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Networking: The Leader experience

This study was carried out by Dorothee Duguet,
expert for the Leader+ Observatory *Contact Point*

Leader+ Observatory *Contact Point*
81, rue du Marteau
1000 Bruxelles/Belgium
Tel : +32 2 235 20 20
E-mail : contact.point@leaderplus.org
<http://ec.europa.eu/leaderplus>

Leader and rural development networking is an issue that is regularly raised by the different actors of the Community Initiative. Current Leader+ National Networking Units and Managing authorities in the EU 15, as well as those in the new Member States, would like to learn about network organisation and experiences, and to know what is done elsewhere, how to improve what they are doing at present, and also how to prepare for the future. To date, no complete analysis has been carried out on this theme which is both essential within Leader and central for tomorrow's rural development.

The Leader+ Observatory Contact Point has launched a study on the theme '**Networking in Leader**' in order to: enhance the understanding of how "networking" has been implemented in the Member States (decision process, implementation, analysis of strengths and weaknesses, etc.): to assist decision makers and technical structures in the implementation of the networking units during the final phases of the Leader initiative until end of 2008; and also within the rural development network. The initiative for this study has been taken under the guidance of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development.

The current document is the final report of this study. It presents the method used, the surveys carried out, and their results in terms of experiences undertaken and lessons learnt. It is meant to be both an **analysis** about Leader networking as a whole, and a **methodological guide** showing: the different ways that Leader networking has been developed: some of the difficulties encountered and solutions found: some 'hints' that can assist at the different stages of definition: and the implementation and development of networking units at European, national or sub-national levels.

This report is organised in several complementary parts tackling the major issues around the theme:

- what is networking: towards a common definition of the word itself?
- how have the networking units been implemented under the Leader programme (decision making process, selection, strategy, structures, method used, resources...)?
- which tools have been used and developed within Leader networking?
- main lessons learnt from Leader networking;
- networking implementation evaluation processes.

Each one of these parts is initially based on the Leader experience (Leader I, II and +). A step back is then taken to analyse what has been done (and how) and gives some interesting comments from the person contacted, including details on the pitfalls to avoid and the 'keys' to make the networking process a success.

It is hoped that this report brings elements, ideas and support for the definition and implementation of a rural development networking procedure.

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Methodology behind this document

The theme of networking, moreover of Leader and rural development networking, is very broad and also very complex. It involves a wide variety of people who represent the diversity of Leader actors (representatives of the Commission, the national and regional administrations, the NNU¹, the LAGs and their associations etc.) and, more broadly, people active in rural development (local, regional, national and European individuals, structures and networks).

An informal meeting held in January 2006 between representatives of the managing authorities and national network units in the EU 25 led to the conclusion that, even if most people had a clear idea of what networking represented in their own country and how it had been implemented during the Leader programmes, they did not know much about what was going on in the other Member States. There was a general eagerness to learn more about the way networking had been developed elsewhere, the tools used, the methods applied etc., in order to enhance cross experience and to allow for the transfer of good practice.

In order to clearly define which issue this document should trigger in more detail, and which answers and technical aspects ought to be described precisely, it has been decided to proceed in two complementary steps.

The first step has consisted in the sending out of a very general questionnaire asking 'easy to identify' Leader people throughout the EU 25 about which networking issues they were willing to exchange on and/or to learn more about. This first general questionnaire was constructed around the following questions:

- *which issues should a document on Leader networking definitely address?*
- *when you think about Leader networking, which words first come to your mind?*
- *which points of Leader networking would you like to learn more about?*
- *do you have any questions regarding networking in the future?*
- *any other idea or comment?*

People were also invited to give contact details of other people to contact on the theme of Leader networking. Information was sought from: experienced Leader groups (some having been part of Leader I, II and +); rural areas interested in the Leader approach (especially in New Member States not having implemented Leader yet); and from Leader associations (either 'formal' or 'informal'²) and on any other type of person, structure or network who might have something to say about the theme.

A total of 80 persons were contacted representing 54 structures in EU 15 and in the new Member States. Answers were received from 14 structures (nearly 26%) representing 11 of the 25 Member States (44%). This response rate can be considered as fairly satisfactory since Step 1 was carried out in April and beginning of May 2006, at a time of year where workload is very important (preparation of many activities to be implemented before the summer break). Moreover, it was more relevant to have people answer the second and more complete questionnaire. The decision has thus been made to contact people once or a maximum twice during this first phase and to become more insistent during the second work phase. Details of where the answers came from can be read in the following table.

¹ NNU: National Networking Unit, the 'formal' Leader+ networking tool implemented at national level.

² Elements of discussion on the 'formal' and 'informal' aspects of Leader networking are given later in the document.

Level consulted	N° contacted	Number answers	% of answers
EU: ELARD	1 structure	0	0
EU 15	36 structures *	9 structures	25%
	15 Member States	6 Member States	40%
New Member States	17 structures **	5 structures	29%
	10 Member States	5 Member States	50%

* 43 structures have been contacted but for 7, mistakes in the address or technical problems meant that the person did not receive the information

** 20 structures have been contacted but for 3, mistakes in the address or technical problems meant that the person did not receive the information

The result of this first step showed that, either from EU 15 or from the new Member States, apart from technical questions on how to do things, many have similar concerns about Leader networking and the future rural development network.

Using the results of this first phase, and taking direct contact with some of the people interviewed, a second more complete set of questionnaires was developed. This was designed to stimulate the topic of networking in a very broad sense: including past and present and future Leader networking issues, to ones ranging from content and philosophy to very technical ones.

