European Network for
Rural Development

What do we know about Networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)?

A Discussion Paper from the ENRD
May 2012

Connecting Rural Europe

Contents

Executive Summary

This paper has been prepared by the ENRD Contact Point as a Discussion Paper in preparation for the 15th NRN meeting on 'Demonstrating the Added Value of Networking' on 8-9 May 2012. The purpose of this paper is to help inform / 'frame' discussions at the meeting by:

- clarifying some basic concepts regarding networks, networking and rural development – including introducing the concept of 'policy networks';
- highlighting some issues of relevance to the current performance of networking as a rural development policy tool, and;
- introducing some indicative questions that are proposed for discussion during the 15th NRN meeting in Finland (8-9 May 2012).

The establishment of national / regional network structures in the EU-27 Member States has been characterised by huge diversity – and a very uneven landscape of network development has emerged. The paper addresses various aspects of this diversity and highlights some of the potential issues / key learning messages that need to be taken from the current situation and applied to the planning of further network development in the 2014-2020 programming period. The key issues addressed relating to the network support units (NSUs) are:

1. Budget
2. Structure
3. Representation
4. Operational Mandate
5. Capacity and Management

The paper then continues to explore the European dimension of networking via a critique of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD).

ENRD activities have evolved over the four years of its operation, from an initial top-down initiative, gradually maturing to engage a wider range of Member State stakeholder interests, issues, needs and (changing) priorities. When considering the structure, activities, results and potential impact of the ENRD a clearer picture is now emerging about what aspects have worked well and what aspects have worked less well. Since the ENRD Contact Point is one of many network support units established with EAFRD support, the key learnings emerging from the Contact Point may also be relevant to network support units in the EU-27 Member States.

Based upon the experiences of the ENRD Contact Point, the following key challenges have been identified for enhancing the future use of networking as a rural development policy tool:

1. The need to establish basic minimum performance criteria for all network support units that will assist in guiding and prioritizing network activities and resource allocations.
2. More direct acknowledgement of the enormous variance in the structure, capacity, resources, experience and maturity of existing networks and the need to take this into account within the ENRD annual work plans and to adapt support services and products to cater more directly for these differences (i.e. one size doesn't fit all).
3. The need to establish a more flexible, integrated and technically strong network support framework at EU level (acknowledging the importance of both formal and informal frameworks), possibly through the gradual expansion of ENRD membership and the more proactive promotion of the network within DG AGRI.

4. The need to establish minimum levels of network capacity at national and regional levels, ideally linked more directly to the number of rural citizens in specific regions, thereby ensuring the establishment of a critical mass of network support structures that can work more directly with and benefit from ENRD activities.

5. The need to further link the chronology of ENRD activities more directly with the policy agenda to maximize the use of policy analysis findings and practical insights in rural development policy and programme design and development.

6. The importance of much stronger links with other policy networks (e.g. FARNET) and 'communities of practice' (e.g. the rural development research community).

Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the ENRD Contact Point as a Discussion Paper in preparation for the 15th NRN meeting on 'Demonstrating the Added Value of Networking' on 8-9 May 2012.

The general aim of this meeting is to *"…build a shared understanding for forthcoming discussions on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of networking as a rural development policy tool in the EU-27"*. It is anticipated that this meeting will provide an exchange platform for Managing Authorities, Network Support Units and Evaluators to come together and contribute to i) enhance the current level of knowledge and understanding of networking in rural development policy, and; ii) identify ways to improve networking as a rural development policy tool in all EU Member States for the current and future programming period.

The purpose of this paper is to help inform / 'frame' discussions at the meeting by:

- clarifying some basic concepts regarding networks, networking and rural development – including introducing the concept of 'policy networks'. The word 'network' is widely used in many different ways and contexts in most people's day-to-day life and it is vital to clarify exactly how we use this term in the context of EU rural development policy;
- highlighting some issues of relevance to the current performance of networking as a rural development policy tool. This includes observations on the overall status of network development in the EU-27 member States, plus some more detailed thoughts on the functioning of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), and;
- introducing some indicative questions that are proposed for discussion during the 15th NRN meeting in Finland (8-9 May 2012).

Please note that the opinions expressed in this discussion paper do not necessarily reflect or represent the views of the European Commission.

Networks, Networking and Rural Development

'Networks' and 'networking' are widely recognised and adopted as key tools for supporting and promoting sustainable rural development around the world. Consequently, there are many different types of rural development network driven by a great variety of goals and objectives.

