

# **Presentation of the European Network for Rural Development and its Contact Point**

[Original version: French]

**By Mr Sousa Uva, Director for horizontal aspects of rural development, DG AGRI – European Commission. Cyprus, 17 October 2008.**

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be able to confirm that the European network for rural development is now functioning.

This network is new but its development and origin are based on the history of European Rural Development Policy. In the previous programming periods, exchange and cooperation networks had already been created between Local Action Groups. These networks contributed significantly to promoting the exchange of good practices, transnational cooperation and innovation between these stakeholders of the LEADER Initiative.

## **Why and with whom should one network?**

Currently, the need to share experience, information and connections between stakeholders is even greater. The European Rural Development Policy focuses on the agri-food economy, the environment and the broader rural economy and population. Thus, it consists of three axes of intervention, as well as a transversal methodological axis, the Leader axis. This policy will have to face the enormous challenge, which consists in contributing in a decisive way to competitiveness and sustainable development in the following years. And in order to do so, it involves numerous stakeholders in the rural world and public authorities at various levels.

That is why this European Rural Development Network will be a very extensive network in terms of expertise but will also be very structured. It will cover all the axes of European Rural Development Policy and bring together all the stakeholders concerned by this policy.

The role played by national networks will be fundamental given that their mission also is to support European Rural Development Policy. The European network will also rely on the authorities responsible for the management of rural development programmes, European organisations that are involved in the rural development sector and also the Local Action Groups of the Leader axis that will contribute their know-how, which is essential in terms of local development.

## **What are the challenges and the objectives of this new network?**

The size of the network reflects the size of the challenges it faces. This network was not conceived simply for organising meetings between the partners of European Rural Development Policy.

First of all, it will have to provide real incentives for achieving the objectives established within the framework of the Community strategic guidelines for rural development, which have been defined by the Council in 2006.

It will also have to highlight the added value of supporting rural development.

By drawing on lessons from experience on the ground, this will assist decision-makers to make the choices that are still to be made when implementing their strategy and their rural development programme. The simplicity of the procedures for beneficiaries, and also the development of synergies with other European funds intervening in rural areas will become on-going concerns for the network, in order to guarantee its fundamental objective which will be to optimise the efficiency of our policy.

### **How will this be achieved?**

Obviously, in order to achieve this objective, an efficient framework for the exchange of information between all network partners will be necessary.

- In effect, the network should facilitate the diffusion of best practices that are most likely to achieve the strategic objectives defined, as well as to lower the obstacles encountered during implementation of the policy.
- It should constitute a platform for dynamic exchanges between the European Rural Development Policy stakeholders from the various EU countries.
- It should also give the Commission the result of on-site information, and vice versa, relaying from the Commission the orientations and operating needs associated with rigorous policy management.
- Finally, it should ensure timely information on policy debates. Specifically, this information should allow the activities of the network to evolve with respect to these policy debates.

Of course, all these exchanges suppose close discussions with the national networks, national authorities, the stakeholders in the rural world, Local Action Groups and Brussels. Their representatives will form the Coordination Committee for the network, which will also have a Leader sub-committee. One of the basic challenges of the implementation of this network will precisely be to benefit from active participation by the partners of European Rural Development Policy.

This is because, apart from the establishment of a framework of information exchange, the European Rural Development Network will have another mission: it will have to carry out a number of common analyses and develop expertise at European level, based on the strategies and on the rural development programmes for the period 2007-2013. The exchange of information will thus be completed by an analysis carried out by thematic working groups and groups of experts, which will allow identifying common problems and common solutions.

The work of the network will be closely coordinated with the activities carried out within the framework of the European Evaluation Network. The latter will support evaluators responsible for the evaluation of the 2007-2013 programmes. Coordination between these two networks will allow continuous exchange of information in view of exploiting the respective results in a way that will further improve the elaboration and the implementation of rural development policies.

### **What will the operational instrument of this network be?**

Given the range of tasks, our network will be equipped with an animation unit that will be the real worker of the network and known as the “Contact Point”. Perhaps you have already had the chance to meet its representatives here, during the conference. This Contact Point is an external Consultant of the Commission selected in order to implement this framework of information exchange and to provide the support that is necessary for the analysis work. Let me mention some of the services that it will propose so that you are able to assess the means placed at the disposal of the European network for rural development.

- First of all, the Contact Point will offer a whole series of information and communication tools. These include publications such as newsletters, magazines, special issues on best practices, and thematic publications. There will also be a website with purely informative sections in various languages and also more interactive and thematic sections, reserved for organisations or persons interested in a specific subject. The site will also offer search engines, for instance for examples of good practices or LEADER projects.
- Secondly the Contact Point will have a pool of experts at its disposal that can be mobilised in order to participate in various common analyses, for example for thematic groups or for the analysis of the programmes on the basis of indicators foreseen within the framework of the common evaluation and monitoring framework.
- Thirdly, this Contact Point will support transnational cooperation between Local Action Groups in order to facilitate the search for partners and offer permanent information on the progress of project selection procedures, to assist those preparing transnational cooperation projects.
- Fourthly, it will ensure close coordination with national networks through direct contact, common meetings between national units and regular consultation in order to match the activities of the European network with the needs at national level. Of course, the Contact Point will also act as the secretariat for the various entities of the network, such as the Coordination committee, the Leader sub-committee, and will be the organiser of seminars and conferences.
- Finally, I will end this list with an example of a specific service that, nevertheless, is particularly important: the promotion of the European network for rural development. Among its responsibilities, the Contact Point will indeed promote and represent this network at various meetings or conferences, where information on the activities of the European Rural Development Network will be requested.