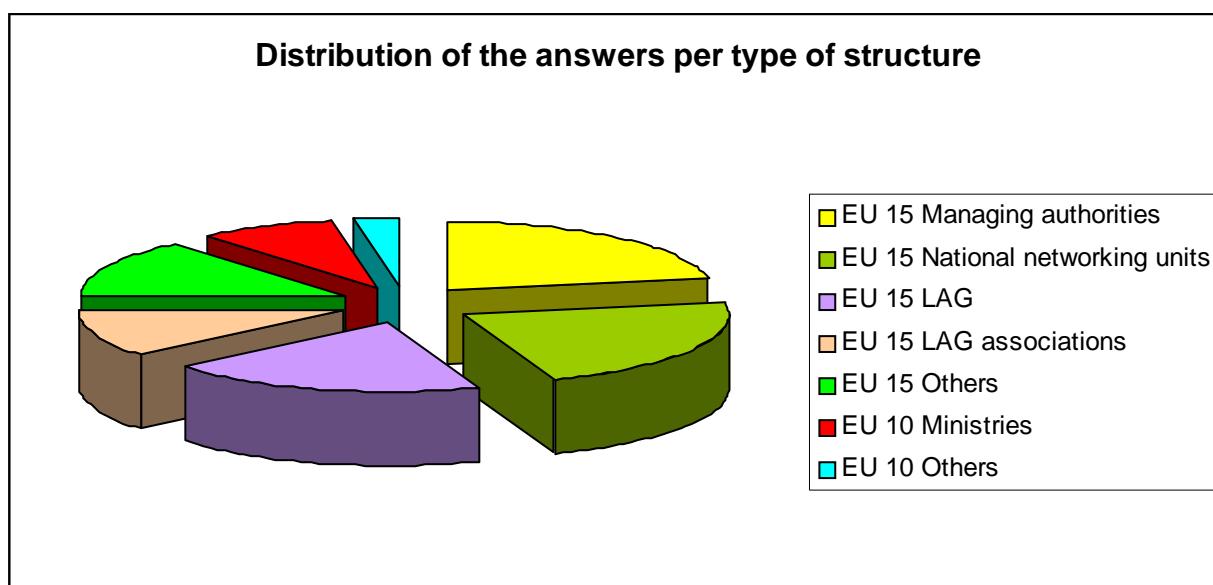
7 questionnaires, all adaptations of a base questionnaire, have been created in order to match the situation, knowledge and experience of the 7 types of people interviewed in the second phase of the work:

- Commission officials
- Managing authorities of EU 15
- National network Units of EU 15
- LAGs
- LAG associations
- Representatives from the new Member States (Ministries, networks outside Leader, LAGs, other structures in rural areas, NGOs...)
- Others (networks outside Leader, people who have been involved in Leader but are not anymore...)

Step 2 of the study:

At the end of June 2006, a total of 36 answers had been received from 36 different structures. This figure represents over 27% of the 132 structures which have been contacted within this second step which may be considered as a very reasonable result given the complexity of the theme, and the time that it takes to fill in the questionnaire, but also owing to the variety of people contacted (some being somehow far from the central issue). Details of the source of the answers can be found in the table below.

		Number of structures contacted	Number of answers	% of structures having answered
EU 15	Managing Authorities	21	8	38 %
	National Networking Units	18	8	44 %
	LAGs	35	7	20 %
	LAG associations	7	4	57 %
	Others	13	5	38 %
EU 10	Ministries	18	3	17 %
	Others	20	1	5 %



These results show that there is a very good coverage of the type of structures represented in the following document.

In terms of countries covered by the replies, the coverage is also quite good with 10 countries of EU 15 being represented and four in the new Member States.

In the answers to the interview, people have used the information and experience that was most accessible to them: the experienced gained through the Leader programme (from Leader I, even if often in a less visible manner, to Leader+).

It is in most cases on the basis of this very specific and precise experience that they have built their approach and their proposals concerning the future rural development network and its unit. This has to be kept in mind while reading of the document, in order to better understand some remarks, ideas or suggestions.

The document is organised in two main and complementary parts. The first part gives elements coming directly from the interview and some items of analysis done by taking a step back from the information given by people, and examining their ideas in context. This first part provides a lot of material concerning approaches and the way that things have been, could be or should be done. It covers the following issues:

- the definition of Leader and rural development networking;

- the decision making process concerning the networking units, their organisation, setting up and implementation;
- the resources and tools for an efficient networking unit;
- evaluation of the networking units;
- strengths, weaknesses and assessment of the activities of the Leader+ networking units;
- the rules to set for tomorrow's rural development network;
- further suggestions for a more efficient rural development network.

This first part is the part concerning core methodology.

The second part presents a short summary of facts and figures concerning the networking units implemented under Leader+ in some Member States. These case studies provide illustrations to the first part.

Part A - Leader and rural development networking, a broad and complex concept: towards a common definition of the word itself?

Networking is a word that arises very often in discussions, speeches or publications related to rural development. It is often assumed that the meaning of the word is obvious. Yet, it often covers realities that can vary a lot according to the country concerned, the situation, the level of intervention or the type of person using the word.

The meaning of the word itself (rather a notion than a 'simple' word) is not always the same, the goals and objectives that people see behind it are diverse and the types and possibilities of networking are numerous.

To begin an analysis of what Leader networking has been and what rural development networking could be, it seems important to set a common definition of the word itself, in the context of Leader and rural development, and of the aims and the different perspectives which it can cover. The very first question of the interview carried out, which also was one of the main questions, consisted of asking people about what they meant by the word.

Network vs. networking unit - a frequent confusion of the words used...

One first observation can be made concerning the answers people gave: what people call 'network' is often, in fact, the networking unit. This misuse of words can create confusion about the whole concept. Indeed, there has only been one global Leader network at the European level. This network enables a link, and is described through its objectives, as 'a system of developing and maintaining contact with people in the same field' (definition of network from the Oxford Dictionary).

The networking units at European, national and sub-national levels are the tools and the structures which contribute to the general goal of networking. The different levels of networking units all participate in one global and unique network.

In a network, people are brought together by a leading actor (in the case of 'informal' networks) or by a defined networking unit (in the case of 'formal' networks).

A.1/ Networking through features and objectives

More than a direct definition of the word, the interviews carried out showed that the concept of Leader and rural development networking is better defined by making reference to key words, features, objectives, tools, and people. Everybody contacted generally agreed on what the network covers and what its main roles are.

It is about 'building bridges between rural development actors', about 'exchanging information and meeting other people working on the same theme', about 'finding common answers and solutions to problems that were felt to be individual before'... It is not the word that is defined but what it can reach that defines it.

The features and objectives stated by the people contacted can be classified in the following categories:

- goals
- means
- challenges
- key aspects

A.1.1/ Defining a network through goals

A network, bringing people together to...

... exchange experience and knowledge

A network is about getting people together, connecting the different actors around one theme or issue, matching people who have different perspectives around similar issues, integrating people and organisations, promoting cohesion etc.

A need for organisation has been underlined, some having suggested that a network cannot be effective if just anybody comes in contact with anybody else, or any structure meets just any other structure. It has been stressed that initiatives, actions and contacts have to be thought, through and coordinated in a way that ensure not only flexibility but that also allows people from the same field of interest to get together.