In the United Kingdom and Ireland alone, a recent study[1] counted a total of 232 local, national and trans- / inter-national rural development networks, all of whom had an active online presence. The same study identified that the most important reasons for local people to access these rural networks were:

- To receive advice and information;
- To share local learning and experiences;
- To develop creative ways to solve local problems and needs;
- To identify sources of funding.

Overall, the research found that *"…involvement with rural networks provided users with a feeling of confidence when tackling a range of issues within their community"*.

---

[1] Miller, M. and Wallace, J. (2012). Rural Development Networks – A Mapping Exercise. Carnegie UK Trust, Dunfermline, UK – can be downloaded from here: http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/rural-development-networks---full-report (last accessed 1 May, 2012)

What are rural networks and networking?

There is **no single definition** of what a 'network' means in the context of rural development – consequently, the word 'network' is often used imprecisely to imply a rather vague and fuzzy concept. Greater care and precision is therefore required when discussing 'networks', 'networking' and 'network support units' – these are three very different concepts and the terms are not inter-changeable.

It is widely understood that all **rural networks are built upon a "web of interactions"** consisting of 'nodes' and 'linkages' where i) the 'nodes' are the rural actors and stakeholders (individuals / organisations) that form the membership of the network, and ii) the 'linkages' are the connections / relationships that exist between them. Some 'linkages' may be strong, others will be weak.

It is less commonly understood that networks are **only structures that exist to support the process of networking** - where the process of 'networking' is clearly defined[2] as *"…the sharing, exchange or flow of ideas, information, knowledge, practice, experience (and sometimes resources) between people and around a common interest, or opportunity, to create value"*. Indeed, it is often emphasised that it is not networks themselves that are important, but the information and inter-relationships that flow through them. Or put another way, *"not everything that connects is a network"* - since networks are nothing without the networking processes within them!

Rural networks commonly exist with a very specific purpose – namely, to facilitate the flow of information and sharing of resources in order to promote interaction between, and action by, different rural actors and stakeholders in the pursuit of rural development. This is a very important function that is described in academic terms as *"the mobilisation of intangible intellectual assets through learning, innovation and the building of human and social capital"*. Information for learning and innovation may flow horizontally (e.g. knowledge exchange between local businesses in an administrative territory); vertically (e.g. dissemination of research findings to foster innovation within a specific rural sector), or; various combinations of both.

Whatever the way that information flows, the ultimate value of rural networking must be judged by the i) **quality of the learning processes and experiences that are generated**, and; ii) their **impact upon stimulating the growth of economic development, creation of new job opportunities, enhancement of living standards, improvement of environmental management etc. in rural areas.**

What is a policy network?

There are two main forms of network:

a)   **informal / organic / bottom-up** – these are normally sustained as a natural result of the interactions (e.g. regular meetings and word of mouth communication) between members. They are very important and can be highly influential, but commonly reach a threshold beyond which their activities are limited by lack of resources. Informal rural networks are not discussed further in this paper;

b)   **formal / engineered / top-down** - these are devised and established by an external agency for a specific purpose. One specific type of formal network is the **policy network** which is created by a public authority / agency specifically to include actors in the formulation and implementation of a policy in a given sector.

---

[2] Gilchrist, A. (2009). *The Well-Connected Community: A Networking Approach to Community Development*. The Policy Press, Bristol, UK.

Formally-constructed policy networks are increasingly important for policy-making and governance and recognised as a powerful tool to help solve many of the problems inherent to modern public policies[3]. For example, policy networks are claimed to:

- deal rapidly and in a flexible way with complex issues, including those with an international dimension;
- involve a wide range of stakeholders in policy debates thus increasing the quality and the acceptability of these policies;
- take advantage of information and communication technologies to extend the reach of policy-makers into the community.

Policy networks are widely used by the European Union and its Member States in all policy areas and for many functions. They are considered to be particularly important for providing the flexibility required to deal with the wide diversity and sometimes very fundamental differences that exist between administrative cultures and structures in the EU-27. In its 2001 White Paper on European Governance[4], the European Commission committed to *"…a more systematic and pro-active approach to working with key networks to enable them to contribute to decision shaping and policy execution"*.

Since the 2001 White Paper was published there has been a proliferation of studies raising the question about the added value of networks within the EU policy process[5]. Some scholars argue that the key added value of policy networks is indeed their potential to improve the quality of governance – others argue that unless carefully managed, policy networks can work against the principles of good governance due to their potentially exclusive nature and vulnerability to lack of transparency and accountability.

