

15th NRN Meeting, Ähtäri, Finland (8 – 9 May, 2012)

Summary of the Meeting



The 15th NRN Meeting was held in Ähtäri, Finland on 8 – 9 May, 2012. This beautiful small town located in the rural heartland of Finland with its unspoilt natural surroundings, clear-watered lakes and green forests offered the perfect setting for this NRN meeting which was hosted by Maaseutuverkostoyksikkö (the Rural Network Unit for Finland).

This was one of the most important NRN meetings to-date. For the first time over 70 participants from Managing Authorities (MA), Network Support Units (NSUs), Evaluators, the European Commission, plus the ENRD Contact Point and the

Helpdesk of the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (EENRD), came together to exchange experiences and views on the effectiveness and efficiency of networking as a rural development policy tool in the EU-27.

Purpose of the Meeting

The general aim of the meeting was to “*build a shared understanding of how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of networking as a rural development policy tool in the EU-27*”.

Participants were invited to contribute to discussions about i) enhancing the current level of knowledge and understanding of networking in rural development policy, and; ii) identifying ways to improve networking as a rural development policy tool for the current and future programming period in all Member States.

For all background materials, presentations to the meeting and results from discussions click [here](#).

The outcomes of the meeting will be used to feed directly into an ENRD Coordination Committee Workshop on the “**The Future of Networking**” which is planned for September 2012 and will contribute directly to enhancing the networking component for the 2014-2020 programming period.

Programme, Process and Outcomes

Preparations for the meeting began with the drafting and circulation of a Discussion Paper from the ENRD entitled *What do we know about Networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)?* (click [here](#) to view).

The meeting itself took place over 1.5 days (8-9 May) and used various techniques to encourage participants to actively engage in discussions and the exchange of information and experience.

Day 1 opened with welcome statements from the European Commission and the Finnish hosts, before launching into a series of thought-provoking short presentations focused upon identifying what has worked well – and what has worked less well – with networking to-date under the EAFRD. Adrian Neal (ENRD Contact Point) [elaborated](#) upon the Discussion Paper circulated to all participants prior to the meeting and highlighted the common issues that affect the effectiveness and efficiency of networks. This was followed by Angelos Sanopulous (EENRD) who presented an [overview of lessons learnt](#) from the mid-term evaluation of the National Rural Network Programmes (NRNPs), while Francesca Angori (IT NRN Evaluator) [concluded](#) with a presentation on the more specific details of evaluating the NRNP for Italy.

During the following coffee break, selected results from the NRN Joint Action on demonstrating the ‘added value’ of networking were presented in the form of a poster session.



The NRR Joint Action was initially launched in April 2011 and led to the collection of Common Network Statistics, plus a selection of networking “success stories” and “case studies”.

The results of the Joint Action provoked a mixed response from participants – some felt that the exercise of building such a common resource was positive and useful for benchmarking of activities from one Member State to another, whilst others expressed frustration that the available information on the “success of networking” was not more quantifiable (e.g. job creation etc.) and relevant to the practical challenges of sustainable rural development.

After further lively discussions, participants had the opportunity to select one of three parallel workshops for the afternoon of Day 1. Each workshop aimed to address different aspects of the current understanding of networking as a rural development policy tool, including:

- [Workshop A](#): Current understanding of networking as a rural development policy tool
- [Workshop B](#): Factors influencing the efficiency and effectiveness of the NSUs and the networking function
- [Workshop C](#): The role of monitoring and evaluation / self-assessment in improving the value of networking as a rural development policy tool

Key points arising from the Day 1 workshops:

Workshop A

- Well defined objectives are the key to assessing the impact of networking in the implementation of the rural development policy
- Clear definitions about what is understood by the terms Network Support Unit, Network and Networking need to be incorporated in the legislation to have a common understanding between the various stakeholders

Workshop B

- The workshop undertook a SWOT analysis of the key factors influencing the efficiency and effectiveness of NSUs
- From the SWOT analysis it is clear that more strategic planning at Member State level is critical for the future structuring and operation of NRRs

Workshop C

- The intervention logic of the networks could be improved if there was more flexibility to adapt indicators to NRR objectives and needs
- Greater focus is needed on the quality of networking activities (e.g. via self-assessment) and there should be more feedback to improve the action plan

The outcomes of these workshops (including the SWOT analysis) will be incorporated into a revised version of the Background Paper (see below).

Day 2 began with a brief recap on progress made during the previous day and an introduction to a group work session on further developments to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of networking as a rural development policy tool.

Using an ‘Open Space’ format, the participants were encouraged to post questions on topics related to the future of networking and to run a mini-workshop of 45 minutes on their chosen theme. A total of 10 discussion topics emerged ranging from the relationship between Managing Authorities and Network Support Units to the question of whether a rural parliament can be the NRR.

Following feedback on the workshop outcomes and a lively final discussion, the meeting was closed.



Open Space Discussions:

- *Bridging the gap between programming periods* (Hans-Olof Stålgren, NSU, Sweden)
- *Networking success stories* (Mark Redman, ENRD Contact Point)
- *Building social capital as NRN* (Henk Kieft, NSU, Netherlands)
- *What shall be the focus in evaluation of networks? and What indicators shall be applied in evaluation of NRN?* (Jela Tvrdonova, EENRD) and *The NRN intervention Logic* (Maria Gustafsson, NSU, Sweden)
- *Structure of network: Open? Members?* (Huub Kwantes, NSU, Netherlands and Päivi Kujala, NSU, Finland)
- *Minimum criteria for an NSU* (Adrian Neal, ENRD Contact Point)
- *Can the rural parliament be the NRN?* (Alistair Prior, Scotland regional network)
- *Relationship MA-NSU: Clarify what networking is and how to fulfill objectives* (Inés Jordana, NSU, Romania)
- *What are the 'criteria that could be adopted to ensure that the resources allocated to NRNs are based on 'needs'* (Donald Aquilina, ENRD Contact Point)

Click [here](#) for the results of the Open Space discussions

Next Steps

The outcomes of the 15th NRN meeting will be incorporated into a revised version of the Discussion Paper from the ENRD entitled *What do we know about Networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)?* This draft paper will be presented to the 9th meeting of the ENRD Coordination Committee on 14 June 2012 and will then be further developed as a key input to the Co-ordination Committee Workshop on the 'Future of Rural Networking' planned for 17 September 2012 in Brussels.

And finally...are we getting value for money from networking?

"We are getting value for money, but we can improve"

"The budget for NRNs is only 0.3% of the total budget for rural development and considering this we do get value for money"

"The process has been one of learning-by-doing, there is room for improvement by being more strategic in planning"

"There is a need for more evaluation results"

"Looking at the process - the network has matured and more value can be found in its activities"