... boost ideas, thinking, innovation and quality

People have also suggested that a network is a useful means to exchange information, experiences and knowledge, to share, and to learn from others etc. Bringing resources together also activates the transfer of know-how; gives resources to access information otherwise out of reach; and enables an exchange between people or structures on common projects. It also enhances the emergence of new ideas or approaches in the networking and rural development process and sometimes leads to the development of responses to particular issues, enabling the finding of common answers/solutions for what was seen as 'individual' problems.

Finally, it is also seen as a means to ensure the development of consistently high standards in project and group management.

... have people feel stronger because being part of a greater unit

Rural actors are located in areas which are often remote and which are often not open to the outside world or to other rural areas. Their feeling of isolation can lead to a loss of motivation since all the problems seem too complicated to find a direct and quick solution. Bringing people together is seen as necessary to break this feeling of isolation and to widen horizons to groups that do not operate in a 'vacuum'. Networking is considered to be a positive solution for rural actors since they have the feeling that they participate in something bigger, and that they are part of a greater unit entity. This kind of identification with a programme somehow creates a general atmosphere of openness which is very beneficial in terms of emancipation and the development of a local initiative.

... play the role of mediator between people with different approaches

A network can also act as an interpreter between different "worlds" or systems by putting together, for instance, people with different interests around the same issue. This tool builds links between people but also between sectors of activities, inside one main area (Leader yesterday and today, rural development tomorrow) but and also outside towards other sectors, with people and structures from other networks and from other 'worlds'. For instance, agriculture is closely linked with the development of rural areas but it has, except in some very scarce contexts, too few relations with rural development in the wider sense, and no information on the local development initiatives and financing possibilities. In terms of economy, only few countries and actors give an economic approach or goal to their rural development actions whereas it can guarantee their durability. This necessary division as a means to enhance innovation and cross fertilising is very often stated as needing to be improved in the future.

Ireland, LAG association

'I have heard the argument "that networks must be broader than Leader" I agree with that sentiment but that is not the same as saying "networks must be broader than LAGs" In Ireland LAGs are composed of many different sectors including environmental, social, agricultural as well as community and state and local authority sectors. LAGs deliver many programmes apart from Leader, thereby reflecting the wider Rural Development sphere. This model has served the Ministry and local areas very well and ought to be replicated in all EU countries.'

... find project partners and develop cooperation

Crossing themes and bringing together people, experiences, public and private sectors, and the different types of structures that are all involved in rural development provides the network with the means to identify partners to build common projects with.

The network is indeed seen as the provider of an organizational structure for cooperation between actors, structures and areas at the local level.

... inform and promote rural development actions

Even if not directly stated in the answers given to this part of the interview, networking is seen as a way to inform about rural development, about the actions carried out, and the central issues etc. Diffusion of the information is often stated as one of the essential tasks a network has to carry out as well as the coordination of rural development promotion efforts at local, regional, national and international levels. Some insisted on the fact that rural development promotion should be democratic, comprehensive, functional, efficient and permanent giving some essential characteristics the network and its operational units should present.

...promote transparency of practices and of results

Communication of the methods used and the results obtained is seen as one of the central tasks of the networks for transparency in action and financing.

A.1.2/ Defining a network through means and identifying central challenges for the network

a) the means of the network

The main means stated in order to have an efficient network are: a strong communication flow; the preparation of accurate and needed information; and the possibility to make it available in an easy to access way.

Many also see the network as a way to establish common means and resources in order to be more efficient.

The communication about good practices and experiences is also seen as a central aspect. Some having stressed that it is not only success stories that are to be put forward but that the network should also enable the sharing of failure since it is also a way to enhance knowledge and experience and to avoid repeating mistakes.

b) some central challenges of the network: harmony and support

In parallel to bringing together different worlds and people having different objectives, one challenge for the network is to harmonise the way that people do things and in the way that the policies implemented.

It is also seen as a tool to support local development strategies of the different actors.

"networking = providing organized and professional support for LAGs"

A.2/ Various types and levels of networks

Extract from the 'Commission Notice to the Member States of 14 April 2000 laying down guidelines for the Community Initiative for rural development (LEADER+) 2000/C 139/05'

22. Each Member State will propose the steps required in order to put in place the structure necessary for organizing the network.

The Commission recommends that the following activities be performed by the network organisation unit:

(...)

23. An .Observatory of rural areas. led by the Commission will be responsible for organising the network at Community level.

(...)

A.2.1/ The various types of Leader and rural development networking

The persons interviewed saw two main networking functions:

- the first one is one of **technical assistance**: a network ought to bring support to actors, members and target groups with their day to day tasks and thus have a direct bearing on local implementation

- the second one being more of a **lobbying function**; to represent the interests of its members and to ensure effective representation of rural interests; to play the role of interface between the actors and the decision makers at national and European level (advocacy role); to be a strong and influential partner; and be able to have a direct bearing on policy development...

These two functions are often mentioned and have often led to the creation of two different types of networking units, the official networking units and the 'informal' ones, each one having the obligation (official networking units) or the possibility ('informal' networking units) to have different levels of action (European, national, regional, local).

a) the officially recognised networking units

The Commission Notice to Member States on Leader+ foresees, in continuation of the system implemented under Leader II, two complementary levels of networking:

- at the national level with the implementation of national networking units,
- at the European level with the implementation of a European networking unit, the Observatory of rural areas usually referred to simply as the Observatory.

These two levels of networking are stated from the beginning in the European documents concerning the Leader II and Leader+ programmes. They are official, act under contract with the national and European authorities and are paid for the actions that they carry out. They are what we will call the '**formal networks**'.

Their tasks are mainly ones of technical assistance and are defined by the decision makers at national or European level. The details on the decision making process as well as on their tasks will be given later in this document (see part B).

For the future, the same type of formal networks is foreseen with the same type of tasks to be implemented with the major challenge being the diversity of the people involved in the rural development network.

b) the 'informal' networking units

In parallel to these networks designed 'top-down', some LAGs came together, quite early in the course of the Leader programme, to provide the answers to their own needs. This led to the creation of 'bottom up' networks, principally organised as associations, and often improperly called '**informal networks**'³. These informal networks were very active under the Leader II programme in bringing direct assistance to LAGs on many issues and providing the link between individual LAGs and the regional and national administrations. They have, in some cases, played an important lobbying role for the LAGs and rural actors. These informal networks have formed a structured European association called ELARD which is today under the Presidency of the Irish Leader association of LAGs.

