



## **Demonstrating the 'Added Value' of Networking Literature Screening**

Nov 2012



*Connecting Rural Europe*

## Executive Summary

The value of networking within the EU and domestic rural development policies is increasingly widely acknowledged. A growing body of informed opinion has emerged on the effectiveness of rural networks at engaging stakeholders as well as promoting and enhancing the implementation of Rural Development Programmes. This paper intends to provide an overview on the 'added value' of networking as has been identified in the available literature.

Although there is a strong recognition of the increased importance of networks the literature demonstrates that there is no universal definition of the terms network or networking. Broader concepts associated with activation of resources and information flow between individuals and groups tend to be utilised. Equally the lack of a clear understanding of the 'added value' of networking has led instead to observations of networking functions such as their meaning, impacts, forms, aspects, consequences and benefits.

The main obstacle in identifying the 'added value' has been the lack of effective mechanisms for measuring the outcomes of networks and networking, partly because they are so diverse. Networking is however broadly understood to add value through the development of social capital, by enabling the creation and development of territorial and individual identity, improving governance, encouraging the exchange of know-how and facilitating the delivery of rural development policy. Networks enable rural development efforts to become better coordinated around a common 'culture' or rural development strategy and support innovation, flexibility and responsiveness in rural areas. Critics counter these suggestions arguing that the added value of networking is limited. They believe networking appears to be unable to develop social capital where it does not already exist and feel that not all networks are transparent and inclusive, resulting in unfair access to information and resources.

A possible methodology for improving the investigation of the 'added value' of networking could make more use of applied research involving participatory approaches including an exploration of the conditions that would lead to maximising the effects of networking. Some of the theoretical concepts emerging from the literature could also be illustrated with the evidence collected through other activities including the Joint NRN Action on 'Demonstrating the added value of Networking'.

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## Introduction

The following literature review aims to identifying current knowledge on the key concepts and relevant terminology of networks and networking as well as various accepted and contested perspectives on the 'added value' of rural development networking.

This literature screening has been almost exclusively focused upon available academic sources. Nonetheless it has not been limited to only one discipline as authors dealing with rural development networking operate theories and approaches originating from various scientific fields or having a multi-disciplinary character. These concern mainly: anthropology, economy, geography, political science, psychology, sociology and spatial planning. Combining different disciplines for analysing rural networking seems to be applicable in order to tackle the complex features of this phenomenon. Additionally, indications of the 'added value' of networking have been extracted from the EU legal and working documents, as well as wider literature on networks.

As a result of this screening it has become apparent that there is no universal definition of networks or networking. Most commonly, this refers to activation of resources and information flow between individuals and groups involved in particular structures or processes, here relating to rural development. To understand them an operationalization of the concept may be useful. The following literature screening aims to create such an opportunity, while focusing specifically on the 'added value' that networking may generate.

There is a wide consensus among scholars that networking has become increasingly important. They underlie the superior notion of social relationships and ties between people and resources which shape the so-called 'networked society'. Gradually, networking becomes an overarching paradigm explaining social processes and structures in a number of arenas, including European Union and rural development policies.

Thus far the literature examined has not provided any explicit theoretical or evidence based answer to the question of what the 'added value' of networking is. There have been rather different notions applied, observing networking from the perspectives of its functions, meaning, impacts, forms, aspects, consequences and benefits for rural development. Nevertheless in this study they have been considered as semantic equivalents of the 'added value'. It has also become apparent that the 'added value' of networking is context sensitive, thus can be viewed as such only under certain circumstances, e.g. with regard to a network type or maturity.

As a result of the screening the 'added value of networking' can potentially be identified in the following major fields:

- Conceptualising framework
- Brokering knowledge and innovating
- Enhancing social capital
- Improving governance

Although by some it is seen as a panacea for numerous deficits, the concept of networking has also been faced with substantial critics. The main obstacles in identifying its 'added value' have been found with regard to the methodology focused on measurement and specific circumstances of networking, pointing out the inefficiencies or negative effects of the approach. There is a notable challenge in providing evidence on the value of networking and a widely acceptable argument in favour of this concept.

