

13 September 2013, Gdansk, Poland



With thanks to the Polish Rural Network for their hospitality and generous support of this training event

Getting Started

Welcome to the Notes and Observations from the fourth module of the ENRD network support unit (NSU) 'peer-to-peer' training programme. The training day was kindly hosted by the Polish Rural Network in Gdansk and organised back-to-back with the 19th NRN Meeting.

The theme of the training day was Network Resource Management – a highly relevant subject as work continues in the Member States on preparation of the rural development programmes for 2014-2020, including consideration of the structures and operational set-ups that will be used to deliver the expanded and strengthened role of the national rural networks in the next programming period.

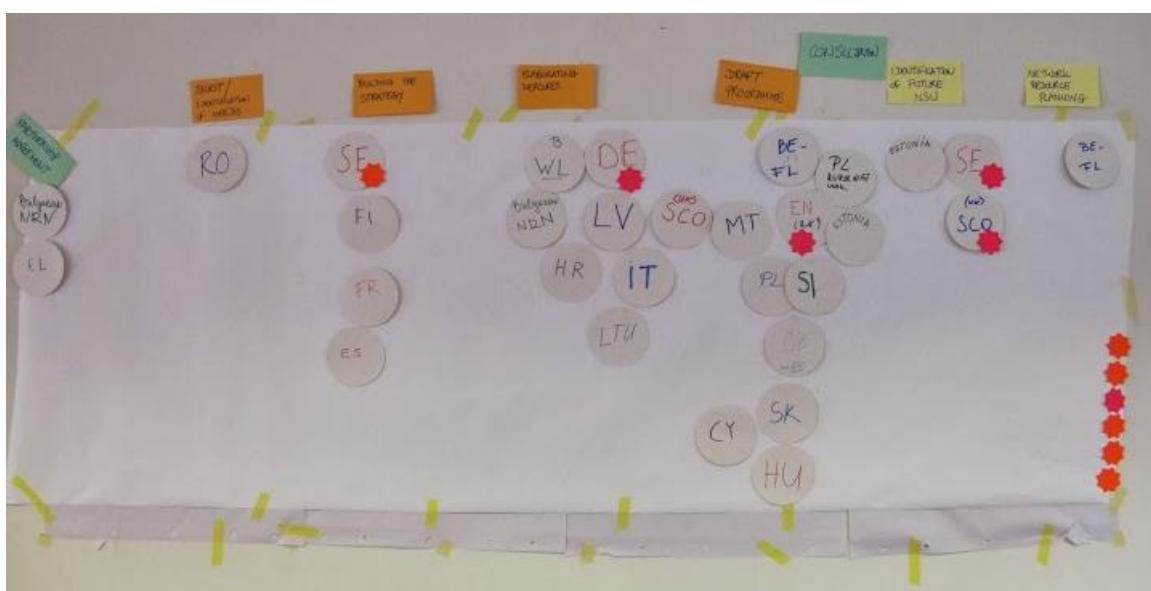
A total of around 60 people participated in the training from 24 networks, including the ENRD, 20 national networks and 3 regional networks.

The specific objectives of the training module were to:

- bring together representatives of national and regional NSUs to **share amongst themselves** existing knowledge and experiences about resource planning for NRNs;
- use a theoretical case study to **facilitate the development of deeper insights and group learning** regarding NRN resource planning for the forthcoming 2014-2020 programme period, and;
- **capture / harvest 'Expert Tips for NRN Resource Planning'** from participants for broader dissemination – notably via the NRN Tool-kit on the ENRD website.

The training programme can be found in **Annex 2**.

Taking Stock of Progress with Planning for 2014-2020



The day began by reviewing the outcomes of a simple exercise started the previous day during the 19th NRN meeting whereby the participants were asked to identify the relative progress with the programming of the 2014-2020 RDP (and therefore also the NRN) in their own Member State / region.

Using cards the progress with programming was marked against a series of milestones, including: SWOT Analysis / Identification of Needs; Building the strategy / intervention logic; Elaborating the measures (including NRN); Consultation; Identification of future NSU, and; Network Resource Planning.

This provided a 'quick' visualisation of the relative progress and provoked much discussion. The majority of Member States are at the stage of having a draft – or near draft – programme which is under (or close to being under) consultation. Many experiences were exchanged about the decisions that have been made regarding the future structure and role of the NRNs with at least 5 NRNs facing significant changes in their organisation and management.

Group Work: Resource Planning for a Hypothetical NRN 2014-2020

Participants were then divided into 3 mixed groups to undertake a theoretical case study. The aim of the case study was to **facilitate some deeper insights and group learning** regarding NRN resource planning for the forthcoming 2014-2020 programme period.

