

Challenging the status quo: The GoDanuBio Kick-off conference on Participative Governance, Bioeconomisation, and Policy Framework

The kick-off conference gave an interesting insight into the current state of and the challenges that lie ahead of implementing the concept of circular bioeconomy in the Danube macro-region. Among the topics discussed at the conference were Policy Framework, Bioeconomisation, and best approaches to Participative Governance. The international hybrid event took place on 20th & 21st May in Sofia, Bulgaria and also online and was organised by BRAIT. The event was attended by national and local government representatives and policy officials, members of national and transnational organisations, clusters, NGOs, and representatives of the private sector. The majority of participants joined online. However, there were also quite a few participants from Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia who attended the conference in person.

At the first day of the conference various internationally recognised experts presented on the topics of Policy Framework, Bioeconomisation, and Participative Governance. The second day of the conference was more interactive and gave participants the opportunity to discuss their findings and conclusions from the previous day in three thematic breakout sessions based on the aforementioned topics.

The conference managed to involve the key stakeholders of the GoDanuBio project and provided them with an excellent opportunity to learn more about the concept of Circular Bioeconomy and how it can be used as a tool for fostering sustainable regional development in the Danube region. In addition, the conference paved the way for interdisciplinary cooperation between different policy areas and sectors of production in order to address demographic change in a participative, multi-governance way.

The conference managed to achieve its aim to inform participants about the main goals of the project which are:

- ✓ To use Circular Bioeconomy in the Danube region as a tool for fostering regional development by focusing on the transition of a fossil-resource based economy towards a more sustainable economy that uses biological resources and processes to develop new products and services, thus focusing on rural-urban areas and their development.
- ✓ To co-create current and future strategies to increase the attractiveness of rural areas in the Danube region and thus provide incentives for young people to remain and revive those areas.

- ✓ To develop an ecosystem for systematic multi-level governance with actors from the regional policy level, industry, academia and civil organisations. Thus, leveraging the institutional capacity of the participating regions and supporting transformative processes to tackle demographic change and brain drain.

Furthermore, during the second day of the event the participants had the opportunity to discuss their findings from the previous day in three thematic breakout sessions - Policy Framework, Bioeconomisation, and Participative Governance. During the breakout sessions the attendees arrived to the following conclusions:

Policy framework:

- ✓ Strategies and policy papers are drafted by national authorities. Nonetheless, regional authorities and local municipalities are crucial for their implementation. Additionally, when it comes to implementation, clusters and business support organisations can provide valuable expertise. In this sense, a practical and holistic approach is needed. Lastly, not having a common definition within the Danube region is an obstacle which is further exacerbated by the fact that within the region bioeconomy is often handled by different ministries.

Bioeconomisation:

- ✓ In order to improve the prospects for Bioeconomisation there needs to be a common understanding about its importance for the future, better education on the subject, and an active involvement of all stakeholders. In addition, transfer of know-how, local supply chains, and better support for SMEs is needed to facilitate the implementation of region-wide Bioeconomisation.

Participative Governance:

- ✓ In order to facilitate and establish an effective and participative multi-governance system stakeholders such as Clusters, Hubs, Local Action Groups, EU Funding beneficiaries, and local “Champions” need to be actively involved. Furthermore, the circular bioeconomy concept can benefit from participative governance by using a multi-stakeholder approach that would see the sharing of experience and best practices in order to implement policies and foster business development.

The GoDanuBio kick-off conference not only familiarised participants with the aims of the GoDanuBio project, but also provided them with in-depth knowledge about the concept of circular bioeconomy - particularly, the challenges and opportunities for its implementation in the Danube region. On their part, the participants shared valuable insights that would be of great benefit in the future of the project.