

ESEE 2027 Themes and Topics

The **28th European Seminar on Extension and Education (ESEE)** is scheduled to take place from **June 28 to July 2, 2027**, in **Rakvere, Estonia**.

A primary goal for this seminar is to facilitate a shift from theoretical concepts toward tangible impact and practical action.

While the seminar maintains its leadership in **European** scientific discourse, the Scientific Committee has reached a consensus to prioritize global scientific relevance over strict geographical exclusivity. Consequently, the themes and topics are designed to be conceptually robust enough to accommodate case studies and perspectives from both Europe and the Global South, focusing on "building networks" and "plurality" within the community.

Central theme

Human-centric Extension and Education: empowering the future of AKIS

In an era defined by rapid sustainability-oriented transitions, the **28th European Seminar on Extension and Education (ESEE 2027)** seeks to bridge the gap between digital advancement and the human core of agricultural systems. While international policies and digital innovations like Artificial Intelligence (AI) offer transformative potential for agrifood systems, they also introduce a **critical tension** regarding the future of human relationships within extension. By positioning the seminar around the concept of "**Empowering**," we frame digital innovation not as a replacement for human actors, but as a sophisticated tool to enhance their capacity.

The 2027 seminar moves beyond traditional boundaries to focus on the **footprint of leadership** and the ethical responsibilities of advisors, educators, and leaders. Drawing on discussions regarding the necessity of **spirit-filled relationships**, the theme emphasizes that extension is at its most effective when it supports individuals in finding their unique strengths within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). We aim to move from a culture of measuring indicators to one of **creating meaningful impact**, recognizing that the ethical creation of a resilient society starts with the quality of individual connections.

ESEE 2027 remains conceptually robust, inviting a plurality of perspectives from both Europe and the Global South. We welcome research and practice that explores how human-centric extension can manage the trade-offs of agroecological transitions while fostering a future for agriculture that is as socially resilient as it is technologically advanced.

(sub) topics/Themes

1. Digitalization and AI in extension and education.
2. Wellbeing and social sustainability in rural communities.
3. Skills, collective learning, and capacity building.
4. Governance and the future of AKIS.
5. Human-Centred Evaluation and Learning in AKIS
6. Agroecological transitions and change in food system

Topic 1: Digitalisation, artificial intelligence and the changing practices of extension and education

Context

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence and digital tools creates a critical tension with the human relationships that define extension. As agrifood systems modernise, there is a risk of digital tools replacing, deskilling, misleading human actors rather than empowering them.

Purpose

This topic invites abstracts exploring the transformative effects of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence on extension and education practices. In addition, we invite research on how digital technologies and AI can be harnessed to **empower advisors and farmers** within their micro-AKIS networks while maintaining essential human-centric relationships. We seek contributions that move to explore how digital monitoring can support agroecological transitions while maintaining essential **human-centric relationships**. Special focus is placed on the ethical application of AI in advisory services to enhance rural connectivity without diminishing the agency of the "free actor".

Abstracts addressing the practical application of AI in advisory services to enhance rural connectivity and improve the economy of digital knowledge transfer are especially welcome. In addition, we particularly encourage papers that discuss the digital monitoring of agroecological transitions and the efficiency of digital innovation hubs in remote areas. Contributions should aim to move from theoretical concepts to tangible practices and impacts within the modern agrifood system.

The following themes are illustrative rather than exhaustive; abstracts may address these or other emerging dimensions of digitalisation, AI, extension and education.

- **Changing roles of advisors and educators:** professional roles, expertise, facilitation and relationships with farmers and learners.
- **Teaching, learning and digital pedagogy:** experiential and peer learning, vocational education and continuing professional development.
- **Trust, misinformation and knowledge quality:** information integrity, conflicting advice, online behaviour and trust in digital knowledge environments.
- **Directionality, participation and knowledge co-creation:** commercial dependencies, alternative knowledge pathways, farmer-to-farmer learning and collective knowledge production.
- **Data governance and professional responsibility:** data ownership, privacy, transparency, responsible use and emerging advisory or educational responsibilities.
- **Digital inequalities, access and inclusion:** infrastructure, skills, geography, age, gender and institutional capacity in digital extension and education.

