

Report "Results questionnaire national rural networks"

Informal meeting Rural Directors, 22nd November 2010

Flemish Rural Network & Coordinating Cell European Policy

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02/02/2011



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1	Context of the questionnaire	3
2	Questions of the questionnaire	4
3	Answers of the managing authorities of the Member States, as presented at the Informal Meeting of Rural Directors on 22nd of November, 2010	5
	Position of NRN	5
	Question 1: describe the current role of the rural network for Rural Development....	5
	Question 2: what is the added value of the rural network?.....	7
	Question 3.1: what could be possible modifications?	7
	Question 3.2.: what is your opinion on a common network for the whole scope of rural development policy?.....	8
	Question 4: does the rural network has to contribute to the evaluation of the rural development policy?	8
	Question 5: what should be the role of the European Network for Rural Development (Contact Point)?	8
4	Conclusions	10

1 Context of the questionnaire

Between November 21st & November 23rd 2010, the Coordinating Cell of European Policy from the Flemish Department of Agriculture and Fisheries invited the European colleagues-Rural Directors for an Informal Meeting in Genk. This organisation took place in the context of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2nd half of 2010).

The Flemish Rural Network supported the organisation of this conference. During this event we took the opportunity to gain insight in the ideas of the Managing Authorities of the European countries concerning the present (and future) work and added value of the national/regional rural network in their country. An anonymous questionnaire was distributed (see chapter 2) and analysed the next day. At the end of the meeting the results were presented to the assembly of Rural Directors.

In the next pages you can find the questionnaire itself and the collected answers of the managing authorities of Rural Development Programmes throughout Europe.

3 Answers of the managing authorities of the Member States, as presented at the Informal Meeting of Rural Directors on 22nd of November, 2010

Position of NRN

Of the **22** questionnaires received and analysed during the meeting of the Rural Directors, **13** concerned a rural network that is located within the administration. **Two** rural networks were seen as partially outsourced and **four** Managing Authorities discussed a rural network that is totally outsourced. **Three** copies did not answer this questions.

If we compare it to the overall data gained by the European Network for Rural Development², we can see that this division of the questionnaires received reflects the reality:

- rural networks within administration: 19
- rural networks that are partly outsourced: 3
- rural networks that are totally outsourced: 9.

Although the questionnaire is anonymous, we did ask this question because we wanted to know if there is a relation between the respective answers and the allocation of the network. Does this influence the appreciation or knowledge of the rural networks at the Managing Authorities of the Rural Development Programmes?

Question 1: describe the current role of the rural network for Rural Development

On the question about the current role of the rural network for rural development, several questionnaires mention the following tasks:

- act as a platform for discussion (formal & informal), for the exchange of views and experiences
- the collection and dissemination of information, good practices, partnership and knowledge (thematic and/or on specific measures)
- promote cooperation (especially between LAGS)
- improve the implementation of the rural development programme by the stimulation of broad participation

² Source: NRN mapping, <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu> (18/11/2010).

- identify bottlenecks and problems in the current (implementation of the) rural development programme

Some also mention:

- the addition of new roles for the rural network due to actual items (e.g. innovation)
- the added value of the rural network to the implementation of the rural development programmes (because of the global view)
- the role of the network to increase the capacity of development in the rural areas
- a focus on the development of the LEADER-groups
- support of evaluation of the rural development programmes.

If we compare these answers with the tasks of the rural networks as mentioned in Article 68 of EC 1698/2005³, we see that the current role of the rural networks as perceived by the managing authorities corresponds to the description in the legislation, namely:

- grouping of actors in rural development (+ stimulate broad participation)
- identify and analyse good transferable practices and information
- organise exchanges of experiences and know-how
- prepare training programmes for Local action groups in preparation
- assist cooperation.

Elements that are not mentioned in the legislative framework but are carried out by (some) rural networks are:

- the identification of bottlenecks and problems & support of the evaluation
- carrying out of new roles linked to actual items
- to increase the capacity of development of the rural actors in the rural areas themselves.

These items show that the tasks of (some of the) rural networks exceed the “networking capacity”, bringing the rural actors together, but that they also influence the implementation of the rural development policy by capacity building at the lowest levels and by evaluation of the programmes as such.

³ 1. Each Member State shall establish a national rural network, which groups the organizations and administrations involved in rural development.

2. The amount referred to in Article 66(3) first subparagraph shall be used:

(a) for the structures needed to run the network;

(b) for an action plan containing at least the identification and analysis of good transferable practices and the provision of information about them, network management, the organization of exchanges of experience and know-how, the preparation of training programmes for local action groups in the process of formation and technical assistance for inter-territorial and transnational cooperation.

Question 2: what is the added value of the rural network?

Questioning the perceived added value of the rural network, most answers mention:

- that the rural network is a good communication instrument: it acts as a “contact point” to get information on rural development policy for all kinds of stakeholders. This increases the awareness and the knowledge of the individual beneficiaries as it reduces the barriers between the levels. Next to this, the rural networks also provide a quick and reliable (two-way) information flow between administration and the users
- that by providing a forum for permanent discussion, matters and ideas become more and more mature before entering a legislative framework
- that the rural network can work thematically, by building partnerships between axes and measures where the individual administrations look at their own measure(s)
- that the rural network can tackle aspects of the Rural Development Policy that the horizontal policy does not cover
- that the rural network can provide more organisation (trainings, meetings, ...) and reach more actors in doing so than the managing authority could possibly provide.

