

National Rural Networks

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

Brussels, 29 April 2009

Introduction

Welcome and introduction by Haris Martinos, Team Leader EN RD Contact Point, who outlined the items on the agenda. Introduction of the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, and the Evaluation Help Desk, who had been invited to make a presentation about their structure and services, and take part in a discussion related to the possible needs of the NSUs in terms of evaluation. In addition there was a further opportunity to take part in 'thematic' round tables continuing from the fourth NSU meeting (01/04/09), not only for those who attended the previous meeting, but also those who were taking part in the workshops for the first time. The afternoon was devoted to an introduction to approaches to 'Good Practice' (interesting experiences) by the EN RD Contact Point, and this was followed by workshop exercises. A brief summary of the results of the 'good practice' workshops was provided verbally. The detailed workshop results, both from the 'thematic' round tables and 'good practice' workshops are given below in the body of this summary.

Morning session:

1. The European Evaluation Help Desk, Presentation and Discussion

Michael Hegarty, Team Leader of the Evaluation Help Desk provided an overview of the structure and services of the European Evaluation Network, the relationship with the European Commission and the EN RD Contact Point. Mr Hegarty emphasised that the ultimate beneficiaries of their activities are the stakeholders in the different Member States, and that their main current tasks include: guidance for the preparation of the mid-term evaluation; guidance resulting from their thematic working groups; identification of 'good practice'; and training and capacity building.

The discussion that followed provided an opportunity to understand further the needs of the NSUs related to Evaluation. A few Member States indicated that they have already started work on Evaluation for example: Denmark has started a dialogue with Leader actors; Slovenia is collecting data to prepare a report, and Austria has worked with the MA in defining set of 15 indicators. Sweden indicated that they would appreciate some guidance for ongoing systems and processes, and how to deal with the learning processes for stakeholders and Managing Authorities. Belgium (Wallonia) would like: to provide a methodological guide not only for LAGs but also NGOs; be able to show the impact of measures and how they work; and more information about self-evaluation.

2. Continuation of thematic round tables

Following on from the previous meeting of April 1st, four thematic round tables were organised and the outcomes of the discussions of these individual workshops are reported below:

Workshop 1: "What are the possible functions of a Network?"

Animator: Anke Wehmeyer, Rapporteur: György Mudri

a) Target Group: Before thinking about the possible functions of a network it has to be clarified what the target group of a network should and could be. The target groups were identified as follows:

- Stakeholders, organisations etc. involved in Axis 1, 2, 3 and 4
- Managing Authorities
- Other (related) stakeholders
- Administrative bodies
- Governmental agencies
- Intermediary organisations

Intermediary organisations were seen as a very important target group for networking since they already have contacts and interfaces.

b) Possible functions:

- At the national level there are expectations of the network to act as representative organisation. However, the more advanced networkers could consider the role of a 'representative organisation' as being contradictory to the role of 'real networking'.
- The variety of stakeholders and their way of working within the framework of the EAFRD differs from one axis to the other. At the same time there are different levels of networking experience in the EU Member States. Consequently these different levels of experience (and stakeholders) require different support activities.
- The activities of a network should always be close to the needs of the beneficiaries. Concerning the agricultural sector there was the question of how to develop "new" activities in addition to those already in place.
- The function of the network always depends on the objectives and priorities in the different Member States. In addition the function of a network differs from one country to another, and to a large extent it mainly depends on the size of the country.
- One of the main goals of networking should be to improve relationships. The smaller the country the easier a network can be established and activities implemented.
- Dealing with conflicts of interest at national level. This can be achieved by integrating all the different national interests into the network.
- Other functions could generally relate to the implementation of the EAFRD.
- NRNs should promote the EAFRD in the Member States.
- The NRNs should provide a good example of being innovative. It is important that they find innovative ways, e.g. on the level of practical exchange or how to implement meetings.

The **role of the network on an abstract level** was mentioned as being:

- An interpreter
- An integrator
- An innovator
- A link between different interests

Information in terms of these roles should be circulated in both directions: 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. The NRNs wish to be informed and have discussions about policy after 2013. They would also like to talk about the synergies between different EU funding streams, which are seen as a main networking objective. One of the main tasks of the network is to make direct contact with **ALL** levels. Direct contact makes it easier to find common solutions for all those concerned (individuals and institutions).

