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Networks and Networking in Rural Development Policy

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Managing Editor: Rob Peters, Head of Unit. European Network and monitoring of rural development policy, Agriculture and Rural Development Directorate-General, European Commission.

Authors and contributors: Donald Aquilina, Stephen Gardner, Tim Hudson, Gaelle Marion, Derek McGlynn, Adrian Neal, Mark Redman, Sabria Regragui Mazili, Angelo Strano, Dieter Wagner, Sarah Watson, Hannes Wimmer.

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Foreword

Networking is a policy instrument within the framework of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) – otherwise known as Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Experience shows that networks are an effective means of informing, inspiring and empowering local people in rural communities. Nevertheless, today, there is no single definition of what a network means in the context of rural development.

Consequently, the terms network and networking can mean different things to different people. Indeed, they are often employed to describe a wide range of activities or any kind of social connection. The downside of this lack of precision is that the benefits of networks and networking may seem rather vague and the overuse of the terms can hinder understanding.

Rural development networking bodies – such as the National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) - are working to ensure that the value of their networking is recognised. Around €500 million has been committed to supporting national and European networking during the 2007-2013 period so the merits need to be clear: there should not be a perception of public expenditure on a 'fuzzy' concept.

Thus, the overall aim of this issue of the *EU Rural Review* is to help de-mystify some important concepts regarding the role of networks and networking in rural development – with a specific emphasis on highlighting the use and effectiveness of networks as a rural development policy tool.



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The following articles provide an insight into the current understanding of networking in rural development policy at European, national, regional and local levels; profile European and rural networks and examine how they work in practice, using specific success stories and case studies; look at the many different types of rural development networks in existence and the diverse goals and objectives that drive them; and provide some food for thought regarding rural networking in the next programming period.

There is a broad consensus that networks and networking have great potential to add value to EU rural development policy. Academic research and practical experience indicate that the added value of networking is its ability to produce solutions and results that otherwise would not have occurred. A problem shared is a problem halved, as the saying goes. However identifying, demonstrating and communicating this added value in concrete terms, which are clearly understandable to a wider audience, is not only very important, it is also very challenging.

Expert opinion suggests that networks take time to develop and must be allowed to mature before their performance and true value can be meaningfully judged.

INTRODUCTION



Networks and networking – reality or rhetoric?

Networks and networking are much talked about these days. Networks, it seems, can make anything and everything happen! But what exactly do networks and networking mean for rural development?

Whether in the popular press, government policies, corporate strategies or day-to-day conversations, the terms network or networking are unavoidable. News agencies use global media networks to keep us informed every minute of the day. Airlines fly passengers all over the world via their network of partners. And we all know someone who is regularly online and checking what's happening in their social network.

The world of networks and networking is modern, exciting, dynamic and universal. It's even been suggested that networks play as important a role in social, political and economic life in the early 21st Century as the advent of machines did in the early 20th Century!

But there are also concerns that the concept of networks and networking

is over-used – at best a hyped-up metaphor for any kind of social connection, and at worst a meaningless piece of rhetoric. According to Ben Ramalingam¹, a network specialist from the UK-based Overseas Development Institute, “like machines before them, networks today are used to describe all kinds of activities, or any set of objects or people that are connected to each other. As such, the term can be used in virtually any context.” However, as Mr Ramlingham also points out, “this breadth of use can also hinder clear understanding and can lead to fuzziness and imprecision in how the term is used and what it means.”

Similar concerns about the imprecise use of network terminology are expressed by Dorothee Duguet, LEADER specialist with the French National Rural Network and author of a report in 2006 on *Networking:*

*the experience of LEADER*². According to Ms Duguet, “networking is a word that arises very often in discussions, speeches or publications related to rural development. It is often assumed that the meaning of the word is obvious. Yet, it often covers realities that can vary a lot according to the country concerned, the situation, the level of intervention or the person using the word.”

Against this kaleidoscope of different network forms and functions, this *EU Rural Review* aims to clarify and demystify some important concepts regarding the specific role of networks and networking in rural development, with a particular focus on the use and effectiveness of networks as a rural development policy tool.

¹ Ramalingam, B. (2011). *Mind the network gaps*. Overseas Development Institute, London – can be downloaded from: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/7110.pdf> (last accessed 20 August 2012)

² Duguet, D. (2006). *Networking: the experience of LEADER*. LEADER+ Observatory Contact Point, Brussels - can be downloaded from: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/pdf/library/methodology/networking_report.pdf (last accessed 20 August 2012)

What are rural networks and networking?

Networks and networking are widely adopted as tools for supporting and promoting sustainable rural development. However, even in this relatively specific context there is no single definition of what a network means. Indeed, there are many different kinds of rural development network, driven by a great variety of goals and objectives, which are effectively informing, inspiring and empowering local people in rural communities on a daily basis.

Take, for example, the simple case of two neighbouring EU Member States - the UK and Ireland. A recent study by the Carnegie Trust³ in Scotland found a surprising total of 232 active local, national and trans / international rural development networks in the UK and Ireland. Each network varied in terms of: their core remit (i.e. geographical reach, specific rural focus and specialist areas of expertise); the nature of the work that they engaged in (i.e. practical advice,

support and lobbying functions); the nature of their members (i.e. individuals and communities, practitioners and professional bodies or organisations); their membership structure (i.e. formal or informal membership); and their reliance on private / public funding to cover operational costs.

However, the one major issue that all of these rural networks aimed to address was helping people to, “learn how to do rural development,” notably by encouraging learning based on the experience of others in the network.

According to the Carnegie Trust researchers, “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 actors and stakeholders that facilitates the



© Cairngorms Local Action Group

flow of information and the sharing of resources in the pursuit of rural development. This is a very important function that is described in academic terms⁴ 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: a) receive advice and information; b) share local learning and experiences; c) develop creative ways to address local problems and needs; and d) identify sources of funding. Overall, the researchers found that, “...involvement with rural networks provided users with a feeling of confidence when tackling a range of issues within their communities.”

Regardless of how information flows, the ultimate value of rural networking must be judged by i) the quality of the learning processes; and ii) their impact on the stimulation of economic development, the creation of new job opportunities, the enhancement of living standards, and the improvement of environmental management in rural areas.

Not everything that 'connects' is a network

It is widely understood that all rural networks are built on a 'web of interaction', consisting of 'nodes' and 'linkages' where, i) the nodes are the rural actors and stakeholders (individuals / organisations) that form the membership of the network, and ii) the linkages are the connections / relationships that exist between them. Some linkages may be strong, others can be weak.

It is less commonly understood that networks are only structures that exist to support the process of networking. The process of 'networking' is defined⁵ 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.”

Indeed, it is often emphasised that it is not networks themselves that are important, but the information and inter-relationships that flow through them. Or put another way, not everything that connects is a network, since networks are nothing without the networking processes within them.

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

3 Miller, M. and Wallace, J. (2012). *Rural Development Networks – A Mapping Exercise*. Carnegie UK Trust, Dunfermline, UK – can be downloaded from: <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/rural-development-networks---full-report> (last accessed 20 August, 2012)

4 Ward, N. et al. (2005). *Universities, the Knowledge Economy and 'Neo-Endogenous Rural Development'*, Discussion Paper Series No. 1, Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne - can be downloaded from: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cce/publish/discussionpapers/pdfs/discussionpaper1.pdf> (last accessed 26 September 2012)

Networking as an EU rural development policy tool

Although people generally have positive expectations of networking, it is not unusual for an enthusiastic explanation of its role as a rural development policy tool to be met with a disbelieving, even cynical, smile. Nonetheless, the simple reality is that networking is now a clearly defined policy instrument within the framework of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) – otherwise known as Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The success of any rural development policy is not only based on the availability of funding and well-designed programmes and measures. Policies also rely on good ideas and experience and on their dissemination within the rural development community. As Mariann Fischer Boel, former European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development once said: "Ideas have the advantage that, if you share them around, their total value increases. They also tend to multiply. And experience helps us to grow ideas into success stories".

This is well illustrated by the fact that networking grew to become such a strong characteristic of the LEADER approach to rural development. Under both LEADER II and LEADER+, two complementary levels of formal networking were established – firstly, at national level,

with the implementation of National Networking Units (NNUs); and secondly, at European level, with the implementation of a European networking unit, the LEADER Observatory.

Based on the positive experiences of networking in LEADER⁶, and especially its role in stimulating new ideas and sharing the growing body of rural development knowledge and practice amongst rural actors and stakeholders, it was decided to introduce networking as an obligatory activity into Pillar 2 of the CAP for the 2007–2013 programming period. In accordance with Articles 67 and 69 of the EAFRD Regulation⁷, it became necessary for a) each Member State to establish a National Rural Network (NRN), which groups together the organisations and administrations

involved in rural development at national and regional level; and b) for the European Commission to establish a European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) to bring national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development together at EU level.

The rest is now – as they say - history. A total of around €500 million was committed to the NRNs and ENRD for 2007-2013 – approximately 0.3% of the total public expenditure on EU rural development policy. The first NRNs became fully operational in the spring of 2007 and the ENRD



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6 Duguet, D. (2006). *Networking: The LEADER experience*. LEADER+ Observatory Contact Point, Brussels - can be downloaded from: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/pdf/library/methodology/networking_report.pdf (last accessed 20 August 2012)

7 EC (2005). **Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)**, *Official Journal of the European Union* **L277**, 1-40 - can be downloaded from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32005R1698:en:NOT> (last accessed 20 August 2012)

was officially launched in 2008. Since then, a chain reaction of ideas and actions has been launched across rural Europe. This new generation of networks quickly began to enhance the policy-making and policy delivery process – even though this added value is sometimes difficult to demonstrate, as the effects of networking are not always easy to measure (for more about this see the article on *The Added Value of Networking* on pages 39).

Nonetheless, in the 2011 report from the European Commission on the *Implementation of the National Strategy Plans and the Community Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development (2007-2013)*, it is stated that⁸: “the National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) have significantly contributed to the consistency in programming, notably by ensuring an exchange of information and practices between RDP managers and stakeholders and by carrying out joint analyses.”

Consequently, it is clearly anticipated that networking will continue to be supported by the EAFRD in the programming period after 2013 – including through the introduction of a new European Innovation Partnership (EIP) network.

Networking as a policy tool

The networks (e.g. NRNs in the Member States and the ENRD) established under the EAFRD Regulation are so-called ‘policy networks’ and are examples of formal networks that have been conceived and engineered from the ‘top down’, specifically to engage key actors and stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of governmental or institutional policy.

This is obviously a very different type of network to those more informal networks that develop and grow from the ‘bottom up’, as people come together, connect and interact on issues of common interests.

Formally-constructed policy networks are increasingly important for policy-making and governance and recognised as a powerful tool to help solve many of the problems inherent to modern public policies⁹, including the challenge of extending the reach of policymakers to involve a wider range of actors and stakeholders in policy debates.

In its 2001 White Paper on European Governance¹⁰, the European Commission committed to, “...a more systematic and pro-active approach

to working with key networks to enable them to contribute to decision shaping and policy execution.” Consequently, policy networks are now widely used by the European Union and its Member States in all policy areas and for many functions. Networks are considered to be particularly important when dealing with the complex policy issues. The EU “legitimacy today depends on involvement and participation. This means that the linear model of dispensing policies from above must be replaced by a virtuous circle, based on feedback, networks and involvement from policy creation to implementation at all levels”.

In this respect, networking is clearly an important tool for supporting the implementation of the EAFRD. According to Rob Peters, head of the unit responsible for the European Network and Monitoring of Rural Development Policy at the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, “we have a common policy, but a common legislative process is not sufficient for ensuring the common understanding and common ownership that is the basis of effective policy implementation. We consider that there cannot be a modern policy for rural development without a network to support greater participation and a permanent dialogue on the governance of this policy.”



- 8 EC (2011). *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of the national strategy plans and the Community strategic guidelines for rural development (2007-2013)*, COM(2011) 450 final, European Commission, Brussels (20/7/2011) - can be downloaded from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52011DC0450:EN:NOT> (last accessed 29 August 2012)
- 9 Clarotti, G. (2001). *Report of the Working Group 'Networking for a good governance in Europe' (Working Group 4b). Work Area No. 4: Coherence and co-operation in a networked Europe, supporting document to European Governance: A White Paper (25/7/2001)* – can be downloaded from: http://ec.europa.eu/governance/areas/group9/report_en.pdf (last accessed 29 August 2012)
- 10 Commission of the European Communities (2001). *European Governance: A White Paper*, COM (2001) 428, Brussels (25/7/2001) – can be downloaded from: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2001/com2001_0428en01.pdf (last accessed 29 August 2012)

There are numerous other examples of policy networks initiated by the European Commission, including URBACT (a network programme to improve the effectiveness of sustainable integrated urban development policies in Europe)¹¹ and the Enterprise Europe Network (a network to help small enterprises to make the most of the business opportunities in the European Union)¹².



However, networking in the domain of rural development policy is 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.

You only have to consider the contrasting needs of the 2 300 Local Actions Groups (LAGs) in the 27 Member States to understand the scale of the challenge – LAGs ranging

from those in the old Member States with over 20 years of experience to those in some of the newer Member States, which have only just been approved and are struggling to implement local development strategies for the very first time.

In view of this challenge, the essential elements for networking as a policy tool for rural development are more comprehensive, and demanding, than those found in many other EU policy networks. They include:

- effective stakeholder engagement;

- building a common understanding of common policies;
- the gathering, analysis and dissemination of good practices;
- the exchange of relevant experience and know-how amongst stakeholders;
- capacity building / trainings for rural actors, and;
- cooperation and joint actions between rural actors.

These elements are further elaborated in the articles in the section on Networking in Action (pages 30).

Networks and network support units (NSUs)

Most formal networks, including EU policy networks, are facilitated or supported by an identifiable entity often described as a secretariat, coordinator, steering group or support unit. One common misunderstanding that is noted by many networking experts¹³ is that too often the term network is imprecisely used to identify the mechanisms that support a network, rather than the web of interactions that define the structure of the network.

This may seem like a minor issue, but it is a symptom of a wider problem with formal networks – namely, that there is rarely a clear enough distinction between the network and its supporting entity.

Network support units (NSUs) are, for very good reasons, commonly modelled on a hierarchical organisation or even a finite project. They can, therefore, be planned, managed and assessed as discrete entities, with clearly-defined aims, objectives, work plans and budgets. When people talk about setting up a network they are usually referring to the NSU – not to the network itself. But it must be remembered that the structures and services provided by the support unit are not the network – the network is the actors and stakeholders it connects and the relationships between them.

¹³ Hearn, S. and Mendizabel, E. (2011). *Not everything that connects is a network*, Background Note (May 2011), Overseas Development Institute, Cambridge – can be downloaded from: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/6313.pdf> (last accessed 29 August 2012)



¹¹ For further information on URBACT II (The Urban Development Network Programme 2007-2013) see: <http://www.urbact.eu>

¹² For further information about the Europe Enterprise Network (EEN) see: <http://portal.enterprise-europe-network.ec.europa.eu/>

Perspectives on networking and rural development

From the bottom up: experts give their views on the benefits of rural networks.



