



# Report of the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of the European Rural Networks' Steering Group

Brussels, 21 October 2019



## Morning session

Welcome and introduction	
<p>9.30 – 10.00 Welcome and Introduction Mario Milouchev, DG AGRI</p>	<p>The key objectives of the 12<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To provide an update on the state of play of the CAP reform and potential next steps</li><li>• To receive and discuss the emerging findings of the self-assessment of the Rural Networks (RNs)</li><li>• To consider the implications of these findings for the work of the Rural Networks and how these should be brought forward to the next RNs' Assembly</li><li>• To start a reflection on current RNs' governance structures and needs for the new CAP Network</li><li>• To discuss and propose ideas for the next RNs' Assembly</li></ul> <p>The Chair opened the meeting, noting this is a period of important changes in the European institutions, with a new European Parliament (EP) and a new College of Commissioners announced, with Commissioner-designate Mr Janusz Wojciechowski expected to take on the agricultural portfolio. He has been tasked, together with other appointees to the college, including Vice President Dubravka Šuica and Commissioner Elisa Ferreira, by the Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen with developing a long-term vision for rural areas. There is a wide range of challenges and key tasks currently facing the EU, which will impact on the Rural Networks' work. These include the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, the climate change challenge, the adoption of the Multiannual Financial Framework for the next programming period 2021-2027 and the CAP reform.</p> <p>Rural Networks need to be flexible and be prepared to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Commission's proposals for the CAP post-2020. Negotiations are advancing in the EP and the Council and there seems to be overall support for the Commission's proposed new delivery model. The Commission continues to work with the co-legislators to agree on the CAP reform post-2020. The Finnish Presidency's objective is to achieve a common general agreement by end 2020; however, this largely depends on the MFF negotiations. It is reasonable to assume that the Council will only adopt a position on the design of the next CAP when there is clarity on the policy's future budget. The new Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (COMAGRI) in the EP intends to build on the report on the Commission's proposals which was adopted in April 2019 by COMAGRI (in the previous mandate), rather than start a new examination of the proposals, which may have implied additional delays.</p>

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If the reform for the 2021-2027 programming period will not be adopted in time to enter into force in 2021, the Commission will be ready with transitional arrangements for the CAP.

Member States (MS) have already begun the analytical work needed for designing their future CAP Strategic Plans (CSP).

One aspect of the Commission proposals concerns the future CAP Networks at EU and national level. There have been some technical comments made on the Commission's proposals for networking, both in COMAGRI and in the Council working party, but the proposed approach has been broadly supported. Networking will play an important role in the future and will involve bringing together the current two EU-level RNs into a single CAP Network covering both Pillar I and Pillar II.

A reflection should be initiated on the most appropriate governance arrangements for the new EU CAP Network. Such a reflection should start with stakeholder views on the current governance structure and its functioning, in order to consider what should be kept and what should be improved in the future. The Commission was in listening mode and wished to hear stakeholders' input.

## CAP reform

**10.00 – 11.00**  
Update on the CAP reform  
Gaëlle Marion, DG AGRI

Gaëlle Marion from DG AGRI presented an [update on the CAP reform](#), starting with a review of recent developments in the European Parliament and Council.

A Q&A session followed the presentation. Participants discussed opportunities for Member States to continue their preparatory work for their CAP Strategic Plans in parallel with regulatory developments. The role of the NRNs in providing information from research and good practice analysis was highlighted – especially in relation to EAFRD programming and implementation. There was also recognition of the value of sharing CAP knowledge and experience through networking between NRNs and their Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies or Monitoring Committees.

Participants asked about the transition to the new CAP and DG AGRI reported that plans for the transition are well catered for. The Commission's proposals will include safeguards for direct payments and for networks the intention is to ensure continuity of networking support between the two programming periods.

Analysis of current performance indicates that most RDPs are contributing to all their planned objectives and no EAFRD payments have been suspended in the Performance Review exercise.