Networks and network support units (NSUs)

Most 'formal networks', including EU policy networks, are facilitated or supported by an identifiable "supporting entity" often described as a secretariat, coordinator, steering group or support unit. One common misunderstanding that is noted by many network experts[6] is that too often the term 'network' is imprecisely used to identify the mechanisms that support a network, rather than used to describe the web of interactions that define the structure of the network.

This may seem a minor issue, but it is a symptom of a wider general problem with 'formal' networks – namely, that there is rarely a clear enough distinction between the network and its supporting entity / network support unit.

Network support units are (for very good reasons) commonly modelled on a hierarchical organisation or even a finite project. It can therefore be planned, managed and assessed as a discrete entity with clearly-defined aims, objectives, work plans and projected budgets etc. When people talk about 'setting up', 'creating' or 'developing' networks, they are usually referring to the network support unit – not to the network itself.

---

[3] Clarotti, G. (2001). *Report of the Working Group 'Networking for a good governance in Europe' (Working Group 4b)*. Work Area No. 4: Coherence and co-operation in a networked Europe, supporting document to *European Governance: A White Paper* (25/7/2001) – can be downloaded from: http://ec.europa.eu/governance/areas/group9/report_en.pdf (last accessed 1 May 2012)

[4] Commission of the European Communities (2001). *European Governance: A White Paper*, COM (2001) 428, Brussels (25/7/2001).

[5] Börzel, T.A. and Heard-Lauréote, K. (2009). Networks in EU Multi-level Governance: Concepts and Contributions, *Journal of Public Policy* **29**(2), 135-152.

[6] Hearn, S. and Mendizabel, E. (2011). Not everything that connects is a network, Background Note (May 2011), Overseas Development Institute, Cambridge – can be downloaded from: http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/6313.pdf (last accessed 1 May 2012)

But it must be remembered that the structures and services provided by the network support unit are **not** the network - the network is the actors and stakeholders connected within the network and the relationships between them.

Networking as an EU Rural Development Policy Tool

Networking was a well-established principle in previous LEADER programmes with two complementary levels of formal networking established under both LEADER II and LEADER+:

- at national level with the implementation of National Networking Units (NNUs), and;
- at European level with the implementation of a European networking unit – the LEADER Observatory.

Based upon the positive experiences of networking in LEADER[7] (and the important role that the LEADER networks played in stimulating new ideas and sharing the growing body of rural development knowledge and practice amongst rural actors and stakeholders), it was decided to introduce networking as an obligatory activity into Pillar 2 of the CAP for the 2007–2013 programming period. In accordance with Articles 67 and 69 of EAFRD Regulation No. 1698/2005, it therefore became necessary for:

i) each Member State to establish a National Rural Network (NRN) which groups together the organisations and administrations involved in rural development at national / regional level, and;

ii) the European Commission to establish a European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) for the networking of national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development at Community level.

The networks (national / regional rural networks in the Member States and the ENRD) established under Regulation No. 1698/2005 are **policy networks** and to-date the European Commission's perception of progress with their development and functionality has been positive. For example, in the 2011 report from the European Commission on the *Implementation of the National Strategy Plans and the Community Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development (2007-2013)* it is stated that[8]:

"The National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) have significantly contributed to the consistency in programming, notably by ensuring an exchange of information and practices between RDPs' managers and stakeholders and by carrying out joint analyses."

Consequently, it is clearly anticipated that networking will continue to be supported by the EAFRD in the next programming period (2014–2020) and there are proposals also for the introduction of an additional European Innovation Partnership (EIP) network.

---

[7] Duguet, D. (2006). *Networking: The LEADER experience*. Study carried out for the LEADER+ Observatory Contact Point, Brussels - can be downloaded from:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/pdf/library/methodology/networking_report.pdf (last accessed 2 May 2012)

[8] EC (2011). *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of the national strategy plans and the Community strategic guidelines for rural development (2007-2013)*, COM(2011) 450 final, European Commission, Brussels (20/7/2011) - can be downloaded from: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52011DC0450:EN:NOT (last accessed 2 May 2012)

Diversity of Implementation – strength or weakness?

The establishment of national / regional network structures in the EU-27 Member States has been characterised by huge diversity – and a very uneven landscape of network development has emerged. See the ENRD's *2011 NRN Mapping Exercise* for further details[9]. The following sub-sections address various aspects of this diversity and highlight some of the potential issues / key learning messages that need to be taken from the current situation and applied to the planning of further network development in the 2014-2020 programming period.

