



The 11<sup>th</sup> NRN meeting – co-organised by the Czech Republic Network Support Unit – brought together over 60 participants from 24 Member States, representing 27 National Rural Networks.

The meeting focused on:

- recent networking updates at the European level;
- Network Support Units' (NSUs) activities including thematic activity;
- what works well and less well in networking from NSUs perspective; and
- lessons learned and opportunities to reinforce networking in areas such as LEADER, cooperation with farming stakeholders and rural youth/generational renewal.

## Meeting Highlights



### Event Information

**Title:** 11<sup>th</sup> NRN Meeting

**Date:** 31 May 2018

**Location:** Prague, Czech Republic

**Organisers:** ENRD Contact Point and Czech NSU

**Participants:** 62 participants

**Outcomes:** Sharing ongoing activity strands, learning outcomes and addressing challenges in areas to improve.

**Webpage:** [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/11th-nrns-meeting\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/11th-nrns-meeting_en)

The meeting brought together representatives from NSUs across Europe and put the key mission of rural networks - strengthening networking itself - into the spotlight. Participants discussed opportunities to reinforce networking now and these exchanges fed into the discussion about networking in the future.

The event started on May 30<sup>th</sup> with a field trip organised by the Czech NSU. Participants visited two local agricultural producers, both using EAFRD support to diversify their activities. The first was a [muesli bar producer](#) and the second a [family farm](#) redeveloped after post-communism restitution. The visits gave first-hand insight into agricultural activity in a local context.

At the start of the NRN meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> May, an update on the ongoing activities of the European rural networks was provided. The ENRD Contact Point will continue to enhance and strengthen cooperation with NRNs, LAGs, MAs and PAs and with European stakeholder groups through events and activities which support further engagement. The EIP-AGRI Service Point is creating a "digitisation toolbox" and a dedicated collaborative space for NRNs/NSUs and MAs. The ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk has been preparing guidelines on evaluation methodologies and tools in partnership with Member States.

The meeting also focused on NSUs' activities and concluded with an interactive exercise on communication, linked to the back to back [ENRD Workshop on NRN Communication](#). Networking continued during the social dinner in the Czech Agricultural Museum, organised by the Czech NSU.

## ENRD`s mapping work on networking

The findings from 25 NSUs, as summarised in the [working paper](#) distributed to participants in advance, showed the main lessons learned in how to improve communication, LEADER delivery, event related issues and how to address resource constraints. The aspect NSUs were most proud of was in their delivery of targeted events. The main challenges faced were in developing links or trust with the Managing Authorities and finding synergy with stakeholders. The main themes the rural networks were working on were LEADER and innovation and addressing environmental themes.

Communication emerged as a very important cross-cutting aspect. Communicating the outputs and networking activities of NSUs is one of the main ambitions of the NSUs, yet also their biggest challenge because of resource limitations.

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## Networking - What works well/ less well

### Organising events

Several successful examples were presented and discussed, with the aim to identify enabling factors to replicate elsewhere. The Slovenian NRN has involved multiple stakeholders in the organisational chain, to pool resources, get a more creative input and reduce costs. The Swedish NRN organised bus/boat trips focused on key topics involving policy makers and journalists. This helped them to understand rural topics through direct contact. LAG events in Wales are organised via Twitter and by using Periscope, a live video streaming app for Android and iOS, which enable greater access for remote communities and improved knowledge transfer.



### Disseminating information

Participants shared their best practices for communicating rural development more efficiently. These included peer-to-peer training for network members (such as the [example](#) from the Walloon Rural Network). Other examples from LAG managers highlighted better coordination between the NSU, MA and PA (as is the case for Estonian and Finnish NRNs); preparing toolkits or a communication guidance section on the NRN website; and providing information to different groups via targeted emails. Overall, event participants reflected on the need for monitoring and surveying the effectiveness of their tools and actions on communication in order to improve or change them.

### Involving stakeholders

Achieving a greater involvement of stakeholders requires an understanding of their perspective and having clarity on their needs and expectations before you start - why is it important for them to be involved? How would they prefer to communicate? What will motivate them to engage? Using the right communication and engagement tools for the right groups and focusing on their interests is crucial to attract and retain stakeholders' attention. NSUs agreed they should take advantage of activities, events and meeting places already used by stakeholders to engage with them more naturally.