© Rob Peters

Rob Peters,
Head of Unit, European Network and
Monitoring of Rural Development Policy,
European Commission

The European Commission's approach to rural development policy networking has undergone an evolution, with lessons learned at different stages, in particular from the LEADER programme and the LEADER Observatory, which were set up in the 1990s.

The network supported by the LEADER Observatory was initially, "a place where those implementing the programmes could exchange experience," says Rob Peters, the Commission's head of unit in charge of rural development networking. "But we started to realise that it was more than an exchange platform, it was really a governance tool for the whole programme. We had a positive experience with LEADER and networking, so we asked: why not extend it to the entire rural development policy?"

Policy networks allow information to be passed up and down the policy-development ladder, so that policymakers make well-informed decisions. "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."

The evolution of rural development networking means that the Commission is now able to call on a number of thematic working groups and focus groups when formulating policy. "In the focus



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groups, different experts are involved: farmers, paying agencies and managing authorities dealing with agri-environment measures," says Mr Peters. "It brings us a lot. It really helps the Commission in further refining policy proposals. The knowledge development and sharing through the network gives a broad insight into how the policy is working in practice."

Focus groups have considered issues such as the mainstreaming of LEADER. "Putting that on the table helped to identify a lot of potential obstacles, which resulted in changes to the implementing regulation for the current period, but it is also useful for the next period."

Mr Peters concedes that there is a risk that ideas emerging from the rural development networks, which are taken on board by the Commission, can still get lost in the EU decision-making process. "The European Parliament and the Council make the final decision, so a lot can change from the initial proposal."

But networks are also useful in this context. They help stakeholders to stay abreast of developments in the legislative process. "We in the Commission can see the process, but it is not always so visible to others. This permanent dialogue [within the networks] helps to overcome this."

Networks also help because officials working on final legislation, such as members of Council working groups, might also have been involved in the policy discussions via the networks. "The better prepared the Commission is with its proposals – meaning the involvement of all the players in the process – then the more likely it is that the essence of the Commission's proposal will be kept," suggests Mr Peters.

Maria Carla Ciscaldi,

**Paying Agency,
Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs, Malta**

"Networking is an important rural development tool in Malta. It is used to bring stakeholders together to share and explore ideas. Maltese professionals network among themselves and with stakeholders across Europe. Networks help us expand and improve rural development policy as they provide a means of listening to all sectors, while keeping rural development at the centre. Good practice is exchanged but it also means that sectors and regions

work together and are brought closer together. A case in point is how we work together on the next programming period [2014-2020]. We are using the NRN to involve stakeholders in helping us to draft the next Rural Development Programme.

One of the Maltese Local Action Groups is also creating a rural tourism network, which shows that networking is being given more and more importance."



© Maria Carla Ciscaldi

Nick Wilding,

**development officer,
Carnegie UK Trust**

The **Carnegie UK Trust** is a charity, established in 1913 by the Scottish-American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, which seeks to improve people's lives in Great Britain by guiding public policy and developing new thinking. Nick Wilding, a development officer with the Trust, says it has a "long-standing interest in rural issues," and has recognised that, "there is a paradigm shift happening in rural development."



© Nick Wilding

Trust play a role in identifying what is working and bring these findings to the attention of policymakers," says Wilding.

From this, emerged a community of practice, dubbed FierySpirits. By July 2012, this boasted nearly 1 300 members, working on a broad range of rural development issues. "People opt in. It's a very loose structure. We take an open networking view that people will use networks based on the value that they offer. The key is creating that value." Central to this is trust, which is why FierySpirits does not rely on online networking alone. "Trust is best built through face-to-face events," insists Wilding. "There are fantastic new technological tools; we've tried to use them but without losing sight of the fundamentals. People in rural networks always appreciate a good gathering with some good food."

This shift entails, "a move 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 – and the creation of more effective learning networks of practitioner and policy makers."

"There are fantastic new technological tools; we've tried to use them but without losing sight of the fundamentals. People in rural networks always appreciate a good gathering with some good food."

In addition, the Trust has learned that networks must "curate the knowledge" that they develop. Though the structure is loose, the work of FierySpirits is focused, with clear outcomes. The group has worked on issues such as land reform in

Scotland, the development of Community Land Trusts in England, and resilience in rural communities. On resilience, in August 2011 FierySpirits published a study on how communities can best cope with emerging economic, environmental and health risks.

The Trust plays the role of facilitator: "ten years ago, the trustees decided to work in a more systemic way. They asked: how can the

More information:

FierySpirits community of practice: <http://fieryspirits.com/>

FierySpirits study on exploring community resilience in times of rapid change: <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/carnegie/media/sitemedia/Publications/ExploringCommunityResiliencedownload.pdf>



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Henk Kieft, advisory group member, ETC, the Netherlands

With four other partners, ETC coordinates the Dutch national rural network, the *Platform Platteland*. ETC is a development-cooperation and regional-development foundation. Henk Kieft, a senior advisor with ETC, says that the rural network in the Netherlands can help to improve mutual trust between government, rural residents, community organisations and other stakeholders. The network also ensures that information from Brussels is passed on quickly and directly to all stakeholders.

However, the network has limited direct influence on rural development policy. In the Netherlands, it is mainly the central government and the provinces that shape rural development policies. "Local bodies such as municipalities, regional civil society organisations and entrepreneurs are seen as implementers [of policies] and treated as such," says Mr Kieft.



© Henk Kieft

"Local bodies such as municipalities, regional civil society organisations and entrepreneurs are seen as implementers [of policies] and treated as such,"

Although the provinces are formally responsible for rural development in the Netherlands, the central government retains a very dominant position, argues Mr Kieft. To provide policy input, over the past three years the Platform Platteland has initiated a series of meetings on rural policy for the 2014-2020 period. "The Ministry and most provinces received our analyses and conclusions with interest, but we do not have great lobbying weight, and the network has no [direct] policy-making role."

He adds: "we have more of an informal influence, because parliamentarians, governments, Local Action Groups and civil society organisations see that the network is quite professional and constructive, and also always provides reliable and timely input." When the Platform Platteland organises discussions on current topics and rural policy, civil servants from the state and provincial level also participate. They come, in particular, "to pick up ideas or to check [the level of] support for certain ideas." The influence of the platform is, "indirect and limited," says Mr Kieft. "The Netherlands lacks a real rural lobby. There is also no LAG member of the European LEADER Network."

© Alexia Rouby



Alexia Rouby, Director, Euromontana, the European Association of Mountain Areas

"Networking," says Euromontana Director, Alexia Rouby, "is essential and the core of what we do." Euromontana manages thematic networks covering a range of subjects, from agriculture and rural development to sustainable tourism.

Rouby emphasises the benefits of this work: enabling exchange, she says, is, "the most useful thing we can do and what people most need, because solutions to their problems have very often already been found somewhere in the network." She also insists that the transfer of good practice can frequently be done without spending large amounts of money.

At EU level, she comments, it is necessary for networks working on issues in mountain areas to take a broad approach when seeking funding. "Nothing is available to support networks in mountain areas directly," she says. "Networks have to go through calls for

"the most useful thing we can do and what people most need, because solutions to their problems have very often already been found somewhere in the network."

tenders and projects to get some funding for the cooperation activities they would like to carry out. Thanks to the European Territorial Cooperation programme, co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund, we have had some actions co-financed. The EU's research programme also finances some studies on mountain areas."

She continues: "the networking we require, and which implies resources that are above those that we access through membership fees, is not financed. The Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development's information measures programme provided some funding for organising information events and exchanges about the CAP, but it is now ring-fenced for very big projects of at least €200 000, which is not compatible with our operating size."

One suggestion to overcome this limitation is, "operating subsidies, based on an agreed working programme," says Ms Rouby. "We could then spend more time on action and less on applications and reporting, which eats up a lot of time." Operating subsidies would also help to overcome cash flow problems that non-profit groups can experience when delivering projects, she concludes.



Teresa Canavan, Deputy Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Rural Development Council

Teresa Canavan discusses how networking is used at different levels and across borders for rural development in Northern Ireland.

"Rural Network Northern Ireland (RNNI) coordinates a series of working groups comprised of representatives of Local Action Groups. These working groups focus on operational matters (for example, the Cluster Networking Group and Communications Working Group) and on specific thematic objectives, such as: social farming; enterprise and entrepreneurship; ICT; children and young people; village renewal and development; and women and food.

"Thematic working is an effective method for sharing practice and exposing members to new ideas and approaches. It offers a forum for collaborative working and problem-solving on issues identified across the Rural Development Programme. RNNI thematic working groups can form the basis of specific activities/events, or develop into working groups with detailed terms of reference and a set duration. These groups can target issues that span the whole programme, while others focus on specific activities.

"These sub-networks are essential to the work of the national network: they inform opinion and allow real bottom-up development to take place.

"The LAGs are formulated and operate on the basis of LEADER principles, i.e. comprised of local people (public and private) to identify issues and implement a local development strategy. The LAGs complement and implement policies at grassroots level. The National Rural Network working groups serve as policy incubators for a range of themes and topics that are crucial to rural development in specific areas. The groups are the voice of the people who live, work and run businesses in rural areas.

"Village Renewal and Development is one of the six measures in Axis 3 of the Northern Ireland RDP. RNNI established a Village Renewal and Development Thematic Working Group to draw on experience and good practice from local, regional, national, European and international levels, in order to influence the delivery and roll out of this specific measure. The aim was also to inform future approaches to village work in Northern Ireland. There were a number of tangible outputs, culminating in a final seminar in September 2010. Two publications were produced, with an article on one published

in the ENRD Magazine (Spring / Summer Issue, 2012). Since the completion of its formal programme, the Working Group has met to update the Village Renewal measure across the Clusters and still acts as a reference group for Village Renewal issues.

"RNNI is one of the constituent networks that comprise the United Kingdom National Rural Network (UKNRN). The UKNRN holds regular teleconferences and face-to-face meetings on all aspects of our collective work. In addition, individual nominated networks represent the UKNRN at EU level. This collaborative working ensures that rural issues across the UK are highlighted at local, regional, national and EU levels. It also serves to enhance the collective work of the national networks by sharing good practice and enhancing information exchange and coordination.

"RNNI has also forged strong links with the Irish National Rural Network. Members of the RNNI team have attended and presented at several seminars/conferences hosted by the Irish NRN and likewise members of that team have been guest speakers at events we have held in Northern Ireland. One specific piece of collaboration was the joint publication of the Cooperation Project Guidance Booklet, in 2010."

Further information:

RNNI website: <http://www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk/>



MEET THE NETWORKS



ENRD: the European dimension

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) was set up by the European Commission's Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) in 2008. Its mandate is defined in the EC Regulation 1698/2005



Overview of the ENRD

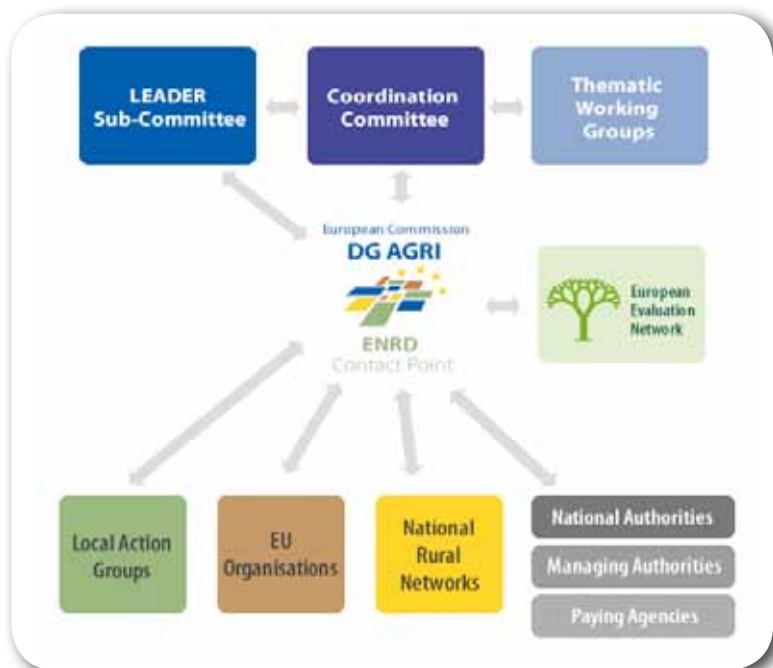
The main tasks of the ENRD are to:

- Collect, analyse and disseminate information on EU rural development measures;
- Collect, disseminate and consolidate at EU level good rural development practice;
- Provide information on developments in the EU's rural areas and in third countries;
- Organise meetings and seminars at EU level for those actively involved in rural development;
- Set-up and run expert networks with a view to facilitating an exchange of expertise and supporting the implementation and evaluation of rural development policy;
- Support the national networks and transnational cooperation initiatives.

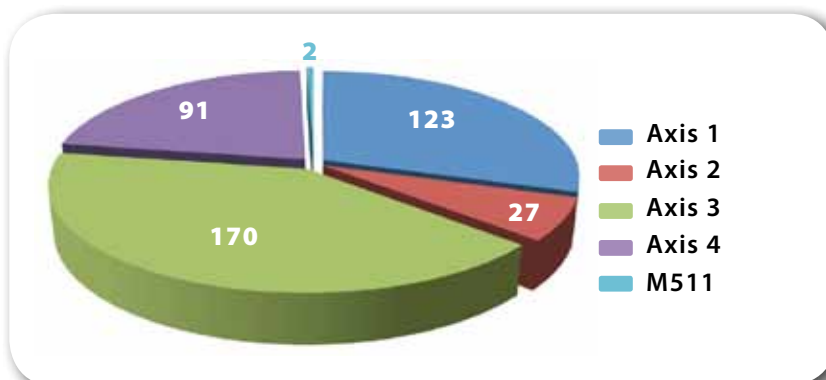
The ENRD's core function is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural development policy

(EAFRD) implementation. The structure of the ENRD is outlined below:

Figure 1: Structure of the ENRD



Graph 1: ENRD RDP projects database
– no. of projects by Axis (Data as at June 2012)



The composition of the Coordination Committee (CC) and Leader Sub-Committee (LSC) is defined by Commission Decision 2008/168/EC¹⁴

A network support unit, known as the ENRD Contact Point (CP), provides services to support the majority of network activities. This function is outsourced to an external contractor. The work of the support unit is defined in annually agreed contracts (with a budget of approx. €3.5 million per annum). Network activities are defined within an ENRD Annual Work Plan, proposed by DG AGRI and the CP each year, and agreed in consultation with the Coordination Committee, whose members include representatives from all major network stakeholder groups (i.e. managing authorities, National Rural Networks and other European organisations involved in rural development).

