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Executive Summary

This guide presents Participatory Visits to Sustainable Farms as a valuable approach to strengthening sustainable agriculture through peer learning and community engagement. Based on the experiences of the GrowLIFE project across mainland Portugal, it offers practical insights into how these visits can foster knowledge exchange between farmers and local actors such as consumer organisations, municipalities, and producer networks.

In the context of urgent challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation, Participatory Visits offer an opportunity to promote agroecological practices rooted in real-life experiences and adapted to local realities. These visits highlight the importance of collective learning, traditional knowledge, and cooperation in driving the transition to more resilient, sustainable food systems.

By sharing the tools and lessons learned from GrowLIFE's implementation of Participatory Visits, this guide supports other actors seeking to promote similar initiatives in alignment with EU priorities such as the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy.

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms *3*

Glossary *4*

Preface *5*

Introduction *7*

1. What are participatory visits? *8*

2. Organising participatory visits *9*

2.1 Why organise participatory visits? 9

2.2 Planning a participatory visit- general considerations 9

2.3 Logistics and Safety 12

3. Secondary (but Relevant) Elements and Criteria for Planning Participatory Visits *13*

3.1 Territorial Considerations ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

3.2 Suggestions for the Staff Responsible for Guiding the Visit (Host Farmer and Facilitators) 13

3.3 Stakeholder Considerations 14

3.4 Practical Checklist for Organizing Participatory Visits 14

4. Follow-up and Verification: Methods for Evaluating the Quality of Visits *16*

4.1 – On-site Visitor Surveys 16

4.2 – Post-Visit Surveys 16

4.3 Interviews or Focus Groups 18

4.4 – Interviews with Key Visitors 19

4.5 – Feedback Between Hosts and Guides 19

4.6 Internal Team Evaluation 20

4.7 – Regular Meetings 21

5. Success Stories *23*

6. Additional Resources *25*

6.1 Organizations Promoting Sustainability 25

6.2 Links to Sustainable Tourism Platforms 25

6.3 Educational Materials to Deepen Understanding of Sustainable Practices 25

6.4 Further Reading and Useful Links 25

7. References *27*

8. Annexes *29*

List of Acronyms

AECID: Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation
ATTRA: Appropriate Technology Transfer to Rural Areas
BIO: Integrated Operational Biodigester
GAP: Good Agricultural Practices.
TE: Technical Evaluation
FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
UNWTO: World Tourism Organization
PAE: Organic Agriculture Program
PV: Participatory Visits

Glossary

Syntropic agriculture: Syntropic agriculture (also known as successional agroforestry) is a regenerative form of cultivation developed by Enrst Gotsch. Syntropy mimics the natural regeneration processes of forest ecosystems, integrating principles of ecological succession, vertical stratification and cooperation between species, increasing production and regenerating the soil and the agro-ecosystem.

Agroecology: It constitutes a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously brings together ecological and social principles in the design and management of sustainable agricultural and food systems. Its objectives are (a) to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans, and the environment, and (b) to build socially just food systems, in which people are free to decide what they consume, and where and how their food is produced. Agroecology is a science, a practice, and a social movement. In recent decades, it has evolved from a perspective focused on the productive domain — the agroecosystem — to a broader vision that encompasses the entire food system. Today, it is shaped as a transdisciplinary field that integrates ecological, sociocultural, technological, economic, and political dimensions, from production to consumption. (Adapted from FAO, 2018)

Agroecosystem: an ecological system modified and managed by man, whose main objective is agricultural production. In other words, it is an ecosystem in which biotic components (such as plants, animals and microorganisms) and abiotic components (such as soil, water and climate) combine to produce food, fiber and other agricultural products.

Agroecological practices: sustainable techniques that optimize resources, improve soil fertility and conserve biodiversity, while reducing environmental impact. They include crop rotation, organic fertilizers and biological pest control.

Nature-based solutions (NBS): approaches that take advantage of natural processes and ecosystem services to tackle environmental, social and economic challenges. This involves protecting, restoring and sustainably managing nature, obtaining multiple benefits and caring for natural resources. In essence, these solutions enable more resilient and sustainable systems.

Preface

Dear readers,

We are pleased to welcome you to this guide, designed to strengthen the connections between farmers and communities through Participatory Visits (PVs) that foster engagement with sustainable agriculture across different regions of Portugal.

At the GrowLIFE project, we firmly believe that the future of agriculture and food depends on active collaboration among all actors involved. In this context, the role of farmers is central to safeguarding and ensuring the food sovereignty of their territories.

