

# Added Value of Networking



## Women in Rural Development Thematic Working Group

Basic information	
NRN:	Rural Network for Northern Ireland
Theme:	Good practice
Coordinator:	Aileen Donnelly
Partners:	Local Action Groups, Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster; Countryside Agri Rural Partnership; Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network.
Beneficiaries:	Rural Women
Resources:	n.a.
Period:	1 year duration
Main element of networking:	<b>Collection, analysis and dissemination of good practice, success stories and relevant experience</b>
Other elements of networking:	Effective stakeholder engagement Exchange of relevant experience and know-how amongst stakeholders Capacity building and training

### Background

The concept of 'Thematic Working' was developed by ENRD as a means of researching and sharing existing learning and experiences on specific themes across the EU. Rural Network for Northern Ireland has established a range of Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) which bring people together in small groups around specific, focused areas of interest such as ICT, Food, Children and Young People. The aim of each group is to share practices and thereby improve the effective delivery of the Rural Development Programme both within Northern Ireland and across other areas of Europe. In this case the particular focus was 'Women in Rural Development.'

### Main activities

In an attempt to get to the grassroots involvement of women in the life of rural areas the Rural Network for Northern Ireland (the NSU) established a *Women in Rural Development Thematic Working Group* in January 2012 to look at a range of issues affecting rural women. The group brought together



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representatives from RDP Local Action Groups, Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster (YFCU), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and Countryside Agri Rural Partnership Ltd. The TWG put in place a series of activities and events aimed at showcasing women who had taken opportunities arising from the RDP and encouraging others to do so.

Three events were held on the theme '*Inspirational Women in Rural Development*'. The first seminar featured speakers and exhibitors who had begun or developed their own businesses with the support of the RDP and was also addressed by the female Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. The event was a success and evaluation of feedback forms prompted the NSU to coordinate two further seminars specifically focusing on business development. These '*Early Steps into Business*' seminars attracted more than 160 women.

The Thematic Working Group was also consulted in a 'focus group' session by researchers at the Queens University Of Belfast who were working on a report on '*Gender Mainstreaming the Rural Development Programme*'.

The range of businesses and success stories highlighted by the TWG have also been collated into a 'sharing practice' guide which has been published by the Rural Network and is available in hard copy or by website download.

## Main results/benefits

There are several aspects of results from this Thematic Working Group. At base level the very existence of the Thematic Working Group was a success in that it brought together those with a specific interest in rural women to discuss challenges and opportunities in the future. The group members forged relationships and made new contacts which they have continued since the formal work of the group has completed. Initially the work of the group was to identify and examine levels of female participation in the RDP and identify good practice examples. The outcomes however have been significantly more in that the TWG has directed engaged with stakeholders across all axis of the programme.

The series of thematic events, coordinated by Rural Network, attracted more than 200 women participants. It allowed women who had created, diversified or developed their own business a voice to encourage others and to showcase their products and build networks.

Dissemination of information on events and activities as well as projects in practice (RDP database) highlighted on Rural Network website, facebook, ezine and monthly bulletin.

Development of a specific, tailored publication which gave more than 2 real life case study examples of



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female entrepreneurs who had taken opportunities arising from the RDP. This publication was not constrained by simply being informative it is a practical, useful, inspirational guide for anyone male or female who may think of beginning their own enterprise.

## Success factors

The initial seminar was a general showcase of women who had begun their own businesses. Feedback from that event was useful in that delegates said they'd like the next one to be specific and relevant with more useful information and support agencies in attendance. The evaluation forms allowed the NSU to plan carefully and focus the next two seminars on what delegates would find useful. The next set of events were themed *'Early Steps into Business'* and were factual succinct events which gave people real, valuable tools and ideas for their own future development. Feedback from both events was hugely positive.

While the Thematic Working Group had a wide membership on hindsight it may have been more useful to have had representatives from all LAGs at the table to give a wider, more informed opinion.

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The Networking element of the activities of this TWG was manifold.

- The Thematic Working Group did not content itself by looking at statistics and writing a report proposing change. The group became actively involved at stakeholder and project promoter level and thereby 'learned by doing'. In many cases the LAG members who had assessed and funded projects only had the opportunity to meet funded projects at the events.

The feedback from those who had opportunity to speak, exhibit and present was very encouraging. Many of the women had not presented or showcased previously and felt that they atmosphere created was safe and welcoming and a great base to begin from. Some comments were as follow :

*"The information seminars were a fantastic way to gain inspiration and motivation for those thinking of starting their own business via listening to the wonderful case study speakers who are already doing just that"; "The 'Early Steps into Business' events run by the Rural Network were great opportunities for delegates to network, learn about support and resources on offer throughout NI"*

*"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, it was yet another huge step forward for me"; "I valued the positive feedback from everyone afterwards. It gave a big boost to my confidence".*

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## Contribution of the NSU

The NSU played a pivotal role in both the formation of the Thematic Working Group, providing a secretariat role for its activities and planning, organising and holding events. The NSU team provided a liaison role between members of the TWG and to the wider stakeholders involved in the events and the publication.

The NSU had sole responsibility for collation material and publishing of the sharing practice guide which will act as both as a guide and spur for others thinking of pursuing similar businesses or ventures.

## Contribution of the partners

The Thematic Working Group members were crucial to the success of the activities as each partner brought specific sectoral knowledge and contacts which were utilised in the management and attendance at events. In addition the members fed into the outcomes of the Queens University Research in a 'think tank' focus group session.

## Additional information

n.a.

## Pictures



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Source: Rural Network for Northern Ireland

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