The key issues addressed are:

1. Budget
2. Structure
3. Representation
4. Operational Mandate
5. Capacity and Management

Budget

Total public expenditure across all EU-27 Member States upon the operation of policy networks established in accordance with Regulation No. 1698/2005 (including the ENRD) amounts to over 515 million EUR[10] during 2007-2013 – of which an estimated 268 million EUR is support from the EAFRD and 247 million from national budgets. The public funding allocated to networks varies greatly from one MS to another with Luxembourg having the smallest budget and Spain the largest over the lifetime of the programme (see Figure 1). The budgets allocated are purely based on Member State decisions and no clear formula linked to size of territory, population, regionalisation, RDP budget and actions planned exists. EAFRD co-financing rates also vary greatly from 80% in Bulgaria and Romania to 0% in Luxembourg – average is around 52%.
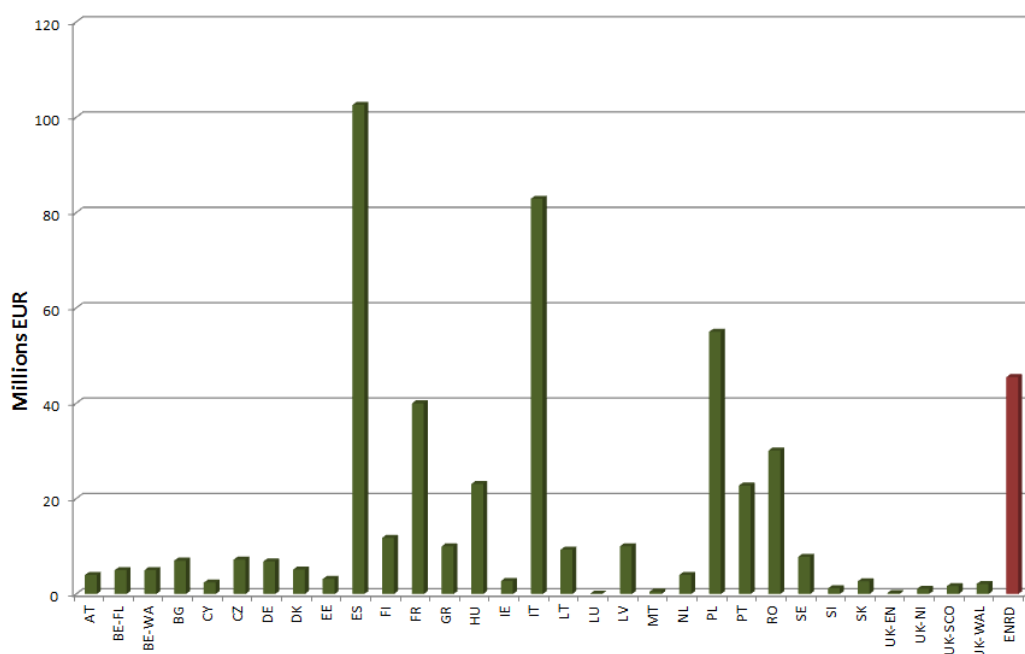

Figure 1: *Total public expenditure (millions EUR) committed to NRNs for 2007-2013 (best available data - November 2011)*

---

[9] ENRD (2011). *Findings of the 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise: Final Synthesis Report*. A report (November 2011) from the Contact Point of the European Network for Rural Development, Brussels - can be downloaded from: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=0DF4FA1F-09F1-5D17-923B-63AADB56186A (last retrieved 2 May 2012)

[10] Best available data from November 2011

For most of the network support units (NSUs), staff costs represent the major component of the budget. However, at this stage no real assessment has been undertaken to establish what minimum critical mass the NSUs should have in order to ensure their smooth, efficient and effective running. It is clear that in many cases the budget allocations for NSUs are quite restrictive and this is impacting upon the number of employees that an NSU can afford, the status of those employees, (i.e. whether they are full time or part-time) and whether they can secure people with the skill-sets that are required to complement the various networking activities undertaken.

The issue of resources obviously extends to the operational aspects of the networking activities themselves with limitations upon the tools, techniques and initiatives that an NSU can adopt to achieve its commitments, promote its visibility and deliver its products. It is very obvious, for example, that the most interesting networking initiatives linked to contacts with wider rural development networks, research institutes, resource centres, etc. are most often carried out by those NSUs that have a secure and sound financial allocation. It is especially obvious that some NSUs are not fully and effectively engaging in networking initiatives at European level because of the significant budget constraints they are facing.