The activities of these informal networks, already decreasing at the end of Leader II (see the Ex-post evaluation of the Community Initiative Leader II), are for most of the Member States even less important under Leader+, although there is a space for them (as in Spain, Greece and Ireland) in supporting the LAGs on day to day issues, in preparing the future or in organising dialogue with national and European levels. This is partly explained by the fact that the informal networks most active under Leader II have been chosen or participate in the Leader+ formal networks. Today, communication with representatives of the LAG associations is quite difficult, even if some (as in Greece) receive Leader funds for their activities.

Within the framework of this study, it has been very difficult to have people express their view on something else other than the official Leader networking. The answers given tend to exclude any elements on LAG associations (maybe because they are rather dormant now). Further to this, the people interviewed did not seem to be able to take a step back from the Leader context and from the Leader usual sphere of people. This perhaps shows that, despite the will of the Commission to involve, within the Leader+ programme, all rural areas either beneficiaries of Leader or not (point 20 of the Leader+ Notice to Member States), only Leader actors have joined the network.

Yet, some of the people interviewed put forward the very central role that these informal networks are to play:

Slovenian Rural Development Network: '(... a network should be a...) strong and influential partner, ensuring effective representation of rural interests in relation to the state implementation of Leader programme and rural development in general (advocacy role, lobbying role, social partner policy making, etc.)'.

Ireland, National networking unit: 'a network should create a consistent lobbying voice'

The Irish LAG association even states that the only network which has existed under Leader was the association of LAGs, the official networking units being only technical support units and not real networks.

c) technical assistance and lobbying, two complementary functions

The general feeling is that the functions of technical assistance and lobby are both necessary and ought to be complementary with a very clear distribution of the roles in order to ensure a global cohesion and harmony of the actions undertaken.

³ Improperly since they have an official status: all of them are organised in associations (non profit making organisations)

In France, the 'Grand Est' sub-national network stresses that networking is useful only if it is political (lobby) as well as technical (technical assistance) underlining the necessary complementarities between the official national networking unit and the other networks existing at national and sub-national levels.

Some see no major pitfall for these two functions being ensured by one unique structure:

Representatives from the Commission have a similar opinion on this issue:

'(... There is a...) need to distinguish between the nature and roles of European/national network structures (which receive EU financial support to carry out certain technical functions) and bodies whose role is effectively to lobby on behalf of rural areas/promote a 'rural voice' either at national or European/international level (e.g. associations of LAGs, ELARD, PREPARE in new MS..). Both are legitimate and have valuable roles to play, but to date EU has offered financial support under Leader only for 1st category. It may be that the two functions can be carried out within a single organisation but there needs to be a clear distinction of tasks.'

Others insist on the fact that these two functions ought to be carried out by two separate structures in order to guarantee both efficiency and neutrality, especially of the 'lobbying' structure. In this second case, it is stressed that a good coordination is essential, especially on issues where there is a possible overlap:

Ireland, LAG association: The real potential for the European "observatory" is to work in partnership with the European Network ELARD. A fantastic meeting of the minds of the academic expertise coupled with the zeal of those involved deeply at ground level across the member-states could produce gigantic leaps forward in Governance, citizenship, building of Social Capital, local economic development and employment opportunities.

Tomorrow, these two functions will still exist and the question remains on how to best have them represented and in establishing the middle-ground between the two views, especially in a context of many more actors and types of structures involved.

d) the more discrete network of administrations

In some Member States, Leader has been or is managed not at the national but at the regional level, as in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, UK, France (under Leader II) and Spain. These regional managing authorities are in fact quite independent from each other. Yet, in some bigger countries, mechanisms are in place which allow the various managing authorities to meet and talk about the implementation of the programme in their region. These meetings, which normally take place on an annual basis, have often had a rather administrative approach and have been poorly attended by the regional managing authorities. Consequently, the national networks of these regional managing authorities can therefore generally be considered as not successful. Yet, many answers received through the questionnaire stress the importance of a coherent approach by the managing authorities (at European level). If this coherence is to be achieved at a higher level, then it certainly needs firstly to be worked on at the national level. Some Member States who have a regional system of implementation have interestingly tried a system where there are nationally

defined general guidelines. In parallel with this, it is also necessary to organise regular (at least twice yearly) meetings for representatives of the regional managing authorities, in order that they: learn about the experiences of their colleagues; exchange ideas about their approach to projects; and perhaps adapt their way of working, in order to promote a coherent implementation of the particular programme or axis.

Further to this national organisation, under Leader+, another type of informal network that has appeared, in a more discrete manner is the informal network of Managing authorities at the European level. The creation of this informal network was motivated by the initial feeling (before the implementation of the *Contact Point*) that the Leader programme was just the parallel implementation of 15 national programmes with no general coherence or common European vision on how to do things (i.e. in terms of procedures and project selection criteria, notably transnational cooperation projects). This informal network gathered twice a year for meetings which were first quite informal and then organised from December 2002 by the Commission through a wider European steering committee. There was also regular mail contact between the different participants.

This third network led to some slight changes and adaptations of some national rules to better match the goals set by most managing authorities. It also helped smooth the procedures related notably to transnational cooperation projects, especially in reducing delays in getting approval.

In the Member States of EU 15 (and even more so for the new Member States) there is a request that this 'networks of administration' is maintained and reinforced for the future. This to be done in an efficient and (if possible) informal way, and, with resources made available (notably financial) in order to pay for travel and accommodation, and with a European coordination.

3 major types of Leader networks to be continued tomorrow?

- . the official networking units --> technical support*
- . the 'informal' networking structures --> political issues and lobby function*
- . network of administrations --> management and direct support on limited subjects*

A.2.1/ The various types of Leader official networking

The Leader+ Notice to Member States gives the main guidelines of what Action 3 of Leader+ is to cover and states that it is for the Member States to propose, in their national programmes, the organisation pattern that they wish to implement as well as the roles and features of the networking unit. This Notice to Member States was wide enough to lead to different approaches that can be divided into two main groups, some Member States having jumped from one to the other during the course of Leader+.

a) countries with a national formal network only

In the Leader+ Notice to Member States, networking was foreseen as being implemented by a structure which many understood as unique and national only ('**Point 22: Each Member State will propose the steps required in order to put in place the structure necessary for organising the network**'). In these countries, a national network has been set up with the objective of working for all the LAGs and Leader actors in the country concerned.

