Guidance Fiche

For Establishment and Operation of National Rural Networks

20/01/2014

Article 5 of Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 [CPR]

Article 51, 52, 54 and 66i of Regulation (EU) 1305/2013 [EAFRD]

This fiche is based on the text of Regulation (EU) 1305/2013 [EAFRD] and, when relevant, on Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 [CPR]. Since Delegated and Implementing Acts have not yet been adopted, some modifications to this guidance fiche might be needed after their adoption.

This guidance does not represent a binding legal interpretation of Regulation (EU) 1305/2013. It is therefore essentially non-binding in nature and complements the related legal acts.

1. Introduction and concept

Policy networks are widely used by the EU and its Member States to improve decision shaping and policy execution. At EU level they were promoted by the 2001 White Paper on European Governance[1] as they provide the flexibility required to deal with the wide diversity between administrative cultures and structures that exists in the EU.

National Rural Networks (NRN) accompany the implementation of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) in all Member States since 2007-2013. For the 2014-2020 period, the regulation sets the following aims: involving stakeholders, improving the quality of RDP implementation, informing about RD policy benefits and fostering innovation.

It is important to make a distinction between network, networking and network support unit.

- Network: web of interactions and links between different actors.

- Networking: process of sharing and exchanging of information, practices, experiences, ideas and resources. Networks do not become operational without networking processes.

- Network Support Unit (NSU): the structure needed for running the network to facilitate the networking process and the engagement of stakeholders. Setting up the NSU does not establish the network per se nor automatically ensure networking.

The period of 2007-2013 brought a very wide diversity in how the NRNs were set up and operating (*see overview of different NRNs at* http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networks-and-

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[1] European Governance: A White Paper. COM (2001) 428 of 25/7/2001.

networking/nrn-information/en/nrn-information_en.cfm). The below recommendations are based on the assessment of NRN activities in 2007-2013 carried out by the ENRD.

2. Programming options

Member States have different options for programming for the establishment and operation of the national rural network(s):

1) <u>In Member States with one RDP</u>

NRN will be described in specific section of the programme.

2) <u>Member States with regionalised RDPs:</u>

  a. May submit a specific NRN national programme, in which case simplified rules apply. The NRN national programme may also be part of a wider national programme covering other topics (e.g. risk management or technical assistance)

  b. May programme NRN at the regional level and include a dedicated section into their regional RDPs.

If the NRN is programmed both at the regional level and with a national coordination, both a) and b) can be used. It should be clear which NRN tasks/objectives are covered at which level and how the coordination will be made, in order to avoid duplication.

3. Structure and governance

Member States have the responsibility to establish the <u>NRN and its structures</u> and start implementing the action plan <u>at the latest 12 months after approval of the RDP</u> according to the programme(s) objectives and the characteristics of stakeholders in the Member State. NRNs may also be set up at regional level (see below).

The experience gained by rural networks shows that effective networking is based on inclusiveness, openness, active engagement by the NSU, and continuity of actions.

NRN Membership

NRN membership is open to all organisations and administrations involved in RD (Article 54 of RDR). NRN must also include the members of the Partnership Agreement, i.e.:

  a) competent regional, local, urban and other public authorities;

  b) economic and social partners;

c) and bodies representing civil society, including environmental partners, nongovernmental organisations, and bodies responsible for promoting equality and non-discrimination[2].

Wide NRN membership (i.e. possibility for all representative organisations involved in rural development to join the NRN) is recommended. For network activities, it is recommended that they are open also for non-NRN members.

With RDP Monitoring Committee members as part of NRN members, more regular exchange of information can be ensured between the network and Monitoring Committee.

NRN Governance

The organisation of and the decision-making process within the network (e.g. decision on the action plan, etc.) may follow different governance models, respecting the principles of inclusiveness and openness at the basis of rural networking. It is recommended to set up at least a coordinating body, which meets regularly and includes representatives of all NRN members.

A regular involvement of all members in the coordinating body activity is important and continuous efforts to engage all members should be made.

Networking activities on specific topics can be better performed through thematic groups, which report their conclusions to the coordinating body. Participation in those groups should be open to all members but is not compulsory.

As networking is an on-going process, allowing flexibility in structures and membership will help to respond to changing needs of stakeholders at different stages of the RD policy cycle.

Regional networks

Member States with several RDPs may have more than one network. In this case a regular exchange of information and coordination among the regional networks is recommended in order to ensure consistency, create synergies and avoid duplications. In case there are networks only on regional level, one of the networks should assume (possibly by rotation) the role of the national coordinating network and represent the regional networks at EU level. If networks are set up at both regional and national level, the national level network should assume the coordination role and act as contact point for the work with the ENRD.

