Improving RDP Implementation

ENRD Thematic Group Report

V1 – August 2015

Contents

List of Acronyms

CP	Contact Point (of the European Network for Rural Development)
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
ECA	European Court of Auditors
EIP-AGRI	European innovation partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
EU	European Union
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
MS	Member State
NRN	National Rural Network
NSU	Network Support Unit
LAG	Local Action Group
PA	Paying Agency
RDP	Rural Development Programme
RNA	European Rural Networks' Assembly
SCO	Simplified Cost Option
SG	European Rural Networks' Steering Group
TA	Technical Assistance
TG	Thematic Group

About this report: what purposes and for whom

This report sets out the conclusions and recommendations of the ENRD Thematic Group on 'Improving RDP implementation'. It provides **7 key recommendations** to make the implementation of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) simpler and more effective in meeting the real needs of stakeholders. It also provides concrete indications of what support National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the ENRD can provide in this respect.

It comes at the conclusion of a series of consultations and activities undertaken in the first half of 2015 that saw the direct involvement of rural development stakeholders. It builds upon exchange of views and practices aiming to understand what determines the quality of RDP implementation and what approaches can be put in place to improve it.

The report primarily addresses those stakeholders who directly - or indirectly - engage in the management and implementation of RDPs such as **Managing Authorities**, **Paying Agencies**, **Auditors** and **EU desk-officers**. **Rural Networks** are also among the main recipients of this report, being themselves a key tool to support the quality of RDP implementation. Finally, other actors participating to RDP implementation 'on the ground' such as LAGs and advisors might find relevant lessons for their field of work.

After a brief overview of the scope and work of the Thematic Group (section I), the report delves into the specific recommendations for 'improving RDP implementation' providing examples of existing practices (section II). Building on emerging lessons and priorities, it finally provides directions for the future work to be carried out by EU-level networking (section III).

I. ENRD thematic work on 'Improving RDP implementation'

"*Improving the quality of implementation of rural development programmes*" is one of the common objectives of National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)[1].

Part of the work of the ENRD in its first year of activities (2014-2015) focused on a better understanding and articulation of this objective in close consultation with rural development stakeholders. The main aim was to understand what can be done to improve the implementation of RDPs and, particularly, what rural networks can put in place to achieve it.

The ENRD Contact Point (CP) carried out a number of integrated activities (see Annex I) whose overarching scope was to *provide those directly and indirectly involved in RDP implementation with knowledge and tools to address key challenges and improve programmes' performance from the outset of the 2014-2020 programming period.* The outcomes of this 'integrated work package' also aimed at **informing key priority areas and themes to be addressed by the work of the ENRD** in the coming years.

Thematic Group on 'Improving RDP implementation'

Within the wider scope of the work package the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on 'improving RDP implementation' was set up to:

- Identify **key priorities and challenges** in terms of programmes' delivery and performance.

- Identify and illustrate **possible approaches and solutions** to be adopted for addressing the recognised needs and opportunities, highlighting the possible **role of rural networks**.

- Raise awareness of **practical and administrative constraints** to delivery and highlight needs for further action.

- **Share experiences in delivering approaches** and distil factors for success (or failure).

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[1] See Regulation (EU) N° 1305/2013, Art. 52. 2 (b) and Art. 54.2 (b)

Work and outcomes of the TG

The work of the TG was based on the active **exchange of views and experiences** among its members (representatives from MAs, PAs, NSUs, members of EU and national organisations, advisory services and research institutes) through both **face-to-face meetings** and **online discussions**. The ENRD CP provided support and animation to the work of the TG[2].

The work of the TG focused from the outset on two parallel strands:

- The first one focused on identifying, together with the stakeholders, those aspects laying the foundations for a better implementation of RDPs. The scope of the exercise was ultimately to identify areas for improvements where rural networks (and other concerned actors) could intervene, with emphasis placed on those aspects requiring urgent intervention.

  Over successive rounds of discussion, the TG articulated a number of possible areas of intervention and actions to be put in place that are presented in the following section of the report providing – in the TG's view – a 'recipe' for improving the implementation of RDPs[3].

- In parallel, a number of priority themes identified by the Rural Networks' Assembly and Steering Group[4] were addressed in turn with the aim of identifying underlying issues, and understanding their links with RDPs and possible interventions from rural networks.

  The outcomes of this exercise directly contributed to informing discussions with the wider set of ENRD stakeholders and eventually defining recommendations provided in this report to shape the work plan of the ENRD for its second year of activities (2015-2016).

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[2] More detailed information on the scope and activities of the TG can be found on the TG web page of the ENRD website: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/thematic-group-improving-rdp-implementation#keydoc and particularly in the Background paper and the reports of the working meetings.

[3] Findings from the TG work were brought to the ENRD Seminar on 'Seizing the opportunity for improving RDP implementation' (Brussels, 11 June 2015), the outcomes of which are fully taken into consideration in the seminar's report: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/en-rd-events-and-meetings/enrd-RDP-implementation-seminar-20150611

[4] See outcomes of the first Steering Group meeting (Brussels, 25 March 2015): http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/en-rd-events-and-meetings/rural-networks%E2%80%99-steering-group-%E2%80%93-25-february-2015-%E2%80%93-brussels-be

II. Recipe for success

Steps to improve RDP implementation

Improving the quality of the RDPs - and their implementation - is one of the stated objectives of the ENRD and NRNs in the current programming period. But the question of what defines the quality of the RDPs is left open. Although not explicitly, the TG contributed to answering this question by identifying and discussing areas where such improvements are sought and would need to be realised thanks to the mobilisation of all concerned stakeholders, rural networks included.

The answer provided by the TG members – therefore reflecting the views of a limited but nonetheless representative sample of rural development stakeholders - seems to resonate with some key lessons learnt from the analysis of past programmes' delivery[5] as well as current priorities for RDP implementation.[6]

In their view, improving the quality of RDPs and their implementation involves five steps:

(1) Addressing beneficiaries' real needs

(2) Strengthening coordination of all the stakeholders involved

(3) Ensuring higher capacity and quality of RDP management and administration

(4) Avoiding unnecessary complications in devising implementing rules

(5) Staying focused on the agreed results and being able to measure them

For the sake of simplification we might say that the first two steps relate to better **customer-oriented RDPs**. In this interpretation, the 'customer' is not only the potential beneficiary but all the stakeholders affected by the implementation of the policy on the ground and who carry expectations and needs on behalf of civil society.

