

The 17th NRN meeting, co-organised by the Swedish Network Support Unit (NSU), took the form of a webinar on 7 May 2020.

The main objectives of the meeting were to learn from each other about how to involve National Rural Network (NRN) stakeholders in NRN's governance, and to examine how rural development is impacted by rural and urban stereotypes and consider how NRNs can contribute to changing the narrative.

The meeting brought together diverse groups of NRN representatives and also Managing Authorities, DG AGRI and other stakeholders.

## Setting the scene

The meeting was opened with welcomes and introductions to the topics by the [Swedish NSU team](#), Neda Skakelja from DG AGRI, and John Grieve from the [ENRD Contact Point](#). It was noted that this meeting would build on previous NRN meeting contributions for the development of effective future CAP networking arrangements, particularly during the morning session on NRN governance. Both the morning and afternoon sessions were followed by participative discussions in small facilitated groups. An update on EU-level rural networking activities was provided by Veronika Korcekova from the [ENRD Contact Point](#), Myles Stiffler from the [ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk](#) and Margarida Ambar from the [EIP-AGRI Service Point](#). Experiences of adapting networking approaches and activities to the Covid pandemic crisis were also shared by participants throughout the meeting.

## National Rural Network Governance

A review of the different [NRN governance models](#) was presented by David Lamb from the ENRD Contact Point. This kicked-off the analysis of the success factors for achieving co-ownership, equality and neutrality within the rural networks' governance approaches at national level. A [talk show format](#) allowed NRN representatives from Sweden, Lithuania and the Netherlands to share their assessments of success factors, what works well in their situations and what needs to be considered for the future CAP networks.

Having inclusive networking structures with strong links to the EAFRD Monitoring Committees and a diversified and representative membership appear to be beneficial. Thematic sub networks and focus groups were also highlighted as being effective in helping increase the value of rural networking for all network partners. The key conclusions from this online session referred to: encouraging MAs to apply a culture of cooperation; and the potential of NSUs to convert NRN visions into tangible results on the ground.

The parallel group discussions which followed in small groups were built around three topics:



**Co-ownership** - Selecting the NRN's topics of interest together with stakeholders, thematic networks or groups and building activities in consultation with them can create synergies between actors and boost feelings of co-ownership. Using local antennae will enable networks to reach more stakeholders.



**Equal terms** - Networks should support communication and interactions between members and ensure that time, information and funding are deployed on an equal basis. Providing a space for free exchanges can build trust and facilitate the participation of network members on equal terms.



**Neutrality** - The neutral role of the network should be ensured, not only internally to network membership but also externally to wider stakeholder groups. The network should not promote the specific interests of any group in particular. Impartial moderation coupled with a large range of actors involved in the channels of communication, as well as products and events, will offer an opportunity to all members to have their voices heard.

### Event Information

**Date:** 7 May 2020

**Location:** Webinar

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

**Participants:** Over 80 participants from 23 MS

**Outcomes:** Useful exchanges and peer-learning on the topics of network governance and the image of rural areas

**Web page:** [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/17th-nrn-meeting-webinar\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/17th-nrn-meeting-webinar_en)

## The image of rural areas

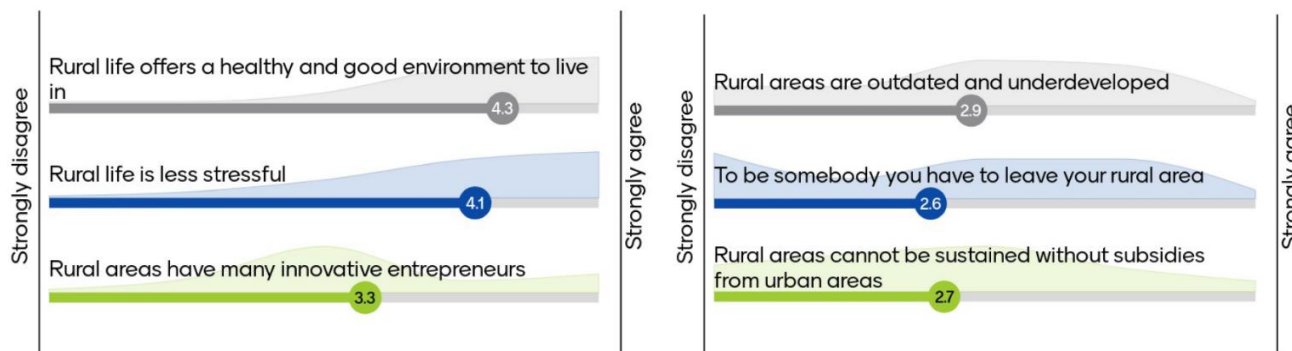
The afternoon session moderated by the Swedish NRN focused on contributing to an improved narrative about rural areas. The [introductory presentation](#) by Terese Bengard of 'All Sweden shall Live' showed that the image of rural areas is not always flattering. Rural areas are often perceived or portrayed as being outdated and underdeveloped places in need of support.

The main focus of the parallel group discussions was on the different perceptions of rural areas, sometimes negative and sometimes more positive, and how to improve the overall narrative. It is important to use different communication channels to promote success stories and the opportunities that the countryside has to offer. These attributes include clean air and water, as well as calm, peaceful and green places which are less stressful and more pleasant to live in. In communicating about rural areas, a different language should be used: replacing 'support' with 'investment', 'depopulated areas' with 'space-rich areas' or presenting the countryside in more appealing ways as was achieved with e.g. the 'smart villages' concept. Creating opportunities for personal encounters with the countryside are crucial, for example by offering the possibility to visit rural areas through 'open farm' days.



Rural networks can also contribute to an improved rural narrative by promoting good practice examples and success stories, providing real and practical information about life in the countryside, showing the importance of farming and highlighting rural-urban links rather than differences. Presenting the added-value of rural life through the authentic testimonies of rural people proved to be very beneficial too.

The wordcloud above provides an overview of the responses of 53 meeting participants on how they describe life in rural areas. The graphs below show their responses to the question 'How well do these sentences reflect the common view of rural life in your country?'



## Conclusions and next steps

### Co-decision, co-share, co-work

- Network members/stakeholders, including organisations of different types and sizes, or from different sectors, should feel that they own the network, that they are part of the decision-making process, can take part in the creation of a network strategy, and that everyone can work together to implement it. 'If the network members are to become co-owners, make them co-producers'.

### Perception of rural areas

- The discussion on the rural narrative revealed that the perception of rural areas is different across Europe.
- The right communication is key, as it can help change the general perception of rural areas. For this the right language has to be used.
- Networks can play an important role, but not in isolation, as many political and other levels of governance can also have an impact on changing the rural narrative. Rural proofing can be a helpful tool and can contribute to developing the long term vision for rural areas.