

20th NRN Meeting: Communication for networking

Open Space 1: How to facilitate thematic and analytical exchanges, share and disseminate practices and findings?

To kick-off the open space discussion Mathilde Houzé from the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur network support unit presented a methodology for communicating on practices and findings from thematic work. Communication ("for and by networking") assumes a key support role in facilitating thematic and analytical exchanges and the following discussion allowed to reflect on how NRNs could address this priority task in the next future.

Presentation of a methodology designed by the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur rural network

When the regional rural network was set-up in 2009/2010, there was no "ready-to-use" methodology to facilitate thematic and analytical exchanges. This was built step by step, learning from failures and successes met during the implementation of two thematic works: one on agriculture, food and territories (2010-2012), the other on economic development in rural area (2011-2013).

The thematic work aimed at achieving the two main objectives of the regional rural network: i) to contribute to the emergence of projects and, ii) to contribute to rural development strategies. The work was carried out through mobilization of stakeholders; sharing and production of knowledge and; consolidation and dissemination of such knowledge also through the same stakeholders. This means that the methodology was based **on a collective, participatory process allowing sharing of experiences and views.**

The methodology is composed of five main stages:

Stage 1- Identification of rural development issues

As a rural development practice can only be judged as good/efficient or not regarding to the way it brings new answers to an existing problem or question, the first step was therefore to identify which issue(s) appear(s) the more relevant. This was done by gathering a diversity of rural stakeholders and organizing debates with the input of researchers.

Stage 2 - Identification of projects which aim to tackle the relevant issues, through:

- i. the establishment of a working group composed of 6 to 10 people from various backgrounds, views and practices;
- ii. the elaboration and dissemination of a call for existing projects/practices which aimed to tackle issues identified during the first stage;
- iii. the selection of the most relevant projects.

Stage 3 - Analysis of the selected projects, through:

- i. organizing a collective and participatory analysis of selected projects (with a larger public than the core working group);
- ii. pooling lessons learned by each participant from their own analysis of projects;
- iii. sharing analysis with other works led on the same topic.

Stage 4 - Consolidation of lessons learned from the selected projects

Through the production of guidelines which present:

- projects analyzed (only most relevant findings);
- lessons learned / recommendations to potential project promoters (public and private);
- links to other conceptual or methodological resources;
- data on financial resources available;
- focus on specific topics ;
- recommendations to regional and sub-regional public policy makers.

See the guide on "Agriculture, food and territories":

http://www.reseaurural.fr/files/agriculture_alimentation_territoires_-_reseau_rural_paca_2012.pdf

Stage 5 - Dissemination and transfer

By using a range of off- and online communication tools including websites, newsletters, e-mails and encouraging a real transfer towards potential project promoters through accompanying activities, such as:

- production of specific professional training materials;
- organization of dedicated meetings;
- presentation in universities;
- targeted presentations for policy makers;
- etc.

Open-space discussion

The discussion within the open space pointed out the **added value** of this kind of thematic and analytical exchanges and the underpinning role of communication throughout it:

- **A two-dimension communication channel:** i) horizontal among stakeholders who participate in the process and, ii) vertical (mostly bottom-up) between stakeholders and policy makers.
- **A well-adapted process for a real appropriation** of practices and findings by participants who are actively involved during all the process, which makes the process itself as important as the final product (guidelines).
- **A bespoke dissemination and transfer of practices and findings** according to the diversity of the targeted audience (professionals, students, policy makers, etc.) and the capacity of each member of the working group to promote the results of the work according to his/her own capacity (on the top of the network's own dissemination channels).

Participants in the open space added a **6th stage** to the methodology presented: its **evaluation**. This should point out quantitative results -as the number of readers of on-line guidelines- as well as qualitative impacts on existing or emerging projects. Nevertheless, the discussion underlined the difficulty to identify precisely the impact of such a work as there is not only the rural network which brings methods and other resources to stakeholders. In fact, the latter usually "pick up" on ideas from different sources (e.g. other networks and databases) forgetting at the same time where the information originates from.

A question about the methodology was also raised during the discussion: **how can this long-term work match with public policies agenda?** Recommendations for public policies must be done at the good time or they have little chance to be taken into account. The longer the process is, the less chance it gives to recommendations to be ready on time. Whether the length of the work should be reduced to meet this goal at the risk of damaging the quality of the process and its impact on stakeholders (out of policy makers) remained an open question. Involving policy makers in the work from the beginning appears to be a good solution for ensuring a relatively quick transfer of knowledge to the "top".

A wealth of resource lies at regional level in terms of both results and methodologies from thematic and analytical exchanges which should be considered and shared at the national and the European level. More communication of such works from the regional level should be encouraged in order to establish exchange of practices and cooperation between regions and improve the impact at the national level. A possible role for the ENRD could be the **collection and sharing of such thematic works' methodologies** in order to support NRNs' task in the next future.