# 1. Key Concepts from the Literature

## 1.1. Typology of networks

On the basis of the literature examined a twofold meaning of ‘networks’ and ‘networking’ can be distinguished. The first one relates to structures whereas the latter is linked with processes. Both ‘networks’ and ‘networking’ are often applied simultaneously or confused. Occasionally networks are also described as ‘webs’, ‘partnerships’, ‘chains’ or ‘clusters’. In this paper such divisions have been kept where it seemed more reasonable or linked with the vocabulary used in the literature.

Since there is no widespread definition of networks it may be helpful to look at their typologies. They relate to specific arenas, forms, functions or issues which occupy network members. In some cases a type of network is defined by contrast with its opposite form (e.g. vertical vs. horizontal).

The following table outlines major types of networks found in the literature surveyed:

**Table 1: Typology of networks based on the literature**

<b>TYPES OF NETWORKS</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
<b>Informal (organic) networks</b>	Networks resulting from natural interactions between members and a process of self-organisation	<b>Frost (2011), Cannarella &amp; Piccioni (2006),</b>
vs.	vs.	
<b>Formal (engineered) networks</b>	Networks established by an external agency on the basis of an explicit agreement	<b>Marquardt et al. (2011)</b>
<b>Vertical networks</b>	Networks built on relations of power and dependencies in the food chain	<b>Murdoch (2000)</b>
vs.	vs.	
<b>Horizontal networks (networks of innovation and learning)</b>	Networks relying upon relations of flexibility, trust and diversity, where mutual knowledge and cooperation is fostered and determined spatially	
<b>Networks of practice (NoP) / Communities of practice (CoP)</b>	Networks where members share the same concerns and participate in mutual exchange of their practices and know-how	<b>Oreszczyn et al. (2010)</b>
<b>Hierarchical networks</b>	Networks created, developed, supported and financed by public institutions	<b>Cannarella &amp; Piccioni (2006)</b>
<b>Peer-to-peer networks</b>	Networks which are not linked to a dominant agent’s behaviour	<b>Cannarella &amp; Piccioni (2006)</b>
<b>Knowledge / learning networks</b>	Networks involving expertise, leading to know-how transfer and innovation	<b>Cannarella &amp; Piccioni (2006), Ward et al. (2005)</b>
<b>Territorial networks</b>	Networks acting with regard to a certain territory	<b>Cannarella &amp; Piccioni (2006)</b>
<b>Communities of identity</b>	Networks focusing on creating a shared identity among members around certain territory (esp. in LEADER)	<b>Lee et al. (2005)</b>

<b>Administrative networks</b>	Networks that facilitate effective programme implementation	<b>Marquardt et al. (2011)</b>
<b>Policy networks</b>	Networks that include actors involved in the formulation and implementation of a policy in a given sector	<b>Clarotti (2001), Henning (2009)</b>

With specific regard to networking within the European Commission, four types of ‘policy networks’ can be distinguished (Clarotti, 2001):

- Networks for information and assistance to citizens and organisations on Commission policies or programmes;
- Networks for consultation when defining or reviewing a policy or programme;
- Networks for implementing and adapting EU policies such as programmes or legislation;
- Networks for developing policies/policy making (including regulation).

## 1.2. Conceptualising the framework

In the vast majority of the literature reviewed networking is perceived as a tool to analyse contemporary rural society, labelled as ‘networked society’. However, networking as an analytical term (or paradigm) is not solely limited to an academic discourse and empirical research, but is in parallel applied by practitioners, including those dealing with rural development.

The ‘Network paradigm’ becomes increasingly important for understanding and explaining complex processes and issues that drive the development of rural areas in the present day. It provides a conceptual framework that justifies practical instruments to address different needs of the heterogeneous, multi-faceted rural society and puts more emphasis on ‘development’ of rural areas as such (Murdoch, 2000; Schmitt, 2011; Ventura et al., 2008). In addition, networking is seen as an ordinary ‘way of working’ (Frost, 2011).