For the same reason, we might say that the third and fourth steps are linked to better **results-oriented RDPs** in that a simpler and less error-prone management system creates the preconditions for achieving better efficiency in policy delivery. Intervening on these aspects will lay good foundations for achieving better quality programmes and delivery.

Effectiveness and performance (point 5) are also indirectly improved. However, other factors outside the sphere of management and administration were considered to play a major role in this respect (e.g. measure design, targeting and selection criteria, etc.). These aspects were

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[5] See for example the final report of the ENRD Thematic Working Group on the 'Delivery mechanisms of EU Rural Development Programmes', December 2011: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/policy-in-action/improving-implementation/delivery-mechanisms/en/delivery-mechanisms_en.html

[6] Summarised in DG AGRI's presentation at the ENRD Seminar on 11 June 2015: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/s2_better-implementation_scheele.pdf

not the subject of specific discussion within the TG, which **therefore did not make recommendations with regards to step 5**. Nevertheless, this is highlighted as a potentially important area for future work at the EU level.

Seven key recommendations for stakeholders

For each of the first four steps identified above for improving RDP implementation, the TG proposed key recommendations for the intervention of the main concerned stakeholders (Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, National Rural Networks, the ENRD and others).

Steps	*Recommendations*
(1) Addressing the real needs of beneficiaries	*1. Develop a sound communication strategy from the outset of the programming period* *2. Bring all involved stakeholders together devising 'new' ways of communication*
(2) Strengthening coordination of all the stakeholders involved	*3. Empower Monitoring Committees* *4. Look at different tools to improve vertical coordination*
(3) Ensuring higher capacity and quality of RDP management and administration	*5. Assess risks and opportunities for improving management systems* *6. Promote knowledge transfer among administrations*
(4) Avoiding unnecessary complications in devising implementing rules	*7. Introduce smart delivery tools*

These steps and recommendations build upon the discussions and lessons that emerged during the exchanges with stakeholders in the TG and ENRD Seminar. They are set out in more detail in the following section, where possible and appropriate with reference to current practices adopted in specific MS to provide concrete examples of what can be done and how.

Note: all the MS examples referred to are provided in Annex II

Step One: Addressing beneficiaries' real needs

Main lessons and considerations

- **Targeted and timely communication on technical implementation aspects** is key to increase understanding of potential beneficiaries on how to use RDP support effectively. Therefore, it contributes to a smoother roll-out of programmes and measures (see example 1). It can also be used to promote new ways of implementing RDP support. Adequate outreach, clarity and accessibility of information are of primary importance to ensure that all categories of potential beneficiaries are covered.

- The **pedagogic function of communications** (rather than a basic informative process) should not be underestimated: more effective implementation of the programmes may be achieved by general communications aiming at raising the level of understanding and the profile of the policy among stakeholders (see example 2). People need to be kept constantly updated about changes and forthcoming developments, paving the way for more responsive and informed action and use of the opportunities offered for support.

- Communication needs to continue working once it reaches the 'ground', generating **more engagement with the stakeholders** at the regional and local level and increasing uptake of the RDP opportunities. Information generated at EU level should be transferred effectively, but **feedback mechanisms** should also be established thus ensuring a two-way flow of information.

Key recommendations for stakeholders

- ***Key recommendation n°1****: Develop a sound communication strategy from the outset of the programming period*

MAs have six months to present to the Monitoring Committee (MC) a communication strategy that should indicate - among others - the role played by the NRN and its communication actions.[7] This exercise should not aim merely to fulfil the regulatory requirement, but be a strategic tool to raise the quality of RDP implementation (see example 3).

Major opportunities lie in **generating synergies with the network of rural development communicators** (advisors, professional organisations, chambers of agriculture etc.) to focus the content of communications and increase outreach – especially towards excluded categories of stakeholders, such as small *farmers (see example 4).*

Key recommendation n°1
Opportunities
- Generating a common vision through increased focus on the expected policy outcomes   - Targeted and prioritised communication actions through early identification of audiences and key messages (e.g. through surveys, public fora)   - Thorough planning to help overcome issues related to timely provision of information   - Clear distinction of roles preventing inefficiencies and duplication of information   - Generating synergies with the 'network of communicators' to increase outreach and focus.
Actors involved: who and how
MA to develop a comprehensive RDP *Publicity and Information Strategy,* which is fully coordinated and exploits the best synergies with the *NRN Communication Plan*. Inputs by the **PA** should be sought.   **MC** to contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of both RDP and NRN communication activities.   **Advisory services**, **professional organisations**, **chambers of agriculture** and other organisations to help implement the communication strategy as multipliers.

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[7] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) N° 808/2014, Art. 13 and Annex III.

- ***Key recommendation n°2***: *Bring all involved stakeholders together devising 'new' ways of communication*

A better understanding of rules from beneficiaries is not sufficient for improving RDP implementation if gaps persist between expectations 'from the top' and real needs 'on the ground'. The value of keeping face-to-face contacts and the learning potential offered by good practice sharing (through showcasing projects, using short videos etc.) and exchange activities (farm trips and study visits in rural contexts, exchange programmes for administration staff etc.) is particularly highlighted (see examples 5)*.*

Targeted use of social media can be considered one of these new communications tools (example 6). However, expectations of their actual coverage and outreach potential need to be realistic and well-considered.

The **role of RDP Monitoring Committees** in facilitating a more effective two-way flow of information should be fully taken into account (see also Key recommendation n°3).

Key recommendation n°2
Opportunities
• Effective transfer of information and shared understanding of rules among stakeholders, particularly during the launch of programme and measures.   • Consistency and coordination of communication messages through the delivery chain   • Better engagement of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries, increasing understanding of policy's support potential and giving direction on the use of measures through showing concrete examples.
Actors involved: who and how
MAs and **PAs** to promote and actively participate in exchange and communications activities closing the gap with beneficiaries.   **NRNs** to devise and propose new tools and activities (such as: study visits, exchange programmes; online platforms etc.), particularly focusing on good practice sharing (e.g. 'champions projects').   **LAGs** to support exchange activities at the local level and provide examples of good practices

Step Two: Strengthening the coordination of all stakeholders involved

Main lessons and considerations

- It is essential that all those involved in managing and implementing RDPs at different stages reach the **same level of understanding** when it comes to applying rules and translating policy priorities into concrete interventions. This becomes particularly relevant for the implementation of new policy instruments. Formal and informal mechanisms can be put in place to address coordination issues and ensure that everyone's views are heard with the aim at achieving better and simpler implementation for all (see example 7).

