

Minutes of the second Leader subcommittee meeting

28th April, 2009, Charlemagne Building, Brussels

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

Participants: Members of the Leader subcommittee (list appended) and representatives of DG AGRI and the EN RD Contact Point.

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

1. Introductory remarks

Mr. J.M. Sousa Uva, Director of Horizontal aspects of rural development DG AGRI, welcomed the members of the Leader subcommittee and reviewed the agenda of the meeting.

It was underlined that the "Leader concept" has an important role to play within EN RD and in promoting networking activities, in order to help EN RD better respond to the objective of improving RD policy implementation.

The main objectives of the second Leader subcommittee meeting are:

- to discuss about the role and potentialities of ENRD in promoting Leader approach;
- to discuss the added value of networking, in particular in relation to Leader;
- to look at the strategy for Leader and to discuss how to improve information exchange between the main actors involved (EC, MAs, NRNs, LAGs);
- to identify ideas for the second annual work plan of the ENRD.

The meeting aimed at listening to the participants to collect interesting and operational examples of the Leader and the views of the Leader subcommittee members in order to develop useful actions for the EN RD to support the implementation of Leader. It is important to identify what works well and where efforts are needed to improve the implementation of the RD policy.

The attention should focus in three particular topics, according to the suggestions sent by the Members before the meeting:

- The fulfillment of Leader expectation, considering the delay of the Leader starting procedure in some countries.
- Difficulties experienced by Leader actors related to decision making process and to receive payments.
- Leader cannot be considered only as a pilot action. It is one of the most successful EU programs; its method is excellent in the public-private and private-private partnership and as a creator of social capital in rural areas. We should find new tools and actions for improving the use of the Leader approach in all the axes.

2. Presentation of Strategy for Leader during 2007-2013: objectives, tools, perspectives; by Mr Panagiotis PATRAS, President of European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD)

Mr Patras presented the organisation, its aims and functions, results and bottlenecks of Leader implementation in the current programming period and the role of networking in the context of Leader. According to ELARD, the main bottlenecks include question marks on the success of mainstreaming, insufficiency of budget, and the delays in the process of LAGs selection. National rural networks' activities envisaged for improving Leader implementation were also presented. In particular:

- enlisting the energy of all stakeholders in the rural development process;
- helping the dissemination of LEADER method to all axis of RDPs;
- promoting innovation and creative ideas;
- supporting LAGs;
- facilitating Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies to better understand the main requirements for successfully implementing Leader (from the viewpoint of LAGs).

3. Presentation of National Rural Network: Leader activities; by Ms Raffaella Di Napoli Italian National Rural Network

Ms Di Napoli presented the main objectives and activities of the Italian network in relation to Leader. In particular she explained what the network must do based on the lessons learnt during the past programming periods, the most important 'key words' in the organization of the network, the main tools put in place for Leader, realized and ongoing activities and the most important themes to be developed in 2009 and 2010.

4. Presentation of Leader in Denmark; by Ms Merete Jeppesen of the Danish National Rural Network

Ms Jeppesen introduced the current state of implementation of Leader in Denmark and then the main Leader related activities (seminars, training sections, meetings, etc.), the plans for next year and aspects identified as needing to be reinforced at national and European level (exchange of project-ideas, exchange of good practices, focus on projects impact, cooperation and education of LAGs boards).

5. Discussion with committee members (11.30 – 12.30)

The following questions were put in focus of the discussion "potentials, expectations and contributions of the EN RD":

- What is the added value of networking?
- What are the needs of the networks: support the creation of LAGs, internal and external training?
- What are the difficulties in the implementation of Leader of the MAs, NRNs, LAGs?

- What activities of the ENRD can help address these needs and difficulties?
- What kind of coordination among networks and different actors involved in the implementation of Leader is already ensured?

Summary of main points raised.

