



Self-Assessment Process Belgium-Walloon Case Study

April 2012



Connecting Rural Europe

Executive Summary

In September 2011, the National support Unit of the Walloon Network for Rural Development (RwDR) set up a self-assessment process with two main objectives: (i) identification of the strong and weak points of the networking and (ii) preparation of the activity programme for the next three years (phase 2 - 2012-2014).

In a first step the NSU hosted a brainstorming session with representatives of the RwDR members (about 30 representatives of federations, administrations, other rural development related organisations, etc.) in order to reflect on the different dimensions of networking. This first step was necessary to build a common language that produced a **mind map** (MindMap) describing in which ways the RwDR members understand the various components of networking.

In a second step, the evaluation of the different dimensions of networking activities during phase 1 (2009-2011) was undertaken based on three scenarios of reference: situation without network for rural development, current situation with a network, desired scenario. The main achievement of this second step was the production of a fairly **comprehensive logical framework**.

On that basis, the members of the RwDR were invited to reflect on the **prioritization of the objectives and actions of networking** to be implemented. All network members reacted firstly on an individual basis, by providing their contributions and their views on priority actions. As soon as the synthesis of those contributions was realized, the NSU hosted a last meeting to define the content of the various working groups, to specify the topics to be addressed, actions to be implemented, expected results, roles and responsibilities of RwDR members, support required from the NSU and the implementation timeframe.

At the end (January 2012), the overall process produced **a detailed work program for 2012 to 2014**, taking account all of assessments and contributions of the network participants.

This self-assessment exercise contributed to the reinforcement of links between members through the collective definition of realistic and achievable actions that respond to expectations and needs of Network members, although one of the main failures is the absence of involvement of a critical part of the Walloon network members in the overall process.

The main **future challenges** are the following:

- Participation and commitment of the absent parties to enhance the legitimacy of the work realised;
- Ownership of the process through the implementation of similar approaches in the member organizations of the Walloon Network and organisation of experience exchange;
- Sustainability of the shared responsibility engaged and the initiated dynamic through the valorisation of results achieved supported by monitoring and regular evaluation of the approach implemented;
- Dissemination of practices initiated to other rural development actors.

Methodology

This case study was developed based on the following sources of information:

- Observations made during the process of self-assessment set up by the NSU of RwDR;
- Discussion papers produced at each step of the self-assessment process (mind-map, logical framework, diagrams, etc.);
- Direct feedbacks collected from the participants within the process of self-assessment.

Background

The capacity to monitor the progress and performance of the NRN activities is an important part of enhancing the functionality of the NRNs, as well as improving the implementation of EAFRD-funded Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) in all EU Member States.

In accordance with Article 66(3) of the EAFRD Regulation, four Member States (Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) chose to prepare a specific programme for the establishment and operation of their NRNs. These National Rural Network Programmes are, as with all other RDPs, subject to formal monitoring and evaluation procedures. Meanwhile all other NRNs have been set up under the umbrella of the Technical Assistance (TA) component of their national or regional RDPs and are not subject to any formal monitoring and evaluation procedures.

In that context and convinced of the critical importance to implement networking assessment, the National support Unit of the Walloon Network for Rural Development (RwDR) set up in September 2011 a self-assessment process with two main objectives: (i) identification of the strong and weak points of the networking and (ii) preparation of the activity programme for the next three years (phase 2 - 2012-2014).

Participants

Throughout the process, about 30 representatives of various member organizations of the RwDR (professional associations, LAGs, Walloon administrations, managing authorities, etc.) participated in the exchanges.

Objectives

The NSU mission of the RwDR is structured around six main objectives set by Wallonia Region (administrations and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development): supporting implementation of RDP 2007-2013; fostering cooperation and exchange of experiences between rural stakeholders and RDP beneficiaries; stimulating implementation of regional projects; facilitating access to information; following evolution of rural areas and anticipate changes.