The instructions for the case study are in **Annex 3** – the key tasks were to:

- Prepare a **clear and simple** overview of the **key tasks / decisions** involved in resource planning (human and financial) for operationalizing an NRN for the first time, and;
- Prepare some **key recommendations** regarding the **optimal use of available resources** for setting-up and running this NRN.

One important consideration that participants needed to take into account when pursuing these tasks, was the decision that the network support unit (NSU) should be outsourced.

The results from the case study were inevitably contrasting and are summarised below.

Group 1



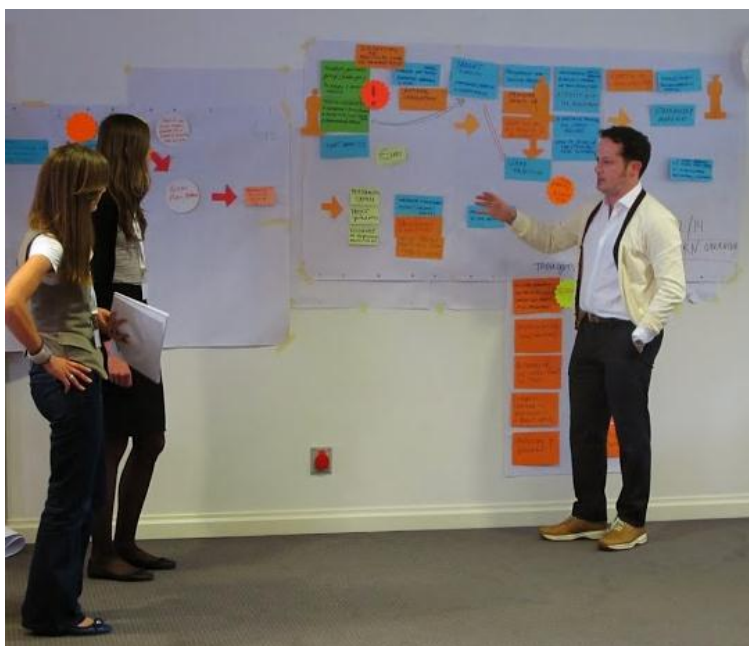
Group 1 began by defining the starting point for network resource planning as being well before the approval of the RDP. They focussed upon the **importance of good governance** of the early stages of network establishment and stressed the importance of i) establishing a Working Group as early possible within the Managing Authority, and ii) this Working Group leading the resource planning process

Key steps identified by the group for ensuring / underpinning effective resource planning of the hypothetical NRN were:

- Mapping and analysing different stakeholders and stakeholder groups
- Consultation with stakeholders to a) identify their needs and b) the network's potential to address these needs
- Clearly prioritisation of NRN tasks

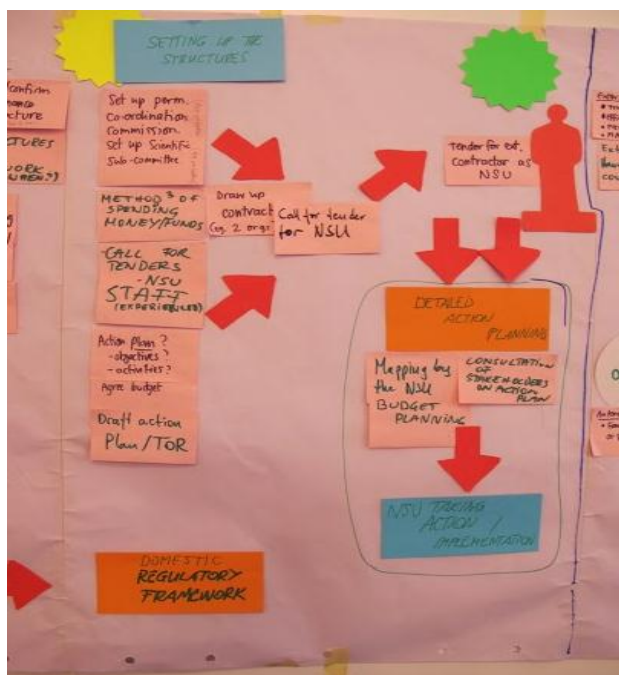
- Involvement of selected stakeholders in the governance of the network (e.g. a Co-ordination Committee)
- Ensuring clear terms of reference for the Co-ordination Committee
- Early establishment of a draft Action Plan
- Ensuring that public procurement procedures for the outsourced NSU progress smoothly – this requires well-defined tender specifications, early consultation with legal services, efficient evaluation / selection procedures etc. It was recommended that submission of an elaborated Action Plan should always be a requirement when inviting tenders.