This situation is compounded by the fact that the regulation itself has no provisions on principles such as proportionality. This has resulted in some Managing Authorities (MAs) slicing the financial allocations for NSUs in order to address other priorities for their Technical Assistance budget.

Structure

The majority of Member States have established Network Support Units (NSU) at national level to animate their NRNs and to implement their respective annual work plans (AWPs) or programmes. In the case of the UK and Belgium the regional networks of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Flanders and Wallonia have been given higher prominence with only nominal representation / co-ordination at national level.

The operational costs of most NSUs and their associated annual work plans (AWPs) are funded under the Technical Assistance budget of the relevant rural development programme (RDP) – with the exception of 4 Member States with regionalised RDPs (Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) where the MAs have chosen to operate and finance NSUs in the framework of a programme document (NRN-P).

The operational set up of the NSUs varies greatly across the EU-27. Some Member States have decided to install the NSU within public administration, whilst others have chosen to procure technical assistance contracts with external service providers. In the case of NSUs situated within public administration, a further distinction can be made between those that are part of the MA structure and those where the provision of networking services has been delegated to a public sector agency or institution affiliated to the MA (e.g. the national agricultural advisory service).

No assessment or evidence-based judgements have been made about which structure or model of NSU (in-house vs. outsourcing) is most efficient and effective – although the question is often asked! There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to both approaches that are influenced by national context, the NSUs financial allocation and the way that public administrations are set up and managed.

However, one cause of particular concern is the vulnerability of those NSUs which are located within MAs to changes in staff and resource allocation. Such changes have been observed in several NSUs during the last few years and have been triggered by various factors, but in all cases they have destabilised and depleted the capacity of the NSU to the point that networking activities (implementation of the AWP) are hindered and the growth / maturing of the network is slowed.

Representation

A variety of different approaches exist amongst the NRNs regarding the inclusion / representation of rural stakeholders in the network. These approaches range from 'open access' to more formalised and/or rather restricted participation.   This diversity of approach is largely a reflection of the different ways that Member States have interpreted and shaped their application of the "partnership principle" outlined in the EAFRD regulation[11]. Although it is also apparent that i) there is a lack of understanding amongst some Managing Authorities about the role of networks and networking, and; ii) that this lack of understanding is manifested in networks which have restricted access and are therefore not truly representative.

Two main types of stakeholder representation appear to have evolved in the current programming period. In 19 Member States, the NRN appears to be rather formally established (e.g. by delegation). Whilst, in the other 8 Member States a more informal approach to NRN membership is practiced whereby anyone representing a stakeholder group involved in, or concerned by rural development, is usually considered a member and as such is admitted to participate in the activities of the NRN.

Of course, the inclusion / representation of stakeholder groups in the network is only the starting point for building a network's connection with its stakeholders. NSUs must also have the capacity, resources and motivation to fully and effectively **engage** with stakeholders, especially those key actors of direct relevance to the priorities of the NSU annual work plan (AWP).   Amongst other things, the NSU must therefore be able to place the right people in the right place at the right time in order to contribute to networking initiatives and engage efficiently and effectively 'on-the-spot' with stakeholders.

Operational Mandate

The operational mandates of the EU-27 NSUs vary considerably. They are influenced to a great extent by the flexibility and decision-making of the relevant Managing Authorities, and in some cases also by the political influence of National Authorities.

The ultimate responsibility for an NRN lies with the Managing Authority – this is clear. But the degree of autonomy that an NSU has from the MA can be a very sensitive issue and can lead to debate about when, how and on what an NSU has mandate. There are no common, clear and exhaustive guidelines on this issue and conflict is known to have arisen between some NSUs and the Managing Authorities on critical decisions regarding actions and initiatives linked to consultation, planning, programme delivery and communications.

There are many different examples of operational mandates given to the NSUs by their Managing Authorities (MAs). These range from MAs that have set-up the NSU, agreed a multi-annual work plan and then largely left the NSU alone to implement the planned activities – to cases where the AWP agreed for the NSU is subject to continued scrutiny and modification by the MA and/or b) the NSU requires on-going approval from the same MA for procurement required to implement the AWP.