- **Organisation, labour and human relationships:** coordination, professional boundaries, digital work practices, dialogue, trust and relational forms of learning.
- **Competencies for digital extension and education:** critical digital and AI capabilities for advisors, educators, facilitators and learners.
- **AI and Business models and public-private partnerships:** strategies, funding schemes and power relations between incumbents of the sector, start-ups, farmers and workers representatives, etc.

Topic 2: Wellbeing and social sustainability in agricultural and rural communities

This subtopic focuses on the social dimension of sustainability, specifically the health and wellbeing of those in agricultural and rural communities. Sustainable transitions can overlook the social dimension, particularly the health and resilience of those at the heart of the system. Education systems at all life stages prepare people to work in agricultural roles in which many stresses are encountered, but such education may not always prioritise knowledge and skills on health and wellbeing. Extension agents form trusted relationships with farming and rural communities and may be well placed to be an important source of support.

Purpose:

This subtopic focuses on the social dimension of sustainability, specifically the health and wellbeing of agricultural and rural communities and the role of extension and education in addressing wellbeing issues. Abstracts should address how extension and/or education systems can work to support farmers, farming families, workers, and those people in allied professions who work within agricultural communities. Communications providing specific attention to hard-to-reach populations working in agriculture (workers, migrants, contractors, etc) are also welcome to debate how advisory services could contribute to their upskilling, well-being and integration in rural communities. We also encourage papers highlighting the role of LEADER and CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) in empowering rural actors to address challenges.

For extension and community-based support, we invite papers that draw on, **but are not limited to**, the following questions:

1. What is the role of extension agents in support landscapes for agri/rural communities?
2. How do wellbeing challenges faced within agricultural and rural communities affect extension agents and what skills, training, and support do they need?
3. What is the evidence for success of extension agent-delivered interventions that are designed to improve wellbeing and social sustainability of agri/rural communities?
4. What community-based approaches could overcome social challenges?
5. How do we deal with the paradox that digital tools (AI, Social Media) may simultaneously enhance the efficiency of Knowledge Transfer while potentially reducing the well-being of farmers dealing with rural isolation and loneliness?

For education, we invite papers that draw on, **but are not limited to**, the following themes:

1. Do agricultural students and extension agents feel prepared to work in an environment in which there appears to be high levels of poor wellbeing?
2. Do challenges and crises faced by agricultural and rural communities affect the attractiveness of working in the sector and how?
3. In what ways can educational curricula (at all life stages), including training for agricultural students and extension agents and lifelong learning, best prepare people for the challenges of working in stressed agricultural and rural communities?

Topic 3: Skills, collective learning, and capacity building

Context

Supporting sustainable agriculture and the agri-food industry requires advisors and educators to constantly develop their competencies. There is an urgent need to strengthen as well as to bridge, formal and informal learning paths to support lifelong development.

Purpose

This subtopic invites research and practice-based abstracts focused on developing the new competencies required by advisors and educators to support interactive innovation and lifelong learning processes in a rapidly changing agrifood landscape. Recognising that the future of AKIS depends on the empowerment of human actors, we seek contributions that take stock of as well as move beyond, theoretical frameworks to explore collective learning processes and capacity-building methodologies that lead to **tangible impact**.

Abstracts should address the **practical skills** required to navigate complex agroecological transitions and effectively manage the knowledge exchange. We encourage papers that investigate **pluralistic learning paths** – both formal and informal – including the role of **micro-credentials (micro-credits)** in supporting the continuous professional development of advisors, innovation brokers, and educators.

In line with our human-centric conference theme, we particularly invite works that explore the **footprint of leadership** and the cultivation of energised relationships. This involves supporting advisors and educators in finding their unique strengths to foster more resilient, ethical, and shock-viable networks.

