National Rural Networks

Summary of the fifth meeting of the National Support Units (NSUs)

Seville, June 8th 2009

Introduction

This meeting took place in the context of FICODER (International Forum on Cooperation in Rural Development), an initiative of the Regional Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries of the Junta de Andalucia, and the Ministry of the Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs.

Welcome and introduction by Haris Martinos, Team Leader EN RD Contact Point, who outlined the purpose of the meeting in terms of Transnational Cooperation (TNC) under the Leader Axis. He provided an overview of the results of the TNC needs enquiry surveys (addressed to the NRNs and the LAGs) and highlighted the TNC activities carried out in the first year, along with the concept and structure of the proposed 'Integrated European Guide on Transnational Cooperation', and an overview of the agenda for the meeting.

John Lougheed, Head of Unit, DG Agri, European Commission (who was attending this meeting as an observer), mentioned his pleasure at being present at this meeting, and stressed the importance of these meetings for 'face to face' networking and as an opportunity to hold discussions and get feedback on matters, such as TNC, through the planned workshops.

1. Proposed structure of the European Guide for Transnational Cooperation.

An outline of the guide was presented by Fabrice Wagner (Contact Point) and Séverine Bressaud (non-permanent expert) and also the different components of the cooperation platform, notably the LAG database; the TNC projects database (under approval/approved), the partner search facility. It was emphasised that the 'guide' would be web-based, and include a toolkit developed using existing knowledge and those needs identified through the above mentioned TNC surveys. There will also be a section on administrative rules and procedures (this is part of an ongoing survey on TNC with the Managing Authorities). In addition the guide is to be illustrated by good examples of TNC projects, and will include interviews with the NRNs and LAGs (some of which will take place during the course of FICODER).

2. Workshops dealing with different aspects of the guide.

In order to address specific aspects of the guide, four workshops were organised. The idea of each workshop was to provide participants an opportunity to understand the content of a particular section of the guide and to have feedback in terms of its usefulness and any areas which were regarded as being unclear or lacking in information. The participants were asked to select those workshops which they considered to be more useful and/or interesting in terms of their particular TNC needs. The results of the workshops are detailed in the annex.

The individual workshop results were reported back to the participants during the plenary. It appeared that certain elements of the guide concerning the more advanced stages: namely project implementation and Monitoring and Evaluation were areas which provoked a greater level of discussion.

Generally speaking the motives for undertaking TNC projects were understood, as were the necessary steps in starting the TNC process. The importance of linking the TNC projects back to the territory and its strategy was regarded as a key factor, as was the need to have motivated people and good communications, and in particular the different ways doing this, either by a selected person or by means of a 'Cooperation think tank'. In the preparation stage the

important elements are very much concerned with establishing the right contacts and getting to know the potential partner(s) in terms of their respective areas. In this respect being aware of cultural and linguistic differences (and overcoming them) and on this basis allocating roles and responsibilities are key elements of success. There was also discussion concerning how to prepare and organise meetings and the need to write reports and communicate back to the partners about what has taken place. It is clear that tools exist which help in this preparatory stage, but having a ready checklist and clear qualified procedures such as those proposed for the guide are of considerable value. It was established that there is some differences in the level of financial assistance available for preparatory work between the Member States which may affect the success of implementation.

As for project implementation, the workshop also highlighted differences in the approval process, and therefore the importance of the proposed 'guide' to explain these in order to help the LAGs understand what the possible solutions could be. As in previous workshops, the importance of communication was highlighted in order to disseminate information and involve the different stakeholders at the different levels. Finding good examples (to illustrate specific steps as 'the process of cultural learning' and 'management methods') was considered to be very useful, especially at the European level. This workshop also proposed that the issue of 'cooperating with third countries' should be raised at the next Leader Sub Committee.

The workshop on 'Monitoring and evaluation' highlighted the different levels of enthusiasm and experience between the Member States. Firstly there is a need to educate and over come any prejudices, especially in the initial stages of TNC projects. These issues therefore need to be firmly addressed in the guide by providing 'toolkits' with the appropriate indicators and concrete examples to show the added value of evaluation. The guide needs to be able to promote an 'evaluation culture' which can be achieved through links to the EN RD website (blogs and forums), and this should be sustained via a 'programme of excellence'. In the longer term there were some questions about the assigned responsibility of promoting monitoring and evaluation. Possibly to be done through seminars and training, and it was considered that there was perhaps a role for the 'European Evaluation Network'.

