

The Value of Rural Networks: Workshop for Desk-Officers



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Make the best use out of networks at all levels

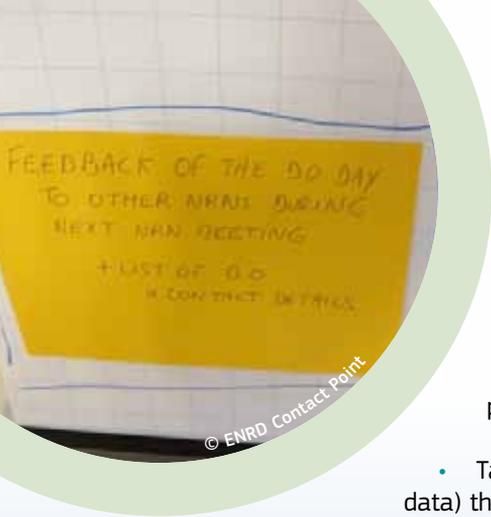
The workshop held on the 10th of October 2013 was particularly relevant for DG AGRI Desk-Officers and aimed at reinforcing common understanding on the function and the added value of networking as a tool for rural development policy.

It provided space for sharing relevant networking experiences and prompting exchanges on how to get the best out of 2014-2020 rural development networks at the national and European levels.

A survey launched prior to this event revealed that there is indeed significant room for improvement for networking and cooperation between DG AGRI Desk-Officers and National Rural Networks as well as with the EU rural development networks: the European Network for Rural Development, the European Evaluation Network and the European Innovation Partnership Network.

The Desk-Officers should exploit the potential of the NRNs to act as their 'eyes and ears' on the ground.

This event was also a new step towards strengthening linkages between geographical and thematic units within DG AGRI, or the **"DG AGRI internal network"** as referred to by José Manuel Sousa Uva, Director in DG Agriculture and Rural Development, in his introductory speech.



Key operational outcomes

- Planning of face to face meetings with National Support Units (NSU) to acquire complementary information and therefore **a more comprehensive picture of RDP design and implementation issues**. Encourage Desk-Officers' participation to NRN and ENRD meetings.
- Take advantage of the existing tools and information (e.g. databases, monitoring data) that networks at national and EU level put at disposal to inform about **successful rural development practices**, including in other RDPs, for comparing experiences between Member States.
- Setting up an **efficient and productive communication channel with Networks** and providing targeted information on how and where relevant information is available is key's for Desk-Officers work.
- Networks can offer knowledge and experience to Desk-Officers when dealing with RDPs' implementation issues; they can support the **formulation of the right questions** to be addressed to their counterpart Managing Authority.
- Networks can **strengthen the links between RDP administrators**, including at the EU, national regional level, creating a community of practice where knowledge and expertise on RDPs and measures management is more widely shared in the view of tackling common issues.

The workshop approached the value of rural networks from three complementary entry points:

1. How engaging with networks can contribute to the work of DG AGRI Desk-Officers?
2. Showcasing networking experiences from National Rural Networks
3. European Innovation Partnership: Networking and Operational Groups

1. How engaging with networks can contribute to the work of DG AGRI Desk-Officers?

Some views from the European Network for Rural Development

- ✓ Getting a better picture and “feeling” of what RDPs are producing on-the-ground, for example through analyses, good practices, success stories, newsletters, publications, etc.
- ✓ “Intermediary” functions between the EU and the local level, better understanding of stakeholders' needs.
- ✓ Better knowledge of national and regional rural development stakeholders and their involvement / participation.
- ✓ Mutual support in assessing what is going well and less well, highlighting issues, working towards positive policy outcomes.
- ✓ Better informed assessment of future NRNs' role and activities.



Practical support offered by the European Evaluation Network

- ✓ Training on common monitoring and evaluation framework (CMEF);
- ✓ Training on mid-term evaluation (MTE) assessment;
- ✓ Methodological backstopping for provision of feedback on MTE;
- ✓ Q&A sessions, presentations at Unit meetings, “lunchtime” debates;
- ✓ Direct involvement in country missions, focus groups, good practice workshops.

Desk-Officers, Managing Authorities and RDP evaluators should work closely together... for a more accurate assessment of the policy's results.

Improving Desk-Officers' understanding of the added value of M&E is a priority. This includes a sound interpretation of evaluation data: what the figures tell about actual policy implementation on-the-ground.

2. Showcasing networking experiences from National Rural Networks

Belgium – Wallonia: Supporting young farmers

- The Walloon rural network looked at how young farmers can adapt their practices, what tools they need and the solutions they have already developed. The Network Support Unit has developed a *toolkit* including video case studies, educational material and information sessions for teachers.
- With the support of a strong partnership of professional organisations and other key stakeholders, networking activities are based on young farmers' real needs and issues such as: land access, conversion to organic farming, finding alternative ways of financial support such as regional banks of land, micro-credit, etc.
- Promotion of the toolkit is supported by the use of media to reach the beneficiaries and it further helps in changing the image of young farmers among the general public.
- The added value of the NRN activities towards the action of professional organisations is linked to its capacity to group diverse rural development stakeholders around the table and to provide experiences from all EU countries and regions through the ENRD platform.