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[2] *Art 5 of the Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 [CPR]*

Setting up the NSU

The Network Support Unit (NSU) is the structure needed for running the NRN. It is responsible for animating the NRN and may be established either within the national/regional authority or outsourced to an external entity by tendering procedures. A "mixed NSU" is also possible, where both the national administration and a selected external entity cooperate to animate the network.

The NSU must be able to carry out the tasks described in the work plan during the whole programming period, and must have sufficient qualified staff.

There is no evidence about one structure or model of NSU being more efficient and effective than others, as it depends on the particular context and practices. In any case the model chosen should ensure the continuity of NRN activities throughout the whole programming period.

In case of outsourcing different network tasks to several different contractors, good coordination must be ensured.

In all cases the Managing Authority keeps the responsibility for the management of the network.

4. Resources

Human resources

Sufficient skills and qualifications of network members are of key importance for facilitating the networking processes. Training of NRN's members and staff (e.g. peer to peer trainings, language trainings to participate in international activities, etc.) should be encouraged.

As regards the NSU staff, the main expertise and skills needed to facilitate rural networking include:

- Animation skills.

- Knowledge on wide coverage of rural development policy issues.

- Knowledge and experience of working with stakeholders.

- Knowledge of communication tools and dissemination activities (editorial skills, good knowledge of different communication tools, website and social media management, presentational skills).

- Experience and skills for organising events and workshops.

- Language skills to work on international level, with the European Network for Rural Development and with other rural networks and to help RD actors to facilitate transnational cooperation.

The NSU must be able to perform the tasks set for the network, and allocate sufficient resources for that purpose. According to the exercise "Mapping the NRNs 2007-2013[3]" carried out in 2011, it was indicated that the average number of full time (permanent) staff was around 5, but variation in different Member States was big, the number of permanent staff ranging from 1 to 32. The permanent staff is usually complemented with non-permanent experts, which is recommended for working on very specific topics.

Financing

The NSU and NRN activities can be co-financed through the EAFRD Technical Assistance as set in Article 51 of the Basic Act. However, 100% national financing for NRN activities is not excluded. In the latter case the NRN should still be included in the RDP and follow all the relevant requirements related to NRN, such as for setting up, managing, implementing the action plan of the NRN.

Financing of the networking activities should be continuous throughout the whole programming period.

Financial support for the NRN[4] should cover activities which are clearly linked with:

a) the objectives listed in Article 54(2) of the Basic Act;
b) the activities included in the action plan of the NRN.

5. Tasks and Action plan

NRNs are policy networks with clear aims set in the regulatory framework, and their action plan should be built on those policy objectives.

Action plans must be set up in a way to ensure continuity of activities throughout the whole programming period, and at the same time flexibility to respond to changing needs during the course of implementation of RDPs. Rolling plans, e.g. covering 2-3 years with periodical review every 6-12 months, have the advantage of being flexible while setting up clear targets in the medium term. Engagement of stakeholders both at the preparation, implementation and follow-up of the action plan helps to create ownership of network members over the NRN actions.

The minimum NRN tasks as required by the Basic Act are described in Annex. NRNs are required to perform all the tasks listed in the regulation. The tasks can be performed

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[3] http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=9956D73B-C54A-0D7C-A772-D02B98E1EA1B

[4] Costs related to the participation of **stakeholders** in European organisations' activities linked to NRN's activities, in line with the objectives of the programme, such as co-organising, common themes, coordinated series of events, etc. would be eligible. On the contrary, fees for being member of such organisations fall outside the scope of the NRN's objectives and operation, so their costs should not be supported by the technical assistance.

separately by different components of the NSU, according to the model chosen by the Member State.

NRN's communication plan and MA's information and publicity strategy

The NRN has the obligation to set up a communication plan, as a part of its action plan.

MAs have the responsibility to lead the overall RDP communication process and to involve the NRN in ensuring publicity for the programme (Article 66 of RDR). The information and publicity strategy drawn by the MA should form the basis for the NRN's communication plan. This strategy should aim at setting the clear division of labour (MA-NRN) and the degree of integration, according to the needs of each Member State.

A good communication plan includes links to the wider policy objectives, task description with clear division of those responsible and timeline, and clear definition of target groups of different actions. Communication objectives, tools and style should be diversified and adapted to the different target groups (RD stakeholders or broader public).

Experience gained in 2007-2013 shows that dissemination of outcomes of different networking activities can be significantly improved. In this respect, NRN's communication plans should include a specific section focusing on dissemination of both ENRD and NRN activities.

