10. The analysis and synthesis of evaluation theme 7: Networking

The MTE of the following MS contain information about an NRN: Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland (Aland Islands and Continental), France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales).

10.1 Topic 7.1: Identification of indicators used for assessing the progress of the National Rural Networks (NRNs)

10.1.1 Findings

The analyzed MTEs showed the presence of indicators for 12 networks in 11 member states including the MS with own network programmes (“NRNP-4”: Germany, Portugal, Spain and Italy).

Most of the indicators used in the MTE are output indicators, measurable in quantitative entities. They can be clustered alongside different topics:

- Public relation: e.g. new content in website introduced, number of leaflets, NRN participation at fairs
- Events (workshops/meeting/training courses): e.g. numbers of events, number of topics.
- Good practice: e.g. number of good practices identified and disseminated (sometimes in combination with a good practice web based project database)

For some indicators it is harder to decide, whether they can be categorized as output or result indicators. They represent the “use of the output”, which is somehow in a “twilight zone”. Examples for that are numbers of participants (events, workshops, etc.) or the number of visits on the NRN website.

Clear result indicators are mainly represented by the degree of satisfaction that participants/stakeholders feel with certain network activities or how useful these activities are perceived. A further kind of result indicators is for example used in the German NRN MTE, namely indicators on consultative support (number and type of answered inquiries).

The result indicators of Denmark and Estonia show a strong connection to Leader. In that respect the criterion for the assessment of the NRN was mainly the extent of contribution to LAG internal as well as LAG co-operation performance.
10.1.2 Judgement

Generally speaking, the indicators in use mainly reflect the “minimum tasks” of a National Rural Network in the sense of the EU Commission defined in article 68 of Reg. (EC) 1698/2005, which seem to represent the most objective and common understanding of RD-networking:

- “identification and analysis of good transferable practices and the provision of information about them
- network management
- the organisation of exchanges of experience and know-how
- the preparation of training programmes for local action groups in the process of formation and technical assistance for inter-territorial and transnational cooperation”

Yet, there are differences between the MS in the quantity and quality of their NRN indicators. Especially the MS with own NRN programmes (the “NRNP-4”) show a large variety of indicators which seem to have the capacity to go into the NRN system more deeply by representing output – result relations.

In many cases, indicators of the NRNP-4 offer target values, whereas some other MS use indicators in a more descriptive and fragmentary way to underpin network performance.

Although the indicators represent important tasks of networking, it is difficult to identify their ability to cover a holistic view of what can be seen as “the added value of networking”\textsuperscript{39}. Especially clear concepts on causal paths in networking (which output should lead to which result that contributes to which impact) seem not to be fully developed.

10.1.3 Conclusions

Evaluating networking performance is a complex issue. To unfold the potential of monitoring and evaluation indicators they should base upon an – at least simple – intervention logic, representing the interconnectedness between outputs, results and intended impacts of network activities. These impacts in turn should be connected to RDP objectives, for example in terms of how increased capacity of network members leads to more quality of life in rural areas. These causal paths should be formulated as hypotheses that can be tested via self-assessment tools respectively ongoing evaluation.

Developing and using an intervention logic and the corresponding indicators would have three major effects:

- It provides a clear and retraceable structure of NRN strategies and activities and makes it easier to synchronize different expectations from MA, NSU (network support unit) and network members. When discussing networking “speaking the same language” is rather ensured.

\textsuperscript{39} “added value of networking” refers to an initiative of the ENRD Contact Point.
This indicator hierarchy can function as a useful tool that helps the NRNs monitor their activities (between ex-ante ⇒ mid-term ⇒ ex-post). This can enable further developments of activities by testing, if the initially formulated “hypotheses” on output ⇒ result ⇒ impact relations prove true or false. In that respect it is not only possible to judge if the NRN generated (or not) results or impacts but also why or how.

help NRNs communicating the “added value of networking” and their role within the rural development system (see Topic 3)

Due to the diversity among networks (roles, tasks, structure, etc.) and the ongoing methodological discussion (mainly concerning NRNP-4) on EU level it is questionable, if it is useful to standardize the intervention logic. This still needs further discussions.

