

Informal Report from the afternoon session of the LEADER Subcommittee meeting 28th April 2009:

Compiled by Paul Keating

Setting the context

The moderator gave an overview of the discussion held in the morning sessions. This was presented under three headings, "A Time of Transition", "The meeting of Cultures" and "Looking Forward". The following section summarises these with some inputs from participants included as quotes.

1 *A Time of Transition*

It was proposed that this is a time of transition for the programme. This transition effects performance at all levels and while it is inevitable in a new programme it was suggested that there are particular challenges in this period.

1. The transition from Structural Funds to the European Agriculture Fund from Rural Development involves adopting to new project management and control practices as well as partnering with new organisations and taking on new priorities.
2. There is the usual restructuring which happens at the beginning of any new programming period.
3. The global economic downturn has had significant impact on many aspects of the programme from resources available to national governments, distribution of funds within the programmes, access to matching funding and the availability of credit to rural enterprises. There was also a feeling that the relationships of trust and partnership may be challenged in such a context.
4. New institutions at national and regional level are being established.
5. The restructuring or establishment of the LAGs at local level has also proved challenging.

"Things have gotten more complicated. It is harder to deliver this programme and we should question how mainstreaming is working on the ground."

"The burden of paperwork makes it difficult to keep people enthusiastic."

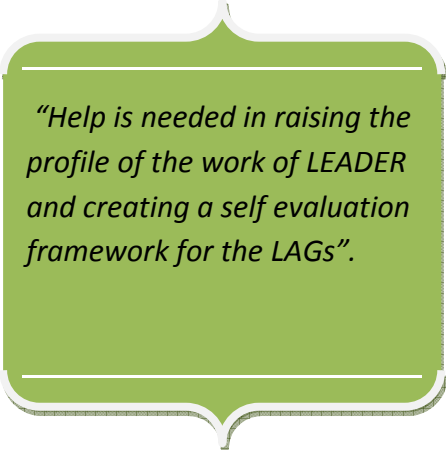
Observation by the Moderator

Uncertainty at times such as this is inevitable. This uncertainty is different for those with experience of LEADER+ and indeed LEADER 1 and 2 as they are perhaps comparing this programme with those which went before. We need to evaluate how the mainstreaming programme is performing and to be proactive in recognising and solving problems. It is important at such times that motivation is maintained as within the LEADER programme. The personal commitment and motivation of people at all levels is undoubtedly a critical and perhaps an acknowledged success factor within the LEADER approach.

2 *The Meeting of Cultures*

This programme sees the merging of institutional cultures in a new and challenging way. As with any cultural interaction this is both enriching and potentially challenging, however it is important that this is recognised and addressed.

1. The meeting of the bottom up approach of the LEADER organisations is now interacting with what is often a very well structured and hierarchal system within the Agricultural sector. It was acknowledged that both are equally valid and serve their purposes well however there can be misunderstanding and conflicting approaches when they come together.
2. There is also the apparent meeting of a culture of necessary flexibility among groups on the ground looking to implement development projects and one of necessary bureaucracy within the organisations with the responsibility for controlling funds.
3. The fact that the visibility of the LEADER programmes was quiet low compared with many other initiatives was highlighted. This may be a characteristic of LAGs whereby they are often slow to promote themselves and take credit for achievements.
4. New relationships are being established between institution at national and regional level with MAs, PAs, and the NRNs as well as the representative networks which exist in many countries.
5. We also discussed the culture of external evolution and that of self evaluation as needing to be addressed. This relates to a culture of the LAG as a subject of evaluation or as being more proactive as a self reflective learning organisation.



“Help is needed in raising the profile of the work of LEADER and creating a self evaluation framework for the LAGs”.

Observation by the Moderator

The integration of the LAGs and the broader Agriculture, Agri business and Agri Environment sectors is perhaps the biggest challenge and the greatest potential of this new programme. The LEADER movement is at a disadvantage as its approach, while valued in many places, is not consistently understood or universally accepted as being of strategic importance to the sector. It would be useful if a concerted effort was made to address this from both the top down and the bottom up. There is little doubt that the competition for resources which is an ongoing issue when it comes to national and EU funds, will intensify in the context of declining budgets. The mid term evaluation and the negotiations to develop the next programme will be beginning in earnest in 2010, it will be important that the NRNs can play a constructive role in this process and in defining areas of mutual interest between stakeholders and synergies across the measures.

3 *The way forward.*

Without exception the feeling from the group was that the challenges which faced the programme could be addressed and that the skills and experience to do so was within the committee. At the offset a “straw pole” was undertaken to assess the level of experience available within the committee.

Approximately 10% of the committee were new to LEADER, most people had significant experience of LEADER +and a significant number had been involved in LEADER 1and 2.

1. There was a sense among the group that there needed to be a proactive approach taken in addressing obstacles which emerge with real solutions rather than simply identifying and sharing them. This needed to be the case across the axes.
2. The issue of constructive mainstreaming and developing the close relationship with the Agri Sector and the 3 axes was discussed. This may involve the need to rebuild LAGs in the case of some countries where the old LAGs have not secured funding or have had to be reconstructed to comply with new regulations.
3. There is an emphasis on the need to measure impact and the added value of Networking within the overall programme. This is particularly urgent in the context of the midterm review. We also need to look actively to the future and the evolution of the programme after 2013.
4. There was a strong consciousness that the mechanisms we develop to look at problems and solutions can listen to the reality on the ground and become a channel for change.