ENRD activities have evolved over the first four years of its operation, from an initial top-down initiative, gradually maturing to engage a wider range of stakeholder interests, issues, needs and priorities. Outlined below is a summary of some of the more visible steps and milestones that were achieved over this period:

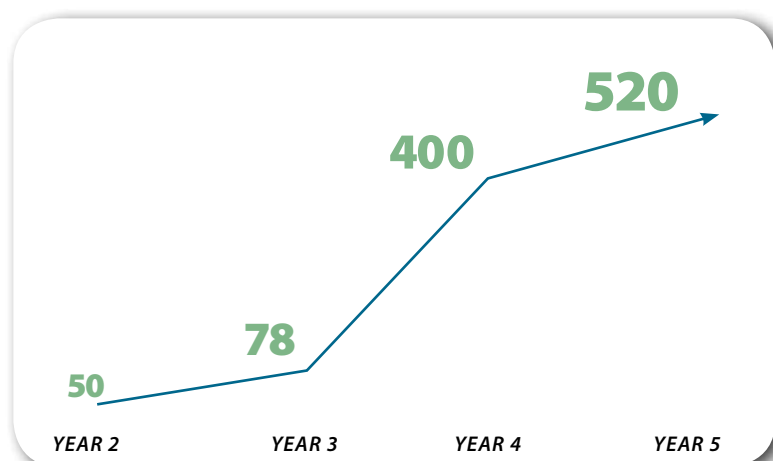
Collection and dissemination of relevant 'policy in action' examples

The collection and dissemination of project examples that demonstrate the different ways that the EAFRD is being used across Europe was considered a critical function of the ENRD. In the first year, discussions focused on finding an appropriate approach for collecting project examples. In the second year, the emphasis shifted to a consideration of 'relevant experience', thereby avoiding the need to make value judgments about individual projects. Subsequently, a pilot phase, involving a core group of National Rural Networks (NRNs), resulted in 50 examples being collected from eight different countries.

Information gathered during the pilot was used to guide the design of

a database and enhanced template, which was rolled out in all EU countries in the third year. With NRN support, over 200 examples were then gathered. However, the quality and consistency of the examples collected varied considerably, so in the fourth year, refinements were made to the database structure and functionality, which improved the quality and usability. This provided the platform to gradually expand the project examples database, which included over 400 examples, covering all 27 Member States, by the end of the fourth year. This was considered to be a significant milestone, providing a critical mass of practical experience of the policy in action. The data set is sufficiently rich in detail to promote European knowledge sharing and exchange and to support other complementary objectives of ENRD stakeholders. Milestones for year five are focused on expanding the type of projects, aimed at illustrating all RDP policy measures, and a more balanced coverage of all Member States.

Figure 2: The evolution of the number of projects included in the RDP projects databases (Data as at June 2012)



Establishment of knowledge exchange mechanisms to gain insight into implementation practices and identify practical ways to improve policy effectiveness

Initially, knowledge exchange mechanisms were dominated by Thematic Working Groups, established and chaired by DG AGRI, and including a small number of nominated

members from Member States. Each Group was guided by a pre-defined set of objectives and expected outcomes. A work plan was developed for each group and analytical activities were undertaken, coordinated by the ENRD Contact Point. Findings and recommendations were prepared in reports and summarised in presentations to the ENRD Coordination Committee. These Working Groups proved to be somewhat rigid, and although the outcomes were often interesting, the levels of participation, engagement and/or ownership of the outcomes were often below expectations. Consequently, the dissemination and impact of the work was viewed by many as being somewhat limited.

Subsequently, a less rigid approach was introduced for LEADER-related activities, which led to the birth of what have become known as 'Focus Groups' (FGs). Initially these FGs included Member State LEADER experts and representatives from Local Action Groups (LAGs). Important features were that the individual FG members were responsible for nominating the Chairperson(s), the FG collectively developed its own work plan, actively engaged in collecting and collating data, and in developing summary reports and presenting its findings. This represented a milestone for the ENRD, helping to make ENRD analytical activities more pro-active. Moving from a more top-down to a more bottom-up approach created a higher level of engagement and ownership over both objectives and outcomes, and instilled a greater level of commitment and interest among participants in getting involved in subsequent network initiatives at Member State and European level. The FG model has evolved over time, using a variety of participatory leadership techniques, to become the preferred structure for coordination of network policy analytical activities, with increasing numbers of participants willing to become involved in the groups and act as active disseminators of findings and recommendations.

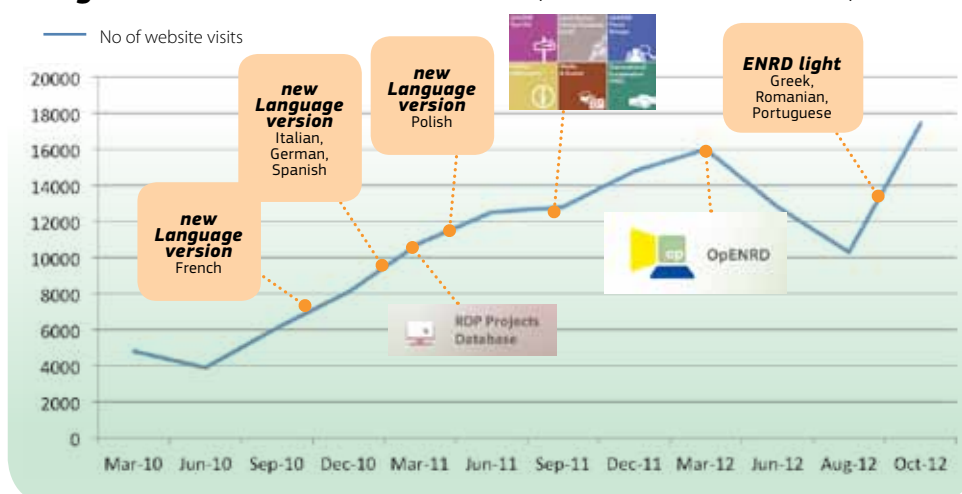
Development of the ENRD website as a key communication tool

The potential utility and range of target users of the site, beyond the core institutional members of the ENRD, were not initially considered in any detailed stakeholder mapping exercise or linked to any wider communications strategy. However, gradually, as the volume of information accumulated, the need to consider better ways to both document and communicate this information and ensure its accessibility to a wider group of stakeholders, became apparent. ENRD website user statistics, coupled with user feedback, gathered over time, were therefore used to guide incremental adjustments to the website. In the third year of operation, a revamping of the site was undertaken to improve its overall look and feel, introduce more images, dynamic tools and multiple information access points to aid users. The site was also expanded to encompass six language versions. These different developments contributed to the reaching of an important milestone: the ENRD site had in excess of 10,000 visitors per month, by the end of the third year.

However, the adjustments introduced did not sufficiently address certain underlying weaknesses in the original structure and design of the site, which continued to restrict expansion and inhibit navigation of the site, particularly by new visitors. Therefore, in the fourth year, it was decided that a more fundamental redesign was necessary. The new structure was deliberately designed to provide greater flexibility for future expansion, both of content and the introduction of new languages. As a result of these changes and innovations, user numbers have continued to rise, reaching a new milestone in the fourth year of operation of 20,000 visitors per month. However, user retention numbers have been more variable over the same period. New milestone targets to improve retention have become an intrinsic part of current website and communications planning, aimed at the consolidation of content and quality enhancements of existing tools and service, thereby aiming to improve user experience and the overall impact of the website as the primary communications tool of the network.



Figure 3: ENRD website evolution (Data as at October 2012)



Visitors by country

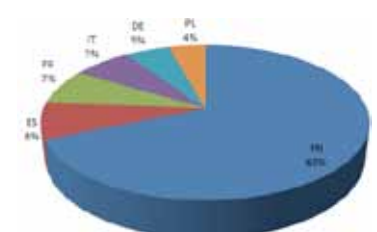
in 2010...			in 2012...		
Rank	Country	Visits	Rank	Country	Visits
1	Spain	1124	1	United States	8770
2	United States	631	2	Italy	3426
3	France	600	3	Poland	3231
4	Luxembourg	590	4	Germany	3085
5	UK	589	5	UK	2751
6	Germany	527	6	Spain	2649
7	Belgium	488	7	France	2445
8	Italy	411	8	Belgium	2001
9	Portugal	328	9	Romania	1553
10	Netherlands	289	10	Luxembourg	1502
11	Poland	255	11	Slovenia	707
12	Ireland	223	12	Portugal	701
13	Hungary	218	13	Ireland	698
14	Slovenia	217	14	Denmark	663
15	Austria	196	15	Austria	636
16	Romania	178	16	Netherlands	635
17	Greece	171	17	Malta	518
18	Bulgaria	147	18	Bulgaria	472
19	Croatia	130	19	Hungary	268
20	Sweden	119	20	Others	1027
-	Others	1865	-	-	-

Development of a suite of publications that directly respond to stakeholder needs and challenges

In the first year of operation, the main official publication of the ENRD was the EU Rural Review. Its contents were often quite policy-oriented, formal, and not designed with any specific audience in mind. As the network evolved, new ideas and insights emerged, which inspired publications that could better respond to specific stakeholder needs and interests. This gradually gave rise to a monthly newsletter and a series of brochures with short descriptions of projects.

This was important, as it marked a shift in the ambition behind the ENRD’s publications; from being potentially ‘interesting’ to trying to be more ‘useful’. Targeted surveys and other feedback mechanisms were introduced to gauge reader satisfaction and this led, in the third year, to a more thorough review of the ENRD publications portfolio. This was considered to be an important milestone in the evolution of the ENRD and its communication strategy. Changes introduced at that time included: (i) the redesign of the structure of the EU Rural Review to allow more in-depth exploration of specific themes, without the use of a pre-defined framework (as of issue 11);

(ii) the introduction of a new publication, the ENRD Magazine, to include articles and features written by the various rural networks, and to be distributed via the networks (piloted initially and launched as a new product in 2012); and (iii) a shift away from the print version of the ENRD newsletter to a new electronic version (Rur@l Newsflash). Thus, insights gained over time have led to an evolution of the ENRD’s publications, which are now more visually engaging, easier to digest and more stakeholder-focused. This has, in turn, led to a gradual expansion in the overall readership.



Language versions of the website consulted by visitors



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Development of the ENRD brand

Towards the end of the second year, as the volume of products began to grow, it was recognised that a clearer and more consistent brand identity was needed. The most significant milestone was achieved in the third year of operation, when an ENRD motto was introduced - 'Connecting rural Europe' – as part of a new visual identity.

This change had several direct and indirect effects on how communication activities were planned, linked and delivered. Dissemination planning for any new initiative was now considered as an intrinsic part of individual work plans from the outset. The branding approach to network activities has clearly contributed to raising awareness and recognition of the ENRD among a wider group of

stakeholders, providing new avenues to promote the work of the network in support of its objectives.



Lessons learnt from what has worked well and what has worked less well in terms of networking at the European level



Key aspects of the ENRD structure that have worked well include:

- The development of a **more flexible and responsive management structure** and support team, increasingly willing to listen, learn, adapt, modify and grow with the network. Over time (as the network has matured), the ENRD has been empowered by the management team to create more opportunities for open exchange and debate amongst ENRD members and targeted stakeholders. It is now understood and increasingly acknowledged that outcomes from ENRD activities do not necessarily need to reflect the views of the Commission, but can simply be the many and varied voices of the network.
- The **broad grouping of EU rural development stakeholder interests** within the ENRD Coordination Committee, promoting a dynamic, multi-faceted policy dialogue that has gradually intensified to cover many aspects of rural development policy, as well as a broader range of stakeholder interests.
- The network structure has provided **access to DG AGRI and other officials** (at national and regional level) to i) engage them in a more interactive policy dialogue; ii) exchange implementation experiences, and; iii) use this information and insight to gradually introduce improvements in the rural development policy implementation framework at EU, Member State and regional level.
- Outsourcing of the majority of network support unit services has allowed the gradual development of an **active partnership** between DG AGRI and the contractor, **promoting innovation**, encouraging the development of new products and services and critically, providing a framework within which to broaden and deepen communication and exchange on rural development policy.



Key aspects of the ENRD structure that have worked less well include:

- The ENRD's formal and somewhat **rigid structures** (CC, LSC, TWGs) often prevent the engagement of a wider group of stakeholders and rural development practitioners in some activities.
- **'Internalising' the ENRD within DG AGRI**: it continues to be a challenge to fully and effectively engage with the geographical / horizontal units and to have them recognise the potential benefits of both the European and Member State Networks as a support structure, complementing their day-to-day work.
- The **limited mandate** and/or possibilities of ENRD support structures to directly engage with, and/or provide direct support to, individual NSUs and MAs has allowed gaps in knowledge collection, exchange and cooperation to develop, thereby limiting the potential impact of European initiatives.
- Lack of mechanisms or a mandate to develop, through NRNs, an effective **dialogue between European and Member State regional networks**. This has often meant that dialogue and information available at European level is not sufficiently shared or disseminated beyond the national level, limiting the impact of some European activities.



Key aspects of the ENRD activities that have worked well include:

- Gradual **expansion** and adaptation of the range and diversity **of ENRD products and services** in response to network feedback (with many available in six languages), providing more opportunities for engagement and information exchange with a wider range of rural development stakeholders.
- Experimentation with a variety of **mechanisms to engage network stakeholders in policy dialogue** and support policy analysis activities (including case studies, working groups and focus groups), which have often provided unique and practical insights into specific policy implementation issues. Outcomes from these initiatives have, on occasion, had a direct influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural policy design and refinement (namely for LEADER and some aspects of implementation mechanisms, rules and procedures). Evidence-based findings have also provided important insights to guide the design of future rural development programmes.
- Collection, collation and **dissemination of a critical mass of relevant project** examples, providing a growing repository of practical information to guide, inspire and demonstrate EAFRD funding in action.

Making a success of networking – lessons from the ENRD experience

Based on the experience of networking at European level, a number of success factors have been identified for policy networking, namely:

Managers/decision-makers need to:

- Support the development of a more inclusive network structure that gradually reaches out and engages with a broader range of rural stakeholders, civil society representatives and other existing networks in an open and dynamic manner.
- Embrace the network as an active partner rather than as an administrative burden, or obligatory policy support mechanism. The network works best if it is seen as being both 'connected' but also sufficiently 'separate and distinct' from the policy formulation and implementation process.

This requires new thinking amongst managers, who can provide leadership but also instil a sufficient level of freedom and flexibility to develop activities, innovate and experiment with what can work and not fear the consequences when things don't quite work as they should.

- Give the network space to breath, learn, experiment, engage and find its own identity. The network is a mechanism that can support policy implementation but it takes time to understand its role, purpose and to realise its potential to guide and influence policy implementation.
- Ensure the network is accountable for the resources it uses but also try to establish a working relationship that is less about control and more about partnership, where targets



Key aspects of ENRD activities that have worked less well include:

- The **lack of a clear intervention logic**, hierarchy of objectives and performance criteria to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of ENRD activities, results and impacts.
- **Lack of engagement** of some stakeholder groups in ENRD activities due to lack of capacity, resources and/or commitment / interest has resulted in less knowledge generation and fewer outcomes than originally anticipated for some initiatives.
- Variance in resourcing of MS NRNs/NSU's has often led to problems of coordination and participation at EU level, often compounded by **lack of continuity** in terms of staff participation/availability, limited technical capacity, or limited access to appropriate technical support to effectively support or deliver core networking functions and actively participate in and/or contribute to EU level networking activities.