Workshop 2: “Innovative practices in communication tools and methods”

Animator: Dieter Wagner; Rapporteur: Breda Kovačič

Workshop participants began by sharing information about promotional activities, tools and methods they use to involve and communicate with stakeholders of their networks. In the following an attempt was made to **group activities by the most common tools** and to identify within each tool innovative or useful practices:

a) Websites still offer a range of opportunities (not yet fully exploited) to invite, and hence achieve, stakeholder involvement:

- Thematic platforms can encourage new stakeholders to access the network. Whether in the form of an online forum or ‘blog’, provision for moderation/supervision should be made;
- Sections such as an Events calendar or ‘Leader-Book’ are useful to invite stakeholders to propose and present their own events or rural development activities for inclusion. Resource for editorial/maintenance purposes will have to be planned for;
- Foreseeing a membership registration facility is vital for an open network that aims to continuously involve more actors and is the best way to maintain an up-to-date mailing list;
- Offering LAGs financial and technical support to create their own website and to inter-link it with the NRN and other LAG websites was found to be an interesting initiative.

b) Publications were described as a traditional communication tool that remains popular among rural actors, probably as they are mostly offered in a more practical way, i.e. electronically via websites. This includes newsletters, programme level information and other brochures offering practical information. Depending on the target audience it was found important to offer key information in more than one language.

- A start has been made to prepare for good practice publications. Using images and DVDs (trailers, mini-movies) were pointed out as approaches which are intended to attract interest and to ensure a good distribution to new and ‘busy’ stakeholders such as farmers;
- Competitions combine different tools as they support content development for publications and events at the same time. Visibility (during an event) often incites actors to participate and can easily replace a money prize.

c) Events are meant to reach and involve as many stakeholders as possible. Most NRNs therefore have organised larger scale launches or annual events.

- Stakeholder inclusion: there is a clear trend to involve other organisations beyond those associated with Leader in the organisation of events to access the whole range of actors supported by the EARFD;
- Relevance and profile: events have a wider audience when addressing specific topics or themes, also linked to innovation. Also: inviting other stakeholder organisations to participate together (joint stands, joint workshops) in agricultural and environmental fairs.
- Utility and access: Some NSUs have chosen to restructure their events, involving more workshops. Holding events in rural areas concerned by the theme of the event helps to get closer to people and to bring local actors together, who work on issues related to different themes.

d) Exchange activities - Cooperation

- Different types of working-level meetings with stakeholders have been instigated by NSUs, such as dealing with transversal themes and addressing either the regional or local level. In some cases these are held as virtual meetings by phone or internet 'blog' to reduce travel and time constraints;
- Visits abroad organised by the NSUs target the exchange of knowledge between NRNs and ministries, NGOs and other actors of different Member States that have identified issues, themes or targets they have in common;
- Study trips or visits for the benefit of municipalities or other regional/local level organisations and groups seeking support for targeting specific questions and/or methods (not necessarily projects) have also proven useful.

Conclusion: From the discussion it appeared that work on the representation and target of the network often faces key issues that should be anticipated when developing communication tools (hence, these may be considered 'learning tools'):

- Time constraints of network beneficiaries/participants: plan how to access/reach different actors (e.g. farmers are very busy people – day and night). Actors will not come to you, you must come to them (approach: web tools, events, exchange activities);
- Language barriers: the use of images and short movies / DVDs can help to accelerate all forms of dissemination and cooperation (approach: web tools/audiovisual media, publications);
- Thematic content coordination: an inventory of thematic studies readily available across the Member States - possibly facilitate by the CP - could inspire those looking for specific information and helps to avoid time unnecessarily spent (approach: web tools, publications);
- Good practice definition and dissemination: the definition and publication of good practice could involve rural actors, to better understand and take into account what they understand and apply as good practice (approach: ways to achieve this are competitions/ awards as parts of publication and events work; web and audiovisual media as publications work);
- Cooperation under Leader: a pan-European standard template for LAG data, so all MS would have the same structure of LAG databases and/or LAG diaries to simplify the search for cooperation partners, until a dedicated partner search tool is in place (approach: web tools).

