



Added Value of Networking Case Study

Learning by Doing –

Monitoring and evaluation with Rural Development actors

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AVN Case Study: Learning by Doing – monitoring and evaluation with Rural Development actors

Executive summary

In 2009 the NRN brought together a range of stakeholders to explore the complexities and challenges of the administration of the RDP. A range of potential and actual solutions were identified, some of which were then implemented to ensure effective delivery of the RDP. In 2013 the stakeholders were interviewed to review the changes that had taken place, assess their effectiveness and highlight any new or different challenges that had been encountered.

The stakeholders formed working groups around specific issues and so had a strong sense of ownership of the challenge and developing effective solutions which would further support delivery. This ensured the stakeholders ‘followed through’ and continued to be engaged with the process. It was hoped this practitioners’ perspective could then inform the development of the 2014-2020 RDP.

Methodology

This case study has been developed with the support of the National Rural Network of the Netherlands.

Background

‘Netwerk Platteland’, the National Rural Network of the Netherlands received several comments from people who have been working in rural development since 2009, about complexities and bottlenecks associated with the procedures of the Dutch RDP (2007-2013). As the RDP was in the early stages of the programme period the Network felt there was sufficient time for change and adjustment. To facilitate work in the field and smooth implementation of the RDP, Netwerk Platteland organised an interactive working session with policy makers, LEADER secretaries, DLG (the Government Service for Land and Water Management) and Regiebureau POP to discuss these complexities and develop possible solutions together.

In 2013 the Network felt the need to evaluate the results of this first evaluation and explore what had happened with the solutions brought forward in 2009. Therefore a round of several interviews with a diverse set of actors from different working backgrounds was undertaken. In addition, an outlook perspective was taken during the interviews in order to inform policy makers about developments and complexities that would be relevant for the new RDP period (2014-2010). Based on long-term experience working in the RDP, the insights of these actors would provide a fruitful insight for policy makers currently writing the national RDP for 2014-2020. The analysis of this exercise was disseminated internally to the government’s RDP writing teams and online on the webpage of Netwerk Platteland.

Participants of networking

The Network Platteland team carried out the work themselves, involving a range of rural development stakeholders.

Objectives

The aim of the working session in 2009 was to support and facilitate effective rural development so that more efficient cooperation around, and implementation of, the RDP could take place. The purpose of the evaluation in 2013 was to learn what had been achieved during the past 4 years of RDP implementation.

The process and main activities

In 2009 a unique evaluation method was used in that the responsibility for developing solutions was assigned to a specific working group, such as leaders, DLG or policy makers (regional or national). This meant that a specific governance group was identified for each problem and accordingly this empowered them to act, as these were solutions based on the collective, informed consent of practitioners from the entire policy field. Dissemination therefore was also carried out by activating the working groups themselves. The Network also published blogs and reports on its own website.

During the 2013 evaluation, useful recommendations for the new RDP (2014-2020) were identified throughout interviews with the rural stakeholders. A report with these findings was written, disseminated with policy makers during an internal writing session and followed by an active discussion which aimed to stress the need for improvement on specific aspects. More broadly papers were also disseminated at policy conferences and discussed in specific workshops.

From the interviews (2013) it became clear that several solutions from the 2009 round had been acted upon. However, some new complexities were identified and some long term issues continued to exist. An example is the method of providing an advance payment to a project so that investments can be made. At the 2009 working session, it was proposed that DLG would work with declared accountancy statements in order to provide advance payments. According to the interviewees the method was working well as people are regularly in need of an advance payment in order to start a project quickly and to be able to make several investments that a project requires, especially in the beginning. Over time however the Dutch interpretation of the EU rules decided that this practice did not conform to EU policy. An identified problem and a collective chosen solution were thus no longer working. The evaluation undertaken in 2013 reveals such insights and aims to raise awareness of these bottle necks and proposed recommendations from the current RDP, that have to be tackled in the new RDP (2014-2020).

Resources

As this evaluation was delivered by the National Rural Network Team no specific resource requirements are known.

The 'added value' of networking

Using an evaluation approach engaging effectively with a network of rural stakeholders added value because:

- the monitoring and evaluation results are the product of a diverse stakeholder group that collectively identified problems and solutions that were then 'owned' by a specific part of the working groups;
- to post-evaluate the same solutions a few years later with the same set of actors strengthens the monitoring and evaluation results and gives a fruitful, practical based insight for policy makers to adjust the new RDP to several recommendations brought forward by the evaluation sessions held in 2013.

It also important to highlight that to do a critical policy evaluation was a challenging task. Even though part of the Network's mandate is to give "policy signals" the Networks role facilitating such a critical policy review was viewed with concern by some government officials. In the end however, the activities and recommendations were well received.

What supports networking?

The network of actors in the field will benefit if procedures in the RDP are streamlined according to the evaluation. Even if not all the recommendations are taken up, the process itself has helped people understand procedures - the why, the how and how they can be changed.

The beneficiaries were actors that work together within the RDP, involved in coordination, implementation, and evaluation activities. To bring those groups together or interview them enables the identification of missing links or potential solutions that without the other group would have been more difficult to recognise. It also makes the results and recommendations stronger, as it is based on collective, informed agreement. In brief networking supported the sharing of problems and solutions, which empower the stakeholders to act and so send a strong signal to the policy writing team for the new programme to incorporate or address specific problems based on these long-term experiences.

A concrete benefit of the working session was that DLG encouraged their employees to take training on de-minimis, communication with practitioners and to standardise knowledge on state aid, so that the same coherent and understandable advice would be given. This benefited coordination and project application directly as rural actors who apply for rural projects within the EU RDP received the same and comprehensible advice from DLG.

Future challenges

An immediate challenge is ensuring these evaluation results are incorporated into the new programming documentation for the RDP. This will ensure that the experiences from the 2007-2013 period, both positive and more challenging are used to build a more effective and efficient RDP. In the longer term the challenge is to understand the value of repeating this evaluation, how the evaluation is best to be undertaken and when.