

ENRD webinar

# Working together: linking Rural Networks

## Highlights report

The workshop provided participants with the opportunity to share NRN current methods of connecting and collaborating and exploring how, and on which topics, they can work together. The discussions related both to which areas of activity benefit from linkages between NRNs, and also the format used for these exchanges.

Participants discussed and explored relevant activities and topics for further peer-to-peer exchanges and considered how successful cooperation involves a broad range of stakeholders. Ideas were exchanged on how the model can be adapted to better accommodate more informal and online interactions.

### Event Information

**Date:** 4 May 2021

**Location:** Online

**Organiser:** ENRD Contact Point

**Participants:** 67 participants from 24 Member States (MS) including National Rural Networks, RDP Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, research centres and EU institutions.

**Outcomes:** A range of specific topics and exchanges NRNs are keen to pursue and develop; sharing best practice in online and offline collaboration.

**Web page:** [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-nrns-working-together-linking-rural-networks\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-nrns-working-together-linking-rural-networks_en)



### Sharing successful connections

During the first morning session, experiences were shared by participants from three NRN Steering Groups who are involved in network activities, and who had been active in exchanges with other NRNs. Taina Väre from the Finnish Steering Group highlighted the need for stakeholder involvement to inform new Thematic Groups and involve new actors. Railii Mengel of the Estonian Steering Group highlighted the specific example of 'virtual cafés' in rural areas of Estonia, used to encourage involvement of local stakeholders. Thomas Norrby from the Swedish Steering Committee had been particularly involved in cooperation with other NRNs and highlighted "stealing with pride: finding inspiration and twisting it in our own way to fit our needs."



### Group discussions - working across and sharing common themes

Following a morning poll where participants reported their connections were good but could be improved, participants were encouraged to exchange on themes, sharing existing activities and exploring new areas to work on with others. Four breakout groups were formed, with the possibility to move from one to another and be involved in different topics. The discussions resulted in a range of examples and proposed actions:

- **Youth:** Existing activity under this theme focuses on supporting young farmers, promoting Erasmus exchanges, and in providing support to young people through thematic groups, start-up assistance and regular exchanges with youth leaders/workers. New proposals for collaboration included sharing educational material and facilitating exchanges between urban and rural youth. A proposal was made for LAGs collaborating on youth involvement to create a new cross-country youth collaboration project involving multiple Member States.
- **Good Practices:** A number of successful examples of sharing good practices included cooperation on mobility through using digital tools and developing tourism. LEADER good practices and Smart Village projects are also widely shared. Looking to the future, action areas include considering learning from exchanging some 'bad' practice examples and sharing databases of projects (including examples which illustrate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic). Proven experiences that show the involvement of different stakeholders i.e. from different regions or a large range of social groups in developing rural areas and making them attractive, could be also used as good practices.
- **EIP and Innovation:** The main examples cited during this discussion were actions connecting different AKIS actors, and continuing to foster innovation by supporting the creation of Operational Groups and disseminating their results. Future activity should concentrate on improved links with national Horizon Contact Points and research projects, and creating a forum for knowledge exchange and bringing innovation stakeholders together. Encouragement was given to getting started and to using online methods as appropriate.
- **Communication:** Many existing exchanges on this topic are bilateral and include collaboration on LEADER TNC projects, Simplified Costs Options (SCOs) and sharing experiences using good practices examples (including sharing translation efforts). More work in this area can focus on improved use of social media, renewed efforts to foster a central European



‘communication network’ based on the existing successful Nordic-Baltic model, and MS hosting the ‘Rural Networking mornings’ (online informal exchanges involving a wide range of stakeholders).

### Regional Connections: success factors

Closing the morning activity in a panel session, the focus turned to successful connections between NRNs across the EU, and where there may be further scope for development. Magdalena Mach from DG AGRI presented the upcoming [series of online webinars](#) aimed at providing guidance to the future CAP networks, and their innovation strand in particular, on supporting the new cross-cutting innovation objective of the CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs).

Maria Custódia Correia from the Portuguese NSU highlighted the Mediterranean diet (recognised by UNESCO, across seven countries), and the topic of previous collaborations focussing on health, local food production, lifestyle and heritage. Nancy Samargiu from the Romanian NSU explained how social media had acted as a forum for exchange between communicators on good practices and the sharing of project examples. A recent cooperation between the Romanian NSU and the French NSU had also been beneficial in discussing issues such as using SCOs within LEADER, Natural Resources Management and how the CSPs can respond to local needs.

Teemu Hauhia (FI NSU), Reve Lambur and Ave Bremse (EE NSU), and Hans-Olof Stålgren (SE NSU) jointly reflected on the success of the collaboration in the Nordic-Baltic network. The key to the success is that once the connection is made, communication is easier, the cooperation can expand, and new actors can join and feel welcome in the group. Their ‘informal coffee break’ has expanded network activities from physical meetings twice a year to monthly online calls.



### How to improve connections – examples and ideas

The afternoon sessions focused on improving NRN and NSU connections, including the use of online methods. The session started with an outline of [ENRD support for cooperation](#) and a recap of some good examples stimulated through networking meetings and workshops in particular.

Simona Radecka from the Slovakian NSU mentioned the connection and exchange with the Spanish NSU, undertaken in order to understand their regional antennae model, consequently adopted across Spain. Irena Křížová (CZ NSU) and Luis Fidschuster (AT NSU) both gave examples of exchanges and particularly underlined the importance of regular informal meetings. David Armellini (FR NSU) gave an outline of the activity [connecting regional NSUs](#) in France which has improved with the experience gained by the regional networks and growing cooperation.

### The ‘virtual coffee break’ model: proposing new collaboration

The afternoon’s interactive session served to underline how online collaboration can support improving connections. Since March 2020, NSUs have increasingly used online meetings to connect with stakeholders. These are seen as supporting and extending existing activity, rather than replacing physical meetings altogether, however a different and less formal model is often necessary to encourage interaction. The ‘virtual coffee break’ model has been used each month in informal meetings between DK, EE, FI, LT, LV, PL and SE NSUs, and participants from this grouping led the breakout discussions to explore potential new connections.

A [summary of the outcomes](#) of the afternoon’s interactive session was collected using MIRO, and while some existing potential topics were explored, some proposed new links were also put forward:

- Study visits between Croatia and Hungary;
- An exploration of coworking spaces in rural areas between Finland and Germany;
- LEADER TNC projects between France and Romania;
- Local food cooperation between Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland;
- A conference for researchers organised between Romania and Sweden; and
- The adoption of the informal coffee break model between Portugal and Spain.

An overall summary and reflection on the event suggested that the online collaboration model is a very useful supplementary tool for creating additional exchanges between NSUs and that the value of peer-to-peer learning had been reinforced. A key benefit of using such online methods is that they can enable more immediate and informal exchanges between NSUs.