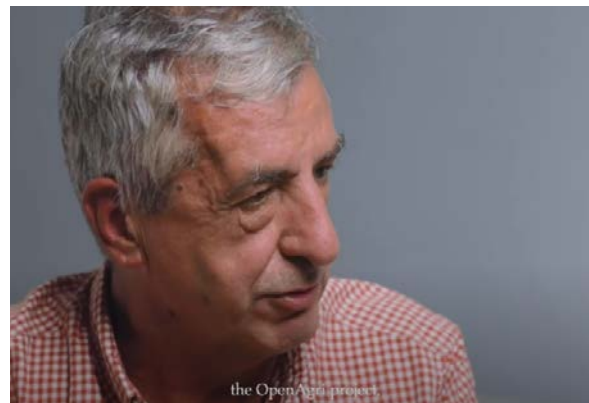
Connecting with the real areas in which people are living!

Hoping that the urban agglomeration effect will pull the countryside along does little to nurture local economies. Yet, sustainable futures won't be found by trying to preserve the economy of the past – or by hurrying after the latest trend. **OpenAgri** understood the challenge and focus the project activities on business development and innovation on **what Milano can actually do best**. The best example is the incubation and startups support that developed innovative projects in the circular economy, with particular focus on the water resource and its use within the food supply chains, along a cycle that goes from production, to transformation, to consumption, to waste and reuse of waste.

Acting smart in the context of **OpenAgri** was not only about technology, but more about the smart use of local resources and amenities and finding

the right balance of business diversity, to create an economy that is specialised but still resilient.

Good peri-urban government enables participation. Andrea Patrucco, from Milano **OpenAgri** team, mentioned that; “...real world solutions won't be found by making decisions for the countryside from a city office”. **OpenAgri** established partnerships between the public, private, and non-profit sectors, giving emphasis to not only about what different groups needed, but what they had to offer and how they contributed.



Paolo Bossi

A perfect example is Paolo Bossi, entrepreneur of the “**Birra per il Corvetto**” project, one of the 18 projects supported by **OpenAgri**. Producing a beer and creating a place to sell it and to aggregate people in the Corvetto district was the main idea - From city farm to pint. Paolo, comments that “...well, the periurban area of Milan is not an easy one for the agriculture, because there is a strong competition”. But he succeeded, by producing a few thousands bottles in the first lot. To him, the added value of **OpenAgri** was to open the area to entrepreneurs and as network, it gave him the chance to know other realities, with whom he now has new projects to sell the beer.



Fiore Urbano

Another good example is the project of Nadia Benatti e Roberta Bajona, **Fiore Urbano**. Nadia and Roberta have a common past in the world of European finance. At a certain point in their life they decide to give up everything and dedicate themselves to launching a start-up: FioreUrbano, which prepares bouquets of freshly picked flowers and delivers them by subscription in Milan, promoting an economy linked to the territory and committed to the environment.

OpenAgri, "...allowed us to start, by engaging us with local realities, giving the opportunity to know this world and linking to many people of Milan that don't know, the south part of Milan, its agricultural history, many realities that exists already, many realities that deal with agriculture".

But, **OpenAgri** transformation in the area went beyond small-medium enterprises and start-ups of the agri-food sector, **OpenAgri** also attracted to the area social innovation projects that moved to self-sustainable businesses. Alessandro Di Donna, in 2017 started agricultural activity with **CasciNet**, the project that he applied to **OpenAgri** for Regenerative Agroforestry, inspired by syntropic agriculture.

Cascinet was born from an association that took over the Sant' Ambrogio farmhouse, located in the Forlamini district, in 2012. After 3 years of mainly cultural activities, they decided to start an



CasciNet

agricultural business, taking the opportunity created by **OpenAgri** in the open call for tender for the thirty-year concession of the farmhouse. They started the agricultural activity on the 10 hectares gave by the municipality in the south-east area of Milan, between Corvetto and Vigentino districts. The first product was an agricultural beer. They cultivated the two-row barley, they harvest it, they brought it to the Vallescura, which is a farm that also has small malting company.

In Alessandro words "...OpenAgri was important for us because the fields used for the project were adjacent to ours. This gave us the chance to relate to other agricultural business in the area. The greatest contribution was the creation of relationships with other entrepreneurs. It created a net that still exists, and we want to continue working together".

As presented in **OpenAgri** Journal N° 3, to activate the Open Innovation Hub, **OpenAgri** launched in October 2018 an open call with the purpose to select a project in the scope of contemporary artistic languages (such as performance, public and participatory art) for a nine-week long residency, interacting creatively with UIA **Openagri's** partnership and activities. The evaluation committee-composed of **OpenAgri** partners selected the artistic production named **MIST – Ritual for Landscape in Transition**, delivered by the company DOM.



