

European Network for Rural Development

Minutes of the second Coordination committee meeting

19th May 2009, Centre Albert Borschette, Brussels

Chair: Mr J.M. Sousa Uva, Director of Horizontal aspects of rural development, DG AGRI, European Commission.

Participants: Members of the Coordination committee and representatives of DG AGRI, DG ENV, DG REGIO, EN RD Contact Point and Help Desk of the Evaluation Network for Rural Development.

Note: the presentations delivered at the meeting are available on the EN RD website (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>)

1. Introductory remarks

Mr Sousa Uva welcomed the members of the Coordination committee and reviewed the agenda of the meeting. The Chairman welcomed the two representatives of the Leader subcommittee, Ms Ave Bremse (representative of the Estonian National Rural Network) and Mr Panagiotis Patras (President of The European Leader Association for Rural Development).

The main objectives of EN RD are to improve the efficacy of European rural development policy and to encourage and support relations and discussions among all rural development actors. The Coordination committee can play an important role in supporting the tasks of programming, in improving coordination among the national networks and European level organisations, in providing advice on the annual work programme of the EN RD, and on the creation of thematic groups and definition of thematic issues.

The two most important issues for discussion at this stage are:

- the main challenges related to the rural development policy and the challenges that the National Rural Networks (NRNs) are facing in relation to this policy;
- the definition of the EN RD activities of the work programme for the second year.

2. Presentation on 'Update of the activities of the EN RD in year 1 (July 2008 - June 2009)'; by Mr John Loughheed, Head of Unit G3, DG Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Loughheed presented the main activities carried out during the first year, in particular the actions related to support the capacity building of NRNs, develop the thematic activities and build the appropriate communication tools. He recapped the major objectives of the EN RD including increasing the efficiency of rural development policy and providing an open and horizontal platform for exchanging information and experiences at both European and national levels.

The activities related to capacity building put in place have been: needs enquiries (meetings, questionnaires); a specific seminar on capacity building; preparation of support to transnational cooperation; coordination activities.

The specific thematic and analytical activities put in place have included: preparation of three thematic groups; two screening of programmes and compendia; monitoring indicators.

Finally, the main communication tools put in place have been: the website (static version); publications (regular newsletter and periodical); participation at events, conferences, fairs, etc.

3. Round table discussion No.1: "Meeting the common concerns"

Participants of the 'round table' panel: **W. Piskorz** (DG REGIO), **P. Patras** (ELARD / Leader subcommittee representative), **C. Zaccarini Bonelli** (IT NRN), **M. Afan de Ribera** (COPA), **H. Martinos** (Contact Point), **M. Hegarty** (Evaluation Network)

Focus for the panel and debate

- Rural development policy: What are the common concerns and needs of stakeholders in the current implementation period and for the future?
- What supports from networking are needed in this policy context?

Introductions (**Mr Rob Peters**, Head of Unit E4, DG AGRI and **Mr Martin Scheele**, Head of Unit H1, DG AGRI)

Overview of TWGs and major 'thematic concerns' to be considered in the current rural development programming period, e.g. territorial cohesion, competitiveness, innovation, environment issues, biodiversity, climate change, Health Check, future of CAP, etc.

The objectives and scope of the three EN RD Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) launched in March and April 2009 were presented. The starting framework of TWGs is based on the RD policy approved for the current period, taking into account complementarities with regional development policy, sustainable development and environment, etc.

TWG1 is focused on how Member States target territorial specificities and needs through the analysis of definitions of rural areas used in the Member States, how these definitions have been used to target the rural development measures and an examination of what could be the building blocks of a new typology to achieve greater efficiency in targeting and achieving a better balance in rural development.

TWG2 analyses the relationships and potential synergies (or conflicts) between agriculture and the wider rural economy and will aim at identifying which Member States deal with these links in the RDPs

TWG3 aims to ensure that rural development interventions enhance the provision of public goods for the benefit of society.

Additional views on TWG3's focus, highlighting the importance of developing a common understanding of this dimension, how it is addressed in RDPs and articulating the practical expression of public goods were presented. It was also mentioned that public goods go beyond the environmental dimension as they can also provide economic and social benefit.

Finally, the wider contextual issues as a basis for discussion on common concerns in rural development were noted, e.g. the need of clarification of the main environmental issues, balance concerning the different dimensions of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental), consistency between the two pillars of the CAP, use of multi-purpose measures and system approaches, response to citizens' needs and expectations.