Group 2



Group 2 took a **systematic approach** to identifying a series of recommendations for the establishment and resource planning of the hypothetical NRN. Their recommendations included:

- Discussions and agreement at political level regarding the network will greatly assist the subsequent management and success of the network
- Set-up a Working Group as early as possible to govern the establishment and resourcing of the network. Terms of reference and a “work plan” are important for this group – they should act upon a good understanding of the intervention logic for building-up the network. The Working Group should be proactive and have a clear mandate for decision-making and action. The Working group can be transformed in the Steering group for the NRN later on.
- Stakeholder mapping for the identification of priority target groups is an important and useful technique
- Public tenders for outsourced NSUs must be based on clearly stated objectives – the difference in form and function between the NSU and NRN must be understood
- Marketing and promotion of the NRN is always important, but especially so when setting-up a new network
- It's important to put in place a performance / self-assessment system to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the network – consider developing an indicator system. Use the ENRD and other networks to benchmark performance
- Activity planning must be supported by good budgeting
- Create a Communication Plan which defines i) to whom you send information and how you send it, and ii) activities to be implemented. The plan should clarify how to use stakeholders to reach desired objectives
- Always keep in mind the need for training and capacity-building of the NSU staff
- Consider twinning with other networks



Group 3 used a “mind-mapping” technique to create a **comprehensive overview** of the network resource planning process

Using this technique the **key tasks** identified for NRN resource planning were clustered under three main headings:

1. Strategic decisions regarding networking

A number of key strategic decisions are needed to provide a clear frame of reference for subsequent practical decisions about the NRN. Decisions and actions must be taken regarding:

- the network’s intervention logic
- the mapping of stakeholders and assessment of stakeholders’ needs – representativeness of stakeholders, coverage of the network, identification of gaps, relationship with other networks
- the communication plan and what stakeholder groups to target and with what messages
- the structure and governance of the network

2. Defining the NRN structures and governance

This will be influenced by factors such as the intervention logic, existing experiences of networking, domestic regulatory framework and commitment to meaningful participatory decision-making. In the case of this hypothetical NRN, specific issues include:

- Setting up both a Permanent Co-ordination Committee and a Scientific Sub-committee (in both cases, the mapping of stakeholders will help to identify potential members)
- Development of the Action Plan with an agreed budget
- Calling for tenders for the outsourced NSU – tender specifications must be well-defined to ensure that the contracted NSU provides the right level of skills and covers the relevant sectors

3. NSU specification

The NSU specification should be carefully detailed in the Call for Tender. It is recommended that defining the first year’s detailed action plan should be the role of the contracted NSU.

The group then offered some specific observations / recommendations / ‘cautionary advice’ for outsourcing the hypothetical NSU:

- The necessary staff time for MA management / supervision of an outsourced NSU will depend upon various factors and will change over time, but ‘typical’ provision for monitoring, regular review and amendment of plans is likely to be at least 0.5 to 1.0 FTE
- It is important to clarify and make strategic decisions about the autonomy of the NSU – what is the level of trust?

- Some specific concerns regarding budgeting are:
 - i) The need to ensure flexibility, whilst also adhering to the regulation (e.g. max % for Network running costs) and provide for accountability. The Italian plans are a good example of this. 24 month planning horizon. i.e. Main activities, level of activities, and human resources can be substantially changed between 2 year periods. Within each period performance can be measured.
 - ii) Clarifying what is (basic) running costs and what is specific activity dependent is very hard to define
 - iii) Annual budgets will change over time, not just as a result of identifying on a case-by-case basis needs and addressing them, but also structurally i.e. the balance of network tasks will change according to the – known – evolution of the programming period.



‘Expert Tips for NRN Resource Planning’

- Perfect Planning Prevents Poor Performance!
- Managing Authorities should try to be patient and flexible with their colleagues / contractors responsible for managing the NRN – it is not always possible to assess all the resources necessary for running the network, especially when establishing a rural network for the first time
- Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies need to accept that there is some degree of risk associated with the resourcing and management of rural networks
- Successful rural networks are fuelled by trust. Do not undervalue this important resource. Work to build and maintain trust at all levels of network operation
- New faces and new talent are also important resources. Do not always work with the same set of stakeholders, make sure that new perspectives enter the process through involving new stakeholders or new members of the same stakeholder groups
- Regularly review and revisit your actions, methods and resources
- Always consider the wider policy context in the course of planning your actions, methods and resource utilisation
- Carefully review the advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing in your OWN national / regional context - the efficiency and effectiveness of outsourced NSUs varies greatly. There are wonderful success stories and complete disasters!