Bottom-Up Networking around the Baltic Sea

Case Study

November 2012

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Executive Summary

The concept of the Baltic Sea cluster emerged as a bottom-up process with the first meeting taking place early 2008. This occurred in parallel to the development of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) which identified a specific framework to maximise the potential of the macro-region. The activities of the cluster are linked to the strategy, focusing on issues identified by the NRNs. Eight countries have been active in the network which is led by the NRNs (NSUs) and MAs. The cluster focuses on sharing knowledge and experience amongst members.

The cluster meets twice yearly with nine meetings now having taken place discussing issues related to delivery of the RDP with a strong focus on identifying and sharing good practice between members. Partnership between members and utilising a participatory approach are the key elements of the success of the cluster. This particular form of networking is characterised by a bottom-up approach, informal interactions and a broad scope of similarities connecting the members. During the four years it has been running the principal objectives of the cluster have been achieved and there is a shared belief that this continues to be a useful process.

As it continues to develop the cluster needs to build its relationship with the wider network dealing with the EUSBSR to improve understanding of its work and achievements. The success of the cluster has led to an increasing number of other organisations wishing to participate. Effectively managing any future growth in membership to ensure the personal interactions its success has been built upon remains will be a challenge.

Photo: Ave Bremse

Abbreviations

CP	Contact Point
DG AGRI	Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
EU	European Union
EUSBSR	European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
FLAG	Fisheries Local Action Group
FNN	Fisheries National Network
LAG	Local Action Group
MA	Managing Authority
MS	Member State
NRN	National Rural Network
NSU	Network Support Unit
RDP	Rural Development Programme

Methodology

This case study has drawn upon a range of available data and information, primarily observations during the recent cluster meeting, semi-structured interviews, discussions with network members and follow-up communication. This has been supplemented by documentation from the meetings and information from the NRN websites. The main focus of the case study is the identification of the added value of networking, whilst also taking into account characteristics of the process, features of the network participants and key factors that support or hinder their activities.

Background

The idea of bringing together NRNs from the countries around the Baltic Sea was initiated by the Swedish and Finnish NRNs (NSUs), while talking with other colleagues from the Nordic-Baltic macro-region during a meeting in Brussels. Prior to this some informal bi-lateral exchanges had taken place and a common need to share similar concerns and experiences within a group of neighbouring countries was growing. The first meeting was organised in Finland during February 2008 with the concept of the cluster emerging in a bottom-up way.

In parallel to this process the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was also being developed. This document offered a specific framework to maximise the potential of the macro-region and in 2009 become legally accepted throughout the area. The strategy did not include any additional financial resources, instead it focused on integrating different existing EU funding mechanisms to ensure a better coherency, support them to fulfil their objectives and create synergies between the old and new Member States.

The Strategy identified a number of priorities which were to be implemented through a recognised Action Plan. The activities of the cluster are specifically linked with these objectives, under Priority 9 of the EUSBSR, "Reinforcing sustainable agriculture, forestry and fishing" and to focus their activity the Nordic-Baltic countries have concentrated their efforts around a Flagship Project "Sustainable Rural Development". This activity has then been focused further on issues relating to youth and innovation in rural areas.

Participants

Those most frequently involved in cluster meetings are the NRNs (NSUs) and MAs. Occasionally, there are also representatives of the FNNs, LAGs, FLAGs, DG AGRI, ENRD CP and selected experts. The following 8 countries have been active in networking through the cluster - Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. The extent to which MSs participate in this networking as well as their institutional representation varies across the macro-region.

Based upon the list of participants at the events and the assessment of their activity given by the interviewees, the graph below illustrates the institutional diversity of the cluster and engagement of the members in shared activity.

