



## Minutes from the first Leader sub Committee Meeting 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2008, Charlemagne Building, Brussels

### **Present:**

**Chair:** Mrs. L. Dormal Marino, Deputy Director General of DG AGRI-European Commission, and then on her behalf Mr. J.M Sousa Uva, Director of Horizontal aspects of rural development, DG AGRI, European Commission.

**Participants:** Members of the Leader sub Committee (attendee list as attached) and representatives of DG AGRI and EN RD Contact Point.

### **1. Introductory words:**

Mrs. Loretta DORMAL MARINO, Deputy Director General DG AGRI, welcomed the members of the Leader subcommittee and reviewed the agenda of the meeting.

The EN RD is an important tool to provide real incentives for achieving the objectives of the Rural Development Policy. These objectives established within the framework of the Community strategic guidelines for rural development cover all axes, but the Leader axis has experience in networking under rural development policies. The Leader subcommittee builds upon the experience and continuity from the previous programming period's Leader+ Steering committee, and should contribute to spreading its experiences for the benefit of other axes. The Committee members are expected to advise the Commission on annual work programme of the EN RD, and they should represent a bridge between national rural networks (NRNs) and with the Commission. There is a need to identify proper ways to work together and to overcome difficulties and bottlenecks; in this context the network should be a tool to ensure the best implementation of the rural development programmes.

### **2. Presentation of the European Network for Rural Development: Organization and specific activities 2008-2009; presentation by Ms. Gaëlle LHERMITTE, Unit G3, DG Agriculture and Rural Development.**

Ms. Gaëlle LHERMITTE presented the legal framework, the structure and tasks of the European Network for Rural Development 2007-2013 and briefly introduced the EN RD Contact Point. The proposed specific activities of the EN RD for the period 2008-2009 were also presented, introducing the state of play of the EN RD and the current steps to be taken with regard to:

- the tasks of the Leader subcommittee;
- the creation of the thematic groups (Theme 1: "Targeting territorial specificities and needs in RD programmes" (in preparation); Theme 2: "Agriculture and the wider rural economy" (in preparation); Theme 3: "Public goods and public intervention (for a later launch);
- specific seminars (Seminar 1 on "Capacity building and the setting-up of national networks" (in preparation), Seminar 2 on "Innovation for the new environmental challenges", and Seminar 3 on "Modernisation of semi-subsistence farms");
- an expert group on "Policy delivery and governance".

### **3. Introduction of the Contact Point, presentation by Mr Istvan FEHÉR, Team leader, EN RD Contact Point.**

Mr. FEHÉR summarized the 1st year draft work programme of the EN RD Contact Point: core functions and tools:

- The work-programme is structured around seven service codes and three core tools;
- The services of the Contact Point;
- Communication tools: Website + thematic exchange facility; seminars and conferences; publications etc.

In this framework, the main tasks that the Contact Point will carry out in relation to the Leader axis were underlined.

### **4. Discussion with all members: (10:30 – 11:15)**

Major points raised during the discussion:

- The publication of examples in the website should not only concern good/best practices, but it would also be useful to share information about difficulties and bottlenecks experienced in the implementation of local development strategies and Leader projects.
- Since in the past period good/best practice examples were more related to Axis 3-type projects, the need was expressed to find suitable examples also for Axes 1 and 2.
- Clarification was asked in relation to the role of the Contact Point, in particular if the experiences, and also the difficulties, related to the implementation of projects should be addressed directly to the Contact Point. Moreover, a question was raised about how the services and tools provided by the CP could generate an added value for Leader approach and the activities of the LAGs.
- In relation to the databases that will be provided by the CP, clarification is required on the timescale, on what kind of information is going to be collected and in which way. In particular, the need for more information on transnational cooperation projects was expressed.
- The Members of the subcommittee suggested bigger involvement in the definition of the activities of the EN RD, in order to provide contribution in programming annual activities. In particular, the thematic priorities should become a common ground for discussion; in theme n° 2, for example, the Leader approach could be considered in investigating the relationship between agriculture and the rural economy.
- Several Members asked for a clarification in relation to the links between the European Network for Rural Development and the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (EEN RD). In particular, the role of the EN RD Contact Point and of the EEN RD Help Desk should be clarified in relation to the evaluation and monitoring activities. Overlapping of their tasks should be avoided.
- A question was raised about the evaluation of the activities of the NRNs. There is a need to assess the real work of the NRNs and to exchange experiences through the EN RD.
- It was asked what could be the role of the NRNs in promoting the influence of Leader approach in the implementation of other axes? It was also asked if some thoughts on this topic have already been developed at the European level.
- A concern was expressed on the way in which innovation could be promoted in the Leader approach, considering the legislative framework established in the new programming period.

