



Special edition for
The ENRD event
*"Connecting rural Europe –
Learning from the past,
preparing for the future"*
Brussels, 2 June 2014

Self-assessment of the European Network for Rural Development

"Not everything that 'connects' is a network"

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Foreword

The ENRD self-assessment started in December 2012 and the main report was finalised by October 2013. Further, in-depth case studies (based on the main findings of the report) were carried out from the end of 2013 until March 2014.

The self-assessment was carried out with contributions from colleagues of the ENRD Contact Point and DG AGRI services in charge of the European Network for Rural Development. We would like to thank the case study interviewees for sharing their views and hence, contributing to the preparation of in-depth case studies.



“Not everything that ‘connects’ is a network”¹

Self-assessment of the European Network for Rural Development

1. What is a ‘Network’ & ‘Networking’?

Networks and networking are widely recognised and adopted as key tools for supporting and promoting sustainable rural development around the world. There are many different types of rural development network, driven by a great variety of goals and objectives. Importantly, there is no single definition of what a network means in the context of rural development.

“Rural networks provide a means to mobilise intangible intellectual assets through learning, innovation and the building of human and social capital.”*

Networks actually exist to support the process of networking - where the process of ‘networking’ is clearly defined² 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.

“The world of networks and networking is modern, exciting, dynamic and universal.”
EU Rural Review No 14

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 a way that is clearly understandable to a wider audience, is highly challenging.

European rural development networks – 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 euro has been committed to supporting national and European networking during the 2007-2013 period, and therefore the merits of networking need to be clearly demonstrated.

¹ Hearn, S. & Mendizabal E. (2011) – *Not everything that connects is a network (Background Note)*, Overseas Development Institute

² Gilchrist, A. (2009) - *The Well-Connected Community: A Networking Approach to Community Development*. Policy Press, Bristol, UK.

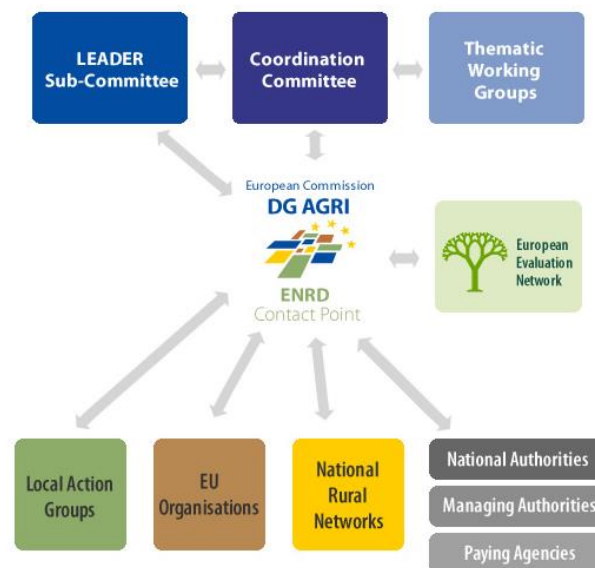
* Ward, N. et al (2005). Universities, the Knowledge Economy and ‘Neo-Endogenous Rural Development’, Discussion Paper Series No. 1, Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne

2. The mandate of the European Network for Rural Development

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) was established by and its mandate defined within EC Regulation 1698/2005. The Regulation specifies the aims of the network as follows:

- collect, analyse and disseminate information on Community rural development measures;
- collect, disseminate and consolidate, at Community level, good rural development practice;
- provide information on developments in the Community's rural areas and in third countries;
- organise meetings and seminars at Community level for those actively involved in rural development;
- set up and run expert networks with a view to facilitating exchange of expertise and supporting implementation and evaluation of rural development policy;
- support the national networks and translational cooperation initiatives.

The ENRD is a complex structure, integrating, among others, the National Rural Networks, Managing Authorities, Local Action Groups (LAGs) and other rural stakeholders (as presented in the figure below). At the same time, the work of the ENRD Contact Point (i.e. the ENRD support unit) and DG AGRI is supported directly by the work of the Coordination Committee (CC), LEADER Sub-Committee (LsC), and Thematic Working Groups (TWG); and indirectly by the work of the European Evaluation Network.



The ENRD Contact Point (ENRD CP) was set up with the aim to provide services to support the majority of network activities. In order to operationalise the stated aims of the network, three specific objectives were defined for the ENRD (through the support of its CP), namely:

- **knowledge development** to provide deeper insight into rural development policy and programmes;

- **knowledge sharing** to ensure access to and dissemination of useful information on EU rural development policy; and
- **exchange and co-operation** to facilitate exchanges and cooperation between rural networks and actors across the EU.

The ENRD CP was assigned a range of core activities (referred to as services) and core tools and these have been classified in line with the specific objectives as presented in *the table below*. It has to be noted that there has not been a clear dividing line between the various services and tools as far as their contribution to the specific objectives are concerned. In other words, most services and tools contribute to more than one specific objective. However, for the sake of clarity, each service has been classified in line with the objective to which it is likely to contribute the most.

Core functions and tools of the ENRD CP

Relevant specific objective	Functions and tools of the ENRD
Knowledge Development	Support to and secretariat of coordination committee and LEADERLEADER Sub-Committee, thematic working groups and expert meetings (Service A.1)
	Support for analysis/summary of programmes and monitoring indicators (Service A.6)
	Good practices (Service A.7)
Knowledge Sharing	Information line (Service A.5)
	Website (Tool B.1)
	Seminars and conferences (Tool B.2)
	Publications (Tool B.3)
Exchange and Cooperation	Support for transnational cooperation (Service A.2)
	Information exchange and coordination with national networks (Service A.3)
	Promotion and representation (Service A.4)

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. Over its first four years of operation the ENRD has evolved from an initial top-down initiative, gradually maturing to engage a wider range of stakeholder interests, issues, needs and (changing) priorities. This evolutionary path has been a ‘learning-by-doing’ process involving various stages of development, with each stage building on the last.

3. The challenge of evaluating networking

Over time it is clear that ENRD has achieved a lot. However, much of this achievement has been hard to

“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”

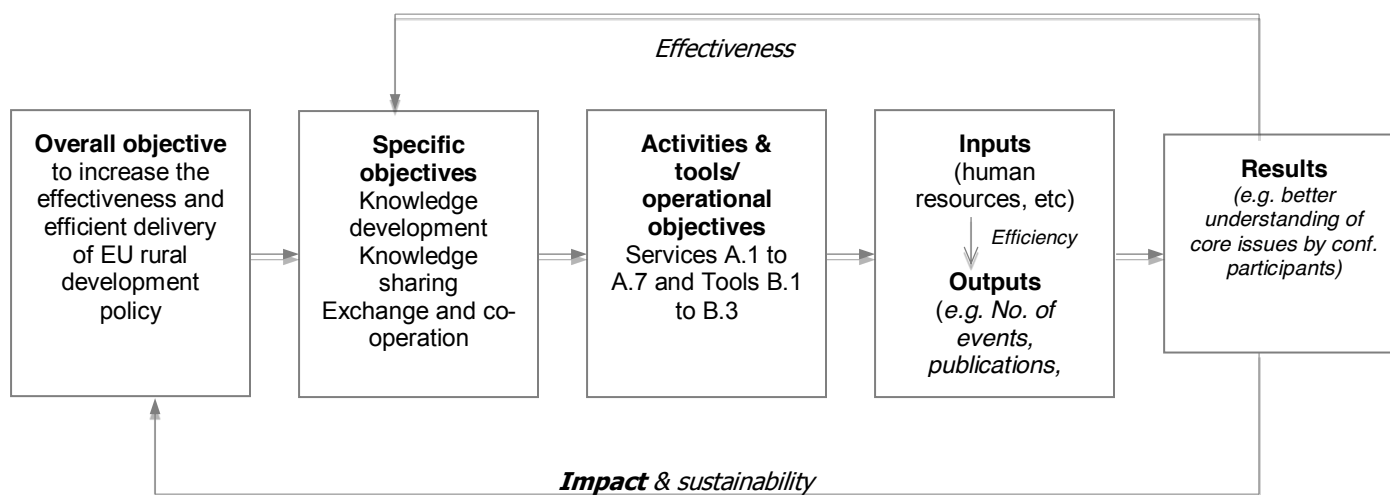
Albert Einstein

measure. Whereas the ENRD has produced a wide range of tangible outputs (events, thematic workshops, relevant project examples collected, etc.); paradoxically many of the real achievements (that is results and impact) of the European network and the networking process remain intangible. How can one measure whether the information

provided during events and presented in publications have been used in policy implementation and spread by NRNs and other rural stakeholders? How can one measure whether the exchanges between members of NRN members have resulted in the improvement of these members' work? Therefore, the main challenge for ENRD assessment has been to assess this 'hidden power' of networking.

