

What can National Rural Networks do to support social inclusion?

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Policy networks play an increasingly important role in policy formulation and implementation. One of the main added values of these networks is that they bring together various stakeholders around common issues of interest and facilitate exchanges of experience and views between them. Through these activities, networks can help to identify and overcome common problems and challenges, and ultimately they contribute to the improvement of policy implementation.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2014-2020 programming period the role of rural networks has been strengthened through the Rural Development Regulation at both the European and national level. One of the common objectives of rural networks is to increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development.

One of the biggest challenges of national rural networks (NRNs) is to engage with the more 'hard-to-reach' groups in rural areas. NRNs tend to connect more easily with those stakeholder groups that are better organised (such as LEADER Local Action Groups or farmers' organisations).

However, a number of NRNs have recognised the importance of engaging with marginalised groups in rural areas.

For instance, social inclusion has been high on the agenda of the Swedish NRN for a long time, and the recent refugee crisis made this even more important. The Swedish NRN sees social inclusion of migrants and other marginalised groups not just as a challenge, but also as an important opportunity for rural areas.

NRNs contribute in two main ways to social inclusion in rural areas:

- Directly engaging with (and organising activities for) marginalised groups and their organisations to improve their involvement in rural development policy;
- Building capacity of various organisations, in particular Local Action Groups in order to better address (integrate within their strategies) social inclusion issues.

NRNs are well placed to address social inclusion issues through the involvement of marginalised stakeholder groups in rural development.

According to a recent NRN survey, 6 networks indicated that they plan work on the theme of 'social inclusion' during 2016.

Rural areas need everyone to stay

- To meet the challenge with decreasing population
- To keep local schools, shops, health care and other services
- To meet the problems with an upcoming labour shortage in different sectors






In Sollerön, nine different nationalities play in the soccer team – it brings people together

✓ NRNs engage with marginalised groups and their organisations

One of the main tools of NRNs to address social inclusion is 'thematic working groups' that bring together a wide range of stakeholders. For instance, the Swedish NRN established thematic working groups on 'social inclusion of refugees and immigrants' and 'youth in rural development'.

Integrating young people in rural areas is a key theme that a number of NRNs have been working on. According to a recent survey five NRNs (Austria, Estonia, Germany, Poland and Sweden) mentioned 'youth' as a core theme of their work during 2015 and 2016.



The main objectives of the project 'International Food Orust' is to start a company, promote local food products and promote integration.

Thematic Group on 'Youth in rural areas' (Poland)

The Polish NRN established a thematic group on youth in rural areas. The first meeting of the group was planned for January 2016. Since there are no programmes dedicated directly to young people living in rural areas the network's goal is to directly support the development of rural youth activities.

The first task of the group is to give opinions on projects submitted by the network partners for the activities supporting and activating youth in rural areas. The group is to monitor rural youth's access to and participation in the EU programmes, with particular focus on their needs and problems. It initiates cooperation and the exchange of knowledge between partners operating for the benefit of youth in rural areas. In particular, the group elaborates tools that facilitate knowledge exchange and cooperation; among others, it disseminates good practices on supporting rural youth.

The Swedish NRN thematic working group on immigrants and refugees

The Swedish NRN recognised that it is crucial to engage with a diversity of key stakeholder groups in order to promote social inclusion in rural areas, including:

- ✓ **Local communities** that can create interpersonal links and local knowledge;
- ✓ **NGOs** that have a key role in improving social life and skills through training;
- ✓ **Businesses** that can enable labour market integration through internship and matching skills with available jobs;

- ✓ **Local authorities** that are directly involved in providing education, healthcare and housing.

One of the main success factors of the thematic group on migrants is a wide representation of stakeholders, including NGOs (e.g. Swedish Football Association), the Swedish Village Action Movement, farmers' organisations, LEADER groups, business associations, representatives of immigrant organisations, local public authorities and private experts.

The aim of the thematic group is to support social inclusion of refugees and immigrants through mapping of areas with potential for social inclusion, good examples, a handbook and checklists for effective social inclusion, seminars, and testing models on social inclusion (e.g. housing provision).

The results of the thematic group are used by local and regional authorities, national agencies, LAGs and NGOs including ethnic organisations that want to develop activities in rural areas. The outcomes directly feed into policy-making processes through the organisation of seminars to inform politicians and other decision makers.

✓ *NRNs generate peer-learning and build capacity within LAGs, MAs and other stakeholders*

The Flemish NRN offers an example of fostering peer-learning among Flemish LAGs, structured around the main themes of their local development strategies. The 'learning networks' were initiated by LAGs, but they involve a wider range of stakeholders including LAG coordinators and members, experts on the theme, the Managing Authority and the Flemish Network Support Unit. The main aim of the learning networks is to collect ideas, learn from each other and start up cooperation projects.