Figure1. Institutional diversity of the Nordic-Baltic Cluster
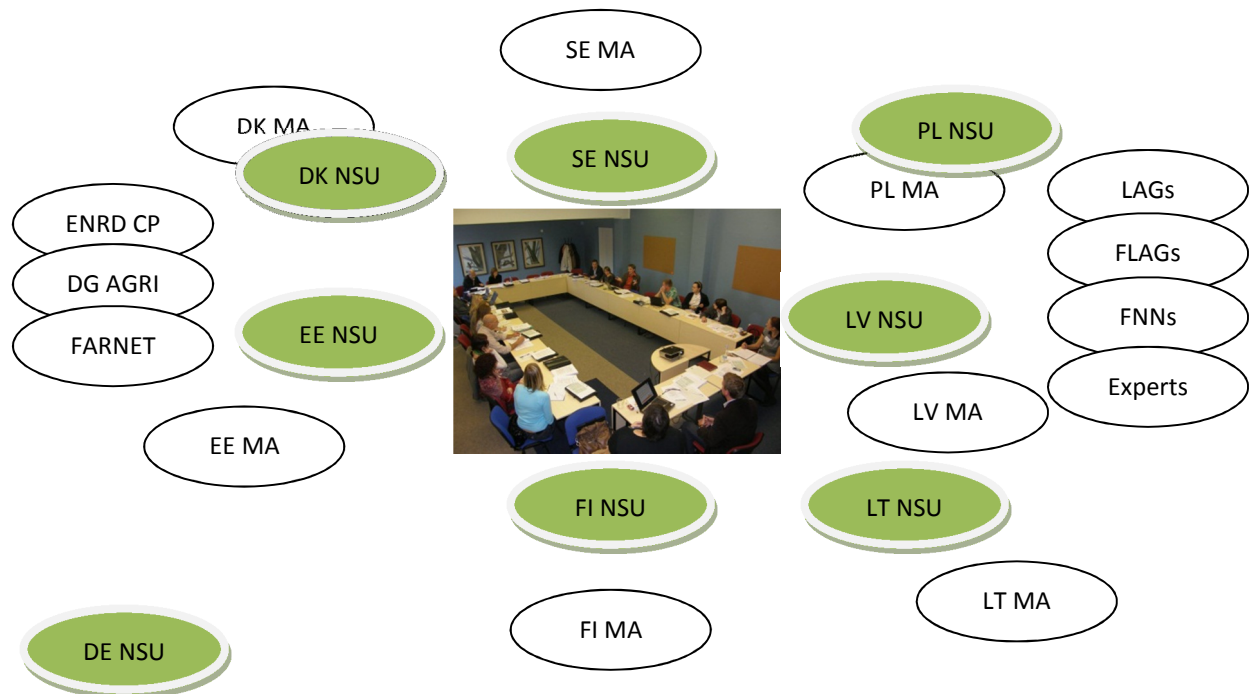
Source: ENRD CP, photo: Ave Bremse

The most active stakeholders who drive the process have been situated around the picture in the centre of the graph and include Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Sweden. The NSUs from these countries clearly demonstrate strong commitment to shared actions and stimulate others to become involved. They are however not dominating, focusing instead on facilitating networking. In Poland the MA participates in the cluster to a greater extent than the NSU.

The most peripheral actor is the German NSU whose representative has only been in touch with the other cluster members occasionally and attended one meeting. The German MA has not joined the cluster so far and in the case of Denmark it is not clear whether meeting participants represent the NSUs or MAs. Attendance at meetings has been between 15 to 60 participants with 25-30 people being the average.

Objectives

The principal objective of the cluster is the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst members. Members are interested in learning about the delivery of RDPs in each country with a specific focus on the NRNs and NSUs, identifying relevant good practice and receiving updates on previous and future activities. They are also seeking inspiration to help develop new activities in their own areas. Similar purposes link the other stakeholders such as the MAs, NFNs, LAGs and FLAGs and there is also a desire to integrate LAGs and FLAGs through the development of TNC projects.

Process and main activities

Members are involved in organising and participating in regular twice yearly meetings. At each meeting the venue and thematic focus of the next meeting are suggested by another host country from the Nordic-Baltic macro-region. Nine meetings have now taken place, rotating round different venues, with extra spaces reserved for those from the host countries. The cluster members also have an opportunity to meet during other events such as NRN meetings organised by the ENRD CP.

During cluster events a wide variety of issues related to delivery of the RDP have been covered. There has been a strong focus on identifying and sharing good practice between members as well as searching for inspiration and possible improvements in the current RDP delivery. The methodology for meetings is based upon presentations, group discussions, workshops and study trips. They focus on good practice such as RDP projects, NRN initiatives or programme delivery solutions with some input delivered directly by the project holders.