A.O.B

The Italian NRN representatives informed further about three cooperation projects for the NRNS which were originally presented during the third NRN/NSU meeting (Brussels April 1st 2009), namely: Thematic Network on Forestry Policy; Mediterranean Network for Rural Development; Thematic Network on Social Farming. These projects are open to all NRNs and those interested are invited to contact Mr Riccardo Passero r.passero@politicheagricole.gov.it at the 'Central Unit of the Italian rural Network'.

Next steps and next meetings

Haris Martinos, Team Leader EN RD Contact Point, outlined the next steps in the cooperation between EN RD and NRNs and indicated the types of meetings that could be planned for the 2nd year of the EN RD.

One strand of activities planned by the Contact Point will continue to be open to all NRNs. They will comprise regular NRN meetings normally attended by NSU representatives and occasionally other national level stakeholders. Typically a part of these meetings can be devoted to exchanges of information and knowledge between the Contact Point (eg feedback from TWG work) and NRNs (eg simplification solutions they've developed implementation problems), whilst another part could take the form of a forum for exchanges between NRNs on topics of common interest. Four such meetings are envisaged for the 2nd year. An increasing use of the EN RD website,

when its dynamic tools become available in the Autumn, of 2009 will further facilitate such exchanges and may reduce the need for frequent face-to-face meetings.

Another strand of activities will address the specific needs of the networks. It is expected that some of these activities will be in response to initiatives by individual national networks, such as the cooperation topics proposed by the Italian (see above) and Dutch (on rural enterprise) NRNs or on-going cooperation by several networks, such as the Nordic/Baltic grouping. Technical workshops are also envisaged to deal with practical issues (eg websites and databases) of interest to a many of the networks. Other activities may also be initiated to provide on-the-spot advisory support to networks which are still at an early stage of development.

Workshop 1: "Why cooperate/getting ready to start a TNC cooperation project"

Animator: Martin Law, Rapporteur: Hans-Olof Stalgren.

The main points arising from this workshop can be summarised as follows:

1. Why cooperate?

- Cooperation enables a project to achieve a greater critical mass, since the total benefits are greater than the sum of the individual parts (1 + 1 = 3). Pooling resources and expertise offers synergies which are particularly useful for dealing with certain aspects of the projects such as: capital costs (technical equipment), training, marketing etc.

2. Getting ready to start

- Start simple and grow organically. It is easier to involve just 2 partners at the beginning and then as the project (expertise) grows, it is the possible to add more partners and increase the scope of the project.

- It is important that TNC projects are be linked to the territory and its strategy. Cooperation as a strategy has to answer the needs and reply to questions which have been expressed within the territory; otherwise the point of doing it is less obvious.

- A good cooperation project is able to manage the different resources needed for cooperation (human, time and money). Distribution of the responsibilities and allocation of tasks is very important. And should be clearly defined and agreed between all partners. The selection of a leading partner (leading LAG) is a pre-requirement.

- Building cooperation using previous contacts is usually a successful strategy. One way of doing this is to carry out a survey in the area in order to establish the existing transnational contacts and then try to fit these into the project framework.

- Selecting a key person to act as a motor and 'drive' forward the aspect of TNC in the LAG is very useful. This person should also be responsible for trying to involve as many as possible from within the area. The creation of a 'Cooperation Think Tank' as a sub-structure within the LAG is also considered as a good idea as it provides a focus and the ongoing stimulus that is required in order to maintain the momentum over time.

- Communication about TNC is crucial. There are different ways to communicate information (meetings, web-based tools) but the more is done, the greater engagement within the LAG regarding TNC, and a greater level of TNC likelier.

Workshop 2: "Preparing a transnational project"

Preliminary steps: During the partner search: define the profile of your partner: What type of partners you are looking for (complementarity or similarities between historical, geographical, cultural aspects, experienced or new LAG...), What are your expectations about your partner, how many partners are you looking for? Which countries, and what kind of areas?

