

Consultation concerning the future Rural Development Policy

In Flanders, the Flemish Rural Network consulted all rural stakeholders in an open survey.

The answers collected came from regional and local authorities, the agricultural sector, the social sector and the environmental sector.

1. Future challenges and goals for rural development policy

The European agricultural model, focussing on a multifunctional, competitive and sustainable agriculture throughout the territory, remains the starting point of the rural development policy. However, this model has to evolve and respond to a number of societal expectations, not in the least those formulated in the Health Check:

- the need for a transition to further sustainability and green growth, with an agriculture that contributes to food security in a responsible manner
- support of diversification of agricultural activities, with attention entrepreneurship and competitiveness and an improved functioning of the supply chain
- maintenance of the peri-urban and rural areas' added value, with a stronger societal role for agriculture
- investments in social and economic infrastructure, peri-urban and rural vitality, mobility and social cohesion
- with attention for ecology, biodiversity, water management, energy, ...

To address these challenges, the rural development policy must set **both economical as environmental goals**. Combined with the **self-empowerment of the peri-urban and rural areas** the rural development policy can then provide a social vital European countryside where food production can be combined with nature.

Therefore, the goals are:

- improving the sustainability of an economic vital agriculture with attention for innovation, efficiency and diversification of the agricultural sector, enabling them and other rural entrepreneurs to respond to current and future societal demands
- supporting the maintenance of landscape, nature and cultural historical values – also outside of the protected nature areas
- improving the “self empowerment” of the peri-urban and rural inhabitants by approaching the area-based integrated dynamics

All these goals have to be addressed without raising the costs of maintenance or implementation. The Member States are responsible to address the challenges present in their region, but have the flexibility to focus on all or some of the common goals.

These goals can be reached by the **integrated approach** that characterizes the horizontal policy of rural development, with a maximal fine-tuning with other European policy areas and procedures. However, the Flemish rural stakeholders do not share a common vision of the implementation of the rural development policy:

- a first group of stakeholders continues to see the rural development policy as one of the two pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy
- a second group shares this opinion but wants to strengthen the rural development policy towards a general policy for peri-urban and rural areas, where all policy areas and funds addressing the vitality and quality of these peri-urban and rural areas are integrated under the umbrella of the Common Agricultural Policy.

2. Efficient implementation of the future rural development policy.

To reach these goals the Flemish stakeholders propose an **area-based implementation** of the rural development policy, where each Member State or region can **prioritize** their own needs and where there is

room for **cooperation and pilot and experimental projects** (also in the mainstream programme). The instruments (and administration) have to be kept simple and **flexible**, without the setting of minimal/maximal expenditures per Axis.

As for the **toolkit** of measures in the current rural development policy, we propose some supplementary measures, addressing economic, environmental as well as society induced challenges:

- possibility of water and energy audits for the agricultural sector
- possibility of crisis management for the agricultural sector
- addressing the agri-environmental issues by replenishing the A.E.M. with a gradual system of remuneration¹ (for the public services provided by them) and alternative A.E.M. for ecosystem services and cooperation of farmers and/or other rural entrepreneurs
- addressing peri-urban issues in all Axis of the RDP
- possibility of the remuneration of climate friendly initiatives in Axis 3/4

As for the **LEADER**-methodology, the Flemish stakeholders stress the added value of the LEADER-methodology but they do not share a common view whether this has to stay a compulsory approach.

Concerning **monitoring and evaluation**, the Flemish stakeholders stress the need for a simplification of the administrative rules and methods of evaluation – enabling comparison between Member States. As for the indicators, they need more emphasis on the evaluation of the impact than on the quantitative results. The added value of the projects, on a short and on a long term, needs to be monitored. Therefore, more qualitative methods of evaluation need to be developed. Measures or projects which have a scientific proven outcome, should therefore not be monitored on a detailed level.

3. Management of the future rural development policy.

The Flemish stakeholders have different opinions on the national implementation and division of responsibilities of the rural development policy. The rural networks already proved their worth in the current RDP, but the independency of these networks must be kept as high as possible.

The management of the future rural development policy can be improved by

- an unambiguous regulation that is coherent with the regulation of first Pillar of the CAP and with other European policy regulations
- shortening the terms of procedures for adjusting the national/regional programmes
- the simplification of administration for all levels
- allowing advanced money expenses.

¹ In the current RDP the remuneration for A.E.M. only covers the costs made and income lost. To concretise the principle of “public money for public services”, we suggest a gradual system for remuneration, where the first step can be compared to the nowadays system. The second step should provide a premium for the efforts made but this remuneration is not linked to results (since these can only be seen on a long term and/or the A.E.M. is not directly relevant for the agricultural business). The last step provides the farmer with the remunerations of the steps 1 and 2, augmented with a bonus for obtaining the predetermined results. In this way agricultural entrepreneurs can be stimulated to obtain environmental or nature goals and the gradual system also stimulates the implementation of measures that create an added value when implemented on an area-based scheme.