



## FINNISH CASE STUDY- NRN SELF ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO DEMONSTRATE ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS OBJECTIVES IN FINLAND

FACTSHEET OF THE EUROPEAN EVALUATION HELPDESK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT - December 2016



### A NOVEL APPROACH TO BUILD CAPACITY IN RURAL AREAS

Finland covers an area of 390 903 km<sup>2</sup> of which 95% is rural. Of the total land area, 86% is covered by forests and 7.6% by agricultural land. The total population is 5.4 million – of which 30% live in rural areas. About 42% (nearly 118 000) of all enterprises operating in Finland are located in rural areas. In 2010 about 93% of enterprises were defined as “micro sized”, (i.e. employing not more than 9 persons). These defining features of Finland make the connecting of rural areas all the more crucial. The Finnish National Rural Network (NRN) plays an important and innovative role in connecting rural areas.

The concept of a NRN in Finland was considered a novel approach in the programming period 2007-2013. For this reason, the Managing Authority of Finland concluded to have a distinct strategy for the NRN.

During the programming period 2007-2013, the main objectives of the Finnish NRN were:

- **Increasing knowledge** of the potential of, and results from, the RDP amongst programme actors, potential beneficiaries and the general public;
- **Enhancing the flow of communication** between authorities and interest groups implementing the programme, and;
- **Facilitating know-how** via the exchange of relevant experiences.

The network was entrusted with the tasks of promoting cooperation and networking, communication, training, collection and distribution of good practice and the facilitation of international cooperation. These activities were also included in the NRN Action Plan.

The NRN had a budget of € 11,8 million. 24% of the budget was spent on communication, 14% on training, 8% on collecting and spreading good practises, and 5% on international cooperation.

The following actors were involved in the evaluation of the NRN:

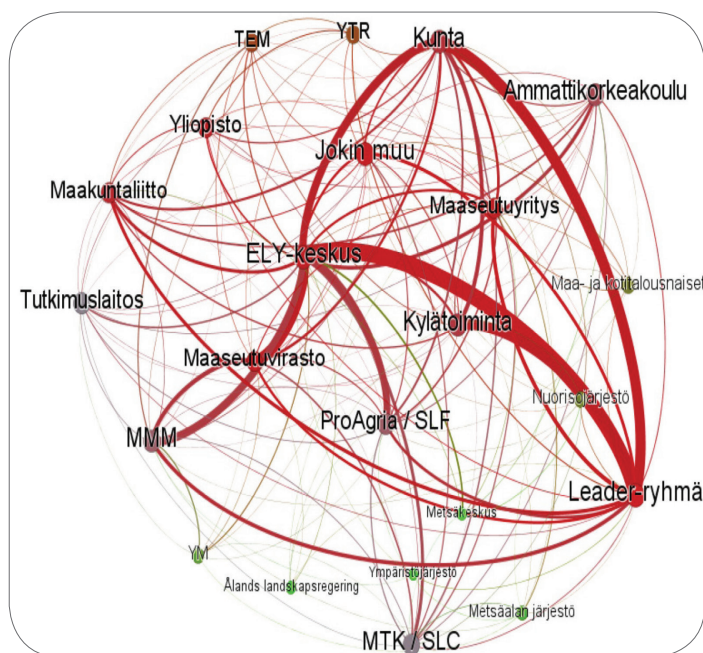
- **The Rural Network Unit (RNU)** is the network coordinator and plays the role of a traditional National Support Unit (NSU). The RNU was part of the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2007-2013 and Agency for Rural Affairs from January 2014 onwards. The unit had seven permanent staff and occasional summer trainees;
- **The NRN Steering Committee** consisted of 21 members representing various rural development stakeholders, and;



### FURTHER INFORMATION

Information provided by the Finnish Rural Network Unit:

- Programming Period: 2007-2013
- Contact: Director Teemu Hauhia, Rural Network Unit, PL 405, 60101 Seinäjoki, Finland
- [Rural Network Reports](#)



This graph shows the cooperation between the different actors in the NRN. The strongest cooperation in the Finnish NRN is between the regional MAs (ELY-keskus) and the Leader groups (Leader-ryhmat). This graph illustrates the “formal” nature of cooperation i.e. between different actors involved in the implementation of the RDP.