Workshop 3: "Network Administration"

Animator/Rapporteur: Martin Law

Key question to address: How to set up an efficient network administration?

The main areas that were discussed:

a) Network administration:

Discussion took place about having the right people in the administration. There were some commonalities identified amongst those present. The National Support Units comprise of key people who are able to address specific needs: these were either vertical, in relation to subject matter corresponding to the different axes of the EAFRD (such as agriculture or environment); or horizontal, in relation to organisational/technical skills, such as cooperation and IT (web-site, databases). Staff may either be part of the permanent team or could be also 'experts' selected

to perform specific tasks or address specific topics. Resources are available for training (through technical assistance).

b) Financial aspects:

It is still early in terms of planned activities to understand/appreciate all budgetary aspects although suggestions are included in the Annual Plan about how money should be allocated. In order to increase the potential of the available budget, one option is to work with other groups on common projects (such as events). For example, accommodation and subsistence may be provided by a hosting organisation, and the NSU provides the staffing resource.

c) Evaluation:

A need is seen for some common indicators and objectives covering 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' issues, as well as to understand what can be evaluated, and then being able to understand the input. For example, web-sites would need to consider the number of visits, and the documents downloaded. Annual questionnaires are one way of carrying out an evaluation of the NSU activities.

d) Internal network relations:

Internal relations depend also on how the NSU structure is supported (within the MA or outsourced). It was noted that LAGs were generally easy to work with (since there was experience from previous programming period), and that access to stakeholders in Axes 1 and 2 is (for the moment) more difficult. A steering committee and Thematic Working Groups have been established to represent all axes and meetings will take place on a regular basis. At the moment it is too early to say much more.

Workshop 4: "Cooperation and study visits"

Animator: Haris Martinos; Rapporteur: Juliette Faivre

Reminder of the main conclusions from the last workshop on this theme of cooperation:

- Cooperation is mainly Leader based
- Cooperation could also be understood to mean cooperation between networks (whatever the axis of the RDP).

Results of round table of needs and projects to support cooperation: Guidance or not?

Italy	Work on an administrative guidance to facilitate cooperation projects between the 21 Italian regions, at a national level -> inter-territorial cooperation
Spain	At the national level, work on a guidance for inter-territorial, transnational and cooperation with third countries, aimed at LAGs. This guidance contains eligible cost, selection criteria for projects (innovative aspects, gender, and environment etc).
Netherlands	Selection criteria for cooperation projects are established by the LAGs themselves. Work on a guide for cooperation -> Question about the legal status of LAG.
Sweden	No information about work on cooperation guidance but there is a need for exchange (maybe via web sites, in English) on axis 4 implementation regarding those procedures

	which concern the approval of the project, and which measures are concerned?
Slovenia	The basis for cooperation projects is the European regulation. No guidance is foreseen. However there is a need to know about the main working themes of LAGs per Member State.

Proposals:

- To develop a **partner announcement (forum on cooperation)**, to be organized according to an identified theme.
- To develop **multi-annual thematic programmes** (lasting 2 years), including a number of events (to be determined) and with different levels of actors: academics, implementation actors (Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies), and the classical 'cooperation' actors (Leader and non-Leader). This would not be on a large scale but rather very operational and practical.

In order to work on this idea, it would be necessary to organize a small working group which could be financed by Technical Assistance.

- **The European guide** could be an interactive one for LAGs but not necessarily for the other axes. In this case, meetings would be really useful.

It is important to link the RDPs on certain themes. For axes 1, 2, 3, a thematic approach is necessary. The problem is to identify, in each Member State, the person interested in one topic. This requires an information flow between the Contact Point / Commission / Member State / MS at Regional and Local level.

Database of experts

Estonia	Need to have a database of experts (English speaking) on various themes, such as bio-energy.
Finland	Finnish experts can register themselves on a public database.
Italy	Need to ask the representative of the national network at European level to have this information.

