NRN Joint Initiative on Demonstrating the Added Value of Network

An Overview of the findings from the exercise on defining the "Common Network Statistics"

(as at April 2012)

Common Network Statistics

Introduction

Capturing the added value of networking continues to be a challenge, in part due to the diversity of networks and networking activity. The different context in which networks operate and the differing nature of their stakeholder groups often results in networks utilising a variety of networking methods and techniques. In order to overcome this and develop a better understanding, the NRNs launched the Joint NRN Action on 'Demonstrating the added value of Networking'. Part of this action has focused on developing a better understanding of some of the quantitative outputs developed by the networks and so the common network statistics initiative was launched. This document seeks to provide an overview of the results of the data provided during this initiative.

Methodology

A survey was designed to collect information on four of the six key elements of networking. These were selected as they were felt to be the four areas with most commonality between networks and with the most likelihood that common tools would be utilised. The survey included questions relating to:

- effective stakeholder engagement - with a particular focus on network communications;
- exchange of relevant experience and know how;
- capacity building and training, and;
- support for cooperation and joint actions.

The survey was distributed to NSUs and NRNs with the first set of data received in April 2012 from those who chose to participate. These data sets were then analysed with the initial results presented shortly thereafter.

Results

Overall 21 of the NSUs and NRNs responded to the questionnaire, answering some or all of the questions posed. As far as possible these results have then been grouped by networking category as it is hoped that these quantitative aspects will provide a broad perspective on the added value of networking and will be further complimented by the added value of networking stories provided by the NRNs which have been similarly categorised. It must be remembered however that these results do not reflect the totally of the activity carried out under each networking category.

Effective stakeholder engagement

NRNs were asked to provide data on the network communications elements of the activities which they deliver. These aspects fall broadly under the category of effective stakeholder engagement and include the organisation of meetings and the development and use of a variety of communication tools.

Over the period from 2007 until 2011 5,287 network meetings had been organised with over 284,000 participants attending. In 2007 there were 30 meetings held, rising to 1,937 during 2011, showing an increase in participation from an average of 22 participants per meeting to 78.

The NRNs were then asked to identify what type of communication tools they have implemented and have been used by the network. The results are laid out in the table below:

Network communication tool	Total no. implemented and used	Total no. of users
Help Lines	24	28,764
Website pages	231	2,347,307
Stakeholder surveys	82	11,334
Publications	625	1,035,205
Social Media	23	71,852
Promotional tools	1,008	1,652,528
TOTAL	**1,993**	**5,146,990**

When analysed by year the number of networking tools being used by the networks was only 33 in 2007 with 65,600 users. The increase seen since this time highlights both the growth in networks over this period as well as an increase in the variety of tools utilised to engage stakeholders. For example social media as a network communication tool was not utilised by the NRNs until 2009 yet there are now nearly 72,000 users of the NRNs social media tools.

Information was then collected on the number of network meetings and events organised at a regional, national or EU level. The results show that over a five year period 3,625 meetings were organised at a regional level, 757 nationally and a total of 180 at EU level.

Exchange of relevant experience and know how

Through this element the focus of data collection was on the sharing of good practice and the use of 'electronic' discussion groups such as website fora and e-mail discussion groups. This provides a snapshot into the level of transfer of good practice both through tangible examples and as part of a process of mutual sharing of skills and knowledge.

The results demonstrated that during 2007 there were 11 good practices being identified, collated and shared, with that number rising to 2,050 by 2011 giving a total of 5,601 good practices shared in total. A steady growth in the number shared per month has also been seen from 2009 until 2011.

Electronic discussion groups have been established throughout the whole period and have risen in popularity to 73 in total by the end of 2011. E-mail discussion groups have been a far more popular tool than website fora, perhaps because they are easier to establish and utilise a system already well understood by stakeholders. A total of 62 e-mail discussion groups have been established with an average of 212 users per group while only 11 website fora have been in use with an average of only

26 users per fora. This suggests that e-mail discussion groups are able to reach more users and so might be a more effective knowledge transfer tool.

Capacity building and training

For this networking element the questionnaire sought to determine the number and type of training activities organised by the network and the number of people participating in the training. Not all the NRNs have training delivery included within their remit however those which do have organised a total of 1,716 training activities throughout the 2007 to 2011 period. These training activities have engaged with over 72,000 participants.

Where information has been provided on the nature of the training activities it has demonstrated the variety of topic of those organised, once again highlighting the diversity of the networks and the needs of their stakeholder groups. Types of training activities delivered included management and delivery of the Leader Programme, understanding the RDP, communication, local community engagement, local development strategies and many thematic topics such as short supply chains, renewable energy and economic diversification in rural areas.

Support for cooperation and joint actions

Under this theme the questionnaire focused on the cooperation events organised by the network and those who attended the events as a means to provide information on this element of networking. A total of 1,106 events were organised by the network starting with only 6 in 2007 rising to 386 during 2011.

A variety of different organisations attended these events. As expected the majority of participants were from Local Action Groups, Managing Authorities and Network Support Units. These events were however also attended by a number of NGOs, agricultural producer groups and advisory services, universities and local and regional government. Several of these events also saw participation from LAGs, networks and NGOs from other member states, in some cases to share good practice and inspire attendees or simple to identify potential partners.

Conclusions

The common network statistics initiative has provided an overview of some of the quantitative results achieved by the networks. This data has been collected to identify activity in four of the six key elements of networking in the hopes it will provide an overview of the types of activity being undertaken and the number of stakeholders benefiting from that work.

The results suggest that even in this small snapshot of network activity there is a great diversity of tools and methods utilised to engage with stakeholder groups. This diversity makes common data collection challenging however remains a strength of the networks and the networking they undertake.

It would be useful to extend this quantitative survey approach to the other elements of networking and to extend the understanding of those areas already included in this survey. This would again add to the body of knowledge being developed through this joint initiative and develop a greater understanding of the role of networks and networking as the new Programme period progresses.

When these results are utilised in partnership with other complimentary elements of the added value of networking joint initiative a fuller, deeper understanding of the activities of the networks and the benefits their actions bring can be formulated. The continuation of this joint action will provide a more complete picture of the shared quantitative outputs of the networks and the added value of their on-going work.