Finland: Rural innovation camps

- The rural innovation camps serve as platforms where different actors come together and through a bottom up and participatory way new ideas and seeds for innovation are “fertilized”.
- Innovation Camps showcase the strengths of the countryside, transform new ideas in product development and service provision and raise awareness of the opportunities provided by the Rural Development Programmes. The Finnish Network Support Unit played a key role in developing the camps from the concept to implementation at national and regional levels.
- A very important message from the camps is that in order to foster innovation the focus should not be limited to the end result. It is equally important to acknowledge the process as a mean to create innovation.



Latvia: Cooperation for development

- To ensure the efficient flow of information both horizontally and vertically, the Latvian Rural Network Support Unit consists of a central office and 26 offices spread throughout the country. A wide range of stakeholders are involved in discussions about rural development implementation and the CAP. The Network channels the views of different target groups, including, farmers, rural entrepreneurs and local communities, about rural policy in Latvia and European Union.
 - The Support Unit is playing a role of observer, facilitating exchange processes and organizing trainings and face to face meetings to increase ownership of policy among the stakeholders. Besides, a lot of effort has been done in promoting the LEADER approach.
- The [Latvian NRN website](#) provides a powerful support tool for NRN activities. It primarily provides a channel for dissemination, and attracts a large number of visitors thanks to the use of light and comprehensible language, serving as information platform for a broad public.



Italy: Free e-learning course on the evaluation of EU rural development programmes (e-valprog)

- The Italian National Rural Network has launched **E-VALPROG**, a free e-learning course on the evaluation of EU rural development policy, aiming in particular at:
 - disseminating basic knowledge on the theory of evaluation;
 - providing tools and information to better organize the evaluation activities;
 - consolidating the vision of evaluation as a useful tool for the policy making processes;
 - raising awareness on the role that people can play in the evaluation processes;
 - fostering general understanding of issues of rural development.
- The course represents a useful tool for those who work on management and implementation of development policies: over 300 people (Regions officials, RDP managers, public and private bodies operating on territories, LAGs, evaluators, teachers, researchers, ONGs, professional organizations) have participated in e-valprog. One of the key challenges is to offer a product that must be suitable for all types of beneficiaries, taking into account several categories of needs.
- As for other similar on-line platforms (*YouRuralNet*, *LeaderBook*) the Italian NRN provides the resources for launching the overall process, animation and monitoring thus ensuring continuity of the learning tool. This is made possible by the existence of a solid IT platform (website, social media, etc.) and a constant engagement of the staff. NRN web-services for supporting the implementation of rural development are indeed very promising tools according to the experience of the Italian National Rural Network.

The four examples are available for consultation on the [ENRD website](#) (Documentation section)

THE EVALUATION: PRINCIPLES, APPROACHES, METHODS.

Module 1 - Introducing evaluation

Module 2 - Approaches and the evaluation design

Module 3 - The evaluation need and the experimental method

Module 4 - Acquiring data and information for evaluation

Module 5 - Managing the evaluation processes

THE EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Module 6 - The evaluation of the European Rural Development Policy

Module 7 - The governance of the European Rural Development Policy evaluation

Module 8 - The common evaluation questions

Module 9 - The monitoring of the European Rural Development Policy

TECHNICAL ANNEX

Module 10 - Statistics and evaluation



3 European Innovation Partnership: Networking and Operational Groups

The [agricultural European Innovation Partnership](#) (EIP-AGRI), which was launched in February 2012, aims to foster a competitive and sustainable agriculture and forestry sector. The EIP-AGRI adheres to the “interactive innovation model” which focuses on forming partnerships using bottom-up approaches and linking farmers, advisors, researchers, businesses, and other actors in Operational Groups.

To support this initiative, the European Commission established the [EIP-AGRI Service Point](#) in April 2013. The EIP-AGRI Service Point acts as a mediator within the EIP Network, enhancing communication and cooperation between all innovation actors, including farmers, advisors, agri-business, civil society, and researchers, working at EU, national and regional level.