Particularly, networking is perceived as a synthesis, complement or alternative (‘third way’), to the traditional development models of rural areas. It has been contrasted with the exogenous (top-down) and endogenous (bottom-up) development approaches, as well as approaches based solely on the market (‘market failure’) or state regulation (‘government failure’). In the light of theories advocating networking all these approaches fail to address rural development when being practiced separately. Networking is thus considered as an alternative paradigm, having potential to overcome their limitations and being a mechanism of neo-endogenous development (Amin & Thrift, 1995; Börzel & Heard-Laureote, 2009; Murdoch, 2000; Van der Ploeg & Van Dijk, 1995).

Positive effects of networking have also been noted with regard to human interactions. According to Duguet (2006), networks offer a meeting space for individuals with different needs, where they can negotiate and adjust their common goals. In result of their interactions, rural development efforts become better coordinated around a common ‘culture’ of rural development strategy (e.g. substantiated as Local Development Strategies of Local Action Groups) and collaborative planning (Shucksmith, 2009).

In addition networks raise the importance of a ‘territory’ and allow for creation of an identity and branding around a certain area (Lee et al., 2005; Ventura et al. 2008). For instance LEADER networks strongly rely on building common identity within the communities operating in LEADER regions.

Local Development Strategies are territorially embedded and LEADER inspired identity may boost the local economy through creating and selling territorially related brands, e.g. local food products.

**For further info:**

**Case study**

*Networking in neo-endogenous rural development in United Kingdom (Frost, 2011) and Spain (Galdeano-Gomez et al., 2011)*

### 1.3. Brokering knowledge and innovation

Nowadays rural areas are continuously facing dynamically changing economic settings characterised by a high level of risk and uncertainty. Their dynamics require constant efforts to improve adaptation mechanisms and respond to a rapidly growing number of challenges (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Ventura et al., 2008). At this point networking can be practiced as a flexible mechanism that prevents or counteracts crisis situations; easing adaptation to the 'New Rural Economy' and facilitating prompt access to resources (Galdeano-Gomez et al., 2010; Marquardt et al., 2011). Under these circumstances the importance of access to relevant information and knowledge brokerage is increasingly gaining in importance (Karner et al., 2011).

Participation in a network allows members to benefit from exchange of their know-how and experiences. According to Oreszczyn et al. (2010), who classify rural development networks as networks of practice, their members share common activity, concerns and interests. They are oriented towards mutual exchange that allows the generation of knowledge through social learning mechanisms (learning from each other through interactions). Sharing practice between members within networks leads to cumulating their existing knowledge and experiences, exchange of know-how and transferring them into new contexts.

Similarly, Murdoch (2000) views networks as agents of innovation, which becomes possible thanks to learning mechanisms and consequently leads to economic development in rural areas. Horizontal networks of innovation and learning (based on flexibility, trust and diversity) are here contrasted with vertical networks of the food chain (based on power relationships). In particular, he valorises the role of horizontal networks in creating innovation: they move beyond the traditional sectoral approaches and focus on assets other than agriculture and economic patterns of development, thus also recognising the importance of 'social' and 'intangible' aspects. In contrast to the vertical networks, they represent a more holistic view of the rural economy and target the generation of benefits across various sectors.

As a result of networking, interacting actors become more competitive, waste less time gaining access to rural development funding and benefit more from the available support than those acting separately (Marquardt et al., 2009). Particularly, they offer resistance mechanisms against failure of a single member (Clarotti, 2001) and are thus cost effective ways to assess or provide goods and services (Mendizabal, 2008). Unfolding the 'webs' of activities, processes, people and resources should contribute to improved performance of regional rural economies (Van der Ploeg & Marsden, 2008).

## Further information

### Case studies

- *Networking in the knowledge-based economy in United Kingdom (Ward et al., 2005)*
- *Fruit sector network in Latvia (Tisenkopfs et al., 2012)*

## 1.4. Enhancing social capital

Rural development networks play an active role in enhancing social capital which is seen as a key prerequisite for effective rural development (Lee et al., 2005; Marquardt et al., 2011; Wiesinger, 2007). Most commonly social capital is understood as the resources of individuals that are activated if linked to their formal or informal membership in networks. Thus, rural development networks can be specific catalysts of social capital, helping to activate the resources of individual members of the rural population in order to boost rural development (Lee et al., 2005). These are in particular trust, civicism and ability to collaborate with others (Wiesinger, 2007).