The main purpose of the ENRD self-assessment was to assess how far ENRD activities contributed to the achievement of its main objective, i.e. to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural development policy (EAFRD) implementation. The assessment started at the beginning of 2013 and aimed to cover the first full years of the ENRD's operation (i.e. July 2008 to June 2012). The assessment framework is presented in the figure below.

Figure 1: Self-assessment framework



4. What have we learnt about the ENRD?

Activities, outputs, results and potential impact of the ENRD were assessed by the self-assessment. The main findings were structured according to the specific objectives of the network and can be summarised as presented below.

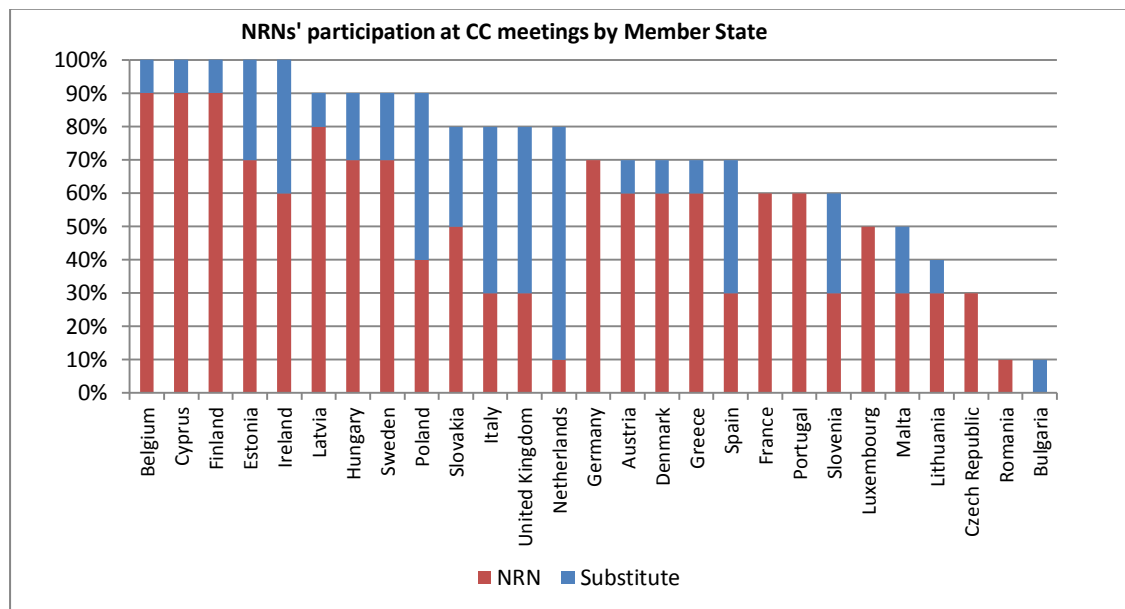
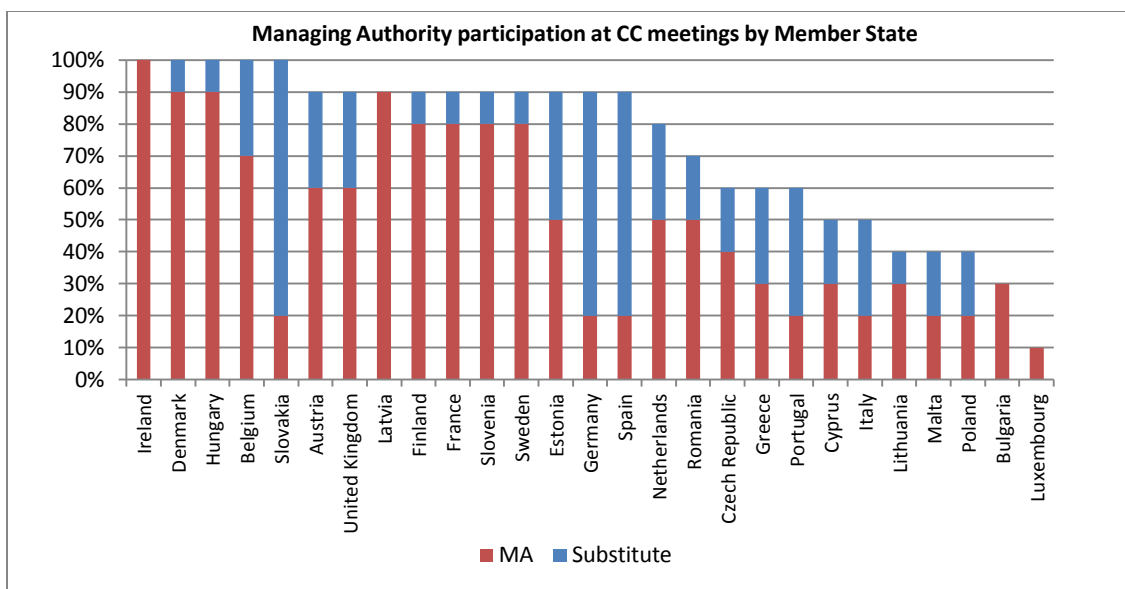
4.1 Development of relevant & useful new knowledge

The main activities of the ENRD in the field of knowledge development are:

- Support for Coordination Committee (CC) and LEADERLEADER Sub-Committee (LSC) meetings
- Analysis of programme monitoring indicators
- Collection of relevant experiences (good practices)

Coordination Committee & LEADER subcommittee meetings

Organisations represented in **the Coordination Committee (CC) and LEADER Sub-Committee (LSC)** are Managing Authorities (MAs) and National Rural Networks (NRNs) of each of the 27 Member States and 13 European-level organisations. Over the first four years of ENRD, 10 CC events and 8 LEADER LSC events were organised: an average of 2-3 events of each type per year. Furthermore CC and LSC workshops were organised on the topics of ‘strategic programming, monitoring and evaluation’ and ‘Community-Led Local Development’ (CLLD) respectively. The level of participation of Member States at these events varies. As an example see participation of MAs & NRNs in the CC events presented in the charts below.



Thematic Working groups produced some 15 analytical reports, over 38 case studies and a series of dissemination products during the first four years.

The four **Thematic Working Groups** (TWGs) produced in-depth analyses and reports on the issues of 'targeting territorial specificities and needs' (TWG1), 'links between agriculture and the broader rural economy' (TWG2), 'public goods and public interventions' (TWG3), and 'delivery mechanisms of EU rural development policies' (TWG4).

LEADER Focus Groups (FGs) covered specific issues regarding the 'bottom-up principle' (FG1), 'innovation and the experimental character of LEADER' (FG2), and the 'implementation of the "cooperation" measure' (FG3), and 'better local development strategies' (FG4).

According to a CC and LSC member survey in May 2011, over 75% felt that the quality of LSC/FG reports were excellent or good.

How far Thematic Working Group and Focus Group outcomes were useful and used

An in-depth case study of four of the Thematic Working Groups and Focus Groups aimed to analyse how far the outcomes of the groups were useful, disseminated and used by key stakeholders (including policy-makers). The summary of the case study outcomes is presented in Annex II. Among others, the case study found that the potential impact that TWGs and FGs included:

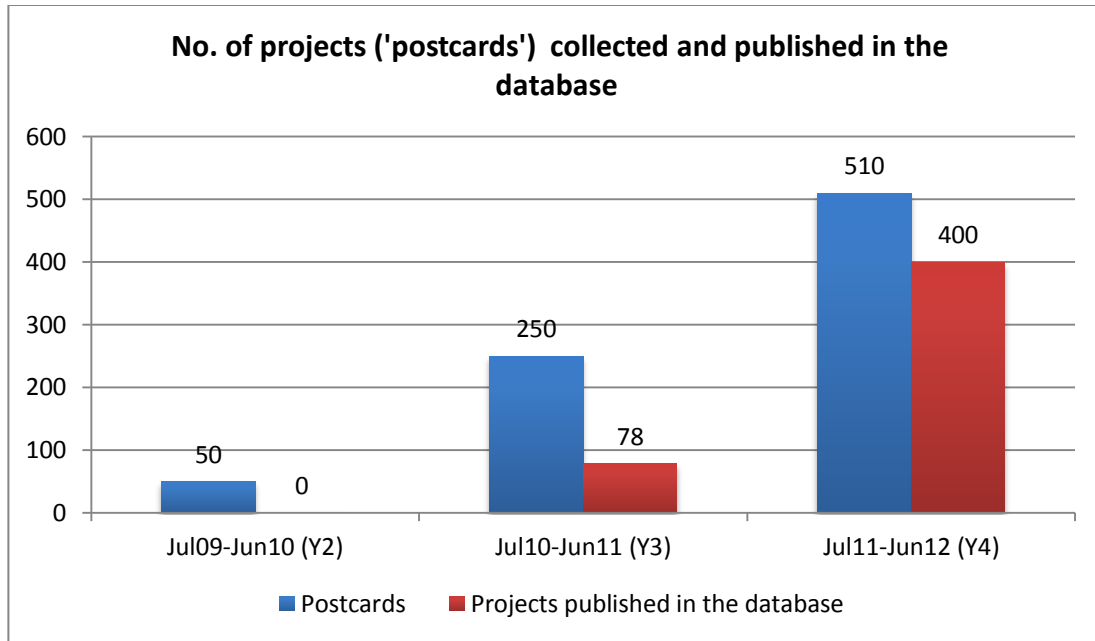
- Their contribution to the EAFRD Regulation
- Contribution to guidelines for Member States
- Impact at local level
- More effective preparation of RDPs
- Impacts at the personal level

Analysis of monitoring indicators & relevant project experience

The main outputs of the (quantitative) **analysis of monitoring indicators** included fiches, guidance tables and charts produced with regard to the 88 Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), a compendium of all RDPs and a Mountain Farming Report, as well as eight thematic information sheets.

