



European Network for
Rural Development

EU RURAL REVIEW
No 27

NETWORKING



*The POWER
of NETWORKS*

European Network for Rural Development

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) is the hub that connects rural development stakeholders throughout the European Union (EU). The ENRD contributes to the effective implementation of Member States' Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) by generating and sharing knowledge, as well as through facilitating information exchange and cooperation across rural Europe.

Each Member State has established a National Rural Network (NRN) that brings together the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. At EU level, the ENRD supports the networking of these NRNs, national administrations and European organisations.

Find out more on the ENRD website (<https://enrd.ec.europa.eu>)

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Managing editor: Neda Skakelja, Head of Unit, EC Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Editor: Derek McGlynn, ENRD Contact Point.

ENRD Contact Point

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Main contributors: Veneta Paneva; Elena di Federico; Michael Gregory; John Grieve; Kaley Hart; David Lamb; Andrew Moxey; Eamon McMullan; Peter Ramsden; Sari Rannanpää; Mark Redman; Paul Soto; Jean-Pierre Vercauteren; Sarah Watson; Hannes Wimmer.

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Introduction	2
1. The evolution of rural development networking	4
2. Rural networking in action.....	11
3. Networking as a policy instrument.....	18
4. Better performance.....	24
5. A rich network ecosystem	31
6. Networking and the new CAP	38

Introduction

Networking brings rural development policy to life. This publication traces how networking has grown to become a defining characteristic of rural development in Europe. Networking has not only matured as a policy tool, all types of rural stakeholders interact in today's increasingly diverse networking ecosystem. The future policy environment at European level will remain supportive with the CAP post 2020 expected to rely on networking to an even greater extent.

Networking has long been a component of rural development policy. Prior to the creation of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) by the European Commission in 2008, LEADER blazed a trail by demonstrating how networking furthers and deepens the reach of rural development policy amongst rural communities.

Fast-forward to today and networks have been established to address a breadth of EU rural development policy matters. While LEADER remains an inspiring networking laboratory where people assess the strengths and weaknesses of their locality, new networks and approaches continue to emerge at local, regional, national and European levels.

This edition of the EU Rural Review tells the story of networking and how it has evolved as a rural development policy tool. The emphasis is on the lessons learned over the past decade of ENRD activity and from the mainstreaming of the networking concept across a range of policy areas.

The added value of networking for rural development policy implementation is centred on capacity building, improved stakeholder involvement and better Rural Development Programme (RDP) delivery.

To put it more simply, the value of networking lies in its ability to make connections and deliver results that otherwise would not occur. Therefore, this EU Rural Review emphasises how networking works in practice as well as from a theoretical point of view.

Successful networking initiatives are featured, and profiles are provided of different types of rural networks and networking activities. The publication thus gives a flavour of the range of networks and the diverse goals that drive them. It primarily focuses on the rural development space, but also takes a look at how networks operate in some other policy areas.

Regardless of how they are organised, all networks share at least one factor. Networks are about people. In telling the story of networking, this EU Rural Review has thus asked a selection of people involved in rural development to provide their personal insights into networking.

In April 2019, the ENRD's conference⁽¹⁾ – networX – will be the largest gathering of rural networking practitioners organised under the current programming period. It will focus on how networks are inspiring rural Europe and will be a showcase for all the latest thinking on networking. If you are looking to learn more about networking in action be sure to consult the ENRD's website for all the news from the networX event.

(1) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/networx-inspiring-rural-europe_en



STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLICATION

1. The evolution of rural development networking

The origins of networking in European rural development policy are traced – from the LEADER Observatory to today's ENRD. The article also examines how networking has become more purposeful over time.

2. Rural networking in action

Networking brings people together and makes change happen. Good examples of networking are highlighted alongside insights from some of the people who have been part of the networking journey from the LEADER Observatory onwards.

3. Networking as a policy instrument

Networking supports better RDP delivery and implementation through capacity building and improving stakeholder involvement. It is also an important feedback channel that can help shape future policy based on real-world insight into rural development challenges.

4. Better performance

Networking is helping Managing Authorities to evaluate their RDPs. The article profiles how the Evaluation Helpdesk supports evaluation practice under the EAFRD. It also examines how self-assessment can help networks work more effectively towards their objectives.

5. A rich network ecosystem

All networks operate within a wider ecosystem. The article considers policy and stakeholder networks that have relevance for rural development. It looks at how such networks interact with their target communities. Networks naturally seek to work with each other to find solutions to shared challenges.

6. Networking and the new CAP

The legislative proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) beyond 2020 combine strategic planning across Pillar I and Pillar II and create a single EU CAP Network. What will it mean for networking and rural development? The article examines potential future trends for networking under the CAP.



1. The evolution of rural development networking

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This article outlines the relationship between networking and rural development, tracing the origins and evolution of networking in European Union Rural Development policy.

RURAL NETWORKING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EU-FUNDED RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS

TODAY'S RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK LANDSCAPE

RURAL NETWORKING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Rural development policy in Western economies has evolved over time. For much of the twentieth century, the policy emphasis was upon exogenous interventions: development was something that happened to rural areas and typically revolved around public support for specific commodity production/extraction sectors and/or large infrastructure projects. From the 1980s onwards, the emphasis shifted more towards encouragement for endogenous actions: development was something that happened in rural areas, typically revolving around market-led opportunities, particularly with a territorial rather than sector-specific focus and intervening alongside sectoral agricultural policy.

However, straddling binary distinctions between exogenous and endogenous approaches, there was a growing recognition that development actually occurs through people sharing or exchanging ideas, information and resources. This can happen in a variety of ways and across different geographical scales, but reflects the role of networks and networking in rural development.

Networks comprise people or groups linked together and interacting in some way. Unfortunately, formal terminology can be ambiguous, drawing on competing academic theories with elastic definitions stretched to cover a variety of situations. However, all networks are characterised by facilitating interactions between members as a means of raising (mutual) awareness, building relationships and identifying options to achieve desired outcomes.



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Connecting people (whether face-to-face or via communication technologies) creates opportunities for discussion and discovery of capabilities, challenges and aspirations, potentially leading to more effective development actions and innovation. For example, enabling members to receive advice and information; share learning and experiences; develop creative ways to address problems and needs; explore ambitions for transformational change; and identify sources of funding.

As this edition of the EU Rural Review demonstrates, networks can take many forms and vary greatly. For example, networks may cover only a handful of people or many hundreds, be concentrated around one location or span continents and focus solely on a single sector or encompass multiple sectors.

In addition, networks can also vary in terms of how they are structured/governed, funded and operated. For example, they may: have a central hub or be more dispersed; be funded

WHAT IS A NETWORK?

A network is a social structure consisting of actors (people, businesses, organisations) and the relationships or ties between them. Academic work on social networks can be traced back over a century, drawing upon several disciplines including sociology, psychology, anthropology, information science, mathematics, political science, and economics. The size, form and functions of networks vary, and it is often difficult to determine the boundaries since social interactions are pervasive. The performance of a network in terms of supporting the sharing of information and resources depends on the number and quality of ties between actors. Whilst close ties between actors can reflect overlapping relationships and beneficial levels of, for example, trust and reciprocity, access to new ideas and information is often enhanced by less frequent interactions with less familiar members of a network – something which Granovetter described as the, “strength of weak ties.”⁽¹⁾

(1) Granovetter, M. (1973). ‘The Strength of Weak Ties.’ American Journal of Sociology, V78/6, 1360-1380.

by government or membership fees; and operate as passive providers of information or support more active linkages between members.

Rural development networks can thus span a variety of geographical scales and connect a variety of members, including, for example, farmers and farm workers, other rural businesses and workers, other rural residents, upstream suppliers, downstream processors, advisors, academics, NGO staff and public officials whether from local, regional, national or European level.

By encouraging shared understanding, trust and cooperation, networks help to improve levels of social capital amongst members. This can take two forms, bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to the associations within a group of people (often local),

bridging capital refers to associations with other groups (often non-local).

The absence of sufficient bonding constrains local development capabilities. For example, residents and businesses may not share a common identity or ambition and/or levels of trust may be low. Strengthening local ties to improve cohesiveness can overcome this to raise awareness of shared challenges and opportunities and encourage collective development actions.

Reliance on bonding capital alone can lead to insularity and missed possibilities. Network ties that extend (bridge) beyond local groups to reach more distant and diverse groups can be an important source of new information, ideas and capabilities.

External animateurs (facilitators) can play a pivotal role in helping to form bridging capital but have to be trusted by local groups and viewed as legitimate in terms of having, for example, appropriate skills, experience, connections and motivations.

The appropriate balance between bonding and bridging capital, or strong and weak ties, will vary according to context and over time, but networks that contain both types tend to perform better than those dominated by one type.

The policy challenge is how best to encourage network ties, with the irony that the strong ties required for bottom-up approaches to rural development may require initial top-down intervention before they form.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EU-FUNDED RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS

Networks can, and do, arise spontaneously without policy interventions. Hence, for example, agriculture has long been characterised by technical networks between farmers, advisers and researchers seeking to improve farm productivity and by policy networks between farmer representative bodies seeking to exchange with and influence policy-makers. Equally, some rural communities have strong ties amongst their members and have successfully forged weaker ties to other communities and other organisations.

However, spontaneous networks do not necessarily achieve or maintain a healthy balance between strong and weak ties: they may omit groups with something to contribute and, moreover, they do not necessarily

encompass all groups that would benefit from membership. Hence there is scope for policy interventions to add value through improving networks' performance in terms of both effectiveness (efficiency) and inclusiveness (equity).

Although some individual Member States and regions had already introduced policy support for networking, funding for rural development networks was first implemented at the EU level from 1991 to 1993 through a Community Initiative that launched the LEADER approach (the term LEADER standing for Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale; Links between the rural economy and development actions). Community Initiatives allowed the European Commission to offer special,

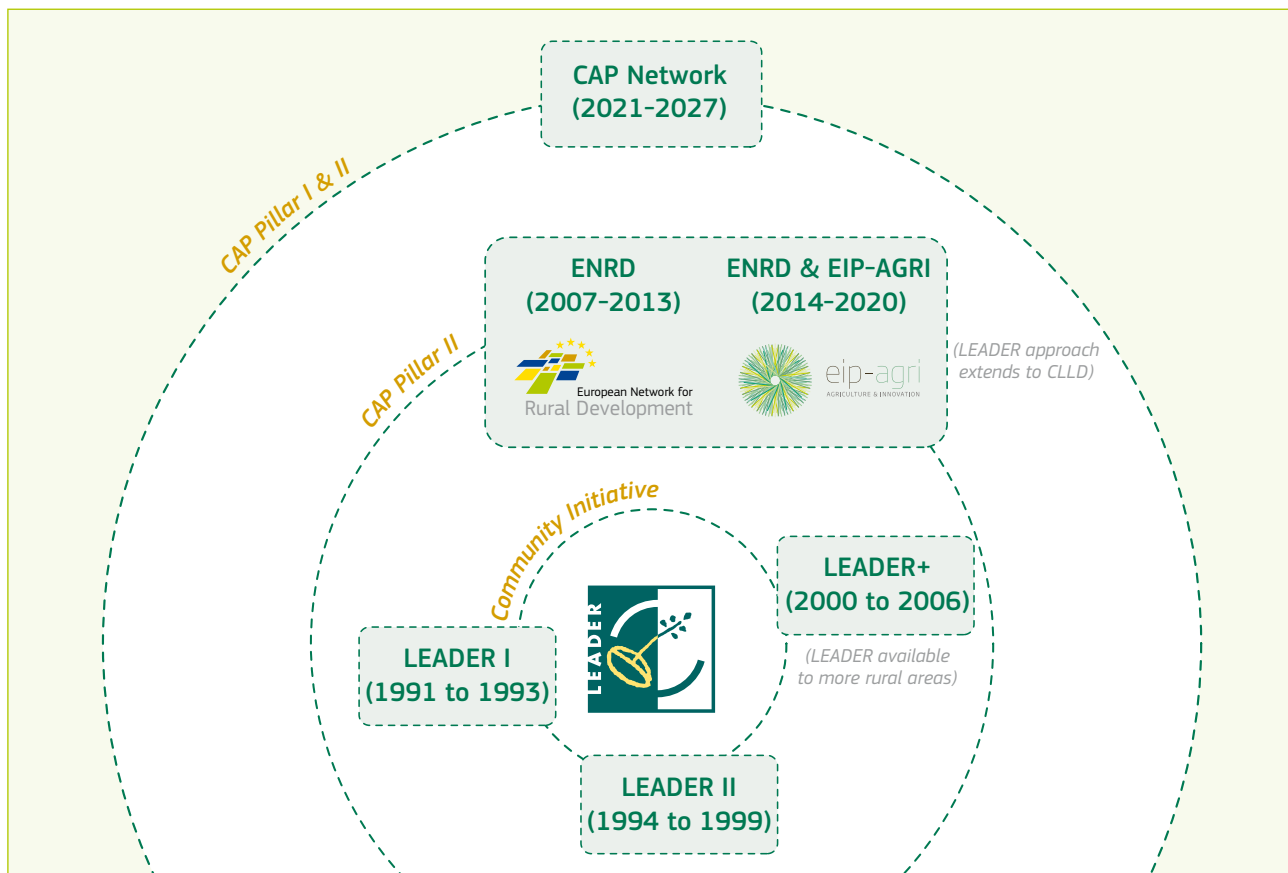
stand-alone interventions to support specific areas or sectors.

LEADER I (as it subsequently became known) was a policy experiment, trialling a new approach targeted on a few disadvantaged rural areas⁽²⁾ with objectives to: draw on local initiative and skills; promote the acquisition of know-how on local integrated development; and disseminate this know-how to other rural areas. Within this there were explicit requirements to support networking among people, organisations and institutions at different scales plus cooperation among groups to (e.g.) share experiences and achieve critical mass.