Example of thematic work developed in the Netherlands: "Rural entrepreneurship in northwest Europe". Various meetings will be organised on this theme and the first one is foreseen for spring 2010.

Afternoon session:

1. Next meetings

In a change to the agenda, Mrs. Isabel Aguilar Pastor (from the Spanish MA) was asked to make a short presentation concerning the Cooperation Fair and the planned fifth meeting for the NSUs. The date for the Cooperation Fair is June 8-10 and will take place in Seville (Expo). There will be a dinner organised during the evening of the 7th and 8th. The meeting of the NSUs will take

place on the 8th following the official opening of the event. LAGs will be able to have a stand (free of charge) and the NSU representatives were asked to inform LAGs about this possibility. During the event field trips may take place and it will be possible to visit the fair itself. More details are to be provided by the Spanish network, but in the meantime further information is available from the following web-site: <http://www.ficoder.es>

In respect of the planned NSU meeting on the 8th, the CP informed the meeting that the agenda would include a presentation and discussion (in workshops) of the European TNC Cooperation guide. **Since the agenda for this meeting is not finalised suggestions for items for the agenda are welcome.**

2. Introductory presentation on approaches to 'Good Practice' and workshop exercises

The CP gave an outline presentation concerning possible approaches to the definition of 'good practice' and made the point that it is perhaps more pertinent to talk about 'interesting experiences'. Such examples should fulfill certain criteria (desirable attributes) according to some predefined objectives such as 'effectiveness and efficiency', and depending on the situation, other criteria such as innovation, sustainability and simplicity may be taken into account. At national level it will be necessary to consider strategic guidelines and priorities, some of which may be related to a specific axis of the EAFRD or linked to the CAP Health Check. At the European level there are experiences to be learned from the various EN RD actors, and these should offer a balance between topic and geography, and should not ignore the experience gained during the Leader+ period. Possible tools for disseminating examples include 'a database' covering all 4 axes and publications. Challenges are seen as the identification of examples in axes 1&2 and finding effective new and proactive ways to disseminate information which will increase levels of participation, especially amongst the new rural actors.

Three different workshops were then asked to consider the same issues, and a summary of these is given as follows:

Workshop 1

Animator: Nils Lagerroth, Rapporteurs: Marieke Koot and Dieter Wagner

1. Tour of table: Update about experience to date, plans for selection of 'good practices'

Spain: A methodological guide for good practices for the new programme period is currently being developed. At present they are still using the experience / good practices from the Leader + period.

Slovenia: Nothing has been done yet about good practices. They are searching for a way to handle good practice.

Finland: They are constantly publishing good practices in a magazine, and have a database of good practices. Joint work is taking place with a university in order to develop a method for the selection of good practices.

Italy: A point was made that information on good practices / experiences should be established and exchanged at the level of Managing Authorities. Another interesting initiative is to finance a Phd student working on innovation in rural development.

Sweden: The NRN is organizing a rural gala (30/09/09) with awards for the best good practices (in different categories). The best practices will be described in a brochure and supplemented by video clips. The Managing Authority has a database (open to anyone) listing the projects.

France: The database on projects is not public. They are looking at how they are going to deal with good practice.

Netherlands: a database with all kinds of innovative projects (not only EU financing) is in place. In spring 2010 they will organise a competition for the best good practice.

2. Identifying Good Practices in axis 1 and 2

- The experience in the group from finding good practices in axis 1 and 2 was limited. One view was however that there should be no differences in the collection of practice from axis 1 and 2 in comparison with axis 3 and 4.
- Suggestions were made to cooperate with universities and research institutes in order to find and analyze good practices.

3. Data collection and data sheets

- Experiences from the previous programming period 2000 – 2006 should be exchanged, for selecting good practice methods among Member States.
- A data sheet for the Leader axis was presented. The question was raised whether there should be different datasheets for each axis, showing a preference for a single datasheet for all axes, with information entered only where applicable.

4. Dissemination

- The Leader+ experience with dissemination of good practices should be secured by exchanging methods between the two programming periods.
- Competition of best practices – use publicity as an incentive (for example with 7 categories as in Sweden). A critical mass of projects might be necessary before a competition can be launched. Perhaps this will be available in 2010?
- Innovative projects and measures can be put in a database via a web-based questionnaire. They will then be accessible via criteria or themes, including attachments and web links, movies/images etc.
- The development of a database of project activities to inspire others is important.