- **Five working groups** set up by the NRN Steering Committee (Inter-regional cooperative group, working groups on innovation, LEADER, entrepreneurship and communication). The groups’ objectives were to analyse programme results and make proposals connected with the NRN action plan.

Action Plans were based on the strategy and they were drafted to be flexible enough to adapt to emerging needs. Indicators were formulated corresponding to the activities.



## AN EVALUATION FOR PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

### RN TRAININGS AND EVENTS 2008-2014

#### Strategy review as basis for assessment activities

Action Plans were drafted in a flexible manner to allow them to be adaptable to emerging needs and based on the unique strategy, which the MA had developed for the NRN. During the strategy process, the vision and the objectives of the Finnish NRN were formulated and indicators corresponding to the activities were defined (e.g. number of good practices introduced, generation of new cooperative relationships). The Intervention logic of the NRN was not formalised.

#### NRN self-assessment

During the programming period 2007-2013, the Finnish NSU introduced and tested NRN self-assessment. There was no overarching self-assessment plan, rather self-standing self-assessments conducted over the programming period. The post-event feedback surveys were part of regular activities, whereas the interest group surveys were conducted every second year.

Post-event feedback surveys: The Finnish RNU arranged approximately 40-60 network events for 4000 participants annually. A map of the locations of these events can be observed on the right. Participants regularly had to give electronic feedback on the extent to which their expectations for the event had been met as well as if they considered the technical content relevant. Participants could also give general feedback on the activities of the RNU.

Interest group surveys: Every second year the RNU arranged an interest group survey. In 2010, the survey was sent to 830 people, and in 2012 to 1,500, and in 2014 to 1,100. Feedback was gathered about both the activities of the rural network and those of the RNU.

#### External studies

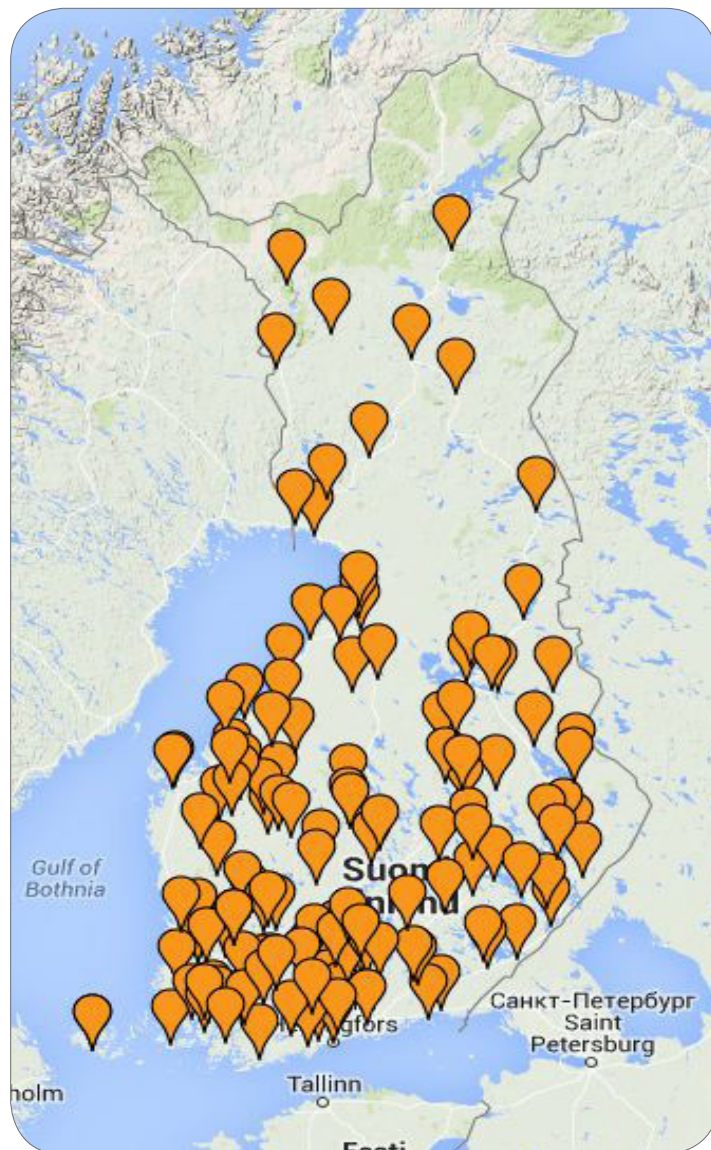
Media surveys: The RNU additionally contracted several media surveys throughout the programming period and carried out a couple of surveys on public awareness on the NRN and its activities.