Enhancing social capital becomes possible through bridging and capacity building mechanisms. This means creating opportunities for members of networks to interact and an investment into the development of the knowledge and skills of the rural population. Networks are here a useful mechanism that allows for gathering different actors and activating their particular capitals. As a result of interactions between individuals in networks, based on mutual exchange and social learning, their capitals become reinforced and synergies among their particular capitals created adding a new value into development processes (Hearn & Mendizabal, 2011; Murdoch, 2000).

With regards to the strengthening of social capital the main benefits can be found in the activities of the networks that deal with constructing a rural identity. The key facilitators here are LEADER networks. Within this approach creation of identity on the basis of specific rural territory determines the resources to be activated and utilised for development purposes. LAGs integrate members around shared territorial identity that is also visible and often attractive for outsiders ('communities of identity', Lee et al., 2005).

On the basis of such an identity branding of a territory becomes possible and territorially branded products can be marketed (e.g. as local products) and consequently distributed raising the incomes of the rural population.

Furthermore working in a network demonstrates the potential to reinforce individuals (Duguet, 2010): they start to feel more powerful than when acting alone. Together in a network, rural development actors become able to build their own identity and a lobby that represents their interests in the broad policy context; this boosts continuity and counteracts the marginalisation of rural society. Also, in this perspective rural development networks promote European values and identity that can be built at various levels (from local to global).



## Further information

### Case studies:

- *Empowering rural communities in LEADER networks through animation in Hungary (Katona-Kovacs et al., 2011)*
- *Enhancing social capital through LEADER networks in Austria (Wiesinger et al., 2007)*

## 1.5. Improving governance

Another area where the benefits of networking have been observed relates to governance processes embedded in the specific framework of EU policies (and including domestic policies of the Member States). In this context networks have been particularly recognised as tools that allow for the facilitation of various policy mechanisms within the on-going institutional reforms of the EU (such as reform of the Common Agricultural Policy) as well as facilitating their understanding (Moschitz & Stolze, 2010), and execution (Kull, 2008, 2009). Essentially, they correspond with dynamic democracy and governance processes (such as changes in decision making and power relationships), and where specific attention can be paid to emerging policy networks contrasted with the traditional approach of a centralised institution (Agranoff, 2003).

The institutional reforms of the EU have been largely focused upon multi-level and good governance mechanisms and included in the following papers: *European Governance. A White Paper (2001)*, expanded with the *Committee of the Regions White Paper on Multi-Level Governance (2010)*. Bearing in mind threats of democratic deficits, in these documents 5 principles on which decision making should be based have been laid down: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Accordingly, networks have been recognised as agents of change that should contribute to ensuring these principles and improve execution of the subsidiarity principle. In particular networks should allow for making EU and domestic policies more open and closer to citizens, thus more effective in addressing their issues.

The changing EU policy framework also refers to strengthening participatory and deliberative democracy. These concepts imply involving as many members of society as possible in decision making through participatory mechanisms, stimulating engagement and constant negotiations of different perspectives. However, due to the fact that direct inclusion and engagement of large society groups would not be practically possible, it needs to be facilitated by mediating structures (or reflexive agencies) which are offered by networks (Duguet, 2006; Marquardt et al., 2009; Nemes, 2004; Schmitt, 2011). Ideally networks represent numerous actors, integrating a broad scope of various interest groups (stakeholders) and permit for building a space (real or virtual) where they can meet, exchange and seek a common action, especially influencing policy.

Multi-level governance, in contrast with governing, denotes blurring boundaries between sectors and changing the notion of power relationships in vertical administrative settings (bottom-up and top-down decision making). Thus, possibly it gains on effectiveness when driven by the collaborative planning of networks crossing those boundaries (Shucksmith, 2008; Frost, 2011; Lee et al. 2005, Van der Ploeg, 2000, Shucksmith 2009). Specifically they may facilitate interactions between local and non-local level actors and thus let the voices be heard of those situated far from decision-making centres (Frost, 2011). In turn they may contribute to empowerment of local communities and individuals (Clarotti, 2001; Davies, 2002; Schmitt, 2011).