Con il progetto OpenAgri, Comune di Milano e 15 partner del mondo universitario, associativo e imprenditoriale, partecipano a UIA - Urban Innovative Actions, iniziativa dell'Unione Europea che promuove azioni innovative nelle città.



OPENAGRI

MIST 28 september

DOM, is a collective of artists formed by Leonardo Delogu and Valerio Sirna who builds through the practice of walking explorations and performances dedicated to the places they experience, giving back unusual perspectives, glimpses of light and long shadows.

The **Artist-in-Residence** activity brought the attention of the City of Milan and its community about the beauty of the suburban landscape and the challenges it poses.

The first months were dedicated to developing artistic activities with **children**, exploring the territory and the borders between the countryside and the city, based local mythology and collective ritual dimension. The participants were engaged in a series of explorations of the neighbourhood, **between the city and the countryside**, looking of fantastic and frightening places, hidden from street corners that see all days. A journey on foot made of games and stories where they mix reality and imagination, local history and mythology, training sensitivity and perception, building a map of the city that maybe exists, or maybe not.

The second stage of the **Artist-in-Residence** activity engaged **adults** in a peri-urban walk exploration with arrival at Nosedo farm and projection of artistic film named Desert. The closure of the residence was on the 28th of September with an open event for all Milan community to show case the experience and learnings of the residence.

Andrea Patrucco highlighted the fact that; “The call has worked as a flywheel to engage new stakeholders by the means of producing a participatory artwork. The local stakeholders have got further insights on relevant issues concerning the future of the area, even controversial, through a conversation with key-actors not previously included, such as the Roma Community living in Vaiano Valle, bordering the agricultural lands”.

OpenAgri, by establishing a strong bond with its surrounding local dimension is activating processes of social inclusion, urban regeneration and cultural innovation. The **MIST – Ritual for Landscape in Transition** residency was an exploration of the relationship between place and emotional and social space.



Land observation and social dinner

The idea of **Legacy** may remind us of the end of the project, but it's not the end that we are talking about. Being reminded of the end of the project is actually a good thing, because informs about the need and urgency to make the project activities sustainable and to prepare the

knowledge transfer period of the project, in 2021. Legacy for OpenAgri is "an interconnection across time, with a need for those who have come before OpenAgri and a responsibility to those who come after OpenAgri".

SECTION 2: MAIN IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The unexpected

Based on the rapid spread of the CoViD-19, a lockdown was declared in the whole Northern Italy by the Government. The application of increasingly rigorous containment measures allowed to reduce the impact of the CoViD-2019 pandemic on the Italian National Health System but at the same time these restrictions caused difficulties to close the project and unexpected problems. Especially the renovation projects due to their multi-faceted components. COVID-19 and the measures set in place to combat the pandemic have changed the way *OpenAgri* team and partners worked and how they implement the project activities in this last months.

During this period, *OpenAgri* team made all the efforts to close the project with success and impact.

OpenAgri is an experimental project that challenged existing practices and regulations in the city, region, policy fields and the local context. In here I address the challenges faced during the 3 years of the project, showing the main findings

Leadership for implementation *OpenAgri*

Was closely aligned to Milan policies and strategies -**Milan Food Policy**- giving the project a favorable political framework where the city's leadership remained consistent. The operational leadership of the project was strong, overall and

for each of the seven **UIA Challenges for implementation**: Leadership for implementation; (Smart) Public Procurement (using public spending to leverage more local innovation); Organisational arrangements within the urban authorities to deliver integrated innovative projects (cross-department working); Participative approach for co-implementation (incl. private partners); Monitoring & evaluation (measurement); Communicating with target beneficiaries and Upscaling (incl. resizing/re-planning interventions).

The project proved to be an excellent opportunity to experiment a hypothesis of work that is inherent to **UIA program**.

This suggests a regeneration, communication and development strategy of the city suburbs that integrates the two aspects.

This is very interesting because it means to start not from a regeneration of the "container", but from the activation of new economic dynamics.

on work package level. The work packages are strongly interrelated functionally; frequent contacts and briefings make sure that the leaders are well informed about the progress in each domain.

Public procurement

A project with a big investment in renovation works, public procurement is never a risk free. The public procurement process had some initial delays as described in previous *OpenAgri* Journals. The management of public procurement followed a conventional approach imposed by the municipality rules and many times it was not easy for the management team to overcome

some administrative barriers to move faster and more important to implement innovative practices. Lessons to retain for future projects with similar dimension is the need to have a “green way” inside the administrative and bureaucratic process of the municipality to speed procurement.