These six objectives have been assessed by the members of the RwDR with the following questions : What is the added value of networking ? What actions, channels and ways of exchange, tools should be developed or reinforced? How to improve efficiency of networking?

Process and main activities

Three major steps have marked the process of the self-assessment exercise of the RwDR:

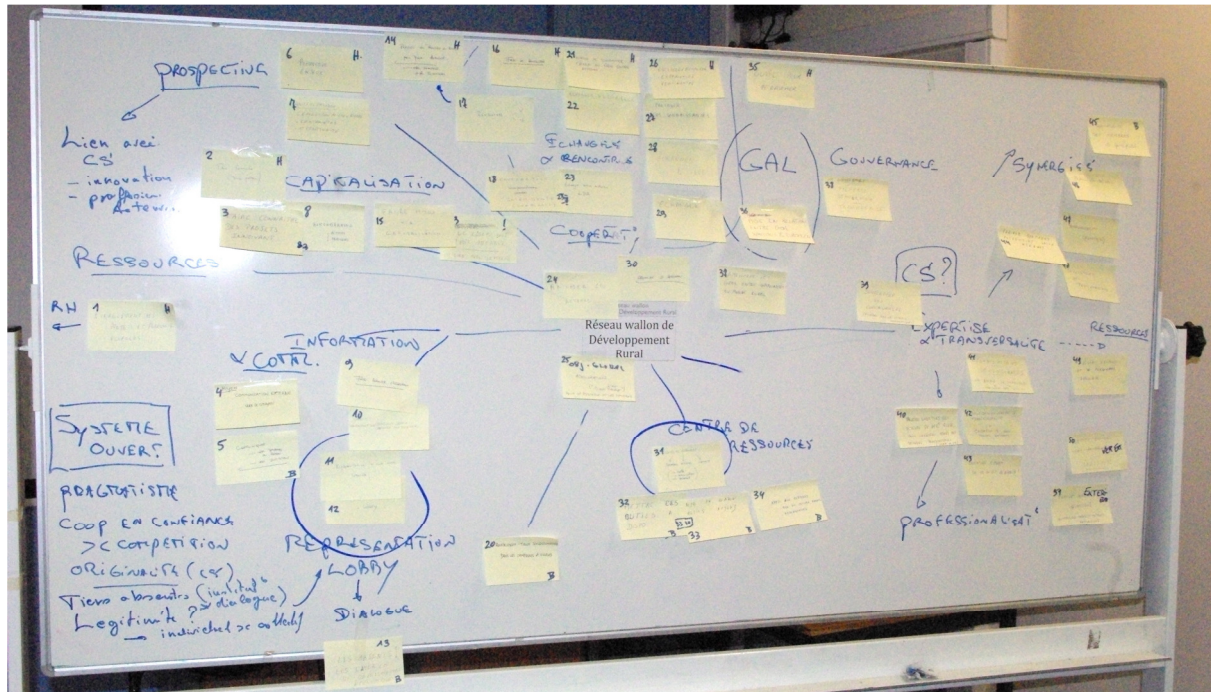
First step: Collective brainstorming

A initial brainstorming session with representatives of the RwDR members has been launched on the following issues:

- What should the network allow to achieve?