- The **RDP Monitoring Committee** is at the core of realising the Partnership Principle[8] through direct participation of stakeholders in the implementation of RDPs[9]. As such, it is key in ensuring RDPs are customer-oriented. However its effectiveness relies on balanced representation of all stakeholders groups concerned and a high degree of their participation, which is not always the case in many RDP contexts.

- Issues with coordination are mostly – but not exclusively – experienced in countries where the responsibility for the implementation of programmes is delegated to the regional level. This means a multiplicity of bodies intervene in the implementation of RDPs and different layers of laws and rules add up moving from the top (EU) to the bottom (regions) of the system. Lack or shift of competences within the administrations often add additional obstacles in the process.

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[8] As set out by the European Code of Conduct on Partnership.
[9] Final report of ENRD Thematic Group on Stakeholder involvement: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/thematic-group-stakeholder-involvement

Key recommendations for stakeholders

- ***Key recommendation n°3:*** *Empower Monitoring Committees*

Formal coordination mechanisms such as the MC can be strengthened by introducing participative arrangements that encourage more engagement and dialogue. Reinforcing relationships with informal coordination platform can also offer opportunities for improving its effectiveness. In this respect, closer collaboration with NRNs can help the inclusion of a wider group of stakeholders.

At the same time RDP authorities should provide assistance and **capacity building for weaker interest groups** to allow more effective participation.

Operationally, MCs can gain in effectiveness by a more structured organisation of the work and better planning of activities. A good practice is to put in place agile structures to consult more transparently and effectively on specific themes, such as ad-hoc working groups.[10]

Key recommendation n°3
Opportunities
- Addressing issues of lack of time, poor preparation and effective consultation   - Increase grass-root stakeholders' involvement in RDP implementation, including emerging interest groups and 'weak voices'. In general, more balanced representation.
Actors involved: who and how
MA to fully recognise the role of the Monitoring Committee and ensure a more effective functioning, including through increased coordination with NRNs **MA** to provide assistance and capacity building to interest groups including through NRNs **NRN** to provide support to the work of the MC as requested and link with wider stakeholder organisations establishing a flow of information with institutional actors.

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[10] This is common practice in a number of MS such as: AT, RO, NL and UK (England and Scotland)

- *Key recommendation n°4: Look at different tools to improve vertical coordination*

Solutions are needed to address issues of coordination in countries with regional programmes (or where multiple bodies intervene in policy delivery) to help a more consistent implementation of RDPs.

Existing formal instruments are available that aim at better vertical coordination. National Frameworks, for example, can be drawn at national level which set common provisions for the implementation of certain EAFRD measures at regional level (for the 2014-2020 programming period this has been done in ES, FR and DE). In some cases, formal coordinating bodies are also established.

However, experiences exist across the EU of initiatives - initiated either by MAs or NSUs – which have aimed at bringing together relevant stakeholders in different ways. For example, in Spain, **working groups** involving national and regional-level authorities are established to share and discuss practical implementation aspects on single measures (e.g. eligibility criteria, definition of minimum requirements etc.). **Road shows** across the country are also organised by the NRN to generate common understanding and coherent approaches towards the implementation of EIP-related measures (see example 8). A similar task is covered in Germany by **regional innovation offices** (see example 9).

These examples need to be shared to illustrate how often simple solutions can contribute to achieving concrete results in policy implementation. They do not usually require high level of 'organisational innovation' but may be 'new' with respect to the country's administrative culture and practices. Therefore it is appreciated that a transition period might be required for putting in place such approaches.

Capacity building actions such as the provision of **online resources** ('toolboxes', frequently asked questions, public discussion fora, examples of procedures, contact lists of staff) support the exchange of information, the transfer of good practices and the coherent implementation of rules at national level (see example 10).

Key recommendation n°4
Opportunities
- Providing solutions to vertical coordination aspects in contexts with multiple intervening bodies (e.g. countries with regional programmes).   - Addressing issues of uncertainty and insecurity when it comes to interpreting and applying legislation   - More consistent approach to implementation through e.g. coherent definition of selection criteria   - Replicable at all institutional levels, including the local one
Actors involved: who and how
MAs, **PAs** and other mandated **implementing bodies** (e.g. governmental agencies) to initiate the process and guarantee access to information **Municipalities** and other actors such as **LAGs** or their associations to be the promoter at the local level **NRNs** and **ENRD** to provide support and tools to facilitate the exchange of information (for example establishing online database of contacts) and promote good practices

Step Three: Ensuring higher capacity and quality of RDP management and administration

Main lessons and considerations

- Shortcomings in RDP management and administration hold back the capacity to deliver against results and increase the risk of irregularities.

- Raising technical capacity of administration staff through training is a key issue for most MS since shortcomings in procedures e.g. for processing application are often due to a lack of knowledge.

- Ad hoc **corrective actions** in terms of trainings however cannot work in isolation. Quality of procedures and technology (i.e. IT tools) should be raised in a **systemic way** as a prerequisite for the success of RDP implementation. It is important the efforts put in place for such improvements should not add unnecessary complexity to the system.

- Those in charge of management often lack knowledge of the real shortcomings and how these affect implementation on the ground. This makes it difficult to identify what improvements need to be made in the way the system is administered.

- **Monitoring & evaluation** and **audit** as independent assessment tools can offer substantial help through identifying areas requiring urgent action. Other useful insights can be gained by **involving stakeholders in the evaluation of policy management** thus ensuring feedback towards the administration and suggesting improvements based on real needs.

- The primary role of **technical assistance** (TA) is to improve know-how and build capacity. There is scope for improving the way TA budgets are used in this respect under rural development policy.[11] Rural Networks - as the main instrument of technical assistance under the EAFRD - have a clear role to play in supporting capacity building in areas that directly contribute to raising RDP efficiency and effectiveness while 'improving transparency of TA spending'.