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are developed over time, rather than pre-determined in a long-term rigid plan. Work plans need to be flexible. While there is a need to establish minimum performance criteria to be delivered, there also needs to be resources and capacity available to react and respond to evolving needs and circumstances and/or to build on areas of activity that grow and provide positive outcomes.

- More clearly recognise the difference between the network support unit and the network itself. The support unit cannot force the active



participation of network members, particularly when their participation is voluntary and competing with other priorities for their time, and therefore cannot be fully accountable when network member participation is limited.

- Commit to and sustain a sufficient level of financial support to allow the building of core competencies within the network support team. It takes time to develop the appropriate skills and experience and for this investment to be reflected in terms of tangible outcomes.

Network Support Units need to:

- Ensure that a core group of network support team experts are attracted and retained, with the appropriate skills and experience to deliver basic services to the network, including the ability to: effectively communicate network experience, information, news and analysis findings; organise key participatory events, workshops, conferences and other gatherings on issues of relevance to network stakeholders; and collect and collate evidence-based experiences of policy in action that can be used to share within the network and at European level.
- Achieve a minimum level of activity in the 'core areas of network competency'. Failure to achieve this will undermine the network and prevent the building of credibility, thereby limiting its ability to grow over time and deliver more long-term benefits in support of policy or programme objectives.

Network members need to:

- Consider what they actually want and expect from the network, and the timeframe by which this can and should be achieved. This can be supported by becoming involved in the forums and exchange platforms that allow these needs and expectations to be articulated and taken into account in the planning and delivery of network activities and services.
- Be willing to contribute to the activities of the network in terms of their time, engagement and active participation. Without such commitment the partnership will remain uneven and the outcomes limited in their ownership or linkage with policy implementation. A network is very much a product of the contributions and commitments it receives from its members.





Future challenges for networking as a rural development policy tool

The experiences of EU level networking to date suggests that by overcoming the following key challenges, the future use of networking as a rural development policy tool could be greatly enhanced:

- There is a lack of common understanding of what policy networks are for and how they can benefit stakeholders at all levels. There is a need, therefore, to better document and promote network success stories, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, to overcome these misunderstandings and ensure sustained support for networks and their activities.
- There is a need to give time for networks to develop as functioning entities, even if this does not result in clear and tangible benefits in the short term (linked to the above lack of understanding and awareness).
- There is a need to develop and retain a core team of people that can support and guide the network in its development path to reach key milestones. The threat of a change in staff, management, funding and commitment can adversely affect a network and its potential to deliver measurable benefits over time.
- There is a need to establish basic minimum performance criteria for all network support units. This approach assists in guiding and prioritizing network activities and resource allocation and provides a basis to monitor progress and to justify on-going investment (particularly at a time of increased austerity in Europe).
- More direct acknowledgement of the enormous variance in the structure, capacity, resources, experience and maturity of existing networks is required, and this must be taken into account in the ENRD annual work plans and support services and products adapted accordingly (i.e. one size does not fit all).
- There is a need to establish a more flexible, integrated and technically strong network support framework at EU level (acknowledging the importance of both formal and informal frameworks), possibly through the gradual expansion of ENRD membership and a more proactive approach to promoting the network within DG AGRI.
- There is a need to establish minimum levels of network capacity at national and regional levels, ideally linked more directly to the number of rural organisations and citizens in specific regions, thereby ensuring the establishment of a critical mass of network support structures that can work more directly with, and benefit from, ENRD activities.
- There is a need to link the chronology of ENRD activities more directly with the policy agenda in order to maximize the use of policy analysis findings and practical insights into rural development policy and programme design and development.
- The importance of building stronger links with other policy networks (e.g. FARNET) and 'communities of practice' (e.g. the rural development research community) that can both extend and share network practice, connections and information must be better recognised.

The European Evaluation Network for Rural Development



European Evaluation Network
for Rural Development

The European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (abbreviated to Evaluation Expert Network) provides support for improving the quality and efficiency of evaluation of rural development programmes (RDPs) in Member States of the European Union in the period 2007-2013.

What is the legal basis for the Evaluation Expert Network?

Article 67 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) foresees, as a part of the technical assistance for rural development policies, a European Network for Rural Development to be established at Community level. This Article on the European Network for Rural Development stipulates different tasks, including to “set up and run expert networks with a view to facilitating an exchange of expertise and supporting implementation and evaluation of the rural development policy” (Article 67 (e)). Against this background, the European Commission has set up, as a part of the European Network for Rural Development, a European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (hereinafter referred to as “Evaluation Expert Network”) that fulfils the evaluation-related functions foreseen by the aforementioned Article.

The network works under the responsibility of the evaluation function of the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development. The work of the Evaluation Expert Network related to the exchange of expertise and the establishment of best practice on evaluation of the rural development policy is followed by the Expert Committee on Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes (Evaluation Expert Committee). It is composed of two representatives from each national competent authority and chaired by a representative of the Commission.

Who is the target group?

Evaluation stakeholders at the level of Member States, as well as at programme level (administrations, evaluators, academics, and stakeholders) are involved in the network’s activities, via seminars, workshops, discussions on thematic studies, and through the dissemination of a newsletter. Increasingly, a closer interaction within relevant Commission services is also being established.

How does the network operate?

The Evaluation Helpdesk serves as a central information point with regard to the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes and assists in the establishment and the management of the Evaluation Expert Network. Moreover, the Helpdesk provides expertise and guidance on methodological issues, such as evaluation practices and data collection, and supports the Commission and to the Member States in dealing with evaluation reports.

A dedicated set of technical support services and tools is provided by the Helpdesk. This includes a trilingual website (English, French and German), an electronic newsletter, a question and answer service, a glossary of terms, a good practice section and a collection of key literature.

The Helpdesk is composed of a permanent team of staff in Brussels, and is supported by around 20 experts from across the 27 EU countries, who have specific knowledge in the field



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of evaluating Rural Development Programmes. Thematic working groups are set up to analyse and draw conclusions on key themes, such as the assessment of socio-economic and environmental impacts, or the assessment of the Leader approach.

What are the network's objectives?

The overall aim of the Evaluation Expert Network is to **increase the usefulness of evaluation as a tool for policy design and steering**. This aim is broken down into three specific objectives:

1. To improve methods and tools in evaluating rural development programmes;
2. To increase capacity in implementing rural development evaluation processes;
3. To share knowledge in the evaluation of rural development programmes.

To what extent have the objectives of the Evaluation Expert Network been achieved?

In order to answer this question, it is helpful to get an overview of some physical outputs of the network, as presented on its [publications page](#), and to examine the perception of stakeholders that have been involved in the network's activities. In

relation to the latter, the network is currently carrying out a number of interviews at EU and Member State level. In the following section, a summary of the responses of stakeholders are grouped according to three questions (the full answers will be published in the next issue of Rural Evaluation News):

A) What are the most significant achievements & milestones of the Evaluation Expert Network?

- The Evaluation Expert Network is key to the **continuous improvement of the evaluation culture and professionalism**.
- Thanks to the Network, **evaluation has become more visible** and is now considered as a substantial part of the programme implementation processes.
- In the previous programming period there were only working groups on monitoring and evaluation, which have now been **consolidated by the activities of the network**.
- The added value consists in **creating contacts with thematic experts** from different Member States concerned with evaluation and indicators.
- The biggest achievement of the Network lies quite simply in **bringing people together**, to spend dedicated time on improving the design, conduct and utilisation of evaluation. This helps us all to work

smarter and consider how we can do things better. **Linking theory and practice** is a key part of this, and this applies both to the practice of rural development and to its evaluation.

- The added value of the Evaluation Expert Network at EU level is the **establishment of a permanent open forum for discussion** and the exchange of experience in evaluation related objectives.
- The significant change in comparison to the past is the **"creation of a common view"** between Member States and DG AGRI. In the past, the approach to evaluation was a "single bureaucratic one". Now, at least at the managing authority level, evaluation is perceived as a useful tool which can be used both in management and programming.
- In my opinion the biggest achievement of the Evaluation Expert Network so far is the **improvement of the methodologies and tools** that were developed by the Helpdesk.
- Furthermore, an essential improvement is the **open dialogue and the increased awareness of evaluation**, and the progress that has occurred in the formulation of a common terminology. This was made possible through various interactive methods and high level discussions between the European Commission and the Member States.



B) Lessons learnt from what concrete activities have worked well and what have worked less well?

- The Evaluation Network has managed to **create a structured exchange** with the European Commission. While in official expert meetings there is a hierarchical approach, in the meetings organised by the Evaluation Helpdesk there is an exchange between Member States and the Commission on equal terms.
- The primary benefit of the Evaluation Expert Network lies in the **forum it provides for communication and discussion** of rural evaluation and related issues. I think it has been extremely important in enabling evaluation to be addressed proactively and in a better planned and more consistent way.
- I find the **annual focus groups valuable** in extending the reach of the evaluation networking activity within the Member States, which all ways welcome the opportunity to come together and discuss evaluation matters with their peers. It links theory and practice and helps evaluation to be addressed in a positive manner.
- There are many achievements but so far, the biggest one in my opinion is the **good preparatory work and overall guidance** for the mid-term evaluation and subsequently the methodological assessment of Mid-Term Evaluation Reports for the 2007-2013 RDPs, which provided added value for all parties concerned. For evaluators and managing authorities it was a good opportunity to compare evaluation methods, practices and outcomes, and to benefit from some transfer of know-how.
- Sometimes the **guidance produced** cannot be implemented in the Member States.
- The **draft guidelines for the ex-ante evaluation** of 2014-2020 RDPs are, in my opinion, very useful for the managing authorities and the evaluators. We were happy to

receive these guidelines at the right time. I cannot see any missing activities. However, I believe that the Member States should be asked how they consider evaluation and how the recommendations proposed can be used efficiently.

- I would say that the **good practice workshops are my favorite activity**. It is an intelligent mix of knowledge transfer and exchange at all levels. It is also a great opportunity to get to know the individuals who are involved in the evaluation process and to understand their expectations, constraints and frustrations and to work on common relevant solutions.
- **At the moment, we do not see any missing activities**. The existence of the Evaluation Helpdesk and its pool of national experts make them easily accessible when evaluators want to ask for advice on any rural development evaluation related issues. We have made use of this service several times.

C) Future challenges for evaluation-related networking

- I believe that **more “capacity building” events** could be organised in the future, where specific issues are addressed.
- In the future, I would like to see **more themed events**, where specific issues are addressed. There have been a number of these so far but I think we could do more in order to strengthen our understanding of evaluating different delivery approaches.

- Some improvement could be made in terms of **networking with other evaluation expert networks** and especially with the ERDF – ESF.
- We are currently **missing similar monitoring and evaluation networks** at national level.
- There is a gap in terms of **coordination with respect to monitoring and evaluation with the Structural Funds**, both at EU and national level.
- The preparation for the indicator plan and evaluation plan to be used in the next programming period needs to be better coordinated: The Rural Development Committee and the Evaluation Expert Committee do not always work in tandem and we as Member State representatives sometimes notice incoherencies (e.g. indicator plan).



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National Rural Networks - the diversity of approaches

Approaches to rural networking in the EU vary significantly. All of the 27 Member States have established national rural networks (NRN), as required by EAFRD Regulation No. 1698/2005. However, the findings of a NRN Mapping Exercise, conducted in 2011 by the ENRD¹⁵, show that the structures created to animate the NRNs display huge diversity, in terms of both their design and functionality.

Structure and operational setup

Given the flexibility of Article 68 of the EAFRD Regulation, which does not strictly specify the organisational setup of NRNs, Member States tended to design implementation structures that were compatible with their national context, i.e. aligned to the way in which national public administrations are set up and managed.

Most EU Member States chose to establish network support units (NSU) at national level. In a number of cases, NRN implementation structures have been complemented by regional structures. Examples include the UK and Belgium, where national-level roles are limited to representation at EU level and coordination, while the regional networks of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Flanders and Wallonia all fulfil animation tasks and implement their respective annual work programmes (AWP). The French NSU covers a far more extensive portfolio of networking tasks, but also cooperates continuously with correspondents representing the animation teams of 26 regional

networks, each of which implements its own AWP. In Latvia, the NSU is composed of one central and 26 regional offices. Poland also maintains regional secretariats in each of its 16 regions. Like the country's central NSU, each contribute to the AWP implementation and cooperate with the NRNs of other EU Member States.

Differences in the operational setup of NSUs adds to the variety of implementation approaches, as certain Member States have decided to integrate NSUs within the public administration, while others have chosen to procure technical assistance contracts with external service providers. In the case of NSUs situated within public administrations, a further distinction can be made between those that are part of the administrative structure and those where the provision of networking services has been delegated to a public sector agency or institution affiliated to the administration.



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Budget

Over €515 million has been committed to the operation of networks (including NRNs and the ENRD) during the 2007-2013 programming period, of which an estimated €268 million comes from the EAFRD (less than 0.3% of total EAFRD funding) and €247 million from national co-financing¹⁶. AWP implementation by NSUs is usually funded from the Technical Assistance budget of the relevant rural development programme (RDP). In accordance with Article 66 of the EAFRD regulation, some of the Member States with regionalised RDPs (Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) have chosen to operate and finance NSUs in the framework of a programme document (NRN-P).

15 'Findings of the 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise: Final Synthesis Report' (ENRD Contact Point, November 2011); see: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=0DF4FA1F-09F1-5D17-923B-63AADB56186A

16 Best available data at completion of the NRN Mapping Exercise, November 2011.

In the absence of regulatory provisions, Member States were free to decide how much of their technical assistance budget to allocate to the operation of NSUs. Principles such as proportionality linked to size of territory, population, regionalisation, RDP budget or actions planned were not applied. EAFRD co-financing on average amounts to 52%, but individual rates also vary greatly between Member States, from 80% in Bulgaria and Romania to 0% in Luxembourg and Northern Ireland.

As a result, NSUs display different levels of capacity to engage in the design and implementation of networking activities. In addition, NSUs facing significant budget constraints or that have recently been the subject of budget revisions, find it difficult to expand and further develop contacts with the NRN's wider constituency, or with research institutes, and can rarely participate in networking initiatives at European level¹⁷.

Network management and operational mandate

NSU service delivery is usually based on work plans, which are agreed and approved in the form of AWP's by managing authorities. While such AWP's govern the current operation of most European NSUs, four Member States actually implement multi-annual work plans (Bulgaria, Denmark, Luxembourg and Poland). Two Member States (Greece and

Romania) only recently launched the implementation of their very first AWP's.

All Member States dispose of particular mechanisms to approve the AWP, to assign responsibility to the NSU or NRN members for the implementation of AWP priorities and/or specific activities, and to review the progress made. The latter has been gaining more prominence recently with NRNs undertaking joint action, sharing their knowledge and understanding of how best to realise the value that networking can bring to the implementation of rural development policy¹⁸.