This system has been efficient over a limited number of tasks in countries with a low number of LAGs which is quite logical given the fact that:

- these countries are of rather small size;
- that the limited number of LAGs makes personal contacts easy;
- that each event can involve representatives from nearly all LAGs.

This type of national network can be described as a small but dense mesh where circulation of information is easy and exchange frequent.

Examples:

- Luxembourg with 4 LAGs
- Denmark with 12 LAGs

Some bigger countries have also chosen to implement a unique national network. A greater number of LAGs, greater distance between them, more difficult personal relations etc., has made it necessary to develop a more complete (and complex) networking device in order to match each LAG's needs and to reach out to every rural actor concerned. This mechanism includes, for instance, some events on carefully identified thematic issues in order to lead to a systematic cross-participation of LAGs.

Strengths of a unique formal national network:

- *very good coordination of the work carried out*
- *same high level of information, service and quality delivered to every LAG in the country*
- *same criteria used to analyse and select actions that should be put forward (i.e. best practices)*
- *economy of scale (if duplication of an event needed to touch a greater number, easy to do)*
- *a greater number of LAGs that have a chance to meet, exchange and build common projects*
- *a wider platform that it easier to open to non-Leader actors (research institutes, other national networks...)*

Difficulties which may occur with a unique formal national network:

- *sometimes too distant from the LAGs and the issues they are faced with;*
- *when high number of LAGs, not enough time / human resource to assist them individually and difficult to bring tailored answers to the individual needs that they have;*
- *risk that the elements brought by the network stay to theoretic when LAGs ask for more and more tangible and technical elements.*

b) countries with different levels of formal networking

Under Leader II, some regional networks have been created (in most cases by LAGs) to be a regional platform for exchange of experience and know-how, to liaise with the administrations in charge of the management of the programme and to deliver technical assistance on some specific themes (i.e.: for local management, on evaluation issues, to assist the building of cooperation projects). This level of proximity has received positive comments from many LAGs.

Some Member States have used this experience to develop under Leader+, either from the very beginning (as in France) or later on in the programme (as in the United Kingdom), infra-national network units working in parallel to a national network unit. These infra-regional networking units are either regional (UK) or cover several regions (France: there are 5 inter-regional networks to cover 20 regions concerned by Leader). They can, as for the national level, be set up according to a call for proposals. They can also be based, like in France on a partnership between the Managing Authority and local structures (NGO's in some cases, regional independent administrations or private companies in other cases), this partnership being both technical and financial (Leader and national funding covers only part of the budget of the inter-regional networks who have to participate financially in the actions that they are willing to implement.

Belgium, part of the small countries of Europe, is a specific case concerning Leader+ networking. Since rural development and Leader are regional matters, both the Flemish and Walloon region wanted to establish a regional network unit, which was probably the best way of working,

considering the typical situation in Belgium. As the Commission wanted only one contact point for each Member State, a national agreement was reached which decided that the Walloon network would also be the national referent and would exchange information towards and with Flanders.

The national organization comprising both national and regional networking units enables, especially in bigger countries, LAGs to feel that they have someone close at hand to help them in their day to day work and to assist them on specific issues (thematic or methodological).

Yet, it means a greater organisation in terms of:

- definition of the tasks to be carried out by the different levels: each one should have its clear fields of intervention to avoid duplication of the work and for LAGs to know exactly where to find the service or information that is needed;
- coordination of the activities of the different levels: national networks units often had to ensure, either formally or informally, this coordination.

Each infra-regional network is able to implement actions directly related to the area's specificities, yet, some basic services are needed by all LAGs and should, for economic reasons at least, be financed nationally. An interesting solution to this last point has been to propose, after a national level organised on one theme, infra-national seminars on the same theme which use the material and lessons learnt from the first seminar and make them accessible to LAGs in a more tangible way (cascade seminars).

Strengths of a national system which has different levels:

- *closeness to the LAGs and easier personal contacts between LAGs and infra-national networking unit*
- *ability to organise actions (events or publications) on issues specific to the area concerned*
- *closer human resource which makes direct technical assistance easier*
- *possibility for the infra-national levels to bridge between LAGs and their administrations*

Difficulties which may occur with a national system which has different levels:

- *coordination between the levels*
- *quality of information and service differs from one network to the other*
- *risk of using different criteria for the selection of actions that should be put forward*
- *giving all LAGs the minimum set of basic necessary information*
- *manage at an infra-national level, to open-up to non-Leader actors*

c) necessity for both horizontal and vertical networking contacts

The presence of different levels of networking unit described above for the official structures can also be observed for the informal structures. Further to national associations of LAGs, a European association, ELARD, exists.

This implies the necessity for a very good coordination not only between the different types of levels, as already mentioned above, but also between the different levels of each type of network.

For the global Leader or rural development network, it is indeed necessary that both horizontal and vertical contacts function in the best possible way.

A.3/ Some proposals for tomorrow in terms of roles and functions of the rural development network

The people interviewed were asked what objective they saw for the period 2007-2013 for:

- a rural development network
- the rural development networking units foreseen at the different levels.

The key elements of these answers are given below:

A.3.1/ The roles and functions foreseen for rural development networking

UK, Leader+ Managing Authority for England:

'The global objectives of rural development networking are:

- the sharing of experience, best practise, knowledge and skills.
- evaluation and reflection around issues involving those who are concerned with rural development policies and programmes.
- a prospective role
- innovation and creativity
- the facilitating of rural development promotion and coordinating the development efforts at different levels '

The roles of tomorrow's rural development network are somehow similar to the ones experienced over the period 2000-2006 and detailed above:

- bring people together,
- inform,
- exchange of experience and know-how,
- COOPERATION is put forward as one of the most important tangible objectives of the network

Some representatives of EU 15 and also from the New Member States also stress the importance of networking as a means to contribute to the consistency of comprehensive rural development policies, as a tool to promote democracy and transparency.

Euromontana:

'The Rural Development Network will have to answer 3 main objectives which are:

- 1/ communicate on rural development
- 2/ identify successful practices that can be transferred to other areas
- 3/ exchange on these actions and way of proceeding'

In parallel with these concrete working objectives, a component is outlined which will somehow be new in the period 2007-2013 and which concerns a much wider public. This is seen as raising new challenges in terms, for instance, of a cohesive perspective, of strengthening national knowledge, improving regional performance, and the overall efficiency of European intervention.

