Managing landscapes effectively requires the involvement of a wide variety of stakeholders. The views and interests of these different groups can be effectively integrated by agri-environment ‘collaboratives’ — a type of bridging organisation which can be found in varying forms in Europe. Using data from Germany and the Netherlands, a study concludes that these groups make important contributions to landscape management, ranging from implementing policy to generating income.

Caring for the landscape requires collaboration between a range of rural groups. These include farmers, who most clearly shape the landscape through their activities and whose central role is acknowledged by the EU Rural Development Regulation. Other groups include users of the land who influence the landscape through economic and recreational activities, and local government, who shape the landscape through building and planning regulations.

Managing all these different expectations and interests related to landscape management is a difficult task, but can be facilitated by bridging organisations, which connect and mediate between stakeholders. This study considers the role these organisations — and in particular agri-environment collaboratives (AEC) — play in achieving sustainable landscape management.

AEC are voluntary collaboratives formed by local stakeholders and can include farmers, conservationists, municipalities and residents. They may also include governmental stakeholders, although AEC are non-governmental organisations and have no statutory power to enforce rules. They exist in different countries under different names, but all work towards the same goal of sustainable landscape management. This EU-funded study focused on AEC in Germany (where they are known as ‘landscape management associations’) and the Netherlands (where they are called ‘agricultural nature groups’ and ‘landscape organisations’).

The research was based on the views of AEC members and individuals they work with. Data were gathered from a cross-section of groups in Germany and the Netherlands, selected to cover a range of landscapes and activities. Overall, 22 key informants and 19 others (e.g. representatives of umbrella organisations) were interviewed about the groups to which they belonged, their goals and their contributions and achievements. Informants were also asked about which gaps would arise should their group be disbanded.

Both countries have roughly the same number of collaboratives (around 150), but Dutch groups are larger (on average 100–200 members) than those in Germany (around 50 members). The most strongly represented sector in both countries is farming.

The interviews revealed that none of the groups had undertaken a formal evaluation of their contributions or had a structured method of assessing the impact of their activities, and most were lacking the resources needed to carry out monitoring. Despite this, the interviews revealed six major areas of contribution:

- **Policy implementation and service provision**
  German groups, for example, help to implement monitoring for the Natura 2000 network, and Dutch groups are involved in shaping and implementing national government policies. Several groups were found to contribute to design and implementation of policy, including agri-environment schemes. The collaboratives helped to tailor schemes to the local context, increase uptake, improve the quality of applications and reduce transaction costs. The analysis also showed that AEC help to implement measures under the Landscape Convention.

*Continued on next page.*
How bridging organisations aid design and uptake of EU agri-environment schemes (continued)

- **Coordination and mediation**
  Groups helped to resolve conflicts (e.g. between farmers and conservationists or farmers and developers), initiate projects and facilitate networking.

- **Awareness-raising and behaviour change**
  The groups raised awareness of environmental issues among farmers and the public.

- **Care for ‘everyday’ landscapes**
  Members reported working not only in protected landscapes, but also ‘everyday’ landscapes without protected status, and maintaining areas on marginal land of little economic interest and vulnerable to abandonment.

- **Maintenance and protection of landscapes**
  A major area of AEC contributions related to maintaining and preserving the landscape, including species and their habitats. For example, groups in the Netherlands protected meadow birds and rare species, while German groups coordinated management of grazing on marginal grassland.

- **Income generation and economic benefits**
  Collaboratives provide economic benefits by creating jobs, keeping the landscape attractive for tourists and developing options that allow farmers to generate income from landscape management.

Given this wide range of contributions, the study concludes that governments should support AEC. However, creating groups to achieve specific government objectives would be ‘counterproductive’, as the collaboratives work best under open, flexible conditions. Groups should be able to pursue their own aims under the broad goal of sustainable landscape management, and governments should support existing networks (which is also more cost- and time-effective than creating new ones).

The researcher says building on the efforts of existing organisations could deliver outcomes rapidly and at low cost, as AEC are already established in many places. However, she suggests financial support is needed and should be focused on two areas: funding for **facilitators**, who play a critical role in motivating existing members and establishing new connections, and **monitoring**, so that groups can collect the data they need to protect nature and assess impact.