

# Added Value of Networking



**Awarding the best of LEADER – finding and sharing best practice**

**Estonian National Rural Network**



*Source: Estonian Rural Network*



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## Executive summary

The Estonian Network Support Unit (NSU) had previously developed two project competitions: the first focused on Leader projects, while the second highlighted innovative agricultural projects supported through Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme. This approach enabled the NSU to identify a range of good practice examples which could then be disseminated further to raise awareness of the projects and the European Programmes which had funded them. This approach was so successful that the Estonian NSU has now collaborated with network partners across the Nordic Baltic region to develop and deliver a new competition, which identifies and awards examples of good practice in Transnational Cooperation (TNC) projects.

Each series of Awards has followed a similar process for nominating, evaluating and identifying the winning projects. Nominations take place electronically with strict criteria published on the types of projects which are eligible. Assessment criteria are developed based on the nature of each of the Awards and widely publicised to ensure all nominees are aware of the evaluation process their projects will undergo. A series of finalists are selected with the winners presented with their Awards at a high profile Award Gala event.

Information on the project finalists is compiled and utilised to capture as much value as possible through the publication of materials as well as media coverage of the events and the projects nominated. This process has enabled the identification, collection, analysis and dissemination of a high number of good practice examples.



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## Background

In 2011 the Estonian NSU established a 'Notice Leader!' competition and Awards with the aim of identifying a range of good practice examples of Leader projects. This was delivered very successfully, proving a very effective way of finding good practice examples. Consequently it was decided to develop this Awards approach further, and in 2012 a new competition was launched focused on Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme – competitiveness of agriculture. This new competition was called 'Notice Innovative Agriculture' and sought entries in the following three categories:

- Best agricultural cooperation projects,
- Best innovative agricultural projects,
- Best agricultural knowledge transfer projects.

This initiative was similarly successful and the competition and Awards approach was then adopted by partners in the Nordic Baltic region. Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have networked together to identify and award examples of good practice in Transnational Cooperation (TNC) projects.

This case study was developed with the support of the Estonian NSU, data provided through them and information available on the competition websites.

## Networking participants

The participants through each of these competitions have been highly varied. The nominees, finalists and eventual winners of the competition have come from a number of different rural areas across Estonia and now the entire Nordic Baltic region. Members of the Estonian Network Cooperation Chamber, the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture and the Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce were also involved in supporting the competitions and participated in the networking opportunities at the Gala events. The information on best practice projects was widely disseminated supporting on-going networking within the broader community.

## Objectives

The main objective of the Awards was to identify good and best practice examples of projects funded through the Rural Development Programme. These examples were then collated, analysed and

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disseminated through a variety of publications and media exposure. The awards were also established to:

- raise awareness of the LEADER Programme internationally, nationally and at a local level;
- raise awareness of how European Programmes have contributed towards the development of rural areas;
- promote the activities of the projects involved; and by doing so,
- encourage more applications to the funds.

## The process and main activities

The Estonian NSU discussed the idea of developing and launching the 'Notice Innovative Agriculture' Awards during the Network Cooperation Chamber meeting in April 2012. Once agreed it was decided that external support would be sought and three experts were contracted who prepared the application forms and any additional documentation required. The Estonian NSU also developed a webpage – <http://www.maainfo.ee/?page=3602> , which contained all the information about the competition, including downloadable application forms.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2012 the competition was launched in the Estonian NRN e-newsletter Võrgukiri, the Ministry of Agriculture distributed a press release, advertisements were run in newspapers and letters were sent to many relevant stakeholders. The application period ran from May 29 until July 5 with nineteen applications received from eighteen projects across all three categories.

At the end of July pre-evaluation committee members including experts, representative of the Managing Authority and the NSU met to assess the applications. Criteria were established for each of the three categories. When evaluating projects the panel explored:

- the nature and strength of any partnership or joint action,
- the benefits to the participants and their business,
- the added value the project brought to the local area, people and local resources,
- the uniqueness, creativity and local appropriateness of the project,
- the impact on the business and the broader impact on the local area,
- dissemination of the project activity and added value.

The pre evaluation committee selected four projects in every category to be entered into the final. The NSU then organised three study tours to the nominees during September and the evaluation committee

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made up of seven members of the Network Cooperation Chamber chose the winners, having visited them all.

Best practice stories on each of the twelve final projects were compiled for a brochure to accompany the Awards Gala and to be disseminated to generate greater awareness of their activities. The winners were announced on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2012, a date which coincided with the Ministry of Agriculture's anniversary, at a Gala dinner held in rural Estonia.

Members of the Estonian Network Cooperation Chamber contributed their time to visit the projects on the study tours and in making the final decision on the winners. The Ministry of Agriculture helped with raising awareness of the event in the Ministry. The Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce supported the preparation of the brochure text and elements of the competition. The management and administration of the competition was carried out by the Estonian NSU.