The European Union (EU) is facing significant biodiversity loss in agricultural landscapes, caused by intensive farming practices that negatively impact pollinator insect and bird populations. Soil degradation, resulting from erosion, compaction, and contamination, compromises both productive capacity and ecological stability. In addition, agriculture accounts for around 10% of greenhouse gas emissions, mainly due to soil management and the use of synthetic fertilisers.

Climate change is intensifying extreme weather events, affecting European agriculture and, specifically, productivity in Portugal. In this context, promoting agricultural sustainability is essential to ensure food security and support the well-being of rural communities. The EU has recognised this need by implementing regulations that balance agricultural production with biodiversity conservation.

Against this backdrop, promoting sustainable food systems has become urgent. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) introduces incentives for agroecological practices such as crop rotation and soil conservation, aiming to improve soil structure and reduce erosion. Initiatives like the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy seek to reduce emissions linked to the transport of agricultural products and encourage more sustainable practices.

The GrowLIFE project aims to promote sustainable farming practices and the creation of collective learning spaces, supporting farmers in adopting ecologically sound measures without compromising their economic viability. This methodological guide, developed with farmers, seeks to share concepts that facilitate exchanges around sustainable practices, encouraging dialogue and awareness-raising.

We thank the farmers who share their knowledge and all participants willing to learn and contribute. Together, we can be agents of change in the transition toward a fairer, more inclusive, and more sustainable agri-food system in Portugal.

Thank you for being part of this initiative!

We hope this guide will inspire and support all those who wish to value and share their knowledge with their peers.

With appreciation,

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Introduction

In the European Mediterranean region, agricultural landscapes are diverse and the result of centuries of interaction between humans and the environment. However, these ecosystems face challenges such as water scarcity and biodiversity loss, which are being exacerbated by climate change.

Agriculture is a complex system involving knowledge, practices, and relationships between farmers, communities, and other local actors. Transforming this sector requires strengthening networks for learning and interaction. In this sense, the adoption of sustainable farming practices calls for spaces where producers can exchange experiences and knowledge, and access new strategies to improve the sustainability of their production systems.

Participatory visits are an innovative and effective strategy to promote learning-by-doing and knowledge sharing. They consist of organised gatherings between farmers and key territorial actors — such as municipal representatives, consumer organisations, or producer groups — who come together on the farm of a host farmer. These visits are grounded in practice, open dialogue, and mutual learning among farmers and local stakeholders. This approach promotes horizontal knowledge exchange, where farmers not only acquire new techniques and methodologies but also share their own knowledge — knowledge that reflects the local context and expresses the biocultural memory of the territories.

This memory includes knowledge, practices, and values developed over time, integrating traditional know-how and collective experiences in the management of ecosystems and biodiversity.

Participatory visits are designed to address specific challenges — such as sustainability, efficient resource management, or the adoption of new technologies — through concrete, real-life examples. This helps to stimulate the agroecological transition and reinforces the connection between ancestral knowledge and contemporary innovations, promoting production systems that are more resilient and in harmony with the territory.

The essence of this methodology lies in its practical and collaborative nature. It enables farmers to directly observe implemented solutions, encouraging the adoption of good practices and fostering innovation in their own farms. Furthermore, these visits strengthen local networks and create an environment for collectively confronting challenges. They allow farmers to share solutions adapted to the specific conditions of the Mediterranean climate, such as water use techniques, soil conservation strategies, and crop diversification.

By addressing the specific issues of the European Mediterranean region, participatory visits contribute to the transition towards more sustainable, innovative, and resilient agricultural systems.

1. What are the Participatory Visits?

Participatory Visits to Sustainable Farms are field visits carried out on "reference" farms, with the aim of showcasing various practices for the sustainable management of natural resources, integrated within agricultural, forestry, and animal husbandry systems. The main goal of these events is to enable farmers, key stakeholders, and participants in general to learn about sustainable practices, so they can implement them in their own productions, promoting a transition to more ecological agri-food systems with a lower ecological footprint in their territories.

These visits can take place on both conventional farms — exploring opportunities for transition to more sustainable models — and on farms that already apply sustainable practices, in order to deepen their implementation.

Participatory visits are part of an iterative process of joint learning (peer-to-peer learning), which seeks to validate the experience and knowledge of farmers who have undergone transitions to sustainable production systems using clean production techniques, such as:

a) Reducing and/or eliminating synthetic pesticides.
b) Soil management and conservation techniques to reduce wind and water erosion.
c) Production of ecological biopreparations for pest and disease management.
d) Incorporating functional diversity in crop design and planning.
e) Managing ground cover as green manure.
f) Local sales systems.
g) Management of organic and non-organic waste.