Working together to improve understanding of the interactive innovation model

- The support of geographic Desk-Officers is crucial to build a better knowledge around the EIP and the setting up of Operational Groups. Desk-Officers can benefit from the support offered by the DG AGRI EIP unit and the EIP-AGRI Service Point in order to respond to national and regional authorities' taking into account the specific contexts.
- DG AGRI and the EIP-Service Point are supporting capacity building through discussion sessions, seminars, participation to country missions. A bulk of knowledge is already available to Desk-Officers including concrete examples of EIP operational groups (see “key tools”).
- The EIP-AGRI Newsletter distributed by the Service Point is a useful tool for Desk-Officers to get up-to-date information on latest development regarding the EIP (subscription is possible through the [EIP-AGRI web page](#)).
- The NRNs represent useful and targeted tools for the EIP-AGRI for collecting and exchanging information. The framework of this cooperation is not yet in place however the strategy for doing so is currently under consideration. Based on a recent inquiry, around half of the Member States indicated that they consider using the NRNs for supporting EIP related activities rather than creating a new network.
- Setting up EIP operational groups is an ongoing process and it is crucial to bring together different actors to brainstorm and allow programming authorities to make informed decisions. The NRNs can provide the platform for such discussions and facilitate both formal and informal exchanges between stakeholders. Also, given the fact that the EIP-AGRI will be built around the bottom up approach, the experience of the NRNs in using such models will be very useful.
- Through the ENRD there is already significant experience on how to find partners, set up cooperation at transnational or trans-regional level; and relevant tools are also already available including, for instance, partner search tools, databases, etc.



The regulatory and guidance framework for rural networking for 2014-2020: What's NEW?

Relevant provisions for rural networks at the EU...

Rural development basic act:	Art 51* on technical assistance Art 52* on the ENRD (including evaluation) Art 53* on the EIP
Implementing rules:	Organisational structure and operation of ENRD (including Evaluation) and of EIP Network

..and the National level:

Common Provisions Regulation:	Art 5* on Partnership principle
Rural development basic act:	Art 51* on technical assistance Art 55* on national rural networks Art 73(i)* on publicity and information
Implementing rules:	Establishment and operation of NRNs Publicity and information
Commission guidance:	Guidance fiche on NRNs for Managing Authorities

() As per current version of EC legislative proposals, without prejudice of the final adopted Regulations*

Highlights:

- Improved coordination of rural development networks at EU level (ENRD, Evaluation Network, EIP);
- A reinforced role of National Rural Networks towards the realization of the partnership principle (inclusion of partnership actors such as: competent public authorities, economic and social partners, bodies representing the civil society);
- A more detailed list of tasks for NRNs linked to four main objectives;
- A monitoring and evaluation system inclusive of networking activities, including some common indicators;
- A compulsory and specific communication plan as one key component of the NRN activity plan (in close coordination with Managing Authority's general communication strategy);
- Towards stronger cooperation and involvement of National Rural Networks at the EU level.



Key tools for Desk-Officers

ENRD

NRNs information resource: general information on the EU National Rural Networks, their structure and activities

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networks-and-networking/nrn-information/en/nrn-information_en.cfm

Added value of networking: information on National Rural Network statistics, and examples of successful networking experiences and tools

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networks-and-networking/added-value-of-networking/en/added-value-of-networking_en.cfm

National Rural Network Toolkit: guidance for National Network support units, Managing Authorities (MAs) and other relevant NRN stakeholders for strengthening and enhancing EAFRD-financed rural networks

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networks-and-networking/nrn-toolkit/en/nrn-toolkit_en.cfm

RDP Project Database : one-stop-shop for information on rural development projects supported by a search function

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/rdp_view/search/en/search_en.cfm

Rural Development policy in figures: information on RDPs' and measures' performance and rural development policy interventions by theme

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/rural-development-policy-in-figures/en/rdp-figures_en.cfm

Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Gateway: findings from the ENRD Focus Group on Knowledge Transfer and Innovation, and information on EU bodies, projects, studies and publications which focus on research and innovation

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/themes/research-and-innovation-gateway-development/en/research-and-innovation-gateway-development_en.cfm

ENRD work on Delivery mechanisms : an analysis of RDP delivery practices put in place across the EU and conclusions on areas for improvement

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/improving-implementation/delivery-mechanisms/en/delivery-mechanisms_en.cfm

ENRD Rural Development Gateway 2014-2020: lessons and resources from the current programming period to support and guide the implementation of the 2014-2020 RDPs

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/cap-towards-2020/rdp-programming-2014-2020/en/rdp-programming-2014-2020_en.cfm

Evaluation Network

“Our publications”-section on website (methodological guidance, Rural Evaluation news, Good Practice Newsletters, FAQs etc.)

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.cfm

Good Practice Workshops

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/good-practices-workshops/learning-from-practice/en/learning-from-practice_en.cfm

Focus Groups in the Member States

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.cfm#swot

Synthesis of Annual Progress Reports (evaluation section)

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.cfm#syntheses

Missions to the Member States (Minutes available upon request)

Questions and answer sessions with EC Desk Officers (Minutes available upon request)

Training for EC Desk Officers (Minutes available upon request)

Methodological backstopping (e.g. for MTE assessment, technical questions)

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/faq/en/faq_en.cfm

EIP

EIP-AGRI Network and Service Point

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/service-point/index_en.htm

EIP-AGRI Newsletters

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/newsletters/index_en.htm

EIP Seminar on Programming Innovation – Madrid 26-27/06/2013

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/events/madrid-06-2013_en.htm

EIP and Rural Development Programming, presenting the guidelines (presentation)

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/events/madrid-06-2013/scheele2_en.pdf