## Good practices

Participants considered that the best method to identify stronger good practices is by establishing direct contact with rural actors and beneficiaries, or by working with farm advisors, or with other rural stakeholder intermediaries in order to reach good examples on the ground. The format of transferring these practices should vary to meet different needs but can include interviews, presentations, videos and peer-to-peer workshops. The involvement of project beneficiaries in meetings and presentations is seen as a vital component of knowledge transfer.

## Fostering innovation/ Innovation support services

The majority of NSUs confirmed they are already networking with advisors and innovation support services to varying degrees. Discussions highlighted the need to clarify the concept of innovation support services and their core functions, the role of advisors within them, and how NRNs can participate in establishing support for innovation. One area for further network development – where some good experiences were reported – is the expanded dissemination of the results of innovative projects (including EIP Operational Groups).

## Cooperation with ENRD

There was a strong consensus amongst NSUs that it is important to develop and exchange good networking practices. The ENRD CP was asked to consider making more use of its 'Member State' experts whose activities could benefit NRNs as well as the ENRD CP directly. Sharing more information on CP activity prior to ENRD events would also be helpful to encourage improved NRN participation. Finally, it was recognised that the CP and Evaluation Helpdesk need ongoing input from NRNs to continue to meet their needs more fully.

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## Cooperating with LEADER stakeholders

The key message from the LEADER-related discussion was that active interaction between LAGs and NSUs works particularly well. There are many ways in which NSUs cooperate with LAGs, examples included hiring a dedicated CLLD officer and establishing LEADER/CLLD discussion or working groups. Effective support can be provided through LAG meetings and information seminars, by organising training and capacity building events, dial-up seminars or webinars. Resources can also include publishing a quality management handbook, an interactive contact database of LAGs, a project directory or case studies.



Several points were raised in the discussion of 'what needs to be done better?':

- focusing more on the LEADER approach as a strategic tool, not only on the implementation aspects;
- more effectively communicating what LEADER can achieve and what added value it can bring;
- better training for animators and communicators who are active in the LAGs;
- using projects of differing scales for the promotion of good practices and collecting examples on commercialisation of project outputs by LAGs;
- more encouragement and support for small scale projects;
- greater focus on the quality of LAGs and better ways to motivate them e.g. by organising a contest for the best LAG.

## Cooperating with agricultural stakeholders

Participants in this session discussed stakeholder cooperation with representatives from COPA-COGECA and CEJA and agreed that NRN cooperation with agricultural stakeholders can be further strengthened. Operational Groups emerged as a good example of involvement of agricultural stakeholders and are particularly effective at motivating farmers' participation.

One of the key points raised during the session was the need for more interaction and communication between agricultural organisations and NRNs. Proposals included:

- finding a common topic to engage farmers and rural entrepreneurs in the work of the NRN and thereby increase their interest in the network;
- involving external organisations in NRN steering groups, informing them about the work plan of the network;
- making the rural network more visible to wider networks;
- using local media to raise awareness among local stakeholders, farmers and entrepreneurs;
- reinforcing engagement/direct contacts between NRNs, LAGs and agricultural stakeholders.

## Rural youth / Generational renewal

There are many good examples of generational renewal across the EU, but there is a need for an inventory of these to share good practices. Examples of good practice are especially important with regard to access to credit, though it is of course necessary to assess the transferability of the approach. Examples incorporating older and small-scale farmers are also needed, as generational renewal is not just about young farmers but also how to transfer knowledge from older to newer farmers and how to facilitate retirement schemes.

To assess the needs and expectations of young people the Spanish NRN is conducting a survey addressed directly to them, rather than relying on external sources of information. In Wales, an ad hoc law provides recommendations to make sure public bodies act in a sustainable way, keeping in mind the future of younger generations. Rural youth policy is adjusted to comply with this more general legislation. The role of innovative communication channels, such as vlogs and short films, is crucial in improving the image of rural areas for young people.

## Outcomes and Actions

The event provided a chance to discuss the current state of play on the activities of rural networks at the mid-term of the current programming period.

The outcomes of the meeting highlighted how NRNs have the appropriate experience to face critical challenges and to self-reflect on the effectiveness of their activities. NRNs have many good examples and practices to share that can contribute to overcoming some of the challenges they are still facing. The productive exchange at this NRN Meeting helped to identify these issues and possible solutions via concrete examples which can reinforce networking's contribution to policy delivery. Participants agreed that this can be a focus of future joint activities.