In addition, one of the goals of participatory visits is to actively involve participants in learning about natural resource conservation and sustainable management using agroecological practices, as well as to introduce knowledge on how these contribute to the agroecological transition of working agroecosystems.

One of the main strengths of participatory visits lies in their design, which incorporates participatory methodologies facilitated by organisers, with the direct collaboration of the hosts.

Adopting these methodologies allows the integration of activities targeting consumers, fostering networks and awareness-raising, and promoting local consumption and markets. In this way, the visits are not only intended for farmers but also include other territorial stakeholders.

2. Organising participatory visits

2.1 Why organise participatory visits?

Participatory visits offer multiple benefits for both hosts and visitors. One of the most prominent is outdoor education — in the field and through direct interaction with farmers. This feature makes the visits a space for sharing practical knowledge and real-life experiences in agriculture, offering learning that goes beyond theory and focuses on applicable solutions.

Host farmers can teach specific techniques they have successfully implemented, such as the management of multiple crops, irrigation methods adapted to soil characteristics, and natural strategies for pest and disease control. They can also demonstrate the preparation and use of organic fertilisers, the design of agroforestry systems, and the integration of sustainable practices that boost productivity without compromising the environment, while making the most of their local conditions.

Another benefit of these events is that they promote collective learning, giving participants the opportunity to exchange ideas, ask questions, and discuss innovative approaches to shared agricultural challenges. Participatory visits also help reinforce the idea that education is a pillar for building more resilient, sustainable, and community-connected agricultural systems.

They also encourage conscious and responsible consumption, as these experiences inform visitors about the origins of the food they consume, and the processes involved in its production. By observing how products are cultivated, visitors can gain a deeper appreciation for agricultural work and the value of local, seasonal, and sustainable consumption. This awareness can, in the long term, help promote short supply chains.

Finally, the visits raise awareness of the real costs of agricultural production, highlighting the importance of fair payment to farmers and the reduction of food waste. They also stress the importance of working towards a circular economy that benefits everyone. Through these visits, purchasing is understood as a conscious act of solidarity.

2.2 Planning a participatory visit- general considerations

NOTE: It is essential to register the entire activity. On the day of the event, it is crucial to have an attendance sheet for signatures, where participants can sign, authorize photographs, and receive relevant information about the project and/or the activity after the participatory visit.

a. The first step is to clearly define the educational objectives of the activity, based on the most important aspects of the farm and what is intended to be showcased. This involves identifying representative and relevant agricultural processes or techniques to highlight to the visitors. It is essential to prioritize meaningful, practical activities to ensure that visitors acquire useful and applicable knowledge.

The interests and knowledge levels of the target audience should also be considered to tailor the visit's topics and ensure a valuable learning experience.

b. The itinerary of the activity should be designed to provide an organized, educational, and engaging experience. The tour plan must include key stops, highlighting the most relevant areas of the farm so that farmers and participants can retain "key ideas" to internalize and apply in their own agroecological practices

   Activities should be participatory and hands-on. Some examples include seed sowing and harvesting workshops or demonstrations on the use of farming tools and preparation of organic fertilizers. It is also important to integrate educational content, such as informational panels and printed guides, to complement the educational work carried out by the organizing team.

   The use of materials that minimize the environmental impact of the visit is recommended, including proper waste management, responsible use of water and energy, and the promotion of practices that respect local biodiversity. This not only reinforces the educational message but also makes the visit a tangible example of sustainability.

c. Scheduling a participatory visit is crucial, as it can determine its success. It depends on factors such as seasonality, weather conditions, and the availability of resources on the farm. Although it is advisable to visit farms during peak agricultural activity (spring and/or summer), this is usually not the ideal time for farmers, as the high demand for labor and their dependence on seasonal harvest and delivery schedules make them less available for the experience.

   Ideally, participatory visits should be scheduled during periods of low agricultural activity to allow full availability of farmers and to observe the agricultural cycle from its early stages. Thus, the most suitable times for visits are late summer, autumn, and winter. In some cases, the ideal period can be extended to early spring, depending on the characteristics of the territory where the visit takes place.

Figure 1: Ideal Dates for Participatory Visits

In late summer and autumn, one can observe the end of harvests, soil preparation, crop transplanting, annual calendar tasks, crop planning, green manure sowing, and stubble incorporation; while during winter, it is possible to observe and perform pruning, grafting, and sowing practices, among others.