The scope of monitoring analysis changed over time: moving from aggregating monitoring data at EU-level, towards addressing inconsistencies in the monitoring practices of Member States, to providing synthesised information on RDP outputs and outcomes.

Parallel to the analysis of quantitative data, qualitative information about the RDP activities was also collected in the form of 'relevant project experiences' (as well as published in the project database of the ENRD). Projects were uploaded to the database at an increasing rate over the years (as presented in the chart below).



Main assessment findings on ‘knowledge development’

It was highlighted by self-assessment interviewees (and confirmed by the specific case study at a later stage) that outputs and results of ‘knowledge development’ services, such as Thematic Working Groups (TWG) and Focus Groups (FG), have a strong potential impact on improving rural policy delivery, given their thematic focus and methodology to work with a wide range of stakeholders. Knowledge development services evolved considerably over time (also reflecting the stages of the policy-cycle). For instance the collection of examples focused on ‘relevant experiences’ (when only limited project examples were available), later moving towards ‘useful examples’ and possibly moving towards identification of ‘good practice’ projects. The initial lack of clarity on targets, and in some cases the changing operational objectives (an example is the changing scope and purpose of the collection and analysis of monitoring indicators), limited to some extent the potential impact of some of the activities. Overall, there is evidence that the relevant outcomes of TWGs and FGs have been used by various Commission services in EU-level policy-making, and there are also indications of some impact at national level (mostly through multiplication by group members). The case study on ‘Understanding the use of Thematic Working Groups and Focus Groups’ showed that, despite some weaknesses in terms of the dissemination of results, there is evidence of some impact at EU and national/regional level, primarily through the incorporation of results into the new EU Regulation and the drafting of guidelines for Member States, the inclusion of some results in the drafting of local development strategies and the incorporation of some of the lessons learned into RDP preparation.

4.2 Sharing knowledge across the network

The ENRD has disseminated the information and knowledge that it produced, through the following main channels:

- ENRD CP information line
- Website
- Conferences & events
- Publications

Information line

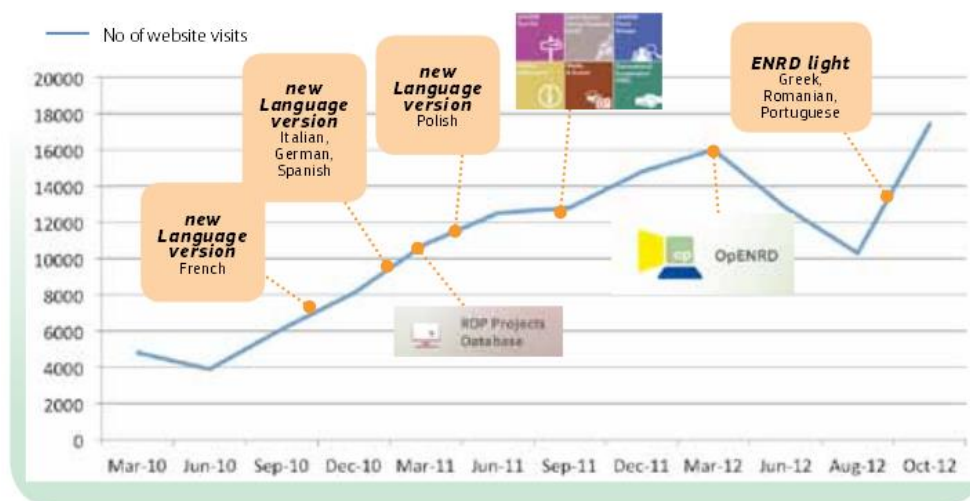
The ENRD CP responded to enquiries through its 'information line' comprising of email and phone responses, the website's FAQ section, as well as its reception facilities. The number of infoline enquiries amounted to some 300 per year; and on average some 11 scheduled visits (mostly from NRN, MA, LAG members and other types of stakeholders) were organised yearly in the ENRD CP's premises.

ENRD website

Over the years the ENRD website went through considerable developments. The website user statistics, coupled with feedback, gathered over time were used to guide incremental adjustments to the website. The ENRD website was first enhanced in December 2010 through new interactive and audio-visual sections. In the third year of operation (by March 2012), 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 different developments to the ENRD website 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.

ENRD Website evolution



Source: Rural Review No 14: Networks & Networking in Rural Development Policy

The various sections of the ENRD website, as at December 2013, are presented in the image below.

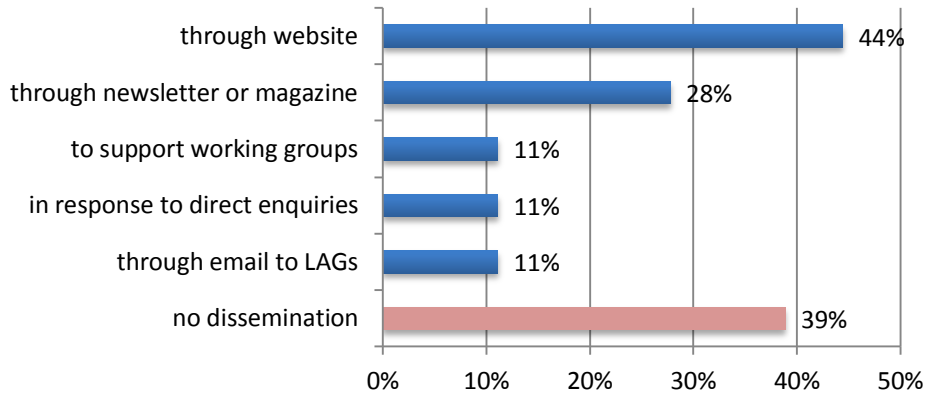


Generally, the most visited sections of the website included the more practically-oriented sections and tools, such as the RDP project database, parts of the LEADER Gateway and the TNC Offers database.

The ENRD website's outreach to the wider rural community

One of the findings of the main ENRD self-assessment report was that there is some lack of clarity on whether the website reached out to the wider rural public (or to key stakeholders, such as NRNs and Managing Authorities only). In order to address this issue further, a detailed case study was prepared on *'The added value of the ENRD website to the wider rural community'*. The summary of key findings of the case study is annexed to this report (see Annex I). Among others, the case study found that NRNs disseminate and multiply some of the information provided by stakeholders through various channels, as presented in the chart below. For instance, some 44% of the respondent NSUs disseminate information through their website (either through providing summary information or through adding links), whereas 11% of respondents (i.e. 2 of the 18 respondent Network Support Units members) indicated that they emailed the information to LAGs, or used it in response to direct enquiries from stakeholders or to support working groups. Much of this dissemination is however, focusing on transnational cooperation offers rather than the broader rural development information.

Dissemination channels used by NSU respondents for information received from the ENRD (as % of total number of respondents who indicated a given source)



At the same time, the survey of the 'wider rural community' also showed that rural development stakeholders are generally aware of the ENRD website. According to the respondents, the LEADER section is the most visited website area (54% of the most visited pages as identified by respondents form part of the LEADER section) and is predominantly visited by LAGs. The second most visited section is 'the policy in action' website section (14% of the most visited webpages are located within this area). These pages are mostly used by those respondents who categorised themselves as 'interest groups or federations'. For more details on the case study findings see Annex I.

Seminars & conferences

Over the first four years of its operation, some 7 seminars and 2 conferences were organised with the support of the ENRD Contact Point (CP), involving the participation of around 2000 stakeholders. The events covered topics such as LEADER, cooperation, semi-subsistence farming, public goods, ICT, communication, Rural Development Programme delivery, monitoring & evaluation and Community-Led Local Development.