Main steps to consider:

1) **Contact by email (and later by phone)**
   - Presentation of the LAG
   - Exchange about the TNC idea and theme, and the main objectives
   - Exchange about general implementation/administration possibilities
   - Identify the contact and the working language
   - Provide contact information
   - Ask for a confirmation on your mail

   Tools needed:

   - checklist for the first contact
   - Email list with priority themes of all the LAGs and contact information

2) **Before the first meeting**
   - Know the TNC procedure of your partner
   - Decide who will participate at the first meeting. Choose the participants carefully: LAG manager, operator, elected people (decision makers)...
   - Share the responsibility of each participant
   - Prepare the draft agenda and write the objectives of the meeting with the partners.
   - Prepare a fact sheet about your area as background information: administrative organisation of your country etc.
   - Decide the working language for the first meeting (foresee any translation)
   - Identify a moderator and reporter
   - Begin to exchange with your partner about the role you want to play in the project.

   Tools needed:

   - Checklist
   - Template for LAG/area presentation

3) **During the first meeting**
   - Present the area/people at the meeting (think about creative ways to do it: videos...)
   - Presentation of your expectations from this first visit
   - Visit the area (field visits)
   - Exchanges about:
     - Partner's expectations
     - Administrative rules about cooperation
     - Definition of the project
     - An eventual creation of a legal structure to lead the project
     - Role and responsibilities of each partner (who will be lead partner?)
     - Budget/time schedule/calendar
   - next steps after this meeting
   - establish a deadline for the report
   - take pictures to be included in future communication

   Tools needed:

- List of possible functions and responsibilities within a TNC project

4) After the first visit
- Write a report and send it to the partners for checking
- Communicate the results of the meeting back to the main local stakeholders of your area (summary of the visit with pictures)
- Brainstorming with your team and with the participants to the first visit:
  - Do you want to cooperate with these partners?
  - Is the project design alright for you?

Tools needed:

- Examples of meeting reports from other LAG's

A second visit may be useful to confirm the partnership, the project's design, the next steps...

What have the countries (present in this workshop) foreseen to help the LAG for this preliminary step (specific budget?)

- Flanders   EUR 5 000 per project
- Wales   EUR 5 000 per LAG
- Ireland: EUR 5 000 per LAG
- Poland   EUR 2 000 - 35 000 per LAG. (based on population of the LAG)
- Netherlands   No limit (budget is from the RDP)
- France   EUR 6 000 per LAG to organise the first meeting
- Sweden   EUR 5 000 to organise the first meeting
- Finland   No limit
- Austria   Technical assistance (an expert) to support the organisation of the first meeting
- Estonia: No limit.

Workshop 3. Project implementation

At this stage of the project the stakeholders have already: identified their cooperation partner; defined a common project and sent the application to the responsible national (managing) authority. During the implementation phase of a cooperation project it is possible that spontaneous changes of the project are necessary. Therefore it should be noted (by the partners) that the application should not go into too much detail (concerning tasks and budget), and provide the possibility for changes to be made. The LAG should use the opportunity to negotiate with the administrative bodies in advance if changes or adaptations are necessary.

It should be clarified before the implementation of a cooperation project: what to do if there are changes in the coordination staff; changes in the partnership composition; who can provide any necessary support/mediation; and how to maintain financial flexibility

The approval process differs between Member States concerning the time needed for giving the final approval. Therefore the LAGs should take into account this difficulty and consider for example the following:

- how to manage differences between approval times/procedures in different countries ? (for example by starting with local / preparation projects (on your own risk)

- How to analyze the risk (what is the risk and what is the solution?)

    - by making some different scenarios; organizing a crisis meeting with all partnership and make some common decision

    - What to do if project fails?

In this funding period there is a new process whereby Member States need to inform the European Commission about projects under approval. This procedure is not clear for the Member States and more detailed information should be made available as soon as possible.

Once a cooperation project is planned and approved one of the difficulties is to keep the involvement of all the participants alive. It is therefore important to have an excellent communication strategy within the own area. Developing new communication tools are a possible option, including: e-mailing of specific information to a targeted public; a web-based forum for each project developed by each NRN-basis, with a possibility to host this at the EU - level); a personal database to follow up the progress of individual projects; training in the use of "new social medias" (examples needed for the guide).

There are various possibilities to manage a transnational cooperation project. An overview about the different management tasks and models described in a short and clear way should be part of the guide.