Two distinct types of decision-making processes have been identified, the first being steering committee-type structures to which the NSUs often provide secretarial assistance, and less formal decision-making processes, which mainly rely on consultation and mutual agreement, and very often the NSUs fulfil a moderator or facilitator role.

Once again, guidance is missing as to how exactly an NRN should assist RDP implementation. The four network programmes (NRN-Ps) with their more rigid framework and

intervention logic clearly identify the functions and tasks of the respective NSUs. In the case of all other NRNs the different NSU operational mandates range from largely independent implementation of planned work programme activities to cases where AWP implementation is subject to continued scrutiny and modification and/or requires repeated approvals by the national authorities for procurement purposes.

The 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise showed that most of the activities undertaken by the NSUs concern communication and training. The implementation of actions and initiatives linked to consultation and the analysis of programme delivery are, on the other hand, less often included in the operational mandate of NSUs, and it appears that this has become an issue where conflict has arisen between some NSUs and their national authorities¹⁹.



© Mario Folchi

Table 1: NRN decision making set-up by NSU

NRN participation / representation	
Formal membership	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK-Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland, UK Wales
Open membership	Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Italy, Latvia, The Netherlands, UK-England

17 'What do we know about networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool?' (ENRD Contact Point, May 2012), p. 8; see http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=837D98FA-C1BC-8182-E67A-93D2B2B70528

18 See http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networks-and-networking/added-value-of-networking/en/added-value-of-networking_en.cfm

19 'What do we know about networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool?' (ENRD Contact Point, May 2012), p. 9

Participation and representation

As specified in Article 68 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005, the role of NRNs is to bring together organisations and administrations involved in rural development. In the context of the ENRD's 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise, eight NSU operators (Belgium-Wallonia, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Netherlands) stated explicitly that NRN participation is also open to individuals, i.e. RDP beneficiaries.

In accordance with the partnership principle of Article 6 of the EAFRD Regulation No. 1698/2005, Member States have taken a variety of different approaches to network governance. The spectrum of stakeholder inclusion in rural networks ranges from open access to formalised and/or rather restricted participation. As a consequence, two main types of NRN participation have evolved in the current programming period: nineteen NSUs in seventeen Member States maintain formal processes, i.e. assignment or application, to determine membership and hence admission to the network. Another twelve NSUs

from eleven Member States seem to practice a more informal approach to membership, i.e. anyone representing a stakeholder group involved in or concerned by rural development is usually considered a member, and as such is admitted to participate in the activities of the network.

The dominance of fixed/or rather restricted conditions for participation in rural networks, however, points to a potential lack of understanding amongst national authorities about the role of networks and networking. This carries multiple risks, given that stakeholder inclusion and representation is vital for building connections and thus establishing the network's constituency. It could potentially result in restrictive assumptions regarding the NSU capacity needs and may affect available resources and motivation to fully and effectively engage with the community of rural stakeholders, especially those key actors of direct relevance

to the priorities of the NSUs' annual work plans. It is, therefore, of particular importance for NSUs to be in a position to flexibly involve any rural stakeholder considered to be important for the efficient and effective implementation of networking initiatives.

Note that in the case of United Kingdom and Belgium a number of regional Networks (One per every RDP) have been set up. In the case of Belgium these comprise of Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, whilst in the case of the UK these are UK-Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland, UK Wales and UK-England. In the case of Poland and France several regional structures have been established within one RDP.




© Carmen Pérez solo

Table 2: Stakeholder membership by NRN




Operational set-up of NRN decision making processes	
Formal (steering-committee-type)	Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden
Formal, including co-ordination with others	Belgium-Wallonia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, UK-Northern Ireland, UK-Wales
Informal, including co-ordination with others	Belgium-Flanders, Denmark, The Netherlands, UK-England, UK-Scotland

Note that in the case of United Kingdom and Belgium a number of regional Networks (One per every RDP) have been set up. In the case of Belgium these comprise of Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, whilst in the case of the UK these are UK-Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland, UK Wales and UK-England. In the case of Poland and France several regional structures have been established within one RDP.

NRN participation / representation

-  **Fixed/restricted membership**
-  **Open membership**
-  **non EU members**
-  **others**

NSU Operating Structure

-  **Within National Authorities**
-  **Delegated to public sector agency or institution**
-  **Outsourced to external service provider**

NORDIC-BALTIC CLUSTER

- Voluntary initiative launched in 2008 in the context of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) involving NRNs from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden
- NRNs located around the Baltic Sea share similar concerns: RDP delivery and the impact of the development of rural areas on the whole macro-region
- Knowledge transfer involves NRNs, NFNs, MAs, LAGs and FLAGs.
- Current focus: flagship project to implement a long-term Nordic-Baltic macro-region platform on youth and innovation.

NETHERLANDS



- NSU support provides all rural actors with know-how and information: villagers, entrepreneurs, farmers, environmental groups, local government and administration
- Among the innovative tools of the NSU's support kit:
 1. Website, weblog, web 2.0 tools, digital newsletter and magazine;
 2. Various platforms from small workshops to large conferences and communities of practice around specific themes;
 3. Thinktanks, workshops and webinars;
 4. Excursions and field meetings to bring target groups together around best practices.

MEDITERRANEAN CLUSTER

- Initiative launched in Feb 2012, involving NRNs of Italy, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta.
- The cluster focuses on "Developing Mediterranean Quality Agricultural Products". It's specific objectives include:
 1. Sharing experience with EAFRD support for Mediterranean quality agricultural products;
 2. Development of a "Common Opinion" identifying wider common and country-specific issues, providing recommendations for joint action at macro-regional level;
 3. Possibly, establishment of an expert network supporting the set-up of a quality food Mediterranean platform.

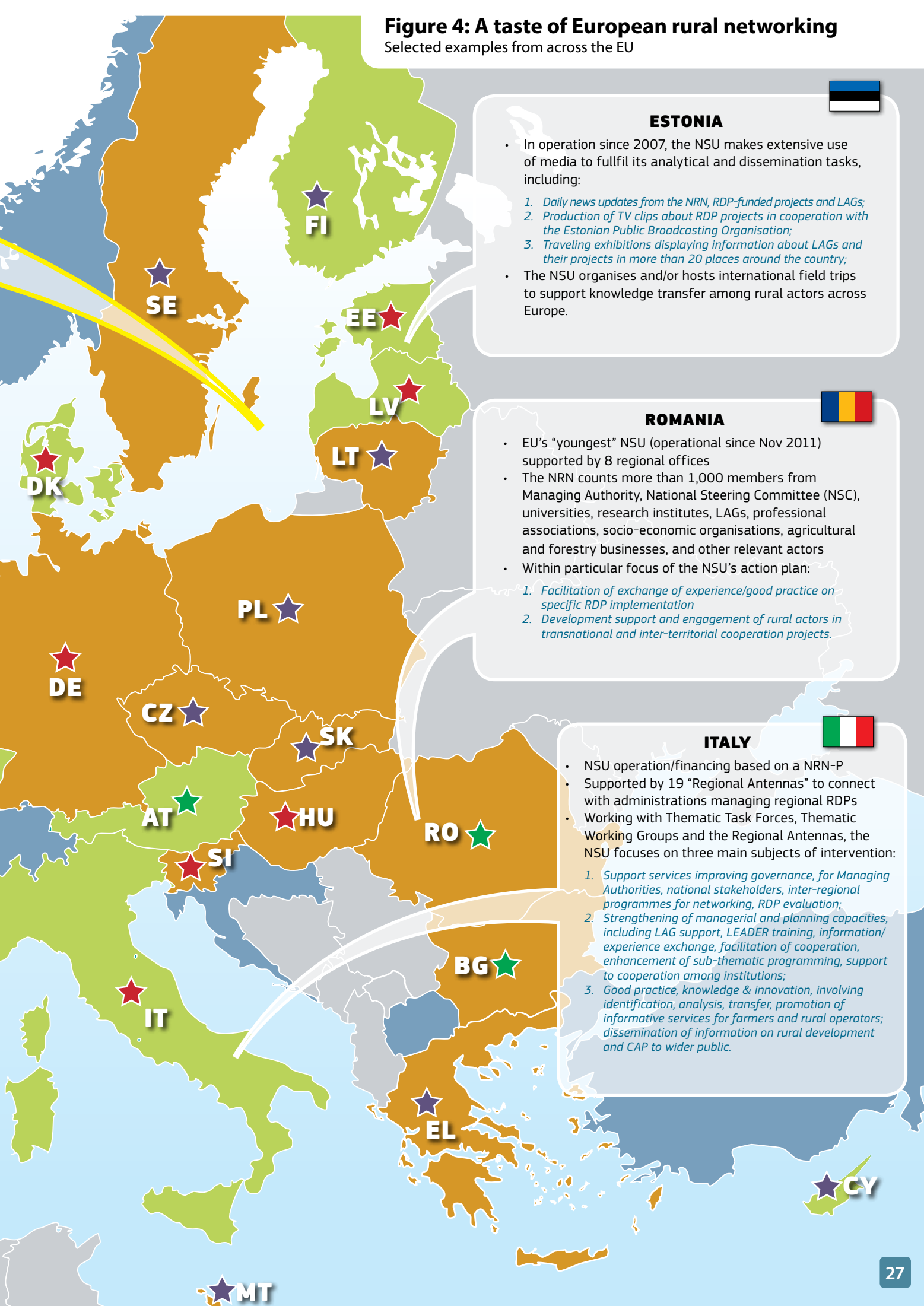
PORTUGAL



- NSU operation/financing is based on a NRN-P
- NRN-P implementation is based on an action plan, created through a participatory process involving proposals of regional rural assemblies and an annual work plan;
- The NRN-P priorities correspond to five intervention areas:
 1. Capitalising on experience and knowledge;
 2. Facilitating cooperation among rural actors and territories;
 3. Monitoring the rural world and the implementation of rural development policies;
 4. Facilitating information access;
 5. Rural Network Operation.

Figure 4: A taste of European rural networking

Selected examples from across the EU



ESTONIA



- In operation since 2007, the NSU makes extensive use of media to fulfill its analytical and dissemination tasks, including:
 1. Daily news updates from the NRN, RDP-funded projects and LAGs;
 2. Production of TV clips about RDP projects in cooperation with the Estonian Public Broadcasting Organisation;
 3. Traveling exhibitions displaying information about LAGs and their projects in more than 20 places around the country;
- The NSU organises and/or hosts international field trips to support knowledge transfer among rural actors across Europe.

ROMANIA



- EU's "youngest" NSU (operational since Nov 2011) supported by 8 regional offices
- The NRN counts more than 1,000 members from Managing Authority, National Steering Committee (NSC), universities, research institutes, LAGs, professional associations, socio-economic organisations, agricultural and forestry businesses, and other relevant actors
- Within particular focus of the NSU's action plan:
 1. Facilitation of exchange of experience/good practice on specific RDP implementation
 2. Development support and engagement of rural actors in transnational and inter-territorial cooperation projects.

ITALY



- NSU operation/financing based on a NRN-P
- Supported by 19 "Regional Antennas" to connect with administrations managing regional RDPs
- Working with Thematic Task Forces, Thematic Working Groups and the Regional Antennas, the NSU focuses on three main subjects of intervention:
 1. Support services improving governance, for Managing Authorities, national stakeholders, inter-regional programmes for networking, RDP evaluation;
 2. Strengthening of managerial and planning capacities, including LAG support, LEADER training, information/experience exchange, facilitation of cooperation, enhancement of sub-thematic programming, support to cooperation among institutions;
 3. Good practice, knowledge & innovation, involving identification, analysis, transfer, promotion of informative services for farmers and rural operators; dissemination of information on rural development and CAP to wider public.

Building connections: the family of EU policy networks

Networking is at the core of EU policy planning and implementation, because it allows for the diversity of European actors (from public institutions to civil society) to develop and share ideas, transfer knowledge, and ultimately to add value to the links that already exist between the 27 Member States. Countless EU networks currently exist, but outlined here is a selection of those that are more relevant to rural development policy.

FARNET- the European Fisheries Areas Network

FARNET is the community of people, including experts, civil servants and local citizens from across the EU, that are collectively engaged in implementing a particular strand (Axis 4) of the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) aimed at promoting sustainable development in EU fisheries areas.

Funding available under this new strand is targeted primarily at creating alternative economic activity and improving the quality of life in areas affected by a decline in fishing activities.

A particularly innovative aspect of Axis 4 is its territorial or area-based approach, whereby decision-making on the use of funding is delegated to locally established organisations, known as Fisheries Local Action

Groups (FLAGs). Decision-making is based on a local strategy, developed by each FLAG in response to specific local needs and opportunities.

FLAGs, and others involved in the implementation of Axis 4, are assisted by the FARNET Support Unit, which facilitates networking

“Improved access of network partners to information on ‘who does what’ helps to avoid duplication and exposes gaps, while dissemination of good practices (success stories) provides inspiration and encouragement”

Urszula Budzich-Szukala (FARNET)

it is particularly valuable that it can provide opportunities for exchange and capacity building for all actors involved in Axis 4 of the European Fisheries Fund – local groups and their national networks, as well as managing authorities and EU Desk Officers. The following have been identified as the key areas where networking can add value:

- information and capacity building: improved access of network partners to information on “who does what” helps to avoid duplication and find gaps, while dissemination of good practices (success stories) provides inspiration and encouragement; this exchange and mutual learning can also help to build capacity and improve the operations of network members;
- building trust and providing a platform for joint activities: once the network members get to know each other, they can begin to undertake joint action, i.e. develop and implement cooperation projects;
- representation: many networks are set up to represent the views of their members towards regional, national and European decision-makers. This function helps to give a voice to local actors and facilitates the consultation processes.”

For further information:

<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet/>



© Monika Stonecka

The Enterprise Europe Network

The Enterprise Europe Network, with its unique outreach through more than 600 partner organisations in 53 countries, has a clear mission: to bring businesses closer to businesses in order to help European SMEs to grow. Partner organisations include chambers of commerce and industry and technology centres. Through local business organisations, the Enterprise Europe Network helps small businesses to develop new markets, source or license new technologies and access EU finance and EU funding.

“The tourism sector was identified by the Commission as one of the potential growth sectors, despite the difficult economic climate, and a set of actions are under development to maximise the potential of EU policies and financial instruments in this sector. The ENRD can contribute to the achievement of these objectives, notably by increasing synergies with other European networks active in the field of tourism, like the Enterprise Europe Network, NECSTouR and ERRIN,”

Alain Libéros, Directorate General for Enterprise and Industry, European Commission.

Every year, tens of thousands of SMEs participate, with the help of the Enterprise Europe Network, in specialised matchmaking events targeting a vast range of industries. These events lead to the signature of thousands of commercial or technological cooperation partnerships. Through its Sector Groups, the Network can also target SMEs in specialised sectors, such as the tourism industry.

For example, a German company – Weitsprung, which specialises in tourism for individuals with reduced mobility - went to a networking event organised by the Enterprise Europe Network at the ITB Berlin international travel and trade fair and found a business partner in Greece.