Publications

The main publications issued by the ENRD CP include Rur@I News, EU Rural Review, best practice & thematic publications and the ENRD Magazine. The number of issues for these publications during the first four years was 26, 12, 11 and 2 respectively. The number, scope, form and content of publications were refined over time mostly based on users' feedback. As publications evolved, so became the target audience of various publications more defined.

Originally two publications (the Rural Review and Rur@I News) were envisaged. The other two publications (i.e. thematic publications and ENRD Magazine) were created on the basis of user needs and feedback.

Key assessment findings on 'knowledge sharing'

There is evidence that useful information has been disseminated through the 'knowledge sharing' tools and activities. Communication tools (especially the website and publications) were considerably improved over the years (e.g. the range and content of publications; as well as the structure and content of the website have been adjusted according to users' feedback). At this stage knowledge about how information is actually used by relevant stakeholders to improve the delivery of rural development policies is still partial. The potential impact of 'knowledge sharing' tools could be improved through better understanding of who ENRD provides specific information for; improved targeting and dissemination of both information on the website and publications; as well as building more on the synergies between various communication tools.

4.3 Exchange, cooperation & networking

The main areas for exchange and cooperation supported by the ENRD included:

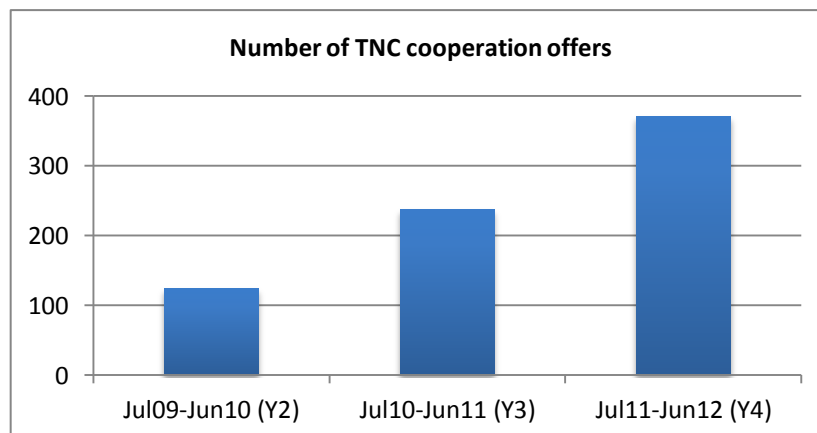
- Support to LEADER and transnational cooperation (TNC)
- Information exchange and coordination with national networks
- Promotion and representation of ENRD

Supporting LEADER and transnational cooperation

The primary activities through which the ENRD supported LEADER implementation included LEADER Sub-Committee meetings and LEADER focus groups (as described above) and support provided on the website (under the LEADER

The web-based tools in support of LEADER were continuously enhanced. However, the update of information in the LAG database advanced relatively slowly.

Gateway of the website) including LAG and project databases, as well as LEADER events and LEADER-related publications. In addition, transnational cooperation activities for LAGs were also supported through guides, proactive support (including the dissemination of cooperation offers) and other promotional and dissemination activities. Similarly to the number of projects in the RDP database, the number of TNC offers was also gradually increasing over the years (as indicated by the chart below).



Information exchange and coordination with national networks

Over the first four years some 16 NRN meetings were organised. In addition there were some 12 NRN visits, 6 networking surveys were launched, and 6 NRN initiatives (thematic and geographical) clusters were supported by the ENRD (covering topics of forestry, social farming, rural entrepreneurship, short supply chains).

Promotion and representation

The ENRD increasingly used social media to promote its activities and disseminate relevant information to key stakeholder groups. By the end of Year 4 the ENRD CP Twitter account had some 360 followers and 500 tweets posted.

Activities with regard to the promotion and representation of the ENRD primarily concerned the participation of CP staff at various events, including Rural Development Days, NRN events and agricultural fairs. Overall, during the first four years of its operation, the ENRD CP participated at some 55 events. Other forms of

dissemination of relevant information (such as printed, audio-visual and social media products) were also widely used.

Key assessment findings on exchange & cooperation

Network Support Units (NSUs) are key partners of the ENRD and important potential multipliers of its products. Therefore, in order to increase the potential impact of ENRD activities, particular attention needs to be paid to exchange with and if necessary capacity-building for NSUs. As far as 'promotion and representation' activities are concerned, the self-assessment found that one of the major challenges lies in finding the right balance in addressing the general public and more specific target stakeholder groups through communication and exchange. In order to achieve this, the most efficient communication forms have to be identified. The Contact Point increasingly explored the opportunities provided by social media in order to generate interest in ENRD's work.

5. What have we learnt about networking?

A number of **cross-cutting key suggestions and recommendations** emerged through the ENRD self-assessment (mostly through the in-depth focus group interviews carried out during the self-assessment). A number of lessons were drawn that can help to achieve more efficient networking; and to improve the effectiveness of rural development programme implementation:

- ✓ The operation of the network should be based on well-developed **intervention logic**. Understanding what the overall, specific and operational objectives are and how specific activities are likely to contribute to these is an important initial step for ensuring efficient network performance.

The collection of project examples has a 'natural cycle'. The net need to be cast widely at first to catch relevant examples; only then can consideration of what is 'interesting', 'useful' or 'representative' begin.

- ✓ Consider the limits set and opportunities provided by the **programme life-cycle**; including the assessment of possible difficulties and planning of specific tasks over time.

- ✓ Create **ownership** (e.g. of specific 'research' and their themes) among key stakeholders to engage them more efficiently.

- ✓ Balance **'top-down'** and **'bottom-up'** approaches during planning and implementation of activities (e.g. scope of needs assessment, consultations or validation of findings) depending on the nature, content and timing of the activity, as both approaches can add value and can be justified.

Independently from whether topics for thematic working groups are identified from the 'top-down' or from the 'bottom-up'; it is important to ensure that over time members gain full ownership for the topics selected.

- ✓ Always consider **who the target groups** are of specific activities; and through what channels/methods they can be addressed the best.

It is considered highly important to understand how the information produced is actually used by key stakeholders.

- Be strategic, focused, and targeted when planning and implementing activities.

- ✓ Think about **dissemination** of networking results already at the planning stage of activities (e.g. communication plans including objectives and key target groups). At the same time, follow-up the results with regard to dissemination and impact.

- ✓ Think early on about possible **synergies** between activities, i.e. how one activity can complement and feed into another.

- ✓ Focus on the **necessary preliminary activities** from early on (e.g. collection of basic data about stakeholders and programme(s); assessment of stakeholder capacity), as these are prerequisites/basis for the effective implementation of many other activities.

- ✓ Don't **use or consider NSUs to be synonymous with the network**. The focus always needs to be on engaging with the wider rural network membership; and NSUs provide a useful instrument for this.
- ✓ Consider early on the possible **limits of stakeholder capacity and information availability** in support of networking activities; and plan capacity-building and any other necessary actions in order to overcome these.

Available resources of NSUs were often limited. Personal contact with and targeted requests to NSUs proved to be useful methods for better engagement.
- ✓ Build on the **strength of your network stakeholders** whenever it is possible. As far as events planning and implementation are concerned: prior information, small group discussions, practically-focused exchanges are particularly useful methods in the 'networking' context.
- ✓ Consider in advance the **multiplier** capacity of stakeholders; plan the necessary activities to improve these, and/or find alternative ways of dissemination.
- ✓ Do **follow-up surveys and assessments** to gain a better understanding of results and impact achieved. Be flexible in adjusting activities in line with the evolving nature of network needs.
- ✓ Continue to build on **existing experience** and tools; do not start from scratch, as in most areas important experience has already been accumulated somewhere in the network.

Event surveys often do not reveal in-depth information about the actual use of the information provided. This gap highlights the importance of carrying out follow-up assessments.

6. What have we learnt about network assessment and self-assessment?

Networks evolve considerably over time and often produce intangible results, which makes their assessment (such as the assessment of the ENRD) difficult. It has been learnt that developing a '**network intervention logic**' at the start can improve both the effectiveness of networks, as well as their assessment. Key elements of the intervention logic include overall and specific objectives (including target groups), planned activities to achieve these (with the involvement of key stakeholders), and expected outputs and results. The overall objective of the ENRD is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural development policy (EAFRD) implementation. This objective provided the basis of the ENRD self-assessment in the absence of a preliminary elaborated intervention logic, hierarchy of objectives or baseline indicators.

The main difficulty with regard to **setting network indicators** is that quantitative indicators often do not reflect the true nature of networks (i.e. the most important results cannot be measured). For instance, 'the number of thematic working groups and their outputs' do not fully reflect the achievements of the network; what matters is how the results of thematic working groups contributed to the improvement of

rural development policies. Therefore, it is suggested that quantitative indicators are complemented with qualitative ones. In particular, it is suggested that detailed **'relevance & usefulness' indicators** are developed with regard to each activity and surveys are planned to capture these. In other words, it is not sufficient to obtain a quantitative rating of 'usefulness' of certain activities (e.g. events) by target groups; we need to go deeper in the assessment to understand how far the results of the activities were actually used by the target stakeholders, or reached the wider rural community through multiplier effects.