10.2 Topic 7.2: Assessment of the different methodological approaches and tools used to evaluate the NRNs and assess the achievements

10.2.1 Findings

The following methods and combinations of methods could be extracted from them MTE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Presenting few indicators (numbers of events, best practise projects submitted and awarded, expenditures) and qualitative description of organisation and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE/Flanders</td>
<td>Interview with Rural network and workshop with provincial coordinators of axis 3, LAG-managers and MA of axis 3 and 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE/Wallonia</td>
<td>The evaluator has participated to the initial meeting of the Rural Development Network of Wallonia (WRN) in April 2009 and has based his assessment on the content of the newsletters and publications of the Rural Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CY</td>
<td>Tools used were output indicators (numbers of events, number of participants, expenditures) and qualitative description of organisation and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE/Network</td>
<td>MTE is based on the recommended programme specific output and result indicators defined and quantified in the Ex Ante Evaluation which was based on the LEADER+ Mid-Term Evaluation. In addition to the data gained from the questionnaires linked to the events/workshops the evaluator conducted a written survey with the programme coordinators of the RDPs’ Two methodological approaches: 1st, analysis of documents (incl. monitoring data) 2nd, expert interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK</td>
<td>Interviews with key persons, questionnaire-based survey, finding good-practice examples. Desk research of instructions, guidance notes and local development strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>Presenting expenditure data and a qualitative description (based on interviews, focus groups and panel discussions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES/Network</td>
<td>The methodology proposed included desk work and field work. The field work includes interviews with the managers and the managing authorities # different phases of the research are established: preparation, design, research, analysis, and conclusions # a triangulation evaluation strategy is used# the method uses top-down and bottom-up approaches in a complementary way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HU</td>
<td>LAG questionnaire (return rate above 90%), interviews, focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT/Network</td>
<td>The overall approach used by the evaluator is based on the consideration of direct and indirect results. In addition, the rationale behind it is threefold: based on i) utility; ii) communication and iii) participation. There are 5 main methodological approaches: i) structure of the evaluating system; ii) observation; iii) analysis; iv) judgement; v) spread of the results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table above shows the range of methods applied for evaluating NRN per programme. Amongst others they contain: content analysis of publications and newsletters, analysis of reports, interviews and workshops, questionnaire based surveys, focus groups and panel discussions, analysis of feedback sheets distributed at network events, process analysis. Sometimes these methods were used solely, sometimes in combination.

### 10.2.2 Judgement

It can be stated positively, that the MS approach the complex undertaking of evaluating NRN performance with versatile methods. Due to the limited possibilities within this MTE synthesis (without collection of additional data) it was not possible to retrace the interconnectedness of the different methods in detail. So it remains unclear if and how the methods were part of methodological “triangulations” or just implemented parallel and loosely.

The “investigative interaction with stakeholders and actors in the field” seems to be well balanced with desk work, as the Evaluation Helpdesk recommend in their “Working Paper on the Evaluation of National Rural Network Programmes” (2010). That offers a larger potential of identifying results of NRN activities than referring solely to output indicators.
Another noticeable fact in the methodological context is, that though there is a huge diversity in methods, it seems that the focus lies stronger on more “simple” ones. (Social) Network Analysis, for example, would have been a tool for assessing social capital between rural development actors but was never mentioned as used in the MTE. This methodological gap also limits the possibilities of drawing “the big picture” of networking.

10.2.3 Conclusions

Compared to other MTE themes where the CMEF often suggests the use of certain methods, the choice of methods for assessing NRN activities is more or less up to the evaluator. The same is true for the way, how the chosen methods are used. In that respect the current process undertaken by the Evaluation Helpdesk for evaluations of the NRNP-4 shows the limitations concerning the knowledge of “optimal” methodology and yet no clear suggestions can be made for (non-programme) NRN. So it is not possible to conclude on the different methods in use as such, but some aspects can be discussed: One factor that can be considered as being important for an “optimal” evaluation design is the cost/benefit ratio. The geographical expert for UK-England states on the methods applied:

“This was a reasonable approach to use, given limited resources”

That limits the possibilities for the use of more complex and often more expensive or time consuming methods, like the social network analysis.

In methodological terms the integration of subjective experiences with NRN work via interviews, focus groups, etc. can be seen as very useful and important part:

- it helps visualizing and measuring results that are related to changes that occur inter-personally (e.g. social capital) as well as intra-personally (e.g. enhanced knowledge via best practice).
- if impact categories are not pre-defined (what is currently mainly the case) it may lead to identify them in the function of an “explorative” research which in a further stage can be transferred into monitoring and evaluation indicators.

10.3 Topic 7.3: Summary of the problems/challenges that have occurred in implementing the NRNs

10.3.1 Findings

- **Inside and outside perception:** Some MTE showed, that roles and tasks of NRN are unclear or too broad (Poland, UK-Scotland, BE-Flanders, Finland) or the division of tasks at national level is scarce (Italy); Others described the level of knowledge about the NRN in rural areas as not fully developed (Slovenia, Latvia)

- **Network composition:** Problems with ensuring a certain degree of diversity in the network with regard to the representation of specific and relevant stakeholder-groups (Latvia, BE-Wallonia, Germany, Hungary). The Latvian MTE states for example, that the
participation especially from organisations outside the agricultural sector has to be strengthened.

