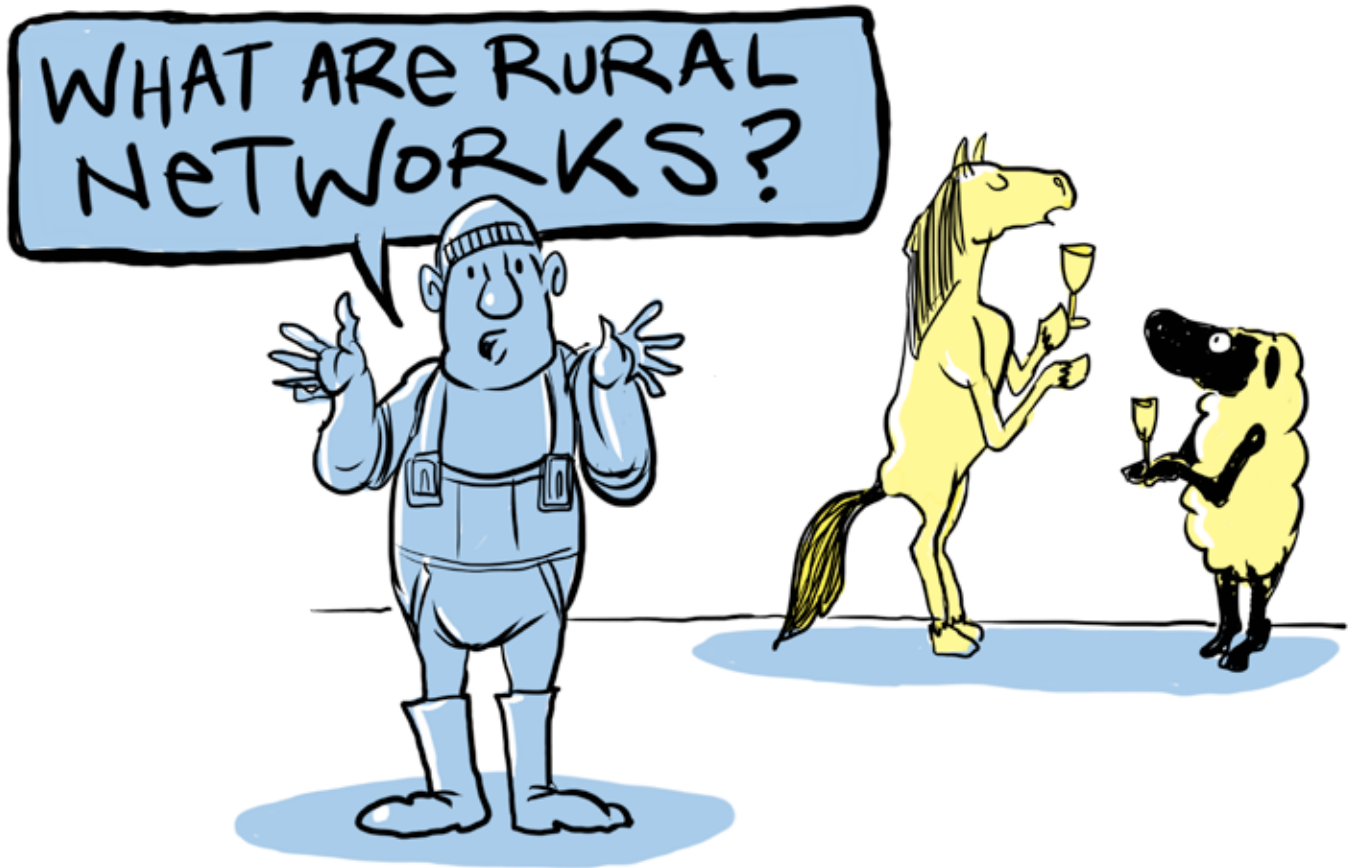# I. Introduction

1.1 What are rural networks and networking?

'Networks' and 'networking' play an increasingly important role in social, political and economic life. *"Whether in academic research, the popular press, government policies, corporate strategies, blogs or just day-to-day conversation, the term seems unavoidable."*[1]

Policy networks are set up in order to support the delivery of a policy (or several interrelated policies) by directly involving stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of that policy. These formally constructed policy networks are increasingly important for policy-making and governance and are recognised as powerful tools for helping to tackle many of the challenges faced by modern public policies. For example, it is thought that policy networks:

- deal rapidly and in a flexible way with complex issues, including those with an international dimension;

- involve a wide range of stakeholders in policy debates, increasing the quality and the acceptability of these policies;

- take advantage of information and communication technologies to extend the reach of policy-makers into the community.