The assessment should not be a 'one-off' activity towards the end of the programme implementation (although an in-depth mid-term assessment is considered to be useful for the learning process), but should be supported by **on-going assessment tools and methods** (such as event surveys; website statistics analysis). It is important that these on-going assessment activities are carried out systematically in order to allow for comparison and analysis over a longer time period. Feedback from the on-going self-assessment methods should contribute to the continuous refinement of activities.

Self-assessment activities should always **reflect the overall objective of the network**. In other words, activities are not carried out for the sake of producing certain outputs (e.g. number of events; number of

"It's the things that don't work that give you the real insight you need to do the whole project life cycle. It's all about continuous improvement, you've got to look back to look forward. Seeing things in the wider context and learning from the mistakes is crucial."

EU Rural Review No 16

participants, number of reports), rather they should aim at achieving outcomes that directly contribute to the overall objective. One should always keep this objective in mind when carrying out the assessment of activities. The intervention logic should provide a good basis for linking activities and objectives.

New initiatives (such as the ENRD) always bring **unexpected results**, and considerable learning

happens throughout the process. Assessments are not a 'box-ticking' exercise, but are there to learn from previous experience and to improve future activities (in other words, 'first time it's mistake, the second time it's choice'). Assessments help to contribute to the continuity of programmes and initiatives, i.e. help newly involved stakeholders not to 'start from scratch', but to learn from the experience of others.

Outlook: networking during the 2014-2020 programming period

Networking of rural development stakeholders continues to gain recognition in rural development policy. The draft Rural Development Regulation for 2014-2020 specifies in more detail the requirements with regard to 'networking' at both European level, such as the European Network of Rural Development (ENRD), and European Innovation Partnership (EIP) in Articles 52 and 53; and at national level (Article 54). It is expected that the common elements of any NRN self-assessment would be an intervention logic that sets clear objectives and indicators; continuous monitoring of progress and feedback of results including common indicators, alongside a strong focus on complementary qualitative assessment.

There is a broad consensus that it is important to ensure that network relationships, experience and continuity are not lost during the transition to the next programming period (neither at the national nor at the European level). Much experience has been accumulated within existing networks. It is essential to build on this experience when setting-up the 'next generation' of rural development networks.

Annex I

Summary of findings of Case Study No 1 on 'The added value of the ENRD website to the wider rural community'

Purpose & methodology of the case study

One of the main findings of the ENRD self-assessment report was that there **is not full clarity as to the target audience of the ENRD website**, and especially as to whether the website sought to reach out only to some of the key stakeholders that the ENRD Contact Point regularly liaised with (such as Managing Authorities and Network Support Units) or also to the wider rural community (such as LAGs and other members of National Rural Networks). The uncertainties around this issue were reflected in the diverse opinions of those closely working with ENRD with regard to who the website target groups were: some arguing that the ENRD website is one of the main tools through which ENRD communicates towards the wider public; others arguing that 'there is not much out there for the wider rural community'. This finding of the ENRD self-assessment was the basis of the case study, that primarily aimed to answer the question of ***whether the ENRD website has reached out and how useful it has been to the wider rural community?*** This question was even more relevant given the fact that the continuous development and maintenance of the ENRD website has been one of the most resource-intensive activities of the ENRD.

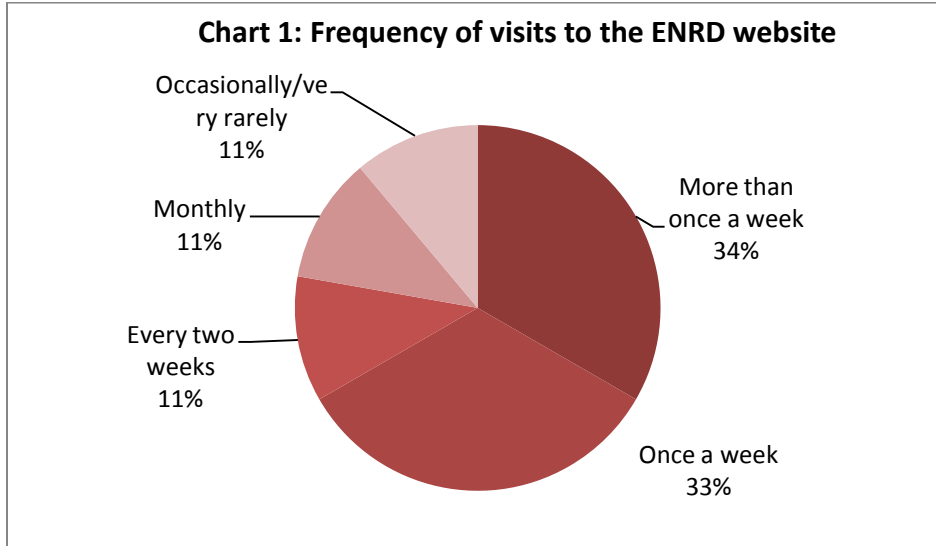
The method for the case study was developed to assess these issues from two different angles: Firstly, the aim was to gain better understanding about the use of the website by the members of the National Support Units; and in particular how far they multiply results towards their membership. Secondly, members of eight National Rural Networks (a total of 162 members coming from different types of organisations, including LAGs, NGOs, research institutes and associations) were addressed through a survey that was designed in the own language of potential survey respondents in order to achieve better response rate (which was almost 30%).

The case study research shows that the simple answer to the question of 'whether the ENRD website has reached out to the wider rural community?' is yes. The survey showed that there is **clear evidence that the wider membership of NRNs know about the ENRD website and have already visited it** (82% indicating this).

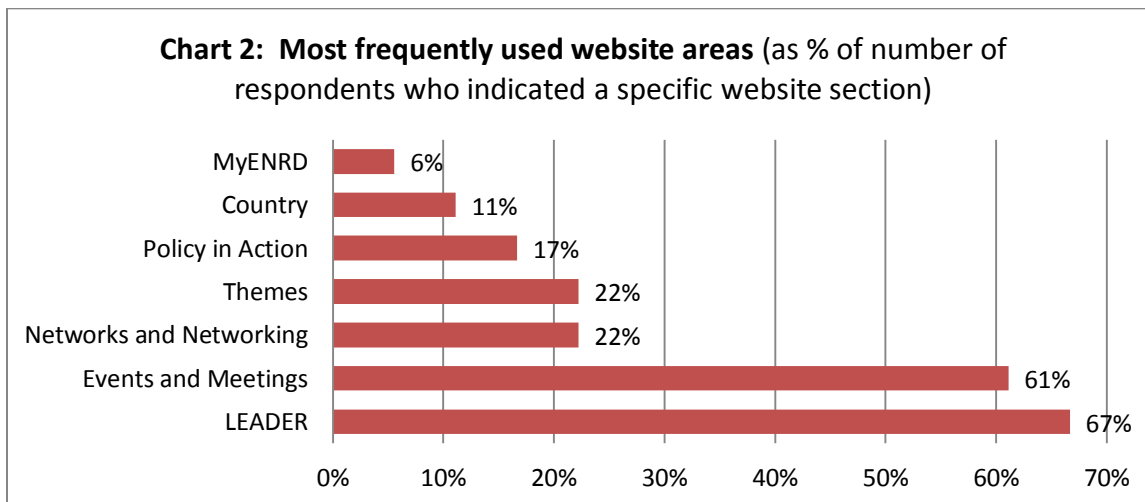
Use of the website & dissemination of information by NSU members

There are no indications that the ENRD website did not offer relevant information for particular stakeholder groups (as the few respondents who stated that they do not visit the website are coming from different types of organisations). In addition to the direct visits by NRN members to the website; **a number of NSUs multiply the ENRD website information** in various forms (most commonly disseminate through their own website and newsletters).

At the same time, the website tends to offer more for NSU than NRN members on an every-day basis, as the large majority of NSU members interviewed claim to visit the website regularly (i.e. at least once a week); whereas only 2 interviewees (out of 18) indicated that they visit the website less than once a month.