During autumn, winter, and early spring, it is ideal to carry out visits in the morning, with a maximum duration of five hours. This helps avoid excessive cold and humidity and ensures that farmers and facilities are well prepared to welcome the group. If the visit takes place in late summer, it is preferable to conduct it in the late afternoon.

d. It is important to consider the availability of materials and resources necessary for carrying out the planned activities, including tools, protective equipment, supplies, and educational materials. It is advisable to prepare a detailed list of resources to be used and make it available to the organizing team. Proper planning of the schedule and resources ensures that the visit runs smoothly, is relevant, and enriching for both organizers and participants.

e. Choosing the appropriate locations for the activities is crucial to ensure safety, comfort, and the effectiveness of the visit. The following areas should be considered:

   i. **Discussion and learning area** (e.g., for PowerPoint presentations): Provide chairs, electricity access, and equipment to project a presentation about the activity, program, photos, etc.
   ii. **Refreshment area:** This space should have coffee, drinks, water, lunch and/or general food available. It is also recommended that this area be conducive to interaction among people to facilitate idea exchange.
   iii. **Tour route and hands-on activity area:** The route must be pre-studied and walked with the farmer before the event. It should be conducted in areas that allow comfortable movement, with paths wide enough to easily accommodate the group. Appropriate signage should be incorporated throughout the route, such as arrows, signs indicating waste disposal points, restricted areas, caution zones, etc. (see Annex). It is also necessary to provide explanatory materials at the points where specific activities will take place. For example, at a composting activity stop, there should be educational and didactic materials explaining the procedure, duration, cycle, steps, etc.

Finally, the needs of participants, such as mobility limitations must be considered, to ensure an inclusive experience in every sense. Safety of people, spaces, and animals must also be prioritized to ensure a secure and comfortable experience for all participants, while maximizing the educational impact of the visit.

2.3 Logistics and Safety

A crucial step in organizing participatory visits is ensuring that all logistical aspects are carefully planned to guarantee a smooth and accessible experience.

If the organizing team is responsible for transporting participants to the farm, shared vehicles should be arranged from nearby meeting points. If participants are making their own way to the site, the organization must ensure that signage along the route is clear and easy to follow.

Accessibility should also be taken into account, by checking for level paths or alternative routes that allow full participation in the activities. Other logistical considerations—such as the availability of parking areas, clean restrooms, and rest spaces—should also be anticipated to ensure visitors' comfort and satisfaction. Good technical execution strengthens the professionalism of the event and builds participants' trust.

Each type of farm has specific features that must be considered during visit planning. On crop farms, it is essential to protect crops from potential damage during the visit by setting clear boundaries for visitor movement and marking sensitive areas, such as newly sown or experimental plots. On livestock farms, animal welfare must be ensured by restricting access to certain areas and explaining basic rules for interacting with animals. In mixed farms, activities should be designed to balance both crop and livestock components, ensuring that each receives appropriate attention without compromising overall safety.

An environmental risk assessment should also be carried out, especially for potentially hazardous practices such as the use of heavy machinery. A first aid kit must be available on-site.

It is necessary to ensure that activities comply with local regulations and promote sustainable practices, such as proper waste management and the protection of natural resources. It is also essential to highlight the positive impact on local biodiversity, while minimizing disturbance to sensitive habitats. By integrating safety and environmental care into all stages of planning, the visit ensures a responsible experience aligned with sustainability values.

3. Secondary (but Relevant) Elements and Criteria for Planning Participatory Visits

3.1 Suggestions for the Staff Responsible for Guiding the Visit (Host Farmer and Facilitators)

The success of a participatory visit largely depends on the preparation and performance of the staff responsible for guiding the participants. Guides or facilitators are not only the bridge between visitors and the experience but are also responsible for ensuring that the activities are educational and engaging. Their training, interpersonal skills, and positive attitude are key elements in creating a rich and memorable experience.

Typically, facilitators, including the host, possess solid and well-grounded theoretical and/or empirical knowledge of the topics to be addressed. As a starting point for the visit, it is important that the host/facilitator provides context on the historical background of the site, its ethnographic characteristics, local ecology, cultural traditions, and the functioning of the region's agri-food system.

Facilitators should be knowledgeable in agroecosystem management—from cultivation techniques and sustainable practices to interactions with natural resources. They should also have group management and communication skills, using clear language adapted to the different knowledge levels of the visitors. The ability to convey information in an understandable and engaging way is crucial to capturing participants' interest and ensuring learning.

The guide should also be capable of making the visit dynamic, transforming it into an interactive experience through open-ended questions, guided discussions, and brainstorming exercises. For example, during a crop tour, the guide could ask visitors about their own experiences with plants or food, encouraging constructive dialogue. This interaction not only makes the visit more interesting but also enriches the learning process by incorporating participants' perspectives and knowledge. Thus, guides must be able to create an atmosphere of trust, where visitors feel comfortable and safe to share their opinions and ask questions.