Policy Networks

1   Ramalingam, B. (2011) *Mind the network gaps*. London: Overseas Development Institute: *http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7110.pdf*

Policy networks are widely used by the European Union (EU) and its Member States in many policy areas. They are considered to be particularly important for providing the flexibility required to deal with the wide diversity, and sometimes very fundamental differences that exist between administrative cultures and structures in the EU-28[2].

Rural Networks

Experience shows that networks are an effective means of informing, inspiring, and empowering local people in rural communities. By encouraging and promoting interaction between different rural stakeholders, rural networks facilitate and inspire learning, innovation, and the building of both human and social capacity based on the experience of others in the network.

"...involvement with rural networks provided users with a feeling of confidence when tackling a range of issues within their communities"

Carnegie Trust

According to the findings from Carnegie Trust research[3], *"rural development networks exist in order to improve the well-being, capacity and resilience of rural communities."* They do this by promoting interaction between, and action by, different rural stakeholders that facilitates the flow of information, the exchange of know-how, and the sharing of resources, all in the pursuit of rural development. This is a very important function that is described in academic terms as *"...the mobilisation of intangible intellectual assets through learning, innovation and the building of human and social capital."*

The Carnegie Trust study identified that the most important reasons for local people to access rural networks were to:

- receive advice and information;

- share local learning and experiences;

- develop creative ways to address local problems and needs;

- and identify sources of funding.

"...rural development is moving from a dependency culture to one that is about building on the strengths of local people and places. Networking is at the heart of this."

Nick Wilding, Carnegie Trust

Networks, networking & network support

All networks are built upon a **web of interactions** consisting of 'nodes' and 'linkages' where:

 i) the 'nodes' are the stakeholders (individuals / organisations) that form the membership of the network, and

 ii) the 'linkages' are the connections / relationships that exist between them. Some linkages can be stronger, others may be weaker.

It is less commonly understood that networks are **only structures that exist to support the process of networking** - where the process of 'networking' is clearly defined as *"...the sharing, exchange or flow of ideas, information, knowledge, practice, experience (and sometimes resources) between people and around a common interest, or opportunity, to create value"*.* Consequently it is often emphasised that it is not networks themselves that are important, but the information and inter-relationships that flow through them – the networking.

Network support secretariats/units are often in place to support the work of network members and the process of networking. By facilitating the flow of information, ideas etc. (in other words by networking), these secretariats help the creation of new 'linkages' or relationships between stakeholders, as well as the improvement of existing ones.

 * Gilchrist, A. (2009) *The Well-Connected Community: A Networking Approach to Community Development*. The Policy Press, Bristol, UK

2 ENRD (2012) *What do we know about Networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)? A Discussion Paper*: *http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/nrn-toolkit/01-DiscussionPaperonNetworking12_06_2012.pdf*

3 Miller, M., Wallace, J. (2012) *Rural Development Networks – A Mapping Exercise*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust: *http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/rural-development-networks---full-report*

Part of the challenge of developing a single definition of what a 'network' means in the context of rural development is that rural networks commonly vary in terms of:

- their **focus** – geographical reach, specific rural focus and specialist areas of expertise;

- the **nature of the work** that they engage in – including practical advice, support and lobbying functions;

- the **nature of their members** – individuals, communities, practitioners, organisations etc.;

- their **membership structure** – formal or informal membership, and;

- their reliance on **private / public funding** to cover operational costs.

""The successful implementation of rural development policy depends very much on the involvement of all the actors. Networking provides this opportunity for all the actors to be involved on a continual basis."

Rob Peters, DG AGRI

This diversity means networking in the domain of rural development policy becomes particularly challenging because of the huge number of rural actors and stakeholders, operating at different levels, from a multitude of different socio-economic contexts, and with a broad spectrum of needs, priorities, interests and expectations.
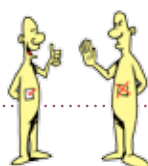
...beyond the technical definition of rural networking

Furthermore, there is something at the heart of rural networks that lies beyond a technical definition. Rural networks add value through the development of social capital; they have a strong sense of place, a shared culture and identity. Rural networks are built around this sense of belonging. They enable the creation and development of territorial and individual identity with the desire to improve the area that stakeholders are connected to, driving their involvement in rural networking[4].

Networking is a policy instrument within the framework of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) – known as Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Networks and networking, as well-established policy tools, have intensively supported the EU rural development policies implementation and their use has significantly increased since 2007.