- **Integrated networking:** Difficulties in enabling a cross-axes-networking/NRN focusing only on specific axes (UK-Northern Ireland, Estonia)

- **Lack of competences and resources** of both NSU-staff as well as network members (Cyprus, BE-Flanders), “particular constraints in relation to the ability of human resources” (Ireland).

- **Framework:** Late start due to delay in creating law and institutional capacity (Poland), late approval of budget and action plan (Hungary). In Lithuania for example only 0,1% of funds were allocated during the evaluation period.

- **Context specific challenges regarding the network structure:** e.g. complex structure (presidency elected by MA, secretariat elected by Minister) (Hungary) or unclear role allocation between the Managing Authority and the Cooperation Council (Network Advisory Board) (Latvia).

### 10.3.2 Judgement

The information in the MTEs do not provide clear patterns of problems and/or challenges and show a rather diverse picture that reflects more or less the broad variety of networks. Nevertheless unclear roles and tasks could be connected to the former mentioned sometimes vague images of aims and impacts of networks. Also an unbalanced network composition can result out of it, especially when the benefit resulting from network-participation is not tangible for certain stakeholder-groups and prevent them from joining the network.

### 10.3.3 Conclusions

It might be that some evaluators explored problems that also affect other networks but did not reach the surface there (possibly due to the chosen methods and/or indicators). So findings can be seen more as an exploration of possible problems than a comprehensive collection which is representative for all the NRNs. Anyhow the mentioned problems are a good possibility to get an idea of things that can complicate rural development networking and should be further examined and monitored, especially in the light of the allocation of roles and tasks between the actors.
10.4 Topic 7.4: Identification of the main impacts of the NRNs

10.4.1 Findings

The MTE information on impacts (seen in a broader sense) can be clustered in four main categories:

- **Experience/best practices and expertise are exchanged and distributed** via different media (publications, seminars/workshops, study trips…) (Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Germany, Estonia, Portugal-Network, UK-Scotland)
- **capacity of actors/partnerships is enhanced** (Belgium-Flanders, Spain-Network, Finland, France-Guyane, Italy-Network, UK-England, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales)
- **Awareness for RDP is risen** on different levels (Belgium-Flanders, UK-Wales)– Denmark for example speaks of a “local anchoring”, the MTE of UK-Northern Ireland mentions the general support of axis 3 delivery.
- **Networking and cooperation have been supported and improved** (nationally and/or internationally) (Cyprus, Spain-Andalucia, Finland, Hunger, Portugal-Network, UK-England)

10.4.2 Judgement

The identification and communication of good and transferrable practices seems to be well covered. In addition to that it should be highlighted that even capacity building and the support and improvement of cooperation were already being realized bearing in mind the often rather late starting time (see figure below).

**Figure 64**: Date when NRN started their work

![Graph showing the dates when NRNs started their work](http://enrd.ec.europa.eu)

Source: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu, compiled by author

All in all most of the “common NRN tasks” defined by the former mentioned Art. 68 Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 seem to generate different kinds of results and impacts, although – as already mentioned – a clear vertically connection (output – result – impact) as well as an attribution to RD-objectives is not always clearly retraceable. In the absence of clear and common judgement criteria for networking and due to a very heterogeneous way of evaluating and describing networking activities, a more elaborated comparison of NRN impacts does not seem practicable at that point in time.
10.4.3 Conclusions

Considering the indicators it seems, that the pictures of what an NRN is expected to do (in terms of basic outputs) are quite similar throughout Europe. But these pictures seem to become vague and heterogeneous when talking about what NRN are expected to achieve (in terms of results and impacts). It might be the case, that for this reason some aspects of networking might have not been measured. So if the “findings” do not include networking results/impacts of a special network it is not said that they are not there – they could have been simply been outside the evaluation focus.

10.5 Topic 7.5: Structured synthesis of the findings (conclusions and recommendations) in relation to NRNs

10.5.1 Findings

Some evaluators focused in their findings on if and how the planned outputs/results/impacts set in. In that sense many positive statements regarding successful information transfer and capacity building were made. Ireland for example, underlines the “value as a neutral forum”. Others placed more emphasis on recommendations: improving/extending NRN evaluation (Cyprus, IT-Network, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, UK-England), ensuring representativity of network members/motivation of new members (BE-Wallonia, UK-England), strengthening resources and/or competences within the network (BE-Flanders, Cyprus, France-Guyane), further clarification and/or communication of the role of the NRN (Cyprus, IT-Network, Finland-Continental, UK-Scotland), strengthening the role of the NRN (France-Ile de la Reunion) enriching the actions and improving the organization (Greece). Few concluded rather critical on NRN’s work/effectiveness (Hungary, Slovenia).

10.5.2 Judgement

The information from the MTE identified as “conclusions and recommendations” is diverse, equal to the topics above and rather fragmentary. The logic of “concluding” often differs between the MTE and provides a wide spectrum from rather outcome orientated statements to more general lessons learnt.