Thematic Group on

Smart and Competitive Rural Businesses

Final report

Brussels, 11 July 2017

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1. Context & objectives

'Smart and Competitive Rural Businesses' has been the sub-theme of the ENRD thematic work on 'Smart and Competitive Rural Areas' carried out by the ENRD Contact Point (ENRD CP) from 16 July 2016 to 15 July 2017.

The **overall objectives** of the thematic work on 'Smart & Competitive Rural Businesses' were set in line with the main ENRD objectives, to:

- Improve the quality of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs),
- Increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development.

More specifically, the Thematic Group (TG) aimed to bring together key rural development stakeholders with an interest and experience in the theme of 'rural businesses', with the primary objective of improving the implementation of RDPs in supporting rural businesses.

2. Members

The TG worked in a stakeholder-driven way (see below) and therefore, it has been crucial to engage a diverse set of members that participate at and contribute to the thematic work regularly and actively. The TG **engaged 20 members** who participated in at least two (out of four) TG meetings[1] representing 7 different Member States[2] and a wide set of organisations (see Annex). Altogether 39 stakeholders participated in at least one meeting.

3. The approach, methods & activities

3.1 Approach & methodology

The guiding principles and methodologies that have driven the thematic group work were set out at the start in the initial Background Paper[3] as follows:

- **Stakeholder-oriented & participative:** The thematic work largely relied on the contribution of TG members (see above). TG members have actively participated in the organisation and running of thematic group meetings and largely contributed to the TG outputs through their experience.

- **Focused & practical:** The thematic work aimed to be focused and practical in terms of the chosen sub-themes, methods and outcomes. Themes were defined during the 1st TG meeting and narrowed down and structured further during subsequent TG activities (see below).

- **Complementary & inspiring:** The thematic work aimed to add value to existing work. One of the main objectives of the thematic work was to inspire people to learn and experiment new ideas, methods and examples in their own working context.

- **Relevant to a wider audience**: The TG aimed at producing outcomes that are relevant for a wider interested audience. The outputs and recommendations have been disseminated (including at the ENRD Seminar) at various levels from practitioners working on the ground to policy-makers at national and European levels.

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[1] Does not include ENRD Contact Point. 8 members participated at all four meetings, 4 at three meetings, further 8 at two meetings. 19 further participants came to one of the four TG meetings.
[2] Finland (5), UK-Scotland (3), the Netherlands (2), Belgium (2), Austria (1), Poland (1), Greece (1), representing National Rural Networks (4), DG AGRI (4), LAGs (3), EU stakeholder organisations (3), advisory services (3), research (2), Managing Authority (1).
[3] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tg1_rural-businesses_tg-background-paper.pdf
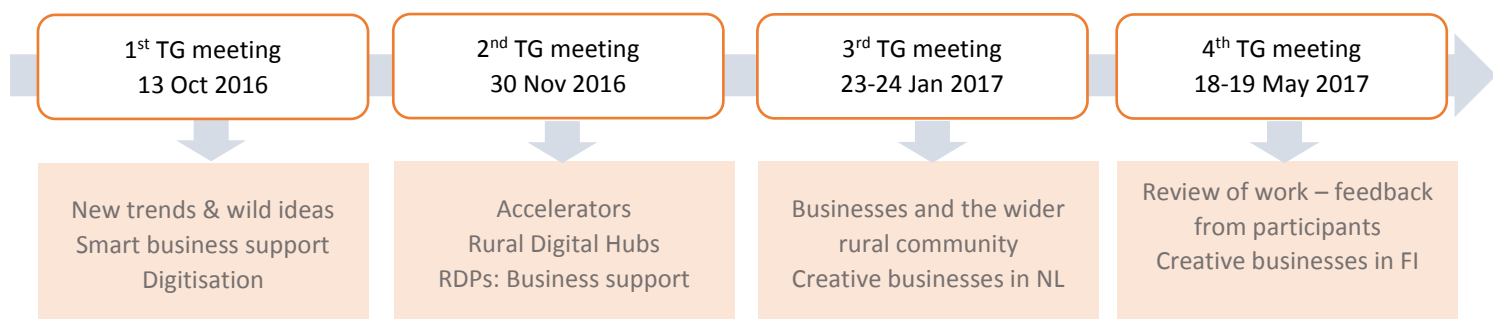
3.2 TG meetings & ENRD Seminar

