

Task Force on Sustainable Agriculture and Innovation

Evaluation Report

Based on meeting held 11:00 – 12:00 CEST, Friday 30th of July 2021

Introduction

This report gives an overview of views on the work carried out by Reimagine Europa's Task Force on Sustainable Agriculture and Innovation in its first six months and includes a section on plans for the coming six months and beyond. It draws on material from four sources to inform its content: a survey circulated after the first meeting of the Expert Committee in February 2021; views expressed during an online evaluation meeting held on the 30th of July 2021; a survey circulated in the run-up to the evaluation meeting; emails sent to RIE by various members of the expert committee expressing their views. The aim of this report is not to give a name-by-name account but present the broad variety of views expressed in a comprehensible fashion.

1. General

As can be seen in Figure 1(a), members appeared satisfied with the overall mission and direction of the Task Force, with 40% of respondents “very satisfied”, 55% “satisfied” and no expressions of dissatisfaction. A similar breakdown held on the questions of both the level of satisfaction with the working of the Expert Committee and with the format of Expert Committee input to the work carried out by the Task Force. Wherever less satisfied responses did arise, they did not appear to stem from a dissatisfaction with the level of involvement in the activities carried out by the Task Force as 95% of respondents felt that there was “sufficient contact”.

2. First meeting of the Expert Committee

Expert Committee members were generally satisfied with the format of the two-day inaugural meeting held on the 16th and 17th of February 2021, with a majority finding it good and over 30% believing it to be excellent. In addition to the presentations, the choice of using breakout rooms for open discussion in smaller working groups was highlighted as a particular strength in the format of the meeting. In fact, given the complexity of the issues and variety of backgrounds and perspectives, many of the experts expressed a desire for more time to be allocated to the discussion in breakout rooms for future meetings.

3. Task Force Reports

The two-day meeting was intended to inform two deliverables of the Task Force – a report on narratives surrounding the debate on the role of new technologies such as genome editing in agriculture entitled *Beyond the Apple of Discord: Existing Narratives and Ways Forward* (hereafter referred to using the term “narratives report” and a *White Paper on the Regulation of Genome Editing in Agriculture* (hereafter referred to using the term “Policy Options report”). On the question of whether input during the first meeting of the Expert Committee was adequately reflected in the final versions of the two reports, 65% of respondents believed that it was, with the remaining believing that discussion during the meeting was partially reflected in the final reports.

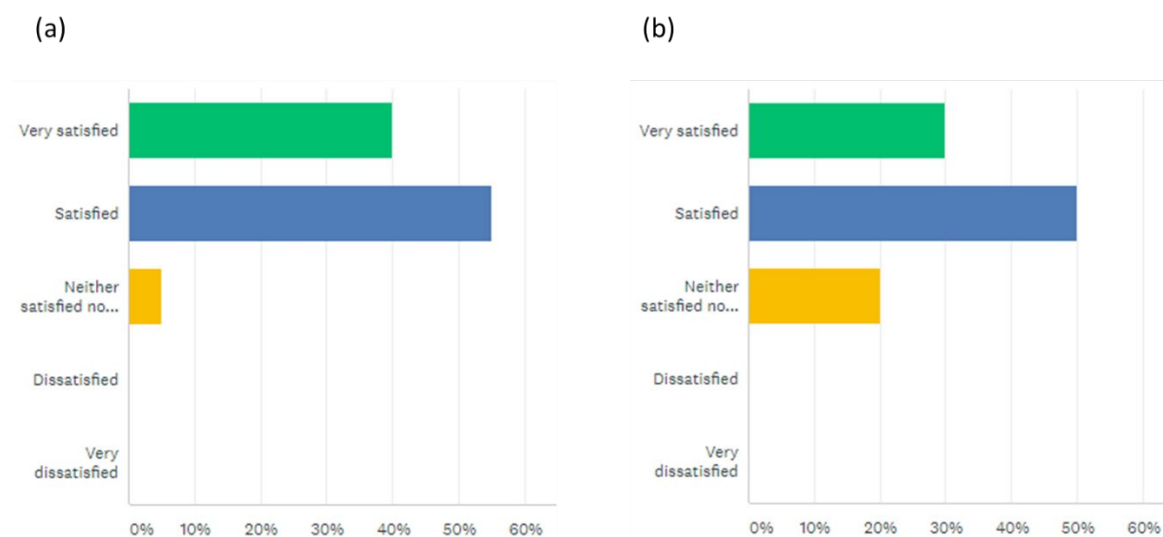


Figure 1. (a) Breakdown of level of satisfaction with the overall mission and direction of the Task Force. (b) Breakdown of the level of satisfaction with the overall content of the Task Force deliverables.

An even larger majority (70%) felt that they (personally) were adequately consulted during the drafting of the deliverables, with only 5% feeling that they were not consulted enough. This was reflected in the generally positive attitude to the Task Force deliverables as illustrated in Figure 2(b), with half of respondents satisfied with the overall content of the reports and 30% very satisfied. Many experts gave detailed feedback on the content of the reports during either the drafting phase or upon the finalised versions. It is worth noting that much of this input was of a very technical nature, and therefore cannot be easily addressed beyond the attempts already made in the reports. To give some less technical and more general examples, one expert wished to see a recognition in the Narratives report of the different form of dialogue that emerges from a value-dominated discussion (as compared to an interest-driven discussion) and more of an outline on how the two reports could work together in synergy to deliver desired outcomes. A similar comment was also made by another expert who believed that the Policy

Options report does not adequately reflect precaution-focused narratives in its analysis and therefore risks jeopardising broad stakeholder agreement on the issue. A related comment on this point was a desire to include a more detailed discussion of options for harmonisation of legislation on NGTs in the context of “the spirit of the [GMO] Directive”. Be that as it may, there was a strong consensus that the reports reflect the diversity of views present in the Task Force.