Empathy and adaptability are fundamental qualities for a guide, as each group of visitors is unique and may present different expectations, rhythms, and needs. It is important for guides to be sensitive to the group's characteristics and to adjust their methods, the type of explanations they provide, the time allocated to each activity, and the overall intensity of the visit accordingly. For example, a group of young students may need more dynamic activities, while a group of farmers may prefer to focus on more technical discussions.

Lastly, guides should be prepared to handle unforeseen events, such as sudden changes in weather conditions or unexpected questions, while maintaining a positive and proactive attitude. This flexibility ensures an inclusive and satisfying experience for all visitors, regardless of their background, interests, or prior knowledge.

3.2 Stakeholder Considerations

Identifying local stakeholders and involving them in the participatory visit process is crucial. Their participation in joint activities with farmers, consumers, and members of the municipality allows these actors to get to know one another, interact, and discuss issues that affect them all.

It is important to integrate key stakeholders from the territory, ideally in a proportion of 3 to 5 individuals within a total group of 20. These stakeholders may include policymakers, activists, sustainability promoters, kitchen managers (chefs and procurement staff) in schools and hospitals, restaurant owners, consumer group leaders, producers, etc., as well as various local community members who can play a vital role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of these activities. Their participation ensures that the visits are relevant, inclusive, and aligned with the needs and expectations of all involved.

As a preliminary step to organizing the participatory visit, it is essential to map and identify the stakeholders. This involves holding initial meetings with the farmer or farm owner and their network of contacts. Actively including these actors in the planning of the visits can significantly enhance their positive impact, as they are well acquainted with the territory and its communities.

Similarly, the local community can provide cultural and social perspectives for the planning of the visits, suggesting ways to integrate local traditions or promote community values during the activities. Including stakeholders throughout the entire visit process also enables the collection of direct feedback, helping to identify areas for improvement and opening up new opportunities for future activities. This inclusive approach fosters positive relationships among stakeholders, strengthens social cohesion, and supports a model of sustainable community development.

3.3 Practical Checklist for Organizing Participatory Visits

- Carry out a detailed assessment of the physical space available for the visit activities. Evaluate the size of the area, terrain conditions, and its capacity to host groups of visitors without compromising safety and comfort, considering a maximum of 20 people.

- Do not exceed the maximum of 20 people per group, as this allows for a steady and dynamic pace during the farm tour. It also ensures that everyone can hear and see the explanations clearly and calmly throughout the activity.

- For practical activities, it is always better to divide the main group into smaller teams of 5 people to form working groups.

- Have an indoor space that can comfortably accommodate these 20 people.

- Provide a space for final discussion, evaluation, and facilitation exercises, where participants have the opportunity to express themselves and take part. They

should be given sufficient time to discuss and present solutions and/or ideas that contribute to improving the territory and/or group work.

An example of the time allocation for a participatory visit is the one used during the implementation of the GrowLIFE project, in which each visit has a maximum duration of five hours, distributed as follows:

- Welcome activity and participant introductions
- Explanation of the program and distribution of materials
- Guided tour by the host farmer
- Coffee break
- Presentation of key concepts and possible projections related to the observed/shared work

In a context where technology plays an increasingly important role, its strategic use can significantly enrich the experience of participatory visits. Tools such as mobile apps, audio guides, or augmented reality systems can provide additional information, allow visitors to explore specific details at their own pace, and complement the host's explanations. However, it is crucial that these technologies do not replace or interfere with direct interaction, which is one of the main strengths of these activities. Technology should be viewed as a support—not a substitute—to promote dialogue and collaborative learning.

4. Follow-up and Verification: Methods for Evaluating the Quality of Visits

To carry out the evaluation process of participatory visits and determine their effectiveness and impact, it is essential to have tools that collect information on the perceptions, experiences, and suggestions of the various stakeholders. Below are some key methods for conducting this evaluation.

4.1 On-site Visitor Surveys

Surveys, administered during or at the end of the visit, are a simple and direct way to gather participants' opinions. Ideally, each person should have the opportunity to share their experience by answering questions about what they liked, what they would change, and how useful they found the activity. To obtain better-quality responses, it is recommended to mix closed questions (with answer options) and open questions (requiring a written response).

4.2 Post-Visit Surveys

Alternatively, surveys can be sent out a few days after the visit. This allows participants more time to reflect on what they learned and how the visit experience impacted them. These surveys can be sent via email or through online platforms, which makes participation easier and helps to collect a larger number of responses.