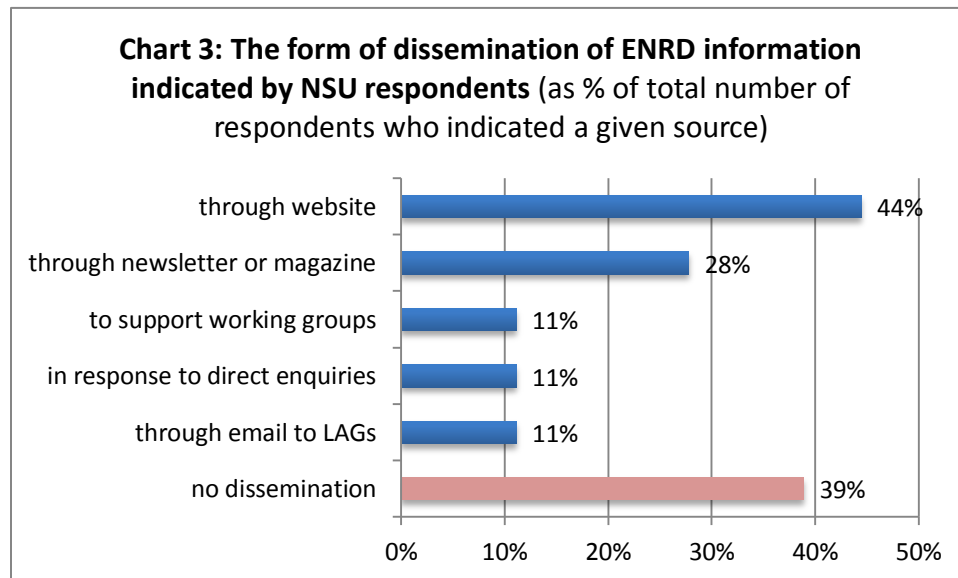


However, the case study research also showed that NSU members use the website selectively, i.e. they tend to visit some sections on a regular basis, whereas almost entirely ‘neglect’ others. The **LEADER section of the website is visited the most**. Typically, NSUs use the LEADER section to identify potential transnational partners or to respond to other enquiries coming from LAGs. In addition, NSU members also identified the ‘Events & meetings’ section as one they use the most (to look for event information, brief other colleagues and identify stories for their newsletters/websites).



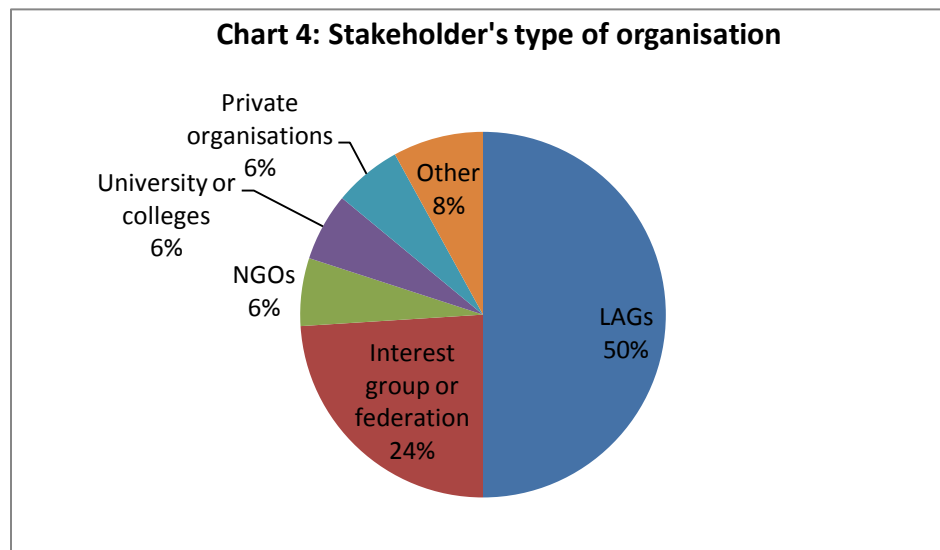
Some of the NRNs multiply information towards their NRN members through various channels, the most commonly used channels being, the website (indicated by 44% of respondents), followed by the newsletters (indicated by 28% of respondents). However, some 39% (i.e. 7 out of 18) of the NSU

respondents indicated that they do not carry out dissemination activities. Five of them did not see this as being part of their role within the NSU and in each case alternative members of their NSU team had this responsibility.



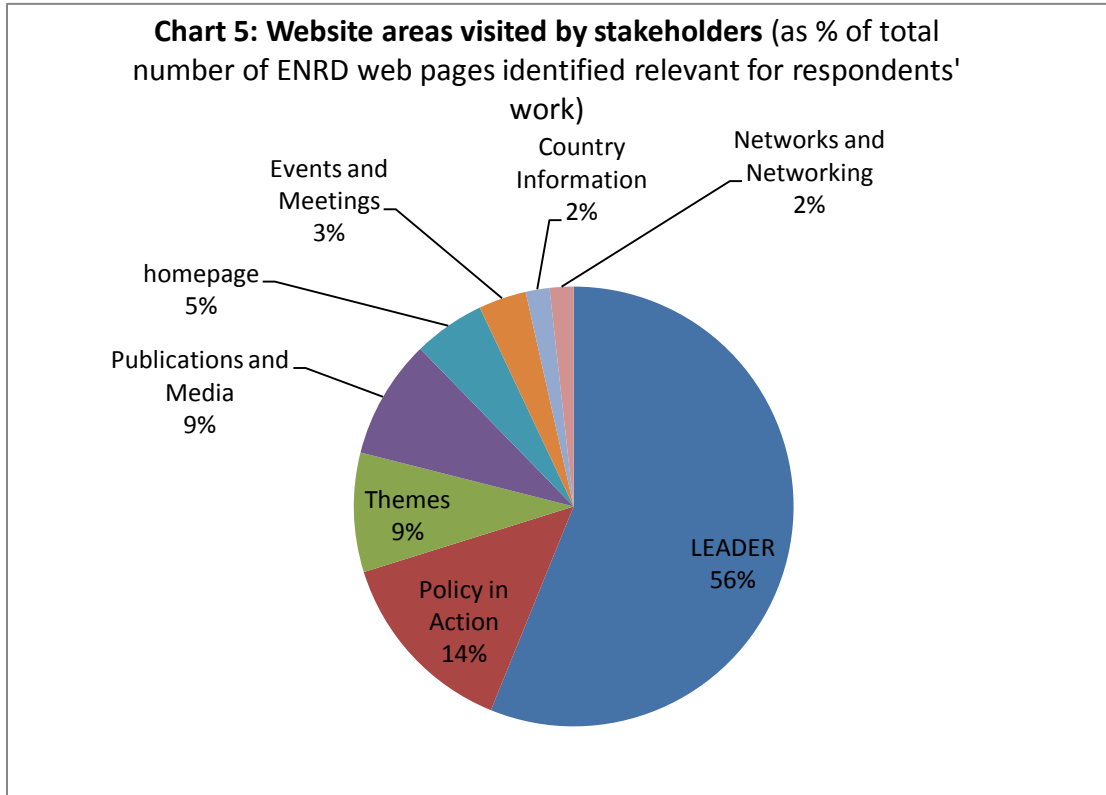
Use of the website by NRN members

Some 50 responses were received to the wider NRN membership survey and these covered a wide range of organisations as presented in the chart below.



The survey results showed that the most visited area by NRN stakeholders is the LEADER section of the website, which is explained by the fact that a considerable part of the NRN membership are LAGs (and half of the respondents of the survey are also LAG members). Some 56% of the ENRD webpages identified by NRN members as being the most relevant for their work fall under the LEADER section. This

section was mostly used for partner-search, and for accessing LAG database and LEADER event information. NRN members (especially those that classified themselves as ‘interest groups or federations’) also mentioned the ‘Policy in Action’ (especially the project examples database) section (14% of website pages that were indicated as being most relevant for the work of respondents).



Overall findings

Overall, it can be stated that the website is known, used and visited by NSU and NRN members. What is striking is that certain sections of the website generally seem to be neglected by these two key stakeholder groups (i.e. NSU members and the wider NRN membership). Even the ‘Networking’ section of the website was mentioned only relatively few times by NSU members; and other sections, such as ‘Publications’, ‘Country information’ or ‘My ENRD’ are among the less frequently visited sections of the website. These findings highlight the importance of focusing more on the way various website target groups are addressed by specific information; and more specifically how information is spread about these sections in order to raise awareness about their added value for the work of various stakeholder groups.

Annex II

Summary of findings of Case Study No 2 on 'The usefulness, dissemination and use of Thematic Working Group and Focus Group outcomes'

Purpose & methodology of the case study

The European Commission Decision of 2008 on the 'setting up of the organisational structure of the European Network for Rural Development'³ defined the details of the setting-up and operation of Thematic Working Groups (TWG).