From the activities reported by the NSUs as part of the *2011 NRN Mapping Exercise*[12], it is noticeable that that most of the actions and the activities undertaken by the NSUs are limited to communication and training activities. In a few instances only this mandate is extended to programme implementation. The

---

[11] See Article 6 of Regulation No. 1698/2005

[12] ENRD (2011). *Findings of the 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise: Final Synthesis Report*. A report (November 2011) from the Contact Point of the European Network for Rural Development, Brussels - can be downloaded from: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=0DF4FA1F-09F1-5D17-923B-63AADB56186A (last retrieved 2 May 2012)

lack of clearly identified and designated networking functions within Regulation No. 1698/2005 itself may also, in some cases, have contributed to uncertainties about how exactly an NRN should assist in RDP implementation. In the case of the 4 Network Programmes (NRN-Ps) this issue is less pronounced given the more rigid framework and intervention logic that the NRN-Ps are required to follow.

Capacity and Management

In keeping with the diversity observed in budget, structure and operational mandate etc., the capacity of the NSUs is also highly variable and there are concerns that in many cases the capacity of the NSUs to engage with new issues and new stakeholders is already exceeded. This is apparent, for example, in the differing levels of engagement by NSUs in activities at a European level, including the ENRD Joint NRN Thematic Initiatives which have suffered from "patchy" participation by the NSUs and associated experts.

The financial limitations imposed on many NSUs through the respective budget allocations have obviously driven many units to rationalise on human resources, capacity and skills. This means that the basic internal resources and expertise that many NSUs possess also need to be complemented with the support of external technical expertise in order for an NRN to deliver comprehensive services. There must be a balance between the work done by internal staff, and that done by external resources. Good coordination, versatility and flexibility are required for a general coherence in the interventions and also for transparency in decision making and management.

A network is something which should live and where the needs are continuously and sometimes fast changing. The NSUs and MAs must keep in mind the need for network evolution and growth, not only in terms of the technical resources they utilise or develop, but also in terms of the available human resources. It is important therefore that the competences and skills of the NSU staff also evolve and grow (as well as diversify) in line with the development and maturity of the network and networking processes.

With this in mind, it is important that NSUs focus upon building their own internal technical and management capacities. This should also not be overlooked when outsourcing certain functions or services, especially in the case where NSUs are delegated to external bodies. Internal learning processes, such as 'self-assessment', are very important and should be further encouraged within all NSUs.

Figure 2 - *Simple overview of the generic 'steps' associated with the establishment and functioning of an NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period*
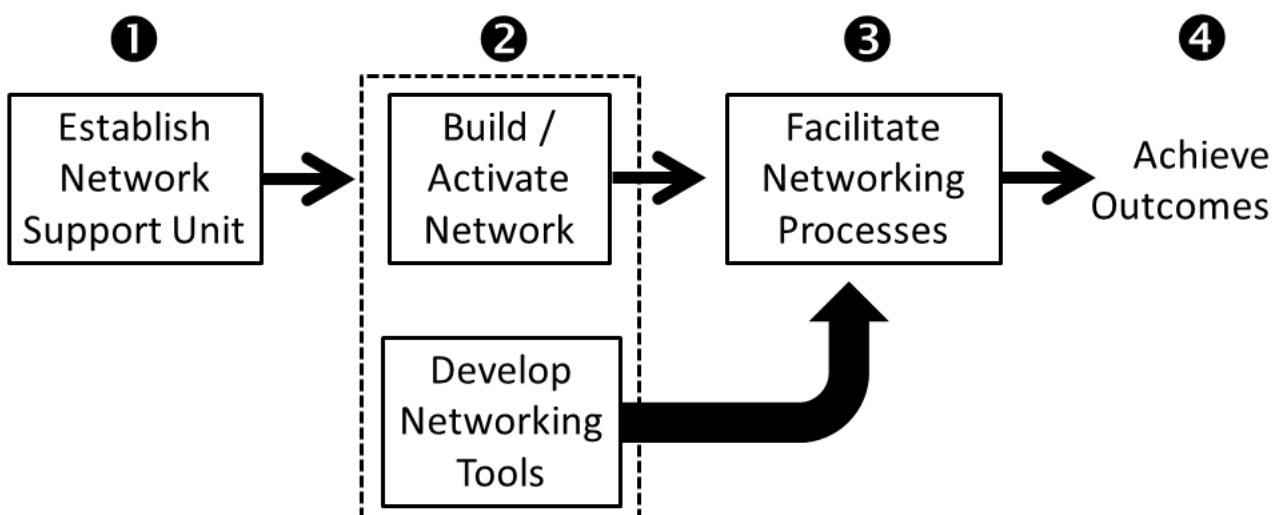
One final observation from experts in non-rural networks is that expectations of new networks (such as the the NRNs and ENRD) can be very high and consequently these networks are often expected to "run before they can walk". This is a very important and relevant point in the context of the huge diversity in capacity and activity observed in the NRNs of the EU-27.