The TG meetings and the ENRD Seminar served as corner-stones of the thematic work, where the main themes and direction of the work were agreed:

- The 1st TG meeting (13 October 2016) identified the key topics to be covered within the TG including 'smart business support' and digitisation (see meeting summary).
- The 2nd TG meeting (30 November 2016) discussed Rural Development Programme Measures and National Rural Networks' practices in support of innovative rural businesses (see meeting summary).
- The 3rd TG meeting (23-24 January 2017) explored the links between rural businesses and the wider rural community and presented innovative businesses from the Netherlands (see meeting summary).
- The 4th TG meeting (18-19 May 2017) included visits to innovative rural businesses in Finland and focused on how to finalise and efficiently disseminate TG outcomes and start the new thematic work (see meeting summary)

The **specific themes** covered by the Thematic Group were defined and refined by the members during the working process and included:

- The importance of **creative ('wild') ideas** for viable local businesses that can respond to new rural challenges;
- **Business support approaches** (such as the accelerator approach) to help these business ideas emerge and help businesses to realise them;
- Creating a **supportive ecosystem** (including access to broadband and other services) that can help businesses to settle in rural areas.

1st TG meeting 13 Oct 2016	2nd TG meeting 30 Nov 2016	3rd TG meeting 23-24 Jan 2017	4th TG meeting 18-19 May 2017
New trends & wild ideas Smart business support Digitisation	Accelerators Rural Digital Hubs RDPs: Business support	Businesses and the wider rural community Creative businesses in NL	Review of work – feedback from participants Creative businesses in FI

The ENRD Seminar on 'Revitalising Rural Areas through Business Innovation' (30 March 2017) explored how rural businesses – both farm and non-farm – can innovate in ways that "create the conditions for future prosperity and vitality" as articulated in the Cork 2.0 Declaration. It largely built on themes and outcomes of the thematic group work.

3.3 Other relevant activities

A set of further analytical activities were associated with the thematic work:

- The ENRD CP has carried out an analysis of 5 RDPs (Portugal, Slovenia, Finnish Mainland region, Basque Country in Spain and Scotland in the UK) – see below.
- The ENRD CP published Rural Review No 24 and the EAFRD Projects Brochure on Rural Business.

3.4 Specific themes addressed

a) New trends and wild ideas

The starting point and overarching theme for the thematic work has been **identifying new trends and wild ideas** that offer new opportunities for rural businesses (see Event's Summary No 1: ENRD Thematic Group agrees specific themes to work on).

New trends mean identifying new products, services, sectors, technologies or markets that can help businesses to stay viable in the long run (see Event's Summary No 2: 'Rural Businesses in 2030' and EU Rural Review 24: New opportunities for rural economies).

The thematic work identified a **range of (thematic) areas** and opportunities where rural businesses can thrive, including growing interest of consumers in healthier and more environmentally friendly local food products (the food economy); demand for new 'experiences' and services linked to rural areas, including tourism, recreational, care and health services (the experience and residential economies); opportunities offered by environment and climate change (the bioeconomy and green economy).

Other than new sectors, there is a set of new opportunities offered by **new methods or ways of working** including new technologies on-farm (precision farming) and off-farm (e.g. digital access to markets, services, marketing and tourism); new business models; new ways of financing and innovative solutions for maintaining and modernising rural services (e.g. crowd funding and other social innovations).

Relevant reading and resources: New trends & wild ideas

- Event's Summary No 1 (13 Oct 2016)
- Event's Summary No 2 (30 Nov 2016): 'Rural Businesses in 2030' (the vision of thematic group members)
- For specific creative businesses see Event's Summary No 3: 'Wild business ideas in rural Netherlands' and Event's Summary No 4: 'Inspiring businesses in Southern Finland' & EAFRD Projects Brochure on Supporting Rural Business.
- Factsheet on 'Building on local community, environmental and cultural assets' (prepared for the 1st TG meeting)
- EU Rural Review 24: '1. A new vision of rural business potential'

In order to seize these opportunities, businesses often need **'wild ideas'**, i.e. inspiration and 'out-of-the-box' thinking. At the same time, they also need an enabling business ecosystem, including an appropriate service environment (broadband and digital services, local schools, housing, etc.) and suitable and flexible forms of financial support (through the RDPs and other funds).