- A concern was expressed that Leader is not recognisable anymore as a specific programme; it has a certain lack of visibility because of the change of its status from the previous programming period compared to the current one.
- Mainstreaming of Leader is not working in many countries. Simplifying legislation was considered by several members as a possible solution for improving the implementation of the Leader approach.
- Discussion should be promoted between MAs and NRNs about the involvement of Leader in all axes, particularly 1 and 2. It was recognized that RDPs are very different - in some axis 2 type of projects being excluded from Axis 4 activities. Administrative procedures and bureaucracy are indicated as important difficulties by beneficiaries; being considered 'not useful' and too complicated. Leader is becoming evermore influenced by administrations and the situation could become even more difficult for the implementation of very innovative projects.
- Several members expressed the necessity that Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies should be more familiarized with the particularities of the Leader approach ("what is Leader") and how Leader is implemented. It is important to solve difficulties that MAs and PAs are experiencing in relation to payments. It is also important to ensure that LAGs can respond to the needs of rural areas. The organisation of workshops, involving MAs, NRNs, LAGs, PAs and the EC, was suggested to explore possibly methods of related especially to simplification of the administrative framework and payments.
- Co-funding is difficult for beneficiaries to find; SMEs especially experience problems in obtaining public funds and accessing credit. The situation could get even worse with the economic recession. Allowing the payment of advances for Leader projects would make a real positive difference, especially for those operations that are not investments. Regarding advance; a specific concern was raised about the bank guarantee required, which corresponds to 110% of the amount of the advance (Reg. (CE) 1974/2006 art. 56).
- The evaluation system (Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework) is perceived as too complicated. Members expressed the view that the evaluation system should have been decided in collaboration with LAGs. However, LAGs would need some more guidance on the self-evaluation of the groups, where a methodological support could be given.
- Encouraging an exchange of ideas at European level would be positive for finding common ways to networking in relation to axes 1 and 2. The fact that Leader has been mainstreamed becoming a part of the RDP has created some problems for networking activities, because the actors involved in the implementation of RDPs are very diverse, with different cultures and approaches to working.
- The need for improving the visibility of cooperation projects was highlighted, particularly the organisation of tools, such as newsletters, able to encourage contacts between beneficiaries and to facilitate partner searching activities.

- A specific concern was expressed about the implementation of innovative projects given the fact that they, by their nature, have a higher proportion of 'failures'.

Some clarifications

- The subcommittee members gave many ideas which can feed into the further work of the EN RD. It is important to acknowledge that the transition from one period to another is not completely over yet and there is a certain adaptation period.
- Visibility of Leader could be impaired due to its integration in rural development programmes. There are however possibilities for increasing it - the logo used in the previous Leader programming periods has been kept, and LAGs can also help with their communication actions.
- Evaluation is an important issue and therefore evaluation of Leader is also part of the 2009 work programme of the Evaluation Expert Network.
- The possibility to pay advances is not eligible for the establishment of LAGs but is for the running costs of LAGs selected to implement local development strategies. Advances can also be paid for investment projects implemented by Leader. A bank guarantee or an equivalent guarantee is needed in the case the advance is used.
- The administrative "*Guide on the measure cooperation...*" has been discussed in the Rural Development Committee and Managing Authorities are required under Article 39.5 of Commission Regulation No 1974/2006 to communicate information about approved TNC projects via SFC2007 under the function "other documents/programme modification". The notification form in Annex II of the Guide has to be used for that purpose.

6. Administrative matters: rules of procedures and election to the coordination committee of two Leader subcommittee representatives

An amendment to Article 15 (*Reimbursement of experts*) of the rules of procedures for the group of experts was pointed out by the Commission. The rules of procedures were adopted.

According to the requirements of Article 2(1)(d) Commission Decision 2008/168/EC and following the proposals submitted by the Members by 31 December 2008, two representatives of the Leader subcommittee were designated to become members of the Coordination committee. 54 out of 67 members of the Leader sub-committee were present during the designation.

4 candidates were nominated. **Mr Panagiotis PATRAS** (ELARD) and **Ms Ave BREMSE** (Estonian NRN) were duly elected by majority of the LSC members present as the representatives of the Leader subcommittee.

7. Presentation of the activities carried out by EN RD, suggestions for the activities in the 2nd year

Three presentations were given by DG AGRI, Unit G3 and the EN RD Contact Point in order to highlight the main activities (particularly in relation to Leader) of the EN RD's 1st year (July 2008 –

June 2009). Points of discussion were raised about the proposed activities for the second year particularly related to the Leader axis.