Flemish LAGs' Learning Network

The Flemish 'learning network' on poverty and vulnerability

The first 'learning network' that emerged in October 2015 assessed the incorporation of the poverty and sustainability theme in the local development strategies and discussed the interpretation of poverty by different LAGs. Various elements of poverty were identified, including inter alia, village quality of life (community building), access to social services, lack of (public) transport facilities, a digital divide and an ageing population.

The 'learning network' was not limited to LAGs. It also brought together speakers from socio-cultural associations, public social assistance centres and representatives of the Flemish action plan for poverty reduction. They covered issues related to sustainable mobility, poverty for special groups such as families with young children, the tasks of the public social assistance centres and even the evaluation of public policy for the reduction of poverty.

The role of stakeholder networks

There are various national and European organisations and networks that address poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. These organisations typically represent the interests of specific target groups, including various marginalised groups in rural areas.

One of the recommendations of the ENRD seminar on Stakeholder involvement (March 2015) was that NRNs should work closely with stakeholder organisations as connectors to people on the ground.

NRNs are increasingly working together with stakeholder organisations concerned with social inclusion. Most NRNs operate as 'network of networks' and use other stakeholder organisations and intermediaries to better reach out to specific stakeholder groups on the ground. There is much scope for NRN cooperation with other networks on social inclusion issues. Many voluntary and community groups have emerged over the years to respond to the problems of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. These range from transnational networks to national and local organisations (some of which are very active in rural areas).

One of the national networks that work on the integration of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants is SPAR (Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) in Italy. This network was created by the Italian Ministry of Home Affairs and is funded through the National Fund for Asylum Policy and Services.

The SPAR network in Italy brings new life to rural areas through the integration of immigrants

The SPAR network consists of 376 municipalities in Italy. The aim of the SPAR project is to support and protect asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants. The project deals with initial care, integration and protection of immigrants and refugees.

The care services include:

- admission to a small facility;
- supply of food vouchers;
- orientation in relation to local services;
- support of a linguistic mediator;
- assistance in procedures to access social, health and educational services (e.g. Italian language courses for adults, enrolment in school for minors).

The integration services include:

- orientation in relation to employment;
- enrolment in training courses;
- professional re-training;
- support in looking for a job and a home.

In addition, SPAR offers legal protection services as well as psycho-social protection services.

Thanks to the SPAR network, rural villages that suffered from depopulation have been revived with the arrival and integration of refugees and immigrants.

"Migrants who arrive here are useful people. They have allowed us to rebuild and reopen schools, to launch businesses, to revive the village"

Mayor of Lucano

The ERGO network as an advocate of the CLLD approach for the social inclusion of Roma people

ERGO is a Grassroots Organisation, which brings together over 25 Roma organisations from across Europe and functions as a liaison between Roma organisations and European decisions makers, policy makers and institutions. At European level, the work of the ERGO network has been fundamental in promoting the integration and empowerment of Roma people, focusing on Bulgaria Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

ERGO has been active **in analysing the potential offered by the LEADER/CLLD** approach for the integration of Roma people. ERGO formulates policy recommendations for aligning the CLLD strategy and process with the allocation of funds. These include inter alia: a) the identification of Roma leaders in every community and their involvement in the LAG planning process; b) the establishment of a network with Roma coordinators in LAGs operating in administrative districts with a large Roma population; c) the inclusion of Roma as a target group in CLLD documents and the development of a blueprint for reaching out to Roma communities.

ERGO has provided both policy recommendations and operational tools for assessing and reinforcing the CLLD process in LAG areas.

Recommendations: How to improve the role of rural networks & stakeholder organisations?

- ✓ National Rural Networks can play a **key role in bringing together a wide range of organisations** around the issue of social inclusion, including policy-makers, LAGs, stakeholder organisations and NGOs (in particular those dealing with marginalised groups). Thematic Groups are a useful form of exchange.
- ✓ National Rural Networks are **'networks of networks'**, and as such they need to rely on their network members and their strength/specialist expertise (for instance the Swedish NRN works closely with the Cooperation Group for Ethnical Associations in Sweden on the social inclusion theme).
- ✓ **Exchange of experience and relevant practices among different National Rural Networks** is important. Although social inclusion is a common theme of several rural networks, it covers diverse issues (e.g. integration of youth, migrants, Roma, women, etc.). Therefore, exchange among networks working on common topics is becoming even more important (for instance a group of NRNs is now regularly exchanging about the migrant issue, whereas Roma integration is a particularly important issue in some of the EU10 Member States).
- ✓ Networks can **contribute to capacity-building among LAGs and other rural organisations** interested in social inclusion issues. Capacity-building may involve the facilitation of exchange and cooperation among LAGs with similar interests, as well as dissemination of inspiring examples and useful and transferable practices (such as local Roma, integration or youth coordinators/coaches).
- ✓ **Managing Authorities can encourage and enable the role of NRNs** in facilitating exchange and capacity-building.