Contributions focusing on multi-actor approaches, the organisational capacity of “independent” agents, advisory institutions, and the use of innovative methodologies, such as **videos as process** tools for social learning, are highly welcome to ensure the transition is as socially resilient as it is technologically advanced.

We invite papers that draw on, **but are not limited to**, the following questions:

- What new roles and competencies do advisors and educators need to develop to navigate complex agroecological transitions and manage knowledge exchange?
- Which experiences with collective learning fostered by (formal and informal) advisors can be conceptualised as transformative?
- Which are the processes of learning and change (re: transitions and transformation) individual advisors and educators as well as of their organisations from the private, public, non-profit and commercial sectors?

Topic 4: Governance and the future of AKIS

Context

As countries around the world develop and implement agricultural and rural development policies and strategies, they are increasingly organising and investing in their Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). In this context, the creation of **enabling environments** has become a hot topic for 2027. Governments must move beyond simple administrative mandates and, AKIS coordinating bodies expand their networking activities to include the diverse knowledge actors who sustain rural livelihoods, communities and value chains, and bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Purpose

This subtopic shifts the focus from abstract AKIS concepts toward practical action, tangible impact, and strategic planning within public policies and beyond. We invite abstracts that analyse how **countries or regions** are structuring, supporting and coordinating their systems to foster robust knowledge flows and effective innovation.

We invite papers that explore government, governance structures and interventions essential for sustainable rural development, with the firm understanding that **governance encompasses much more than the allocation of public resources**. We particularly welcome contributions that examine effects of the complex trade-offs between value-driven innovation support as e.g. agroecological transitions and international trade within national and international economic and political frame conditions. Contributions may also address contexts where short-term economic incentives may constrain engagement in skills development or collaborative action, despite the wider societal value of knowledge development and behavioural change. The economy of advisory and innovation support funding is another topical challenge that can be addressed. Contributions may explore how governance and funding structures can balance responsiveness to the needs and demands of farmers and rural communities with accountability and transparency in the use of public funds.

In alignment with our overall human-centric theme, we encourage reflections on how governance can support leadership by empowering intermediaries and individuals who connect people (regardless of formal mandates) to ensure a resilient and ethical future for agriculture. Contributions could explore how policy frameworks can move beyond measuring indicators to support individuals in finding their unique strengths and passion within the wider AKIS.

For theme 4 on governance and future AKIS approaches, we invite papers that draw on, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- How are countries and regions structuring and funding their Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) to transition from administrative compliance to tangible farm-level impact?
- How can governance and funding structures be designed to broadly mobilise resources and activities beyond public actors and funding, including pluralistic advisory providers?

- How do we deal with the paradox where short-term economic incentives or international trade frameworks constrain long-term farm-level engagement in agroecological transitions?
- How can governance and funding structures be designed to be responsive to the needs and demands of farmers and rural communities, while ensuring accountability and transparency in the use of public funds?
- What government and governance structures and interventions foster networks capable of supporting agricultural communities through crises, conflicts, and natural disasters?
- In what ways can public policies empower independent intermediaries who connect actors across the AKIS within and beyond of formal institutional mandates?

Topic 5: Human-centred evaluation and learning in AKIS

Context:

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning are increasingly important for understanding how Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) contribute to sustainable agrifood transitions. As AKIS evolve through interactions among actors, organisations, networks, and support services, there is growing interest in approaches capable of capturing structural, functional, and transformative dimensions of change, including learning processes and innovation pathways.

A human-centred perspective is particularly relevant in this context. Education, extension, advisory, and innovation support services are ultimately shaped by the people who generate, share, adapt, and apply knowledge. Understanding how individuals and organisations learn, collaborate, and build capacities is therefore essential for assessing the functioning and evolution of AKIS and their contribution to farmers' livelihoods and rural development.

Purpose:

This subtopic invites abstracts presenting innovative frameworks, methods, and instruments for monitoring, evaluation, and assessment within AKIS. We seek contributions addressing systemic change, learning pathways, innovation processes, and the functioning of AKIS, while placing people, relationships, and learning processes at the centre of evaluation activities.