In addition it is very important to disseminate information the project outside the own are. For the guide it was suggested: to organize local PR and to involve as many people as possible in order to have 'open minds'; dissemination information up to European (even worldwide) level, and involve internationals NGOs such as OECD.

During all phases of a cooperation project it is very difficult to deal with different languages, and advice on dealing with this problem could be really useful.

There are also cultural differences which cause a lot of problems for the stakeholders over the duration of the project. For the NRNs/NSUs it is very difficult to find methods to support LAGs in the area of intercultural learning. Finding good practices for this at the European level could be very helpful. In detail it means to find good examples for:

- The process of cultural learning

- step by step learning, slow at the beginning

- intercultural management methods

- to build trust

- "Institutional" culture: how to avoid misunderstanding? (by finding in each LAG people in the same position for the first meeting)

Interterritorial cooperation is something which has to be done by the Member States without support from the European level (although the methodology is the same as that for TNC projects). Therefore the TNC guide could also be used for inter-territorial cooperation and this should be communicated even on the website of the EN RD Contact Point.

The workshop suggested that "cooperation with third countries" as a topic to be discussed at the next Leader Sub Committee.

Workshop 4: Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

Issues/areas and types of support needed:

Since LEADER II, attempts have been made to encourage self-evaluation, although not many LAGs appear to be using monitoring and evaluation techniques when implementing TNC projects. The different levels/lack of knowledge about M&E tools and the ways to apply them seem to be the main reasons why people are unaware about the benefits of using of M&E results for managing TNC projects.

Objective:

By clarifying the extent of the work required and the advantages/benefit for TNC projects, the Guide should aim to establish an 'evaluation culture' among LAGs, which helps to encourage the practice and use of M&E to improve the quality/added value achieved by TNC projects:

- Monitoring provides useful information to support project management
- Evaluation substantiates the changes and the added value of the TNC project, by establishing the impact and effectiveness of the activities undertaken, and by assessing the sustainability of the project's results.

A common prejudice is that M&E is time-consuming. How far should we go in M&E process?

- Monitoring indicators need to be established at the project preparation stage, so they can be tested and used from the beginning. Only then monitoring can be useful and used efficiently in identifying the need for corrective action at any point of time during project implementation.
- If collected regularly, monitoring indicators can also provide valuable information for evaluation purposes (interim, final).
- Depending on the time and means available, evaluation may be conducted internally or by an external contractor.

Means and tools:

- Monitoring is the observation of the project's progress by means of **indicators**. The Guide could present different indicators that LAGs could use. It could also provide examples of indicators that are: qualitative or quantitative, and that at any moment of time could help to measure project progress. It should be noted that indicators should agreed at the stage of project preparation, and that they should be compatible and comparable between the different partners, clearly relating to the TNC project plan and to the Local Development Strategies involved.
- The Guide could achieve this by providing a **M&E toolkit** that comprises: (a) two sets of indicators: one an easy understandable set of **basic indicators**, supporting project management; and one of more **specific indicators**, looking into qualitative aspects of the project; (b) concrete **examples of project evaluations** at different project stages and explanations how these can serve to support reporting to become more than just a description of activities. This to be effected by **substantiating the impact and effective added value** that the joint actions of the TNC project have contributed to; (c) a **glossary** in order to 'demystify' terminology; and (d) a list of "do's and "don'ts.

Dissemination:

As stated above there is a need for an 'evaluation culture'. The Guide could help to overcome the current lack of motivation through:

- Linking the M&E toolkit to a blog/forum on the EN RD website in order to inspire the debate and the continuous review/update of the toolkit.
- Creating a 'programme of excellence', by awarding projects successfully practicing M&E (certificate).

However, it is not sure whose task it will be to promote M&E in TNC projects among LAGs, nor how and when. It is very important to ensure that these tools are understood as support for better project management rather than an administrative burden:

- Beyond the EN RD website, additional communication efforts will be needed to disseminate and encourage the use of the M&E toolkit offered as part of the Guide.
- Permanent feed-back from the Member State NSU's about the success and use of the guide as well as M&E process will be needed.
- Seminars for LAGs as well as MAs could be run, comprising a "TNC management package" on how to prepare and carry out a good project, and how to usefully report and conduct sound M&E.
- It could be useful to consult experts from the evaluation network in designing the M&E toolkit.