Summary of main points made in the debate:

Rural development policy: What are the common concerns and needs of stakeholders in the current implementation period and for the future?

- *Simplification* represents a key common concern at all levels (EC, Member State, regional and local levels) and for the whole range of rural development stakeholders e.g. managing and paying authorities, NRNs, rural development programme beneficiaries, etc. Simplification is recognised by all parties as a real need in order to increase flexibility, accessibility and efficiency of rural development measures. However simplification is not an aim in itself, it must demonstrate value and be balanced with maintaining accountability and being able to properly monitor and evaluate programmes. The ability to introduce timely policy responses in a changing environment (for example, the recently announced recovery package) is also important and not always compatible with simplifying implementation.

Simplification is not limited to procedures but also has to be considered at the level of policy objectives to better reinforce synergies between rural development and other policies at the territorial level. At this early stage of implementation [in the current programming period], priority should first be given to observing and understanding what is functioning well and what is not, in order to see how far any corrective measures are necessary and may best be implemented.

- *In terms of policy assessment (monitoring and evaluation)*, the new evaluation framework i.e. the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), contributes to a better definition of evaluation objectives. Strong efforts have been made to install the common indicators and the on-going evaluation approach which works best when there is a regular exchange of information [networking] between key stakeholders in rural development.

However, several methodological challenges remain, e.g. data collection, aggregation and comparison between Member States, choice of indicators appropriate for several purposes (baseline indicators, impact indicators, etc.) and target groups.

- *The territorial dimension of rural development* was also discussed as being an 'overarching' concern for the EN RD to integrate in the thematic and analytical activities it supports and in its communications with stakeholders. Specific aspects of the territorial dimension highlighted were:-
 - The importance of understanding and taking account of the territorial specificities; links and synergies between urban and rural areas and the role of rural areas in regional development, e.g. evolution towards partnerships within functional regions as opposed to areas artificially divided and [possibly] perceived to be in competition.
 - The need for an increasing focus on territorial cohesion and structured links between Rural and Regional policy approaches (and their related funding instruments).

- Sustainability and an integrated development (economic, social and environmental aspects) focus through the application/validation of the Leader approach in other axes.
- *Environmental issues.* Specific considerations were raised the need for issues such as climate change, biodiversity, etc. to be considered in the context of both pillars of the CAP and the need to consider consistency between the 'polluter pays' principle and the [*de facto*] funding approach of pillar 1.

What supports from networking are needed in this policy context?

- *TWGs.* Regarding communication of policy and progressing the policy debate, the TWGs are considered to have the potential to develop as an important knowledge exchange tool for rural development stakeholders and as a relevant channel to reinforce consistency and complementarity between strategic orientations developed at EC and those developed at Member State levels.

To enhance the potential of these groups, several suggestions in favour of a structured and systematic communication and dissemination of their results towards a broader audience at national level were put forward. In general, Coordination committee (CC) members are expecting more details about these groups (membership, working programme, and expected results). In this context, it was mentioned that the TWGs will have a dissemination strategy and that TWGs' results will be discussed with the CC members.

- *New TWGs.* Several new topics were suggested for further TWGs to be launched in the second year of the EN RD, these ranged from simplification to the impact of rural development policies on employability in rural areas¹.
- *Knowledge platforms.* The EN RD and its various knowledge platforms should be considered as "ideas' boxes" and facilitate the active exchange of experiences.

4. Rules of procedure of the Coordination committee

There were no procedural issues raised.

5. Presentation 'synthesis of the morning session: implication for the activities of the EN RD'; by Michael Gregory, EN RD Contact Point

Dr Gregory gave an overview of the main points raised during the morning. In particular, he stressed the main issues raised as regards RD policy: the territorial perspective; public goods, which are expected to play an increasingly important role in the policy debate and; simplification, a topic which needs to be addressed at several different levels. He also noted to what extent these are being addressed by the current EN RD thematic work.

¹ A full list of suggestions received from the CC (and LSC) members including those submitted in writing will be compiled by the CP.