I would encourage you, if you have not already done so, to meet the people representing the Contact Point team who are here.

### **The organisational chart of the European Rural Development Network.**

Before continuing and describing the thematic activities planned for this first year, I would like to present the entire organisation of our network, which allows me to summarise briefly.

*In this chart, you will find the national authorities, national networks and organisations that are active at European level, which are also represented at the two coordination bodies: the Coordination Committee and its Leader sub-committee. You will see that the Commission, in particular DG AGRI, will work with the support of the Contact Point, whose services are described here in a more detailed way. Finally, you will see that a number of thematic*

*groups will work jointly with the other activities of the network and will report their results to the Commission – and the coordination committee. Ad-hoc groups of experts will also be able to provide additional support for analysis and expert work. The last arrow simply indicates that the results of the work carried out by the thematic groups will be used as information and in the activities of the network in general.*

*I believe that this chart presents in the most comprehensive way the structures and the principles of operation of the network, even if it may appear a bit complicated. Necessarily, there will be multiple links and this multiplicity of links will rapidly become a source of enrichment.*

### **What is the work plan for the first year?**

As I said before, I now wish to talk about the specific activities foreseen for this first year of operation of the network. We have already organised the first meeting of the Coordination Committee, on 1<sup>st</sup> of October, and the preparation of the annual work programme for the network has progressed a lot.

First of all, this will involve preparing and implementing the activities of the Contact Point progressively. This will last for the time needed to make the necessary choices guaranteeing total functionality of the backbone of the network.

On the other hand, we are going to set up thematic working groups: two very soon, then one or two later on, still perhaps in 2009. Their mission will be to prepare a specific analysis in less than 2 years on the basis of ongoing rural development programmes. The first two groups will work respectively:

- on “targeting territorial specificities and needs”, that is how to ensure, through the European Rural Development Policy, and through programmes, an efficient targeting of the specificities and needs of the territories; and how to ensure that these interventions will favour a balanced development of Europe’s rural areas.
- and on the “links between agriculture and the broader rural economy”, by analysing the relations between agriculture on the one hand and the rural economy on the other.
- At a later date, a third group could look into the public goods generated in the rural areas and the way in which public intervention facilitates their maintenance and development.

In order to support these groups, and the work of the network in general, a group of experts on “governance and delivery mechanisms of the European Rural Development Policy” will be created as soon as possible. This will be a group of expertise that will base itself on the lessons learned from the implementation of the programmes, which will assist us in reflecting on future governance.

I wish to underline that these work themes have been chosen assuming that they will allow a common and multi-sectoral analysis and therefore, had to be preferably horizontal themes and not limited to a single axis of the Rural Development Policy. Their scope will be sufficiently wide to integrate the results of the analyses carried out by national networks and the experiences of Local Action Groups.

Of course, the common concerns studied by the European Network for Rural Development will evolve during the period 2008-2013. As the mid-term evaluation period approaches, or at the end of the programming period, the themes will be different. For these first few years we think that the thematic work groups should concentrate on operational issues which will

also be useful for the information needs concerning the implementation of the rural policy we will have in 2010. They will also have to contribute to the evaluation work that the Member-States and the Commission services have to carry out.

Finally, we have naturally made provisions for seminars in 2009. Until the results of the thematic working groups become available, it seemed to us that a certain number of subjects required reflection – at least an immediate one if not on a longer basis. Thus, 3 seminars are proposed:

- the first one, which will be very operational, will be mainly addressed to the national networks and will concern the implementation of networks, capacity building and the connections to the European network. We consider this seminar to be a priority and a pre-condition for commencement of the European network's activities. It will take place at the beginning of 2009;

- another seminar will concern innovation for responding to the new environmental challenges, such as climate change, the issue of energy resources and water management. Being clearly linked to the health check of the Common Agricultural Policy and the review of programmes for the integration of its priorities, it would be advisable to arrange this seminar during the first semester of 2009. Considering the extent of this theme and in view of the needs which will be expressed, this seminar could constitute the starting point for a thematic working group or a group of experts;

- finally, a third seminar on semi-subsistence farming is proposed. This form of agriculture will receive specific support from the EAFRD in some EU Member-States, more specifically in the new Member-States and needs to be carefully considered notably from the territorial point of view, from the perspective of its role in the rural economy and from the perspective of the public benefits it provides to society as a whole. Indeed, the solutions to the evolution of this structural reality need to be found. Our recurring concerns are apparent.

The experience and lessons learned from the use of other European structural funds available in rural areas will undoubtedly enrich the activities of both the seminars and the thematic working groups.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you for your attention. I sincerely believe that the means available to help exchanges between the stakeholders of the rural world will stimulate – as well as an efficient implementation of the European Rural Development Policy – a new creativity, a reinforced cooperation, and the acquisition of new knowledge. Each one of us will have to make his or her own contribution, to ensure the dynamism and the catalytic effect expected of this network. It will take us some time to implement the full regime. We will receive lessons along the way, since we all still have a lot to learn from one another in order to find better ways of making public governance most efficient, thus contributing to sustainable development in the Union.

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