This series of informative fiches aim to present, in summary, examples of practices and approaches that EU Member States and Regions have put in place in order to implement their Rural Development Programmes in the current period. These examples want to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in the delivery of the 2007-2013 RDPs and as far as possible, draw lessons in the view of future improvement of the programmes.

“Practical Networks” support knowledge development and disseminate business development and other relevant practices - the Netherlands

Needs addressed

Farmers are continuously seeking solutions to the challenges their agricultural businesses face. Based on the joint understanding that interaction and exchange generates new knowledge, farmers and stakeholders representing e.g. research, education, water boards and municipalities have therefore joined forces in various “Practical Networks”. Farmers can apply for M111 by presenting the problem they have to face and the partners (from Universities, research institutes, advisory services, etc.) they would like to cooperate with to solve the issue. If the project is funded, money is used to support the work of the Practical Network and the possible solution found during the process may be further developed also using the possibilities offered by M124.

Key elements of the approach

Following the assessment of proposals by an evaluation committee, up to 70 applications submitted by farmers were granted funding every year. The networks were launched and operated on the basis of issues agricultural entrepreneurs experienced in the course of their daily business. Each network had a lifespan of two to three years.

Objective

The objectives of the “Practical Networks” scheme under RDP measure 111 were to support farmers by (1) contributing to the development of innovative management techniques, (2) increasing their strategic space of operation (e.g. new ways of business development), and (3) ultimately disseminating the newly generated information, so that more farmers can access and make use of knowledge and techniques relevant to their businesses.

Keywords: Innovative product, innovative process, innovative form of organisation, innovative marketing

EU Member State: the Netherlands

Specific Location: The Netherlands

Implementing entity: “Process facilitators” from universities or consulting companies managed the different existing Practical Networks. In addition, all facilitators were networked for the purpose of sharing and exchanging knowledge.

RDP Measure and budget: M111 - Vocational training and information actions (Funding rate 70%, €3-€4 mill annually)

Implementation Period: 2007-2013 EAFRD programming period
Main steps and features of the initiative or approach

- Farmers apply for funding by describing the issue they would like to solve and the partners they co-operate with.
- From 2008 to 2010 the Practical Networks subsidy scheme covered only the animal production sector and foresaw a limited number of participants for each individual network.
- In 2011 the scope of the scheme was expanded to cover the whole agricultural sector, and networks with larger numbers of participants were introduced to better address new challenges.
- About two thirds of the Practical Networks counted between 6 and 20 participants, and an almost equal number of remaining networks were either of small size or comprised of more than 70 participants.
- Three types of issues led to the establishment of Practical Networks:
  - Supply processes and/or entire agricultural businesses were not running smooth, which prevented them from engaging in business development activity and/or led to falling revenues (35%).
  - Lack of knowledge, information, and/or poor data availability, were causing inefficient business operation (30%).
  - Health and quality issues (35%).
- The variety of professional backgrounds of the networks’ participants enabled the facilitators to establish a pool of scientific, technical and local expertise for each individual network. The fact that issues were not looked at in isolation anymore, promoted individual and mutual learning, and led to the establishment of a selection of practical options to solve the issues under discussion.
- Given the wider range of the networks’ participants, the discussion of challenges, issues and bottlenecks encountered was also expected to produce ideas, which could be tested and improved in a wider context, hence providing solutions for more than just one agri-business.

Main results and benefits

- In some Practical Networks the discussion generated ideas for projects promoting cooperation in innovation, eligible for funding under RDP measure 124 “Cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies in the agriculture and food sector and in the forestry sector” (funding rate 35%; up to 3 years of project duration; available RDP budget between 7 and 8 million EUR annually).
- More specific examples of concrete results include new animal production practices allowing for a reduction of:
  - The use of antibiotics.
  - The percentage of dying piglets.
Lessons learnt

I. Former participants concluded on the Practical Networks’ process that:

- Bringing together fellow farmers who face similar issues has significantly accelerated the learning process: “The two of us were complaining about this issue for years and then, within the Practical Network, we suddenly managed to solve it”.

- The linking of knowledge of farmers and scientists has allowed to optimize the results of agricultural production: “We learned a lot from each other, more alternatives have become available to solve production issues”.

- The wider scope of Practical Networks has provided more clarity about the interaction of variables affecting the issues under discussion: “One would have never come to this conclusion in isolation, because your own business keeps you busy and you therefore keep sticking to a few known solutions only”.

- It is not impossible to develop solutions, however it takes determination and time: the more precise the expected results are formulated, the better is the likelihood of such result being actually achieved. It is therefore important to formulate cleverly issues and related objectives.

II. The more specific lessons beneficiaries learned were that:

- The idea to practice mutual rotation of labour is unrealistic, because skilled workers are scarce and find it is too risky to switch between different/competing agri-businesses.

- The transformation of results into concrete legislation and/or administrative rules takes time, even if all parties involved agree that there is a need for change.

III. Concerning management of the Practical Networks beneficiaries were of the view that:

- The networking process depends on the quality of its moderation, and therefore training and certification of Process Facilitators was recommended.

- During the Practical Networks’ final evaluation farmers should also have opportunity to assess their Process Facilitator, and the results should be made available to them.

- For issues, which justify the establishment of larger networks, funding applications should be submitted by farmers’ associations rather than individual farmers, in order to minimise financial burden/risks linked to network implementation.
Additional sources of information

Focus Group on Knowledge Transfer and Innovation / ENRD Research and Innovation Gateway

- Launched in June 2012 by the ENRD Coordination Committee, the Focus Group (FG) analysed how Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) support Knowledge Transfer & Innovation (KT&I) in practice under the 2007-2013 policy framework. The FG provided recommendations to Member States about how to promote KT&I in the 2014-2020 programming period.


European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI)

- Information on RDP budget, project duration, and subsidy volumes for Practical Networks under M111 and Cooperation in Innovation under M124 in the Netherlands has been sourced from a presentation of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (by Karel van Bommel), on past experience with RDP-funded innovation networks and first ideas on 2014-2020 programming for EIP-AGRI. More information is available on the EIP section of the DG AGRI website at [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/events/madrid-06-2013_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/events/madrid-06-2013_en.htm)