Positive evaluations of LEADER I led to subsequent increased funding and geographical expansion to more (but still disadvantaged) rural areas under LEADER II (1994 to 1999). This was

(2) Parallel initiatives were introduced for disadvantaged fishing areas (PESCA) and urban areas (URBAN).

Figure 1: The evolution of rural networking at EU level



then followed by LEADER+ (2000 to 2006) which was made potentially available to all rural areas in an attempt to widen and deepen coverage. Although the initial emphasis was on local networking to strengthen intra-community ties, gradual recognition of the importance of cooperation between LEADER groups led to additional funding being made available specifically for this purpose, including across national boundaries. In addition, top-down networking structures intended to facilitate formation of bridging capital were created at the EU level, such as a Coordinating Unit and later LEADER Observatory to organise information transfer and technical support for cooperation between Local Action Groups (LAGs).

The success and maturing of the LEADER approach led the European Commission to mainstream it as a

horizontal priority scheme within Pillar II of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) from 2007 to 2013 (although some new Member States (MS) had already shifted in this direction from 2004), greatly increasing the profile and funding of LEADER. At the same time, networking was also mainstreamed through creation of National Rural Networks (NRNs) and accompanying secretariat Network Support Units (NSUs) at the national (or regional) level and the ENRD (European Network for Rural Development) at the EU level

to facilitate networking activities not only for LEADER but across Rural Development Programmes (RDs).

Subsequently, in the 2014-2020 period this mainstreaming approach continued but was expanded through a number of step-changes. First, the LEADER approach was extended to coastal and urban areas to become CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) with access to multiple EU funding sources rather than the previous more restricted eligibility. Second, provisions for involving partners in all stages of

NETWORK LANDSCAPE IN THE MS: 2014-2020

32 National Rural Networks (and NSUs)

42 Regional NSUs

Source: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/w24_regional-rdp-delivery-introduction_enrd-cp.pdf

rural policy design and implementation were reinforced with the introduction of the new European Code of Conduct on Partnership applicable to European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programmes⁽³⁾ – representing a deliberate attempt to forge network connections between different groups.

Third, alongside the ENRD, an EIP-AGRI (European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability) network was established at EU level, to support networking amongst farmers, researchers, advisors and all those involved in the knowledge exchange process. Fourth, new governance arrangements and a single Strategic Framework were introduced to harmonise the objectives and activities of the ENRD and EIP-AGRI.

The shift from stand-alone activities to mainstreaming networking within RDPs marks a concerted attempt to harness the power of networks to improve the quality of policy implementation but also policy design in relation to balanced territorial development, sustainable natural resource management and competitive agriculture, as articulated under Pillar II of the CAP. Unsurprisingly, expansion of the reach



© ENRD Contact Point

and expenditure on networking support was accompanied by increased formal governance for public accountability. For example, the formation of various joint steering and monitoring committees at the national or regional level and new thematic networks. Although perhaps not regarded formally as such, these committees and groups involve linkages between actors and are a part of the extended rural development network ecosystem.

Looking ahead, the legislative proposals for the CAP in the 2021–2027 period envisage that MS will

establish CAP Strategic Plans, as a single framework covering both pillars, and a parallel shift is foreseen with the proposed introduction of new CAP Networks at EU and national level, also encompassing both Pillars. Although the precise details are still under discussion between the legislators and the reconfiguration of responsibilities is yet to happen, it does signal a further and remarkable expansion in remit from the original experimental trialling of network support under LEADER I. For more about the future of networking see article 6.

TODAY'S RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK LANDSCAPE

Since 2015, the ENRD and EIP-AGRI have been coordinated under the Rural Networks' Assembly, the leading governance body for the two rural networks at EU level. It comprises a range of stakeholder representatives from each MS and European NGOs and seeks to provide a strategic framework for operation of both

networks, and to guide and monitor their activities. Permanent sub-groups of the Assembly have been created to oversee activities relating to, for example, Innovation and CLLD/LEADER, with additional *ad hoc* sub-groups also possible.

In terms of network activities, EIP-AGRI seeks to promote agricultural innovation through bringing different

groups together at both the EU level and RDP-level through a network comprising, for example, farmers, advisers, researchers, businesses, and NGOs. Activities are supported by the EIP-AGRI Service Point at the EU level, combined with national or regional-level support through NSUs and/or other entities acting as 'innovation support services' (e.g. chambers

(3) Delegated reg (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014.

of agriculture, regional innovation agencies, advisory services, etc.).

The focus of support on-the-ground is EIP Operational Groups, which are project-based and focus on specific practical problems or innovation possibilities. Operational Groups comprise stakeholders selected to achieve project outcomes, to share experiences and disseminate learning and results widely by drawing interactively on different types of knowledge. For example, practical, scientific, technical, and organisational.

The ENRD serves as a hub for the sharing of information about how Rural Development policy, programmes, projects and other initiatives are working in practice and how they can be improved to achieve more. The ENRD also works to ensure networking between NRNs and other stakeholders, whether LAGs, farmer representative bodies or individual businesses.

The ENRD Contact Point is one of the two support units facilitating the work of the ENRD, the other being the European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development. The Helpdesk seeks to improve rural development policy evaluations and supports stakeholders in complying with the CMES (Common Monitoring and Evaluation System). For more about how the Evaluation Helpdesk disseminates evaluation information and builds evaluation capacity amongst stakeholders see article on 'Better performance' (page 24).

Services offered by the ENRD Contact Point and EIP-AGRI Service Point include: a helpdesk; Focus Groups; thematic working groups addressing specific challenges; organisation of workshops/seminars and training events; dissemination of best practice

guidance and/or examples; technical support and networking for LAGs and OGs; and information provision through newsletters, publications, websites and social media.

The obligation to involve stakeholders more purposively in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of agricultural innovation and rural development policy is an acknowledgment of the legitimate interests of a range of groups in policy outcomes but also of their potential contribution to improving policy processes. This applies at the level of individual innovation or development projects, at the level of local/regional plans and at the level of national/EU programmes and strategies.

Stakeholders fall into three broad categories: individual citizens and businesses; representatives of interest groups (e.g. farming unions, NGOs, universities); and public officials with responsibility for designing and implementing rural policies and programmes. At the national level, NRNs and other EIP-networks are charged with grouping organisations together to help such policy networks

to form and to function, and to reach-out to the broader public to communicate the rationale and benefits of agricultural and rural development policies. This reflects Europe2020 ambitions with respect to increasing participation in policy processes, improving policy quality and increasing public awareness.

Rural development networks are often viewed positively, but are subject to criticisms relating to how success is measured. For example, focusing on activity counts or event reports rather than outcomes, favouring supply-side provision rather than user-demand and perceived relevance, and ignoring overlaps/redundancy with the wider network ecosystem.⁽⁴⁾

However, to an extent, such criticisms reflect the difficulties inherent in attempts to measure social capital and network effects which by their very nature are often intangible, diffuse and slow to accumulate. As such, better insights may be gained by focusing on networking processes to explore the quality and configuration of network relationships. Self-assessment can play an important role here (something covered in more detail in article 4).



© ENRD Contact Point

(4) For example, networks such as PREPARE (the Partnership for Rural Europe), PURPLE (Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe) and ELARD (the European LEADER Association for Rural Development) have emerged alongside EU-funded rural development networks as ways of linking various groups, including LAGs, NSUs and the European Commission.



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That is, it is apparent that organisational arrangements for both top-down networking and bottom-up networking vary greatly, as does the nature of networks themselves in terms of, for example, their openness, diversity, flexibility, dynamism, level of resources and responsiveness to user demands. The ENRD holds a wealth of case-study material on networking and offers detailed advice for setting up and operating rural networks.

Binary distinctions between endogenous and exogenous approaches mask the messy reality of rural development needs and experiences. Context matters, and rural areas vary markedly in terms of, for example, their location relative to

urban areas and markets, biophysical characteristics, histories and amount of social capital. Consequently, different areas need different levels and combinations of policy support, and networks play a key role in enabling the exchange of information, ideas and resources needed to find solutions.

Although networks can arise spontaneously, the potential for policy interventions to add value by strengthening and extending rural development networks was first recognised at the EU level through LEADER. Networking has subsequently been mainstreamed and expanded under increased resourcing, with proposed future changes extending

funded networks to encompass both Pillars of the CAP. This evolution has seen the focus of support widen to include more diverse groups as well as more formalised top-down structures, and to encompass broader cooperation and interaction activities alongside networking of communities.

This expansion has not been without challenges, but the principle that development occurs through people is widely accepted. The European Commission has demonstrated its commitment to support for networking, innovation and participation recognising their core role in successful delivery of rural development policy.



2. Rural networking in action

© Patrick Perkins, Unsplash

Well-run networks are drivers of change. They energise communities and help rural actors improve their business, environment or local services. Networks of networks also deepen the knowledge pool and help share good ideas. The workings of networks and some of the people who support them are profiled in this article.

HOW NETWORKS EFFECT CHANGE

THE NETWORKER PERSPECTIVE

HOW NETWORKS EFFECT CHANGE

Whilst the formal networking structures of the ENRD and National Rural Networks (NRNs) have been a part of the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) for over ten years, networking and networks have long been an integral part of rural development.

As explained in the article on ‘The evolution of rural development networking’ (page 4), the basis for rural development networking at European level was established under LEADER, where cooperation, networking and partnership working form three of the seven core principles of the LEADER approach.

The application of these principles to the working of a Local Action Group (LAG) extends to the practical exchange of information and experience that can lead to improved functioning of the LAG and better strategic delivery by building skills, understanding and capacity.

The rural development networking landscape has matured considerably over the past two decades. LAGs exist to develop and deliver on Local

Development Strategies. The LAGs are broad-based representative partnerships, and are required to work in partnership with other agencies. The establishment and facilitation of formal networking frameworks, the ENRD, the EIP-AGRI network and NRNs, and cooperation actions has also extended this opportunity to a much wider range of actors, from those in Managing Authorities,

right through to farmers, advisers, researchers, rural innovation actors and other potential beneficiaries of rural development funding.

Rural development networkers naturally seek to intertwine with others as their needs change over time. For example the LAG Felso-Homokhatsag, which hosted the LINC network event in 2016 (for more about LINC see case study below), actively



© LINC Finland 2018

LINC

The LEADER Inspired Network Community (LINC) is an annual European conference promoting innovative exchanging of experience and networking between rural regions in Europe. The event is an initiative from LAGs and National Network Units for rural development in Austria, Germany, Estonia and Finland.

LINC has developed and grown from initial discussions between these NSU representatives about an initiative originating in Austria, and which has now become a successful international event. Its 10th edition will take place in Pärnu, Estonia in September 2019. LINC has now existed alongside the formal NRN/ENRD structures over two different programming periods and it is extending its reach with each passing year.

The most distinctive feature of LINC is the opportunity it provides for those involved in LEADER and rural development to come together outside of formal structures. In doing so it also acts as a vehicle for supporting improved cultural exchange and understanding, and improving cohesion between different Member States (MS). LINC offers a unique networking opportunity to a wide variety of participants and helps to identify potential cooperation opportunities and partnerships. It supports the capacity building of LAGs and other actors within rural development through its extensive reach and range of participants.

<http://www.info-linc.eu/>





INNOVATION ROUTE

In some cases, networks have even offered an alternative means of addressing policy goals not covered elsewhere in the RDP, thereby directly adding value to programme outputs. The Walloon Rural Development Network, for example, includes 'innovation diffusion' as a key component of its mission, and under this theme was able to develop the Innovation Route programme, as part of its wider work. This programme goes beyond the types of information exchange and capacity building typical of most NRN initiatives, bringing together a much wider network of various stakeholders involved or interested in the future of agricultural innovation. The programme, supported by a scientific board, comprised a series of farm-based events that brought local farmers together with scientists,

professionals and consumers to investigate potential farm innovations. Each visit was tailored to the interests of the local stakeholders taking part.

The Innovation Route, which was launched in 2017, ran for 18 months and comprised six farm-based events and a final seminar which summarised the knowledge accumulated along the way. The programme has facilitated greater understanding of innovation potential by farmers and opened doors to collaboration with companies who can help improve their agricultural practice. The project has enhanced integration and understanding between farmers and the wider rural community.

www.reseau-pwdr.be/news/route-de-linnovation

initiated other networks in Hungary covering distinct aspects of LEADER such as a forum for LAG Managers for peer-to-peer education and cooperation (NATURAMA Alliances) and the Federation of LEADER Associations Hungary, which facilitates collaboration between LAG representatives, co-ordinating knowledge transfer, professional research and consultation, participation in working groups and improved communication of the RDP.

For many, networking is seen as a practical way to get things done, for others a way to learn. But networking also plays a vital role in linking individuals to something larger, where they can see and celebrate the wider impact of what they do.

Just as the range of measures adopted by each Member State in composing its Rural Development Programme can vary significantly, so the organisation,

geographical scale and role of the NRNs' governance, operational structures and workplans can vary significantly from one Member State to another. Some networks continue to focus support on LEADER, whilst others have extended across into other aspects of RDP implementation and agricultural innovation. Some operate at national level, while others are regional.

Over time too, the focus and value of networking has shifted and changed but the overall framework of the EU Rural Networks and NRNs continues to offer a means for a wide variety of stakeholders to learn from each other, developing a better understanding of the scope of the EU rural development policy objectives and the way in which they can be used to tailor actions to meet specific local development needs.

Networking also provides a channel for the European institutions to learn from

the ground-up of implementation or other issues that they should address to improve policy delivery. In this way, rural networking has developed and expanded to become a key tool to get things done, and to add real value to the success of RDPs.