Link to the success story:
<http://portal.enterprise-europe-network.ec.europa.eu/success-stories/trip-lifetime>

For further information:
<http://portal.enterprise-europe-network.ec.europa.eu/>

URBACT

URBACT is the European exchange and learning programme promoting integrated and sustainable urban policies in cities across Europe.

By means of thematic exchange and learning networks, URBACT enables cities to work together to develop sustainable pragmatic solutions that tackle economic, social and environmental issues in urban development. URBACT enables cities to share good practices and draw lessons from their experience, in order to disseminate them to urban practitioners and policy-makers across Europe.

Since 2007, URBACT has supported 56 transnational networks and working groups, implicating about 500 European cities and around 7000 stakeholders in the production of integrated action plans at local level. So far, 27 projects (networks and working groups) have completed their activities and delivered a series of thematic outputs, good practices and policy recommendations on various issues, ranging from the active inclusion of young people or the elderly, to the development of science districts or the regeneration of abandoned military sites. Partners involved in these networks have produced more than 250 integrated local action plans, some of which are currently being implemented with the support of

the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or the European Social Fund (ESF). All results are available on the URBACT website (www.urbact.eu), which also contains information on ongoing networks. Nine other thematic networks are currently in their final stages and about to deliver another series of outputs, while 19 new networks are under development.

For further information:
<http://urbact.eu/>

INTERACT

INTERACT is a Territorial Cooperation programme co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the Member States of the European Union, Norway and Switzerland. It provides practical support, training and advice to Territorial Cooperation programmes on management techniques, financial issues, European regulations, communications, strategic orientation and policy development. INTERACT also provides a unique forum for Territorial Cooperation stakeholders by supporting institutional and thematic networks on topics of common interest.

A substantial amount of INTERACT's activities are based on networking, for the simple reason that this is at the core of the advancements in knowledge and in good practices. Networking and committed communication among professionals of any field make it possible to share understandings of common issues and how to best tackle them. The resources used to promote this approach more than outweigh the opportunity costs that would be incurred with the alternative approach – continuously reinventing what has probably already been invented.

For further information:
<http://www.interact-eu.net/>

NRN's: good practices and success stories

Six key elements can be identified in networking development within rural development policy. While these remain the same for each NRN, the differing nature and maturity of the networks has led to a highly diverse number of actions being delivered under each element. It is the combination of these networking actions by NRNs which enhance the knowledge, understanding and expertise of the network.

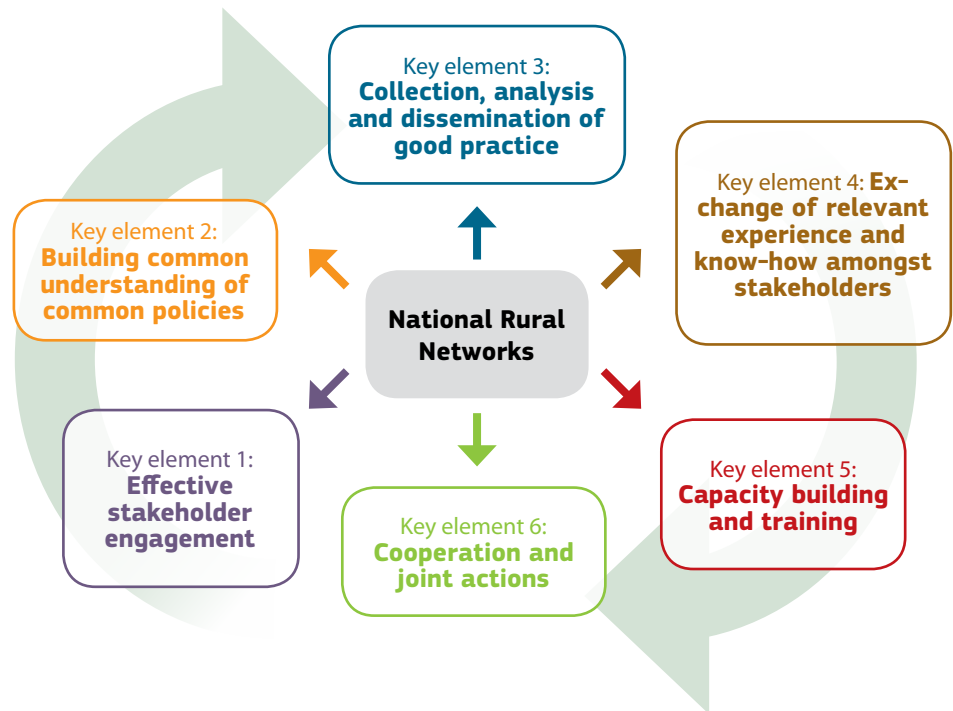
The process begins with the networks engaging with their stakeholder groups. This engagement utilises a broad approach for all stakeholders, complemented with specific activities which target harder-to-reach groups or those with specific needs. Once engaged with the network, these stakeholders can be supported to work together to develop a shared understanding of the common policies they are involved in managing or delivering. This shared

understanding then enables the networks to facilitate the collection of good practice examples that can be further analysed and disseminated to support the development of their stakeholder's knowledge. As the network stakeholders understand and experience grows they will also seek networking vehicles to exchange information and experience in their own or other networks. This exchange of good practice and know-how will enable stakeholders to more easily identify

their training needs and so lead to requests for networking support to deliver appropriate training. Networking actions develop knowledge amongst stakeholders and over time, members will have the confidence to seek support to identify potential partners to deliver joint, cooperative projects. All of the above elements help to raise awareness of the networking support available, which will engage new stakeholders and so the cycle begins again.

The six key elements of the networking cycle:

There are many examples of how these six key steps have been effectively delivered by NRNs. The nature of the networking cycle means that experienced, mature NRNs are using the same steps as the new networks, which indicates the benefit of continued shared learning at a network level.



Key element 1: effective stakeholder engagement

To be successful, networking activity must engage with the stakeholders involved in that network. Effective engagement enables the network to deliver both broad and targeted information and support when and where it is most needed. There are many examples of differing

techniques to engage with all, or identified groups of stakeholders. Nearly all NRNs utilise communication tools such as websites and newsletters and many have also implemented innovative approaches, particularly when attempting to engage with harder-to-reach groups.

The Finnish NRN targeted engagement with young people through

a touring Rural Van, which disseminated information and encouraged young people to take part in local activities and action groups, and to make use of the business and project funding available. In the Netherlands, the NRN works with municipal aldermen to engage 'communities of practice' through the facilitation of problem-solving discussion sessions.

Case study: effective engagement of women in local development - Poland

The regional NSU of Wielkopolskie Voivodship recognised that an increasing number of women were acting as the catalyst for development activity in rural areas, and so identified them as a key stakeholder group. This led to the development of the 'School for Women Leaders', an initiative to effectively engage women in rural areas, provide support to improve their professional skills, and increase their ability to achieve positive outcomes in their communities.

The project consisted of two training modules, the first of which was devoted to local animation techniques, covering issues such as the recognition of local community resources. The second module focused on establishing NGOs in rural areas, and also provided an opportunity to meet women who run successful NGO activities in other areas. Seminars for groups of 20 people were also held, during which the group performed common tasks, solved problems, got to know one another and learned how to understand others and ask questions.

Training participants exchanged information, with many new contacts made and ideas for joint projects developed.

A support group with a tutor from each of the four participating LAG's of Association Puszcza Notecka, LAG Association Wrota Wielkopolski, LAG Association Solna Dolina and Czarnkowsko-Trzcianecka LAG was also created, with LAG offices becoming contact hubs for rural women. Other LAGs expressed a need for similar training and a willingness to deepen and expand the knowledge and skills developed within this project, so during 2011 and 2012 the NSU continued the project with the remaining 27 LAGs in the region. The project has been so successful that the regional secretariat has recently launched a competition to give awards to the best activities developed by participants as a result of attending the training course.



© Polish NRN



Key element 2: building a common understanding of common policies

The NRNs are ideally placed to develop a shared understanding between a range of different stakeholders. In some cases, the NRNs provide the only platform through which particular stakeholder groups can communicate. This enables the NRNs to work with different groups involved with similar areas of policy to develop a shared understanding, not only of the policy itself but also of its effective delivery. Methods for building this understanding vary widely across Member States.

The English NRN organised a conference to encourage all stakeholders to work together to understand the changes in the delivery of Axis 4 that occurred at a national level after a change in administrative structures during the programme period. This facilitated working enabled the managing authority to identify and manage potential delivery issues from the beginning of the process.

The Flemish Rural Network delivered 'experience platforms' prior to meetings with the Monitoring Committee of the RDP to explain the measures to all interested members. Although the topic was different each time, these platforms focused on the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Many of these activities also focus on a single policy theme. To improve the implementation of the agri-environment measure relating to biodiversity, the Austrian NRN organised workshops involving all relevant stakeholders. This enabled them to work together on the existing concept of biodiversity areas, to develop new ideas for the coming period, and to raise awareness of the importance of these areas for the environment.

Case study: building a shared understanding of rural environmental issues - Finland

The aim of the environment themed year in 2010 was to draw attention to rural environmental issues and to improve the environment through the diverse measures available under the Mainland Finland and Åland Islands Rural Development Programmes. A number of events were organised during the year for the general public, farmers and rural communities, to build a common understanding around the efforts made to care for the environment and to encourage them to take advantage of the opportunities available.

A nationwide educational tour comprising 26 events focused on solving local and regional environmental challenges was attended by 852 people. The theme was also promoted through exhibitions and events organised by various stakeholder groups. Almost 400 people convened in national seminars to hear about the latest scientific findings associated with agri-environmental efforts and to discuss new ways of improving the state of the environment.

The networking approach taken to deliver the initiative also encouraged other network stakeholders to develop and implement complimentary activities, and therefore added significant value to the programme of events. For example, the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Finnish 4H Federation (4H - Head, Hands, Heart and Health) organised an environmental campaign aimed at schoolchildren.

The Finnish 4H Federation is the largest youth organisation in Finland, with 75,000 young people as members. It works with 6-to-28 year olds on a range of long-term goals, which combine entrepreneurship, education, workplace skills and active citizenship. A teacher's handbook, which includes both classroom-based and outdoor activities, was also designed, to acquaint pupils with environmental conservation efforts in rural areas, biodiversity, and water system management. The campaign also featured at an agricultural exhibition aimed at children, which had approximately 4,000 visitors.

During the year, the general public received information on topics that are usually considered difficult to understand and real life examples were presented in a way that made them easy to discuss. These activities encouraged people to take action on the environment, resulting, for example, in the establishment of several new wetland areas.



© NRN Finland

Key element 3: collection, analysis and dissemination of good practice

In most cases, NSUs have access to project data held by managing authorities and paying agencies. Consequently, their knowledge of the actions being undertaken and projects being delivered is unrivalled. Identifying and collecting good practice examples, which are of relevance to other members of the network, enables good practice to be replicated. There are many different approaches to project delivery and a diverse range of tools available to accomplish them. Communicating examples of where these have worked

well enables other network members to identify actions that could work successfully for them.

In the Alentejo region of Portugal, eight experienced LAGs are working together to identify good practice in local development strategies and models of local governance. This focus on the concepts, methods and techniques of rural development will enable them to manage the significant changes that are occurring in rural areas, deepen the conceptual framework and introduce new scientific knowledge that will enrich the LEADER approach in their areas.



Case study: assessment of good practice with academic partners and rural practitioners - Wallonia

In order to identify and disseminate good, transferable practices, the Walloon Rural Development Network created a Scientific Committee. The Committee is made up of five academic organisations, all of which are familiar with multidisciplinary approaches, have invested in applied research or produced training tools, and have significant experience in supporting, monitoring and evaluating rural or territorial development projects.

This Committee helps the Network Support Unit with its analysis of the needs of the network and provides business intelligence on rural development and the socio-economic aspects of the rural development guidelines. It supports the working groups, identifies innovative methodological approaches for LAGs, participates in the development of good practice examples, and formulates recommendations on rural policy.

Based on their analysis of the needs of the network, the Scientific Committee and the Network Support Unit propose to the Steering Committee and the General Assembly of the Rural Development Programme some key issues to be addressed in multi-sectoral discussions that bring together project operators. The Scientific Committee has already supported networking between rural development actors in Wallonia through the production of a range of good practice examples, studies on the efficacy of policy measures, and other collaborative activities with LAGs.



© Walloon Rural Network Support Unit

Key element 4: exchange of relevant experience and know-how amongst stakeholders

As well as sharing good practice it is also important to exchange other forms of relevant experience and understanding throughout the network. Interpreting and exploring actions which have built knowledge and know-how and exchanging this information is as important to the efficacy of policy development,

management and delivery as the dissemination of good practice.

The Latvian NRN organised an exchange visit for Latvian forestry owners to learn about the experience of cooperative working in Scandinavia. Finland and Sweden were chosen due to their similar forest conditions and management practices, as well as the fact that many Scandinavian companies are active in the Latvian forestry sector. During the study trip, participants from Finland shared

information on the historical establishment of cooperatives, their conditions and economic benefits, as well as about the forestry sector in general. In Sweden, a seminar was held on forest cooperatives, which included meeting with members of such cooperatives, who gave practical information about the challenges and benefits of working together. After the study trip the first forest owners' cooperative in Latvia, 'Mezsaimnieks', was established.



Case study: exchanging experience between Local Action Groups - Italy

The 'LEADER in practice' project included a series of study visits organised by the LEADER Task Force of the NRN and was offered to all LAGs and rural development practitioners in order to exchange experience in developing innovative project solutions to rural development issues. The purpose of this initiative was to provide study visits to real projects supported through the RDP that addressed key innovation issues in the development of rural areas.

To ensure the exchange of experience was as broad as possible, the project provided attendees with the necessary tools to use the lessons learnt in their own areas. Every visit was accompanied by a set of useful materials, such as key regulations, and examples of communication and financial statements. Information on each visit was presented in detail with texts and images that could be used by the LAGs to present it in their own areas. Also included was all the information needed to use the visits to organise training activities or study visits for local practitioners.

The study visits were organised using a standard formula: they focused on a single subject, examined specific operational issues, and heard from real practitioners. The visits lasted two days and included field trips, with support documents available online. Each example selected was in an advanced stage and financially self-supporting, was related to a specific issue, had positive effects throughout the local community, created local innovation and had been supported by LEADER funding, alongside resources from other funds.

Themes have included: value added through local production, multifunctional tourist services, new forms of renewable energy, and the creation of new economic activities. LAGs that participated in the study visits are in ongoing contact and are launching cooperation initiatives and helping each other in carrying out their projects. After the four initial exchanges, fifteen other LAGs have also volunteered to organise study visits in their areas.

Key element 5: capacity building and training

The knowledge gained through sharing of good practice and experience is complimented through the delivery of training initiatives. These actions are highly diverse as they are tailored to the specific needs of each group and can be broad in nature or highly specific. Various, innovative models for delivering training have also been developed, which themselves are examples of good practice.

Both the Maltese and Latvian NRNs have delivered generic training to their LAG managers and, in some cases, to the managing authorities. This has helped new LAGs to better understand the RDP and facilitated more effective delivery. Actions can also focus on specific areas of need, with the Hungarian NRN delivering thematic training to improve the LAGs knowledge of and capacity to communicate. This training covered communication techniques and channels, effective presentations, and using the internet, with a particular focus on social media.