French Ministry for Agriculture:

'Networking in the new programming period should enable to identify the actors of rural development (all the actors concerned by the measures of the EARDF), to capitalize and promote good practices in the fields of rural development. This networking could also be an occasion to enhance cross-knowledge and common work and projects common to actors and partners. This would enable, in the longer term, to ensure the coherence of the actions carried out

leading to an optimizing of the use of European funding for rural development.'

A.3.2/ The roles and functions foreseen for a European Rural development networking unit

Coordination of the activities of the sub-European networking unit is stated as being the very central role of this European level structure. It is seen as the focal point for putting structures in contact (UK, Leader Managing Authority for England).

As underlined above by the French Ministry for Agriculture, the European networking unit should, through this coordination, guarantee **coherence** in the actions carried out by itself and by the national and sub-national networking units.

Training, development of actors and knowledge support are considered as points to be further worked on at European level tomorrow.

Finally, the European networking unit is seen as the central point for the development of **transnational cooperation** projects tomorrow. A complete support on this theme is required by many, through communication about the added value of cooperation, the diffusion of methods to build and implement projects, support for the identification of potential partners etc.

Austrian Leader+ networking unit:

'The roles foreseen for a European rural development networking unit:

- 1) To develop innovative offers for networking, cooperation and exchange of experience for each of the 4 axes of the rural development plan (on European level),
- 2) To develop appropriate interfaces for networking and cooperation between the relevant organisations and experts of the 4 axes (European level and national authorities in charge of the 4 axes),
- 3) To support the further education of relevant stakeholders of each of the 4 axes by appropriate training measures (European level and national authorities in charge of the 4 axes),
- 4) To advance the networking offers and process of LAGs and other development organisations in rural areas'

A.3.3/ The roles and functions foreseen for the national Rural development networking units

The networking units at national level are seen as the first ports of call for all organisations involved in rural development. They should be able to:

- provide direct support to structures (i.e. LAGs) and actors notably at the beginning of the programme;
- enable the strengthening of knowledge and the qualifying of actors to strengthen local and regional capacity to act;
- develop an exchange of ideas.

Above all, they are seen as having to be able to take up in a tangible and efficient manner the direct challenge of a wide rural development network, notably, in many countries, of integrating agriculture.

A.3.4/ Analysis on the answers given on the roles that should be the ones of networking tomorrow

In a general manner, it is very difficult for the people contacted to take a step back from the situation they have been faced with under the 2000-2006 period (and more specifically under the Leader+ programme) and to imagine what the future could be, notably on what support the rural development networking units of tomorrow could bring to structures other than LAGs. The

answers and ideas given do not reflect the building of a new approach but is based on an opening up of what exists under Leader+ in terms of objectives, target groups, roles and functions.

The rural development policy in the next programming period merges the 'classical' types of European intervention (i.e.: in the field of agriculture) and more innovative approaches like Leader. Many people interviewed have stressed the challenge that represents the evolution in the type of people concerned by EARDF and the possibly very different (and sometimes perhaps contradictory) expectations have been underlined as having to be dealt with. The more central challenge might be, further to just the type of people, how to ensure the continuity of the Leader approach and its mainstreaming. Indeed, Leader will move from an individual and well defined programme to a rather small part of something much wider. The rural development networks will have to take this issue into account, and to put energy in the safeguarding of Leader, even when pressures might be more important on other issues, financially more important.

Rural development networking has very high ambitions in terms of exchange and contacts for the following tasks:

- technical support;
- rural development promotion;
- coordination of rural development efforts around a common culture of rural development strategy;
- renew national ways of acting with a European added value;
- strengthen rural European identity.

Slovenian rural development network

'The roles of rural development networking are the following:

- .building partnership for rural Europe and its comprehensive development
- .bringing comprehensive rural development in the heart of political agenda at the EU and national levels
- .providing a floor for continuous debate about EU and national rural development policies
- .facilitating consensus on comprehensive rural development policy and measures
- .providing exchange of experience, knowledge, research, practices at the EU level
- .providing conditions for learning from each other
- .developing joint activities
- .influencing policy-processes important for comprehensive rural development (different sectoral policies)'

The European networking unit seen as the central coordinator of the future network, and the central 'focal point' could, further to the introduction of coherence between all networking actions undertaken at the different levels (EU, national and sub-national), lead to the promotion of a **holistic and coherent** vision of European rural development.

The European networking unit should be able to bring support and technical assistance as for Leader under the previous programming periods:

- *ensure general animation;*
- *support national networking units;*
- *help national networking units on matters beyond national level;*
- *identify best practices and bring support for their transfer and/or development;*

- *facilitate exchange between people, structures and networks at other levels by acting as a 'network of the networks' and playing the role of interface, of being the link between the Member States and the different actors*
- *promote transnational cooperation: exchange visits, expert advice;*
- *be watchful that the programmes progress right*

Further to these core tasks, a deeper focus should be given on some specific issues.

For instance, the rural development network at European level could coordinate research around programmes around issues linked to rural development (with the participation of research institutes etc..) which could lead to training actors on these issues, producing more content than under Leader+ (content which could be presented either in the form of studies or analysis) or making proposals for developing the programme to a steering committee

Slovenian Ministry for Agriculture

'It is necessary to develop a Europe-wide programme of the analytic tools involving collaboration of Member States. These larger collaborative projects can be a very cost effective means for Member States to participate in focused projects which will deliver greater benefits to their national programmes that otherwise may not have the financial resources to undertake projects that meet their objectives.'

The European networking unit could also reinforce European communication and a coherent European approach of rural development inside the EU boundaries and further. It should finally, as one of its central roles, reinforce cooperation between rural actors and rural areas for the development of common projects and actions.

The national networking units ought to play, at national level, a role similar to the one of the European networking unit at an international level:

- *organise all national initiatives related to rural development;*
- *develop training programmes and capacity building methods for national actors;*
- *facilitate discussion and liaisons;*
- *facilitate the work of rural actors.*

The national rural development networking units should be the first port of call for all organisations involved in rural development. This means the need for a deep knowledge of the context, the organisations, the issues, and to be able to communicate widely and efficiently about rural development, and to ensure good promotion and to deliver direct technical assistance where needed, especially on the Leader axis.