b) Innovative business support tools with focus on the accelerator approach
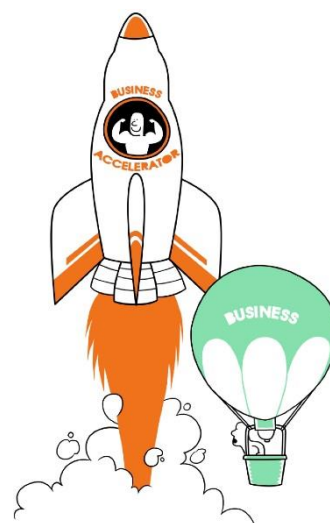
Innovative business support tools can contribute to identifying innovative business ideas and provide support for implementing these. One example for identifying new trends and wild ideas is the LEADER 2030 process and the foresight camp in Finland that aimed at developing a new vision for Finnish LEADER post 2020 (see Event's Summary No 1: Members' Perspectives). The Thematic Group focused on identifying non-traditional ('smart') business support tools that can help businesses to develop and implement creative business ideas.

Business support is most efficient and powerful when different types of support tools and services are combined into a kind of 'one-stop-shop'. Peer-to-peer learning and networking are often at the heart of these integrated business support services, and are coupled with more traditional forms of business advice (e.g. legal services, advisory on funding sources, etc.).

Among the smart business support tools available, the Thematic Group focused on the **'accelerator approach'** (building on the experience and expertise of the TG members, see Event's Summary No 2: In focus - Accelerators and Digital Hubs).

Accelerators are focused business support approaches that:

- run for a short period (e.g. 3 to 6 months period or even shorter) often with some follow-up actions;
- focus on a small number of entrepreneurs with strong innovation potential;
- use networking and peer-to-peer exchange widely (bringing together businesses, advisory, research, etc.);
- involve inspiring and innovative ways of supporting businesses;
- provide integrated business support (from emerging business ideas to starting up the business).

The thematic work has assessed the **concrete steps** of setting up and implementing accelerator programmes and has drawn **lessons and recommendations** (see Case study on 'Accelerating rural businesses').

Relevant reading and resources: Innovative business support & the accelerator approach

- Event's Summary No 2 (30 Nov 2016): In focus - Accelerators and Digital Hubs
- Case Study on 'Mobilising the innovative potential of rural businesses – The example of three rural business accelerators'
- Factsheet on 'Business Accelerators and Other Tools for Supporting Change in Rural Businesses' (prepared for the ENRD Seminar of March 2017)
- ENRD Seminar on 'Revitalising Rural Areas through Business Innovation' (30 March 2017): Workshop on 'Business Accelerators and other tools for supporting change in rural businesses'
- EU Rural Review 24: '4. Accelerating rural business change'

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c) The business ecosystem and links with the wider rural community

Rural businesses do not operate in isolation. An efficient rural business ecosystem needs to be in place including flexible business support environment, access to networks, access to finance, access to fast broadband and to basic services (including for entrepreneurs and their families).

There are important links between businesses and the wider rural community (see Event's Summary No 3: In focus: Rural businesses and the wider rural economy).

For instance:

- rural digital hubs (see below) create digitisation opportunities for both businesses and the wider community,
- basic services in rural areas (e.g. shops, post, health) provide new opportunities for businesses as well as ensure a good quality of life for entrepreneurs and their families,
- people living in rural areas are direct customers of products of farm (short supply chains) and other businesses,
- the local rural community often directly provides funding to businesses (crowdfunding).

Relevant reading and resources: Business ecosystems

- Event's Summary No 3 (23-24 Jan 2017): In focus - Rural businesses and the wider rural economy
- Factsheet on 'Building on local community, environmental and cultural assets' (prepared for the 1st TG meeting)
- Factsheet on 'Urban-rural linkages for rural businesses' (prepared for the 1st TG meeting)
- Event's Summary No 4 (18-19 May 2017): In focus - Smart Countryside initiative in Finland & Planning the next ENRD Thematic Group on 'Smart Villages'
- Rural Review 24: '2. Grounding business potential in local realities'

d) Digitisation with focus on rural digital hubs

One of the main challenges identified for efficient business support was overcoming the digital divide including:

- Improving fast and superfast rural broadband connectivity (see Case studies on Community Broadband and Rural Digital Hubs)

- Improving the digitisation opportunities and capacity of rural businesses and the wider rural community, especially through rural digital hubs (see Case study on Rural Digital Hubs).