Case study: building the capacity of LAG managers - Austria

In many cases, different LAG managers experience similar challenges in their everyday work. However, these often occur at different times, often depending on the maturity of the LAG, and consequently seminars and workshops are not always the right means of addressing them.

The Austrian NSU began looking for a learning tool that would enable knowledge transfer from experienced LAG managers to those with specific challenges or issues. Intervention, a tool for 'cooperative counselling' was already working very well in systemic consulting in professional organisations, so it seemed to be an appropriate mechanism to achieve this.

During an Intervention session, one LAG manager describes a problem or issue they have encountered and the other participants take on specific roles and review the situation by asking questions or interpreting the information provided. These roles can either be in relation to the problem or can also simply be the role of an observer,

who gives feedback and provides new viewpoints to the person presenting the issue.

The Austrian NSU established a number of Intervention groups involving between four and five LAG managers, who were trained in the use of the tool. These groups have helped LAG managers to gain new viewpoints on their problems and to develop their own competences, sometimes through their own, self-organised Intervention groups. Currently there are several independent groups who regularly work with the Intervention tool or use it occasionally when a special need arises.

For this innovative approach to be successful there must be continuous and committed participation, openness, and mutual trust between all the participants in the Intervention session. The members must be willing to bring forward actual cases from their own professional lives and have a good understanding of the roles they take on without judging other members of the group.

Key element 6: cooperation and joint actions

The networking activities delivered under the previous five steps help to build the confidence of stakeholders and so encourages them to work with other stakeholders from their own network or from networks in other countries. To facilitate this, the network provides stakeholders with the opportunity to meet potential partners, discuss shared ideas, and develop cooperative projects.

Case study: cooperation at the international agricultural and food fair - Slovakia



Every summer, the international agricultural and food fair, Agrokomplex, takes place in Nitra, Slovakia. In 2011, the National Rural Network of the Slovak Republic organised an exhibition area at the fair, which included Local Action Groups from other Member States.

The aim of the exhibition was to present the work of the NRN and the implementation of the LEADER approach in Slovakia, to promote traditional regional products and folk traditions, and to facilitate a discussion about the future of the Slovakian countryside. The exhibition was also an excellent opportunity to develop new contacts, share good practice, search for inspiration through partnership between NRNs and LAGs from other countries, and develop inter-territorial or transnational cooperation projects.

An exhibition area of 385m² was created, where LAGs from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland had a chance to create new or strengthen already established partnerships.

To attract the attention of visitors, and to emphasise the unique nature and traditions of rural areas; the tasting of regional products and presentations of traditional craft works, skills and folk traditions were part of the daily programme. A special part of this cultural activity was a fashion show of traditional folk costumes, which proved very popular with visitors.

For further information:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNLD_7Tfx20&feature=related



Networking the NRNs: action and learning through cooperation

The national rural networks (NRNs) are increasingly visible as they connect, inform and support rural stakeholders at all levels in each of the EU-27 Member States. What is less visible, but equally important, are the joint actions between NRNs – the ‘networking of the networks’. This is a higher level of cooperation and information exchange that has the potential to greatly enhance the effectiveness and impact of individual NRNs.

The huge diversity of the EAFRD-funded rural networks (see National Rural Networks: the diversity of approaches on pages 23) can be a little confusing when encountered for the first time. There are so many different network structures, forms of governance, thematic priorities and activities.

But this diversity is actually very healthy and contributes to the effective functioning of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), as it is one of the key factors supporting the flow of information, knowledge, experience and ideas at European level. And of course, this flow is greatly enhanced when the NRNs communicate between themselves and generally become more inter-connected.

Facilitating the networking of the networks is one of the key roles of the ENRD. Since its launch in 2008, NRN representatives have been regularly invited to participate in meetings and events organised at European level to share experiences and information. Since 2010, the NRNs have also been encouraged to form clusters – so-called NRN Thematic Initiatives - to develop joint activities,

promote greater cooperation and promote technical exchange and dialogue. More recently, it has become obvious that many NRNs have also been forming their own geographical clusters (including cross-border partnerships) and this is now actively promoted by the ENRD under the title of Macro-regional Knowledge Exchange Clusters.

Thematic clusters

The establishment and promotion of NRN Thematic Initiatives is a specific approach used by the ENRD to bring together NRNs at European level with a common interest in specific areas of rural development policy and programme implementation. Following a consultation exercise and a review of potential subjects, three preliminary NRN Thematic Initiatives were launched by the ENRD in March 2010: Social Farming, Forestry and Rural Entrepreneurship²⁰. An additional Thematic Initiative on Communicating Rural Development was launched in June 2011. Priority was given to topics with a strong European dimension and where there was both a clear need to share knowledge and relevant experience of programme implementation and

the potential to engage the interest of a wider audience of stakeholders within the ENRD.

The NRN Thematic Initiatives have developed in different ways and with varying levels of activity and success. Building effective communication and connections between the NRNs has not always been easy. The ENRD Contact Point was inevitably required to play an active role in maintaining the Thematic Initiatives since, due to resource constraints and competing priorities, relatively few NRNs were willing or able to take the lead on specific activities. Nonetheless, there have been many successful outcomes.

For example, the NRN Thematic Initiative on Forestry has flourished, with a core group of ten NRNs emerging to promote the exchange of experience and practice relevant to improving the implementation of the forestry measures in the 2007-2013 programming period. Following the initial preparation of a background paper, supported by the ENRD Contact Point, the NRNs maintained the momentum with a series of meetings and events, including a study trip to the Dehesa in Spain (2010),



a public goods seminar in Belgium (2010), the RomaForest 2011 event in Italy, a LAG event in France (2011), and a bioenergy from forests seminar in Finland (2011).

For more information on previous and currently active NRN Thematic Initiatives please see the ENRD website (http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/themes/en/themes_en.cfm).

Geographical clusters

The coastline of the Baltic Sea uniquely connects a total of eight NRNs commonly known as the Nordic-Baltic rural networks²¹. Some of these NRNs, such as those in Finland and Sweden, have a deep-rooted heritage in networking, whilst others are completely new networks.

The Nordic-Baltic rural networks first began communicating in 2007. "We were setting-up our networks for the first time and we all had a lot to learn", explains Ave Bremse from the Estonian Rural Network. "The natural thing to do was to pick up the telephone and ask our neighbours what they were planning – and so our cooperation began." Since 2008, the networks have regularly met twice per year and have recently also been joined by the fisheries groups' national networks established in the region.

The Nordic-Baltic networks are increasingly important in the context of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which was adopted by the European Commission in June 2009²². The EUSBSR aims to address the urgent environmental problems of the Baltic Sea region through an integrated strategy. One key element of the strategy is sustainable rural development and the Nordic-Baltic rural networks are actively promoting synergies between their rural development programmes (RDs) and the objectives of the EUSBSR.



One of the key lessons learnt from the Nordic-Baltic cluster is that networks are much more likely to co-operate effectively – as well as learn from each other's experiences - when they have a well-defined common interest. As Hans-Olof Stålgren from the Swedish Rural Network commented during a recent meeting of the networks, "we have a common history, a common identity and a common future, so it's therefore appropriate that we work together on common solutions to our common issues and challenges."

Communication between networks is greatly enhanced by regular meetings focused on specific macro-regional issues which can be either territorial or thematic. Likewise, it is also much easier to engage other stakeholders, such as managing authorities, organisations, Local Action Groups, and project promoters in meaningful dialogue when discussions have relevance to the national context of all participants.

The importance of 'good neighbourliness' should also not be underestimated. The networks in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania especially emphasize the importance of having confidence in the experience and opinion of their neighbours in the older Member States. This was particularly important during the early phases of network establishment and development, but is also expected to continue as the networks evolve and mature.

The clustering of NRNs around mutual learning and support is clearly not only relevant to the Baltic Sea region and cooperation between NRNs in other macro-regions could foster common visions that cut across national and organizational boundaries. The promotion of Macro-regional Knowledge Exchange Clusters²³ is therefore a new initiative of the ENRD and the first meeting of the Mediterranean Macro-regional Cluster in Thessaloniki was held in February 2012. This brought together the NRNs from Italy, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta in order to share experience of EAFRD support for quality Mediterranean agricultural products and to identify common issues that might justify further joint action at a macro-regional level²⁴. A second meeting was held in Cyprus on 17/10.

One further important motivation for macro-regional cooperation between NRNs is to promote transnational cooperation between Local Action Groups. The Hungarian NRN has, for example, been very active in forming bilateral cross-border partnerships with its neighbouring NRNs – notably in Poland, Slovakia and most recently Romania. As Agnès Kiss from the Hungarian NRN concludes, "relations between our countries date back to the middle ages and we have traditionally enjoyed a close friendship. We hope now that partnership between the NRNs will facilitate further informal long-term relationships at all levels and contribute to productive bi-lateral cooperation between our rural communities."

21 Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany

22 For further information, please see here: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperate/baltic/index_en.cfm

23 Macro-regions are clearly defined geographical regions consisting – either wholly or partially - of two or more Member States

24 For further information, please see here: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en-rd-events-and-meetings/meetings/en/1st-nrn-cluster-meeting_en.cfm

The case of LEADER and the networking of LAGs

LEADER has been, and still is, a wonderful networking “laboratory”, where local stakeholders assess the strengths and weaknesses of a region by consulting with all the interested parties. Local Action Groups (LAGs) – the implementing bodies of the LEADER approach - play an important role, by providing the platform for exchange and cooperation between players at local, national and transnational level.



© ENRD Contact Point

The concept of the LAG represents an approach to networking in itself, as it is structured around local participation and representation. To establish a LAG, local actors need to be brought together to share their knowledge about local assets, needs and perspectives.

LAGs also act also at regional, national and European level. They develop exchanges with other LAGs on their own initiative or by participating in NRN or ENRD initiatives.

Experiences and lessons learnt from networking in LEADER

The exchange between local stakeholders helps to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of an area; it clarifies which rural development initiatives should remain ongoing and it identifies those aspects currently not working so well. Most importantly, this process involves consultation with the local population and aims to ensure maximum inclusion of relevant views and experiences.

Eventually, this local networking process raises awareness and stimulates those most concerned to contribute to the formulation of a local development strategy (LDS).

The main reason that networking has been so beneficial to the implementation of LEADER lies in its capacity to help LAGs stimulate innovation. Networking has supported rural areas by establishing new links and contacts beyond the LAG, which in turn facilitate access to much needed information, be it about solutions, achievements or simply experiences. In a nutshell, networking has enabled the transfer of relevant practices and ensured that rural development continuously builds on the lessons learned within the LEADER community.

Cooperation under LEADER (2007-2013) as a complement to networking activities

In the current programming period, the facilitation of cooperation continues to be an important networking activity of the NRNs, the ENRD²⁵ and other informal LEADER networking

organisations, such as ELARD and PREPARE²⁶. Building on the exchange of knowledge and experience, cooperation is the best tool to exploit the fruits of networking. By going a step further, it enables LAGs to undertake joint actions with other LEADER groups, or with groups taking an approach similar to LEADER, in another region, Member State, or even in a third country. In other words, it promotes the establishment of a new partnership to engage in joint rural development actions which reach beyond the limits of a single LAG. The following examples demonstrate how the injection of new information and knowledge contributes to joint actions, which aim to overcome the specific challenges faced by rural areas in addressing the objectives of their LDS²⁷:

- In the WOLF Transnational Cooperation (TNC) project, LAGs from Spain and Portugal jointly promote environmental, economic and social cooperation between livestock farmers, hunters and other actors involved in wildlife conservation, thus promoting biodiversity and employment creation. Applying the LEADER method, proposals supporting the

25 Support is provided to LAGs mainly in the form of Cooperation guides, Cooperation offer databases and Cooperation fairs. For more information see http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader/leader/en/transnational-cooperation_en.cfm and http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en-rd-events-and-meetings/seminars-and-conferences/en/seminars-and-conferences_en.cfm

26 See http://www.elard.eu/en_GB/cooperation and <http://www.preparenetwork.org/about-prepare/programme>

27 For more information see http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/rdp_view/en/view_projects_en.cfm?action=jsview (selecting TNC as search criterion)

- coexistence of wildlife and livestock are developed for presentation to the European Commission and the Member States. This project also involves informal contact with an Estonian LAG and three LAGs from Romania.
- LAGs from Estonia, Finland and Latvia are using TNC to develop innovative ways to promote their cultural heritage through the project, Medieval Festivals. The partnership involves actors and artisans typically involved in medieval festivals and aims to generate interest among and employment for young people.
- The partners of the CULTlands LEADER TNC project are jointly developing processes for promoting the conservation of endangered landscapes, which provide the basis for the production of typical regional products. Such landscapes use extensive cultivation and have local cultural significance. The aim is to promote products that help to conserve the characteristic features of the participating rural areas. The specific objective is to establish a scientific basis for the marketing of products from such landscapes (e.g. cider/juices from Austria, ham from Spain, and apicultural products from Poland).
- The European Network for Supporting Entrepreneurship (ESCALE) aims to promote sustainable rural development by supporting the creation of new enterprises in rural areas. Together with non-LAG associations from France and Malta, two Portuguese LAGs are promoting business creation in rural areas as a pro-active response to the need to generate jobs and economic viability.

Demonstrating the added value of networking

There is a broad consensus that the national rural networks (NRNs) and European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) have great potential to add value to EU rural development policy. Identifying, demonstrating and communicating this added value in a way that is clearly understandable to a wider audience is very important – but also very challenging!

Many studies, representing a great diversity of theoretical and practical approaches, have asked the question – what is the added value of EU policy networks? One clear and simple definition emerging from the academic literature²⁸ is that the added value of networking is “producing solutions and results that otherwise would not have occurred through single hierarchical organisations”

As a starting point for further discussion, this definition seems relevant and applicable. EAFRD-funded networks are clearly working to produce

solutions and results that go far beyond the usual institutional mandate of DG AGRI and the relevant national authorities in the EU-27 Member States. However, the next question is – how can we identify, demonstrate and communicate the solutions and results of networking?

This is the point at which care must be taken not to cross-over into a parallel and closely connected discussion, on how to monitor and evaluate the rural networks as a tool to help achieve the current EU rural development policy objectives on

competitiveness, the environment, quality of life and local governance.

There are formal RDP monitoring and evaluation reporting obligations to the European Commission. These raise a multitude of questions about: the precise purpose of the NRNs and whether their activities are well aligned with objectives; the impact of NRN activities on rural areas and whether they are meeting objectives in an effective, efficient and sustainable manner; and last but not least, the capacity of the NRNs to expand and create social capital.