Acting in partnership is seen as a principal prerequisite for achieving the ‘added value’ of networking (Davies, 2002; Marquardt et al., 2009) and often the notion of ‘network’ and ‘partnership’ tends to overlap. Ideally partners have equal position where their relative power is not the matter of social control, but rather production (‘power to’ instead of ‘power over’). It is executed in a decentralised manner, no longer dominated by the central state actors. Multi-actor and multi-level partnerships change the perception of power in decision making, which becomes a shared responsibility between actors (Davies, 2002). In the light of the actor-network theory (ANT), power in networks becomes diffused, negating the traditional top-down ways of governing and authorities (Murdoch, 2000). This in turn contributes to a greater policy transparency, accountability and legitimacy (Kaiser, 2009).

Rural development policy delivery can also be facilitated and improved by networks (Frost, 2011; Marquardt et al., 2011) through increasing organisational and staff capacities of those dealing with delivery of Rural Development Programmes. In particular, institutionalised networks help to increase the quality of rural development policy through brokering knowledge and allow for a greater policy transparency by applying social control mechanisms (e.g. multi-actor monitoring committees dealing with progress of rural development policy delivery).

Networking can also be viewed as a means of counteraction against corruption and an incentive to build a certain political culture in countries with those democratic deficits. Acting as an external technical assistance (like in the case of Romania, explored by Marquardt et al., 2009, 2011 or Lithuania, Macken-Walsh, 2009) they may promote trust and new forms of social control emanating from the positively perceived values of the EU ‘community’. Networks may act as external agents of change and a ‘check and balance’ for domestic policies. They appear to be useful in areas with long-term state reliance through provision of capacity building and empowerment (Murdoch, 2000; Nemes, 2005).

Furthermore, inclusion of a wide variety of actors allows for a deeper insight into a broad scope of perspectives of the heterogeneous rural society and for their better recognition by decision makers, with a view to improve redistribution mechanisms. Specifically networking leads to incorporating local (‘tacit’) knowledge into decision making (Shucksmith, 2009). Inclusion of marginalised rural representatives helps to recognise their specific needs and channel rural development funding to address their issues.

With regard to the objectives of Rural Development Programmes and LEADER in particular, networking contributes to a better dissemination of good practices and the results of interventions. Mechanisms applied by networks serve dissemination of information about and promotion of rural development. Networks also facilitate contacts between different partners for the purpose of cooperation (Duguet, 2006).

**Case studies:**

- *Policy outputs of the organic farming policy networks in Czech Republic and Poland (Moschitz & Stolze, 2010)*
- *Contribution of LEADER networks to multi-level governance (Kull, 2009)*
- *Technical assistance and European integration through LEADER networks in Romania (Marquardt et al., 2009, 2011), Lithuania (Macken-Walsh, 2009) and in Hungary (Nemes, 2004)*
- *Partnership processes in environmental networks in United Kingdom (Davies, 2002)*
- *Contribution of environmental cooperatives to governance in Netherlands (Wiskerke et al., 2003)*

## 2. Contested perspectives

Although being increasingly recognised as an important paradigm and a practical tool to address the issues of contemporary rural society, there are still critical voices that can be heard when trying to identify the 'added value' of networking. Some consider networking as simply an overarching approach, others that networks are only one of many tools which sometimes fail to deliver their promises.

Most commonly critics have been focused upon the methodology applied to identify the effects of networking activities. According to Frost (2011), difficulties appear with accrediting networking and networks with delivery of actual, measurable outputs and outcomes. Possibly the issues raised can be explained by the paradigm complexity, characterised by the 'intangible' effects of informal institutions (High et al., 2005). Though it is not simply a matter of one clearly defined discipline, but is an object of interdisciplinary investigations and applications. The literature examined originating from various scientific fields provides diverse means of evidence on the 'added value of networking': both measurable (quantitative) indicators and intuitive (qualitative) assessments. Moreover, there are identifiable gaps between theoretical approaches and evidence based research.

