

Summary of the second national rural networks meeting Prague, 13 February 2008

Networking for Rural development: towards a greater stakeholder involvement

Morning Session: rural development in the wider context of the EAFRD

Welcome and introduction by Martin Law, EN RD Contact Point. Mrs Dvořáková NRN Czech Republic excused the absence of by PhDr. Ivo Hlaváč, First Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Czech Republic, who had been expected to make the opening speech.

Aims and objectives

The meeting was organised by the EN RD Contact Point, and kindly hosted by the Czech NRN. The agenda was drafted in direct response to feedback from the previous national rural network meeting held in Brussels, 27.11.2008. At this meeting the network representatives indicated that one of the most pressing needs was to understand how to engage the wider rural community, and in particular, those rural stakeholders within Axes 1 and 2. Consequently the agenda was drafted to reflect this by providing an opportunity for presentations from selected experts and rural networks with different approaches and experiences of working with stakeholders in the different axes. This provided the wider context of rural networking, and subsequently fed the discussion which took place in the group workshops (the outcomes of which are presented below).

It was also noted that this meeting would provide preparation for the first EN RD seminar 'Capacity Building for rural networks', planned Brussels, March 30-31.

Workshop outputs

There were three workshop groups which were asked to consider two specific points:

- What are the expectations from the active integration of axes 1&2 stakeholders in the NRNs?
- How can the interlinks between the different stakeholders be ensured?

Summary of Workshop One moderated by Françoise Bonert

What are the expectations from the active integration of axes 1 & 2 stakeholders in the NRN?

This question was more understood as what can the NRNs do to integrate the stakeholders in the already existing networking activities and how to bring together all rural stakeholders of the EAFRD.

- The first step is to create a better understanding and more trust between all the stakeholders, for example, creating possibilities for farmers to cooperate with other rural stakeholders will help to create a better understanding and trust
- Farmers are more able to see their own role in different areas of rural development if they are working with stakeholders from the other axes: this will both motivate them and enable them to see more clearly the benefit of the networking
- Giving stakeholders from axes 3 and 4 the possibility to broaden their scope of activity: bringing more stakeholders together allows the possibility of more networking activities and exchanges
- Organizing seminars and information days at **all levels** (regional, national and international) in order to develop more awareness about the goals of the RDP's, and identify common goals

- Ensuring cooperation between LAGs and stakeholders from Axis 1, by introducing the concept of group work to farmers, and to show them that this is useful. This requires greater communication and more activities
- More connections between organizations of stakeholders, particularly between **innovative** people in all axes. Individual stakeholders should be involved instead of organizations (especially for Axes 1 and 2)
- Addressing all people who are interested in rural development and networking, even those who don't play an important role and try to strengthen those people, and in particular involving young people who came back to rural areas

How can the interlinks between the different stakeholders be ensured?

- A strategic approach is needed (starting with different target groups and with homogenous groups)
- Building strategic groups in all axes as a mixture of organizations. These groups can help to create interlinks, and afterward benefits can be defined and interlinks can be created
- Supporting the change of behaviour of all the different stakeholders
- Animators for all group of stakeholders are needed

Summary of Workshop Two moderated by Breda Kovačič.

What are the expectations from the active integration of axes 1&2 stakeholders in the NRN?

- That there is a need to explain to the stakeholders both the differences and the complementarities between the different axes of the rural development programme, especially the farmers in understanding the Leader axis.
- It is necessary to build and create relationships between the different axes, and make the rural stakeholders feel responsible for rural development, in particular, for nature protection and the landscape.
- There will be a need to have greater links with the farming community (such as farmer's unions) and provide information in a language that they can understand.
- NRNs to consider getting input for their work programmes by consulting with all rural stakeholders.

How can the interlinks between the different stakeholders be ensured?

- It is necessary to have the right communication platform. This can be achieved in a variety of different ways: trainings and seminars; use existing services, and include existing networks in order to ensure the inclusion of all stakeholders.
- Develop innovative tools and approaches, such as using new technologies, and dedicating specific parts of the web-site to address targeted groups or areas of interest
- Enlarging the role of Local Action Groups (provide them with more money and responsibility) and in many Member States they cover all the territory and involve all stakeholders.
- At EU level, the planned thematic working groups will help to ensure links with rural stakeholders.

