NETWORKING FOR POLICY
Strand highlights

The Networking for Policy strand of the networX event aimed to acknowledge how networking contributes to improving policy design and implementation – at the local and national level – in three policy areas: Smart Villages, rural bioeconomy, and other policies (beyond rural development).

On the first day of networX, three parallel sessions explored the key networking actions and tools that contribute to implementing concrete initiatives on the ground and to shape the policy framework. Participants exchanged experiences about success factors and obstacles faced by different types of networks operating in different fields.

On the second day of the event, a closing session engaged the attendees in the discussion of overall lessons learned and the future role of European policy networks.

About the strand

Title of the sessions: Networking for Smart Villages, Networking for Bioeconomy, Lessons from other EU networks, Networking for Policy - Closing session

Dates: 11-12 April 2019

Participants: Managing Authorities of RDPs, Paying Agencies, NRNs, local action groups, research institutes, European organisations and the European Commission

Speakers: Isane Aparicio, Guido Bezzi, Jackie Bierton, Fabio Boscaleri, Luc Bouvarel, Valentina Caimi, Giulia Cancian, Laura Colini, Ana Cuadrado Galván, Bérénice Dupeux, Gemma Estany, Fintan Farrell, José Manuel Hernández Luque, Lauri Hyttinen, Barna Kovács, Andrea Lorenzini, Lauren Mosdale, Marc Pattison, Clive Peckham, Kaja Peterson, Sointu Räisänen, Sophie Reynolds, Joshua Roberts, Bill Slee, Emilija Stojmenova, Reka Tunyogi, Monica Veronesi, Hartmut Welck

Facilitators: Flavio Conti, Carlos De La Paz, Elena Di Federico, Laura Jalasjoki, Derek McGlynn, Enrique Nieto, Paul Soto, Peter Toth, Roxana Vilcu, Kostantinos Zapris

THE FUTURE OF EU POLICY NETWORKS: KEY LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY-MAKERS

Networks can contribute to policy design by mobilising stakeholders and facilitating bottom-up approaches, leading to local solutions and strategies. To make this process efficient, networks' contribution to policy design and implementation must be clearly defined, membership of networks should be open to all, not defined from the top down.

The efficacy of networks can vary depending on the focus of their activity and the target audience. Networks should resist the temptation to be all encompassing and aim to achieve a restricted number of well-defined objectives. Similarly, they should clearly identify their target audience to select the right communication and networking tools.

Involving hard-to-reach stakeholders should be a priority. For effective communications and outreach, networks should avoid 'EU jargon' (hard to understand for many people) as well as complex communications tools, information overload and excessive numbers of meetings with overlapping content.

Capacity building activities for stakeholders and advisory services and the collection of good practices constitute two key

© European Commission, 2019

contributions of networks to policy implementation. Both should be strengthened in the future, particularly focusing capacity building on the implementation of innovative approaches (i.e. EAFRD-funded cooperation measure) and new schemes, and the collection of good practices in overcoming key implementation difficulties.

Networks have a key role in bringing Europe closer to the people. National Rural Networks should act as a two-way channel between stakeholders and the EU, to bridge the gap between Brussels and local actors. All networks should make further efforts to promote the visibility of the EU at national, regional and local levels, regularly bringing EU policy-makers closer to ordinary people, for instance by organising more networking events in different Member States.

"Future networks should have the capacity to reach out and reduce the distance between Brussels and on the ground, between policies and implementation, between places that work well and less well. We need to do deep networking!" Paul Soto (ENRD Contact Point)

NETWORKING FOR SMART VILLAGES

Networks play an important role in supporting the implementation of Smart Villages initiatives on the ground. They also make a major contribution towards the emergence of an enabling policy framework for Smart Villages in fields such as mobility, renewable energy, digitisation, entrepreneurship and social innovation.

Social and territorial innovation

→ Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas SIMRA (H2020), Lauren Mosdale
→ Smart Villages competition, Lauri Hyttinen

Both networks pointed to the importance of grassroots, multi-stakeholder approaches, bringing together villagers and villages to facilitate mutual learning. They developed solid research-based evidence to convince policy-makers to create a more supportive environment for local initiatives. These experiences show that networks should have a specific and clear focus with flexible and adaptable action plans, learning from both failure and success.

Digital innovation

→ Enhancing Rural and Urban Digital Innovation Territories (ERUDITE-Interreg), Clive Peckham
→ Fab-lab Network, Emilija Stojmenova

Networking is often the result of a fluid process which cannot be forced as it is built on mutual trust. It is important to involve local champions and mentors to raise awareness. Targeted communication can show the impact of local initiatives and gain political support for digital innovation. A key success factor is to build links between rural and urban territories and stakeholders.

Smart rural businesses

→ The Network of coworking spaces in Catalonia, Gemma Estany
→ GrowBiz, Jackie Brierton

Successful networks often start small, with the immediate needs and ideas of local people, and then snowball when they are seen to work. Peer-to-peer support networks among local entrepreneurs can play an important role in this process. Local intermediaries are also essential for building capacity and linking local initiatives to regional policies and support.

Services innovation

→ European Federation of Renewable Energy Cooperatives REScoop, Joshua Roberts
→ Pilot Project on Smart Rural Transport Areas (SMARTA), Andrea Lorenzini

EU funding has played an important role in creating networks in emerging EU policy fields that are very relevant for Smart Villages and rural areas in general. These networks identify and exchange good practices among a large membership across Europe. A central 'secretariat' is crucial to analyse local experiences and information, identify common challenges and draw up solutions for a more enabling policy framework in each field.

Concluding messages to EU policy-makers

There is a need to reinforce the positive drivers of Smart Villages by creating favourable higher-level policy frameworks which enable local initiatives, building coalitions of engaged actors, developing flexible funding schemes adapted to local needs and facilitating broader learning networks on common themes.