Austrian Leader+ networking unit:

'The challenge of broader networking is an important strategic issue. Leader offers the opportunity to support the networking process of all organisations concerned with local and regional development (LA 21, Regional management - in charge of Structural Funds Programmes, nature and national parks, LAGs). To extend the networking process to all these organisations could bring a new quality for the rural and regional development process (better adjustment of activities and programmes, cooperation instead of competition). Furthermore this new kind of networking could support a better integration of the agriculture in

an integrated rural development process and close the gap between agricultural development and multisectoral development. By a better integration of agricultural organisations in the regional development process and more cooperation between agriculture and an integrated rural development, agricultural organisations and their target groups can benefit from new and innovative approaches which are more common in multisectoral and integrative acting and thinking organisations.'

Either clearly said or not, there is a general agreement for a prior need to define the common aims and objectives of the whole network, and for all networking units to 'look in the same direction'.

The network ought to integrate all 4 axis of rural development, this is a fact, but why not, as it has been done in some Member States under Leader+ or as suggested notably by the Slovenian Rural Development Network, imagine thematic 'sub-networks' including one on Leader.

Slovenian Rural Development Network:

'A networking unit is an organization with a highly professional staff which provides technical support to national rural development network. A separate Leader networking unit should be formed with the National rural development networking unit or as an independent organization, but which is also part of the National Rural Development Network, because LAGs and Leader networking requires special support.'

If this raises further questions in terms of coherence and of work common to all actors, it also increases the existing risk of creating a barrier between sectors which already have difficulties in meeting naturally. On the other hand, it could help to maintain the Leader characteristics and be the central point on which mainstreaming of the Leader approach is based, in order to diffuse information to other more specialized sectors of rural development.

The division of the global network is sometimes also proposed not by axis or sector but by theme with the development of a thematic approach on trans-sectoral issues:

Euromontana:

'Rural development cannot be treated as a homogeneous discipline, as there is great diversity between rural areas. To ensure that coordination does not remain purely administrative or general, we support the idea of setting up thematic networks which can then work with local groups, adopting a more practical approach.'

This agrees with the views of other people interviewed who also defend the idea that only thematic networks can be precise enough to be of direct interest to actors and act as a strong incentive for their participation around common issues. At the beginning of the programming period, thematic sub-networks could determine the global process and introduce in a progressive manner a way of working together. The thematic networks would then have to widen the range of issues being developed in order to avoid division and allow for a general exchange of information and experiences.

The issue of research, already mentioned in the roles the European networking unit ought to play, is again mentioned several times at a national level, notably by the Slovenian Ministry for Agriculture:

'Networking will facilitate the dissemination of research itself and research results to those researchers and policy makers who will test the approach to the next step of field trials. In this way it will make sure that European concepts get the best chance to be developed by national policy makers. National problems are not only local or regional. In the presence of the globalization the gaps of the societal problems in the rural areas call for Europe-wide coordination and implementation of social policy.'

A.3.5/ Suggestions on the role that the rural development networking units could play in terms of information on EAFRD and community actions in favour of rural development

When asked what the future networking units could bring in terms of information on EAFRD and community actions in favour of rural development, the following answers were given:

- the European network should make available information on what is done in the other countries which is not done at all today (French Ministry for Agriculture)
- the rural development networking units, should promote transparency and coherent interpretation of legal texts on EAFRD. Less bureaucratic Member States could be a model for more intensely bureaucratic states (German National Networking Unit)

Slovenian Rural Development Network:

Future networks at European and national levels should focus on:

- dissemination of information on EAFRD and community action in favour of rural development
 - organisation of public debate about EAFRD and community actions in favour of rural development
 - becoming a player in policy debates about rural development
- provide an effective channel for bottom-up approach in policy debates (providing possibility for expression of rural citizens and actors needs and interests), thus develop a two-ways information flow

A.4/ Target groups and people involved in Leader+ and rural development networks

A.4.1/ what has been done under the different generations of Leader programmes

a) key elements given in the answers to the interview

Very few non-Leader actors involved in the network...

Leader networks have concerned mainly (not to say exclusively) Leader actors throughout Europe: LAG staff and board members, national networking units, managing authorities (at national and, where relevant, rural levels). Local actors have also been involved in the activities of the network, especially in events organised at a more local level.

Hardly any non-Leader structures and/or organisations have been actively involved in Leader networking. This is especially true for Leader I and II, notably at national level. At the European level or under Leader+ for some national networking units, the recommendations from the Commission (Notice to Member States on Leader+ point 21, second paragraph) have been

followed, and have led to non-Leader representatives being regularly invited to events to talk about their experiences, know-how, and projects to the Leader public, enabling exchange and some cross-fertilization. These presentations have sometimes been completed by the involvement of these non-Leader rural development actors in thematic or strategic working groups. Despite this known fact, people interviewed individually mention these non-Leader people proving that the involvement of non-Leader people has remained rather rare from Leader I to Leader+ despite a slight progression.

Disparity of participation between actors...

The French, Irish as well as Welsh representatives interviewed both noted that there were different categories of LAG representatives participating in the activities of the network. Some are very active and are very keen in participating regularly to all the activities organised (events, publications, studies...). This part of 'actors very active in the network' covers about 40% of the LAGs in Ireland and one third in France, which is a relatively close percentage in the two countries. Other LAG representatives tend to participate very little to not at all in any kind of action undertaken by the networking units (either nationally or at a European level). These kinds of LAG representatives represent a minority of LAGs (a maximum of 10% both in France and Ireland). Between these two 'extremes', other LAGs are represented regularly, even if less often than the 'leading group'.

The Austrian Networking unit pushes the observation one step further saying that participation often varies greatly according to the service delivered by the networking unit. For instance in Austria, the following table gives details on which actions are the most popular and for which it is more difficult to have people be active:

Type of action carried out by the Austrian national networking unit	Percentage of LAGs represented by a representative
Information and advisory services	100%
Contributions to Magazine	70 %
Events	60 %
Publish information on website	55 %
Thematic Working groups	25 %

In countries others than Austria, participation from LAG representatives to the meetings and seminars is more regular because the return they get from these actions is more direct through face to face contact, discussions on experiences and good practices, identification of potential partners to build common projects with etc. In parallel, in such countries, the contribution to publications is more difficult since the direct return is not as obvious.

Basically, many of those interviewed stress that it is important that the network organises activities leading to a direct 'return on investment' of time and money to ensure a wide participation.

A French LAG: networking should stay something bringing support to LAGs and not a further burden for LAGs, except if sufficient resources are reserved at local level.

Both physical and distance participation...

