

BUILDING A NETWORK

Strand highlights

Building a Network was an interactive group exercise that brought together 40-50 participants over two sessions to explore how specific rural development challenges can be addressed by networking. Working in mixed stakeholder groups, participants considered how a rural network in 'Ruratania' (an imaginary EU country facing one specific, pre-defined challenge) could be most effective in the post-2020 period. They were tasked to identify key network components (target groups, main member organisations and institutions, strategic actions and communication tools) and the linkages between them. To 'set the scene' for the exercise the new challenges arising from the enhanced scope of future CAP networks and three EU Member State perspectives on their network planning were presented.

About the strand

Title: Building a Network

Dates: 11-12 April 2019

Participants: 40-50 participants in each session (Day 1, Day 2), including representatives of local action groups, research institutes, Managing Authorities, European organisations and the European Commission

Speakers: Peter Toth (ENRD CP), Lauri Hyttinen (FI - NRN), Andreas Mattisson (SE - MA), Veronika Madner (AT - MA) and Michael Fischer (AT - NRN)

Facilitators: Maria Custodia Correia (PT - NRN), Maria Gustafsson and Hans-Olof Stalgren (SE - NRN), Michael Fischer (AT - NRN), Lauri Hyttinen (FI - NRN), Michael Gregory (ENRD CP), Peter Toth (ENRD CP)

MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE DISCUSSION

Current networks – common features

Three EU Member States presented their perspectives on planning their future networks based on lessons learned in this programming period. Finland focuses on flexibility and innovation through their continuing use of 'innovation camps' as a method of bringing various rural stakeholders together. In Sweden, working with member stakeholder organisations ensures that various rural development interests are represented and brought forward. The Austrian network uses those stakeholder networks and associations who are strongly represented in the NRN structure to reach out through their own networks and associations. All three highlighted the importance of actively promoting and maintaining communication within the networks – between all levels and stakeholder types involved.

Planned network 'architectures' – common features

The six groups designed network 'architectures' addressing different challenges, their proposed solutions had three key elements in common. Firstly, the bottom-up approach is key to effective network operation, local perspectives of stakeholders need to be considered. Secondly, the network needs to remain open and flexible, able to respond to emerging challenges. This relates to both the involvement of stakeholders and the methods through which emerging tasks and challenges are addressed. Finally, the underlying principles above need to be operationalised within the overall network structure.



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SPECIFIC CHALLENGES...

Six groups worked on specific challenges based on various country specifications. These specifications 'modelled' real EU Member State contexts related to population (small, medium, large) and the degree of organisation of key stakeholder groups in associations or chambers (low, medium, high). Each version of 'Ruratania' faced a specific challenge which was linked to a specific CAP objective. In each case the country they worked for had one CAP Strategic Plan. The six challenges related to the following issues (all related to relevant CAP objectives):

1. Climate change impacts on agriculture and rural tourism
2. Depopulation of rural areas as a persistent trend

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3. Low level of community activity and cohesion in rural areas, low level of youth involvement
4. Difficult access to land and markets for small farmers and new entrants, continuing land concentration
5. Low level of potential beneficiary activity in relation to CAP measures, potentially low uptake of CAP support
6. Achieving a step change in the level of engagement of farmers and other land managers in the network

...AND SOLUTIONS

Several solutions explored involving 'non-conventional' stakeholders in networking. For climate change, this meant focusing on researchers and consumers in awareness-raising actions on possible adaptation and prevention solutions. Involving financial actors and real estate brokers was emphasised in relation to difficult land access, joint ownership of initiatives to be developed under the strategic actions was important.

The empowerment of local stakeholders and a 'bottom-up' approach to problem solving were key factors for increasing the farming community and land managers involvement in networking. Several solutions to low levels of community activity and fragmented communities were proposed; building on strong existing networks and associations, creating a community development toolkit, consistent use of the bottom-up approach and clearly distinguishing between the target group and partner organisations in addressing the challenge.

Increasing potential beneficiary activities in relation to CAP measures requires other aspects to be mobilised. Strong awareness-raising and the mapping of local needs were core actions proposed in a network where farmers, rural business and local authorities are involved. To address depopulation, a strong link needs to be established among

top-down and bottom-up policy initiatives through the coordinated involvement of regional actors by and within the network.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE EXERCISE

Participants emphasised the challenging nature of the exercise regarding the need to focus efforts and ideas on a key set of target groups, stakeholders and strategic actions. Network Support Units were given a strong, coordinating role for the majority of the issues and challenges.

In dealing with a specific challenge or specific contextual requirements clear distinction between rural stakeholders is needed in terms of whether they are the target group of the proposed interventions or the partner organisations the network aims to involve in developing and implementing the solution.

"It was all about coming together and finding a common solution." – Michael Fischer (Austrian NRN)



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