

This series of informative fiches aim to present, in summary, examples of practices and approaches that EU Member States and Regions have put in place in order to implement their rural development programmes (RDPs) in the current period. These examples want to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in the delivery of the 2007-2013 RDPs and as far as possible, draw lessons in the view of future improvement of the programmes.

N. 02

Consultation process for the preparation of the national strategic plan and rural development programme in Austria



Needs addressed

The participatory consultation process carried out in Austria for the preparation of the national strategic plan (NSP) and the rural development programme (RDP) attempted to bring regional, national and EU strategic priorities into a coherent framework. In terms of programme design, it ensured coherence between strategic priorities and the distribution of funds among axes and measures.



Key elements of the approach

The Austrian ministry of agriculture coordinated a parallel consultation for the design of the NSP and the RDP. Participants included regional and local administration, economic, social and environmental stakeholders. The consultation process consisted of formal and informal procedures (web-based discussions, Dialogue Days, working groups) which facilitated the effective strategic orientation and targeting of rural development policy.



Lessons learnt relevant for the future

The participatory approach facilitated regional involvement in the definition of national strategic objectives, though some coordination difficulties emerged in the process. In the future, a wide consultation approach can facilitate the development of coherent development strategies and programmes, if pursued through a clear strategic vision and representative participation of rural stakeholders.



Context

A wide consultation process involving a very significant number of stakeholders was launched in Austria for the preparation of the National Strategic Plan (NSP) and the rural development programme (RDP). This approach was put in place for two reasons: from the strategic point of view it abides with the Community strategic guidelines which ask to take into account national institutional arrangements and, promote close collaboration of national authorities and partners (i.e. competent regional and local authorities, economic and social partners, and partners representing the civil society, NGOs and environmental institutions). Secondly such a participatory approach was considered as particularly valid for addressing specific characteristics of the national context, namely: i) the federal structure of the country (and the subsequent devolution of several jurisdictions) and; ii) the country's structural diversity, especially in rural areas. This participatory approach was replicated for the preparation of the RDP in order to achieve consistency and coherence with the NSP and also to ensure that the programming was both transparent and based on actual needs.



This approach addressed both strategic and administrative needs:

- from the strategic point of view, it facilitated coordination and convergence between development needs and priorities specific to different territorial levels (local, regional, national EU);
- from the administrative point of view, it ensured wide consultation among competent authorities and economic, social and environmental stakeholders whose role is usually more 'active' in a devolved administrative setting.

The preparation of the rural development strategy and programme in Austria involved an intensive and wide consultation approach with stakeholders. Such an approach was utilized to address different development needs and priorities in a manner which is compatible with the highly devolved institutional framework of the country.

Moreover, such participatory process allowed the NSP and RDP to reflect national and federal specificities concerning budgeting and co-financing and also encouraged to reach consensus among regional and national decision making bodies.



The consultation process

The preparation of the Austrian NSP was carried out by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management (BMLFUW). An initial draft of the NSP was formulated within the Ministry, and subsequently published on the Ministry's website for consultation. This **web-based discussion platform** (to which 700 persons were invited) accompanied a consultation process which was launched at an opening conference (November 2004) and then taken further during a series of four 'Dialogue Days'. These events involved between 200 and 400 participants each, and included stakeholders representing public bodies (national, regional and local level), economic and social partners, agricultural and forestry interest groups, civil society (NGOs), local initiatives (Leader LAGs and regional managements), science and research bodies, politicians and farmer's organisations. The consultation phase provided equal opportunity for representation of any stakeholder view, for consideration by the Ministry's preparatory **working groups**.

The draft NSP was discussed twice, a process which provided the opportunity for informal inputs and comments. A representative for the nine federal States, social partners, NGO from the environmental and the non-agricultural sector and the European Commission (EC) participated in these discussions. Later NSP changes -due to the CAP Health Check and EU Economic Recovery Plan- were discussed in the Monitoring Committee which includes 50 members representing around 40 different organisations.

The consultation process of the NSP partially overlapped with that of the national rural development programme as some of their components were fulfilled in the same period and in many cases involved the same participants. Consequently, rural development strategy and programme development in Austria were not really a consequential exercise. Rather the development of the RDP benefited from the NSP consultation process and vice-versa.



Consultation on the Austrian RDP effectively started in the November 2004 national conference, where possible programme elements were discussed in workshops. These were organized in accordance with the

priorities of the (then) proposed Rural Development Regulation (indicatively: investments, adding value to rural products, diversification in rural development, forestry, nature conservation projects, agri-environmental programme, etc.), supervised by responsible ministerial departments and coordinated by a steering committee. The working groups comprised of representatives of institutions and organizations in charge of programme implementation and delivery, economic and social partners (depending on theme) and of invited experts.