Particular attention will be given to approaches and metrics for assessing knowledge flows, collaboration dynamics, inclusiveness, transparency, and the quality of advisory, education, extension, and innovation support services. Contributions exploring how evaluation can capture the tangible effects of AKIS approaches and education, extension and innovation support on farmers' livelihoods, rural communities, and rural economies are especially welcome.

We also encourage reflections on how monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices can inform policy development, adaptive management, organisational improvement, and the empowerment of AKIS actors. Studies applying research impact pathway frameworks and other approaches that support resilient, inclusive, and transformative AKIS are particularly encouraged.

For evaluation methods and assessment frameworks, we invite papers that draw on, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- How can monitoring, evaluation, and learning approaches capture qualitative, human-centred, and transformative dimensions of change in AKIS?
- Which frameworks, methods, and indicators can effectively assess AKIS functioning, knowledge flows, collaboration, inclusiveness, transparency, and the quality of advisory, education, extension, and innovation support services?
- What evidence and methods can demonstrate how AKIS, education, extension, advisory, and innovation support contribute to farmers' livelihoods, rural communities, and rural economies.
- In what ways can transparency in the evaluation of advisory services strengthen trust, empowerment, organizational improvement and adaptive policy planning?

- How can monitoring, evaluation, and learning (including research impact pathway approaches) support adaptive management, organisational learning, policy development, actor empowerment, and more resilient, inclusive, and transformative AKIS?

Topic 6: Agroecological transitions and change in the food system

Context

The transition to agroecology presents a complex set of critical tensions between environmental sustainability goals and the economic viability of the rural economy. As the agrifood system modernises, navigating these trade-offs requires more than just technical adjustments; it demands knowledge, tools, and facilitators to identify and manage conflicting interests while ensuring the long-term attractiveness of the farming business.

In addition, agroecological transitions take place within highly diverse socio-economic, institutional, cultural and ecological contexts. Experiences from Europe, North America and the Global South reveal different challenges, pathways and forms of innovation, while also offering opportunities for mutual learning and knowledge exchange. Understanding these diverse trajectories is essential to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and to identify how agroecological principles can be adapted to different farming systems, territories and development contexts.

Purpose:

This subtopic explicitly addresses agroecological transitions and their intricate relationship with both local and global agrifood systems. We seek abstracts exploring the practical management of trade-offs between environmental goals and rural livelihoods, with a strong emphasis on the role of education and extension in facilitating transitions to resilient, shock-viable systems.

This topic embraces a holistic **One Health** perspective. We specifically invite contributions that address the human and systemic elements of **animal husbandry, mixed farming systems, regenerative agriculture** and the development of robust **short food supply chains**.

In alignment with our human-centric theme, abstracts should explore how advisory and innovation support services can bridge the gap between policy-level green goals and practical farm-level implementation. We particularly welcome contributions on co-creation and transdisciplinary approaches, including those developed through Living Labs and other collaborative spaces, that bring farmers and other actors together to develop context-specific solutions, test alternatives and navigate the challenges of agroecological transitions.

We encourage papers that highlight the footprint of leadership and the role of independent agents in navigating these transitions. We seek works that demonstrate how facilitators can support farmers and rural actors in finding their passion within the transition, fostering energised relationships that ensure the future of agriculture is as socially resilient as it is ecologically sound.

For systemic food transitions and trade-off management, we invite papers that draw on, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- How can extension facilitators and educators help farmers practically manage the critical tensions and trade-offs between environmental goals, economic interests and rural livelihoods?
- How do short food supply chains and local food networks contribute to the social and ecological resilience of agrifood systems, and how can extension support them?
- What role does a One Health perspective play in bridging the gap between national green transition goals and practical implementation in animal husbandry and mixed farming systems?
- How can transdisciplinary co-creation approaches, for instances supported in Living Labs and other collaborative spaces, support farmers and other actors in developing context-specific pathways for agroecological transitions across diverse regions?