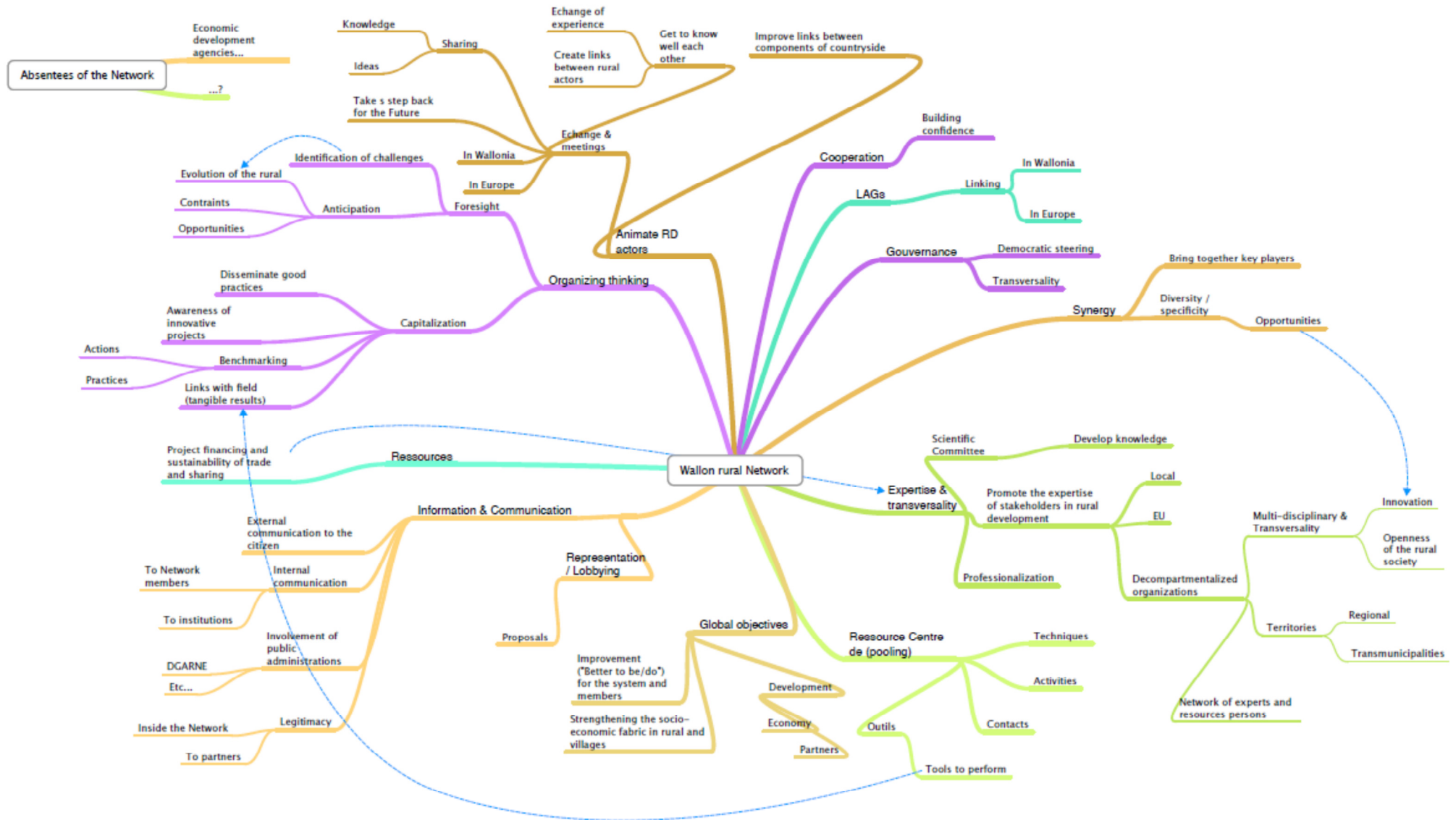
- What has the Network to offer to its members?
- Which kind of support does it need to perform?
- What are the networking systems and tools to be developed and actors of the Network?

A mind map (MindMap) was produced collectively. It schematizes how members understand and organize the various aspects / components of the networking.



This first critical phase, allowed building a common language and common references needed for further work. Divergences and common views identified helped to clarify and strengthen the understanding of the "network system":

- the Network is an open and pragmatic system;
- cooperation within the Network is organized upon a climate of confidence and originality;
- the Network is a resource centre (skills and expertise, material and immaterial resources, cross-cutting approaches, etc.) ;
- innovation and professionalization of rural development actors are the purposes of the Network;
- good governance ensures the Network legitimacy;
- synergies between actors and rural areas are critical.



