

The 13th NRN meeting – co-organised with the [Irish Rural Network support unit](#) – brought together participants from 24 Member States, representing 28 National Rural Networks.

The meeting explored ways of reinforcing stakeholder engagement and enhancing collaboration by effectively addressing the needs of network members and reaching out to new actors.

Through the open space methodology, the participants discussed various topics including networking under the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Smart Villages and Generational Renewal.

Finally, network representatives discussed their involvement in and contribution to the upcoming ENRD event ‘networX’ (11-12 April 2019 – Brussels, Belgium).

Event Information

Title: 13th NRN Meeting

Date: 21 February 2019

Location: Athlone, Ireland

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point and Irish NSU

Participants: 69 participants

Outcomes: Thematic presentations and exchanges on how to connect the delivery chain, discussions on topics proposed by NSUs and of ‘networX’

Webpage: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/13th-nrn-meeting_en

Meeting Highlights



Before the meeting the participants had a chance to attend a field trip with focus on Generational Renewal organised by the Irish NSU.

The field trip featured two visits to family farms in Kilbeggan, both excellent examples of successful farm succession to the next generation. The [Lalor](#) family farm produces and markets organic food products based on the farms home grown organic oat crop. Pat’s son, John, decided to get back to Ireland after several years working abroad in order to support his family’s business in the marketing of farm products. Connors family farm is a third-generation beef farm. Dave and his son Rob are now involved in the Succession Farm Partnership offering the possibility for part-time farming.

The NRN meeting was launched by Andrew Doyle, Irish Minister of State, who reminded participants of the importance of the CAP in helping to face today’s main challenge, climate change. He highlighted the work of the Irish NRN, communicating the benefits of the programme effectively to all stakeholders. The consortium running the Irish NRN was [presented](#) by Seamus Boland, head of the Irish NSU. He stressed the importance of maintaining the Irish RDP as community-focused and innovative, so that rural development and farming continue to progress.

The meeting tackled four themes: 1) Connecting the delivery chain, 2) Open space topics, 3) Update on rural networking activities and 4) the networX event. Networking continued during the social dinner organised by the Irish NSU. Many participants stayed for the [ENRD Workshop on Generational Renewal](#), organised at the same venue the following day.

Connecting the delivery chain

The first session of the day was opened by Dr Áine Macken-Walsh from Teagasc who gave a thought-provoking [presentation](#) on 'A CAP network post-2020: a sociologist's view'. She suggested that social interactions are the fundamental building blocks of networking. Networks are not static, but dynamic, constantly changing and are shaped from the bottom-up as well as top-down. Networks of the future are encouraged to broaden engagement, ensuring further diversification. However, wider stakeholder involvement does not always equal inclusiveness; this can be enhanced through co-creation with a variety of actors to establish new networks. The use of reflexive questioning in the process of network creation increases transparency and reduces bias. Animation is a crucial skill, and so is 'reflexivity' – the periodic reflection to assess an organisation's motivations/reasoning behind its actions. Networks are more important than ever as governance institutions and a key to drive and steer policy for the future.

As a second step, representatives of three NSUs - in [UK-Wales](#), [Portugal](#) and [Ireland](#) - provided updates on their activities. The Welsh NSU has created a dedicated network website with a built-in interactive LEADER LAG and project map that provides users with much-needed flexibility and functionality. The Portuguese NSU uses regional workshops, training activities and events to share practical experiences and knowledge, cooperate with current partners and link to new partners. The Irish NSU engages with stakeholders through joint workshops delivered in collaboration with other service providers. It has gained much greater exposure by 'piggybacking' on other organisations' events.



Open Space session

The Open space session allowed discussions on five themes proposed by the NRNs:

Future CAP and NRNs

Participants in this discussion emphasised two new key elements to be considered in planning the rural networks 'post-2020': integrating the AKIS and Pillar I stakeholders. Rural networks are 'facilitating bodies' that can contribute to the knowledge flow and networking in AKIS. While considering new stakeholders and their needs, it is important to maintain existing linkages with rural stakeholders, apply existing working methods to new stakeholders (especially farmers) and contexts, and select themes that are of their interest. Stakeholder engagement is based on shared interests and has to go beyond the simple dissemination of information. Networks should make new stakeholders aware that the rural networks are exchange and networking platforms and not a source of funding.