Working groups started off with an introduction of the baseline situation and a summary of relevant strategic considerations. Members were then invited to input their expectations, ideas and first development proposals (in the form of position papers), followed by a discussion to identify and prioritise the most pressing rural development needs. Their inputs were also influenced by past programme and measures experience, and as a result, existing programme data facilitated the design of measure packages agreed upon within the working groups. On this basis, inputs for the definition of the programme were elaborated and provided in accordance with requirements established by the chairing ministerial staff. Through this process, consensus on the focus of the 2007-2013 RDP was achieved relatively quickly.

Prior to and during the development of the NSP, the federal States held joint but informal thematic workshops so as to provide coordinated inputs to the Ministry in different draft stages of the NSP. In this way the federal level managed to propose efficient solutions regarding issues discussed in the working groups also in the RDP preparation. Where smoothly operated, these federal groups provided technical inputs and recommendations to ministerial 'equivalents',

based on prior and informally achieved consensus.

A federal state specific informal consultation group prepared inputs to the ministerial working group for the agri-environmental programme (ÖPUL). This consultation group was established in 2005, convened four times every year, and undertook intense preparatory efforts in close contact with the Paying Agency and BMLFUW.

A first draft of the RDP measures package was discussed in March 2006, while individual RDP chapters and measures were presented and discussed in an information event held in November 2006.

The strategic orientation of the Austrian RDP towards multifunctional, sustainable and competitive agriculture and forestry determined the allocation of RDP funds between priority axes. Ultimately, 72.5% of RDP funds were allocated to axis 2 and 13.4% to axis 1. Rural economic diversification and quality of life were pursued through the allocation of 7% and 5.3% of funds to axes 3 and 4, respectively.



Conclusions and relevant lessons

Consultation undertaken for the preparation of the rural development strategy and programme in Austria was a highly participatory process, driven by general consensus that promoted the convergence of regional, national and EU priorities. It also facilitated effective strategic orientation and improved targeting, as it combined territorial, sectoral and beneficiary concerns. The difficulty to separate the definition of the strategy from programme development suggested the need to adopt a transparent and 'innovative' approach. The consideration of the view of a wide range of stakeholders was a powerful element to support programming based on actual needs, and develop solutions to strategic issues. Finally, the participatory process proved to facilitate collaboration, constructive discussions –also of technical details- and consequently, reaching compromise in the preparation of technically sound planning documents.

This notwithstanding, in several cases the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders caused the discussion of relevant strategic elements to be compromised by a strong focus of the participants on very specific action points in support of their interests.

Overall, federal states and stakeholders expressed satisfaction on the approach adopted at national level. In the view of several federal states the orientation of the final NSP aligned with the needs identified at regional level and created a coordinated framework. On the other hand, the Austrian case highlights -in the case of a small and relatively centralised country- the possible difficulty in separating strategy from programme development. In this

respect it was suggested that combining the discussion of strategic priorities with the definition of implementing measure packages, would: ensure smooth transition in implementation between funding periods and; avoid delays that generate pressure on both implementing bodies and beneficiaries.



The Austrian approach seems to be relevant with several future orientations of rural development policy as outlined in the EC's legislative proposals for post-2013. The strategic element of the policy comes out reinforced in the proposed regulatory framework which: i) sets clearly defined common priorities for rural development at EU level, linked to the EU2020 headline targets and; ii) promotes the take-up and the fine tuning of such priorities at national level through the new instrument of the Partnership Contract. The wide and articulated consultation carried out in 2007-2013 offers in this respect a practice for future reference.

Also, the coordination of several funds in the scenario envisaged by the proposals can be effectively promoted through wide consultation practices and effective

participatory methods, as noted in the Austrian case. Such participatory procedures can also facilitate the development of coherent and effective local development strategies and partnerships.

Further, the design of strategically-coherent Partnership Contracts which embody regional and national priorities will benefit from wide stakeholder involvement -and especially from the participation of the regional level- in the definition of national strategic priorities. However, if such a process is not driven by clear agreement on the role of agriculture and rural development in each context, it could lead to strategies and programmes which are defined by the balance of interests of an expanding range of different stakeholders. As these interests could include non-rural priorities, only a representative participation of rural stakeholders would facilitate the consideration

of the needs of rural areas and serve their development.

A wide consultation with stakeholders should not only deal with local and regional needs, but also promote horizontal, 'cross-regional' policy priorities. This can be achieved through the adoption of a flexible approach depending on the existence of different institutional and administrative settings (e.g. centralised or devolved jurisdictions).

In the future, wide consultation approach as the one carried out in Austria can facilitate the development of coherent local development partnerships and strategies. However, such an achievement can only be pursued through a clear vision on the role of agriculture and rural areas and a representative participation of rural stakeholders in the consultation process.

Information included in this fiche is primarily coming from the case studies carried out within the ENRD Thematic Working Group 4 "Delivery of EU rural development policy". The fiche is compiled by the Contact Point on the basis of the information collected in the EU Member States and Regions and takes into account views expressed at the European, national and regional level. This notwithstanding, the content does not necessarily reflect the official position of the EU institutions and national authorities.