4. July event “Beyond the Apple of Discord: Changing our Agri Culture”

The picture became much more mixed when it came to attitudes towards the format of the event entitled “Beyond the Apple of Discord: Changing our Agri Culture” held on the 22nd of July. Although 20% of respondents were very satisfied, 35% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 10% were dissatisfied. Notwithstanding an active comment section during the event, an interactive dimension to the debate from the audience was identified as an element that was lacking. Some respondents also expressed a desire to see more representation either from the European Commission or to include more panellists with controversial points of view.

5. Next steps

According to the survey, a slight majority of respondents (53%) would like to see more outreach by the Task Force to the general public. As seen in Figure 2, this sentiment was reinforced by the fact that 32% of respondents believe that the priority for the Task Force in the coming months should be expanding stakeholder participation in the Expert Committee. Other areas identified as priorities for expansion include expansion to other topics such as Digitalisation and Big Data (26%) and communicating conclusions and deliverables of the Task Force to target groups such as policymakers. Discussion on the future direction of work of the Task Force centered on differing views as to its precise role up to now. Some experts feared that by taking a position or recommending particular policy actions, RIE risks losing the element of providing an open forum for debate. Consequently there were some voices that recommended the Task Force re-focus on its role as an honest-broker rather than providing positions one way or another.

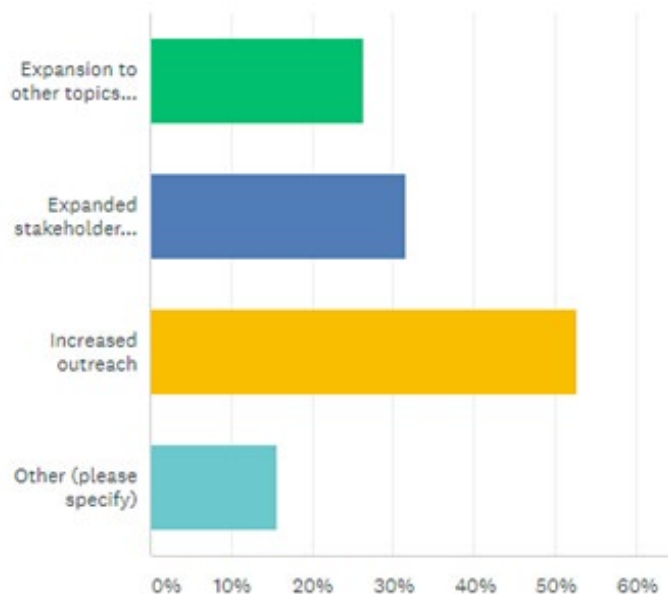


Figure 2. Priority areas for expansion of the Task Force.

Other experts took the opposing view, arguing that policymakers are an important part of the Task Force’s target audience and benefit from clear positions, especially in light of the new knowledge that the Commission will definitely initiate a policy action. Following on from this view and the shift in position of European institutions from “if” to “how” policy should be changed, some experts commented on the importance of the element of narratives in informing the wider debate. One expert expressed a view that there are two likely paths for the Task Force to follow in the coming months, the first being to take a broader or more food system-based approach and the other to focus on providing a platform to discuss elements flagged by stakeholders in the Commission report. Here once again, many experts emphasised that RIE’s ability to bring together very different perspectives in open dialogue will be very valuable to the European Commission. Notwithstanding the need to be clear in distinguishing between the element of being a forum for debate and being an advocate for policy change, it was acknowledged that there is overlap between the two and that even attempts to catalyse policy change will require engaging with dissenting voices.

A related point repeatedly stressed by experts is the need to strengthen the interactive element in RIE events. Firstly, the conspicuous absence of in-person meetings due to the adoption of public health measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 has had a predictable effect on the opportunities for interaction between stakeholders. The wish was therefore expressed to hold more of an in-person dimension to meetings when sanitary conditions permit. Some experts additionally commented that panel discussions, whether in-person or online, are of limited value in this regard. One expert went as far as to say that the success of the Task Force hinges on convincing critical voices that see new technologies such as genome editing as a continuation of a corporate assault on agriculture. For example, those who regard products of genome editing as having the same risk-factors as transgenic GMOs should be included. If they are genuinely part of the

discussion it will help shape any policy options presented by the Task Force. In addition to increasing interactivity in stakeholder discussions and broadening the stakeholder base, increased outreach was understood by at least some experts to include outreach on social media to engage with members of the public that may not already be conscious of the topic.

The Task Force will continue to work on the broader discussion around bridging the gap between sustainability and innovation. Furthermore, it is clear from feedback given by its members that much remains to be discussed on the issue of new genomic techniques and their application to sustainable agriculture. The Task Force will therefore continue its present focus on genome editing in the context of the sustainable agriculture and innovation until at least the next meeting of the Expert Committee in October.