- Conclusions: Integration of axes 1&2 stakeholders requires a greater explanation and promotion of RD policy – making policy more pertinent and understandable. The key to ensuring this is by having an appropriate 'platform of communication'.

Summary of Workshop Three moderated by Päivi Kujala

What are the expectations from the active integration of axes 1 & 2 stakeholders in the NRN?

- This question was initially answered as: *"to achieve a better understanding of regional and local (i.e. territorial) aspects of rural development"*

How can the interlinks between the different stakeholders be ensured?

- This question was initially answered as: *"by means of a strategy for networking (i.e. via the identification of issues, followed by the development of appropriate tools)"*

The discussion subsequently focused on the development of strategies for networking that are relevant to different stakeholders and take into account local and regional needs. NRNs have used different means to identify issues:

- Monitoring/working groups corresponding to axes and involving a variety of stakeholders;
- Meetings at local level bringing together representative stakeholders of different axes when appropriate (e.g. Natura 2000 and Leader);
- Events targeting specific axis themes bringing together stakeholders at regional level;
- Sending out messages to stakeholders of relevant sectors, containing specific suggestions, thus 'provoking' concrete feedback.
- An integrated approach, comprising the establishment of three stakeholder groups: (1) a LAG focus group, (2) a group of axes 1-2-3 representatives and (3) a scientific committee; with the aim to establish (a) transversal needs and (b) needs by axis.

When proposing the tools which are to become part of the networking strategy, the following aspects were considered important:

- Make use of the Leader (i.e. the 'bottom-up') approach at LAG level in order to: continue and consolidate axes 1 & 2 stakeholder inclusion; and identify 'higher' (i.e. regional and national) level stakeholders;
- Themes/topics that have been chosen due to their local/regional relevance must demonstrate a clear benefit in order to ensure a degree of motivation for the stakeholders concerned, and a level of sustainability in terms of the efforts and outputs required;
- Develop modest and easily understandable tools, in order to avoiding criticism of anything which could be considered too costly and/or ineffective;
- Aim to facilitate and support programme implementation and as far as possible support programme development on an ongoing basis.

Afternoon Session: Discussion on capacity building and points for discussion at the first EN RD seminar

The workshop conclusions were presented on the basis of the outputs as described above.

Lessons learned about relevant tools and activities for NRNs in order to increase the interlinks between the beneficiaries of EAFRD and rural stakeholders

Haris Martinos, Vice President, EN RD Contact Point.

Starting point

Interlinking stakeholders of different axes is a big challenge facing all NRNs. The meeting highlighted that:

- practically all NRNs are still at the starting point in tackling this challenge;
- there are considerable difficulties at the starting point stemming from the prevailing attitudes of stakeholders on their involvement in rural development programmes and projects, and on the value of networking.

Generally the attitudes of participants in Axes 1 and 2 are very different from those involved in Leader. As summarised by Martina Reuber (Chamber of Agriculture, NRW, Germany), in the former case the administrations have a "take it or leave it" attitude whilst farmers tend to expect straightforward and fast decisions on financial support applications. Moreover, they tend to dislike the novelty of being expected to become engaged in group work that Leader normally entails.

Regarding the need for networking, to which all NRNs are actively committed, the first reflex reaction of those who are not involved in Leader is often "why networking?" Appreciating the value of, and potential benefits from networking varies considerably across axes.

However, it will be wrong to assume that the starting point is a wholly negative one, as several contributors reminded the meeting that local networking exists, at least within Axes 1 and 2, and of course in Axis 4. Therefore the main challenge is how to take this further and interlink with other axes.

Stakeholders

Many participants commented that talking about or dealing with "the stakeholders" often sounds like an abstract exercise but it should not be so.

NRNs need to have a clear picture as to who are the stakeholders. Luis Fidschuster (NRN, Austria) stressed that understanding the diverse stakeholders and defining target groups for the activities of the NRNs are essential steps in the action plan of any NRN.

Tomas Ratering (UZEI Institute, CZ) provided the basis for such a typology which shows a wide spectrum that includes individuals as well as various organisations and authorities:

- Farmers – recipients of incentives or benefits;
- Farmers' organisations (non-profit: unions; profit: marketing cooperatives);
- Local inhabitants – recipients of private or public benefits;
- NGOs representing consumers of mainly public/social benefits;
- Business and other economic associations;
- Environmental, cultural and social associations;
- Government and regional/local government administrations;

- Programme implementation institutions and extension services.