Social network analysis, conducted by an external consultant, was used to assess the composition and dynamics of the rural network, as well as the cooperative relationships within the network. The analysis, which was based on a survey, focused especially on "active nodes", which operate as catalysts and opinion leaders in the network. After three subsequent network analyses, a clear picture of the changes in network structure and activities was obtained. The network structure was analysed in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

#### Follow-up and use of assessment activities

The self-assessment results from the post-event feedback surveys were reviewed by the RNU, discussed in the NRN steering group, as well as summarised in the Annual Reports and the Final Report. The self-assessments and the external studies (media survey, SNA) were also used in the drafting of the NRN Action Plans.

The annual report combined monitoring and self-assessment information. Monitoring data from the PA and the RNU events log was used to describe targeting of funds per axis, activity type, location, and stakeholders. During the annual reporting process, the activities were assessed against the general strategic objectives of the network. The



This map depicts the rural network's trainings and events, which were considered in the SNA.

RNU prepared the annual report, but perspectives of those participating in the network were also obtained.

#### Ex post evaluation

The ex post evaluation of the Finnish RDP covered the NRN at a very general level. The NSU provided the evaluator with the self-assessment materials and the external studies (media surveys, interest group surveys and SNA), as well as the Activity Plans and annual and final reports. In addition to these pre-existing materials and the monitoring data provided by the PA, the ex post evaluator conducted interviews with selected members of the NSU and NRN steering group to arrive at conclusions and recommendations.

The programming period 2007-2013 was about establishing the network, the current period is about deepening and widening its operations.



## MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Social network analysis** is a useful method for illustrating the structure of the network and the connections between the NRN participants. It helps to identify further areas of work (e.g. peripheral actors) and key players. A repeated social network analysis can show how the network has developed.

**Comprehensive and systematic planning** of monitoring, self-assessment and evaluation activities for the programming period is essential. As the NRN's work is continually evolving, it was necessary to plan a more complex follow-up and assessment for a more complex system. The monitoring, self-assessment and evaluation should reflect this change.

The Finnish NRN will be implementing the following lessons from the previous programming period:

- **A plan for ongoing self-assessment**, e.g. illustrated through an annual self-assessment clock, necessary in order to select the correct self-assessment activities and time them accordingly. This facilitates the efficiency of drafting the Activity Plan and allows it to be fed into the annual reporting process. Better planning of self-assessment can also help focus the information gathering and reduce the amount of data that goes underutilised.
- **Detailed monitoring data** can give useful information on the NRN's actions (e.g. type and number of participants in training actions). This information can show swiftly whether actions are on the right track. However, further analysis is needed to find out why things do or do not work.
- **The event database** of the Finnish NRN combines the event planning, implementation, payment and feedback modules. An integrated database like this permits the running of comprehensive data reports, which can be used in monitoring activities.
- **A self-standing evaluation is needed** to see a.) if targeting of NRN funds is right, b.) whether the funds have been spent in an efficient and effective manner, and c.) how the work could be developed further.



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The Evaluation Helpdesk works under the supervision of Unit E.4 (Evaluation and studies) of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development.

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EVALUATION WORKS!

