The Nature of the NRN and NRN Activities

Background and Objectives

The Irish National Rural Network is not a membership organisation. It is open to all involved or interested in the implementation of the Irish Rural Development Programme to participate in it activities. The Network is delivered by the Tipperary Development Unit of Limerick Institute of Technology on behalf of the Managing Authority. It has a small staff dedicated to this delivery and appoints private suppliers of specific services for the implementation of particular parts of the Network activities. The two key elements of the work of the network are information gathering and dissemination and the encouragement of networking.

Information Gathering and Dissemination

One principal role of the Irish National Rural Network is information gathering, provision and dissemination. It does this in a variety of ways on the basis of a work-plan agreed between the NRN providers and the Managing Authority. The work-plan has clear activities, targets and timelines for delivery though these are, of course, subject to change as the year progresses. The principal mechanisms through which the Network implements its information gathering and dissemination activities are as follows –

Website

A website at www.nrn.ie which is updated on a daily basis. This website provides regular posts of matters that are of interest to the rural development sector, with these posts being linked to facebook and twitter posts. The site also contains both NRN and other publications, contact details for LAGs and other rural development organisations and information on the current activities of the Network. Traffic to the website has grown through the years and it now receives about 25,000 hits a year with about 2,000 twitter followers.

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Strategic Issues Working Group Reports

These groups bring together researchers, experts and practitioners to consider the practical application of existing knowledge with respect to a matter of general rural development importance. These SIWG Reports have, to date, addressed issues such as Biodiversity, Farm Partnerships and the Rural Economy. These reports are both printed in hard copy and disseminated and posted on the website.

Research Reports

The Network also commissions research from independent researchers on specific topics associated with the RDP both to learn from the existing programme experiences and to draw lessons from that learning for future programmes.

Case Studies

These are reports of between 3,500 and 4,500 words on examples of good practice associated with the RDP in Ireland. To date these have addressed issues such as

- Facilitating and Encouraging Older Farmers to Retire
- Changing the Attitude Towards Farm Waste
- Addressing Health and Safety on the Farm – Case Study
- Upperchurch – A report on a Vibrant Rural Community
- Renewable Energy Development in County Mayo
- A Report on Developments that have received Cross-axis Support
- Farming in Natura 2000 areas

- Wicklow Outdoor Recreation
- Cappoquin Community Development Company

These are highlighted in the Newsletter and are published in soft copy on the website.

General Promotion
The activities and key publications of the network are highlighted and promoted in the national, regional and local media both print and broadcast.

Attendance at European Coordination Meetings
Staff of the Network attend at meetings of the ENRD Coordination Committee and the Leader Sub-Committee.

Facilitation of Projects
The Network acts as the contact and dissemination point for requests for participation in Trans National and Inter-Territorial projects. Given the long experience of the Irish LAGS in this area, however, little active support is required to be provided by the Network.

Networking
A second aspect of the work of the network is the promotion of interaction between the actors in the different sectors engaged in the rural development programme. This work is an inherent part of all activities of the network in that its publications and online media are addressed at all those interested in rural development in Ireland. There are also, however, a number of specific mechanisms through which networking is promoted.

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Annual Rural Development Conference
While the information provision role of the network has progressed in a number of ways, the principal specific way in which the networking function is implemented is through the Annual Conference. The conference brings a wide range of participants from different aspects of rural development together and it is an important mechanism through which the networking function is specifically pursued. The conference proceedings are published on the website. The Network co-operates with other rural development organisations in the organisation of this conference.

Rural Network Forum
In a new departure in 2012 a rural network forum is being developed and will be held twice a year. The purposes of this Forum are –

- To provide an opportunity for a broad range of actors concerned with issues of rural development to meet together;
- To allow for the sharing of good practice and effective actions amongst members which can be further shared through the other information dissemination tools of the network;
- To identify issues that are common to those participating in all Axes of the Rural Development Programme and to identify ways in which those common issues might be addressed;
- To identify barriers and bottlenecks to the effective implementation of the Rural Development Programme and to identify mechanisms through which these might be addressed;
- To assist in identifying ways in which the SIWG recommendations might be implemented;

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- To provide observations and ideas to the Managing Authority regarding future policy, strategy and programme design;
- To create a greater awareness and presence for the Network across the country; and
- To facilitate the engagement of those who are active in the delivery of the Rural Development Programme and associated or complementary programmes.

The effectiveness of the network forum is still to be seen as its first meeting has not yet been held.

Quarterly Newsletter

A 12-page newsletter, written and designed to a high standard, is published once a quarter in both hard and soft-copy versions. The first step in developing the newsletter is to agree the overall table of contents, the principal issues and examples that will be addressed. A journalist with an excellent background in rural development in all its aspects has been procured by the network both to meet with those who are the subject of news stories, to source appropriate photographs and to write the copy. The journalist also works with the printers/designers to ensure that that quality of the publication is excellent. The Network management oversees the development of the table of contents, the quality of the final production and, in particular, the appropriateness and focus of the newsletter pieces.

Newspaper Articles

In a new development in 2012, the Network will publish a page in one of Ireland's principal farming publications highlighting the work of the Forum and other matters of importance to the Rural Development Sector.

Main results

As can be seen the National Rural Network in Ireland uses a variety of mechanisms to implement its role. The direct impact of the network is virtually impossible to assess. Based on attendance at its events including the annual conference and the use of its website it does, at least, provide information and insight that is considered useful. It must also be borne in mind that Ireland is experienced in the implementation of the Rural Development Programme over many years and has well established and effective structures both for farming and rural development in general. Also, since Ireland is a small country in terms both of area and population, the principal rural development actors meet each other regularly in a variety of forums. In such a context, the role of the NRN and its metrics of success are different to those that may be appropriate to larger and more complex environments.