'Thematic working groups' requirements based on the European Commission Decision

Article 3 of the Decision on 'Thematic working groups' states that:

- TWGs shall have a *mandate* and shall be *chaired by a representative of the Commission*;
- A thematic working group shall *not have more than 15 members*.
- The Commission shall designate the members of the thematic working group taking into account *proposals made by the Coordination Committee*.
- The thematic working groups shall regularly *report to the Coordination Committee* (and shall submit the results of their activities in the form of a final report, at the latest two years after their creation)

Focus Groups (FG) were more 'informal' initiatives, initially set up with regard to LEADER-related issues, in order to explore some specific topics with the direct involvement of key stakeholder groups. Participation on the FGs was voluntary, and topics and working methods were very much driven by the members themselves.

"The secret of success of a group is to involve participants who deal with programming in their daily work"

The main purpose of Case Study 2 was to assess how far the information produced by various TWGs and FGs has been used 'on-the-ground' by national policy-makers and other key strategic stakeholders. To this end, a sample of TWGs and FGs were chosen to be analysed in depth, namely:

- TWG2 dealing with "Linkages between Agriculture and the wider rural economy"
- TWG4 dealing with " Delivery Mechanisms of Rural Development Policy"
- FG4 dealing with " Better Local Development Strategies", and
- FG KT&I "Knowledge Transfer and Innovation";

A sample of 25 members and other stakeholders of TWG2, TGW4, FG4 and FG KT&I were interviewed during November-December 2013.

³ Commission Decision No 2008/168/EC of 20 February 2008

Relevance of the groups

The analysis of the relevance of the Groups revealed that **overall it is not the way the Groups are set up (e.g. agreed processes, the role of chair, etc.) that matters the most but the people involved**. If the actors involved are (a) relevant and (b) participating out of interest and not obligation, then it is more likely they will use the results of the group in their work and that they will try to disseminate them internally and/or to other stakeholders. TWGs and FGs had quite a different method of working. Members of the TWGs were nominated, more specifically, they were proposed to the Commission (DG AGRI) by their respective organisations who then offered them to participate in the TWG. Generally, members of the TWGs simply gave their opinion on the subjects discussed, although they most often got more actively involved and engaged in TWGs. It was common that members came from the Coordination Committee or the LEADER Sub-Committee. Participation to FGs was voluntary and NRNs played an important role in informing about the FG and looking for members. There was also a multiplier effect with institutions informing each other about the FG (e.g. NRN informing the MA who then informed the LAGs or other experts or regions informing each other).

All the **themes covered by the groups were relevant for policy-making purposes** and contributed to increased knowledge and in some cases also capacities of stakeholders. A clear definition and focus of the theme proved to be an important factor in attracting the interest and increasing the potential for impact of the group's work. The timing of setting-up thematic or focus groups determines the potential of the group to have an impact in policy implementation and design: not too early in the programming period so as to have a repository of experiences to analyse and learn from and not too late so that results can feed into policy-making.

Key findings on the working methods

Success factors

The case study found that key factors for the success of a group includes:

- ✓ **Coordination and chairmanship** (the approach and personality of the chair)
- ✓ Informal working methods for TWGs and a **participatory method** for FGs
- ✓ Variety of stakeholders involved & **inclusiveness**

The different working methods of TWGs and FGs were pertinent to their structure and set up, i.e. TWGs were smaller in size and chaired by the Commission and FGs were larger in size and coordinated through participatory methods. The methods of coordination, the informal way of working, the participatory approach and the capacity of the groups to gather different types of participants around the table are amongst the critical factors for their success. It appears that

“People need to talk to each other and share experiences, this is not theory, it is practice. This has been the most powerful element of the FGs”

the voluntary participation in FGs resulted in higher commitment of participants in comparison with TWGs where members were nominated. In some cases, the working tools could benefit from simplification, while the working method should involve a higher complementarity between technical and non-technical approaches.

The outcomes of the groups were useful for learning how different countries/regions implement rural development policy and the problems they face, for developing long-lasting contacts with counterparts in other countries and for identifying what works well, where and why. Useful examples were identified in relation to the topics covered by the groups and can be used as benchmarks.

Key findings on the usefulness of outcomes

All groups were useful for: a) **discovering** how **the themes** addressed by each group are dealt with / implemented / approached in other countries and for understanding how rural development is implemented in each case. In other words, the work of the groups enabled participants to discover aspects they were not aware of; b) participants **to inform the Commission** in a clear and transparent way of the difficulties Member States face when implementing rural development regulations; c) **for the Commission to learn** how rural development policy is implemented in different contexts.

In **comparative terms**, TWG4 was more useful than TWG2 for the following reasons: a) TWG4 was the last TWG to be implemented and therefore incorporated all the methodological knowledge from previous TWGs, b) the topic and objectives of TWG2 was not very clearly defined as opposed to a clear definition of objectives and scope of TWG4, c) the topic and timing of TWG4 fitted better in the design of the new programming period, d) TWG4 produced results that were of practical use for policy making.

“People participating should be the ones who will use the results”

The **outcomes of FG4** (Better Local Development Strategies) **were of a more practical use due to their timing and content** than those of FG KT&I. More specifically, FG4 was organised at the time just before new programmes were drafted and can contribute to them, while the content is of high relevance due to the many issues identified in the current programming period for the effective elaboration of Local Development Strategies (LDS), such as gaps and difficulties in the strategy preparation process, issues related to the LAG’s autonomy, how to select the appropriate strategies and involve local stakeholders in them, gaps in capacity for strategy development and implementation, how to measure and monitor performance, etc.

Selected examples of use of TWG & FG results

The case studies of FG4 were very useful for informing on approaches that work well and that could be adapted and replicated in different contexts. One such example stressed for its usefulness by several interviewees is the **Finnish** case study on peer-to-peer evaluation between LAGs or the multi-step LAG selection procedure, which has proved to increase the quality and efficiency of LDSs in Finland.

In **Estonia**, FG4 outcomes were useful for the improvement of guidance addressed to LAGs. More specifically, the “Guidelines to LAGs” document was improved and updated and covers the following topics: general guidance on how to develop a LDS, guidance on monitoring and evaluation, LAG selection criteria including LDS selection, application process, specified content of LDS.

The Knowledge Transfer & Innovation (KT&I) FG revealed the different degrees of progress in different Member States as well in different regions within a Member State. For instance, the FG was useful for validating how far **Scotland** is in comparison with other regions and countries in knowledge transfer and innovation. It was also useful for confirming the increased importance that will come from policy on promoting knowledge transfer and innovation.

Another example from **Italy** confirms the FG KT&I usefulness for exchanging ideas and opinions on concepts that were new to most participants, such as the concept of innovation support services / innovation brokering or operational groups. For Italy, the FG was useful for learning from other countries and seeing examples of initiatives/projects akin to the notion of future operational groups.

Key findings on the dissemination of outcomes

Despite the **usefulness of outcomes (recognised by virtually all interviewees), few members engaged in disseminating them.** Dissemination took place mainly at EU level in the case of TWGs, although more extensive dissemination (at Member State level) was foreseen. In the case of FGs, there are some dissemination examples, ranging from peer to peer dissemination to more intensive dissemination at national, regional and local level. There is evidence that the interest, commitment and relevance of experience of the groups' members determined the extent of dissemination. More committed or active participants disseminated more intensively, while participants with relevant experience (i.e. dealing with the group's topic in their daily work) had a higher interest and capacity to disseminate the results in their respective countries. There is a clear need stemming from the above to ensure dissemination is incorporated in working/focus groups' plans and followed through / monitored to ensure its effectiveness.

Selected examples of the dissemination of TWG & FG results

Although dissemination was incorporated in the work-plan of **TWGs**, their results were not eventually disseminated at Member State level by the Commission. Some of the examples of dissemination of TWG results include internal dissemination by the **Finnish** MA which did not carry out dissemination of the result of TWG4 at national level but included them in internal discussions in the Ministry. The Finnish MA member of the TWG used the material also in seminars within the Ministry for the preparation of the new rural development programme. **COPA-COGECA**, the representative of farmers and their cooperatives in the EU has presented the results of TWG4 to COPA Europe.

The situation is somehow different with **FGs**, which demonstrate more evidence of dissemination, mostly due to the commitment and interest of their members.