Follow-up/next steps/clarifications:

- Experiences and difficulties should be addressed at the relevant level of competence (national or European level – NRNs, EC, and CP).
- Some clarifications about the EN RD annual working programme were provided by the Commission. In order to make progress and launch the EN RD activities with more enhanced speed in the first working year, the European Commission has chosen to be pro-active by proposing priority themes for the first year and is consulting the members of both committees on the thematic priorities. The members of the Leader subcommittee are invited to contribute within the framework of the priorities proposed for the first year, also in view of drafting thematic working groups' mandate, and submit additional themes and ideas that could be taken into account in the next year's work programme, the preparation of which will start soon. Also proposals for experts made at the latest by December 10 will be considered as much as possible. (Cf. point 12 hereunder)
- Under the coordination of the European Commission, the EN RD and the EEN RD should work together in an efficient way, avoiding the overlapping of the activities carried out by the Contact Point and the Evaluation Help Desk. The Contact Point will analyse databases and identify difficulties experienced in the use of the indicators and possibly make suggestions for their improvement.
- The evaluation of the NRNs can be discussed on the basis of information from the NRNs. It is related to the objectives and tools of NRNs, on the basis of which the relevant indicators can be defined.

#### **5. Progress on the implementation of Leader Axis, presentation by Mr Jean-Michel COURADES, Unit G3, DG Agriculture and Rural Development.**

Mr. COURADES presented the state of play of the implementation of Axis 4 in the Member States. An overview of the up to-date financial commitment to the Leader axis was given: EUR 5.4 billions (programmed EAFRD expenditure) are programmed to fund Axis 4 in 2007-2013 (6,06% of total EAFRD expenditure). A comparative analysis of the programming approach was also presented based on the results of the survey conducted among the Member States. Already 8 Member States have selected all local action groups (LAG). It is expected that the selection procedure will be finished in most Member States by mid-2009. At the moment 1.295 LAGs were selected. The total number will be 2.125 LAGs. 1603 projects were already approved (including 168 for Axis 1, 186 for Axis 2 and 11 cooperation projects) in seven Member States

#### **6. Presentation of three case studies, presentations by representatives of national rural networks (NRNs)**

Three case studies on the implementation of the Leader approach in Axes 1, 2 and 3 were presented by representatives of NRNs:

##### **Presentation of the first case study: Leader and Axis 1, by Mr Dominic ROWLAND, English Rural Network**

Mr. ROWLAND (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, UK) presented an overview of the application of Leader axis in the English RDP and illustrated two projects (Organic egg packing, Organic flour mill) financed under Axis 1 in the Isle of Wight's LAG, underlying the benefits of the application of the Leader approach.

##### **Presentation of the second case study: Leader and Axis 2, by Mr Henk KIEFT, Dutch Rural Network**

Mr. KIEFT (National Rural Network of the Netherlands) presented projects financed by the Dutch RDP under Axis 2 which have been implemented through the Leader approach or could be examples of possible integration with it:

- Leader-related projects on sustainable energy in Wadden islands;
- A project on 'green energy' as by-product of landscape maintenance partially financed by Axis 4;
- Two projects on "climate friendly dairy farming" and "Consumers as investors in solar energy on farms" as possible example of Leader-type projects.