Rural Digital Hubs have been identified as key tools that can contribute to both improving new generation rural broadband connection and building digital capacity of local businesses as well as the local community. The thematic work has assessed the concrete steps for setting up and implementing rural digital hubs and has drawn lessons and recommendations (see Case study: 'Rural Digital Hubs' and EU Rural Review: The potential of rural digital hubs').

Relevant reading and resources: Digitisation

- Event's Summary No 2 (30 Nov 2016): In focus - Accelerators and Digital Hubs
- Factsheet on 'Digitisation, the use of ICT and access to broadband' (prepared for the 1st TG meeting)
- Factsheet on 'Rural Digital Hubs' (prepared for the ENRD Seminar of March 2017)
- ENRD Seminar on 'Revitalising Rural Areas through Business Innovation' (30 March 2017): Workshop on 'Rural Digital Hubs'
- Case Study on 'Revitalising rural areas through digitisation – The experience of three rural digital hubs'
- Case study on 'New digital opportunities for rural areas – Community broadband'
- EU Rural Review 24: '3. The potential of rural digital hubs'

e) Rural Development policy in support of rural businesses

Within the policy analysis several measures were identified as possibly being the most relevant for rural business support (see Event's Summary No 1: Opportunities within the RDPs):

- Measures 1 and 2 can facilitate the access to technical as well as entrepreneurial knowledge through a combination of traditional one-to-one advice support and more experimental (e.g. peer-learning, networking, etc.) knowledge transfer methods.
- Innovation brokers supported under Measure 1, Measure 16 or the technical assistance (Measure 20) can support the emergence of business ideas;
- Measure 6 provides direct support for start-ups, new farming and non-farming activities and pilots; and can promote innovative projects through specific selection criteria;
- Measure 16 provides funding for sharing ideas among stakeholders and opens possibilities to implement more complex 'multi-stakeholder' innovative;
- Measure 19 supports small local businesses and is often the only Measure providing support for non-agricultural businesses;
- Measure 20 (and National Rural Networks in particular) often focus on the theme of rural business support and provide specific networking tools (e.g. thematic working groups) to improve business support through the RDPs.

This policy analysis looked at how far measures:

- are used to directly support rural businesses including funding for start-ups or improving the capacity of businesses;
- are implemented through flexible methods and approaches capable of supporting new ('wild') ideas to become successful businesses.
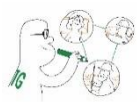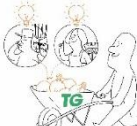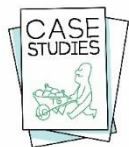
During the thematic group work specific RDP approaches were highlighted and discussed based on experience of TG members, such as supporting innovative rural businesses in Austria, the work of the National Rural Network in Finland (see Event's Summary No 2: Rural Development Programme approaches to support rural businesses) and LEADER in Scotland (see Event's Summary No 3: Lessons from Scottish LEADER).

At the ENRD Seminar a range of successful RDP approaches were presented and discussed linked to LEADER (Measure 19), Cooperation (Measure 16) and other RDP measures (with specific focus on the Finnish and the Basque RDPs).

Relevant reading and resources: RDP support to rural businesses

- Event's Summary No 1 (13 Oct 2016): Opportunities within the RDPs
- Event's Summary No 2 (30 Nov 2016): Rural Development Programme approaches to support rural businesses and LEADER in Scotland
- Event's Summary No 3 (23-24 Jan 2017): Lessons from Scottish LEADER
- ENRD Seminar on 'Revitalising Rural Areas through Business Innovation' (30 March 2017): Afternoon workshops: LEADER (Measure 19), Cooperation (Measure 19) and other RDP measures
- Rural Review 24: '5. What Rural Development Programmes can do?'
- EAFRD Projects Brochure on Supporting Rural Business
- 2014-2020 Rural Development Programmes' support for Rural Businesses, Analysis of selected RDP Measures

