

The 9th Meeting of the National Rural Networks (NRNs) considered the ongoing activities of the NRNs across Europe and how exchanges and joint actions between them could be improved in specific areas.

Three morning workshops looked at Common Network Activities, Thematic Activities and Good Practices.

The afternoon had parallel working sessions on how to take forward outcomes from the June 2017 Finnish NRN Meeting 'Innovation Camp' in three areas: Rural Proofing, Innovation and Communication.

The meeting was followed by a field trip which included visits to [Riverland Organic Farm](#) and to a [Donkey Sanctuary](#).

Event Information

Title: 9th NRN Meeting

Date: 15 November 2017

Location: Nicosia, Cyprus

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point and Cyprus NRN

Participants: 61

Outcomes: Development of new actions and exchanges between NRNs

Web page: All event presentations available at:
https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/9th-nrns-meeting_en

Meeting Introduction



'If somebody were to ask me what the NRN meetings are, I would say: people working together willing to share their experience and knowledge with commitment and enthusiasm.'

Giuliana Keller – DG AGRI

Dr Androula Georgiou, from Cyprus Ministry of Agriculture, opened the meeting highlighting the importance of the work of the National Rural Networks in the implementation of the Rural Development Policy.

Eleni Mytilineou Ioannou from Cyprus Ministry of Agriculture introduced the state of implementation of LEADER in Cyprus (the presentation is available through the [following link](#)).

To close the morning session, Mike Gregory from the ENRD Contact Point (CP) presented the various activities planned under the Contact Point's six support [priorities](#).

Common Networks Statistics

The first of the morning parallel workshops sought to validate work carried out by a small working group of NRNs in developing the system through which network statistics are submitted and shared between the networks.

Following the discussion, the workshop group agreed that significant progress had been made in certain areas:

- Submitting the data online.
- Simplifying the categories.
- Removing redundant categories.

Whilst the value of the collection of the data was recognised, the workshop concluded that the process can be further simplified. A group of volunteer NRNs agreed to test and comment on the simplified survey during December 2017, ahead of collection of the data in 2018.

The group welcomed further simplification of the submission format. This will make the completion of the process simpler and faster. There was also a request for guidance and common understanding of the indicators (for example on event participation) in order to have consistent information across the NRNs.

Thematic Activities

This workshop focused on how NRNs can best exchange information on their thematic activities. It was a thoughtful discussion from which a clear consensus emerged on the following:

- NRNs exchanging such information is worthwhile and that the ENRD is the best 'clearing house' for this.
- NRNs should use the term 'thematic initiatives'. Some NRNs don't use the mechanism of formal 'thematic groups'.
- Thematic initiatives (TI) are characterised as topic-based activity streams with specific outcomes which relate directly to one of the wider NRN objectives – usually that of 'improving RDP implementation'. These TIs are usually timebound with a typical timeframe of one or two years. Individual workshops or seminars are not in themselves TIs.
- Some TIs may be relevant to a single Member State only. NRNs TIs could frequently benefit from knowledge of or coordination with similar TIs being undertaken by NRNs in other Member States. The appropriate level of coordination may simply be an exchange of information, such as relevant projects or good practices. Sometimes there may be value added in more tangible collaboration, such as reciprocal participation in meetings or even the conduct of joint activities.
- NRN – ENRD TI coordination will bring similar added value.



A simple draft information template for TIs was circulated during the session. It was agreed that the CP – in the form of its 'member state experts' - will contact each NSU in order to collect up to date information on TIs which the CP will then share among all NRNs. This will be actioned in early 2018. In the longer term, the CP will consider developing functionality on the ENRD website to allow NSUs to update their own information.

Good Practices

In the third of the morning workshops, the NRNs considered the proposal put forward by the ENRD CP for an EU-wide Good Practice competition. Several NRNs reported that good practice competitions are currently organised in their Member States. In Italy, Lithuania and Slovakia, these are focused on young farmers. In the Baltic / Nordic Member States the focus is on project impacts on an area rather than on a specific theme. In most cases, these competition processes are at the stage of project calls being launched or collecting projects with the pre-assessment / selection to take place in 2018.



All NRNs confirmed that they would be interested to see an EU level competition organised in 2018/2019. They considered that by then they will have a sufficient number of completed projects with recorded results from which they could select and propose the best examples. In the meantime, a preparation work should take place to define selection criteria and a common format for jointly collecting the information. This can meet the needs for both national and EU level competitions.

NRNs also reported that they are using new formats for disseminating good practices and make them more user friendly. In Finland, good practices are mainly published as short stories on successful beneficiaries via social media (Facebook). In Slovakia, visits to interesting projects are organised.

Innovation Camp Activities – Workshop Outcomes

Rural Proofing

Rural Proofing is a process where policies, regulations and governmental acts or decisions are evaluated on the basis of their contribution and suitability to the needs of rural stakeholders. Rural proofing is usually implemented through stakeholder consultations and ‘checklists’– asking policy makers if the impact of their regulations on rural areas was taken into consideration.

The NRN participants in this workshop agreed that although checklists are a necessary step, only local rural stakeholders can provide feedback on the real impact of policies. Those NRNs who have strong knowledge and relationships with rural stakeholders and policy makers believe they can play a role in this process: informing people and gathering experience-based knowledge.

Some NRNs have difficulty in motivating policymakers who do not deal directly with rural issues. It was widely agreed that there is the need for a strong national policy mandate calling on the participation of different Ministries, the NRN or other bodies like Rural Parliaments to engage in a discussion of rural needs.

In order to create a mandate, information should be gathered on the activities implemented by NRNs which impact on rural proofing. Presenting this to policymakers will engage them in a joint discussion.



Communication

Participants in the Communication workshop highlighted the need for more interactive tools and platforms for NRNs to exchange information, methods and practices in communicating rural development. A Facebook group managed by the Finnish and Swedish NRNs, which is used by 78 members, was mentioned as an existing example of such a network. This platform is accessible to all NRNs and is not restricted to the dedicated communications officers of NSUs. It aims to include all NSU staff or other users whose job involves some aspect of communication. It was proposed to explore the possibility for an EU level initiative to establish a 'day for communicating rural development'. This initiative could be organised as a festival held in a different Member State every year using a common visual identity. As a first step, it would be important to increase NRN involvement and exchange methods of communication.

Innovation

The Innovation workshop discussed two main proposals. Discussion of the Euruvation Contest confirmed that participants would form a small grouping to develop actions on the proposed contest and create an exchange of Good Practice in Innovation in June 2018 through links and shared videos between a small number of NRNs. The second proposal discussed was to develop an action plan for young farmers. This will be taken forward as a pilot project in Finland where a group will be established linked to the NRNs that will devise and create their own strategy for rural development delivery targeted specifically at young farmers. The strategy actions will also be defined by the group.

Outcomes and Actions

There were very clear outcomes from the NRN Meeting to take forward in 2017/18 and the NRNs were willing to lead the delivery of many of the actions proposed:

- Further Simplification of the Common Network Statistics process – the Contact Point will refine and test a new approach for submission of the 2017 data.
- The Contact Point will collect and exchange information on *Thematic Initiatives* in a common format across all NRNs
- NRNs will continue to develop and pilot approaches on Rural Proofing and on Innovation which were initially developed in June 2017.
- NRN communication activities will be further strengthened with increased participation led by NRN activities through social media, and this includes EU stakeholder participation.
- Following a trial exchange between the CP and the Finnish NRN and clear interest from NRNs, further exchanges of personnel will be sought between NRNs in order to foster capacity building by participating and learning from the activities and working methods of each other.