Survey 1: Example of a Post-Visit Survey

Dear Visitor,

Thank you for participating in our participatory visit. To help us improve future experiences, please take a few minutes to complete this survey.

1. **General Information**

   Date of visit:
   Type of visitor:
   - Student
   - Farmer
   - Professional sector: _____
   - Other:_____

2. **Visit Evaluation**

   a. Overall organization of the visit:

      - Excellent

- Good
- Fair
- Poor

b. Quality of information provided:

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

c. Interaction with the team (host and facilitator):

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

d. Infrastructure and Equipment

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

3. Visit Content

a. Which topics were most interesting to you?

- Crop management
- Irrigation techniques
- Use of agricultural machinery
- Sustainable practices
- Other: [_____]

b. Do you consider the information received to be useful for your work or personal knowledge?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

4. Overall Satisfaction

a. Would you recommend this visit to others?

- Yes

- No

b. How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the visit?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

5. Comments and Suggestions

a. What aspects do you think we could improve?

b. Additional Comments:

Thank you for your time and your feedback. Your input is very important to us.

4.3 Interviews or Focus Groups

Organizing individual interviews or focus groups with a segment of visitors offers a deeper understanding of their experience. This method allows us to explore specific topics, such as learning dynamics or areas for improvement, and to gather more detailed information than what can typically be obtained through a survey.

Focus groups, in particular, encourage the exchange of ideas and enrich the analysis, making them a strong option for evaluating the impact of the visits.

The main differences between the two methods are presented below, based on the texts by Aaker (1990) and Dias (2000):

Factor	Focus Group	Individual Interview
Group interaction	Interaction is present and stimulates new ideas.	There is no group interaction, as the interview is only between the interviewee and the interviewer.
Influence	Responses may be "contaminated" by the opinions of other participants.	There is no influence from other people.
Controversial	Some participants may feel	As long as the interviewee feels

issues	uncomfortable in the presence of several strangers.	comfortable with the interviewer, it is easier to talk about controversial topics one-on-one.
Amount of information	It is possible to gather a relatively large amount of information in a short time and at a relatively low cost.	A large amount of information can be obtained. However, this requires much more time and higher costs.
Scheduling	It can be difficult to coordinate the schedules of many people.	It is much easier to schedule individual interviews.

Table 1: Differences in the methods of evaluating participatory visits

4.4 Interviews with Key Visitors

Interviewing selected visitors, such as experts or representatives of relevant stakeholder groups, provides a specialized perspective on the quality and impact of the visits. These participants often hold technical or professional insights that can help organizers refine and improve activities according to higher quality standards.

4.5 Feedback Between Hosts and Guides

Hosts and guides are a valuable source of feedback, as they interact directly with visitors and are in contact with their reactions in real time. Collecting their input allows for an evaluation of their perception of the success of the activities and helps identify the challenges they encountered during the implementation. A simple way to structure this feedback according to the activity carried out is presented in the following table.

Feedback Aspect	Description	Example Questions or Indicators
Preparation and logistics	Evaluate the planning and suitability of the resources and infrastructure used during the visit.	• Were the resources ready and in good condition? • Were the scheduled times in the itinerary followed?
Technical knowledge	Assess the depth and clarity of the content presented by the guides and hosts.	• Was the host able to answer the visitors' questions? • Was the content relevant and appropriate for the target audience?
Communication skills	Evaluate the clarity, enthusiasm, and interpersonal skills of the guides in their interaction with visitors.	• Was the information provided clear and easy to understand? • Were practical examples used to explain concepts?
Group management	Observe how the dynamics of the visitors were managed, promoting participation and keeping the group engaged.	• Was active visitor interaction and participation encouraged? • Was the group's time managed effectively?

Sustainability and ethics	Evaluate the commitment to sustainable and ethical practices during the visit.	• Were sustainability protocols respected? • Did the host promote respect for the natural environment?
Adaptability	Measure the host's ability to adjust the program in case of unforeseen events or group needs.	• Was the host flexible in the face of last-minute changes? • Was the host able to meet the visitors' needs in a personalized way?
Attitude and empathy	Analyze the level of friendliness, respect, and empathy shown toward visitors.	• Were the hosts available and willing to help? • Did the visitors feel welcome and appreciated?
Direct feedback	Integrate the hosts' opinions and observations on the overall development of the activity.	• What aspects of the event could be improved? • What was the perceived level of group satisfaction?

Table 2: Validation Criteria and Descriptive Indicators for Hosts

4.6 Internal Team Evaluation

One of the practices that contributes to the success of visits is the regular assessment of the performance of the team responsible for organizing them. This process involves analyzing aspects such as the clarity of explanations provided to participants, the ability to engage the group, and group management skills. This evaluation should be constructive—that is, it should focus on identifying opportunities for improvement and reinforcing best practices.