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	<p>The treatment of regional issues in CAP Strategic Plans was also clarified. The plans must have a single national interlocuter and the strategy must be national. Regional arrangements can include the integration of regionally specific SWOT elements in the national CSP, dedicated support rates and eligibility conditions. Regional reporting would be aggregated in terms of contributions to the national level objectives and targets.</p> <p>The possible use of impact indicators for setting targets was raised. The Commission clarified that these will only be used during evaluation (when externalities can be properly assessed) and will provide an understanding of the overall impact made through European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF)/EAFRD support. Performance monitoring and reporting will focus on outputs and result indicators which can be linked directly to interventions supported by the CAP.</p>
<b>Rural Networks' self-assessment</b>	
<p><b>11.30- 13.00</b> Rural Networks' self-assessment <b>Sari Rannanpää</b></p>	<p>A presentation was made on the <a href="#">emerging findings of the 2019 self-assessment</a> of the Rural Networks.</p> <p>The self-assessment exercise was first undertaken in 2017, and this most recent survey was shorter with slightly different questions but using the same overall process.</p> <p>Following the presentation participants were asked to break into working groups to develop reflections on the emerging findings, which will be presented to the Rural Networks' Assembly at its next meeting.</p>

## Afternoon session

<b>Report back from working groups</b>	
<p><b>14:00 – 14:15</b> Report back from working groups</p>	<p>Working groups provided reflections according to their assigned EU RN general objective.</p> <p><b>General Objective 1 - Enhance participation</b></p> <p><b>Improved targeting of events and information</b></p> <p>Targeted events for specific audiences or topics could enhance the engagement of both existing and new stakeholders and show the benefits of rural development and innovation. New stakeholders could include, among others: young people, the socially excluded, civil society and municipalities. Efforts should be made to identify possible 1<sup>st</sup> pillar stakeholders who are currently not involved in rural networks. Participation can be improved by ensuring that the topic of is relevant for the target group(s) identified for a</p>

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certain networking activity. Identifying specific topics and developing more detailed agendas for events can help participants to better assess the relevance of their involvement. Similarly, more targeted and shorter publications would improve their usefulness to stakeholders. Current EIP Focus Groups were mentioned as a good practice both at EU and national level: by mobilising new actors in different specific working areas, they lead to greater involvement and enlarge the networks stakeholders' basis.

#### **Fostering thematic networks**

Collaborative work and synergies with various/different sectors and initiatives should be encouraged by focussing on common issues, thematic areas and geographic clusters. This can include involving calls for participation on events which draw in stakeholders who are not currently engaged in network activities, and in creating more bottom-up based work programmes. In the thematic networks, the EU Rural Networks could take the role of a facilitator which supports communication and interaction between different stakeholders, particularly through participative and innovative techniques.

#### **Support free exchange and build trust between different actors**

Introducing Chatham House rules [where information disclosed may be reported, but the attribution of that information is not explicitly or implicitly identified] in events, where appropriate, may encourage improved interaction and exchange. It may give participants the confidence and space to share personal views and enable the involvement of those who are less familiar with rural development.

### **General Objective 2: Improve policy quality**

#### **Capitalising on the neutrality and reach of the Networks**

The neutrality and diversity of the ENRD and EIP-Agri Networks allows them to be used as platforms for discussing issues related to rural development policy as well as to research and innovation policy. Networks have a strong potential to collect out-of-the box ideas arising from different sources such as H2020 and Interreg, discuss them and co-create relevant policy recommendations with key stakeholders. Networks are therefore in a suitable position to act as mediators of policy exchanges. Furthermore, Networks can take two distinct roles in these processes: they can simply reach out and support existing initiatives which bring together different stakeholders, or they can take a more proactive role and stimulate new linkages.

#### **Improve relevance and uptake of policy recommendations drawn up from the Networks**

There are several ways of enhancing the relevance and uptake of policy recommendation from the Networks:

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- a) deepening the work and focus on specific topics with key stakeholders - e.g. on specific measures/interventions, LEADER, EIP operational groups, Simplified Cost Options (SCOs);
- b) addressing broader issues which interest and attract a wider variety of different groups (e.g. climate change, or social inclusion);
- c) Incorporating evaluation results more systematically into networking events and outputs, more capacity building for evaluators and other stakeholders, and an enhanced networking for evaluations.

**Include flexibility in Networks’ action plans to allow them to adapt**

Rather than planning and timetabling all Network activities in detail, some degree of flexibility and space should be allowed in the planning to allow for rapid responses to unforeseen issues and events.

**General Objective 3: Increase awareness**

**Sufficient resources for communication activities**

A more interactive approach, which encourages discussion, could be taken on social media. This is resource intensive- EU RN Support Units, as well as the NRNs will require sufficient resources.

**Raising awareness of the benefits of networking for rural development policy**

A prominent part of Networks’ communication activities focus on informing stakeholders about upcoming activities or materials produced. There is a need to demonstrate the benefits of EU-level networking for rural development policy stakeholders and communicate these widely.