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[11] See recommendations from ECA's Special report 04/2015 "Technical assistance: what contribution has it made to agriculture and rural development" (http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR15_04/SR15_04_EN.pdf).

Key recommendations for stakeholders

- ***Key recommendation n°5:*** *Assess risks and opportunities for improving management systems*

Systemic improvement of management systems should start from a rigorous analysis of existing procedures to map where the bottlenecks are. This will identify important shortcomings and critical points for intervention. On the basis of these, targeted corrective actions can be implemented, thus focusing efforts and resources.[12] In this respect, it is of the utmost importance to consider the **introduction of monitoring systems and reviewing of procedures**.

Audit trails are potentially useful sources of information and might be considered primarily as a learning tool.[13] Sharing of audit findings among administrations and implementing bodies will encourage the adoption of further improvements.

Insights gained through these analyses could provide the basis for **the implementation of Quality Management Systems** at different implementing levels (see example 11 and example 12). Piloting and testing such new approaches can be good practice to assess their relevance, accessibility and effectiveness. The establishment of success indicators is also encouraged for monitoring their success.

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[12] See the example of West Cork Development Partnership LAG featured in the summer edition of the Rural Connections magazine: (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/publi-enrd-magazine02-2015-en.pdf)

[13] See on this the article 'Learning from Auditing' featured in the ENRD Rural Review N°20 'Getting rural development programmes going', July 2015: (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/publi-enrd-rr-20-2015-en.pdf)

Key recommendation n°5
Opportunities
- Placing capacity building actions in a wider systemic approach towards quality management (putting emphasis on preventive as well as corrective actions)   - Tailoring improvements to the customers' needs   - Consider a specific focus of formal monitoring and evaluation on reviewing RDP management (e.g. through mid-term evaluation review)   - Understand and rehabilitate audit as a useful learning tool for implementing continuous improvements.   - Consider *National Action Plans for the reduction of error rates*[14] as diagnostic tools to implement short- and long-term corrective actions.
Actors involved: who and how
MAs, **PAs**, **LAGs** to perform risk analyses of management and administrative procedures; and design and implement corrective actions **Auditors** to be involved in the process at an early stage **NRNs** to provide/look for expertise and offer technical support as appropriate; and share examples of good practices and results of audit findings

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[14] The 'Action Plans on error rates' have been put in place by MS upon initiative of the EC. They include preventive and corrective actions to address the most common causes of errors (e.g. related to reasonableness of costs and public procurement rules) in the implementation of rural development policy.

See also Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2013)244 final:
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/swd/2013/0244/COM_SWD%282013%290244_EN.pdf

- ***Key recommendation n°6:*** *Promote knowledge transfer among administrations*

Training and capacity building programmes for RDP managers and administration are key to raising technical knowledge. It is important however that they do not take place in isolation as one-off activities. They must rather be followed through as part of a continuous learning process to ensure that action is taken on the matter.

Establishing and nurturing informal contacts among concerned staff contributes to more effective and long-lasting transfer of knowledge, particularly through peer-learning and working out solutions to common problems.

Here, rural networks at national and European level have a key role in identifying needs, solutions and good management practices, distilling learning and delivering targeted 'capacity building packages' to the right stakeholders at the right level (MAs, PAs, LAGS and Auditors).

Key recommendation n°6
Opportunities
- Increasing technical knowledge of administration staff   - Involving the right stakeholders at the right time   - More efficient use of TA budget to improve know-how and build capacity
Actors involved: who and how
MAs, **PAs**, **LAGs** staff as recipients of training and mentoring programmes **NRNs** and **ENRD** to promote the flow of technical knowledge, establish contacts within administrations, look out for external expertise, examples and guidance, provide input and facilitate capacity building actions (e.g. workshops, FAQs on 'hot issues')

Step Four: Avoiding unnecessary complications in devising implementing rules

Main lessons and considerations

- Simplifying the way RDPs are administered is not only a political priority but a need recognised by stakeholders at all levels. It can improve both efficiency (e.g. through budget savings) and effectiveness (i.e. paying for results) of policy implementation for the benefit of all those involved. Consequently, it is a **shared responsibility of both policy makers and those involved in RDP implementation**.

- The **involvement of stakeholders** in the design of administrative processes and tools is key to ensure simplification from the client's end. Going further, all actors directly or indirectly influencing implementation need to establish closer dialogue and mutual consultation. A shift of mentality towards simplification and measuring the success of simplification measures[15] needs to be realised.

- Tools and strategies are already available. Some of them (e.g. the use of Simplified Cost Options) are effectively used by RDP managers and lessons can be learnt and shared for promoting a wider adoption across MS. For others, there is less experience available (at least within EAFRD management) offering more room for testing and joint work to understand the potential and practical aspects of their implementation. The **adoption of these 'smart' delivery tools** needs to become a priority for all work around programme implementation, but it is essential that such efforts do not generate 'gold-plating', adding unnecessary complexity to the rules governing the implementation of RDPs.

- PA staff and auditors play a central role in the interpretation of rules and ensuring conformity of the procedures. It is highly advisable that the implications of any change or novelty introduced in the system is jointly discussed with them to be widely accepted, thus avoiding risks of irregularities or non-compliance. Contacts between stakeholders should also continue during the implementation phase to ensure rules are understand and correctly applied (see example 7).

Key recommendations for stakeholders

- ***Key recommendation n°7:*** *Introduce smart delivery tools*

Keeping the cost of the policy under control and paying for results are two concurring arguments that make the use of SCOs interesting for public administration. This is

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[15] See more in the article 'Simplifying RDP implementation: why and how' featured in the ENRD Rural Review N°20 'Getting rural development programmes going', July 2015: (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/publi-enrd-rr-20-2015-en.pdf)

demonstrated by the number of practices being increasingly introduced in EAFRD management across MS.[16] SCOs also provide important benefits for beneficiaries in terms of reduced administrative burdens.

Examples of current practices need to be shared between MS to show the possibilities and solutions for addressing practical implementation aspects. This, however, should be part of a wider approach to **build knowledge and stronger skills** (e.g. through training) for their implementation.