The case study examples in this article illustrate the breadth and range of networking in action – whether within the ‘formal’ rural development policy space or beyond it such as LINC. Such linkages provide the means to deliver practical actions in support of

national or regional RDP objectives; with projects and initiatives being developed between NRNs, or by supporting distinct programmes of information exchange and cooperation between a wide range of rural actors including LAGs and Managing Authorities, as well as local authorities and sectoral organisations (e.g. tourism, agriculture or forestry).



© MOAM

MOAM (MALTA ORGANIC AGRICULTURE MOVEMENT)

In some cases, LEADER funds have supported the activities of external thematic networks that contribute to Local Development Strategies (LDS) objectives; the MOAM (Malta Organic Agriculture Movement) is an example of voluntary networking to develop and support changes in public policy and consumer attitudes. It has received LEADER funding to develop and deliver training to farmers in organic agriculture. MOAM has been in operation since 1999 and exists to create a supportive environment to encourage growth in organic agriculture in Malta. It does this by lobbying for an

appropriate certification system for organic agriculture, by raising awareness among farmers and providing training on how to convert to organic farming, as well as running educational programmes and activities to educate the public about organic food. The MOAM network also enhances its awareness raising and educational capacities as a member of the International Federation of Organic Movements. This connection provides an opportunity for MOAM to learn from other regions and to keep updated with policy issues which it can then reflect in its own practice.



© ENRD Contact Point

Most importantly, rural development networks are networks of people, many of them volunteers, and it is their enthusiasm and commitment that these structures depend upon. The success of networking thus depends on the individuals that make up the network, and their ability to make the

most of the opportunities offered by the networking ecosystem, such as events and activities organised by Network Support Units.

Networks depend upon people with a wide range of experiences sharing their knowledge with others, to engage

and to learn. Recent efforts have also focused on encouraging a new generation of young people in rural areas to engage in rural development as a means of fostering their longer-term engagement in the success of their locality.



ST. OLAF'S ROUTE - FINLAND

Cooperation is increasingly used as a means to reduce fragmentation and increase coherence and consistency in developing and delivering rural tourism products/experiences. The St. Olaf's route seeks to extend the understanding of assets and stories associated with St. Olaf to build on an existing route and extend the benefits of the tourism potential across other parts of rural Finland.

Within the wider activities of this project a new network was established among the eight participating Finnish LAGs acting as a mechanism to ensure the ongoing management

of route development, packaging and branding; the network will be an integral part of the sustainability and quality of the tourism product developed under the Inter-territorial cooperation project.

Building on this cooperation, the LAGs have established a network relationship to exchange information and to ensure ongoing coordination of project outcomes. Going forward this network will work together as a source of information on local tourism and/or other tourism routes that have also been funded by the EAFRD.

THE NETWORKER PERSPECTIVE

As the application and value of networking have evolved and become increasingly significant with each rural development programming period, one thing has remained constant. Networks are about people. The personal perspectives of those who have been part of the networking journey provide a qualitative indicator of its value.

As rural development programmes and their delivery structures mature there is a risk of them becoming ever more bureaucratic or risk averse. New entrants are the best guarantee of a dynamic future for networking: their energy, enthusiasm and openness provide a reminder of how it all began. Within the CAP, networking must continue to be a laboratory and given the freedom to innovate, develop and extend.

“More than ever, networks have a fundamental role to play. The challenges are immense for rural areas. But we must be careful to allow place for robust discussion that challenges conventions.”

Yves Champetier
Former Director of the LEADER
Observatory



Rob Peters
Former Head of Unit,
DG AGRI, European Commission

Rob Peters was a key influencer in establishing networking structures to support rural development during the formative stages of networking as a rural development policy tool at European level. He identifies the LEADER Observatory as the first iteration, established primarily as a forum for exchange of information and experience between those involved in delivery of LEADER. The success of the Observatory during the 2000-2006 programming period inspired the Commission to expand networking across all aspects of rural development. Thus the ENRD was established, and with it a structure of supporting counterparts, the National Rural Networks, within Member States.

“The original idea was the recognition that shared policies across Member States cannot be centrally managed; that policies carried out in shared management cannot come to life without the key stakeholders on board; a network was a mechanism to make this happen; to share experiences across Member States of how to deliver EU-level policy.” He notes that as experience was gained, the Commission recognised additional value offered by stakeholder networks – they also provided a useful and immediate feedback channel offering insights beyond that received via formal consultation processes.

Whilst initiated ‘top-down’ by the Commission, Rob Peters notes that, “for networks to function effectively, they require flexibility. They need to adapt to the changing needs of their stakeholders. Network benefits can often arise from outcomes that were not foreseen at the outset.”

Yves Champetier
Former Director of the LEADER Observatory

Yves Champetier arrived in Brussels after working ‘on the ground’ with rural communities in France for 12 years. “When setting up LEADER, everything had to be invented from scratch to put in place a dynamic exchange. Using the experience of the first LEADER groups, and working in close relation with them, we created methodological tools to facilitate the transfer of experience and knowledge between

rural areas and to help make the multiple innovations of rural women and men better known.

In today’s more diverse network landscape there are three fundamental benefits of networking: the creation of a collective dynamic; the collective production of knowledge based on the different experiences of citizens, project leaders, experts and policy-makers; and networking’s wider contribution to the construction of a rural Europe rich in talent and diversity.”



Julia Saurwein*Former Chairwoman of Rural Youth Austria*

When Julia Saurwein joined her local rural youth group, at 15, it was clear to her that she wanted to be involved in the organisation. She quickly became a board member and after a couple of years vice chairwoman. A decade later and she is chairwoman of Rural Youth Austria.

Rural Youth Austria is a multifaceted, active community of 90 000 young people in which everyone can share their

personal ideas, and where the personal development of young people takes centre stage.

“The organisation brings together young people who share a commitment to rural development and to work to make their rural areas more attractive. People not only learn from what works well but also from how any problems were resolved when things do not work out as planned.” In a world of virtual connectivity and instant communication this digital native’s experience is that, “showing and talking, communicating with each other is the best way to connect.”

**Ave Bremse***Network Support Unit,
Estonian NRN*

Ave Bremse has been involved with rural development since Estonia’s accession to the EU, initially as a LEADER specialist in the Ministry of Agriculture and subsequently as a member of the NSU team. Her NSU takes part in ENRD activities which has helped them build their own network activities.

“Networking enables valuable meetings with colleagues to share experiences from across the EU. It helps support and inform the design of national programme activities in Estonia, in particular the use of Thematic Working Groups

as a concept for bringing people together and developing ideas.”

In Estonia the NSU structure operates at arm’s length to the Managing Authority and therefore has a greater degree of flexibility in its work programme than either being internal or fully outsourced would offer. “It means that we are independent enough to be trusted by those in the network to support them and act as a broker between the Managing Authority, Paying Agency and the LAGs, helping build effective relationships between the actors and thus supporting better programme delivery. It also helps identify and address any regional variations in the interpretation of programme rules.”

Tomas Kozolka*Network Support Unit, Slovakia*

Tomas got involved in rural development through his university studies, and has worked in rural development since. Initially working as a LAG manager, he is currently the manager for the Network Support Unit (NSU) antenna for the Nitra region in Slovakia and is also finishing a PhD in Integrated Rural Development.

The NSU antenna for the Nitra region is run by the association PROUNION that interconnects various rural actors in the area. Next to the regional NSU activity, the

association is a founding member of a bioeconomy cluster.

“Networking initiatives bring added value in interlinking different beneficiaries, raising awareness about innovations and realising international projects, for example through INTERREG or Horizon 2020. In addition, our association is involved in various working groups such as the EIP-AGRI Subgroup on Innovation, SCAR AKIS or ENRD Thematic Groups. Thus we can draw on and connect various areas of EU policy in a way that can be integrated to provide for the development of our area.”





3. Networking as a policy instrument

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The success of any rural development policy is not only based upon the delivery of adequate funding through well-designed and targeted programmes and measures. Effective rural development policies also rely upon the fostering of good ideas and the sharing of experiences. As a previous European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development⁽¹⁾ once said, “policy runs on ideas and experience. Ideas have the advantage that, if you share them around, their total value increases. They also tend to multiply. Experience helps us to grow ideas into success stories.”

SO WHAT IS A POLICY NETWORK?

NETWORKING AND POLICY

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL POLICY NETWORKS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

TAKING STOCK

(1) Mariann Fischer-Boel, European Commissioner (2004 - 2009)

SO WHAT IS A POLICY NETWORK?

Rural development networks exist in various forms and with various functions, but there are two basic types.

Some rural networks are informal and grow organically from the bottom up around issues of significance to rural communities. They are often sustained with minimal resources, but thrive on the interactions between members, whether these are occasional face-to-face meetings, a regular newsletter or the constant buzz of social media. These networks are very important and can be highly influential, but commonly face a threshold beyond which their effectiveness is limited by their lack of resources.

Other networks are more formal. They are commonly devised and established from the top down by some form of external entity in order to achieve a certain purpose. The policy networks created by public authorities to engage people, businesses, special

interest groups in the formulation and implementation of specific policies in specific sectors or fields are one particular type of formal network.

In its 2001 'White Paper on European Governance'⁽²⁾, 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." Consequently, formally-constructed policy networks have come to be widely used by the European Union in all policy areas and for many functions. These currently include, for example, the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) that links the community of people implementing Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in the fisheries sector; the URBACT network that aims to improve the effectiveness of sustainable integrated urban development policies; the Enterprise Europe Network which functions as a support network for small and

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); and the Broadband Competence Offices (BCO) Network that is expected to play an important role in broadband development in rural and remote areas.

These policy networks are valued for many different things, but they all have two important characteristics in common. Firstly, they add a legitimacy to their policy domains by breaking the typical linear transfer of policies 'from above', and instead creating the opportunity for spirals and loops of engagement and dialogue between policy-makers and their stakeholder community. Secondly, as flexible structures (rather than hierarchical organisations) networks have the adaptability required to deal with the many different types of stakeholders and the wide diversity, and sometimes very fundamental differences, that exist between administrative cultures and structures in the different Member States.



AN OPEN NETWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

The South Holland Food Families Network is a policy network that blends a formal, top-down approach with the encouragement of active bottom-up engagement, creativity and innovation.

The network was initiated under the 'Innovative Sustainable Agriculture Agenda' of the province of Zuid-Holland in the Netherlands with the aim of a) pursuing the provincial government's vision of 'healthy, sustainable and affordable food for everyone' and b) connecting a diverse range of actors from the entire local food chain to the available funding in the 2014-2020 Netherlands Rural Development Programme.

It is an open network and anyone from the province who wants to work collaboratively towards the creation of a sustainable local food system is welcome to join. A mixture of classical activities, such as a professional communication strategy and regular workshops, are used to keep members of the network engaged, informed and connected. More innovative approaches, such as

participatory 'Dream Sessions', have also been used to refine the vision and guide the direction of the network.

However, the main focus of the network is the development and implementation of pilot projects that bring diverse network members together to nurture, develop and test innovative approaches and actions that support a sustainable local food system. Pilot projects are eligible for funding under either Measure 16: Cooperation of the RDP or LEADER. A 'regional network broker' is employed by the provincial government to help to connect relevant individuals, businesses and organisations around potential pilot projects.

The network was established in 2016 with a diverse group of 30 members, ranging from farmers to agricultural researchers, retailers, caterers and policy-makers. Within a few years it has grown to 250 members and has implemented several pilot projects – with many more in the pipeline!

(2) Commission of the European Communities (2001). 'European Governance: A White Paper', COM (2001) 428, Brussels (25/7/2001).

NETWORKING AND POLICY

As mentioned in the article on ‘The evolution of rural development networking’ (page 4) one of the most significant commitments to the integration of networking into EU policy-making and implementation has been observed within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Or more precisely, within the legislative framework of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) – otherwise known as Pillar II of the CAP.

Networking first emerged in EU rural development policy as a key characteristic of the LEADER approach. Under both LEADER II and LEADER+, two complementary levels of formal networking were established at national and European level. The LEADER National Networking Units and the EU-level LEADER Observatory that operated up until 2006 were the precursors of today’s modern rural networks and generated a reservoir of knowledge and experience in many Member States that is still hugely valuable.

Based on the positive experiences of networking, and especially its role in stimulating new ideas and sharing the growing body of rural development knowledge and practice, it was decided to introduce networking as an obligatory activity under Pillar II of the CAP for the 2007–2013 programming period, at the same time as the mainstreaming of LEADER approach.

The first National Rural Networks (NRNs) became operational in the spring of 2007 and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) was officially launched in 2008. A total of around €500 million was committed to the NRNs and ENRD at this time (approximately 0.3% of the total public expenditure on EU rural development policy for 2007–2013) with a broad – and relatively flexible – focus upon improving the implementation of national and regional Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

The mainstreaming of rural networking into the CAP continued in the 2014–2020 programme period with four key developments:

- Whilst the broad remit of both the ENRD and the NRNs remained the same (with the exception of ‘fostering innovation’ – see below), the 2014–2020 rural development legislation set much clearer aims and more precise minimum tasks/activities for the networks. This made it significantly easier both: i) to prepare coherent and consistent Action Plans for the rural network activities (this was actually introduced as an obligation for RDP Managing Authorities in 2014–2020); and ii) to subsequently monitor and facilitate in due course the self-assessment and/or evaluation of the overall performance of the rural networks⁽³⁾;



ADDRESSING GENDER EQUALITY IN RURAL AREAS

The promotion of gender equality is a regulatory obligation in all EU programmes, including the EAFRD. It is also an important governmental priority in France and the specific issue of gender equality in rural areas was recently reviewed in a comprehensive study entitled ‘Obstacles and levers for women’s access to employment in rural areas’⁽⁴⁾ that was supported by the French Ministry of Territorial Cohesion. Results of the study were published in March 2018 and highlighted the need for more actions relating to:

- Facilitating access and/or return to employment for rural women, especially in relation to emerging new sectors that are creating the ‘jobs of tomorrow’;
- Supporting female entrepreneurship; and
- Investing in rural mobility as a key factor for ensuring access to employment, childcare and other opportunities/services.