[*See ENRD Communications Gateway* http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/communicating-rural-development/eafrd/en/eafrd_en.cfm]

6. Monitoring and self-assessment

NRNs are not responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of the RDPs, but contribute to the M&E process by sharing and disseminating M&E findings. In addition, NRNs should build in a simple system for the monitoring and self-assessment of their own activities since the beginning. Some common CMEF indicators will have to be collected to ensure an overall EU monitoring of NRN activities (basic indicators such as number of thematic and analytical exchanges set up with the support of NRN, number of NRN communication tools, and number of ENRD activities in which the NRN has participated). NRNs will be invited to define their own specific indicators and monitoring/self-assessment procedures to complete what is foreseen at EU level.

On-going self-assessment would start with developing first an intervention logic for the NRN, with setting clear objectives and indicators, then continuously monitoring the progress and feeding results back into the work of NRN. It is important to acknowledge the different stages in programming cycle, for example sharing good practices might be difficult at the beginning of implementation (as there are very few examples yet), but this would come later. Experience has also shown that basic qualitative data need to be complemented with qualitative assessment and case studies.

7. Other networks on national level

It is recommended for the NRNs to cooperate and seek synergies with other networks, research institutes, resource centres etc. In the period 2014-2020, the networking functions of EU funds are reinforced:

Innovation networks

Fostering innovation is a new objective of rural networking for 2014-2020. There is no obligation for the Member State to create a specialised innovation network (EIP network partner on the national level), this role can be assumed by the NRN which would help to create synergies and avoid duplication. In this case specific knowledge and expertise on innovation should be looked for, e.g. through establishing an expert pool.

EMFF national rural networks

They group the Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) and other relevant stakeholders. In countries with links between LAGs and FLAGs, establishing good cooperation between networks would help to create synergies.

In case (part of) the structures for EMFF national network and NRN are the same in a given country/region, a clear division must be kept for expenditures on EAFRD related actions and EMFF related actions.

8. Cooperation with ENRD and EIP

Rural networking on EU level relies upon the contributions from and cooperation with the national level. RDP implementation can significantly benefit from exchange and networking at EU level. Therefore the NSUs should <u>foresee capacity to work with the EU level</u>, and to provide contributions to different activities. This will help the ENRD to fulfil its aim of sharing experiences at EU level. Examples include:

- Participation at meetings and exchanges at EU level,

- Input into planning at EU level,

- Providing examples of projects and good practices (relevant experiences) in the implementation of RD policy,

- Providing information for network statistics,

- Contribution to thematic work (both through providing content input and providing participants to meetings at EU or regional cluster level).

Networks have also an <u>important multiplier function</u> at national level. Among other activities, it is recommended to foresee some translation capacity for disseminating anything relevant which is developed at EU level or together with other networks.

A specific network has been put in place at EU level to support the EIP for agricultural productivity and sustainability and enable the networking of operational groups, advisory services and researchers, in line with Article [53] of the Rural Development Regulation. Also for innovation RDP implementation can significantly benefit from exchange and networking at EU level. Therefore, and in particular in view of fostering innovation as required under Article [54(2) d] the NSUs should <u>foresee capacity to work with the EIP Network, notably via the EIP Service Point</u>, and to provide contributions to different activities.

The exchange of information and networking will on the one hand feed the European EIP network with relevant information, such as examples of projects and good practices. On the other hand the national rural network will get access to information provided by the EIP network, including data bases listing (research) projects relevant to stimulate innovation as well as outcomes of the work of focus groups, workshops and seminars. The EIP is also the instrument to inform the scientific community about the research needs from practice.

9. Further guidance

The NRN toolkit with different examples and lessons learned from current period is available through the ENRD website

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networks-and-networking/nrn-toolkit/en/nrn-toolkit_en.cfm

Annex

NRN Tasks 2014-2020

1. Links between the aims and the tasks of the NRNs stated in the Basic Act

Aims/Tasks	Involve stakeholders	Improve the quality of RDP implementation	Inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries	Foster innovation
Collection of examples of projects covering all RDP priorities		✓	✓	
Facilitate thematic and analytical exchanges between stakeholders, sharing and dissemination of findings	✓	✓	✓	✓
Training and networking activities for LAGS: inter-territorial and transnational co-operation, co-operation among LAGS, search of partners for Art. 35 measure	✓	✓		✓
Networking activities for advisors and innovation support services;		✓		✓
Share and disseminate monitoring and evaluation findings		✓	✓	
Publicity and information concerning the RDP, information and communication activities aimed at a broader public		✓	✓	✓
Participate in and contribute to the European Networks' activities	✓	✓	✓	✓