Timely preparation is encouraged as it is fundamental to allow thorough background analysis (e.g. collection of data), definition of methodologies and therefore adequately investing technical and human resources prior to implementation.[17]

Key recommendation n°7
Opportunities
- Achieving economy, ensuring that RDPs fund activities that are cost-effective   - Reducing administrative burdens both for administration and beneficiaries   - Reducing significantly the risk of irregularities and increasing focus on outcomes   - Generally increasing administrative capacity and quality
Actors involved: who and how
MAs, **PAs, LAGs** to perform analyses, defining methodology and implementation **Auditors** to be involved in design and evaluation from an early stage **NRNs** and **ENRD** to promote the flow of technical knowledge, look out for external expertise, share examples, and facilitate capacity-building actions (e.g. workshops, provision of guidance etc.)

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[16] Countries such as DK, ES, SE, IE, FR & BG have introduced or plan to introduce SCOs for the implementation of specific RDP measures. Examples are available on the ENRD website: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/en-rd-events-and-meetings/SCO-training-20150226

[17] An introduction and step-by-step guidance for the implementation of SCOs is available in the ENRD Rural Review N°20 'Getting rural development programmes going', July 2015: (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/publi-enrd-rr-20-2015-en.pdf). Additional resources are also provided in the publication's 'information inventory'.

III.   Informing the future work of the ENRD

The last section of this report pulls together key findings from the TG work providing **recommendations for better targeted and more effective networking at the EU level**.

These recommendations stem from considerations raised around horizontal aspects of RDP implementation (dealt with in Section II) as well as comprehensive discussions undertaken with stakeholders around priority working themes.

The wider strategic framework: thematic priorities for EU networking

The activities carried out within the work package on 'improving RDP implementation – and particularly the Thematic Group – were placed in a wider strategic framework defined by the by the EU Rural Networks' Assembly (RNA) and Steering Group (SG).[18]

At the first meeting of the RNA (26 January 2015) discussions were held around priorities topics for the thematic work of EU networks (Workshops 4 & 5 on the agenda)[19]. Later on, the Steering Group members took this initial input forward to provide further indications on priority themes for 2015[20]. In this exercise **four criteria** guided the selection of themes. According to these, selected themes should:

- o   Raise a **wide interest** across the EU
- o   Be relevant with respect to the programming cycle (**time-relevance**)
- o   Build on **past lessons**, avoiding repetitions
- o   Ensure **balance** between 'methodological' and 'topic-based' issues and between rural development objectives.

The discussions highlighted a set of ten topics bearing - in the members' view - a different degree of urgency (**Picture 1**).

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[18] As main governance body of the EU Networks, the Rural Networks Assembly (RNA) provides the strategic framework for the activities of the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI networks, including thematic work. In accordance with this framework, the Rural Networks Steering Group (SG), working on an operational level, coordinates the work of the Networks.

[19] EU Rural Networks Assembly – Report of the first meeting, 26 January 2015: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/rural_networks_assembly_26_jan_2015_-_final_report.pdf

[20] EU Rural Networks Steering Group - Report of the 1st Steering Group Meeting, 25 February 2015: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/150317_sg-report_websitev.pdf

Picture 1 – Priority topics emerged from the SG discussions

N*	Selected topic (not ranked)	Priority
1.	Simplification (for all, in order to achieve the relevant objectives)	++
2.	Empowering advisory services – Knowledge transfer – Broader innovation	++
3.	Local food – Short Supply Chain – Rural-urban partnership – Small farms	+
4.	Pillar 1-Pillar 2 linkages	++
5.	Demographic change & social inclusion	+
6.	Multi-fund approaches	+
7.	Green economy related to job and growth	+
8.	Starting-up the NRNs	+
9.	Evaluation of networking activities - NRNs	+
10.	Climate change	+

The contribution of the TG

The TG aimed at bringing forward the discussion around priority themes initiated by the RNA. Six of the 10 themes identified by the RN Steering Group[21] were addressed in turn with the scope to articulate the specific issues, understand their links with RDP programmes and possible interventions from rural networks.

The outcomes of this exercise were joined up with further findings and considerations stemming from different ENRD activities thus completing the analysis of the ten priority themes[22].

The findings were summarised in short informative fiches that directly fed into a final round of discussions with the ENRD stakeholders[23]

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[21] Namely: Empowering advisory services & knowledge transfer; Local food, short supply chain, rural-urban partnership and small farms; Pillar 1 –Pillar 2 linkages; Demographic change and social inclusion; Green economy for jobs and growth; Climate change.

[22] Namely on: Simplification; Multi fund approaches; Starting up the NRNs; Evaluation of networking activities.

[23] See report of the 2nd Steering group meeting, particularly Annex 1 and 2: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/150729_sg2-report_final_v4_0.pdf - Further considerations on the topics of Green economy and Climate Change can also be found in the report of the third TG meeting: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tg_rdp_impl_3rd_meeting_23.06.15_report_v1.pdf

Recommendations for future ENRD work: what and how

Preliminary considerations

- Reflecting the four above-mentioned criteria, the priority topics identified by the ENRD stakeholders comprise both horizontal and methodological aspects of RDP implementation (notably addressing the question of "**how**" to deal with implementation) and theme-related areas of work ("**what**" to focus on in implementing RDPs).

Picture 2 – Priority topics by category

WHAT	- Empowering advisory services - knowledge transfer - innovation - Local food - short supply chains - rural-urban partnerships - small farms - Demographic change and social inclusion - Green economy related to jobs and growth - Climate change
	- Pillar 1 - Pillar 2 linkages
HOW	- Simplification - Multi-fund approaches - Starting up the NRNs - Evaluation of networking activities

- The first five themes broadly address the **3 overarching objectives of the rural development policy**, namely: 1) 'fostering the competitiveness of agriculture'; 2) 'ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and climate actions'; 3) 'achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities including the creation and maintenance of employment'.

- The last five themes instead are clearly liked to **3 categories of stakeholders** who are directly involved in RDP implementation, namely: programme managers (MAs, PAs), Networks Support Units and, Local Action Groups.