Another context in which networking has been strongly criticised is in the notion of social capital. Regardless of the voices contesting social capital as a paradigm itself, the limitations of networking are seen in its apparent inability to create linkages between the resources of individuals in areas where no or little social capital exist. Hence social capital cannot be created through networking and networking can only be successful where a certain degree of social capital has been identified (Lee et al., 2005, Wiesinger, 2007).

With a view to governance processes, networks can also be seen as both positive and negative agents. In particular the negative effects of networking relate to issues of membership openness and inclusiveness: networks may involve unequal access to resources and benefits and an imbalanced spread of benefits between members and their competition (Lee et. al, 2005). Frequently participatory processes tend to be dominated by the most powerful local actors (Marquardt et al., 2011). Furthermore their competition may deepen the deficits of governance and policy legitimisation (Börzel & Heard-Laureote, 2009).

In networks social capital may be used by individuals or groups to keep benefits from any changes in their hands and limit the advantages for the wider population. The access to a network might be restricted and they may turn into powerful lobbies influencing policy makers (Clarotti, 2001). Networking may lack transparency (Börzel & Heard-Laureote, 2009). Thus an efficient networking approach must be rooted in a culture characterised by democratic principles. It has to be based on a collaborative atmosphere between different sectors and a high degree of trust. Networks must also be clear how they ensure equal balance between network members, engage effectively with them and mobilise less powerful actors in order that they are able to become involved in a common action (Carnegie UK Trust, 2011; Shucksmith, 2008)

Shared power and responsibility for decision making may be ambiguous features of networks. They can be particularly counterproductive when ensuring deliverables for which neither of the single members is clearly accountable (Shucksmith, 2008). Especially in networks with large numbers of actors where decision making tends to become highly time consuming.

There is no one-size-fits all approach to networking and types of networks. For instance, Marquardt et al. (2011) observed advantages in formal networking over informal: in formal networks the output is easier to predict (reliant on voluntary contributions and personal benefits), continuity can be better assured, the degree of commitment is higher, risk of losing information is reduced and the involvement of actors is more organised than in informal networks.

Networks operate in highly changing environments. Therefore it is desirable to maintain a high level of flexibility in order to adapt to change. They are constituted by actors and individuals representing plurality of principles, visions and norms, that need to be recombined according to the situation (Ventura, 2008). In order to achieve the greatest synergy, they have to be member-driven, and lead to perceived ownership of practice and policy by their members (Mendizabal, 2008).

Some literature also suggests the need to employ external factors to support networking. A contribution from public administration to networks seems to be crucial for successful rural development policy delivery. When serving as a target oriented instrument networking requires stimulating and support measures. The support of public administration is particularly sought where establishing networks would consume too much of the financial resources of stakeholders. It is also needed to ensure continuity of actions (Marquardt et al., 2009, 2011; Nemes, 2005).

A certain degree of flexibility has to be assured as too many rules hamper networking efficiency (Canarella & Piccioni, 2006). Networks operate in a very flexible, changing environment and resistance of public administration towards innovation might be a hindering factor (Marquardt et al., 2009; Murdoch, 2000). In disadvantaged regions which lack a history of collective action by the local population the exogenous policy stimulus may fail, as effective rural development policy cannot be engineered from the outside (Petrick, 2010). The effects of networking are questionable in areas that are progressively weakened in development. External guidance is needed there to enable the area to 'catch up' (Murdoch, 2000).

Moreover networking may fail where local ties are not strong enough. There is a call to boost trust between network members based on the mechanism of social control. Successful networking requires intensive social interactions and close relationships. In specific circumstances external networks such as ENRD may provide a sort of check and balance for the national networks, if there is an issue of mistrust between stakeholders (Marquardt et al., 2009, 2011).

Creating networks may also be resource inefficient, involving high transaction costs. It requires investing funds and time and can be hindered by the remoteness of rural areas. Successful networking is not possible without the involvement of the members, which need to be motivated with incentives and reciprocity.