Dissemination of FG4 (Local Development Strategies) results

- ✓ Several dissemination activities were undertaken by a LAG in **Hungary** in order to share the information from FG4. These activities have been recognised by other LAGs (non-participants to the FG) as very useful for learning more about LDSs. The MA did not have the time or the resources to disseminate the results of FG4. LAGs in Hungary appear to be appreciative of the dissemination efforts undertaken by the LAG Felső-Homokhátság (member of FG4).
- ✓ In the **Czech Republic**, the national network of LAGs undertook a range of dissemination activities of FG4 results, including the translation into Czech some of the material of FG4 to reinforce the knowledge of the national LEADER Committee; sending an informative email to all members of the Czech LAG Network after each FG meeting; preparing a booklet to help the Ministry and the MA design the new programmes and introduce more flexibility and openness in the minds of policy makers.
- ✓ In the UK, the **Scottish** MA has published information on LDSs on their website (www.scotland.gov.uk/LEADER2014) and presented the results of FG4 to LEADER groups and has therefore contributed to feed information related to the development of LDS into the work of LAGs. The FG4 member from the MA gave a brief overview to LAGs at the coordinators' meeting. UK NRNs have also been active in disseminating the results of FG4 to their members.
- ✓ In **Portugal**, dissemination was carried out at national level by the MA and the NRN. The NRN produced a leaflet to disseminate the results of FG4 to other stakeholders at national level (MA,

PA, Office of Planning and Policies of the Ministry of Agriculture) and regional/local level (mainly LAGs). At regional level, the MA organised a seminar at the University of Évora in December 2012. The main objective of the seminar was to present the final results of their project “Discussion on the Local Development Strategies and Models of Governance”. They disseminated the leaflet, the video and the final report of FG4 to LAG and regional members of the NRN.

- ✓ In **Finland**, the MA discussed the results of FG4 internally, while two LAG managers engaged actively in discussions at their local level about future LDS.

Dissemination of FG Knowledge Transfer and Innovation results

- ✓ The **Italian** NRN has published the results of the FG KT&I on its gateway, including the reports, summaries and case study examples.
- ✓ **COPA-COGECA**, the representative of farmers and their cooperatives in the EU, intends to use the reports of the FG KT&I as background material for a meeting.
- ✓ In **Hungary**, the MA will provide information on the results of the FG KT&I to the newly formed EIP structure under the umbrella of the Hungarian Institute for Advisory Services, Training and Rural Development (a background institute of the Ministry), which also hosts the Hungarian NRN.
- ✓ In **Scotland**, the expert from Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) communicated every result of the FG meetings back to the Scottish government, produced a list of top 10 ideas for KT&I and published them on the SRUC website, as well as included findings in forums and consultations organised by the Rural Policy Centre of the SRUC.

Key findings on the impact of TWGs & FGs

Despite the weaknesses in terms of dissemination, **there is evidence of some impact at EU and national/regional level**, primarily through the incorporation of some results into the new EU Regulation and the drafting of guidelines for Member States, the inclusion of some results in the drafting of local development strategies and the incorporation of some of the lessons learned into RDP preparation. There was a **significant impact at the personal level for group members** in terms of increased knowledge and better understanding of issues and problems. The predominant message from this Case Study is that groups should continue in the future, especially in view of the evolving rural development policy context and the high number of novelties introduced in the 2014-2020 period that will need to be monitored and assessed.

“When we see others tried it and it did not work, we should try and do something different”

Examples for potential impact of the groups

Contribution to the EAFRD Regulation. There are examples of how TWGs have contributed to the new EAFRD Regulation.

- ✓ The EC regulation proposal was coming out when the work of the **TWG4** was concluding and there was the opportunity to confirm some of the ideas already under discussion in the Commission on the simplification of delivery mechanisms. TWG4 provided evidence on what issues related to delivery mechanisms need to be considered when drafting the new Regulation. The new Regulation incorporates indeed several aspects that were addressed by TWG4, for instance, the elimination of

axes, the mixing of measures, the multi-fund approach or the importance of the national level strategic framework.

- ✓ In relation to **TWG2**, the Commission has used its findings to inform the new Regulation about the contribution of agriculture to inclusive growth in rural areas. The impact assessment of the CAP towards 2020 accompanying the proposals for the new Regulation included explicit references to TWG2 when analysing the role of agriculture to the generation of additional economic activities (http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/policy-perspectives/impact-assessment/cap-towards-2020/report/full-text_en.pdf).

Contribution to guidelines for Member States. The technical support to the FG KT&I by relevant DG AGRI units (including the Unit responsible for the EIP) was fundamental for including some of the most important themes of the FG, namely innovation support services / innovation brokering and Operational Groups into the development of guidelines to Member States on how to set up Operational Groups. The FG KT&I process of regular meetings with Member States and experts was useful for producing recommendations on Operational Groups (how to set them up, skills required, etc.). This process also contributed to better clarity of the innovation support services / innovation brokering concept (e.g. what skills innovation brokers should have).

More effective preparation of RDPs. The **Finnish** MA has started work on the RDP using the knowledge obtained through TWG4 and trying to make the RDP less bureaucratic. In Ireland, farmers' organisations used the TWG4 case study for their own work on future programming. In **Scotland** (UK), the results of FG4 were used by the MA for the preparation of the next RDP. In **France**, the future RDP programming was based on the findings of FG KT&I, for instance, there was one region which did not want to include the cooperation measure in its programme but changed its mind after seeing the results of the FG – the new programme for that region now includes the cooperation measure with a view to support cooperation in innovation in the context of the EIP. The **English** MA intends to include LDS in its operational guidance document on CLLD expecting there will be more credibility in it as the methodology on the development of LDS stems from the ENRD work – there will be emphasis on selection criteria and the balance between the top-down and bottom-up approach. In **Hungary**, the MA will use the FG4 results to draft the new rural development programme and will organise a training seminar for LAGs on the FG4 topics to coordinate the elaboration of LDSs.

Capacity building for more effective preparation of LAG strategies. In **Portugal**, the NRN in partnership with the MINHA TERRA network developed a work programme regarding the requirements for LAGs and for the construction of participatory and high quality LDS within the European Structural and Investment Funds. The NRN and MINHA TERRA Network funded and monitored training activities, disseminated the results of FG4, reaching the central bodies of the Ministry of Agriculture and Sea, in particular the Office of Planning and Policies, the MA and PA. As a consequence, there is evidence of a greater understanding of LDS and the requirements that arise for developing better quality LDS in the next programming period.

Impact at local level. The **Hungarian** LAG Felső-Homokhátság shared the information with colleagues and has already started preparing their LDS using the tools obtained through FG4. In the **Czech Republic** too, the results of FG4 were used by the National Network of LAGs to develop new strategies. In **Portugal**, as a result of FG4 and the NRN project on “Discussion on the Local Development Strategies and Models of Governance”, which run simultaneously and complemented each other, the LAG of Alentejo became more aware of the need to embark as soon as possible on developing its LDS and improve its quality.

Impacts at the personal level. Members of the FGs established new contacts with colleagues from other countries and can now contact them when they need advice/support or exchange an idea. In new Member States the impact at the personal level entailed a better understanding of where they are vis a vis other countries and enabled to become better prepared for designing and implementing future policy.

Overall Conclusions and Recommendations

A key message stemming from the analysis is that groups need clear objectives, a clear definition of the topic, a competent and dynamic chairman, relevant members who participate on a voluntary basis and a participative working approach. The ideal group should balance time and resources and if necessary reduce the scope of the work and focus on what members collectively regard as most pressing issues. If the actors involved are (a) relevant and (b) participating out of interest and not obligation, then it is more likely they will use the results of the group in their work and that they will try to disseminate them internally and/or to other stakeholders.

The involvement of DG AGRI is fundamental: these participatory groups can help bringing EU policy makers closer (and provide them with first-hand information on) various implementation issues and on-the-ground problems in Member State. It is also critical for taking up the results of the group's work into the improvement and/or design of policy. Similarly, the involvement in the groups of policy makers from Member States facilitates the uptake of results into policy design and implementation at Member State level.

The involvement of regional/local level stakeholders such as LAGs ensures a bottom-up approach is incorporated in the group's work and outcomes. It is also the level that can better inform policy makers at either the MA or the EU level of the real implementation problems facing stakeholders on the ground. FGs in particular help bridge the information gap between the higher end of policy making (EU or national level) with the lower end (local and regional stakeholders/beneficiaries) and correct any lack of information or misinformation between them.

Results were useful but had a limited impact. Impact was more likely when the results were disseminated and when the timing was appropriate (for instance at the end of the current programming period and before the new regulations/programmes have been completed). At the same time, the impact does not have to be associated with a contribution to policy making. It can include equally important effects that can improve implementation, such as the identification of training needs in Member States on the topics analysed and discussed and lead to the development of targeted training, for instance, to MAs on innovation concepts, to LAGs on evaluation methods, on selection criteria, etc.

Dissemination has been sparse overall, with some group members undertaking several dissemination activities, others disseminating internally or to their immediate stakeholders and the majority not

“The Groups need to leave Brussels for a while and go closer to Member States and to the farmers”

disseminating at all. Dissemination should be incorporated in the group's work programme from the beginning and followed through / monitored for effectiveness. More specifically, dissemination planning should include activities to raise awareness and inform of the group's outcomes at national level and ideally also at regional level. For instance, results can be better communicated at regional level possibly through regional dissemination workshops. Such workshops could group a number of countries/regions with common issues/characteristics, for instance a dissemination workshop covering Scandinavian and Baltic countries.

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