- The work on such themes therefore, should involve the **right mix of stakeholders** to ensure that key actors involved in RDP implementation move forward together in the understanding of issues and possible solutions. Discussions also highlighted the need to focus on those aspects that can have the most impact with respect to the current stage of programming.

- Another aspect clearly emerging from the consultation relates to the need for further **sharpening the focus of the selected themes** and articulating the specific issues. Operationally, this translates in understanding how concretely RDP can intervene and what are the specific measures concerned.

- Stakeholders also suggested that there is scope for further reflection on the **best 'packages' of networking tools** to address the identified priorities, also considering possible synergies (between the EU and the national level) and limitations. The working framework should be flexible in order to adapt to changing needs and policy priorities.

- Every theme, however, is characterised by **different support needs** such as better understanding, more guidance, knowledge sharing, learning through peer-to-peer, capacity building or the exchange of good practices. Future thematic work will therefore need to consider the most relevant working tools case by case.

- Future work promoted at the EU level would need to be guided by the principles of **focus**, **traction** and **additionality**. This means considering the scope for further improvement, reaching a critical mass of interest and finding out what has already been achieved and where.

Recommendations

WHAT
The work plan of the ENRD for 2015-2016 should incorporate the **priority themes** that emerged from the consultation with the stakeholders. In consideration of the principles of focus, traction and additionality - and availability of resources - it is expected that not all themes will be given the same prominence. The work plan should allow for a certain flexibility in consideration of changing or emerging priorities at the level of the EU agenda and the national interests. Crucially - as stressed by stakeholders - it will be of paramount importance to look at how EAFRD can contribute to the broader **EU2020 agenda** and emerging changes or evolutions in that regard, such as the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). In this respect, for example, a major focus will be placed on investments in infrastructures and particularly broadband coverage in low population density areas.

As highlighted by the work of the TG, working on specific areas can unlock the potential of RDPs to deliver quality and results. These include e.g. **communications**, **coordination mechanisms** (particularly through more effective MCs), and **raising technical capacity** of RDP managers. These areas can be the subject of focused exchanges and capacity building actions particularly through exchanges of good practices.

Specific capacity building should be delivered to develop the competences of NSUs staff and ensure NRNs are effective instruments in consideration of the key roles they can play in supporting the quality of RDP implementation.

As far as technical aspects of RDP implementation are concerned (e.g. simplification, reducing error rates; outcomes-based approaches; multi-funding; new tools and measures such as Financial Instruments and co-operation) the work should closely coordinate with capacity building actions undertaken by DG AGRI (seminars, work in the Rural Development Committee meetings, production of guidance).

It goes without saying that the choice of themes and areas of work for the ENRD - including the RDP evaluation - will need to be carefully coordinated and take into consideration creating synergies (or avoiding duplications) with those addressed by the EIP-AGRI Network.

HOW

The different scope of the themes asks for a different combination of tools and methods of work.

Also, networking activities shall consider more precise targeting in terms of stakeholders and MS. Different configurations need to be envisaged in terms of participation to EU-level activities. NRNs should be involved in the ENRD's activities at an early stage so that their contribution (also in terms of participation to EU-level events) becomes more targeted and better informed.

Typically, activities such **workshops** and **trainings** (involving a limited number of participants and allowing in-depth technical discussions), **guidance documents**, online **toolboxes**, **FAQs**, will be appropriate tools for addressing technical aspects of RDP implementation.

Here it would be crucial to involve those stakeholders directly involved in RDP design and implementation (MA, PA, Auditors, desk-officers, LAGs).

Themes that are more topic-based (e.g. local food, green economy etc.) will require a systemic approach to better identify key issues within the theme and the role of RDPs within it (e.g. what measures can be used and how). **Seminars**, **thematic groups** and **RDP analysis** will be the most appropriate working solutions.

Such exchanges will involve a wider section of rural development stakeholders and allow for awareness raising and the emergence of transferable practical examples. The choice of the theme

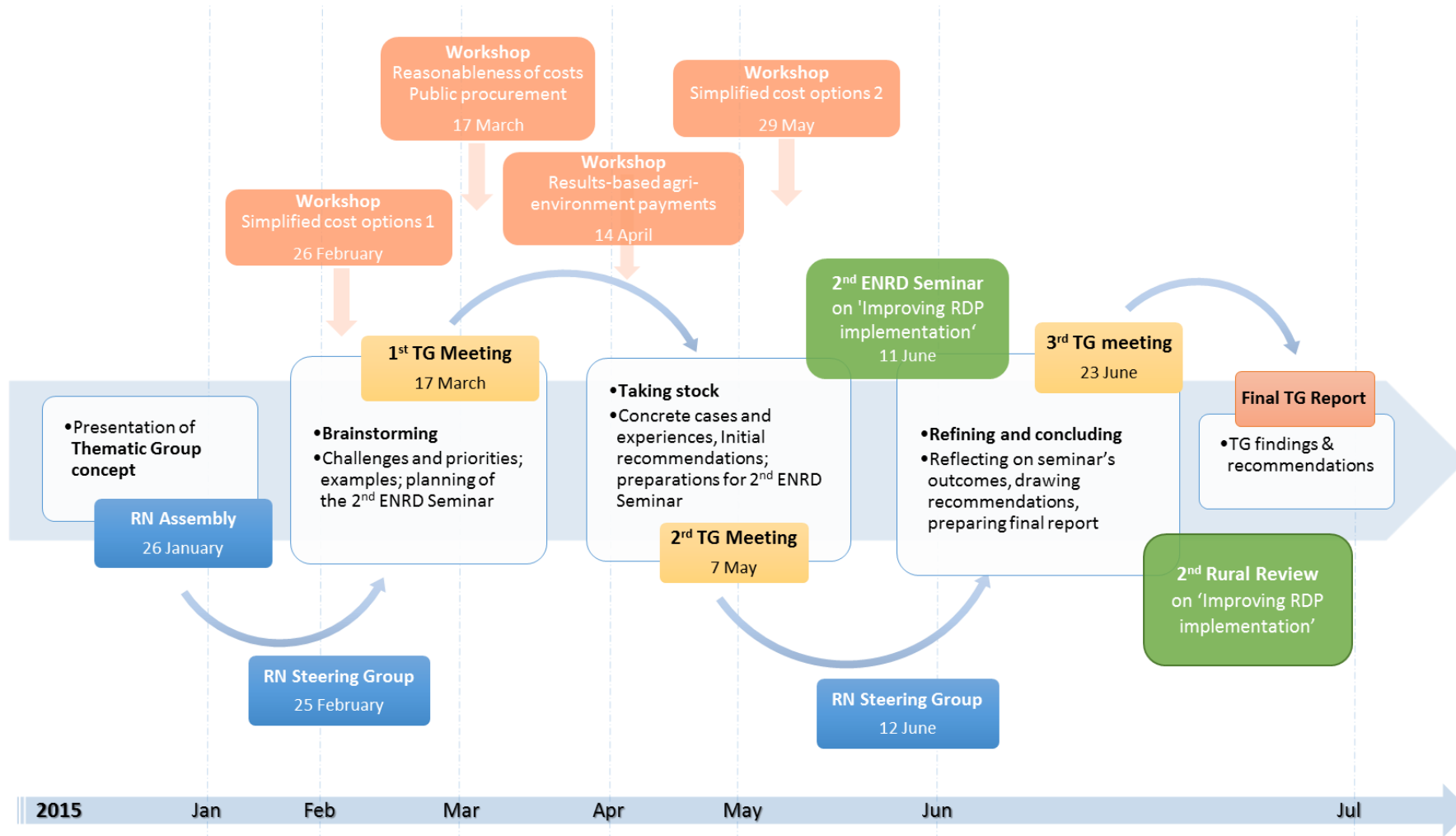and the MS involved should reflect those criteria of traction, focus and additionality previously indicated.