Figure 2 presents a simple overview of the generic 'steps' associated with the establishment and functioning of an NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period. It must be remembered that NRNs in the EU-27 are all at different stages of progress through these steps. There are some relatively mature NRNs who are well advanced with the facilitation of networking processes and increasing concerned, for example, with the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes – whilst there are other NRNs where the establishment of the NSU has been delayed and the network and associated networking tools are only just being built-up and developed.

The European Dimension – the ENRD

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) was established and its mandate defined within EC Regulation 1698/2005. The ENRD's core function is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural development policy (EAFRD) implementation. Network management and selection of members is undertaken by DG AGRI. A Network Support Unit, known as the ENRD Contact Point, provides services to support the majority of network activities. This is outsourced to an external contractor (Kantor Management Consultants). The work of the support unit is defined within annually agreed contracts (3.5 million EUR per annum). Network activities are defined within an ENRD Annual Work Plan, proposed by DG AGRI/ENRD CP each year, finalized in consultation with the ENRD Coordination Committee members which includes representatives from all major network stakeholder groups (MAs, NRNs and European organisations involved in rural development).

ENRD activities have evolved over the four years of its operation, from an initial top-down initiative, gradually maturing to engage a wider range of Member State stakeholder interests, issues, needs and (changing) priorities. When considering the structure, activities, results and potential impact of the ENRD a clearer picture is now emerging about what aspects have worked well and what aspects have worked less well.

Since the ENRD Contact Point is one of many network support units established with EAFRD support, the key learnings emerging from the Contact Point may also be relevant to network support units in the EU-27 Member States.

ENRD Structure - what is working well? And less well?

Key aspects of the *ENRD **structure** that have worked well* include:

- The development over time of a more flexible and responsive management structure, increasingly willing to listen, learn, gradually adapt, modify and grow with the network.
- The broad grouping of EU rural development stakeholder interests within the ENRD Coordination Committee, promoting a dynamic, multi-faceted policy dialogue that has gradually intensified to cover all aspects of rural development policy, as well as a broader range of stakeholder interests.
- The network structure has provided access to DG AGRI and other officials (at national and regional level) to i) engage them in policy dialogue; ii) exchange experiences, and; iii) use this information and

insights to gradually introduce improvements in the rural development policy implementation framework at EU, Member State and regional level.

- Outsourcing of the majority of network support unit services has allowed the gradual development of an active partnership between DG AGRI and the contractor, promoting innovation, encouraging the development of new products and services and critically, providing a framework within which to broaden and deepen the communication and exchanges on rural development policy.
- Establishment of a large pool of consultancy resources to fund a wide range of technical support and expertise allowing a high degree of flexibility and adaptability in support of almost all aspects of ENRD activities and priorities.

Key aspects of the *ENRD **structure** that have worked less well* include:

- The ENRD's formal and somewhat rigid structures (CC, LSc, TWGs) often prevent the engagement of a wider group of stakeholders and rural development practitioners in some activities.
- The scope of ENRD work was initially limited by DG AGRI. However, over time (as the network has matured) the ENRD has been empowered to create more opportunities for open exchange and debate amongst members and targeted stakeholders. It is now understood and increasingly acknowledged that outcomes from certain ENRD activities do not necessarily need to reflect the views of the Commission, but can simply be the many and varied voices of the network.
- Establishment and running of the ENRD has been a "steep learning curve" for both DG AGRI and the Contact Point with many challenges initially related to less than optimal levels of knowledge, understanding, engagement, and/or coordination within the network.
- "Internalising" the ENRD within DG AGRI was challenging and it took some time to fully and effectively engage with the geographical / horizontal units.
- The limited mandate of the Contact Point to directly engage with, and/or provide direct support to, individual NRNs, NSUs and MAs has allowed gaps in knowledge collection, exchange and cooperation to develop, thereby limiting the potential impact of European initiatives in many areas.
- Lack of mechanisms or mandate to develop an effective dialogue between European and Member State *regional* networks.

ENRD Networking Processes - what is working well? And less well?