The focus of these networking activities is knowledge and cooperation. The cluster started by understanding the current state of rural development in each other's countries and have then informed and learnt from each other. The network members have now begun to apply their new knowledge and to cooperate. The graph below briefly illustrates the evolution of the Nordic-Baltic cluster as seen by one of its members.

Figure2. Evolution of the Nordic-Baltic Cluster
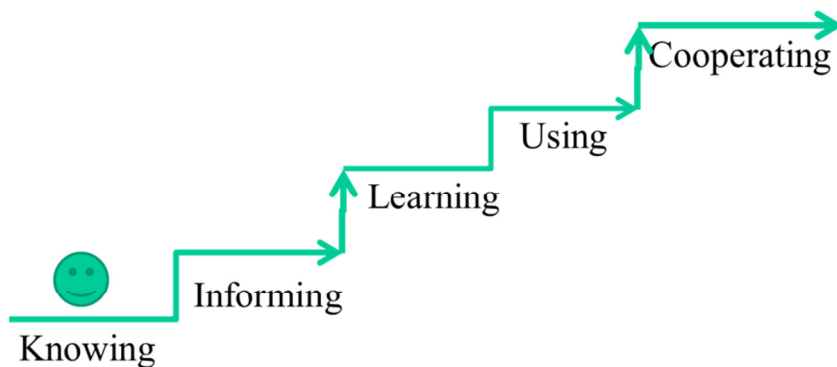
Source: Stålgren (2011)

The cluster emerged as a bottom-up, informal and self-organised initiative. There have been no official rules put in place to regulate interactions between its members however membership is guided by several factors including institutional context, geographic location, rural development, RDPs and EUSBSR. It functions as a mutual support group, characterised by the input of a high level of volunteer time and members which are brought together through shared practice in a community network.

Some organisation of the network stakeholders around individual activity has taken place. The Lithuanian MA identified the most effective ways to organise network communication through a survey, hoping to support the common actions developed around the flagship project on sustainable rural development. The Polish MA and Swedish NSU also supported member coordination while streamlining the flagship project.

Although they have a common background the NRNs are all diverse. They are led by the targets they are set, their organisational models and their different operational models - some more hierarchical, some more flexible and their relationships with MAs. Despite this diversity they demonstrate a willingness to be a part of a broader regional scheme.

Partnership between members and utilising a participatory approach are the key elements of the success of the process of self-organisation within the cluster. For example when deciding on the working priorities for the flagship project a questionnaire was designed jointly by the Polish MA and Swedish NRN. This was then circulated to the cluster members who, by answering questions, had the opportunity to recognise their priority areas of rural development and identify resources available for the common work in the cluster, so focusing the discussion. The results of this survey helped to streamline cooperation around the issues of youth and innovation in rural areas.

Resources

Networking is financed from the budgets of the NRNs and MAs covering the costs of the meetings, travel and accommodation. One of the members estimated the input of human resources at approximately one NSU staff working 20 days a year. Overall it is not considered a very resource intensive activity.

'Added value' of networking

The principal objectives of the cluster have been achieved so far and remain unchanged. Exchange of knowledge and experience between the NSUs and MAs has been deemed very fruitful and inspiring for members. There is a shared belief that this is a useful process for learning how to deal with similar issues which occur in each of the countries involved. As an example some RDP delivery mechanisms have been identified that have been or have a potential to be transferred from one MS to another, including:

- Danish RDP project application and control procedures to Sweden
- Lithuanian and Latvian financial instruments for RDP projects to Sweden
- Swedish award for the best practice RDP projects (Rural Gala) to Finland and Estonia
- Estonian and Swedish activities targeting youth to Latvia
- Swedish work on area planning to Latvia
- Finnish "Rural Van" to other MSs within the cluster

The cluster also contributes to the EUSBSR with the flagship project on "Sustainable Rural Development" which with the support of members was developed to focus on the themes of rural youth and support for innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas. This activity has helped to galvanise members around a common goal and increase their cooperation. As a result an originally unintended initiative has been undertaken to develop a long-term platform involving stakeholders dealing with youth and innovation in the Nordic-Baltic macro-region. Most recently start-up funding has been identified outside the RDP and stakeholders are seeking to develop a joint bid for funding.