Integrated/cross-developmental *OpenAgri*

Was an excellent opportunity to experiment a model. It had its specific goals, it was a very complex and integrated project because it keeps together many different dimensions and makes them work in a specific place, but also in a city systematically. It was an opportunity to relate areas of competence of the administration that are very different from one another and that are used to look at problems from their single point of view. This project necessarily had to confront

with the people responsible for environment, urban planning, agriculture, labour. All these dimensions, in a complex administration such as the municipality of Milan, are divided. Such an integrated project forced to create new relationships and we learned something from this collaboration. At the end of the 3 years, is correct to say that the project overcome the challenge.

Participatory approach for co-implementation

The project succeeded on this challenge, because, through small mechanisms like studying together an innovative call to give publicly owned land and a free loan, many local stakeholders (politicians, public servants, universities, companies, NGOs, and others) had to work with the agriculture sector on a type of call they had never worked

before and this could be applied again in the future, contrary to the agricultural leasing procedures and others. Overall, there was a good interaction and in some cases *OpenAgri* built or experiment new instruments that could be used in other fields.

Monitoring and evaluation

An essential aspect of sustainable urban development is the ability to focus on the actual changes achieved locally: the results and impact of the project activities, rather than on the delivered outputs. In this respect, the project developed a monitoring and evaluation tool that aims at presenting a reviewed list of indicators (21) as a result of the confrontation within the

UIA team, and the assessment methods in use. The Impact Assessment Report (D.4.4.1) provides further elaboration by focusing on the sustainability of project results and the medium-long term impacts. Moreover, a policy analysis perspective is adopted in the final assessment, to grasp specific aspects of the project that most directly question the public policy of the

municipality of Milan and its agenda on project-related topics. The scheme presented aims at making transparent the approach adopted to the reviewing and updating the project result indicators.

“Categories” of results are identified and described. Categories are meant as thematic areas where project results could have a greater impact in the medium or long-term perspective: Land and urban regeneration; Food; Environment; Capacity building; Economics and Awareness.

Results are clustered by categories; each of the result indicators is then associated with a number

Communication

In the last months communication has been a big challenge due to the difficulties to organize physical events and led the project team to cancel the final project conference. To overcome these difficulties, the project increased the digital communication activities. A good example was the organization of a set of *OpenAgri Talks* with members of the project community that shared in first-hand their opinions and feelings about the project. All available in this link:

Upscaling

The project formally closed, but the upscaling can be seen on the interest of the Municipality of Milan to invest massively on a Cascina Nosedo. Thanks to UIA, the area of Cascina Nosedo is now a hub for the agri-food sector but the city wants it to be a more complex hub that will work not only on the themes of peri-urban agriculture, but also on circular economy, trying to put them in relation. They have understood that there are

of project outputs which are relevant to its achievement.

Results are expected to be measured within the short term (at the end of the project, within the Annual Progress Report 4) and the medium term (1 year after the end of the project, within the Final Qualitative Report).

The project fourth year will be important to put in practice this monitoring and evaluation tool and to get data about the transformative impact of *OpenAgri* in Milan.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3wX4L_CJLYIFHwU91AFNaA. Also, it produced several videos to reach different audiences, like the video of MIST landscape art event, <https://vimeo.com/468868175>. The capacity of project team to change the communication strategy in the last months, definitely is a good example to other cities of resilience and capacity to adapt to a new context.

interesting connections between peri-urban agriculture and for example the water cycle, thanks to the nearby water purifier. This will open the door to new enterprises that will imagine new solutions and projects to work also on this cycle. There is clear evidence that the core principles and components of *OpenAgri* will now apply at a larger scale within Milan but also in other cities of Lombardi.

SECTION 3: KEY LEARNING POINTS

OpenAgri started in 2016, with the ambition of creating new opportunities and job skills in the area of Porto di Mar, Vercelli, where rural and urban meet, with the creation of a center for innovation and peri-urban agriculture realized in Cascina Nosedo. At this stage, we measure what we can because the deeper impact of *OpenAgri* cannot be assessed until some future point.

The **First key learning point** is the fact that *OpenAgri* worked as a territorial activator. The virtuous path has been the ability to build different bonds, between different competencies of different parts of the administration, and to find a new partnership that will allow the city to give a more solid future to it. The risk of the projects is to start an experiment that is not sustainable and to have to abandon it the next year. In this case the outlook is promising.