5. Other points raised

- Involve external expertise to develop new approaches (universities, beneficiaries, etc). Build bridges with representatives from other sectors/interests. Engage and consult with projects such as those under Interreg IVB and IVC.
- Make innovation a fixed criterion.
- Offer scholarships to support the work of project analysis.

Workshop 2

Animator: Mike Gregory; Rapporteur: Gregor Novak

1. Update on good practice activities and plans in Member States (those represented in the workshop group)

Ireland: To date experience in Ireland has been Leader+ based. Currently a limited number of GP case studies are being developed. The criteria for selection are broadly similar to those shown in MPG's presentation (approach section), and one specific criterion is that no project may have been previously selected. Case studies are being collected from other Member States to be able to include examples from axes 1 and 2. The case studies are being prepared externally; this includes the analysis and identification of critical success factors.

Hungary: Leader+ based. Work so far not based on specific criteria. A specific database of GP examples would be useful.

Estonia: So far no discussion on axes 1, 2 or 3. A workshop was held in December 2008 on Leader (axis 4) good practice, where the following criteria were agreed upon. Good Practice projects must meet all the criteria, namely: meet the needs of the local community; be innovative and/or provide added-value; be technically well implemented; project implementers must be willing and able to publicise the project; be sustainable; be multi-sectoral; have elements of cooperation; and include young people

Sweden: The good practice database covers all 4 axes. Best practices are selected as part of an award process (awards are presented at a special gala). Categories include: best rural development project; best entrepreneur; best 'young peoples' project; best project involving 'ethnic groups', and; best project with a 'gender focus'. Overall the emphasis is on effectiveness.

Denmark: Nothing as yet for axis 4 in the current programming period (in previous programming period all Leader+ projects were on a database). In this programming period, for axis 4, LAGs will be asked to contribute directly. Some 'good practice' projects in axes 1 and 2 have been selected by the Danish Paying Agency, but not on the basis of any agreed formal criteria.

Portugal: Definition of methodologies for good practice now being worked on. No good practice examples yet for the current programming period.

Austria: In the previous programming period had a project database on (all) Leader projects. This included short project descriptions only, and was not a good or best practice database. Currently work is underway on a new database covering all axes, with short text descriptions, searchable by key words. Plan is to have awards, which is understood to be for the projects which are: most economically beneficial; socially relevant; and innovative.

2. Identifying Good Practices for Axes 1 and 2

- It was understood that no axis specific criteria were used in the selection of the axes 1 and 2 case studies to be disseminated in Ireland.
- Selection criteria for good practice examples in axes 1 and 2 in Denmark were not formally defined.
- In Sweden the database of 'good practices' (which includes axes 1 and 2) does not include information not already existing/submitted by the project implementers. Therefore it appears that selection of 'good practice' is not based on more than overall project efficiency, effectiveness, etc.

- What is best practice for axes 1 and 2 exists, but it is information which lies mainly with researchers and research institutes etc.

3. Data Collection

- Hungary has developed a simple good practice datasheet. It is easily searchable using keywords.
- No 'new' information is collected for the Swedish 'good practice' database (i.e. there are no discrete data collection exercise undertaken, and all the information is already generated by projects). For 'best practice' in Sweden the (regional) Agricultural Boards are informed about the agreed criteria/categories for awards and each is asked to identify four 'best practices'. This is not a major exercise.
- The development of databases where information is specifically collected is expensive and (most probably) not cost effective. This was a comment based primarily on the Austrian experience, but the workshop participants felt it was probably valid.
- Results indicators are used in the identification of best practice in Sweden.
- The data collected and examples generated need to reflect the needs of the Member State. There are (at least) two levels. In the New Member States the main immediate need is for basic useful ideas.

Datasheets:

- The views of the workshop participants varied. Some thought that datasheets - with the level of detail shown in the draft example Leader data sheet distributed at the workshop were useful.
- Others thought datasheets were expensive to compile and not widely used.
- There was a consensus among the workshop participants that datasheets would not meet the information needs of all the possible good practice objectives.