Working with Nordic Baltic region partners the Estonian NSU has now also launched the Nordic-Baltic Transnational Cooperation Awards, which will continue to deliver the objectives developed for all the project competitions which have taken place. The Awards are open to any TNC project which involves at least one Nordic-Baltic LAG as a partner, is included in the list of TNC projects that have been notified to the European Commission, and has not yet been completed.

There are five award categories for this competition. These are laid out below with examples of the types of project nominations which are expected:

- **Youth:** diversifying activities for young people and children in rural areas; youth exchanges, camps, festivals or other thematic events; activities which develop entrepreneurship and involvement in community development amongst young people in rural areas.
- **Tourism:** developing rural tourism; promoting tourism through the creation of a common brand, identity or idea for a region(s); promoting tourism in an area through festivals or thematic events.
- **Culture:** supporting cultural development in the fields of art, handicraft, theatre, music, dance, folklore or heritage protection; festivals, exhibitions or other cultural events; research or publications in the field of culture; business development in the field of culture.

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- **Local area development:** enabling local area development; village development; new solutions for delivering services and infrastructure, local business support or business diversification and innovation.
- **Local Resources and Environment:** developing the use of local resources; local food and supply chains; better use of local raw materials; activities in environmentally protected areas; ecological entrepreneurship; development of renewable or alternative sources of energy.

Criteria have also been developed for these awards and projects who apply will be evaluated against the following areas of consideration:

- Participants benefits
- Transnational cooperation and strength of the partnership
- Level of innovation
- Impact on regional development
- Added value – transferability and sustainability

A similar two stage process has been utilised for these awards with a pre-selection committee who will select four finalists in each category, and a selection committee to decide the winners during September 2013, ready for the Awards Gala event in Tallinn later that month.

These Awards are also piloting a 'People's Choice Award'. Information on the twenty finalists will be available on the competition website and members of the public will vote for their favourite with the winner also receiving an award during the Gala evening. Further information can be found on the Nordic-Baltic TNC Awards at [www.maainfo.ee/LeaderTNC](http://www.maainfo.ee/LeaderTNC).

## Resources

The two main costs associated with delivering these Awards are the production of the brochure publicising the finalists and the Gala event itself. The 'Notice Innovative Agriculture' awards cost approximately 10,000 Euros. It is anticipated that the Nordic-Baltic TNC Awards will require a similar level of resourcing. The work of the NSU team is not included within this budget.

## The 'added value' of networking

The 'Notice Innovative Agriculture' initiative enabled the Estonian NSU to identify a total of eighteen good practice project examples all of which are in the RDP projects database - available in English

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<http://www.maainfo.ee/index.php?page=3451>. A brochure including the four finalists for each category will be available in summer 2013 with an Estonian version already available at [http://www.maainfo.ee/public/files/TRYKIS-VEEBILE-Marka\\_uuenduslikku-pollumajandust.pdf](http://www.maainfo.ee/public/files/TRYKIS-VEEBILE-Marka_uuenduslikku-pollumajandust.pdf).

Networking has enabled similar outputs to be developed from the Nordic-Baltic TNC Awards, which will enable all participating countries to raise awareness of the value of joint actions, promote the projects involved and disseminate information on best practice examples to audiences in many countries.

These types of competition are an excellent tool for identifying and disseminating good practice, and a catalyst for supporting future networking. Developing the awards approach to include specific TNC Awards would not have been possible without the support of the network which has developed between the NSUs and National Rural Networks across the Nordic Baltic region. By working together and developing a shared commitment to the success of these Awards networking has ensured they have been smoothly implemented and effectively promoted across the whole region.

These Awards recognise the excellent work being delivered by project beneficiaries and by having information on their projects disseminated encourages greater networking between those with similar project types. As many project beneficiaries tend to work directly with their Local Action Groups this process has also built stronger understanding and connections between NSUs, NRNs and those working to deliver the Programmes on the ground.

A great deal of communication and effective awareness raising has to take place to ensure as many potential award nominees as possible are able to submit their projects. This can be particularly difficult when attempting to identify projects supported through Axis 1 and Axis 2 of the Rural Development Programme.

It is also essential to develop clear objectives for the awards to ensure that as much value as possible can be captured from them. The collection of best practice examples is a key purpose of the activity and utilising and disseminating these in an effective fashion is vital to the overall success of the Awards.

## **Future challenges**

It is hoped that, as the Awards are now entering their third iteration, awareness and understanding of them is growing amongst potential nominees. It is also vital that key stakeholders are supported to recognise the value of this process of identifying, collecting, analysing and disseminating good practice examples.

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## Further information

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