Evaluation Aspect	Description	Key Indicators or Questions
Technical Knowledge	Assesses the team's preparedness on the topics addressed during the visits.	• Does the team have a good grasp of the relevant concepts? • Are they able to answer visitors' technical questions?
Communication Skills	Analyzes the team's ability to convey information clearly and effectively.	• Was the communication clear and appropriate to the audience's level? • Were practical examples used to explain the ideas?
Group Management	Observes how individuals manage group dynamics and encourage participation.	• Did the group remain engaged and interested throughout the activities? • Were the scheduled times followed?
Attitude and Empathy	Assesses staff availability to attend to visitor needs and interpersonal relations.	• Was the team friendly and respectful? • Did they show interest in

		participants' concerns?
Adaptability	Evaluates the ability to deal with unforeseen circumstances and adjust activities to the group's needs.	• Were effective adjustments made in response to unexpected changes? • Did the team handle critical situations well?
Compliance with Protocols	Verifies whether the staff followed the established safety and sustainability regulations.	• Were safety measures adopted during the visit? • Was respect for the natural environment promoted?
Teamwork	Analyzes coordination and collaboration among team members responsible for the visit.	• Did the team work cohesively? • Was there a clear distribution of roles and tasks?

Table 3: Key Aspects of Internal Evaluation

4.7 – Regular Meetings

Holding regular meetings between organizers, guides, and other involved parties is an effective strategy for analyzing the outcomes of visits, sharing learnings, and planning adjustments. These meetings should be based on data collected through the methods described above and should be oriented toward problem-solving and innovation. This collaborative approach ensures that the entire team is aligned with the objectives and committed to continuous improvement.

Meeting Aspect	Description	Key Questions or Activities
Meeting Objective	Define the specific purpose of the meeting, such as performance evaluation, discussion of improvements, or planning future activities.	• What is the main objective of the meeting? • What outcomes are expected by the end?
Frequency	Determine the regularity of meetings (monthly, quarterly, etc.).	• Is the frequency sufficient to address important issues? • Does it align with activity cycles?
Key Participants	Identify members who should be involved, such as hosts, guides, support staff, and coordinators.	• Are all key decision-makers invited? • Are representatives from different roles included?
Predefined Agenda	Prepare an agenda with topics to be covered and distribute it in advance to participants.	• Does the agenda cover all necessary aspects? • Was it distributed with enough time?
Review of Indicators	Analyze the main indicators related to participatory visits, such as visitor satisfaction and operational efficiency.	• Have the established objectives been met? • Which indicators reveal areas for improvement?

Space for Feedback	Provide participants with the opportunity to share experiences, concerns, and suggestions.	• What aspects worked well? • What problems were identified?
Problem Solving	Discuss and propose solutions for challenges identified during the visits.	• What concrete actions will be implemented to solve the problems?
Planning Next Steps	Establish clear and responsible actions for the upcoming period.	• What tasks were assigned and to whom? • What are the deadlines for these tasks?
Minutes and Follow-up	Document agreements reached and ensure follow-up for future meetings.	• Were clear notes taken on agreements? • Will there be follow-up at the next meeting?

Table 4: Considerations for preparing Participatory Visits to Sustainable Farms

5. Success Stories

Participatory visit programs have proven to be effective tools for educating, inspiring, and connecting visitors and farmers with the realities of agricultural, livestock, and forestry operations. Through carefully designed activities, these visits not only promote learning but also raise awareness about the importance of sustainable practices and strengthen ties between rural and urban communities. Below are examples of successful cases and activities that stood out for their impact, starting with the participatory visits carried out under the GrowLIFE project.

Over the first two years of the project, we have organized participatory visits to farmers in various regions of Portugal. To initiate these visits, we selected a group of 15 certified organic producers (hosts) who are partners of the GrowLIFE project. Thanks to their involvement, we were able to organize events where participants could directly observe sustainable agricultural practices, covering a range of crops such as vegetables, legumes, fruit trees, vineyards, and berries.

These experiences have been deeply enriching and transformative. In each one, we co-constructed the narrative and defined the key aspects to highlight, allowing other farmers, visitors, stakeholders, and the general public to witness firsthand the agricultural cycles and the core practices of organic farming and agroecology.