Involvement in workshops and trainings can differ reflecting the different level of preparedness of MS. Different 'circles' of MS can be involved also addressing specific needs in terms of programming stage. The experience cumulated within the '**community of practice**' of more advanced MS can be then transferred to other MS in a genuine peer-to-peer learning approach.

In this respect, '**training packages**' could be envisaged that can be rolled-out at the national level (or regional level) ideally through the support of the NRNs. Examples are available of such initiatives. This approach will also have the advantage to respond to specific capacity-building needs in a more timely fashion.

The collection and dissemination of **good practices** is seen as a prominent task for the ENRD. Stakeholders stressed in particular the value of sharing MS approaches towards the implementation of specific tools and instruments ('methodological' practices). This knowledge should be consolidated distilling success factors to inform practical guidance (e.g. in the form of FAQs, trainings and workshops).

Workshop
Reasonableness of costs
Public procurement
17 March

Workshop
Simplified cost options 2
29 May

Workshop
Simplified cost options 1
26 February

Workshop
Results-based agri-
environment payments
14 April

2nd ENRD Seminar
on 'Improving RDP
implementation'
11 June

1st TG Meeting
17 March

3rd TG meeting
23 June

Final TG Report

- Presentation of **Thematic Group concept**

- TG findings & recommendations

- **Taking stock**
- Concrete cases and experiences, Initial recommendations; preparations for 2nd ENRD Seminar

- **Brainstorming**
- Challenges and priorities; examples; planning of the 2nd ENRD Seminar

- **Refining and concluding**
- Reflecting on seminar's outcomes, drawing recommendations, preparing final report

RN Assembly
26 January

2nd TG Meeting
7 May

2nd Rural Review
on 'Improving RDP
implementation'

RN Steering Group
25 February

RN Steering Group
12 June

2015   Jan   Feb   Mar   Apr   May   Jun   Jul

ANNEX 2: Examples referenced in the report

Please note that additional references to examples and practical experiences are provided in the footnotes throughout the main body of the text (they are directly accessible by clicking on the web links, when provided).

Example 1: 'Customer-oriented' services offered by the Bulgarian PA

All the staff in the 'Direct Payments' department of the Bulgarian PA are duty-bound and committed to provide tailored information to beneficiaries upon request. This can happen in different ways according to the issue and the needs of the beneficiary:

- Three 'Hotlines' are established for RDP measures (one of which solely dedicated to agri-environment and organic farming). Calls are logged-in together with the issue reported and the answer provided, allowing to keep track of beneficiaries and providing a tailored service.
- An email service is also available to beneficiaries where 1-2 experts per measure are available to answer specific requests.
- Finally, depending of the complexity of the request, 'visiting day' are established for every officer on which beneficiaries can ask to meet one or few experts looking at issues within specific measures.

For further information: Yanitsa Karamarkova - National Paying Agency, BG

(*Return to top*)

Example 2: 'Liveable' campaign – Communicating Austria's new RDP

'Liveable' is a nationwide communication campaign awarded at the 2014 CAP Communications Awards ceremony. It uses creative visuals in a well-thought-out strategy with clearly defined objectives and target groups. It also involves the combined use of channels (national media, social media, information tours and events) alongside individual testimonies, successfully explaining the likely impact of the new RDPs.

Communications addressed both stakeholders and the wider public with the specific intent to reach potential applicants and provide them with details of the new programme.

For further information and contacts see here

(*Return to top*)

> **Example 3**: Communication strategy for the new RDP in Finland
>
> A rounded communication strategy was devised in FI to mark the launch of the new RDP.
>
> All communication actions are connected to specific measures in the NRN's action plan. Preparatory work for the strategy was launched at the end of the previous programming period involving officers from the MA, the PA and the NSU. The network of 'regional communicators' - responsible for the implementation of communication measures on the ground – were also heard during the preparatory phase.
>
> The strategy focuses on the coordinated used of a range of tools (e-communication channels, printed material and an intense events plan). The core of the strategy is an effective branding coupling a compelling message and a fresh visual identify (including a new visual identity for LEADER).
>
> It addresses both potential beneficiaries and the wider public stimulating recipients to 'get to know more' about the possibilities offered by the national programme. A thorough planning characterises the Finnish strategy with a focus on fully exploiting synergies with national and local communicators (TV, radio, local authorities and LAGs).
>
> *For further information and contacts see here*

(*Return to top*)

> **Example 4:** Coordination of communication activities with NGOs when launching the 2014-2020 RDP in Czech Republic
>
> To coordinate the communication campaign for the launch of the 2014-2020 RDP and ensure the necessary information was provided to stakeholders, the Czech Ministry of Agriculture consulted a range of stakeholder organisations through a survey in November 2014.
>
> This allowed to assess information needs and ensure synergies were created with NGOs' planned communication activities, also exploring possible multiplier effects.
>
> Managing Authority's staff directly participated in communication activities (such as workshops or seminars) for farmers run by NGOs, which was appreciated by the stakeholders.
>
> *For further information and contacts see here and here*

(*Return to top*)

Example 5: Travelling exhibitions in Estonia

The Estonian NRN created a format of travelling exhibitions to communicate RDP activities and outcomes to a broader concerned public. The campaign was based on a series of eye-catching roll-ups providing information on project examples and typical RDP activities (focusing on LEADER, village development, young farmers). The communication campaign involved partner organisations to ensure a wider outreach.