4. Summary of main outputs

Policy factsheet	The policy factsheet provides the summary of the main lessons from the case studies and RDP analysis and makes recommendations on how to improve rural development policy to better address the needs of rural businesses.
Mapping Survey	An initial survey to potential members of the ENRD Thematic Group highlighted some of the new challenges and opportunities regarding supporting rural businesses that was summarised in an initial Background Paper.
Thematic factsheets	At the start of the thematic work and based on the outcomes of the mapping survey, four factsheets were developed on: - Digitisation, the use of ICT and access to broadband - Smart networking for rural businesses - Building on local community, environmental and cultural assets - Urban-rural linkages for rural businesses
Four TG meetings	- The 1st TG meeting (13 October 2016). See Event's summary No 1. - The 2nd TG meeting (30 November 2016) See Event's summary No 2. - The 3rd TG meeting (23-24 January 2017). See Event's Summary No 3. - The 4th TG meeting (18-19 May 2017). See Event's Summary No 4.
ENRD Seminar	The Seminar on 'Revitalising Rural Areas through Business Innovation' (30 March 2017) explored how rural businesses – both farm and non-farm – can innovate in ways that "create the conditions for future prosperity and vitality" as articulated in the Cork 2.0 Declaration.
Case Studies	Based on the interest expressed by and experience of TG members, three case studies have been developed on: - Mobilising the innovative potential of rural businesses - The experience of three rural business accelerators, based on three examples: Academy on Tour (Belgium), AgriEnt (Greece) and Masterclass (the Netherlands). - Community Broadband: New digital opportunities for rural areas, based on three examples: Ludgate Hub (Ireland), Cocotte Numérique (France) and #hellodigital (Scotland). - Revitalising rural areas through digitisation - The experience of three rural digital hubs , based on two examples: Molenwaard Community Broadband (the Netherlands) and Northern Kuhmo Village Network (Finland).
RDP Analysis	The analysis was carried out for 5 RDPs (Finland - Mainland, Spain – Basque Country, Portugal - Mainland, UK – Scotland and Slovenia). The synthesis report presents the summary of main findings and relevant examples on the use of the RDPs.
	Publications - EAFRD Projects Brochure on Supporting Rural Business - EU Rural Review No 24: Reimagining rural business opportunities

5. Summary of recommendations

5.1 Recommendations from the case studies for practitioners

The three case studies (on rural broadband, rural digital hubs and rural business accelerators) and the specific cases that are the basis of these, differ largely. However, some common findings and conclusions emerge:

Understanding local needs and engaging the community throughout the process

The case studies demonstrate that understanding specific local needs is crucial for the success of business support tools. The involvement of the members of the community from the planning phase strongly contributes to local ownership and ensures better use of new developments and tools.

For instance, involving the community in the planning and setting-up of broadband infrastructure can result in better use of digitisation opportunities and improved subscription/penetration rates at a later stage (i.e. avoiding costly top-down investments without knowing if and how it will be used by potential subscribers). Similarly, involving the community in setting up rural digital hubs can improve local service provision and avoid hubs becoming empty 'ghost' building with fast broadband connection.

Pilots are crucial for developing successful business support tools

Experimenting and piloting new tools, and testing them first on a small scale are important for developing successful large-scale or mainstream programmes and initiatives later (i.e. "turning quality into quantity"). Community broadband investments often started as small-scale pilots (e.g. the North Western Kuhmo Network) involving few villages at the start and extending the scope along the learning process. Learning-by-doing has been an important aspect of the business accelerator programmes (e.g. the AgriEnt example was tested on a fully voluntary basis with later plans to develop a more commercial/ financially-sustainable programme). Piloting allowed refining the programmes to better suit the needs of businesses and to make them most suitable to generate innovative ideas. Rural development policies should give space for piloting and for testing flexible business support tools.

Understanding the feasibility of business support approaches

Some of the business support tools involve large investments (e.g. fibre optic broadband and digital hubs), and therefore, it is crucial to understand the feasibility as well as to plan the approach carefully. Community-involvement (above) is also crucial for this process, e.g. to ensure that new subscribers will sign up for the broadband (and therefore it will be useful and sustainable at local level), or to ensure that local businesses and the community are aware of the opportunities offered by digital hubs, and therefore will use them in the future. Certain conditions may need to be in place to make investments worthwhile (e.g. fast broadband and suitable building in the case of digital hubs).

Committed experienced and enthusiastic initiators & the role of networks

None of the initiatives would have been successful without committed and experienced initiators. Flexible and innovative business support tools also need flexibility and creativity from those leading the process. They usually have to face several challenges on the way and without believing in the process and the added value at local (or business) level, it is impossible to overcome these obstacles.