In April 2018 the Network Support Unit of the French National Rural Network organised an inter-regional workshop on the theme of ‘Mobilising the EAFRD to create the conditions for equality in rural areas’. This was the very first workshop of its type and aimed to stimulate constructive and creative dialogue by combining theoretical input with good practice examples, plus the exchange of experiences on women’s employability, female entrepreneurship and measures in favour of better work-life balance.

Several ideas came out of the workshop, such as a bibliography of resources on gender equality in rural areas, the creation of information materials, a collection of best practices in the field, better criteria for assessing gender equality in rural development projects and facilitation techniques for conflict resolution between men and women.

(3) The very first Guidelines for Evaluation of National Rural Networks 2014–2020 were published in July 2016 – see: https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/evaluation/guidelines/2014-2020-guidelines-evaluation-national-rural-networks_en.pdf

(4) <http://www.cget.gouv.fr/ressources/publications/etude-relative-aux-freins-et-aux-levers-pour-l-acces-des-femmes-a-l-emploi-dans-les-territoires-ruraux>

- Fostering innovation was introduced as an important new objective for rural networking for 2014-2020 and, at Member State level, RDP Managing Authorities were required to programme additional new networking activities for supporting implementation of the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) at national/regional level. This included raising awareness of, and involvement in, the EIP-AGRI amongst relevant stakeholders; facilitating the search for EIP-AGRI Operational Group (OG) partners; networking for advisers and innovation support services; and collecting and disseminating examples of OG projects;
- A second EU-level network (with its own network support unit)

was put in place to support the EIP-AGRI. Compared to the more wide-ranging ENRD, which accompanies the full breadth of the RDPs, the EIP-AGRI Network is a specialist network tasked with delivering a 'help desk function' that provides information and support to key actors involved in the EIP-AGRI. This specifically involves providing EU-level support for the establishment of OGs and the exchange of experience and good practices regarding the core EIP-AGRI concept of 'interactive innovation'. Interestingly, this not only involves linking the many different types of actors involved with rural innovation (farmers, foresters, advisers, researchers, agri-businesses, NGOs, etc.), but also directly bridging the gap between science and practice by

connecting with the plethora of so-called 'multi-actor projects' that are funded under the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme⁽⁵⁾;

- Since January 2015, the ENRD and EIP-AGRI Network have been connected and coordinated through the European Rural Networks' Assembly. A single Strategic Framework⁽⁶⁾ introduced by the Commission provides a common governance structure for the two policy networks and allows a broad range of stakeholder groups to input to the setting of priorities and to help steer activities. The integrated governance structure is designed to assist the Commission when managing two top-down policy networks, and helps to promote synergies and ensure complementarity of activities.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL POLICY NETWORKS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Networking to support EU rural development policy is particularly challenging due to the large number of rural actors and stakeholders from a multitude of different socio-economic contexts – all operating at different levels and with a broad spectrum of needs, priorities, interests and expectations.

The essential elements for networking as a policy tool for rural development are therefore more complex and demanding than those found in most other EU policy networks. The main elements of successful rural development networking can be identified as:

- **Effective stakeholder engagement** – successful policy networks must

fully and effectively engage with the stakeholders involved/interested in the network. Effective engagement enables the network to deliver information and support when and where it is most needed, whether this is broad awareness-raising or very specific targeted advice. Rural networks obviously utilise the full range of typical communication tools, such as websites and newsletters, and many have also implemented more innovative approaches, particularly when attempting to engage with harder-to-reach groups.

- **Building a common understanding of common policies** – the CAP impacts millions of farmers and rural communities across Europe, but having a common legislative

process applied in all Member States is not sufficient to ensure the common understanding and common ownership of this policy. Neither does it alone provide the basis for effective policy implementation. This is particularly relevant to rural development policy where although there is a single legal framework, the rules permit considerable flexibility in terms of programme design, content and implementation, so they can be adapted to differing rural situations and needs across Europe. The rural networks therefore play a very important role in developing a shared understanding of EU rural development policy and the RDPs amongst the full range of very different stakeholders.

(5) See the EIP-AGRI 'Brochure on Horizon 2020 multi-actor projects' that is available in multiple languages here: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/publications/eip-agri-brochure-horizon-2020-multi-actor>

(6) <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/strategic-framework-enrd-eip-en.pdf>

• **The gathering, analysis and dissemination of project examples and good practices** – communicating examples of what policy tools and delivery mechanisms are doing on the ground and of what works well, and why – is one of the most tangible benefits of any policy network and contributes directly both to improving current implementation and generating new thinking for the future. The rural networks, especially the NRNs, have unprecedented access to project data held by RDP Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies. This knowledge of the grassroots actions being taken and projects being implemented with RDP funding is immensely important for identifying, collecting, analysing and sharing inspiring examples and good practice at regional, national and European level. In some cases, this might involve the unexciting ‘nuts-and-bolts’ of administrative procedures, but these small details accumulate and contribute to the smooth running of practical policy implementation. Different

exchange mechanisms are used by different rural networks, but there is no doubt that since 2007 the rural networks have facilitated unprecedented opportunity for stakeholders to provide direct feedback to policy-makers at regional, national and European level.

- **Capacity building for rural actors** – the knowledge gained through sharing of good practice and experience is often complemented by the delivery of training and other forms of capacity building. This is related especially to the NRNs – and to some extent also the ENRD – since they have specific responsibility regarding the provision of training and networking for LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs). These types of actions may be broad in nature

or highly specific, but are generally highly diverse as they are tailored to the specific needs of each group and local context.

- **Cooperation and joint actions between rural actors** – providing rural people and rural businesses with the opportunity to meet potential partners, discuss shared ideas and develop cooperative projects – have been at the core of rural networking since the early days of encouraging and assisting inter-territorial and transnational cooperation between LAGs under LEADER II. Supporting such cooperation and joint actions (especially now with the advent of Measure 16: Cooperation in the 2014-2020 RDPs and the EIP-AGRI specifically) takes the rural networks well beyond the collection of good practice and



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THE GROWING AMBITION OF THE RURAL4LEARNING PROJECT

Diverse and thriving local economies in rural areas need more young people to engage with agriculture and other local businesses, including the starting-up of new businesses. However, there can be obstacles to getting positive messages about living and working in rural areas across to young people.

In Italy, some trial initiatives began in 2008 with a range of youth-focused information materials. However, the big step forward came in 2014 when the Italian National Rural Network (NRN) started working with a network of agricultural high schools in a pilot initiative that has now grown into the successful Rural4School programme that links a network of public authorities, economic and social partners, rural farmers/entrepreneurs and schools to develop and deliver common educational information and coordinated communication materials on agriculture and rural issues to school age students.

Rural4School has 4 main elements:

- RuralCAMP (seminars for tutoring young students)
- RuralLEARN (E-learning courses for high schools on sustainability, biodiversity and rural development)
- WhatsAGR (general communication campaign)
- RuralGOOD2016 (a campaign promoting teaching/demonstration farms)

The relationship between stakeholders in the Rural4School network has strengthened greatly and new forms of cooperation and partnership are reported at local and regional level. As one participating farmer explained, “we feel a new wave of interest towards our livelihoods and work. Of course, there are challenges, but the benefits of better communication are growing.”

Since 2017, a parallel Rural4University programme has been running with the participation of 17 universities, 9 regional authorities, 5 farmer associations and 12 organic farms.

exchange of relevant experiences and into the realm of creating new structures and generating new ideas that did not exist before. This is a very exciting dimension of rural

networking where the distinctions between top-down and bottom-up begin to fade, and where formal policy networks can create spaces for informal grassroots initiatives

to flourish (see box: 'Open Network for Local Food System Innovation', page 19).

TAKING STOCK

The experience to-date of rural networking as a policy instrument embedded within the CAP has been positive. The rural networks working at regional, national and European level have delivered information, ideas and contacts to multiple target groups; supported numerous multi-level exchanges, cooperation and knowledge development processes; facilitated important new dialogues for better implementation of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD); and generally encouraged a more participative governance of EU rural development policy.

It however remains inherently difficult to gauge the 'value for money' of EAFRD spending on networking compared to the rural development measures where there are tangible benefits for farmers and rural communities (e.g. investment in new equipment or a rural broadband scheme).

Building durable links between administrations, organisations and individual players is an ongoing process. Involving actors in new forms of dialogue requires dedicated human resources, continually-adapted communication tools and efficient organisational structures.

One persistent issue is the fact that the establishment of national/regional network structures in the Member States (namely, the NRNs plus dedicated EIP-AGRI support

entities where they exist) continues to be characterised by huge diversity.

Such diversity is inevitable as network structures should be flexible and aligned according to the way in which national/regional public administrations are set up and managed. However, an uneven landscape of network development has emerged in terms of resource allocation, network management, operational capacity and levels of stakeholder participation and representation. The reality is that some NRNs continue to be significantly more advanced than others.

Networking will continue to be supported and strengthened in the post-2020 CAP. Moving from two networks (ENRD and EIP-AGRI) towards a single European CAP network is a hugely exciting opportunity to build upon the demonstrable benefits of EU-level networking in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods. The interactions – and associated added value and impact – that are likely to be facilitated by a single CAP network that connects all the dimensions and ambition of the new CAP together with relevant knowledge and experiences generated under the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme will be unprecedented amongst EU policy networks.

In the context where Member States will have much more flexibility and subsidiarity in the design of their CAP interventions, a single EU-level

network will be a key tool to help drive and steer policy and to ensure better coordination between networking activities at the EU and national and regional levels.

A single, unified CAP network has the potential to clarify and simplify greatly future network governance; to reduce stakeholder confusion on 'who is doing what'; to streamline decision-making processes on network activities and tasks; and to provide an effective vehicle for addressing the differential institutional capacity of Member States on different issues of relevance to their CAP Strategic Plans.



4. Better performance

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Evaluation provides insight into the added value of rural development policy. Networking is playing a vital role in bringing the European evaluation community together to identify shared needs, provide guidance, gather evidence and support the evaluation process. While evaluation of policy leads to better rural development programming, implementation and delivery, networks themselves can also benefit from such approaches. Self-assessment can provide individual networks with precious knowledge about how they are performing and how they can become more effective.

SHARING EVALUATION KNOWLEDGE IN THE EU THROUGH NETWORKING

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF NETWORKS

SHARING EVALUATION KNOWLEDGE IN THE EU THROUGH NETWORKING

In European Union rural development policy, networks play an indispensable role in sharing knowledge and building capacity through a wide variety of activities and across a range of topics, including evaluation. Networks support evaluation of the policy by disseminating monitoring and evaluation findings related to the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), through training, assisting in the collection of data related to RDP indicators, establishing evaluation-related thematic groups and drafting publications.

The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development (Evaluation Helpdesk) together with the Contact Point serve as the two support units of the European Network for Rural Development. The Evaluation Helpdesk supports the European



Commission, Member States and other evaluation stakeholders in meeting the objectives of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES) being used for the 2014-2020 programming period. The overall objective of the Evaluation Helpdesk is to contribute to the improvement of evaluation of EU rural development policy. Its networking activities focus on strengthening capacity. It

facilitates networking with evaluation stakeholders at local, national, and multi-national levels.

Networking at the national and local level is where needs and challenges are captured, and experiences are synthesised to provide essential learning into the structure to further strengthen other parts. At the national level, this is primarily conducted by National Rural Networks (NRNs).

Collaborating to identify evaluation needs

In Italy, the National Rural Network (NRN) established a dialogue on monitoring and evaluation issues through a specific task force, which provides capacity building through seminars, practical training and workshops on thematic issues. A cycle of seminars has been launched which targets administrations and evaluators⁽¹⁾. These seminars focus on transversal issues related to the governance and planning of evaluation (e.g. designing and analysing the feasibility of RDP evaluations, the quality of evaluation reports and the use of sources and indicators for evaluation purposes). Other thematic topics include the evaluation of innovation in RDPs and other training opportunities have been planned to support evaluation at the LAG level.

“ Compared to the previous programming period, the NRN works in a much more collaborative and participatory way with administrations and evaluation stakeholders to understand and meet their common needs and build guidance together, facilitating learning for all. ”

Simona Cristiano, a researcher at CREA, the institute running the NRN.

The Evaluation Helpdesk serves as a hub for questions on evaluation and regularly publishes the answers in its Evaluation Related Queries⁽²⁾ document

(1) <https://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/1>

(2) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/evaluation-related-queries_en

Helping to better understand the added value of the policy through evaluation

The Finnish NRN⁽³⁾ has conducted trainings in which they have worked with their LEADER groups to prepare for their peer-to-peer evaluations – where LAGs evaluate each other’s work and activities – and exchange on how they have conducted or are planning to conduct their evaluations. The aim is to share practices, enable learning and help LAGs to build successful evaluation processes. Juha-Matti Markkola, an expert from the Finnish NRN, notes that they are, “a great way for LAGs to see what the benefits and challenges for each evaluation approach are and to work together towards useful solutions to problems encountered.”

A multi-stakeholder project to understand the future needs of rural areas - Countryside 2030 - was conducted in the beginning of 2018. The purpose was to build a broad picture of what rural areas of the future should look like. The need to show the added value of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) through evaluation featured prominently. “Proving the added value of the RDP is very important and evaluation is the main tool that can provide this understanding,” adds Juha-Matti Markkola.