It is also important to tackle the barriers faced by Smart Villages, including the risk of being driven by funding rather than real needs, the need to navigate institutional complexity and the risk of increasing disparities by constantly rewarding those with more social capital who are better able to secure support.

NETWORKING FOR BIOECONOMY

Bioeconomy has the potential to revitalise rural territories and economies through new value chains, but its opportunities can be realised only through concerted action between the various stakeholders involved. Networking between value chain actors is key to this. Formal and informal networks across Europe have demonstrated their potential to build solid bio-based value chains across European regions and to bring local actors aboard.

Bridging the knowledge gap

→ BIOEAST, Barna Kovács
→ RDI2CLUB, Kaja Peterson
→ BBI-Joint Undertaking, Ana Cuadrado Galván

Networking contributes to policy design and implementation by facilitating knowledge transfer and awareness raising among the broad and diverse group of stakeholders involved in bioeconomy (governmental bodies, investors, researchers and practitioners). Networks allow them to connect and engage one another, supporting the development of strategic approaches at macro-regional, national and local levels and encouraging public-private partnerships to respond to common challenges through innovative and sustainable solutions.

Building skills and momentum

→ Biogas Italy, Guido Bezzi
→ Bioenergy Europe, Giulia Cancian
→ AGRIFORVALOR, Hartmut Welck

Enabling factors for deploying the bioeconomy include networks that can credibly reach out to local actors and introduce viable business models. Such local and focused networks can grow to have an impact at the national level, pushing a broader agenda. Bioeconomy requires a broader view on issues such as bioenergy production, ecosystem services and holistic approaches to sustainable agriculture. Networks can promote the involvement of farmers not only as suppliers of raw materials but as partners in fair and inclusive bio-based value chains.

Value chains – forest sector successes

→ ERIAFF, Sointu Räisänen
→ Rosewood, Fabio Boscaleri
→ Confederation of European Forest Owners (CEPF), Luc Bouvarel

Cooperative models among forest owners and producers are effective in disseminating sustainable forest management practices and structure value chains, optimising the potential of forest resources for material and immaterial uses. Networking - in the form of clusters, digital marketplaces and related tools - can also support linkages between different value chain actors and bio-based industries. Finally, by sharing lessons learned in other European regions, networking can inspire policy-makers to design supportive bioeconomy strategies for their areas.

Concluding messages

Policy and strategies at all levels should recognise the explicit and autonomous role of networks as legitimate and effective vehicles for change and provide appropriate resources. Networking contributes to bridging the gap between funding/implementation and policy design, and between practitioners, researchers and policy makers. This is essential to take stock of the lessons learned on the ground and improve the overall policy delivery.

Another key message was that bio-based business models need favourable market regulation to survive the competition with conventional non-renewable products. Incentives for bioeconomy within the CAP and in other sectors should be paired by a carbon tax scheme or similar legislation to support bio-based sectors.

LESSONS FROM OTHER EUROPEAN POLICY NETWORKS

In addition to supporting projects on the ground, networks can play an important role in translating grassroots good practices into a more favourable policy environment. Two different types of networks participated in this session: **policy networks** – financed and often set up entirely by public authorities – and **advocacy networks** – coalitions of people and organisations that campaign around an issue they feel strongly about and are funded from different sources.

Regional and Urban development

→ URBACT, Laura Colini
→ Interreg Europe, Marc Pattinson

One of the strengths of these networks is that they have created common EU frameworks for transnational cooperation and networking between cities and regional authorities on key challenges and themes. URBACT is able to transfer lessons and good practices into broader EU policy through a direct link to the working groups of the 'Urban Agenda'. INTERREG Europe has developed innovative methodologies such as 'peer reviews' (e.g. LINK project) for improving implementation by Managing Authorities facing specific challenges.

Thematic and Territorial development

→ FARNET, Monica Veronesi
→ Broadband Competence Office (BCO), Isane Aparicio

The strength of these networks comes from their focus on rolling out a specific policy, respectively implementing CLLD in coastal and fisheries areas and extending broadband to rural 'white spots'. Having clearly defined target groups, these networks can design demand-driven, practical support packages and action plans. The trust they receive both from institutions and local partners and the flexibility they are allowed are crucial for successfully following these plans. Both consider that ensuring the continuity of the activities and projects between programming periods is essential.

Social development

→ ESF Transnational Platform, Valentina Caimi
→ Social Innovation Community, Sophie Reynolds

The ESF (European Social Fund) Transnational Platform supports learning networks of Managing Authorities and key NGOs. Some networks have managed to bring together the Ministries involved in policy design with those involved in implementation. The Social Innovation Community draws on the experience of key organisations involved in social innovation across Europe. They have translated this knowledge into a 'Declaration' with practical recommendations for the support of social innovation in the next round of the ESF.

Advocacy networks

→ Eurochild, Reka Tunyogi
→ European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Berenice Dupeux

Through their strong national membership base, both networks collect reliable evidence on specific policy issues and develop specific actions plans to provide the right information at the right time to the right policy-makers. They operate in two directions: influencing national policy agendas to build the case for changes in European policy and influencing the EU policy frameworks so that changes trickle down to the national levels. A key success factor is their members' capacity-building.

Concluding messages

EU networks need to ensure that they are connected to real needs on the ground and able to respond flexibly to changes in local concerns. They have a key role in fostering dialogue between communities and including hard-to-reach groups, rather than simply providing a voice for organised stakeholders. While working in a joined-up manner, different networks should concentrate on specific fields where they can have the greatest impact.

LEARN MORE

Find the reports from all the networX thematic strands on the ENRD website:
https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/networx-inspiring-rural-europe_en