Networking as a policy instrument for EAFRD

Prior to 2007, networks were primarily established to support the delivery of the LEADER approach. Two complementary levels of formal networking were established under both LEADER II and LEADER+ with national networking units (NNUs) established at Member State level, and a European networking unit – the LEADER Observatory – established at EU level.
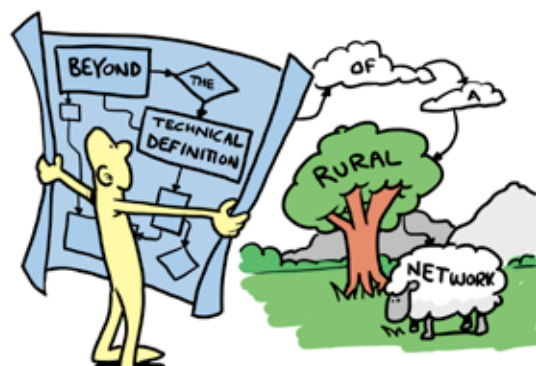

Do's and Don'ts

DON'T confuse or use as synonyms *Network Support Unit* (NSU) (that is a network secretariat) and *National Rural Network* (NRN) (that involves a wide group of stakeholders and relations among them).

"There is rarely a clear enough distinction between the network and its supporting entity. […] Too often the term 'network' is used to identify the mechanisms that support a network or link its members."

Source: Ramalingam, 2011

---

4   Castelloe, P., Watson, T., Allen, K. (2011) *Rural Networks for Wealth Creation: Impacts and Lessons learned from US Communities.* Asheville: Rural Support Partners:
     http://www.ruralsupportpartners.com/docs/RuralNetworksforWealthCreation.pdf

Experiences of networking through LEADER were very positive, with networking playing a useful role in stimulating new ideas and sharing the growing body of rural development knowledge and practice, whilst also contributing to the governance of the LEADER programmes. It was therefore decided to introduce networking as an obligatory activity into Pillar 2 of the CAP for the 2007–2013 programming period.

Did you know that...

...a total of over €515 million was committed to the operation of NRNs and the ENRD during the 2007-2013 programming period of which an estimated €268 million came from the EAFRD (less than 0.3% of total EAFRD funding) and €247 million from national co-financing.

Source: ENRD (2012) Rural Review No 14

According to Article 67 of the EAFRD Regulation for 2007-2013 *"Each Member State shall establish a* **national rural network**, *which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development."*[5] The regulation identified the need for structures to run the National Rural Networks (NRNs). Therefore **Network Support Units** (NSUs), formal top-down structures, were established in each Member State in order to act as network secretariats supporting the NRN members and facilitating networking.

With the aim of connecting even more stakeholders across Europe and *"networking of national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development at Community level"*, Article 68 of the EAFRD Regulation also identified the need to establish a **European Network for Rural Development** (ENRD).

In addition to the ENRD, there are several other examples of policy networks initiated by the European Commission. Apart from the formal top-down structures identified as necessary by the regulations, there are many different types of rural networks driven by a great variety of goals and objectives which are improving the well-being, capacity and resilience of rural communities around Europe by informing, inspiring and empowering local people on a daily basis. Section 1.2 provides further details about European and other rural networks.

1.2   Rural networks in the 2007 – 2013 programming period

During the 2007-2013 programme period networks at a European, national and regional level were established to support the delivery of rural development policy.

Networking at European Union level

There are several networks that operated during the 2007-2013 programming period at a European level with the three most relevant to the delivery of rural development policy being:

• The European Network for Rural Development

• The European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (Evaluation Expert Network), and

• The *European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability* (EIP-AGRI)[6] (from the end of the period).

The European Network for Rural Development

The core mandate of the *ENRD*[7] has been to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural development policy. Over the six years of its operation the ENRD has evolved from an initial top-down initiative, gradually maturing to engage a wider range of stakeholder interests, issues, needs and (changing) priorities. This evolutionary path can be described as a 'learning-by-doing' process involving various stages of development, with each stage building on the previous.

A *Contact Point*[8] (CP) was put in place in order to provide the European Commission's Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) with technical assistance in the framework for the ENRD. The CP is the support unit of ENRD. The main areas of CP activities have been:

---

5   Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005:
     http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0487:0548:en:PDF
6   European Innovation Partnership 'Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability':
     http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/index_en.htm
7   ENRD: *http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/*
8   ENRD Contact Point:
     http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/general-info/faq/about-the-enrd-contact-point/en/about-the-enrd-contact-point_en.cfm