The Evaluation Helpdesk workshop ‘Showing the Added Value of LEADER/CLLD through Evaluation’⁽⁴⁾ in Helsinki, Finland helped foster the transfer of knowledge and good practices between Member States

Providing a platform to learn from evaluation and through evaluation

The German evaluation network MEN-D⁽⁵⁾ has also organised a series of capacity-building events. In 2018, MEN-D held a workshop to discuss the experience of preparing the 2017 RDP Annual Implementation Reports (AIR) and how to prepare for the AIR 2019. These discussions serve as a practical means to support Managing Authorities (MAs) and evaluators. Additionally, events on result indicators in the AIR 2019 and examples of IT-systems for monitoring have been conducted. Sebastian Elbe, Project Leader from MEN-D, emphasises that, “what is important is having mixed participation in these workshops, which for our participants is considered of high added value. This allows Managing Authorities and evaluators to know precisely what is expected and what is needed for both groups to perform their tasks effectively and efficiently.” MEN-D has also established a working group that brings together stakeholders from both Pillar I and Pillar II as well as other ESI funds to discuss future CAP policy.

The Evaluation Helpdesk has produced guidelines⁽⁶⁾ on how to report on evaluation in the AIR 2017 and 2019



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(3) <https://www.maaseutu.fi/>
 (4) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/good-practice-workshops/showing-added-value-leaderclld-through-evaluation_en
 (5) <http://www.men-d.de/>
 (6) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/publications/en?f%5B0%5D=im_field_enrd_publ_ehd_content_t%3A20147

Gathering evidence on the achievements of the policy

Many NRNs are also supporting evaluation and capacity building through data collection. In Italy, the NRN has built an extensive database of information collected from the regions on all the common CAP indicators⁽⁷⁾, which are updated on a yearly basis. Moreover, data are collected for other ESI Funds to provide further support to MAs. The Italian NRN also provides support with the improved use of FADN data. The Latvian NRN's⁽⁸⁾ comprehensive database is a prime example of how an NRN's database can support evaluation even further. Vija Veisa, the project coordinator of the Latvian NRN emphasises, "a database has been created to support self-assessment and provide data for evaluation in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Furthermore, by linking the accumulated data on farm economic performance indicators with the data collected by the NRN, it is possible to trace how stakeholders have used the available information and educational support and how this has affected the economic performance of the holding.

The Evaluation Helpdesk provides an interactive tool on the ENRD website to help evaluation stakeholders assess data needs for different evaluation approaches

Providing guidance to take home

NRNs can provide an array of valuable long-term support to stakeholders through guides, studies and handbooks. MEN-D in Germany has published practical 'how-to' guides⁽⁹⁾ for reporting on evaluation in the AIR 2017 and 2019; they have produced a monitoring handbook to support MAs, which is being revised to reflect the latest EU monitoring requirements; and they have prepared procurement documents to help prepare for the next funding period. The Finnish NRN has worked in collaboration with LAGs to prepare 'quality handbooks' to assist LAGs' peer-to-peer evaluations. The Italian NRN has produced studies on innovation, design and feasibility of evaluations, how to improve data quality and management and how to choose additional indicators.

The Evaluation Helpdesk offers an array of Guidelines, factsheets and Working Documents⁽¹⁰⁾ which Member States and NRNs can further tailor to their local needs and particularities

Sharing practices in clusters

The Nordic-Baltic Rural Network is a multi-national network connecting clusters of NRNs. It serves as a higher-level group for coordination and exchange for both MAs and NRNs in the seven participating countries. One of the main objectives of the Nordic-Baltic Network is to communicate the benefits of the RDPs. To do this evaluation is essential. The network thus collects data from the NRNs and provides common statistics at indicator level. The network coordinates peer-to-peer evaluation between members to help them evaluate their effectiveness. Lauri Hyttinen, network expert at the Finnish NSU and member of the Nordic-Baltic Network, explains, "what we have really achieved is a high level of execution within the network. When members can plan and execute activities themselves, they can better meet their needs and we only have to act as facilitators." The Nordic-Baltic Network has also emphasised the sharing of practices through their 'Nordic-Baltic Rural and Maritime Award'.

The Evaluation Helpdesk supports evaluation events (e.g. of the Nordic-Baltic Rural Network) through presentations and working groups on the evaluation of NRNs⁽¹¹⁾

(7) <https://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/18498>

(8) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/gpw-6_poster_lv.pdf

(9) http://www.men-d.de/uploads/media/170120_MEND_Hinweise_Erstellung_AIR_Stand_01_2017.pdf

(10) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/publications_en

(11) <http://ksow.pl/en/news-single-view-en/entry/7313-samorzadowy-lider-zarzadzania-2015-razem-dla-r.html>

Uniting evaluation practices across Europe

While NRNs can promote essential networking at the national and local level, multi-national networks can unite these networks in clusters. The Evaluation Helpdesk serves as a dynamic base both to provide guidance to Member States (MS) and to collect and share practices, which is vital for continued learning and development. The Evaluation Helpdesk collects practices from MS on the most relevant thematic topics and conducts Good Practice Workshops for all evaluation stakeholders covering these themes. The Good Practice Workshop 'Showing the added value of LEADER/CLLD through evaluation', for example, was organised in collaboration with the Finnish MA and NRN because of their interest and work on the topic. LAG-level assessment was introduced as a new requirement in the

2014-2020 programming period and the Finnish network was well placed to help its members answer this new need.

Other NRNs not only attended the workshop, but also funded LAGs to attend to improve their capacities in evaluation or supported the participation of experts who could then help administrators in their MS to better understand the content. Presentations from different Member States (including Germany, Denmark and Italy) and other sector-related networks (e.g. FARNET) further added valuable contributions to the exchange of knowledge across borders and stakeholder groups. The workshop served as both a space for knowledge transfer and networking across levels of governance, regions and EU funds.

Other EU-level formal and informal networks such as REECAP⁽¹²⁾ and the European Evaluation Society⁽¹³⁾ provide unique contributions to the evaluation

community by focusing their attention on specific advanced methods and providing annual fora for exchange.

Networks in the EU play an indispensable role in the EU's rural development policy - especially concerning evaluation - as they act as collectors of information and they transfer knowledge. Each network plays a valuable part at its respective level of governance in connecting evaluation stakeholders and linking them to their peers across Europe. NRNs can collect practices and support local administrations in their individual evaluation-related tasks, while multi-national networks can bring together groups of Member States to share this information. The Evaluation Helpdesk can unify these practices and stakeholders at the EU level, making sure that all Member States can learn from each other and that knowledge can be collected and shared to the benefit of all.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF NETWORKS

Self-assessment, when undertaken by networks, means the systematic assessment of and reflection on a network's operations by the network itself. The goal is the continuous development and improvement of achievements and working methods. Self-assessment helps to identify success factors, best practices and bottlenecks and to agree on the ways forward. Ideally, ongoing self-assessment should be part of the normal way of working.

Although self-assessment shares several aspects with evaluation, there are important differences as well. The main difference is that whereas evaluation is typically an external assessment of the results and outputs, self-assessment is an inclusive or

participatory process reviewing activities or operations undertaken.

Supporting learning

Self-assessment reveals important information on aspects of a network's working methods and results, such as progress towards targets, quality of the work, or success of the communication strategy. It also increases the transparency and accountability of the network.

Concretely, self-assessment is based on identifying success factors, best practices and bottlenecks. At best, this reflection on working methods and tools can save time and resources. Self-assessment results also provide important material for communications activities and stories

about successes and achievements - typically more compelling than communications about the networks' meetings and regular activities.

Ownership

The main point of self-assessment is to have the participants reflect on the successes and challenges. Hence, it is fundamental that there is wide participation and acceptance of the process. It is possible also to contract an external consultant or facilitator to assist in the design of the self-assessment process and tools. However, the process ownership and the responsibility to act upon the commonly agreed next steps remain with the network.

(12) Research network on Economic Experiments for the Common Agricultural Policy, <https://sites.google.com/view/reecap/about>

(13) European Evaluation Society (EES), <https://www.europeanevaluation.org/>

Good planning and preparation

The process of self-assessment is similar to an evaluation process. The planning phase defines the motivation, topics, resources, timeline and use of results. The preparation phase includes designing the questions and the methods of data collection. When done well, the planning and preparation phases create a shared vision of why the self-assessment is done, its focus and methodology and the intended use of the results. The next steps are the implementation phase followed by the dissemination of findings to the target groups.

Tools

Self-assessment is based on the collection, analysis and interpretation of information, typically about the working process or about outputs and results. Self-assessment data are gathered through standard data collection methods, such as indicator analysis, surveys, polls and focus group interviews (see Figure 1). Self-assessment can also

include stakeholder feedback. Digital tools such as electronic surveys or interactive tools used during events are often used in data collection.

For best results, self-assessment activities can be done sequentially. For instance, analysis of the level of output indicators can be done first to gain a picture of the current status, a subsequent stakeholder survey can give insights into the perceived successes, challenges and quality aspects and finally, those responsible for management can discuss the current status and the stakeholders' views and make recommendations for the future. Data collection, analysis and reporting are resource-intensive activities, as data need to be carefully analysed to be used in a meaningful way.

Self-assessment or external evaluation

Self-assessment and external evaluation share features, such as data collection methods and some data sources.

However, self-assessment differs from external evaluation in several ways. First of all, evaluations are conducted by impartial experts who are external to the operations in question. Self-assessment, on the other hand, is by nature participatory and reflective, meaning that the people who are involved in a given process are also assessing it. Secondly, external evaluation is often summative and focuses on achievements, impacts relevance and coherence. In contrast, self-assessment looks at achievements, processes, strengths and areas to improve. Finally, external evaluations are typically more quantitative, use a wider range of data and information sources, and place greater emphasis on the representativeness of the data. However, self-assessment materials and summaries are typically very useful for external evaluations.



THE FINNISH NSU

The Finnish National Rural Network Support Unit systematised its use of self-assessment in 2016. The NSU formalised the NRN intervention logic and made a medium-term plan for evaluation and self-assessment activities.

“The self-assessment process has helped us to clarify our own goals and link our work more closely to the bigger picture. It provides a good structure for focusing on the right things. When the goals are clear, it is also possible to check how we are progressing towards them,” said Lauri Hyttinen, network coordinator of the Finnish NSU.

The self-assessment results are used to improve the processes, and the findings are typically reported and discussed in the NRN steering group meetings. In addition, self-assessment gained a more prominent role as a way to develop the unit's own working methods.

“Self-assessment is part of the philosophy of continuous improvement. We want to be better at what we do so we check regularly how we succeeded and why – or why not. This is what self-assessment is about. It does not need to be complicated, nor should the process be too heavy. The most important thing is to be open and willing to learn,” said Teemu Hauhia, the head of the Finnish NSU.

As a standard practice, the Finnish NSU collects feedback from all the events it organises. The feedback is summarised and discussed in the unit's regular meetings. Also, if external contractors are included in the event organisation or substance, the feedback is discussed with them. The feedback and the lessons learned are considered when planning and organising future events.

The NSU has included self-assessment as a topic into its quarterly team meeting. Every three months some commonly decided part of the unit's work is analysed and discussed in detail. For instance, in 2016 one event for LAGs was chosen for in-depth analysis. The entire process from planning to completion of the event was mapped on the wall. Afterwards, the successes, failures and used resources were discussed for each step of the process. This led to the identification of success factors and bottlenecks in the event organisation. Finally, the analysed participants' feedback was discussed and recommendations for future actions were formulated.

The NSU found the mapping process highly useful. Not only did it form the basic template for organising events, it also improved the planning of resources for future events. This way, spending half a day on looking at the bigger picture reduced the workload for the subsequent events.

Figure 1: Questions guiding the self-assessment process

Planning phase	Preparation phase	Implementation phase	Dissemination phase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why? • What? • When? • Who? • How much (resources/€)? • How are results used? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is asked? • What are the data sources? • How is the data gathered? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection • Analysis • Reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication: Who? What? To whom? How? When? • Use of results and recommendations



EUROPEAN RURAL NETWORKS' SELF-ASSESSMENT

Networking plays a prominent role in the European rural development policy. Self-assessment of the European Rural Networks, namely the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) network, permits both networks to review their operations on an ongoing basis.

The focus of the self-assessment is the implementation of the Strategic Framework of the EU Rural Networks⁽¹⁴⁾. The strategic framework is centred around three general objectives: enhance participation; improve policy quality; and increase awareness. The aim is to draw lessons from past experience, adapt present work plans and improve future effectiveness.

The 2017 Self-assessment of the European Rural Networks had a number of components. First, it was informed by data on a series of output and result indicators, the majority of which are derived from the work of – and provided by – the three support units of the European Rural Networks (i.e. the ENRD Contact Point, Evaluation Helpdesk, and the EIP-AGRI Service Point). It was completed by findings from a survey, sent to the members of the EU Rural Networks' Assembly and Steering Group, as well as the Sub-group on Innovation, Sub-group on LEADER/CLLD and the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (Grexe) followed by discussion of the findings and draft recommendations in the Rural Networks' governance bodies. At its meeting in December 2018, the Rural Networks Assembly called for some follow-up self-assessment activities of the EU Rural Networks to be launched in 2019.

Figure 2: Sample results and recommendations of the 2017 EU Rural Networks self-assessment⁽¹⁵⁾

Objective	Results	Recommendation	Potential actions
Enhance participation	The EU Rural Networks' activities led to a greater involvement of various stakeholders in rural development and addressed their needs well.	Increase involvement of national and local stakeholders.	Replicate EU-level events at national or local level in the national language.
		Capture better the local stakeholders' inputs and needs by working with the local organisations that engage with them.	Encourage more organisations working with local stakeholders to engage in EU Rural Networks and NRN activity.
Improve policy quality	The ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks have been successful in improving rural development policy quality.	Explore bottlenecks in policy delivery and how they can be addressed at the right level.	Develop information on and systematic comparison of policy delivery mechanisms in the Member States. Identify who has the competence to remedy such situations.
Increase awareness	The activities of the EU Rural Networks helped to increase awareness of the benefits of the rural development policy.	Maximise the multiplier effect by targeting information to those stakeholders who understand the EU networks' role and how they work.	Identification of and engagement with communications' stakeholders who can best relay EU Rural Networks' messages to their target audiences.