Initiators need to be well connected to be able get other relevant stakeholders on board by mobilising their networks (including members of the local community, neighbouring village, private investors, specialist experts, etc.).

Opportunities and services not only for businesses

All of the three business support tools bring important new opportunities and the potential for developing 'wild ideas' and new innovative businesses. They do not only create new opportunities for businesses but also can revive and improve the standard of living for the rural community.

In particular, community broadband and rural digital hubs offer the opportunity of a wide range of new (digital) services for local people. For instance, access to broadband can improve services for elderly people in remote areas (as in the case of North-Western Kuhmo Broadband) and rural digital hubs can not only improve the digital literacy of the local population but can also be centres that provide local community services (e.g. unemployment advice and family support in the case of Cocotte Numerique).

Creative approaches can contribute to rebranding rural areas

The various approaches studied were all born from the belief that rural areas are places that can provide similar or even better standard of living than their urban counterparts. The initiators of the accelerator programmes have the vision that business innovation is not an urban phenomenon but can be a trigger also for rural businesses and the rural economy. Community broadband and rural digital hubs are motivated by the perception that digitisation is crucial not only for urban but also for rural development, and in order to keep up with urban areas, rural areas need to have the same (or even better) connectivity than urban areas.

It is hard to overcome the negative perceptions of various stakeholders (policy-makers, young people, etc.) in this regard. Therefore, several initiatives (e.g. the Ludgate Hub and Cocotte Numerique) invested a much effort and lot of money in the territorial marketing and 'rebranding' of rural areas; raising awareness about the wide range of new opportunities.

Supportive policy-environment & multiple funding sources

Experience shows that the most dynamic business support approaches need a high degree of flexibility in policy and public funding. Since this is often not the case, several innovative initiatives suffer from the lack of policy support and suitable funding (e.g. Ludgate Hub, AgriEnt Accelerator and Molenwaard Broadband). It is crucial to consider how to make funding opportunities more suitable and less risk-averse so that they can transform local villages and rural areas into viable places.

It is also necessary to recognise that most of these approaches yield no short-term results. For instance accelerator programmes need continuous follow-up actions to understand how businesses evolve after the initial boost, and in the case of community broadband projects the final number of local subscribers (and especially the way digitisation opens up new opportunities and services for them) becomes visible much after the initial investment has been made.

A supportive policy environment (e.g. the Broadband for All policy in Finland), can also lead to the emergence of new innovative approaches. In the absence of suitable funding opportunities, promoters of the initiatives need to be 'creative' in using various funding sources in a flexible way (for instance both the Academy on Tour and Cocotte Numerique used a wide range of funding sources and

a step-by-step approach).

5.2 Recommendations from the RDP analysis for policy-makers

The conclusions from the RDP analysis of five national or regional RDPs can be summarised as follows:

Clarifying the role of the EAFRD in providing business support in rural areas

The analysis of the five RDPs identified two main strategies for RDP support to rural businesses:

Some RDPs focus **mainly on the agriculture sector** (e.g. Portugal, Basque Country and Scotland). In these cases business support tools offered by the RDP address mainly farmers with a strong attention to young farmers. Diversification and specialisation processes supported happen only at a farm level, and support to (non-farming) rural-businesses is provided almost exclusively by Measure 19 (LEADER). In these cases, support to non-faming rural businesses is expected to be covered by other national or European strategies.

Some RDPs have a bigger scope of action outside the agricultural sector and in these cases the RDP Measures providing business support - such as Measure 1 on knowledge transfer, Measure 2 on advisory services, Measure 6 on start-up aid and Measure 19 on LEADER - include among their potential beneficiaries farmers as well as other kinds of rural entrepreneurs. In these cases, also the scope of cooperation projects under Measure 16 allows for projects involving other sectors like tourism and social farming.

To understand the scope of RDPs, there is the need to put these programmes within the context of other nationally and EU funded policies[4] that are often strategically planned to complement each other. It is however, important to remember that a high level of complementarity among national and European policies is necessary to ensure that interventions to support the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises do effectively reach rural areas.

Support of rural businesses is most efficient when provided locally

Business support tends to be more efficient if provided by **bodies operating at local level**. The proximity leads to better knowledge of the area and the specific needs of entrepreneurs and businesses. Local "nodes" (e.g. LAGs and municipal local business development agencies) can create synergies between national and EU policies

LEADER is one of the most versatile and flexible Measures in the RDP toolkit and has a long history of community-based business support through training, sharing information, creating networks, encouraging new ideas (including inter-territorial and transnational cooperation) and providing small-scale business finance.

