Guidelines for Protocols of Integrated Production of Vegetable and Fruit Crops:  
an Introduction

One of the objectives of the project “Improvement of Fruit and Vegetable Yields through the Diffusion of Sustainable Productive Systems”, which is financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Law 84 for projects in the Balkan area) and implemented by the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari of the CIHEAM in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro, is the preparation of the Guidelines for Protocols of Integrated Production for 11 Vegetable and Fruit Crops.

These protocols aim at improving the fruit and vegetable yields through the implementation of the EU standards in the project countries. The application of systems for the product evaluation has become necessary in order to face the competitiveness of the agri-food products in the international, European and national markets. Such competitiveness is connected both with the ability of the farms to respond to the new demands by improving the crop technology, the farm management, reducing the production costs, and with the necessity to better the production quality to meet the consumers’ needs who are increasingly concerned with the healthiness, wholesomeness, the nutritive value and traceability.

For these reasons, it is necessary to better use the means that allow guaranteeing the consumers on the basis of clear and comprehensive objectives. Besides, the adoption of particular systems of traceability could make the supply of agri-food products more reliable and credible, and to ensure producers and consumers about the achieved quality.

To pursue this aim, the implementation of the chain quality system, with the certification of the production processes and produce, establishes an indispensable route for the qualification and improvement of the production.

However, the certification requires that the procedure to obtain a product be clear enough and determined in order to characterize the critical points to be checked. In this regard, the project tries to bring a different philosophy in the project countries in order to achieve the integrated production of vegetable and fruit crops, starting with some important crops for the project countries such as peach, cherry, apple, plum, wine grape, olive, tomato, sweet pepper, cauliflower, melon and potato. The ‘protocols of integrated production’ of these crops are a model for other crops to be adapted and distributed in different administrative regions of the project countries; they have to be considered as a ‘guide document’, presenting the technical standards to be implemented by the farmer. These standards comply with the EU legislation and their implementation increases the marketing opportunities of products from the project countries towards the EU markets, to better respect the environment, etc.

The Protocols Guidelines are mainly addressed to the extension officers who work in the field of public and private sectors, allowing them to control the agriculture production in the area by means of these regulations. They provide indications on the soil-climatic requirements and cropping techniques in order to obtain a product typical of the area. The protocols highlight the good practice to be adapted to different areas and farm typology as well as obligations, to make products certifiable and marketable.
The protocols guidelines report environment-friendly cropping techniques which aim to improve the farm budget, the quality of production; they tend to minimise the use of synthetic chemical products, to increase safety for the environment and the human health.

The protocols of integrated production must be continuously updated and adapted to field experiences, to market needs and to the cultivar and agronomic innovations.

The present protocols result from teamwork of the MAI-Bari experts and of the project countries; at the same time they are also a collective work carried out in each country, where an institutional dialogue with the farm operators has started.

As approved by the 2nd Steering Committee Meeting of the project “Improvement of Fruit and Vegetable Yields through the Diffusion of Sustainable Productive Systems” held at the MAI-Bari in December 2004, the MAI-Bari team has to draw up the basic protocol specimen for 11 vegetable and fruit crops and namely: tomato, sweet pepper, melon, cauliflower, potato, wine grape, cherry, peach, plum, apple and olive.

The protocol guidelines for each crop are based on those available for the integrated crop production in some Italian regions (e.g. Apulia, Basilicata, Emilia Romagna); they were translated into English by MAI-Bari and afterwards sent to the country coordinators, who, in collaboration with their special teams, translated the material in the local languages, organised their discussion with country specialists and adapted the protocols initially to the soil and climatic conditions of one or some regions for each project country. The complete protocols were sent back to the MAIB coordinating group and on this bases have been prepared their discussion in special meetings between the representatives of the MAIBari and country teams. Finally, they were approved, translated and published at regional or country level in the project countries.

The protocols then were approved by the mixed group (MAI-Bari and country team representatives). The content of the protocol guidelines were presented/introduced to the farmers during the special training activities scheduled in each country from April to October 2005.

The end-objective of the work with the PIP is that, in a near future, similar and official protocols be prepared also for other typical and most important agricultural regions of the project countries, a common practice in the EU countries. On the basis of this experience the work for the preparation of the Guidelines for Protocols of Integrated Production could also be extended to other crops by the country teams in collaboration with the research centres and the regional and country authorities.