Smart villages in the work of NRNs

Most of the participants joined the discussion to acquire information and understand what is needed for developing smart village strategies. The role LEADER already plays in developing activities locally was highlighted. Additionally, the group discussed the importance of raising awareness of smart villages, the benefits of communication and the key role of local facilitators. Equally important is the need to bring together policies which are relevant for implementing smart villages.

Generational renewal and Young farmers after 2020

Common challenges to generational renewal in farming include the different obstacles faced by young farmers and new entrants with no family background, often unofficial farm succession patterns that prevent young farmers from gaining real recognition as partners in the farm and the clash between hard working conditions and low revenues/poor recognition. Possible initiatives (already adopted by some Member States, yet with different results) include awareness-raising to retain young people in rural areas, the promotion of quality products to give value to farmers' work and early retirement schemes for those who transfer their farm or other forms of support to the transfer of farms from older to younger farmers. The future will see increases in the importance of education and international experience for young people interested in taking up farming (with or without family background), to introduce a stronger business approach that can increase farm sustainability.

Short supply chains

In this discussion group an approach piloted by Sweden and UK-Scotland was presented. This looked at how the NSUs are developing their activities now and for the future, in particular in relation to culinary networks and in the public procurement of food and drink. It was proposed that this activity be progressed further as an NRN-led workshop, considering how NRNs engage with producers, encourage inclusion and, where they can add value to their activities.

Improving RDP implementation

Participants' suggestions for 'improving RDP implementation' included encouraging quicker start-up of RDPs and allowing achievements to be communicated faster, the focus should be on the quality rather than quantity of communications. The NSU in Lithuania facilitated round table discussions with stakeholders which led to changes in their national rules. Themed meetings specifically for MAs and PAs to exchange knowledge and share solutions were suggested, with NSUs helping to identify the right people to attend. Another approach discussed was a commitment to be a 'learning network', linking policy with practice on the ground.

Update on Rural Networking activities

The ENRD Contact Point (CP) [presented](#) updates on its activities, encouraging the NRNs' active participation in data collection and events. It also reminded participants that the outputs of the ENRD capacity-building workshop for NRNs on approaches to collection and dissemination of project examples and good practices (November 2018) are available [online](#). The CP is also progressing with the [Rural Inspiration Awards](#), whose winners will be announced at the '[networX](#)' event in April 2019.



The Evaluation Helpdesk's [presentation](#) provided an overview of the activities from 2018. The EvaluationWORKS! events have gathered over 450 participants in different Member States. New [publications](#) issued include six evaluation guidelines developed in collaboration with Member States and 11 issues of the Rural Evaluation News.

EIP-AGRI [presented](#) their networking activities for 2019. These are structured around the following main priorities: farm resilience (resource management and diversification), digital transformation of agriculture and forestry, thematic networking, cooperation with Rural Networks and extending and consolidating the EIP-AGRI network.

Interactive exercise on the 'networX' event



The ENRD CP provided the NRRNs with information on 'networX', the major rural networking event to be held on 11 and 12 April in Brussels. Participants discussed with colleagues their participation in the Marketplace as well as how they can contribute to the sessions on 'How to build a CAP network' and 'Engaging rural development stakeholders: NRRNs in action'.

The discussions about the Marketplace were organised by clustering the NSUs as they will be in the actual Marketplace zones. The participants exchanged on plans, methods of collaborating and various practical aspects.

During the discussion on 'NRRNs in action', the participants agreed with the proposed approach of sharing current stakeholder engagement methodologies used by NSUs and how these can be transferred to other contexts. Ground-level stakeholders will be involved in this, so that other 'networX' participants can appreciate the value of such approaches through the voices of their peers.

The discussion on 'Building a network' focused on how to make the most of the interactive exercise taking place during 'networX'. This exercise will use physical building blocks to challenge participants to identify the key structural components and the functional linkages among them that will make the new rural networks work.

Outcomes and Actions

The final message of the meeting stressed the increasing importance of peer-to-peer exchange in view of the future CAP framework, as the increased responsibility of Member States will add value to exchanges with other countries. The upcoming 'networX' event will be an invaluable opportunity to envisage a better way of working and networking from 2021 onwards.

It was also concluded that live meetings provide a unique opportunity to get out of the daily work routine and see things from another perspective, gaining inspiration and new energy to continue working with enthusiasm and commitment. Networking is first and foremost about people. The value that the ENRD adds to what is done at national level lies in offering space for live interaction between people working in different contexts for the same objectives.