Providing integrated packages of business support

Rural entrepreneurs are likely to need different types of support at the different stages of their development. The study confirms that many of the necessary tools are available within the RDPs but that it is often difficult to achieve the coordination between them. This situation calls for more integrated packages of business support. Furthermore, information services to entrepreneurs about available RDP support is of key importance. The RDPs studied have used various mechanisms for coordinating and linking Measures, including making the access of one Measure conditional on another and/or integrating various Measures into specific schemes[5].

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[4] Section 3 of this report introduces how national polies and strategies have an important role in the provision of business support and how these can cooperate and complement other EU funded policies.

Flexible finance from start-up to follow-up

The analysis identified several ways of adapting RDP Measures more closely to business needs:

- Authorities should create **synergies** between RDP support, national programmes and other private sources of finance targeting various geographical areas and specific sectors;

- Measures can be made more flexible through **adapting eligibility conditions to the needs of businesses** and using selection criteria to target innovatory businesses more effectively;

- Grants can be adapted to business needs at different stages of development by breaking their support into different phases

- Preparation of ideas, feasibility studies, pilots and small scale investments are important and therefore specific funding needs to be targeted at these early phases;

- Support can be provided through **simplified procedures** (e.g. vouchers), which decrease the administrative burden and are more adapted to the needs of innovative projects.

5.3 Recommendations and lessons learnt through the Thematic Group

On-going engagement of a core set of members

It has been important to obtain the on-going engagement of members to address issues of interest for practitioners and policy-makers, to build on the specialist knowledge and expertise of members (as a key source of information), and to ensure that relevant information is disseminated through the network of members. Interactive and participative methods were important to engage the members of the group and were appreciated by them.

However, the TG did not engage all Member States and types of organisations in a balanced way: seven Member States were represented, and two of these had 3 representatives. Most members were practitioners with experience in working directly with businesses on-the-ground (LAGs, advisory services, researchers running business support programmes, etc.), however, programme-level representatives (e.g. MAs) were underrepresented. Early definition of TG sub-themes and awareness-raising among MAs about these could potentially improve the engagement of programme-level stakeholders.

> **In summary**: While a large pool of different sets of organisations were contacted during the planning phase, it was a deliberate choice of the TG to engage those who had the relevant experience and were ready and willing to contribute to the work actively, and this method has been crucial for the success of the group. Future TGs need to consider how to better engage programme-level stakeholders (especially MAs), e.g. early definition of themes and organising a separate meeting where more detailed TG outcomes that are relevant for RDPs are discussed.

Practical and focused outputs

The TG aimed to produce outputs that practitioners supporting rural businesses can use in their own work. This was only possible through keeping themes focused. Therefore, the group decided to concentrate its work on the sub-themes of 'community broadband', 'rural digital hubs' and

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[5] For example matching training support under Measure 1 and business plans for start-ups under Measure 6 in the Basque Country, and integrating various Measures into specific schemes in the Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Scheme in Scotland.

'accelerator programmes'. The case studies are practical toolkits for those who plan to develop and use similar approaches or methods.

> **In summary**: It is important to produce practical outputs through the TG (using the experience of the members) in order to assist other stakeholders to successfully implement similar approaches. TG members indicated that simple ('toolkit' type) outputs are important and can help the work of other practitioners.

Lessons and recommendations on how to improve RDPs

Ultimately, the Thematic Group aimed to draw lessons on how to improve Rural Development Programme implementation. Therefore, in-depth RDP analysis was carried out in selected Member States/regions with focus on specific measures. The final policy factsheet aims to gather lessons learnt from practice on-the-ground and from the policy tools available to support this.

One of the challenges has been to bring together findings of the TG (mostly coming from practical examples that were often not funded through the EAFRD) and to relate this to the potential contribution of the RDPs.

> **In summary**: The ENRD and TGs aim to improve RDP implementation. The combined lessons from the RDP analysis and practical examples should be developed into useful programming-level recommendations (as in the TG factsheet). However, this is challenging, as there is often a mismatch between the on-the-ground level experience and available RDP funding.