**More targeted information**

Streamlining communication through a filtering and identification of relevant content by topic (e.g. carried out by NRNs if resources allow) is advised to avoid overwhelming stakeholders with too much information (e.g. dedicate specific tags to articles or Twitter handles to reach targeted stakeholders).

**Development of communication tools to enhance engagement**

Several tools for improving communication were mentioned, e.g. a ‘have your say’ box on the Network Support Units’ websites, key word tagging for the website, translating extracts of reports, a specific mobile event application which permits networking and facilitates the exchange of information, as well as webinars and farminars. Alongside newer tools, the continuing value of face-to-face networking possibilities was also highlighted.

**Communication as a Network activity**

The communication activities of the EU Rural Networks can be enhanced through exchanges with national actors (e.g. NRNs), who can use their

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communication networks to distribute information. Co-creation of information by national and EU actors should also be strengthened – the national organisations are more likely to pass on the information if they had a role in its creation. By working together, EU level information can also be tailored to fit national level information needs.

### Governance of EU networks

14.15 – 15:15  
Governance of EU networks  
Giuliana Keller/Antonella Zona  
DG AGRI

A presentation was made on the current organisation and role of the bodies forming the [EU Rural Networks' governance](#). Participants were then invited to reflect on current arrangements, and the aspects they would keep or change, and to make proposals on how they would change them.

Participants made a range of suggestions for the future governance of CAP networks including:

- Have an annual event gathering a large number of stakeholders. This large-scale annual event should be less 'institutional' than the current Assembly meetings where participants may have a different understanding of their role and different degrees of preparation for discussions. It seems more useful that the annual event be mainly an exchange platform, similar for instance to the networX event organised in April 2019.
- Keep specialised governance bodies, like the current Innovation and Leader Sub-groups who are working quite efficiently in steering the networking activities in their fields of competence. New specialised subgroups might be set-up based on a solid needs assessment.
- Maintain a Steering Group with the clear role of coordinating the specialised subgroups and other networking activities;
- Need for members of the different governance bodies to have a clear understanding of their role.
- Create a more concrete and attractive agenda for the Assembly which avoids repetition and showcases the work of the networks. More interaction during the meetings was also requested.
- Use modern IT tools, apps and video conferencing and facilitate access to documents.
- Adjust the agenda over the programming period to reflect each stage of the implementation progress and stakeholder needs.
- Keep the Assembly for validation of the activity of the networks.
- Have a smaller and more dynamic Steering Group composed of representatives of sub-groups.
- Keep rural development as a separate entity/body/representation.
- Ensure the incorporation of Pillar I actors.

The Commission welcomed the richness of suggestions emerging from the discussion, noting that while some ideas were conflicting, all contributions

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	<p>were valuable. The discussion will be continued at the Assembly meeting in December.</p> <p>The Chairman welcomed the in-depth discussions and ideas, which will help feed into the Commission's own reflections</p>
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### Recent and planned network activities

<p><b>15.30 – 16.30</b> Recent and planned network activities – CP, EIP AGRI and Helpdesk</p>	<p>Presentations were made on the recent and planned activities of the <a href="#">ENRD Contact Point</a>, the <a href="#">EIP-Agri Service Point</a> and the <a href="#">ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk</a>.</p> <p>Steering Group members engaged in EIP-AGRI Service Point activities reported that a group of NRNs was being formed to reflect on Innovation Support Services.</p>
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### Outlook

<p><b>16.30– 17.00</b> Outlook Mario Milouchev DG AGRI</p>	<p>Steering Group members were invited to propose ideas for the next Assembly meeting agenda in December.</p> <p>The concluding remarks by the Chair highlighted that the finalisation of the Brexit and MFF negotiations should help to clarify the operational context for rural development policy and that the ENRD will continue to help Member States to prepare for CAP Strategic Plans. Attention was drawn to upcoming events being organised by the Evaluation Helpdesk and Service Point, in this respect.</p> <p>In addition, Swedish representatives informed delegates about an event in November which will encourage dialogue between CAP stakeholders and other EU funding streams involved in developing Swedish rural areas. DG AGRI saw this as a positive exercise and reminded the audience that, although rural development policy would not be as directly aligned with the Common Provisions Regulation in the future, Article 98 of the proposed CAP Strategic Plans Regulation will still require Member States to demonstrate coordination and complementarity of EAFRD with other EU funds active in rural areas.</p> <p>The Chair proposed presenting the reflections gathered in the self-assessment discussions to Assembly Members to seek their views. He also suggested that the suggestions coming from this meeting on the governance of the future EU CAP Network be presented to Assembly participants to allow them the opportunity to make their own input into the process.</p>
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