The **Second key learning point – OpenAgri Integration in other policies and initiatives – OpenAgri** is a complex project that tested unproven solutions at real urban scale, interconnecting different dimensions at municipality level, departments and offices within the municipality. The integration of *OpenAgri* in the broader **Milan Circular city strategy** pushed different departments and city offices to work together in areas such as waste, energy, food, creativity, manufacture and mobility. The areas of intervention are inextricably linked, for example, the positive effect on food

security may be compensated by reduced water security as the downstream water is unfit for certain purposes due to water quality deterioration.

The **Third key learning point – e-bike model** – the e-bike model designed by the partner Poliedra - pedal assisted cargo bike - allow the distribution of products of the *OpenAgri* area in the Southern Milan area and the provision of agricultural material to the Hub. Since the *OpenAgri* Hub has not been already set-up, the design has been focused on identifying other services, through an extensive user-research with several meetings and interviews to valuable stakeholders.

Thanks to the interest of Robert Bosch GmbH for sponsoring a e-cargo bike, Poliedra was able to have at disposal the first e-cargo bike, currently in use by one of the stakeholders operating on the promotion of *OpenAgri* territory.



OpenAgri e-bike

The Fourth key learning point – Food Alchemist Lab

– Future Food Institute experimented OffiCucina activity with a 5-days – 11th to 15th March 2019 - Food Alchemist Lab that took place at Cascina Casottello.

The activity involved 7 persons with minor mental disability coming from “Sportello per il lavoro e Scuola di Formazione San Giusto”.

The Lab focused on **food waste and sustainability, fermentation in the logic of circular economy applied to food.**

After the Lab, the equipment is in use at San Giusto school where the students are keeping up their training under the supervision of their professors.

The activity proved to be an effective social inclusion tool to educate and enlighten the participants.

The Fifth key learning point – Business model and Sustainability – since the beginning of the project that the sustainability of *OpenAgri* was a key activity of the project. The original idea was to open a call for potential investors - private or public or private public partnerships - to manage



OpenAgri Lab

the **Legacy** of *OpenAgri* after the end of the funded period of the project. Many times, the solution for our problems are inside our organization and not outside. That was the case of *OpenAgri* that found a reliable solution with MM Spa. The company is capable of providing tailor-made solutions in the design and upgrading of urban ecosystems.

MM Spa

Set up in Milan in 1955, MM constructed the city’s entire underground railway network and major road and hydraulic engineering works.

Since 2003, MM has also managed the Water Service of Milan, handling groundwater withdrawal, purification, distribution, wastewater collection and treatment and, in general, the maintenance and investment plan of the water supply and wastewater networks.

In 2014, MM Spa took over the management of the real estate of the City of Milan, which consists of over 38,000 items of property including council houses, garages and other buildings.

<https://www.mmspa.eu/>

The solution consists with an **agreement between the Milan municipality and MM** for the development and management of the future Hub in Cascina Nosedo, **preserving the functions and investments developed in *OpenAgri***, the 30 ha of agricultural land as a strategic asset for experimental agricultural and innovative actions of start-ups and SMEs, drafting a feasibility project based of a circular economy farm with focus on water management and agro-ecological agri-food production.

MM spa delivered the **“MM FARM” feasibility plan** describing Cascina Nosedo as new hub for the development of urban water service metabolism. The plan considers different dimensions: agro-ecology, circular farming, water circularity, architectural concept, economic investment and timetable, legal and regulatory aspects. At this stage, Milan municipality activated the related Departments for the analysis of the study.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION... BY NOW

This journal represents the culmination of three years pioneering activity from one of the first wave of UIA projects. One final journal will be published to cover the activities of the project 4th year focus on knowledge transfer.

We can conclude that the project has delivered on its promises, nevertheless there are still works to be done after the UIA funding ends. The activities as foreseen in the project are all on track, and in some aspects, even more was achieved than planned. What is even more important, most of the activities that were started, tested and piloted during the UIA project will continue in the future.

The 4th year will be dedicated to the transfer of the knowledge generated during the project implementation. For the knowledge transfer activities, the project will produce a final qualitative report that draws the main lessons learnt and captures the main knowledge generated during the project implementation.

Also, it is expected that during the 12 months, *OpenAgri* representatives participate in national/international conferences to share the main lessons learned and to explore the possibility to actively transfer the project to other cities across Europe.

Communication and branding will continue to open the hub to other stakeholders from circular economy, to attract firms and wider audiences, pro-active communication and branding efforts will be needed.

The business model will be tested after the completion of the project, that allows the continuity of the provision of services linked specifically to the activities of the hub.

OpenAgri is coming to an end and for the next edition of the journal we will make known the main achievements and the plans for knowledge transfer period!

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.



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