Key aspects of the *ENRD **activities** that have worked well* include:

- Gradual expansion and adaptation of the range and diversity of ENRD products and services in response to network feedback (with many available in six languages), providing more opportunities for engagement and information exchange with a wider range of rural development stakeholders.
- Experimentation with a variety of mechanisms to engage network stakeholders in policy dialogues and support policy analysis activities (including case studies, working groups and focus groups) which have often provided unique and practical insights into specific policy implementation issues. Outcomes from these initiatives have, on occasion, had a direct influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural policy design and refinement (namely for LEADER and some aspects of implementation mechanisms, rules and procedures). Evidence based findings have also provided important insights to guide design of future rural development programmes.
- Collection, collation and dissemination of relevant experience project examples, providing a growing repository of information to guide, inspire and demonstrate EAFRD funding in action.
- Gradual expansion of the range of communication products and channels to enhance exchange of experience including both on and off-line products and services.

Key aspects of *ENRD **activities** that have worked less well* include:

- The lack of a clear intervention logic, hierarchy of objectives and performance criteria to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of ENRD activities, results and impacts.
- A certain lack of visibility regarding the use of the work of Thematic Working Groups or Focus Groups in the policy formulation process has some created some frustration amongst key stakeholders in the ENRD.
- Lack of engagement of many stakeholder groups in ENRD activities due to lack of capacity, resources and/or commitment / interest has resulted in the generation of less common knowledge and fewer outcomes than originally anticipated.
- Variance in resourcing of MS NRNs/NSU's has often led to problems of coordination and participation at EU level, often compounded by lack of continuity in staff participation/availability, limited technical capacity or access to appropriate technical support to effectively support or deliver core networking functions.

Future Challenges

Based upon the experiences of the ENRD Contact Point, the following key challenges have been identified for enhancing the future use of networking as a rural development policy tool:

1. The need to establish basic minimum performance criteria for all network support units that will assist in guiding and prioritizing network activities and resource allocations.
2. More direct acknowledgement of the enormous variance in the structure, capacity, resources, experience and maturity of existing networks and the need to take this into account within the ENRD annual work plans and to adapt support services and products to cater more directly for these differences (i.e. one size doesn't fit all).
3. The need to establish a more flexible, integrated and technically strong network support framework at EU level (acknowledging the importance of both formal and informal frameworks), possibly through the gradual expansion of ENRD membership and the more proactive promotion of the network within DG AGRI.
4. The need to establish minimum levels of network capacity at national and regional levels, ideally linked more directly to the number of rural citizens in specific regions, thereby ensuring the establishment of a critical mass of network support structures that can work more directly with and benefit from ENRD activities.
5. The need to further link the chronology of ENRD activities more directly with the policy agenda to maximize the use of policy analysis findings and practical insights in rural development policy and programme design and development.
6. The importance of much stronger links with other policy networks (e.g. FARNET) and 'communities of practice' (e.g. the rural development research community).

Questions proposed for 15th NRN Meeting

Arising from this Discussion Paper, the following indicative questions will be addressed during the 15th NRN meeting in Finland on 8-9 May 2012:

Current understanding of networking as an RD Policy Tool

- What where the changes (positive and negative) that networking introduced in the way rural development policy is being implemented?
- Do you think that NSUs fulfilled the role they were set up for? Explain how and why do you think so?
- Do you think that the role of networks, network support units and networking is clear for rural stakeholders including national authorities and administrators? What are the reasons for your opinion and what needs to be done?
- Do you think the objectives, roles and functions of an NSU, NRN and networking are clearly defined in the current implementing rules?
- Give reasons for your answers and propose ways how this can be improved.

Factors influencing the efficiency and effectiveness of the NSUs and the networking function

- Identify the threats and weaknesses that are influencing the effectiveness and efficiency of the NSU?
- Is the structure by which the NSU is managed affecting the way it is operating? Is representation of rural development stakeholders sufficient and balanced?
- What are the factors that need to improve in the current NRN framework in order to strengthen the way networking is undertaken? What are the opportunities that can be generated with your proposals?
- What are the minimum requirements that an NSU should aim for in terms of human capacity and skills? On what reasons are you basing your suggestions?
- What is the minimum budget required in order to allow effective networking activities to take place? Do you think that the current network budgets are based on real needs? How can this be improved in the future?
- Define what other needs do you anticipate as an NSU/MA for the future in order to enhance the NSU operations?

Role of Monitoring and Evaluation/self-assessment in improving the value of networking as an RD policy tool

- How did the activities of your network (programme) effect the fulfilment of rural development objectives
- How have activities of your rural network (programme) been monitored and evaluated – experiences from current programming period
- How useful were the outcomes of evaluations/assessments)
- What outcomes/effects should rural networking bring beyond direct outputs of action plan implementation in the future programming period?
- What do we need to know from M&E to strengthen (a) the performance and (b) the effects of networking?
- How should we assess the effects of networking in meeting RD priorities?