As a part of this communication effort, farm visits open to all countries and interested rural development stakeholders (MAs, NRNs, LAGs etc.) are being organised around Estonia.

For further information and contacts see here

(*Return to top*)

Example 6: Scottish Rural Parliament's #ruralhour

Although not directly related to the implementation of the RDP, the Scottish Rural Parliament held a number of discussions on Twitter using the hashtag #ruralhour on key issues facing rural communities. The aim was to encourage people who would not necessarily respond to a formal consultation to put forward their views, to share ideas and best practice and to stimulate debate on important issues.

The subject for discussion is selected according to the stakeholders' interest. The date is set and announced in advance. For that hour, which is usually in the afternoon when stakeholders are less busy, participants can post their views and take part in the dialogue.

Around 50 people engaged in each debate and the Scottish Rural Parliament increased their Twitter following with each event. There are examples of people and organisations who are now collaborating or learning from each other who first connected during the online debates. The Rural Parliament also obtained useful data and potential solutions to rural issues which influenced their activities throughout 2014-15.

This is a quick and easy way to engage a large number of people in discussion on difficult topics, gather viewpoints and share best practice.

For further information and upcoming events see here - For records of past debates see here

(*Return to top*)

Example 7: Building common understanding through 'joint reading' in Finland

A series of discussion sessions and seminars involving central administration, provincial authorities and local-level actors (LAGs) have been organised across the country with the objective of clarifying technical aspects of legislation, avoiding ambiguities and getting the same level of understanding at different levels of implementation.

The NRN contributed to the process through linking administration and stakeholders in a series of roadshows, gathering around 300 people where potential beneficiaries were directly informed about aspects of the legislation and could provide feedback to the Ministry.

For further information and contacts see here - Further contact: Network Support Unit, FI

(*Return to top*)

Example 8: EIP Regional roadshows in Spain

The Spanish NRNs has been organising regional roadshows with the aim of disseminating and raising awareness about the EIP-related measures considered in the RDPs at the national and regional level.

These initiatives saw the participation of MAs explaining the measures and discussing about their implementation with the interested targeted audience (R&D institutes, technological centres, universities, advisory services, cooperatives, agri-food SME's, farmers and other actors of the civil society such as NGO's, local authorities, LAGs etc.).

The three events organised so far gathered over 600 participants from 10 different Spanish regions covering all the targeted sectors and stakeholders. They were the occasion to present the new measure 16 of the RDPs (cooperation) and discuss technical implementation aspects such as eligibility conditions, selection criteria, funding schemes, timing of calls etc. both at national and regional level. Bottlenecks and best practices were also identified from across Spanish regions that will allow to enrich and improve the implementation of the EIP-AGRI from the very beginning.

For further information: Andrés Montero Aparicio – INIA, Spain

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(*Return to top*)

Example 9: Regional innovation offices in Germany

In Germany, regional innovation offices operate within the scope of the EIP-AGRI. Their mission is to facilitate the emergence of EIP Operational Groups and assist them with project proposals, acting as intermediary between the applicants and the administration. They are also responsible for publicity and information about the EIP-AGRI in the *Länder*.

The innovation offices ensure cross-fertilisation among regions and link their experience to the national level via the NRN. Their networking at national level allows for greater coherence of the implementation of EIP-related measures across the country.

For further information and contacts on the Innovation office in Schleswig-Holstein see website and here
For further information and contacts on the Innovation office in Hessen see website

(*Return to top*)

Example 10: Coordination through capacity building in France

The decentralisation of rural development programming in France (through the implementation of 22 RDPs for mainland France and Corse alongside 5 programme for the oversea territories) has raised the twofold challenge of ensuring a coherent approach to implementation and supporting the technical capacity of regional administrations.

The two challenges have been addressed thanks to a conspicuous coordination effort by the national PA which established national benchmarks and enforced their implementation through training sessions for new regional MAs and the fine tuning of the central IT system.

Training sessions for 'trainers' have been held at inter-regional level for regional MA and PA staff to ensure the transfer of technical knowledge in a cascade effect. At the same time an 'e-toolbox' was created to help the implementation of the over 900 sub-measures across the national territory.

For further information and contacts see here

(*Return to top*)

> **Example 11:** Guidelines for Quality Management Systems in Italy
>
> To strengthen administrative capacity and encourage the reduction of error rates in rural development spending, the Italian Ministry of Agriculture with the support of the NRN has worked on guidelines for regional MAs for the introduction of Quality Management Systems.
>
> The approach (still under development) starts from a review of the existing procedures and devises a comprehensive strategy for their ongoing improvement following the ISO 9001 standard.
>
> The NRN will be involved through the provision of training and coaching on quality management principles and the informal review of implementation.
>
> *For further information and contacts see here*

(*Return to top*)

> **Example 12:** Introduction of Quality Management Handbook for LAGs in Finland
>
> In order to improve LEADER implementation, the Finnish NRN supported LAGs to build a 'quality management handbook' to raise the quality of their operations. The Network provided financial support, external expertise and organised trainings and peer-to-peer learning from the national down to the local level.
>
> Every Finnish LAGs took part in the process building its own manual of procedures describing operations, tasks, division of responsibilities and flows of information to and from the MA. During the process good practices were shared among LAGs.
>
> The process has required time and efforts for LAGs to get used to the new 'language' and build the manual. However it allowed them to gain a better vision of their role and strategy and implement risk management procedures building an idea of continuous improvement.
>
> For further information: *Network Support Unit, FI*

(*Return to top*)