During the participatory visits, each farmer (host) shared the strategies they use to optimize local resources, addressing various relevant areas such as composting, seed saving, green manures, and ecological pest and disease management. These practices not only strengthen the sustainability of their production systems but also promote autonomy and resilience in crop management, helping to mitigate the effects of climate change on their operations.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of these visits was the enthusiasm and appreciation of the participants. Their deep interest in this kind of activity and in gaining a firsthand understanding of agricultural cycles was evident. These experiences also fostered collective learning and the creation of highly enriching dialogue spaces. At the end of each event, the conversations among different local actors were productive and forward-looking. These exchanges facilitated interaction between farmers, municipal technicians, consumers, and other key players, generating an important flow of knowledge, encouraging the formulation of proposals, and stimulating the search for joint solutions to territorial management challenges—all of which contributed to greater cooperation and community well-being.

At an organic vegetable farm in Spain, a program was designed in which visitors took part in practical activities such as seed sowing, manual irrigation, and pest identification without the use of chemicals. They also had the opportunity to learn about crop rotation and how it improves soil fertility. This program not only educated participants about organic farming practices but also fostered a deeper appreciation for the human effort involved in growing organic food. At the end of the visit, participants received a small basket of fresh produce, reinforcing their experience with a tangible takeaway.

Another noteworthy example took place in Brazil during participatory visits in forest environments. In a tropical forest reserve, a program was implemented to teach local communities and tourists about reforestation. Participants learned about local biodiversity and planted native trees, becoming active participants in ongoing environmental recovery efforts. The program included guided walks, birdwatching, and workshops addressing the importance of forests and their role in mitigating global warming. This initiative had a significant impact, directly involving visitors in conservation actions and educating them on climate change, local biodiversity, and the value of reforestation.

In other parts of the world, such as Bolivia, World Bank-supported initiatives focused on sustainable farming practices like crop diversification and soil conservation. These allowed visitors to learn firsthand how such strategies improve food security and the quality of life for producers. Similarly, in the Peruvian Amazon, community forest programs were developed that combined participatory visits with educational workshops on reforestation and sustainable forest resource use. These experiences were promoted by organizations such as the ACTO (Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization).

A comparable case comes from the Maule region in Chile, where agritourism programs have been developed to allow visitors to interact with small-scale local producers, participate in harvests, and learn about the production of goods such as wine and olive oil—helping to promote the value of traditional farming culture.

Many of the successful itineraries described in this guide regularly implement programs that combine educational and hands-on activities with recreational events. These cases and activities demonstrate how participatory visits, when well-designed and executed, can fulfill educational, social, and environmental goals while also strengthening the bond between producers and consumers.

6. Additional Resources

To enrich participatory visits and promote deeper learning, it is essential to have supplementary resources that provide relevant information on sustainability and responsible practices. These resources not only broaden participants' knowledge but also amplify the educational impact of the visits, reinforcing values such as conservation, environmental responsibility, and sustainable tourism.

6.1 Organizations Promoting Sustainability

There are numerous international, national, and local organizations dedicated to promoting sustainability and responsible development. These institutions can provide materials, training programs, and even collaboration opportunities. Notable examples include the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which advances sustainable agricultural practices, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which works to preserve biodiversity. Locally, agricultural cooperatives and rural development associations can also be valuable sources of support and information. Including references to these organizations during visits raises awareness of their work and connects participants to broader sustainability networks.

6.2 Links to Sustainable Tourism Platforms

Sustainable tourism is a powerful tool for raising awareness and supporting local development without damaging natural or cultural resources. Prominent platforms in this area include Travelife, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), and EcoTourism.org. These platforms offer guides, certifications, and tools for integrating sustainability into tourism activities. Providing participants with access to these platforms can inspire them to apply sustainable tourism principles in their own travel experiences, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

6.3 Educational Materials to Deepen Understanding of Sustainable Practices

Learning should not end with the participatory visit. It is crucial to encourage participants to continue exploring the themes covered. Providing educational materials, like brochures, guides, videos, or links to digital resources, can help cover topics such as waste management, regenerative agriculture techniques, energy efficiency on farms, and biodiversity conservation. Additionally, recommending books or documentaries can inspire participants to further explore covered topics or delve into new ones. Making these resources available promotes ongoing engagement with sustainability beyond the visit itself.

6.4 Further Reading and Useful Links

1. **"Visiting Exchange Visits: Advice to Maximize Impact"** (FAO): https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f0b63b6-6eee-44bd-8d19-2fd613cc429a/content

2. **“Manual of Participatory Methodologies for Agroecological Initiatives”** (Onda Rural): https://ondarural.org/ondarural.org/manual-de-metodologias-participativas-para-iniciativas-agroecologicas
3. **National Agroecology Network** (Brazil): https://agroecologia.org.br/

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8. Annex

Signage Posters