Next to these common “added values”, some individual replies mention:

- that the rural networks provide structural information that crosses levels (European, national, regional, local)
- that the installation of the rural network increased the quality of the programme management (in comparison with earlier programming periods)
- the precaution that the network can only work as actively as its partners
- the opinion that the added value of the rural network is “very little”.

Question 3.1: what could be possible modifications?

It is always good to keep track of possible alterations during a programming period. The third question thus considered the possible modifications for rural networks and their activities. Most answers agreed that it is still too early to comment on this, but already acknowledge that axes 3 and 4 require a different approach than axes 1 and 2.

Additional individual remarks mention that the rural networks could also:

- provide advisory services for potential beneficiaries (e.g. advise concerning future business plans)
- broaden their scope and take up a role in programme execution
- form a common network with Structural Funds.

Such modifications would mean an increase of the budget for the rural networks (1 opinion).

One managing authority mentioned that the rural networks should be abolished in order to reduce administrative costs and the complexity of the rural development programme.

Question 3.2.: what is your opinion on a common network for the whole scope of rural development policy?

As an additional question concerning possible modifications in the structures and tasks of the rural networks, the enquiry also asked if the setting-up of a common network for the whole scope of the Rural Development Policy (Axis 1 up to 4) makes sense. This question relates to the broadening of the networking scope from Leader+ in the previous period to all Axes of the current Rural Development Policy.

The opinions on this topic go both ways:

- several managing authorities mention that the functioning of the rural network as a general umbrella, covering all aspects of the policy by creating overall objectives and comparing the effects of the different measures, makes sense if this overview can be fed by specialist working groups.
- other managing authorities argue that the overall task of the rural network doesn't make sense because in rural development policy there is a need for specialists (instead of "generalists"), that the rural network as perceived now is too bureaucratic and thirdly that there already is a large scope of intervention.

Question 4: does the rural network has to contribute to the evaluation of the rural development policy?

Since there are suggestions to broaden the scope of the rural networks with evaluation opportunities, we took the opportunity to question the opinions of the rural directors on this issue. Their answers are ambivalent:

- several rural directors are in favour of adding this task to the rural networks because these already provide information (organisation of communication, detected bottlenecks and problems as a kind of on-going feedback of the policy implementation) and the involvement of different actors to the institutions carrying out the evaluation. In this point of view, it would be logic that the rural networks would provide the on-going evaluation themselves and participate more in ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluations carried out by others.
- the opponents disagree with the possible adding of the evaluation task, because the rural networks are also subject of evaluation. This would mean that they would evaluate themselves. Others argue that evaluation could never be part of the rural network-task or even mention that the European Commission should take all tasks concerning evaluation on them.

Question 5: what should be the role of the European Network for Rural Development (Contact Point)?

Most answers agree on the following tasks:

- dissemination and exchange of good practices and information

- detection of common problems
- provision of guidance and assistance to the rural networks
- function as a true Contact Point for cooperation projects
- ensure continuous information flow between European Commission, Member States and actors

In order to fulfil these tasks everyone agrees on⁴, some Member States add that the ENRD should play a more active role, with more attention to the wider public and a closer relationship with the Member States. The network should also be simplified in order to increase the operational efficiency.

⁴ In comparison: the role of the European Network for Rural Development as mentioned in Art. 67 of EC 1698/2005: A European Network for Rural Development for the networking of national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development at Community level shall be put in place in accordance with Article 66(1).

The aims of the Network shall be to:

- (a) collect, analyse and disseminate information on Community rural development measures;
- (b) collect, disseminate and consolidate at Community level good rural development practice;
- (c) provide information on developments in the Community's rural areas and in third countries;
- (d) organise meetings and seminars at Community level for those actively involved in rural development;
- (e) set up and run expert networks with a view to facilitating an exchange of expertise and supporting implementation and evaluation of the rural development policy;
- (f) support the national networks and transnational cooperation initiatives.

4 Conclusions

This enquiry did not bring up any unexpected answers. As for the current role of the rural networks in the different Member States, most answers corresponded to the alignments made in the European Regulation 1698/2005 – as could be expected. Some networks however also play a part in the identification of bottlenecks and problems and in evaluation support.

Likewise, the “added value” of the rural network mainly concentrates on communication and provision of a platform. Some Member States wanted to stress the increase of management quality in the RDP due to the provision of a rural network. These answers could be linked to the duality in the answers on question 3.2. concerning the commonness of the rural network for all current RDP-measures. Playing the umbrella-role brings in benefits but could encounter a more urgent need for specialisation. Another duality was found in the vision on a possible evaluating role for the rural networks: some Member States agree that this could be a task for the network where others disagree.

Looking into the future, other possible modifications to the tasks of the rural networks could be the provision of advisory services and playing a bigger role in the programming execution.

As for the ENRD Contact Point the opinions of the Member States correspond to the tasks allocated to the Contact Point. For future periods the role of the ENRD could be more active, e.g. by playing a bigger role in communication to the wider public.

Reviewing the answers on the questionnaire we could discover that the different Member States definitely agree on the added value of the rural networks for Rural Development Programmes. In these answers, we could not distinguish a differentiation in answers according to the allocation of the rural network (in/out/partially in the administration). This choice does not seem to influence the opinion on the work of the rural networks, but we have to keep in mind that most rural networks are organised within the administration.

This first “analysis” of the rural networks as seen through the eyes of the Managing Authorities did not deliver surprising answers. We recommend to repeat this kind of questionnaire in the end of the programming period – as we expect to get a clear view on the added value of the rural networks by this time. This could then be incorporated in the legislation concerning the networks on national and European level during the next programming period.