European experts come together to focus on innovations to improve forest benefits

Involving the right people at the right time is key to the success of any new venture. The SINCERE project has turned its focus to a broad range of European-level experts and invited their insight and experience on the development of the project's eleven Case Studies.

SINCERE is developing a diverse collection of innovative actions (IA) in nine European regions, as well as one each in Peru and Russia. These involve seeking ways in which the forest can benefit people in local communities, while providing forest owners or managers with an incentive to manage their forests to provide these benefits, such as improving water quality, spiritual services, biodiversity protection and increasing recreational value. Finding new ways to support and promote these services, known as forest ecosystem services, is one of the primary aims of SINCERE.

To date, practice and science partners have collaborated to develop initial ideas for the eleven regional Case Studies. Local stakeholders discussed these ideas thoroughly in a first round of meetings held at the end of 2018.

Now it is time to take a broader view, inviting external opinion and advice, and considering Case Study challenges as a whole. To achieve this, European stakeholders from business, policy, NGOs, and forest owner associations met for two days of discovery and dialogue at the SINCERE Co-Design event, held in Leuven, Belgium on 28 and 29 January.

Plenary sessions included a global view of ecosystem services and learning from current practice to address challenges to innovation for forest ecosystem services. Breakout sessions focussed in on the Case Studies, with presentations on ideas for innovative mechanisms developed so far. The mechanisms are all at different stages of development, some at inception while others are fully functioning schemes that are already bringing some benefit to the forest, its owners and the surrounding communities.

The event also included pitches from the invited experts on how they might interact with the SINCERE Case Studies and the goal to promote the development of forest ecosystem services more generally. Some general conclusions include that defining similarities and common patterns will be useful for consideration of ecosystem services at European scale, that it is important to look for partners outside the forest sector to bring fresh ideas and approaches and that there is significant potential to increase forests' economic importance through the development of such schemes. A General Assembly for project partners followed the Co-Design event, to focus on how the innovation mechanisms can assess themselves for sustainability, policy considerations and communication.

Next steps involve a second round of meetings with local stakeholders to discuss the learning from these four days in Leuven and to decide on the mechanisms each Case Study will use to support the benefits the forest can provide to the people most relevant: its local communities.

SINCERE, **S**purring **IN**novations for e**C**osystem s**ER**vices in **E**urope, is a 4-year project funded through the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, coordinated by the European Forest Institute. The Co-Design event was organised by Prospex Institute and local partner KU Leuven.

The University of Padova, by the TESAF department, has participated at the event as project's scientific partner. The department in fact has expertises in dealing with Ecosystem Services and their provision. Moreover is supporting one of the two Italian IAs (Ecopay-Connect) in collaboration with Etifor.