### **Presentation of the third case study: Leader and Axis 3, by Ms Jenny NYLUND, Swedish Rural Network**

Ms. NYLUND (Swedish National Rural Network) illustrated a project financed under Axis 3 which is being implemented through the Leader approach in the northern region of Upland. The project aims to create favourable conditions in the region for the retention of young people. A nearly 'national level' Leader financed project (to commence substantive operations in 2009) was also presented.

## **7. Discussion with all members: (12:30 – 13:00)**

### Summary of major points raised / clarification on case studies:

- The Leader approach should be considered as an instrument to implement projects in an innovative way and not classical projects that normally entail a heavy bureaucratic requirement. Leader projects correspond to measures or to operations outside the menu of measures achieving the objectives of axes. When Leader is used to implement specific measures, it has to follow conditions of the measures as defined by EU legislation. In any cases operations have to follow procurement and state aid rules, which can be constraining. The challenge is therefore to find room for innovation, especially under Axis 1 and 2.
- The Leader approach should allow taking into account the interests of the whole population, so ensuring the gender balance in the selection committees for Leader projects and also in the Monitoring Committees of the programmes could be discussed.
- In relation to the second case study, the difficult access to market for the renewable energy produced by farmers has been overcome, since renewable energy can be sold at local level, but not at national level. However the solution to this problem still needs to be developed.
- It was asked which tools are available to stimulate the attention and to ensure the involvement of environmental concerns in LAGs activities. The answer on the basis of the first case study indicated that the lack of knowledge should not be the question, since both the Nature Conservation Organisations and the farmers trained in environmental themes are members of the LAGs and actively involved the development of their strategies.
- Regarding the third case study, it was asked which mid and long term actions have been taken to follow up the implementation of the project, and in which way the results will be assessed. The answer clarified that non-economic targets were set up to assess the results since the main objectives of the projects were the networking and the involvement of young people.
- It was suggested to produce and present fiches for case studies, following similar structure pointing out the objectives, main problems and difficulties, legislative framework, experience in the implementation of these projects. They could be used to compare experiences between Member States and analyse which management tools

have been used to cope with constraints (e.g. the issue of public procurement legislation and use of renewable energy, allowing innovation and experimentation .

## **8. Role of National Rural Networks (NRN) related to Leader. Three case studies, presentation by representatives of the National Rural Networks**

### **Presentation of the Spanish Network, by Ms Paloma LOPEZ IZQUIERDO BOTIN**

Ms. LOPEZ IZQUIERDO presented an overview of the objectives of the Spanish NRN and illustrated the specific envisaged activities with regard to the Leader-related objective "*Increase the potential for development of the rural territories and to enhance the "bottom-up" strategy*".

### **Presentation of the German Network, by Ms Isabell FRIESS**

Ms. FRIESS presented an overview of the implementation of the Leader axis in Germany underlying the differences among the 14 rural development programmes. A review of the Leader-related activities (included events and cooperation support) carried out by the NRN in the first year was then illustrated, and then followed by an overview of the activities envisaged for the year 2009.

### **Presentation of the Estonian network, by Ms Ave BREMSE**

Ms. BREMSE introduced the Estonian NRN (establishment, management and coordination, action plan) and presented the state of play on the implementation of Leader axis under the Estonian RDP in terms of: programmed expenditure, LAGs selection, implementation of Leader projects, and main activities carried out by the network with regard to Leader.

## **9. Discussion with all members (15:00 – 15:30)**

### Major points raised during the discussion:

- An important aspect to be considered in relation to the activities of the EN RD are links with the other established networks financed by the European Union, considering also the horizontal coverage of Leader approach and its innovative nature.
- It could be interesting to know what kind of actions the NRNs have undertaken beyond the mandatory minimal tasks prescribed by Article 68 of Regulation n°(EC)1698/2005.