6. Presentation 'The EN RD Second year's activities (July 2009 – June 2010)'; by Ms Gaëlle Lhermitte, DG AGRI, G3, European Commission

Ms Lhermitte presented the framework of the second annual work programme, specifically, capacity building activities (particularly for NRNs), thematic and analytical activities and communication tools. The EN RD's on-going activities and possible new activities to be implemented in the second year (based on suggestions collected so far from a variety of stakeholders) were summarised.

7. Round table discussion No.2: "The second year's priorities"

Participants of the 'round table' panel: **A. Bremse** (EE NRN)/(Leader subcommittee representative), **J. Lougheed** (DG AGRI- G3), **S. Fournier** (FR MA), **C. Jochun** (AT NRN), **B. Kovacic** (SL MA), **P. Keating** (IE NRN), **G. Peltre** (R.E.D.), **H. Martinos** (Contact Point for EN RD).

Focus of the discussion, issues to be addressed by the EN RD and the second year's activities:

- prioritisation of the activities of the EN RD;
- addressing the needs for information to improve communication;
- setting up and sharing common working instruments;
- sharing relevant examples (good practices);
- broadening cooperation practices.

Summary of main points raised:

- The need for information, provided in a comprehensive and a timely manner, was expressed. The information should not concern only the agricultural sector, but also have a focus on wider policy aspects (Cohesion policy, Environmental policy, Fishery policy etc.). Considering the variety of different information needs that the national network units have, they should liaise with the EN RD CP in order to ensure the effective distribution of all appropriate information.
- The information provided should be accurate and useful. For this purpose, common web-based tools could be set up and updated on a regular basis (e.g. summary data showing the state of implementation of the RDPs; experts database per speciality and/or Member State; list of people who are responsible for the day-to-day activities of the EN RD).
- Other specific examples of information needs were given by the floor including:
 - example of 'self evaluation' practices and methodologies established by LAGs;
 - useful examples of synergies established between rural development and cohesion policies and rural development and fishery policies.
- Communication should be enhanced not only between national networks and the EC but also with other categories of stakeholders. More opportunities for meetings between national rural networks could assist in finding common ways to overcome common problems.

- A stronger link should be ensured between national networks and the EC. A common, clear and flexible working method should be established, to avoid gaps in information transfer and ensure the adequate involvement of Member States. The same was said about communication between regional networks and central authorities. Communication at all levels needs to be a constant focus.
- Some proposals for a common working methodology were made in order to develop further thematic activities. Tools should be developed and used for generating information and sharing it at the EU level. Working methods based at local level are important (an example was given regarding the use of specific seminars at local level to provide the basis for a conclusive seminar at EU level).
- An important priority for the second year's activity is to ensure the establishment of a common methodology and tools to collect and disseminate relevant examples (good practices). Despite the high number of indicators set up, the problem arises of whether they are adequate to assist in identifying relevant examples. It is necessary to clarify whether Member States should share the same selection criteria and in which way the national networks can be efficiently involved in disseminating relevant examples.
- Cooperation is a complex concept. The need for further understanding of its dynamics was expressed together with a proposal for a dedicated event at EU level, focusing on cooperation between LAGs and other topics. The need to extend cooperation to axes other than Leader was highlighted, but doubts were raised about the capacity of the national networks to accomplish this task on their own.

Clarifications:

- Practical information tools have been already developed by the EN RD, through the Contact Point. The static version of the EN RD website is now on-line and specific compendia are being finalised.
- Further work will be conducted during the coming year. The setting up of different communication platforms on the EN Rd website will stimulate wider participation and ensure an exchange of ideas among stakeholders. The aim is to ensure smooth communication to inform others about what is going on in different networks/countries. For this purpose CC members are invited to establish a constant flow of information with the CP.
- Further thinking is required regarding the priority themes and activities to be developed. The EC is open to proposals from members regarding the three main fields of activity of the EN RD, namely: capacity building; thematic and analytical activities; and communication.
- The EC stressed the importance of sharing the experiences of [and via] the national rural networks in order to inform the work to be done in the current programming period. The value of these experiences goes beyond rural development since useful lessons may also be drawn relating to complementarity and demarcation with other European funds.

8. Closing remarks / practical arrangements

The Chairman noted that an initial summary of the topics discussed in the morning had been presented by Dr Gregory and that Mr Loughheed had summarised and made some conclusions related to the afternoon session. Members were encouraged to submit proposals relating to the second years annual work programme by the deadline of 29th May.

Annex: Members of the Coordination committee (presence list)