- **Overview of activities carried out in year 1, by Ms Gaëlle LHERMITTE, Unit G3, DG AGRI.**
- **Outputs of the questionnaires on Transnational Cooperation, by Mr Martin LAW, EN RD Contact Point** (Summary of the results of TNC questionnaire addressed to the LAGs and the NRNs were already submitted to members and handed out during the meeting)
- **Outline of year 2 activities particularly related to Leader, by Mr Haris MARTINOS, EN RD Contact Point.**

8. Discussion with committee members (15:30 - 16:30), moderated by Mr Paul KEATING of the Irish National Rural Network (*please see also the "informal Report from the afternoon session of the LEADER Subcommittee meeting 28th April 2009" compiled by Paul Keating*)

The afternoon discussion session focused on the future activities of the EN RD in terms of possible instruments to be put in place and fields of actions. The discussion aimed to stimulate a debate about the role of the Contact Point and to share views between the Members.

Summary of major points raised:

- 1) Setting up of 'focus groups'. A suggestion was made to set up specific discussion groups ('focus groups') made up of Leader subcommittee members in order to address specific topics of concern to the Committee and suggest possible actions.

The audience generally welcomed the suggestion. Proposals for 'focus groups' included:

- *Transnational cooperation.* The necessity to focus on TNC not only at project but also management level was expressed. The focus should be on providing and improving guidance on practical arrangements for implementing transnational projects which are usually complex. LAGs should be the main beneficiaries of this action since the administrative process can represent an obstacle and constrain the implementation of the projects. Regarding the importance of such a 'focus group', it was noted, that only a minority of the projects run by LAGs deal with TNC.
- *Mainstreaming the Leader Axis.* There was a widespread view expressed that the application of the Leader approach to the other fields of intervention in RD policy is a major issue. There is the need to identify the major technical problems in order for methods to be developed to manage and overcome them. In order to mainstream the leader approach the focus should be on what to measure/evaluate, to identify the distinctive and quality aspects of the Leader approach [in practical terms] in order to understand what to promote in the other axes. It was also noted that overcoming the problems being encountered in implementing Leader itself (in axis 4), should take precedence over developing effective mainstreaming techniques.
- *Evaluation.* It was proposed that a 'focus group' dealing with evaluation (which in the LAGs' context could refer to self-evaluation) could help to establish a useful common reference

framework for LAGs, both for 'self improvement' and to better meet the [forthcoming] challenges of formal evaluation

The Commission acknowledged the need for sound information regarding evaluation issues; and noted that the European Evaluation Network is the reference structure for supporting and coordinating evaluation exercises. The possible benefit of a group examining the procedures used to implement typical projects at LAG level [with a view to identifying those that are most effective] was also raised.

- 2) Role/impact of the Leader approach. The question of Leader's real 'impact' was raised. The participants were prompted to discuss the significance of the Leader approach and its application in the RD programmes, in order to inform future EN RD and the Contact Point activities.

The main points raised during the discussion were:-

- Despite the complexity of measuring the impact of Leader and relatively small geographical scale of reference [at the level of individual LAGs], the impact of the Leader approach to date is not questioned.
- The Court of Auditors itself has recognised the added value of Leader both in terms of 'soft' and 'hard' outcomes. The assessment of this added value can take into consideration indicators such as: i) the multiplier effect at the local level, and; ii) the combined impact of a very large number of small-scale projects.
- The evaluation process will help to draw conclusions on the results of Leader at the end of the programming period in order to eventually modify the approach in future. From the Commission's viewpoint, it is important to focus on the present budget dedicated to Axis 4 and on the expected results.

- 3) Members were invited to propose ideas and contributions regarding actions to consider in the capacity building process and communication strategy for the EN RD. The benefit of identifying and sharing common fields of actions and tools was expressed by members. The role of the Contact Point could be decisive in this regard.

9. Practical arrangements and next steps

The Commission invited members to submit written contributions and proposals regarding proposed 2nd year EN RD activities taking into account the main issues, particularly those relating to Leader, by 15/05/09. The Commission itself will elaborate the EN RD's annual work programme for the 2nd year taking into account the proposals received.

Annexes:

- *Members of the Leader subcommittee (presence list)*
- *Informal Report from the afternoon session of the LEADER Subcommittee meeting 28th April 2009 compiled by Paul Keating.*