Another lesson learned from the flagship project is that ideas cannot simply be "copied and pasted" from one country to another. To learn how actions can be successfully transferred more effectively Latvia organised a study trip to Sweden and Finland with Latvian young people, to participate in an innovation camp in Finland. The Polish MA was informed in a feedback letter from a project holder who participated in a cluster meeting about the inspiration he gained from a Finnish project and their intention to design a similar one.

According to cluster members other unexpected results of this networking include:

- Increasing integration and cooperation of the cluster members - getting to know each other better, building trust, partnership and even friendship;
- Increasing cohesion and complementarity – developing a concept to integrate a common framework for the Nordic-Baltic Cluster in future RDPs and NRN activities in the respective countries;
- Inspiring other regions in the EU to create similar networks in their geographic locations - e.g. Danube and Mediterranean clusters;
- Extending the cluster approach to other networks in the Baltic macro-region – partially integrating FLAGs and youth and innovation stakeholders;
- Improving the definition and understanding of what networking is and how it can be beneficial for rural development;
- Strengthening macro-regional and EU identity.

Photo: Ave Bremse

What supports networking?

The starting point for this network was geographic location around the Baltic Sea as well as historical interdependence of the countries concerned. The members of the cluster clearly see linkages between their countries within their common history, cultural background and methods of communication. They share concerns about delivery of the RDPs, functionality of the NRNs and the wider development of rural areas having an impact on the whole macro-region.

People have been highlighted as the main factor which connects members. For those involved networking means an investment in personal relationships, opportunities to involve each other and the building of trust which results over time. In the cluster there is much focus on informal, direct interaction, knowing each other, as well as meeting and communicating wherever possible in person. Frequent contact is seen as the key prerequisite for successful networking.

The voluntary and bottom-up character of this networking is another key shared element. Although no member is formally obliged to contribute or commit to perform certain tasks the scope of engagement is very high. Within this network of practice shared by peer's fields of expertise and issues bring members together and allow for mutual sharing of expertise and learning from each other.

What networking obstacles exist?

Different operating structures, a lack of human resources and frequent rotation of NSU staff are the main factors hindering this networking. This has particularly been the case in Denmark, Lithuania and Poland. In Poland there is one person from the MA who frequently attends and also acts as an NRN contributor by for example delivering content for the NRN website, publications and developing contact with stakeholders. Resources to fulfil the objectives of the flagship project are not readily available.

Neither Germany nor Russia is active in the cluster as they have legal and resource constraints. Germany has a federal structure which grants a high degree of autonomy to its Federal States. This means that the centralised NSU is not able to deal with macro-regional integration however this might be an opportunity for the regional units situated next to the Baltic Sea to become involved. The central NSU also does not have enough staff or financial capacity to engage in the cluster.

Currently there is no clear vision or expressed need to involve the Kaliningrad district of Russia in the clusters activities. There is however some examples of bi-lateral cooperation with Russia and these have been shared with other members during meetings.

Although also an asset the flexible, bottom-up nature of the cluster can weaken shared activity and the flow of information. Members feel this could be helped by introducing a more structured normative framework or a protocol that could organise networking in a more systematic way.

Future challenges

After 4 years of running the cluster members have recognised a growing need to expand the common activities they are delivering. The first steps have already been undertaken through the joint application for funding for the proposed youth and innovation platform. Members expressed an interest in deepening integration around other thematic perspectives. Experience from this cluster could be applicable in the European Innovation Partnership planned for the next programming period. The cluster is also perceived as being complementary to the ENRD, focusing on the more locally specific needs which exist in the Baltic context.

There could be a stronger reference to the EUSBSR and its priorities in country RDPs and the Action Plans of the NRNs. It is also important to improve the external visibility and communication of the existence of the cluster, its work and achievements to the wider network dealing with the strategy.

Over time there have been an increasing number of issues and actors who are interested in becoming involved in the cluster. Most recently meetings have been attended by representatives of the fisheries networks. As the group grows however, ensuring a beneficial and informal group process remains becomes a challenge for the cluster. It is felt that bringing together between 15-25 people in a meeting could be the maximum, however occasionally a larger space could be offered.

Photo: Ave Bremse