In large international networks, physical distance, language and cultural barriers have to be overcome in order to build a strong community based on trust and effective cooperation. Spatially distant network members cannot operate only through ICT tools, but also need to meet face-to-face frequently and ensure a smooth flow of information (Canarella & Piccioni, 2006; Henning, 2009; Marquardt et al., 2009, 2011).

The network approach is most applicable when there are many fairly autonomous actors without any central authority, in large projects with many stakeholders, where there are multiple objectives and in projects designed to function as networks (Ramalingam, 2011). If there is a lack of investment in the community building function of the network and more on administration or the channelling of funding, they become more like a secretariat and thus not real networks any more (Mendizabal, 2008).

Partnership is crucial to create the 'added value of networking', to overcome the issues of power redistribution, domination of particular actors, and collective action. The question has to be answered, whether networks are inclusive or exclusive and how they benefit the local population (Davies, 2002).

## Conclusions

The following literature review aimed to provide a multi-perspective overview on the potential 'added value' of networking. Involving mainly desk-research, it has been concentrated on extracting relevant theoretical concepts as well as identifying potential evidence-based case studies, illustrating the operation of these concepts in practice.

As a result of the screening, the potential positive contribution of networks has been recognised with regard to: conceptualising the framework ('networked society'), brokering knowledge and innovation (thus boosting rural economy), enhancing social capital (resulting in empowered, more resilient rural communities) and improving governance (facilitating delivery of EU rural development policy). On the other hand contested visions emerged that diminish the credibility of networking, in particular due to the difficulty measuring its actual effects. The various circumstances under which networks operate more or less effectively were taken into account and different types of networks were examined.

The analytical work carried out was not exhaustive due to both methodological issues and to the limited availability of relevant evidence-based research addressing the 'added value' of networking. The main obstacle in the screening task was related to the multi-faceted, trans-disciplinary nature of networking, especially when endeavouring to tackle its 'intangible' effects. However, networking is still a relatively young paradigm in rural development research and with time this screening can be complemented with new knowledge.

It appears that there is almost no direct evidence in scientific literature of the 'added value' of networking within the ENRD and NRNs. This is probably due to the fact that these networks are relatively young and as such have not been popularised among researchers. Thus, in this paper a number of findings have been derived from the evidence linked with the LEADER networks, as well as networks embedded in the agri-food and environmental context.

As many of the major critics focus on the difficulties related with measurability and adoption of an appropriate methodology for networking research, additional work could be undertaken to explore and reinforce these approaches. Based on recent developments in the literature and discussions with networks a possible methodology for investigating the 'added value' of networking could make more use of applied research involving participatory approaches, such as participatory action research (PAR) and participatory evaluation. These are currently becoming important paradigms in the research about European rural development policy. In particular they focus on strengthening self-reflection, knowledge brokering and learning mechanisms within networks.

Understanding of the added value of networks would be further promoted through the development of an insight into the networking experiences of non-EU rural development networks (some of them existing longer than the ENRD) as well as following relevant investigations carried out within the recent FP7-funded projects. Currently two of these demonstrate the potential for synergy with the 'added value' of networking exercise:

- [FOODLINKS](#): focusing on knowledge brokerage mechanisms and generation of innovation through networking
- [SOLINSA](#): examining learning mechanisms in networks involving PAR

The other obstacles to overcome are related to circumstances which enable or disable networking. In particular, this may for instance refer to the composition of networks, issues of inclusiveness / exclusiveness, engineered / voluntary character or management styles. They could be explored in a more detailed analysis in order to identify conditions that will potentially lead to maximising networking effects, while focusing on the specifics of the ENRD and NRNs.

Some of the theoretical concepts emerging from the literature could also be illustrated with the evidence collected through other activities under the Joint NRN Action on 'Demonstrating the added value of Networking', such as success stories and case studies. These have the potential to deliver answers to questions on effective networking taking into account relative conditions under which networks operate. Possibly the further collection of success stories could be streamlined so as to respond to questions that remain unanswered in the available scientific literature. Reflections could also be made on different networking settings, such as the structures and processes involved in delivering the Rural Development Programmes.

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