4 Practical Suggestions

This section attempted to develop some practical suggestions as to how the ENRD can support the members of the sub committee. These suggestions arose for the discussion and also for informal feedback sheets provided to the moderator subsequent to the meeting.

4.1 Sharing Best Practice

1. There should be a publication of all the national operational rules on Axes 4 so that we can compare and learn from good and simple examples.
2. We need to have a guide on the administration procedures for implementing LEADER at LAG level across the three axes.
3. We should identify innovative communication tools to enable the NRNs to interact effectively with the stakeholders.
4. We should create a database of the administrative bottlenecks and the solutions developed to overcome them in different areas.
5. We should be more visible (proactive) in sharing the problems we face in implementing the LEADER mainstreaming and in developing and sharing solutions.

4.2 Looking to the Future

6. We should have a "Future Conference" with grassroots rural actors at European level discussing the future.
7. We should record interviews with innovative experts (consultants, researchers, LAG managers, administration) and make them available to all. These people should be asked to speak about the future innovations and rural development (LEADER 2020!!!)

4.3 Training/Capacity Building

8. There should be interactive training for the Managing authorities and the Payment Agencies on the methodology and practice of administration of the LEADER approach.
9. There should be training for trainers in the LEADER approach as well as direct training for LAGs.

4.4 Networking

10. There should be a forum for the Managing Authorities to meet and discuss the bottlenecks and solutions as to how to overcome them.
11. We should encourage meetings of the informal networks of LAGs to identify issues and challenges that they face.
12. We need to know what is happening right now!! Develop a dynamic database on the development and evolution of projects.
13. The national networks and the ENRD should be models of best practice when it comes to holding interactive and innovative events.
 - a. **We should use small group discussions more at meetings**
 - b. **We should circulate profiles of the members of the committee and their organisations.**
 - c. **We should actively evaluate the impact of networking events**
14. Use blogging technology on the site to enable comment and feedback.

4.5 Getting the message out there

15. Access other audiences using popular social networking tools, myspace, facebook twitter etc...
16. Develop publications on LEADER targeting specific external audiences
 - a. University Students of Rural Development or related subjects
 - b. Environmentalists,
 - c. The Agricultural sector,
 - d. Economists
 - e. Secondary Schools
17. Commission a TV documentary on the passion of LEADER

It was suggested that we should develop a way of interacting which enables us to identify share and solve problems in a structured but informal way between the meetings of the sub-committee. The concept of focus/working/ad hoc groups or forums was discussed in some length.

5.1 The possible Topics

A number of topics were suggested as possible issues to be addressed these have not been presented in any order and do not reflect the full range of potential issues but rather a starting point for discussion.

1. **Mainstreaming LEADER across the Axes** We should look at developing a resource which looks at how Axes 4 is applied across the other 3 axes.
2. **Transnational Cooperation.** This would look at the procedural or regulatory regime applying to Transnational Co-operation across in the various member states and to encourage MA to collaborate in minimising administrative bottlenecks.
3. **Experiences in the implementation of "normal projects"** Rather than focus exclusively on best practice we could look at the procedures relating to the delivery of normal projects at LAG level.
4. **Evaluation.** The issue of evaluation of LAGs and NRNs came as one whereby support was needed.
5. **LEADER and Other programmes.** Perhaps a group could look at other programmes within the ESF or other funds which complement LEADER and which LAGs could access.

5.2 The challenges in taking this approach.

As was pointed out by the chairman, the committee needs to be careful not to be seen to establish any further sub groups as this is not catered for in its TOR and would need a formal mechanism for endorsement etc which may not be desirable. It was also agreed that any initiative such as this would take time and resources.

5.3 The strengths in taking this approach

Many of the issues are of immediate concern to members; this approach would enable a relatively quick and comprehensive response to be developed.

The issues raised may be of interest only to a small number of members, only those for whom the issue is a priority need become directly involved.

This approach would further develop mutually supportive relationships between NRN and MA and other Sub –Committee members across the programme.

5.4 Moving Forward

It would seem that an informal approach to groups would be most likely to succeed. This could be facilitated on an ad-hoc basis by contact point as part of its role or could be facilitated by the NRNs themselves. A number of the members volunteered to become active before the next meeting of the sub Committee in moving this issue forward, both in addressing its feasibility and a possible methodology.

Observation by the Moderator

While it is obvious that this is a challenging time for the programme it is encouraging to see the level of engagement and enthusiasm to share and develop solutions. There is also a considerable mix of skills and experiences in the committee. As with LAGs "on the ground" without doubt the greatest asset available to the programme is the constructive committeemen of those who believe strongly in the value of the LEADER approach. One of the challenges faced by the sub-committee relates to the meeting of enthusiasm and passion with the necessary culture of more formal institution. The development of a mechanism, either formal or informal, through the subcommittee, through contact point or as a mutual support initiative between MAs and NRNs would be very useful and should be progressed as a priority.

As subcommittee members we should have confidence that the principles of partnership and innovation apply to us as much as to LAGs. We should be encouraged by the commitment on the part of the commission to consider new approaches to the work of the subcommittee. We should acknowledge the capacity and creativity of contact point in generating mechanisms to move such issues forward and we should rely on the ongoing support and encouragement available through our fellow members of the committee.

Please forward any observations or clarifications directly to:

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