Moreover, the presentation of the Czech NRN by Zuzana Dvorakova showed that regional/local state agencies with programme implementation functions¹ have been designated as “network members”. This broadens further the spectrum of stakeholders.

Relevant tools and activities

It is to be expected that given such a low starting point the NRNs will inevitably adopt a step-by-step approach in building up networking and interlinking between axes. Participants acknowledged that this was a point already made by Jean-Michel Courades (EC, DG AGRI) at the Leader Sub-committee meeting of 26.11.08.

A number of practical examples presented at the meeting showed that this approach is being put in practice by some NRNs, notably in Finland and Austria, by implementing activities focused on specific themes.

The Finnish network (presentation by Paivi Kujala of the NRN) has carried out such activities within specific axes, on themes such as construction planning, profitability of agriculture, business planning under Axis 1 and biodiversity, animal welfare payments, organic fertilisers, agricultural water protection² under Axis 2.

An intervention from the Austrian network (Christian Jochum) showed that a similar approach has been adopted for networking across axes by focusing on selected themes of common interest to participants in Axis 1 or 2 and Leader, such as biomass, innovation, and quality measures.

The above experiences have two common features that are worth noting:

- they offer opportunities for face-to-face encounters between stakeholders, such as training days, stakeholders events, “dating” project leaders, field and study visits;
- they are on a modest in scale in terms of resources and are fast to implement, easy-to-understand, with quick results and multiplier effects.

Although some individual farmers participate in such activities, it is the collective or intermediary organisations that are the main categories of stakeholders who are actively involved. They may be farmer’s organisations, business associations, various NGOs, etc.

Nevertheless, it is individuals within the stakeholder organisations who are the key to successful networking. The Swedish approach on this matter, as presented in the intervention of Leif Berndtsson (NRN Sweden), stresses the importance of focussing on individuals within stakeholder organisations who can act as animators or facilitators. As such they tend to be found amongst those motivated to promote networking or currently involved in innovative actions.

Concluding remarks

The lessons learned fall into three groups:

¹ AARD: Agencies for Agriculture and Rural Development

² TEHO project in Finland (Widespread use of effective agricultural water protection means) presented by Airi Ellen Kulmala

- NRNs strive or at least aspire at building up networking between stakeholders and interlinking between axes, from a low starting point. A step-by-step approach is generally accepted as appropriate. A few NRNs, such as Finland and Austria have already taken practical steps to address this challenge, focusing on creating opportunities for face-to-face contact between stakeholders on well defined thematic areas of common interest. Small steps should not mean ad hoc actions. A networking strategy is essential and this was stressed by Cecile Schalenbourg (NRN, Belgium, Wallonie) and was supported by Paul Keating (NRN, Ireland) and other participants whose networks have developed such strategies. However, several NRNs, including Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Czech Republic, acknowledged that they lack such a strategy.
- Suggestions made at the meeting pointed to a potential framework for the specific activities presented earlier. It has been suggested that a "change management" attitude should be adopted by the strategy and that practical tools should form a coherent "communication platform". Moreover, a number of contextual activities were mentioned as contributing to a sound strategy and facilitating networking across axes, including explaining rural development policy, conducting market research, and carrying out systematic needs analyses across the different axes.

Next steps and next meetings

The network representatives were informed about the next NRN meeting which is linked to the 'Capacity Building seminar'. This NRN meeting will take place on March 31st (afternoon) and April 1st 2009. The Belgium NRN (who have kindly agreed to host this network meeting) provided an outline of their proposal. This includes a field visit on the afternoon of March 31st followed by a social evening, and for April 1st, there would be: in the morning, themed table discussions according to needs identified during the 'Capacity Building seminar', and also 'speed dating' based on areas of 'possible' cooperation which could ultimately form the basis of a project between the different networks. Further information is to be sent out by the Belgian NRN.

Further NRN meetings are planned for April 22nd, May 13th and in June, 2009.

Participants were then thanked for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

N.B. Comments received during this meeting and via the 'evaluation form' will be taken into account in future planning.