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28 Agranoff, R. (2003). *A new look at the value-adding functions of intergovernmental networks*. Paper prepared for Seventh National Public Management Research Conference, Georgetown University (October 9-11, 2003) – can be downloaded from: <http://teep.tamu.edu/Npmrc/Agranoff.pdf> (last accessed 20 September 2012)

There is a growing body of knowledge about the monitoring and evaluation of networking, particularly amongst the independent evaluators who prepared comprehensive Mid-term Evaluation (MTE) reports in 2010 for the NRNPs in Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain. There are also some interesting (albeit rather patchy) observations on networking in the MTE reports prepared in other Member States on the implementation of their 2007-2013 rural development programmes (RDs).

The European Evaluation Network has developed guidance on how to evaluate rural networks given that during the mid-term evaluations of these NRNPs, it became clear that the Common Indicators and Evaluation Questions of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework were not sufficiently developed to evaluate network programmes. To reflect on the evaluation approaches, the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies used so far, and draw key lessons for ongoing and ex post evaluation, a workshop was organised by the Evaluation Helpdesk on the 7 February 2012. Further information on the evaluation of networks can be found here:

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/eenrd/1.1.1/WP_NRNP_240802_final.pdf

Overall, however, most Member States have postponed any consideration of the effectiveness and efficiency of rural networking until the ex post evaluation of their RDs - a process which does not have to be completed until the end of 2016. In the meantime, an information vacuum exists.

During discussions with network representatives at the 11th NRN meeting in Bad Schandau (Germany), in April 2011²⁹, it was therefore proposed to pool the resources of as many NRNs

as possible to illustrate and communicate the current state of knowledge and understanding regarding the outcomes of their work – notably that arising from the on-going self-assessment activities of the network support units.

According to researchers³⁰, in order to clearly identify the public benefits of networks it is necessary to look beyond the rather abstract set of functions that they are commonly ascribed, and understand what they *actually do*. A straightforward and common methodology for demonstrating the added value of networking was proposed by the ENRD to the NRNs, which focused on the identification and collection of: a) common network statistics; and b) network success stories. The simple purpose of this approach was to give an insight into what the NRNs are actually doing and how the relative success of these activities is perceived and explained by the management of the network support units.

Data for the common network statistics was collected from 20 network support units, covering the period from the start of their activities until the end of 2011, and aggregated under four main headings:

- Network communications, including meetings and participation;
- Knowledge exchange, including good practices;
- Training; and
- Cooperation.

The results of statistics collected are shown in Table 3. Despite the methodological issues associated with the collection and aggregation of data, these results provide – for the very first time - a simple snapshot of the overall level of networking activity supported by the EAFRD during the first four years of networking operations.



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Additionally, a total of 98 success stories were collected from 26 networks in 22 Member States. Although prepared using a common template, they were very diverse – a clear reflection of the diversity of the networks themselves, notably in relation to their experience and maturity.

Indeed, it is quite apparent that the examples described by individual network managers are relative successes, i.e. they are dependent to a large extent on the relative maturity of individual networks. This is a very important point that contributes to the key conclusion of this article.

Figure 5 presents a simple overview of the generic steps associated with the establishment and functioning of an NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period. It must be remembered that NRNs in the EU-27 are at very different stages of development, with a resultant diversity in capacity and activity. There are some relatively mature NRNs, which are well advanced with the facilitation of networking processes and are now increasingly concerned, for example, with the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. There are other NRNs where the establishment of the network support unit has been delayed and the network and associated networking tools are only just being developed.

When the success stories are clustered and linked to the main stages of development shown in Figure 5, it is apparent that the great majority

²⁹ For further information – see: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en-rd-events-and-meetings/meetings/en/11th-nrn-meeting_en.cfm

³⁰ Agranoff, R. (2003). *A new look at the value-adding functions of intergovernmental networks*. Paper prepared for Seventh National Public Management Research Conference, Georgetown University (October 9-11, 2003)

of network success stories (a total of 81) relate to the establishment of the network support unit, building networks and developing network tools, whilst relatively few (only 15) are close to describing the *real* added value of networking (i.e. that associated with the unique functions of networks and networking, rather than the day-to-day operation of network support units). In other

words, there are still relatively few examples of network success stories that are producing solutions and results that otherwise would not have occurred through single hierarchical organisations.

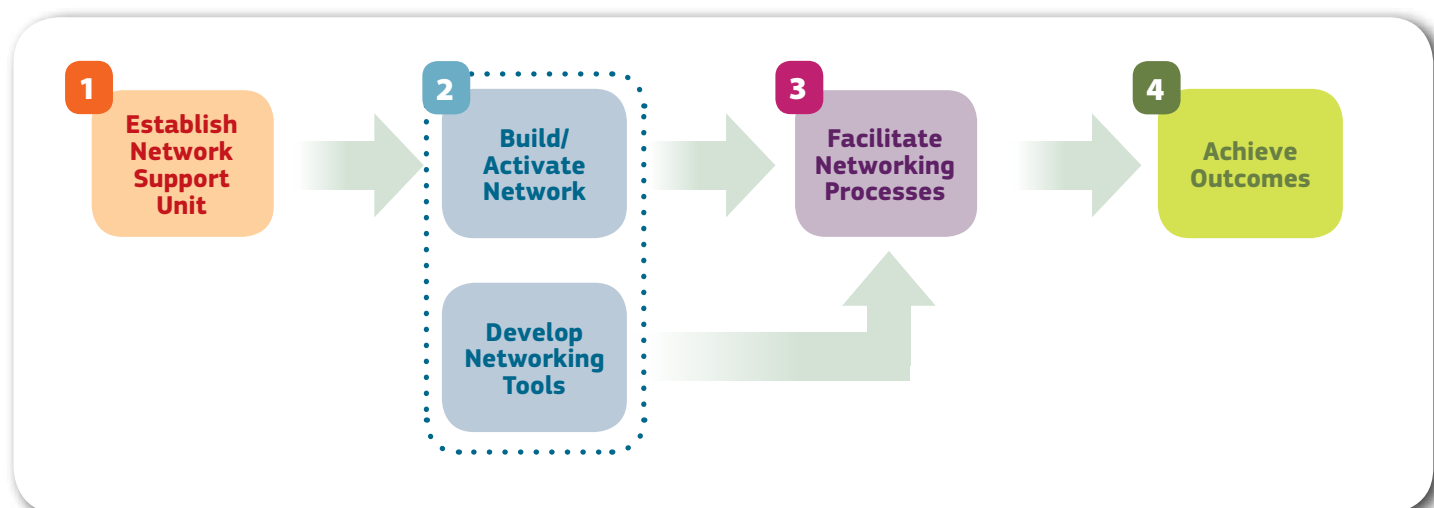
Upon first reading, this result appears rather disappointing – but it is of course a perfectly logical and acceptable conclusion, given the common

observation by experts that networks take time to develop and must be allowed to mature before judging their performance. It also highlights the importance of being cautious about expectations of added value from new networks (such as the NRNs and ENRD) before they have been given time to grow and develop – in other words, **don't expect** them to run before they can walk.

Table 3: Results of the Common Network Statistics collected from 20 EAFRD-funded rural networks for 2007-2011

Operational set-up of NRN decision making processes	
Network Communications	A total of 5 356 meetings involving 286 574 participants (19 networks from 2007-2011)
Knowledge Exchange	The collection of 5 562 'Good Practices' related to RDP project implementation (19 networks from 2007-2011)
	A total of 3 214 790 website visitors (19 networks from 2007-2011)
Training	A total of 1 931 training events involving 79 224 participants (16 networks from 2007-2011)
Cooperation	A total of 1 193 cooperation events involving 33 168 participants (15 networks from 2007-2011)

Figure 5: Simple overview of the generic steps associated with the establishment and functioning of an NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period





Making a success of networking beyond 2013

The Coordination Committee held a workshop in Brussels recently on the Future of Networking. The outcome of this workshop was a number of key recommendations.

The aim of the workshop, which was organised by the ENRD on the 17 September 2012, was to facilitate an exchange of views and experience from various stakeholders regarding the future framework for networking at European and national level. It was also a preparatory step for the next generation of rural development programmes (RDPs),

specifically with regard to rural networks. Specific objectives of the workshop were to:

- Build a better understanding among key stakeholders involved in these networks of the new legislative proposals;
- Support the exchange of ideas and views on the expected scope of networking in the context of future

rural development policy, with a particular focus on the potential roles and functions of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), the Agricultural European Innovation Partnership (EIP) network, the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (EENRD) and the national rural networks (NRNs);

- Identify future challenges and implications of the proposed regulatory framework, and the level of further clarification and guidance needed.

Representatives from managing authorities, NRNs, European organisations active in the field of rural development, agricultural research organisations, agricultural chambers and other relevant network stakeholder groups attended the workshop.

An overview of the provisions of the proposed regulatory framework for the 2014-2020 programming period, including the role and the structure of the ENRD, the EENRD and the proposed EIP were presented. Proposals on networking functions and structures at national level were also presented for discussion and feedback.

The participants explored many and varied related topics, including:

- The need to ensure stronger links and better coordination with other CSF funds.
- The role and functions of the proposed bodies to guide and support the work of the ENRD, EENRD and EIP, which may include
 - (i) the possible establishment of a European Rural Network Assembly, which would meet bi-annually to review and propose activities; and
 - (ii) a Steering Group which would deal with organisational and statutory issues, including work programmes, budget priorities, reporting, and coordination and management of the three networks.
- The need for greater clarity on the role of NRNs to support the agricultural EIP network.
- The implications at Member State level of the proposed European network structures and mandates, including concerns over resource requirements, linkages with existing networks (particularly for agricultural research) and the transitional challenges when preparing future RDPs;

Participants also shared their experience and lessons learned regarding network issues such as governance and management, monitoring and evaluation, effective outreach to stakeholders and capacity building.

Based on the exchanges in the workshop, the following needs were highlighted for rural development networking:

- Agreement on a common set of activities/tasks to be performed by all national networks;
- More inclusive representation of different stakeholders in network governance structures at all levels;
- More opportunities for exchange and learning amongst networks and between peers;
- A commitment to ensuring that network relationships, experience and continuity are not lost - either at EU or national level - during the transition to the next programming period;
- Further clarity and guidance regarding the structure and operation of the future EU networks.



The future of networking

The current experience of rural networking has been positive: it has offered a useful source of information, ideas, and contacts; it has supported numerous exchanges, cooperation, and knowledge development at both National and EU level; it has facilitated new dialogue for a better implementation of the policy; and it has encouraged a more participative governance of the policy. And all at a relatively low cost. However, it has also shown that building durable links between administrations, organisations and individual players takes time. Involving actors in new forms of dialogues requires dedicated human resources, well-adapted communication tools, and efficient organisational structures. Thus, the progress made since the creation of the ENRD, the EEN and the NRNs in 2008 has to be continued and consolidated to get the most out of networking.

Furthermore, the rural development policy is evolving towards an even more results-oriented policy, with more focus on common EU objectives and shared targets. The future rural development programmes will have to perform in very specific domains, such as the competitiveness of all types of agriculture, farm viability, the promotion of food chain organisation and risk management in agriculture, the restoration, preservation and enhancement of ecosystems, the efficient use of water and energy, the shift towards a low carbon and climate resilient economy, the promotion of social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas. They will also have to foster innovation and knowledge transfer in these fields. These ambitious expectations will, even more than before, require good communication and coordination between the actors of the policy at all levels, as well as the capacity to demonstrate the results achieved.

The proposals for networking in the 2014-2020 programming period are thus:

1. To **reinforce networking** for rural development

This reinforced approach will be based on:

- the European Network for Rural Development (the ENRD) providing an overall platform for EU rural development policy,
- two specific sub-networks focusing on particular aspects of RD policy: the European Evaluation Network for Rural development building capacity, developing methodologies and sharing good practice related to the evaluation of rural development policy; and the network of the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability, which will seek to act as a bridge between research and agricultural development;
- Twenty-seven (28 including Croatia) National Rural Networks playing a key role in supporting the implementation of the RDPs, increasing the involvement of stakeholders in rural policy issues, and communicating with the broader public.

All together, these networks will reach and involve all relevant groups of rural stakeholders, stimulate innovation, boost exchanges of good practices, reinforce access to information, and help improve the governance of the RD policy.

2. To **enhance the coordination mechanisms** of the networks and to facilitate interaction between levels and topics

- to further specify and clarify the role of NRNs and their relationship with the EU networks, so that synergies can be more easily achieved and coordination be made more efficient at EU level;

- to ensure a working interface between the ENRD, the European Evaluation Network and the new agricultural EIP network, including common governance structures;
- to ensure regular liaison with networks of the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) funds.

3. To further **involve civil society** in the EU-networks, notably by ensuring strong links with the Advisory Group for rural development.

4. To encourage a **more flexible approach** among the rural networks, so that they can be adapted to evolving thematic priorities, respond to bottom-up needs, and take account of outcomes of any assessments of their activities.

5. Considering the **key role of the farm advisory services (F.A.S.)** in agricultural knowledge transfer and their proximity to farmers, to integrate them into networking activities targeting advisors or their organisations at EU and national levels. The advisory systems as part of the rural network structure (at EU and National level) would also link to the EU and national research networks in support of agricultural innovation.

The objectives for rural networking in the coming programming period have been clarified on this basis, as well as the tasks of the different components (see articles 52, 53, 54 and 55 of the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development).

For more information:

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-post-2013/legal-proposals/com627/627_en.pdf

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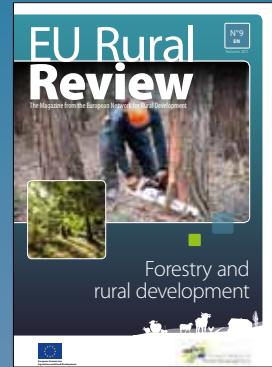
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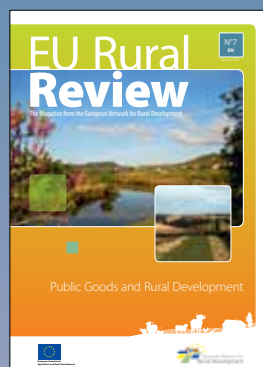
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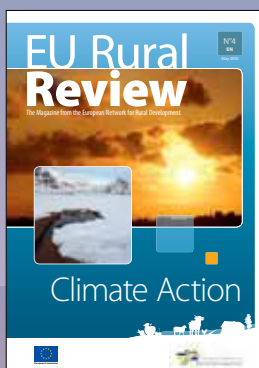
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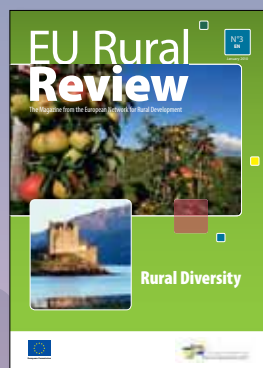
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online

The screenshot shows the ENRD website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with options like Home, Policy in Action, Country, Themes, Leader, Networks & Networking, Publications & Media, Events & Meetings, Info, and LOGIN. A search bar is located on the right side. The main content area includes a banner for a survey, a section titled 'The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)' with a description of its role, and a large map of Europe with country flags. Below the map, there is a 'Key Tools' section with a 'Leader Gateway' link and a 'News' section with several articles.

The European Network for Rural Development ONLINE
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