Second step: evaluation of the different dimensions of networking activities

In a second step, the objectives of the Network set up by the Walloon Region were evaluated. Three scenarios of reference were used to build a complete picture: situation without network for rural development, current situation with a network, desired scenario.

Collaboration with other European networks

- What actions have been most interesting to develop European approaches?
- How to strengthen collaborations between European rural development actors?

Current situation

- Information, support and guidance of LAGs in the definition and operational implementation of their inter-territorial and transnational cooperation projects ;
- Distribution of cooperation offers from the European Network ;
- Active participation in meetings organized within the ENRD.

Expected scenario

- Stimulating exchange of human resources ;
- Increasing interactions between Walloon RDP and other EU RDPs.

Scenario without network

How did we reach this situation?

- Active participation of the NSU to actions of the ENRD and other national RD networks (but lower participation of RwDR members ⇒ ENRD unknown) ;
- Limited interactions with other European networks ;
- Trans-national cooperation (LAGs) on track ;
- Visit of foreign LAGs (Lithuania, Cyprus, Romania ...): interesting for step back, but no direct return (including cooperation) ;
- Links with actions and achievement of other European programs difficult to understand or develop within the rural development framework.

Constraints to get there ? Solutions ?

- Staff exchange via ELARD to be considered (but limited/no immediate return for a LAG except as part of a cooperation project);
- Continuation of EU exchange visits' hosting but by targeting counterpart: return visits, exchanges based on a common approach, etc.;
- Make the EU jargon more understandable (translation, lexicon?);
- Accelerate dissemination of information on EU events (inadequate monthly information media ⇒ info via RSS or blog or Facebook);
- Involve networks linked to other European programs with actions and information issues of the rural development network (RwDR);
- Transfer information about European activities to working groups of the RwDR.

The method used, Who? What? Where? When? How? Why? How much? and under what conditions produced a fairly **comprehensive logical framework**.

Third step : prioritisation and work programme

It then remained to consolidate and prioritize the objectives and actions. All network members reacted individually in a first stage, by providing their contributions and their views on priority actions. Once the synthesis of these contributions was obtained, the NSU hosted a last meeting whose purpose was to define the content of the various working groups and to specify the topics to be addressed, actions to be implemented, expected results, roles and responsibilities of network members, support required from the NSU and timetable.



At the end (January 2012), the overall process produced **a detailed work program for 2012 to 2014**, taking account all of assessments and contributions of the network participants. We learned from the self-assessment exercise that this collective process clearly guarantees a high degree of feasibility but also of relevance to the needs of Network participants. Some active working groups during the first phase have been put on standby as their objectives are achieved in terms of production and reflection, other groups are invested with new themes to be addressed, and others are starting in response to emerging concerns.

Resources

Three workshops were facilitated by the NSU grouping about 30 representatives of organizations and federation members of the rural development Network.

Added value of networking

The following elements summarise the added value of networking developed under the self-assessment exercise implemented by the RwDR:

- creating a common language on the networking via a bottom up approach;
- fostering cooperation between rural development actors;
- clarification of roles of each Network stakeholder;
- better understanding of the NSU mission;

- producing an action plan realistic and achievable to meet the needs of network members;
- Developing analytical tools for monitoring and evaluation of rural development actors and become familiar with the culture of evaluation;
- Broadening the references of the Network stakeholders.

What connects and disconnects?

This self-assessment exercise contributed to the reinforcement of links between members through the collective definition of realistic and achievable actions that respond to expectations and needs of Network members, although one of the main failures is the absence of involvement of a critical part of the Walloon network members in the overall process.

Future challenges

The main future challenges are the following:

- Participation and commitment of the absent parties to enhance the legitimacy of the work realised;
 - Ownership of the process through the implementation of similar approaches in the member organizations of the Walloon Network and organisation of experience exchange;
 - Sustainability of the shared responsibility engaged and the initiated dynamic through the valorisation of results achieved supported by monitoring and regular evaluation of the approach implemented;
 - Dissemination of practices initiated to other rural development actors.
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