(14) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/sg7_strategic-assessment-framework.pdf

(15) The consolidated report of the Rural Networks self assessment exercise can be consulted on the ENRD website, https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/eurn_sa_consolidated-report_en.pdf



5. A rich network ecosystem

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EU Rural Networks - the ENRD works alongside the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) network - exist within a diverse ecosystem of European networks. There are many networks set up and funded directly by the European Commission to support the implementation of policies.

This article takes a closer look at some of the policy networks financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds and tries to draw some lessons. The ENRD and EIP-AGRI are 'networks of networks' connecting the institutions directly involved in the implementation of rural development policy with National Rural Networks and a series of stakeholder networks that have formed around the interests of specific groups or issues to address agricultural, environmental, societal or territorial development.

EUROPEAN POLICY NETWORKS

STAKEHOLDER NETWORKS

EUROPEAN POLICY NETWORKS

Policy networks share the goal of bringing people together to build knowledge and exchange on how to improve EU policy. They have many similarities, but also many differences in their focus, structure and ways of working, which provide a rich source of ideas and experimentation. Here

four networks financed by European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are compared: the ‘learning networks’ of the European Social Fund (ESF); URBACT in the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF); FARNET in the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF); and EIP-AGRI in the

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

Figure 1 shows the main aims and distinctive characteristics of the four policy networks that are reviewed in this article – there is one selected for each of the main ESIF.

Figure 1: Policy network examples under the European Structural and Investment Funds

Fund	Network	Main aims	Distinctive characteristics
ESF	Learning Networks https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/content/esf-learning-networks-2007-2013	To draw lessons from innovations in employment and social policy in the Member States for mainstream ESF implementation.	Strong emphasis on embedding innovative approaches within managing authorities. Development of new approaches and tools for collaborative policy learning.
ERDF	URBACT http://urbact.eu/	To promote peer learning among networks of cities on key themes relevant for integrated territorial development.	A structured and clear approach supporting transnational cooperation directly between cities on strategic themes. Participative capacity building.
EMFF	FARNET http://www.farnet.eu	To support the rolling out of CLLD in coastal areas.	Focused on a specific measure and target (CLLD, coastal and fisheries areas). Clear mandate to build capacity along the entire delivery chain.
EAFRD	EIP-AGRI https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/	To foster innovation in the farming and forestry sectors through linking Operational Groups, advisory services and researchers.	Clearly focused on supporting the successful implementation of an innovative measure with specific target groups. Flexible tools like very concrete and short-term focus groups. Establishes links between the CAP and EU research and innovation policy.

ESF networking example – from Communities of Practice to Learning Networks

The current approach to policy networking within the European Social Fund (ESF) has its origins in the EQUAL Community Initiative 2000-2006, which, in fact, adopted several ideas from LEADER. To support the implementation of this new approach to employment policy, the European Commission established a series of networks to enable Managing Authorities to work together on specific themes.

The first learning networks were created in the 2007-2013 period and were based on the principle of self-motivated ‘Communities of Practice’ (CoP)⁽¹⁾. Most CoP participants came from Managing Authorities (MAs) of the ESF rather than from the project level. While this reinforced the policy and funding role of MAs and was positive for future funding and policy development, it also limited the involvement of project participants that were working on the ground with the target groups.

The 2014-2020 programming period saw the Communities of Practice

transformed into ‘ESF learning networks’. A Transnational Platform currently manages and supports nine thematic networks on the main themes of the ESF: Employment, Inclusion, Youth employment, Learning & Skills, Social economy, Governance & Public Administration, Simplification, Partnership and Migrants. As before, each learning network mainly involves concerned Managing Authorities together with a small number of key stakeholders.

(1) The Communities of Practice concept was developed by Etienne Wenger who defined and categorised 28 forms of collaborative learning. Both formal and informal learning and knowledge can be obtained within a community and from outside it.

EQUAL focused on five main topics linked to employment: increasing employability, encouraging inclusive entrepreneurship, facilitating adaptability, promoting gender equality and integrating asylum seekers⁽²⁾. EQUAL was very different from previous generations of ESF programmes in that it opened funding applications not to single project promoters but to partnerships involving the main horizontal actors at local level, including NGOs, and administrations up the vertical chain of governance. The programme was explicit about innovation at a time before the notion of social innovation had been popularised and it argued for empowering beneficiaries. The aim was also clearly to mainstream good practices into labour market policy at local, regional, national and EU level.



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ERDF networking example - URBACT

As in the case of ESF networking, the URBACT network began as a small-scale exchange and learning initiative to assist the implementation of the URBAN 1 and 2 Community Initiative programmes that supported the economic and social regeneration of cities and neighbourhoods in crisis in order to promote sustainable urban development. Unlike the other funds' networks, it is financed as a separate Operational Programme under shared management with a Monitoring Committee of Member State Managing Authorities (MAs).

An evaluation of URBACT 1 (2002-2006) remarked that policy learning through transnational visits was not being translated into action back at the level of the participating cities. A step change came with URBACT 2 (2007-2013). The key proposal to bring the learning home was that each municipality should produce an action plan to address its most pressing challenge. Thus, URBACT 2 developed a method for action planning based on a Local Action Group model similar in some respects to LEADER.

The networks of cities were formed in two phases lasting a total of 36 months. In URBACT 2 approximately 500 cities participated in 50 action planning networks across a wide

number of topic areas ranging from social inclusion to 'smart cities' and links to universities. More than 5 000 stakeholders worked at local level and nearly all cities succeeded in producing local action plans using the URBACT method.

Features of the URBACT model

URBACT has a well-designed model for engaging cities in action planning for integrated and sustainable development. The model has been refined over the years and includes extensive guidelines on every aspect of

the URBACT method, from the toolkit on action planning⁽³⁾ - translated into all the EU languages - to very specific guides on animating meetings. To support its core networking activity URBACT has also put in place significant capacity building aimed at participants in its networks through summer universities and national training schemes.

However, challenges with the approach remain, in the eyes of some URBACT experts. Most salient is the *ad hoc* nature of linkages with the European Structural and Investment Funds. It



© Urbact

About 140 cities were funded in total under URBAN 1 and 2, with a typical ERDF allocation of about €10 million. Each city had to carry out an integrated urban development programme in a disadvantaged urban area. They were led by local authorities with a more top-down approach than that of LEADER. By 2002 the need to find a way to network the 140 cities that had been working on regeneration in disadvantaged neighbourhoods had become urgent. Thus, URBACT 1 started to build networks of widely varying size around key issues of interest defined by the cities.

(2) http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal_consolidated/activities/life.html

(3) See URBACT toolkit, http://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/urbact_toolkit_online_4_0.pdf

is the responsibility of individual cities to forge links with their relevant Managing Authorities for either ERDF or ESF funding.

A challenge arises when cities struggle to find funding for their action plans. There is no automatic bridge between URBACT cities and the operational programmes financing cohesion policy. Moreover, selection criteria for projects have only rarely provided additional points for cities that have a quality action plan comprising the key elements addressed by the URBACT networks.

Finally, the URBACT 2 stakeholder engagement model centred on a comprehensive action plan may have been radical in 2007, but today a more iterative model of co-design followed by small-scale experimentation may be favoured over the delivery of complex action plans after years of planning.

The greatest legacy of the URBACT programme has been the emergence of a genuine community of practice involving practitioners and policy-makers from cities of all sizes, and also at national level. URBACT knowledge festivals now attract over 500 participants and the numbers from non-URBACT networks are growing. The most recent event, held in Lisbon in October 2018, was attended by 250 cities, of which 75 were new to URBACT.

EMFF networking example – FARNET



In the 2007–2013 period, the European Commission launched a new phase of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in fisheries and coastal areas. This was a response to dwindling fish stocks which led to a reduction of income and employment in the fishing sector, creating significant challenges for the areas that are dependent on fisheries. However, initially, this new approach met with resistance from both fishermen and MAs, who were reluctant to develop a new approach for issues related to fishing.

The FARNET Support Unit was set up by the European Commission in order to exchange good practices and build both understanding and capacity along the whole delivery chain. Over time it became apparent that CLLD-supported projects could open opportunities not only within the fisheries value chain but also by creating linkages with the other segments of the local economy, creating much-needed local jobs.

In addition to identifying and promoting good practices, FARNET brings together key stakeholders: Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), MAs, fisheries experts and the European Commission. Interestingly, this approach aligns with one of the key recommendations of the ENRD Thematic Group on stakeholder involvement⁽⁴⁾: “One of the biggest challenges remains to create bridges between these different categories of stakeholder, more specifically between the broad social needs expressed by civil

society stakeholders and the technical realities of policy implementation.”

The network is a two-way communications channel, bringing information from the ground to the EU-level and highlighting the added-value of the EU at the local level.

“*The FARNET team meets regularly with DG MARE (European Commission) officials in charge of a specific country. They also take part in meetings with Member States in the EMFF expert group. Their presence allows issues related to CLLD to be identified from the bottom up and discussed with the other stakeholders*”

Gilles Van de Walle, FARNET Team Leader

The network is coordinated by a support unit under the supervision of the Commission’s Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE). National fisheries networks have also been set up in 10 Member States⁽⁵⁾ and FLAGs meet also at the regional level in some countries. FARNET combines networking tools to explore specific themes. For example, the recent guide on ‘Strengthening local resource management’⁽⁶⁾ is based on a series of good practices identified by the support unit and discussed with network members. The guide provides practical advice in seven languages.

(4) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tq_stakeholder-involvement_final-report.pdf

(5) These are not made compulsory by the EMFF regulations and their budgets can be very variable.

(6) https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet2/library/guide/farnet-guide-16-strengthening-local-resource-management_en

In addition, the FARNET Support Unit provides expert advice and assistance, organises capacity building events for both MAs and FLAGs and uses a wide array of communications tools to ensure optimal flow of information. A key success factor is that the activities of the network are only related to CLLD and do not extend to the rest of the EMFF or the broader maritime policy. This focuses the mission of the FARNET Support Unit, whose actions take place within the context of a multi-annual strategy that is aligned with the rate of implementation of CLLD.

EAFRD networking example - EIP-AGRI



To support its EU 2020 Growth Strategy the EU launched the Innovation Union flagship initiative including five European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs). EIPs are challenge-driven, focusing on societal benefits and a rapid modernisation of the associated sectors and markets. These initiatives were developed to pool expertise and resources across the whole research and innovation chain

by bringing all stakeholders together at EU, national and regional levels. The EIP-AGRI works to foster a competitive and sustainable farming and forestry sector that 'achieves more with less'.

EIP-AGRI brings together actors from across supply chains to work together in multi-actor projects to solve a specific problem or identify and develop an opportunity. This is primarily achieved through Operational Groups (OGs) funded under Measure 16: Cooperation that involve farmers, advisors, researchers, businesses and others creating localised partnerships to find innovative solutions for specific challenges or opportunities faced by farmers.

Over the 2014-2020 period the aim is to establish over 3 200 operational groups across Europe. In order to achieve this, the National Rural Networks and other entities at national and regional level (e.g. advisory services) work closely with the EIP-AGRI Service Point at EU level to provide dedicated capacity building and support. So far around 1 000 OGs have been created on a wide range of key issues, thus strengthening the links between farmers at local level and the wider Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS)⁽⁷⁾.

Another strength of the EIP-AGRI networks is the way they bring together the knowledge gained at local level through the OGs with wider research activities - both through a series of very specific focus groups as well as by ensuring a two-way flow of information with over 100 multi-actor projects (including 29 ongoing thematic networks) financed by Horizon 2020, the EU research and innovation framework programme.

Mainstreaming innovation

The four policy networks mentioned in Figure 1 were generally created in order to exchange good practices and support the roll-out of a new initiative or policy. As the first article in this edition of the EU Rural Review indicates, this was also the case for the European LEADER Observatory which later evolved into the ENRD.

Discussions with the key actors in these initiatives suggest that one of the major challenges has been and remains how to transfer the innovatory aspects, as identified in good practices, more widely into mainstream implementation.

In response to this challenge, the scope of European networking has diversified from primarily 'horizontal' networking (exchanging and transferring good practices between local actors in different parts of Europe, which still remains very relevant) to also encompass more 'vertical' networking (involving the actors at different stages of the chain of multi-level governance).

This shift can be seen in the ESF Learning Networks' outreach to Managing Authorities, in FARNET's activities to build strong links between Fisheries Local Action Groups, MAs and EU Desk Officers and in the close link between EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and Horizon 2020 research policy.

(7) EIP-AGRI brochure on AKIS, <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/publications/eip-agri-brochure-agricultural-knowledge-and>

STAKEHOLDER NETWORKS

Unlike policy networks, which are top-down constructions, stakeholder networks emerge from the bottom-up. They stem from the grassroots, i.e. directly from the concerns, interests and passions of a particular group of people. They exist specifically to protect and promote these concerns more widely.

Within the realm of rural development, stakeholder networks can take many forms. There are well-established farming and cooperative organisations, such as COPA-COGECA, which is made up of 60 national professional farming organisations and 31 national cooperative organisations from the countries of the European Union, representing over 28 million farmers and 38 000 cooperatives.