4. Dissemination Methods

- Monthly newsletter: each edition focussing on a different 'good/learning practice' (Sweden).
- Agriculture related newspapers and magazines, TV (Ireland).
- With Leader+, ideas were disseminated via conferences, personal contacts etc., and not necessarily by good practice examples. There was a general view among the workshop participants that it was the **informal** not the **formal** dissemination channels that were effective for the transfer of good practice.
- Very good Austrian experience (with lots of positive feedback) when innovative people were promoted, as opposed to simply innovative projects.
- Video clips are very well received. This was the general view of the workshop participants.
- Succinct dissemination is even more important to capture the interest of those who are not used to networking (i.e. farmers).

- The language issue needs to be considered when considering appropriate aims for European level good practice activities.
- An anecdotal example revealed that in the past programming period, when the information was not available, it was researchers etc. who contacted the Leader programme – not the (potential) project owners themselves.

5. Other Points

- It is important to define the objectives of 'good practice'. In Sweden the best practices gala also raises the overall process of the programme.
- The collation of good practices is also of use in describing the overall activities of the programme(s) and showing, at the national level, 'what the money is spent on'.
- Where is the evidence for the value added of good practice databases and formal good practice initiatives? Anecdotal evidence from the workshop participants suggests that formal good practice databases are not well used.
- Different Member States have very different approaches to good practice. These include: comprehensive or selective project databases, specific collection of good practice information and the development of good practice databases, and; in-depth case studies.

Workshop 3

Animator: Mara Lai; Rapporteur: Martin Law

1. Tour of table: Update about experience to date, plans for selection of 'good practices'

Cyprus: too early, as the LAGs have not yet been selected.

Denmark: some work has started, and a meeting is planned to take place in June, and a booklet on 'best projects' will be produced. Also involve the paying agency and meet with those involved in Leader+.

Belgium – Wallonia: Too early. Expect to work with the support of a committee (based on Universities) for help in analysing 'good practice'. Problem to identify the beneficiaries in Axes 1, 2 and 3.

Belgium – Flanders: Work is taking place on an 'ad hoc' basis although would like to be more theoretical in approach. Interested to identify projects to do with sustainability (Axes 3 & 4). Are looking back to Leader+ for examples (half of their LAGs are new).

Greece: The NRN is at an early stage. From Leader+ there are LAGs with 'best practice' listed on a central web-site within the Ministry of Finance, and from this there are plans to make a publication.

Slovenia: It is too early to talk about selection, although they are planning to present some small projects, and are working with the 'paying agencies' to see what is there.

France: Will use the services of a consultant to create a committee looking at 'good practice', which will analyse local and national levels and see how to develop criteria (to know if it is 'good' or 'bad').

Luxembourg: Interested to have some 'good' criteria at the national level and be coordinated by the EN RD, with different criteria for different axes.

Italy: Have defined a methodology and determined Leader criteria; are about to organise a quality 'focus-group' with good-practice experts; opening 'good practice' to axes 1, 2 and 3 with the objective to concretize the Leader experience; have published 200 examples. Realise that they need to have an integrated approach and are looking for a method and themes e.g.; renewable energy; social agriculture.

2. How to select projects in axes 1&2? Should axes 1&2 be quite different?

- Can consider projects that cover both axes, for example, in Italy have demonstration projects concerned with greenhouses which use technology to reduce energy loss, and this can be transferred to agricultural practices.
- Should consider those 'projects/measures' which have an integrated character.
- Organise a workshop to build together the criteria.
- Get people to give examples of 'good experience' and show clearly the criteria relevant to the particular axis.

3. Data collection

One way is to have a data sheet to collect the information, but this needs to be structured for the particular measure concerned. Need to provide for commonality at the European level.

4. Dissemination

Ideally to work with dissemination practices already in place in the existing network structures, such as publications, web-based tools (databases) with possible innovative developments such as video-clips. Needs to work at the different levels: national and European.

Final remarks

Participants were thanked for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

N.B. Comments received during this meeting and via the 'evaluation form' will be taken into account in future planning.