Dissemination of outcomes is crucial

Previous TGs of the ENRD highlighted that it is crucial to disseminate TG outputs wider than the members of the group. A prerequisite for this is to produce outputs that are useful for different sets of stakeholders, including practitioners (LAGs, advisory services, etc.), National Rural Networks and policy-makers (especially MAs and DG AGRI).

The TG aimed at producing useful outputs, including practical case studies based on detailed case examples; policy recommendations from the RDP analysis; and a factsheet that bridges the lessons from practical experience and the lessons and recommendations at the policy-level. These outputs were refined in several phases based on feedback provided by the members.

> **In summary**: It is important that the TG produces outputs that are focused and practical at different levels. The feedback from members has largely contributed to refining outputs to address the needs of specific stakeholder groups. It is important to continue to disseminate these outputs further than the group members, using the contacts and channels of the ENRD as well as the networks of TG member organisations.

Annex: TG members

Core members are those who participated at least in two of the TG meetings and contributed to the work actively.

	First Name	Last Name	MS / EU	Organisation	Type of organisation	No of meetings
1	Jan Willem	van der Schans	NL	Wageningen Economic Research	Research/University	4
2	Juha-Matti	Markkola	FI	Finnish National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	4
3	Kari	Kylkilahti	FI	Kantri ry Leader	LAG	4
4	Marieke	Kok	NL	KnowWhy	Advisory service	4
5	Marko	Mäki-Hakola	EU/FI	COPA/MTK	EU stakeholder organisation	4
6	Markus	Stadler	AT	Austrian Ministry of Agriculture	Managing Authority	4
7	Panagiotis	Madesis	GR	Institute of Applied Biosciences	Research/University	4
8	Robert	Hodosi	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	4
9	Jackie	Brierton	UK-Scot	GrowBiz (Enterprising Eastern Perthshire Ltd)	LAG	3
10	Patrick	Pasgang	BE	Innovatiesteunpunt	Advisory service	3
11	Rob	Clarke	EU/ UK-Scot	Highlands and Islands Enterprise (representing Euromontana)	EU stakeholder organisation	3
12	Giuliana	Keller	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	3
13	Sirpa	Karjalainen	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	2
14	Linda	Hultgren	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	2
15	Agnieszka	Wroblewska	PL	Foundation of Assistance Programme for AgricultureFAPA	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	2
16	Alistair	Prior	UK-Scot	Scottish National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	2
17	Gerhard	Bräunling	BE	Business development expert	Advisory service	2
18	Klaus	Ehrlich	EU	EuroGites	EU stakeholder organisation	2
19	Krista	Antila	FI	Aktiivinen Pohjois-Satakunta ry/ Europe Direct	LAG	2
20	Teemu	Hauhia	FI	Finnish National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	2

Further members who participated in 1 of the TG meetings.

	First Name	Last Name	MS / EU	Organisation	Type of organisation	No of mtgs
1	Clive	Peckham	FR	Nièvre Numérique	National/regional stakeholder organisation	1
2	Grainne	Dwyer	IE	Ludgate Hub	Advisory service	1
3	Lech	Miler	PL	Foundation of Assistance Programme for AgricultureFAPA	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	1
4	Maria Custódia	Correia	PT	Portuguese National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	1
5	Miguel Angel	Gracia Santos	ES	European Parliament	EU Institution	1
6	Pat	Kennedy	UK-NI	eTownz	Advisory service	1
7	Thomas	Norrby	SE	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU)	Research/University	1
8	Vasilis	Margaras	EU	European Parliament	EU Institution	1
9	Xavier	Delmond	BE-Wal	Walloon (Belgium) National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	1
10	Krzysztof	Janiak	PL	FAPA	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	1
11	Domenico	Mastrogiovanni	IT	CIA Agricoltori Italiani	EU stakeholder organisation	1
12	Joel	Karlsson	FI	Finnish National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	1
13	Marianne	Selkainaho	FI	Finnish Ministry of Agriculture Foresty	Managing Authority	1
14	Daniel	Wathelet	BE-W	Walloon (Belgium) National Rural Network	National Rural Network/ Support Unit	1
15	Galin	Gentchev	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	1
16	Pilar	Gumma	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	1
17	Matthias	Langemeyer	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	1
18	Fabio	Cossu	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	1
19	Maria	Ochoa	EU	European Commission - DG AGRI	EU Institution	1