There are also influential and well-known environmental networks such as the European Environmental Bureau, which consists of around 140 member organisations in more than 30 countries, representing some 30 million individual members and supporters. Another example is Birdlife Europe, whose two million members and tens of thousands of volunteers are passionate about birds and changes to the habitats they depend on. At the other end of the spectrum there are many much smaller European networks such as ELARD and PREPARE, described below, that are working on a range of rural development topics.

PREPARE

PREPARE – Partnership for Rural Europe – was established in 1999 by a group of European and national non-government organisations so as to enable the Central and Eastern European countries to better prepare for their accession to the EU. PREPARE sought to develop



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bottom-up networks that engaged with and strengthened civil society. It wants to see these networks empower rural communities to participate in decision-making related to sustainable rural development.

PREPARE favours a territorial as opposed to a project-based approach, based on partnerships (involving public, private and NGO sectors), an integrated approach (linking various aspects such as agriculture, SME development, environment and social policy), and locally-led, people-driven initiatives.

PREPARE has gone on to play an especially important role in building the capacity of rural communities to set up and implement LEADER or LEADER-like approaches. Its member organisations include a mix of rural development networks and forums active in Scandinavian, Central and Eastern European countries.

The PREPARE 'programme' promotes multi-national exchanges in rural development. These focus on the newer EU Member States and non-EU countries. PREPARE seeks to enable

an effective dialogue, building trust, confidence and cooperation between local actors, governments and all rural development stakeholders. Their programme of work is delivered across three main elements:

- Country-specific national programmes – promoting dialogue and cooperation between different rural development actors within countries;
- Multi-national exchanges – sharing experiences and ideas in the field of rural development across country borders;
- International networking – creating a formal network to enable exchange and mutual support between stakeholders who are interested in rural development throughout Europe.

PREPARE is one of the initiators of the European Rural Parliament, which is co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. PREPARE's own activities draw upon a diverse mix of funding sources, including grants from EU and national authorities and from various foundations.

<http://www.preparenetwork.org/>

ELARD

The European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) seeks to improve the quality of life in rural areas. ELARD is an international non-profit association set up to contribute to the LEADER/CLLD implementation in Europe. It has sought to achieve this by networking across existing Local Action Groups (LAGs) and their very localised networks. Currently the association brings together almost 2 000 LAGs from 25 countries. It aims to spread the philosophy of the LEADER and CLLD principles, within the EU and beyond, through a series of networking roles. These include promoting cooperation between national and regional LEADER networks and LAGs, and promoting common projects and experience sharing through these networks and other external partners.

The members utilise the ELARD network to promote strategies and local and national initiatives for rural development. It not only builds linkages between rural, urban, fisheries areas and LAGs. ELARD also helps local networks to link vertically for example with European-level networks such as ENRD and EIP-AGRI.

While the focus of ELARD is to protect and promote the interests of its members – LAGs – by advocating for more and simpler funding for CLLD, its efforts can coincide with the activities of other networks such as the ENRD that are trying to improve the effectiveness of CLLD strategies and delivery systems, even if they do not lobby for additional funding. ELARD is financed partly from subscriptions from LAGs and partly from grants from Member States.

<http://www.elard.eu/>

Shared characteristics

Regardless of their size, many stakeholder networks involved in rural development share a number of characteristics:

- They are generally networks of networks – with member organisations in different EU Member States;
- They exist to promote the interests of their members – which may be mainly economic as in the case of the farming organisations, a concern for the environment or a social issue, or simply a passionate interest in a particular theme;
- Their business models vary – but, in general, their sources of income are

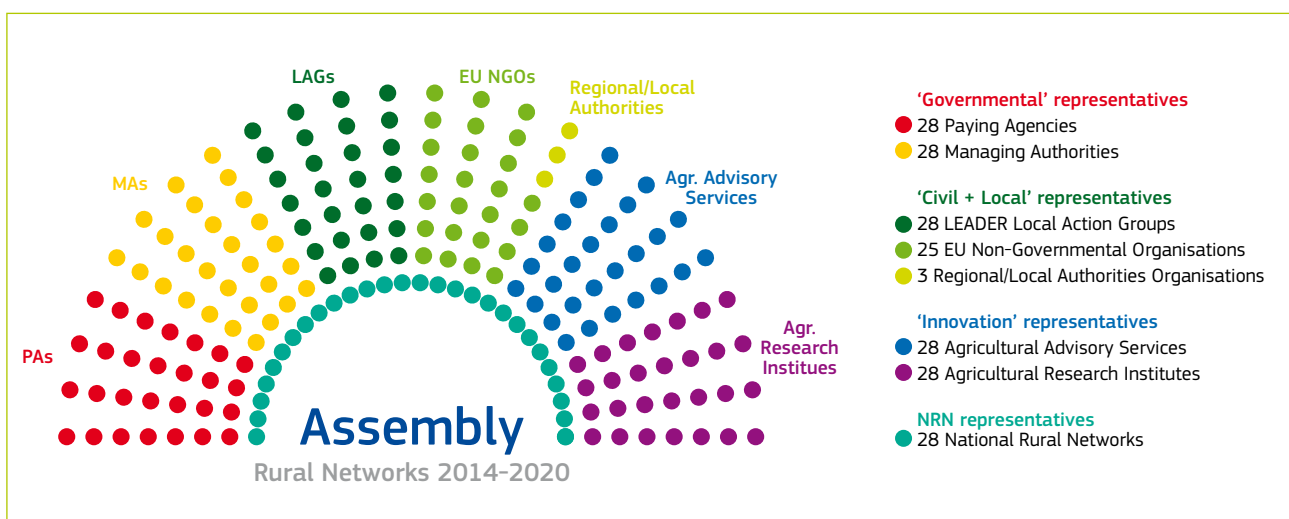
more diversified than those of the policy networks. They usually rely on a combination of membership subscriptions, donations, project work, some grants and a lot of voluntary work;

- They typically have more freedom to make proposals, engage in advocacy and be critical of policies which are not supported by their members.

The Rural Networks Assembly (the governance body of the ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks) brings many of these different networks together with the main institutional and research players in rural development. Figure 2 shows that there are 25 seats for EU stakeholder networks like those described above.

The stakeholder networks can reach out and capture the views and concerns of millions of rural people. The policy networks can help to support the delivery of EU policies on the ground, bring together opposing views, ensure that hidden voices are heard and showcase successful practices.

Figure 2: Members of the Rural Networks Assembly as of 1 March 2019



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6. Networking and the new CAP

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The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) beyond 2020 will be more responsive to challenges such as climate change and generational renewal. Based on nine objectives, the future CAP will ensure high-quality food and strong support for a European farming model which also integrates environmental objectives, and promotes vibrant rural areas. But what might the new approach mean for networking and rural development?

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF NETWORKING - CAP STRATEGIC PLANS

CHALLENGES FACING NEW CAP NETWORKS

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF NETWORKING - CAP STRATEGIC PLANS

On 1 June 2018 the European Commission published its legislative proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the 2021-2027 period. The aim of the proposals is to make the CAP more responsive to current and future challenges such as climate change or generational renewal, while continuing to support the maintenance of a sustainable and competitive agricultural sector and the wider development of rural areas. They also take into account the more than 320 000 responses received to a prior public consultation. To increase the responsiveness of the CAP to these challenges, a new performance-based delivery mechanism is proposed, under which Member States (MS) will have far more freedom to design the

interventions they will use to deliver against a set of economic, social and environmental objectives.

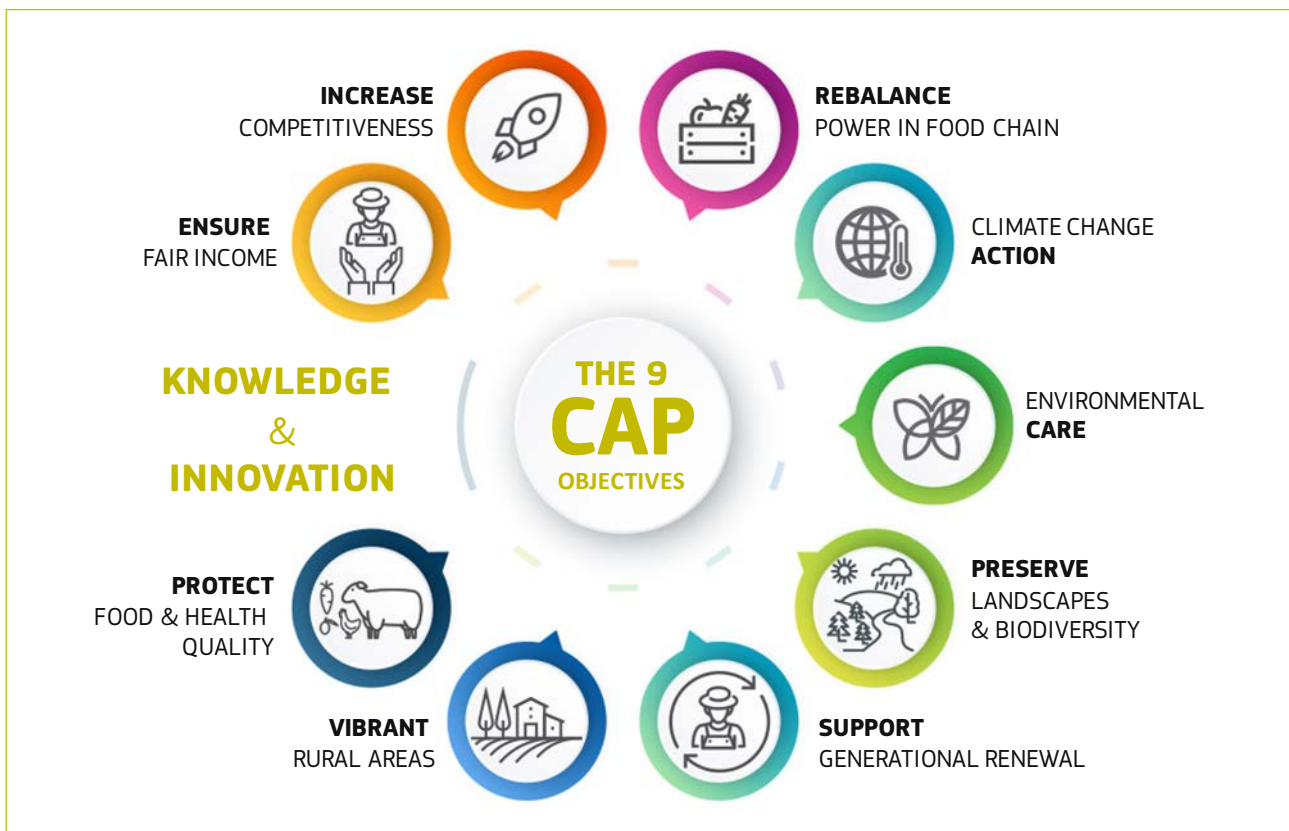
The CAP proposals set out three general and one cross-cutting objective for the new CAP:

- to foster a smart, resilient and diversified agricultural sector ensuring food security;
- to bolster environmental care and climate action and to contribute to the environmental- and climate-related objectives of the Union;
- to strengthen the socio-economic fabric of rural areas; and
- the cross-cutting objective of modernising the sector by fostering and sharing knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture

and rural areas, and encouraging their uptake.

Under these general objectives sit nine specific objectives (see Figure 1) to which MS must demonstrate they contribute in a coherent way through the activities they propose to fund from both Pillars of the CAP. These will be set out within new CAP Strategic Plans – extending the way of programming support for rural development to Pillar I for the first time. These activities must fit within a series of types of intervention. Within this framework MS will have much more freedom to decide the details of exactly what will be funded and where. Achievement of these objectives will be assessed using a series of indicators, building on the

Figure 1: The nine objectives proposed for the CAP 2021-2027



experience from the current Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF). Importantly these plans must demonstrate increased ambition with regard to environmental and climate-related objectives compared with the current situation.

The proposals for networking are in line with the move towards strategic planning and seek to consider the CAP as a whole, including Pillar I for the first time, alongside rural development under Pillar II. This means that the new CAP networks will be able to undertake networking activities related to all interventions that MS put in place within their CAP Strategic Plans to contribute to a particular objective from across the two pillars, whether that be to support generational renewal, promote climate action or develop short supply chains in particular sectors. Also new is the broadening of their remit to look beyond current implementation, providing support and contribution to future Strategic Plan development in subsequent programming periods. It is envisaged that CAP networks will be set up in each MS, with a single EU-level CAP network put in place to promote networking and knowledge exchange between the national networks as well as provide support on common issues. The new national CAP networks will essentially replace the current National Rural Networks and



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expand their remit to include the whole CAP. Member States will have to put them in place at the latest 12 months after the European Commission's approval of the respective national CAP Strategic Plans. The networks will be financed via technical assistance from the EAFRD.

Although the scope of the CAP networks – both at national and EU level – will be broadened, their objectives remain very similar to those of the current NRNs, ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks. The proposals are evolutionary rather than radical and have been informed, amongst others, by the 2017 self-assessment exercise conducted by the current EU Rural

Networks which - in general - found that the subjects tackled, and the working methods used by the networks generated positive outcomes (for more about the European Rural Networks self-assessment see page 30). Thus, the important role that such policy-based networking should play is fully recognised in the draft legislation.