## **10. Transnational cooperation, presentations by DG AGRI and EN RD Contact Point**

### **Update of the Guide for the measure cooperation. Exchange of information on transnational cooperation projects; presentation by Mr. Jean-Michel COURADES, Unit G3, DG Agriculture and Rural Development.**

Mr. COURADES introduced the new amended version of the "Guide for the implementation of the measure cooperation under the Leader Axis of rural development programmes 2007-2013"; some actions to clarify the procedures regarding the implementation of transnational cooperation projects were also illustrated:

- notification to the Commission of the approved cooperation projects (via SFC 2007 system);

- creation of “approved projects” and “projects under approval” databases (by the end of 2009).
- the revised Guide will be translated and circulated before end of the year.

### **Transnational cooperation tools, presentation by Mr Martin LAW, EN RD Contact Point**

Mr. LAW illustrated the activities that will be carried out by the Contact Point during the first year in relation to the support for transnational cooperation. Four areas of activities are envisaged:

- 1) An inventory of needs and existing guides;
- 2) Development of an “Integrated European Cooperation guide”
- 3) Preparation and setting-up of project databases;
- 4) Prospective work on potential direct support to project holders.

#### Major points of discussion about transnational cooperation:

- It would be useful to have a contact list of the persons working in the Managing Authorities, who are involved in transnational cooperation.
- At the national level it is proposed that NRNs could prepare the project databases in a way that is the most useful for applicants (by type of partners for example). It is also suggested to have a description of selection procedures of transnational cooperation projects per each Managing Authority, which can be consulted by other Managing Authorities or interested LAGs.
- It has been stated that cooperation initiatives could benefit from the experiences derived from the implementation of Leader and Interreg Community Initiatives. With regard to this topic it was also suggested that links with other EU-funded cooperation initiatives could be established.

#### Follow-up/next steps/clarifications:

- Neither the Commission nor the Contact Point will be involved in the decision making process about the selection and approval of cooperation projects. The definition of selection criteria and the selection and approval process itself is a task for the Managing Authorities and/or the LAGs.
- The database that will be created for cooperation projects under approval is to be considered a practical and useful tool allowing for involved Managing Authorities as well as LAGs to be informed about the evolution of the respective approval processes in the concerned Member States.
- The Cooperation guide is to be considered only as a reference non binding document presenting common administrative practice.
- All transnational cooperation activities concern only projects with Axis 4 approvals. The obligation of notification is related to all kind of transnational cooperation projects involving LAGs in different Member States (also for those projects involving non-LAG structures or third countries).
- The database is to be considered as a useful information tool for MAs to follow transnational cooperation grants approvals delivered in other MS .
- MAs dealing with cross-border cooperation projects should check the Interreg database in order to avoid overlapping on financing.

### **11. Rules of procedures for the Leader subcommittee**

The EC pointed out that an article (Art. n° 15) about the reimbursement of experts has been inserted in the rules of procedures submitted to the member of the Leader sub committee; this is in accordance to article 6.5 of Commission Decision 2008/168/EC setting up the organisational structure for EN RD. The adoption of these rules has been postponed until the next meeting.

## **12. Practical arrangements and next steps**

The members of the Leader subcommittee have the possibility to provide feedback in relation to the themes proposed with regards to **two aspects, by the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2008 on the e-mail address of [AGRI-G3@ec.europa.eu](mailto:AGRI-G3@ec.europa.eu)**

1. The members can submit comments about the mandate of the thematic working groups.
2. The members can submit complementary proposals for members of the thematic working groups with specific competence related to Leader. These complementary proposals would mainly be used as a reserve list (for substitutes of designated members, or to contribute to some specific expert work to be undertaken on the Leader approach). All proposals should be supported by the experts' CVs.

Leader subcommittee members are also invited to submit **by the 31 December to the e-mail address of [leader-sc@enrd.eu](mailto:leader-sc@enrd.eu)** proposals regarding the nomination of two representatives of the Leader subcommittee to become the members of the Coordination committee. In relation to the "Proposal for the designation of two representatives of the Coordination committee" document - which was sent to the members along with the documents submitted in advance of the Leader subcommittee, the Commission pointed out that the annual mandate for the appointed representatives is proposed to be renewable for one year.

The next Leader subcommittee meeting has not been scheduled; members will be informed about the envisaged date in good time.