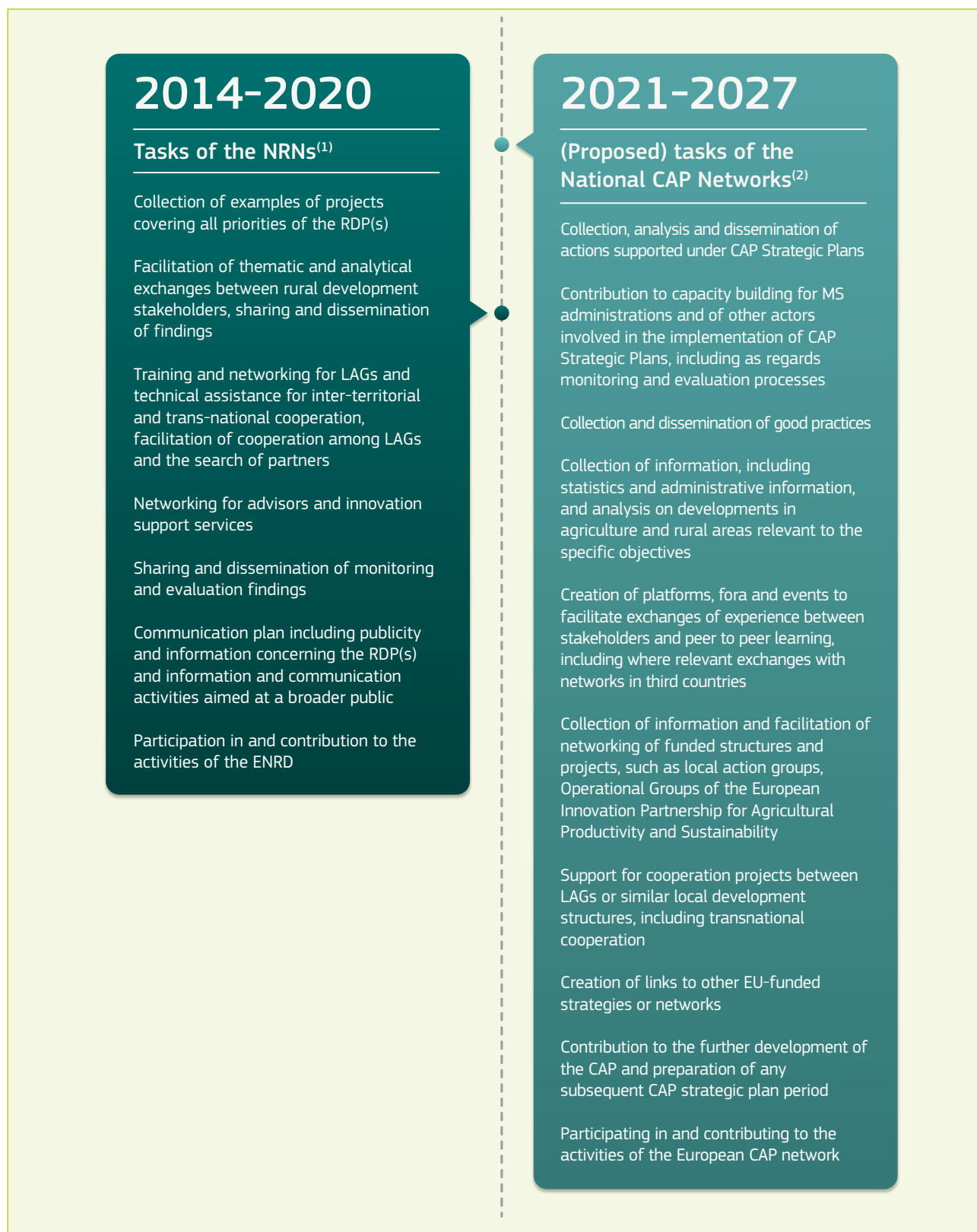
The increased flexibility given to MS under the new performance-based delivery model provides many opportunities, not least the freedom to create more coherent, creative and innovative approaches to deliver the objectives of the CAP that meet the economic, social and environmental needs of a particular area. However, developing these new approaches, shifting the focus from compliance and rules towards results and performance and working out how best to design and combine the different types of intervention available requires new ways of thinking, working and in particular networking. Bringing about such change will require time, guidance and capacity building. This means that the contribution of networking will need to be reinforced both at MS and EU level. The new flexibility will also mean that, at the European level, there will be a key

OBJECTIVES OF THE CAP NETWORKS

- a. Increase stakeholder involvement in the design and implementation of CAP Strategic Plans.
- b. Accompany Member States through the implementation of CAP Strategic Plans and the transition to a performance-based delivery model.
- c. Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and interaction among all agricultural and rural stakeholders.
- d. Foster innovation and support the inclusion of all stakeholders in the knowledge-exchange and knowledge-building process.
- e. Support the monitoring and evaluation capacities of all stakeholders.
- f. Contribute to the dissemination of CAP Strategic Plans results.

Source: CAP strategic plans – Proposal for a regulation COM(2018) 392.

Figure 2: Summary of existing NRNs tasks and possible future tasks of national CAP Networks



(1) See Article 54 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of 17 December 2013.

(2) See Article 113 of the proposals for a Regulation on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the Common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans).

role for the EU-level network to pull together information on how MS have put in place more tailored and diverse types of support to achieve different objectives under the CAP. This will be useful, both to develop a pan-EU understanding of the different approaches taken by MS, but also for individual MS and stakeholders to share experience and information on how different interventions have been combined and targeted, exploring the benefits and opportunities of the different approaches taken. This co-learning will help support the development of more effective and streamlined approaches over time. The national CAP networks will have an important role to play here too, both supporting such exchanges at a national and regional level as well as feeding into and participating in EU-wide exchanges.

This change in approach means that the new national and European CAP networks must not simply be thought of as a kind of 'Rural Networks plus'. The change required is more fundamental than this. Based on previous experience, when publicly-funded EU rural networking expanded from LEADER+ to cover the whole of the EAFRD in 2007, understandably, it took time for those involved in the networks to fully embrace their expanded role and remit. However, the change foreseen for networking from 2021 is arguably even more significant as it requires a reorientation to embrace not just rural development, but a more holistic consideration of rural areas, looking at the way in



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which both Pillar I and Pillar II funding are used within a particular area to deliver environmental, social and environmental needs and priorities. The ground should be prepared for this shift now if the most is to be made of the opportunities to rethink CAP implementation, joining up the way interventions are used in both Pillars to meet objectives. It will therefore be critical to give capacity building a high priority in order to ensure effective CAP networks which support the whole of the CAP become a reality in as short a time as possible. This is not a matter of regulations, rather one of developing a real appreciation of the breadth of the new responsibilities, challenges and opportunities among those who will be charged with setting up and developing the new networks.

The new tasks as outlined in the Commission proposals, naturally reflect the central role of the CAP Strategic Plans. Compared to the current tasks of the NRNs, other differences include

a role in contributing to future CAP developments, as well as flagging the creation of links to other Union funded strategies and networks. Thus, the CAP networks' scope of operations has been expanded in policy terms (covering the full breadth of the CAP Strategic Plans and explicitly linking with other related policies) as well as temporally (as the remit covers contributions to future CAP policy). In geographic terms, the link to third countries will continue.

Further, facilitation of peer-to-peer learning is now explicitly mentioned within the tasks. Thus, it is now much more 'hard-wired' into the proposals that the networks will not only be information providers, but also are specifically charged with developing and employing networking type methods. This will have implications for the necessary skill set of the network support units, as will some of the challenges mentioned below.

CHALLENGES FACING NEW CAP NETWORKS

The new CAP networks, covering both Pillar I and Pillar II, will have at their core the challenge of improving the implementation of approximately six times the amount of public support compared to the current rural networks. At first sight this may sound daunting - as indeed, the Pillar I payments which the CAP networks will support not only represent by far the largest amount of CAP funding, but the vast majority of its final recipients are farmers, only some of whom have been involved in networking under Pillar II. However, in practice many agricultural organisations are already well-established partners in many rural networks. On the other hand, many of the staff of the national, regional and even EU-level administrations who maybe involved with the delivery of the Pillar I support, have little or no hands-on experience of networking. This also provides the new CAP networks with significant

opportunities to extend the value of networking across both Pillars of the CAP, facilitating synergies, interaction and knowledge exchange about how to deliver CAP support to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives in a coherent and joined-up way.

A challenge facing the new CAP networks will be to meaningfully engage those who may be sceptical about the value that can be obtained from such engagement. In this regard demonstrating the value of networking and the benefits it can deliver to government officials, stakeholders as well as the beneficiaries of funding, such as farmers will be essential. One particular aspect will be how to ensure within this wider framework that the needs of specific groups (such as LAGS, Operational Groups) are still met. The lessons from the current programming period in engaging farmers and those

that represent them in the context of the EAFRD will be invaluable. One such example was a workshop, jointly organised by the ENRD Contact Point and the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) in January 2017, that focused on identifying how Rural Development Programmes could support generational renewal.

A further challenge will be the need for CAP networks to keep a broad focus on improving policy implementation and coherence across both Pillars, while balancing a wide range of possible topics, taking into account multiple objectives and multiple stakeholder interests, which may at times conflict. Navigating this wider remit and stakeholder perspectives will make it ever more important that the networks remain places where ideas can be exchanged in an inclusive environment, where all work together to explore ways to improve CAP delivery.

ACHIEVING SUCCESSFUL CAP NETWORKS

The new CAP networks have an important role to play in facilitating the shift in direction of the CAP towards a more performance-based delivery model. To do so they should learn from the experiences of current and previous networking to build effective CAP networks that are fit for the future.

It will be important for the designers and operators of the CAP networks – at MS and EU level – to engage as wide a range of stakeholders as possible with an interest in the CAP. They must set the right tone from the start, ensuring that interactions are founded on the principle that different



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stakeholders should come together and identify common interests and common ways of improving delivery. There is a lot that can be learned from the experiences of the current rural networks here.

An initial stakeholder mapping exercise will be useful to differentiate the distinct economic, social and environmental interests of the wider range of stakeholders that will be involved. This should allow areas of common concern and differences to be made explicit, but in a way that builds on this in a positive and collaborative way, allowing the necessary collective goodwill to be developed to move forward to identify, analyse and propose improvements to CAP implementation. It is good to see that groups such as the Civil Dialogue Group (CDG) for Rural Development are already actively considering how networking can support and assist the development and subsequent implementation of the CAP Strategic Plans to make the most of the

opportunities available.

It should not be forgotten that some of the issues addressed in the current rural development networks will inevitably be relevant also for Pillar I. This is particularly true for the experiences and lessons learned about how to improve the delivery of environmental and climate benefits via agri-environment-climate and other Measures under Pillar II, which are just as relevant for exploring how an expanded group of instruments and interventions (conditionality, the Pillar I Eco-Scheme and land management measures under Pillar II) might work together more synergistically in the future.

Finally, in terms of the European CAP network's activities, key to its success will be its ability to:

- Support the process of development and subsequent implementation of the new Strategic Plans (both engaging stakeholders within MS as well as sharing questions and experiences between MS), with a

focus on peer to peer exchanges and stakeholder involvement to facilitate knowledge sharing and innovation;

- Identify the different delivery mechanisms being used in different MS to achieve the specific economic, social and environmental/climate objectives and help collate examples and experiences of how progress and performance is being achieved;
- Find effective ways of sharing positive and less positive experiences and good practice examples between MS and with stakeholders to enable continuous learning and improvement to take place;
- Provide vital complementary intelligence to the European Commission about the overall implementation of the CAP Strategic Plans, highlighting any issues arising where MS require support and guidance, and to be a 'soft' and supportive element of the policy.

REFLECTION FROM A NATIONAL RURAL NETWORK

How do you think the role of the National networks will change, and where can they create the most value in the future compared to now?

"First of all, we consider that NRNs should be referred to, in the future, as National CAP and RD Network and not just CAP network. Our work is much wider.

With regard to NRN's role in the future, it will be much more challenging as it will include Pillar I, but on the other hand, with the experience we have of working with different stakeholders and with different methodologies, it will bring value to the development of synergies between the two pillars and their beneficiaries, especially in the field of agri-environment, innovation and land use.

This increase in work will require greater financial capacity, since the network will have more responsibilities given the new subjects to be covered as well as the need to increase the work with these stakeholders. It will be like a resumption of the network.

We believe that one solution to overcome this challenge could be to create a Permanent Thematic Working Group for Pillar I, which will bring together entities with know-how to work together, establish an action plan and develop activities together."

Maria Custódia Correia
Portuguese NRN coordinator

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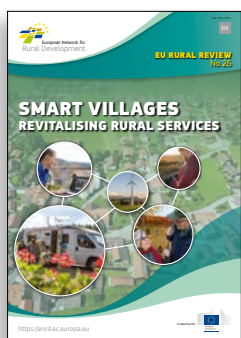
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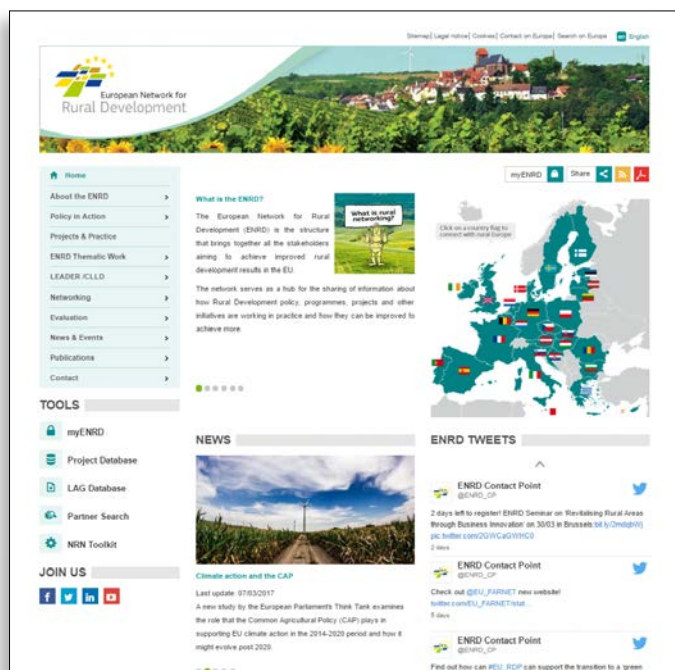
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