Answers to the interview underline that participation is often both physical and through distance communication, except in Sweden where it is more one or the other, which can certainly be explained, at least partly, by the distance factor, by the experience people have in using new technology tools, even in rural areas, and by the fact that the rather low number of LAGs (12) means that Leader people have had a chance to meet several times since the beginning of the

Initiative and know each other. Elsewhere, physical contacts are made on a more regular basis either because they are easier (smaller countries like the Netherlands, Luxemburg for instance) or because they are felt as necessary by the local actors in order to build the trust needed for a good functioning of the network as well as for the development of common projects.

Voluntary participation to the network and its actions...

Many people interviewed insisted on the fact that a network, if it is to be efficient, can only be based on voluntary participation ('forced participation does not work'). On the other hand, others, even if globally agreeing with the above statement, regret the rather low participation of LAGs to some of the activities organised by the networking units and proposed a compulsory participation of the LAGs, sometimes even directly linked with the granting awarded to the LAG.

b) analysis of the elements given in the answers to the interview

Compulsory vs. voluntary participation...

Voluntary participation seems one key factor which leads to a successful network. Yet, the question is regularly raised on how to get people involved in the network and in the activities of the networking units, and how to enhance their participation. In Sweden, the participation is compulsory. In many other countries, the Axis 3 of Leader+, the axis related to networking activities, was defined and promoted as one major component of the programme but without any compulsory aspects (for the participation of LAG representatives or, even before that, in the prior planning of sufficient dedicated resources -time and money- to enable regular participation which would not put a strain on the sometimes limited management budget).

If a voluntary approach seems the most democratic one and enables to have around the table only motivated people who wish to get involved in the process, it also is limiting in terms of the level of representation and the richness of the exchanges.

A German LAG stresses that for all levels (... of networking...) the difficulty is to get everybody in the LAG to think positively about taking advantage of all networking issues. This person suggests that there is more guidance needed, for example that the Managing Authorities should explain what added value the network can bring, and how the different levels of people involved should participate, and asks the question if participation in the network should be compulsory.

The position of this LAG goes further to the basic question about whether participation to the network ought to be compulsory (which is seen as a rather positive possibility by some of the persons interviewed). It raises the question of the different visions that exist between representatives of the same LAG. Where some see the advantages of a regular participation to all activities (LAG technicians are often more inclined to participate) others are more doubtful about what this participation can bring (some managers and local decision makers). Since it is the technicians who have answered the questionnaire, making the participation to the network compulsory would enable them to participate despite the reluctance of their hierarchy. Even if this comes out of the results of this interview, it should not be extrapolated too quickly and be made a general conclusion.

A.4.2/ some ideas and suggestions on the target groups tomorrow's rural development networking should focus

The rather weak experience of Leader actors working together, either with themselves or with other rural actors, and the need to take on-board external ideas and experiences (mainly at **national** level) has been a reason for low participation of some of the 'older' LAGs. Indeed, they have translated this into a feeling of 'd'jà vu' which made them take a step back from the network

they thought could bring nothing new. It is therefore an issue to be looked at in detail for the future.

a) key elements given in the answers to the interview

The rural development regulation for 2007-2013 stresses that networks at European and national levels will be not only for Leader actors and beneficiaries, but should involve 'organisations and administrations involved or active in the field of rural development'.

This should therefore touch a wide variety of people at the different levels of networking. The following categories have been mentioned during the course of the interview:

At European level:

- all rural actors
- the national rural development network people
- New Member States as a priority group.

Slovenian Rural Development Network

For New Member States to be a target group of tomorrow's rural development networking, it is important at the beginning to offer special support to organizing those areas that are new or not well represented through already established organization, like LAGs in new Member States. Without special support to organized themselves and represent their needs, interests and views through their own organization, the Leader approach and self-organized local level will not be adequately represented at the national level.

- umbrella organisations (i.e. farmers, environment structures, industry)
- scientific / research networks
- all EU and national programmes or networks having a link with rural development

Austrian National networking unit

The target group of tomorrow's rural development networking should be:

- 1) Axis 1 - 3: Particularly intermediary organisations and public authorities who are in charge of the implementation of the 3 axes (European and national level),
- 2) Axis 4: LAGs and other relevant organisations (economy, consulting, research, development agencies),
- 3) Specific thematic working groups consisting of particularly innovative stakeholders who should act as a "development department" for rural development and as a pressure group for new approaches.,
- 4) Target groups benefit by exchange of experience and by specific qualification offers with focus on new and innovative approaches.

At the national level:

- all beneficiaries of EARDF and rural development actors (including of course the networks which already exist around rural development and agriculture issues);
- civil society;
- voluntary sector;
- public and private sectors and organisations in a balanced distribution;
- public sectors and organisations to create a link;
- interest groups.

At the local level:

Austrian National networking unit

Axes 1 - 3: Beneficiaries of axes 1 - 3 benefit indirectly from the exchange of experience and qualification measures targeted at intermediaries and public authorities because thus they can improve their know-how and services for the beneficiaries

Axis 4: Direct benefit for LAGs and other relevant organisations or stakeholders as main target group of the networking process

- all EAFRD beneficiaries
- village councils, local councils, regional steering committees
- associations and NGOs
- municipalities
- natural parks

b) analysis of the elements given in the answers to the interview

Difficulty to take a step back from the current and known situation...

As already seen in some previous parts of the current document, at the date when this study is written, there is not a very clear and definite idea of how things will be implemented and who they will involve. It has been difficult for people to take a step back from the organisation that has been implemented under Leader+ and to invent something else, and give concrete ideas on the situation that they thought was ideal. Many answers focus only on Leader and put forward the following target groups: LAGs and managing authorities, therefore not considering the possibility of including all actors involved in rural development.

Target group, members, users, different works which cover the same things in a network...

It is also interesting to note that, if many structures distinguish, in their organisation, their members, the users of their services (or customers when talking about companies), the target groups, their employees, then there is a very close link between all within a network. Members, users and target group are the same. Apart from the networking units which have employees and which are the 'tools', the facilitators to make it all work, one of the main characteristics of a network is that it can only work if its target public participates actively in the activities and builds them, to a certain extent. Networking is performed by the members (nodes) themselves with the help of a facilitator (the Network Unit).

A wide variety of people to be involved... and selected...

Even if the answers are somehow limited (because of the difficulty many had to take a step back from a situation that they are familiar with, as mentioned above), when asked who should/could participate in the future rural development networks, the opening of the network is evoked in a wide and comprehensive manner with different type of people and structures:

- rural development direct actors: LAGs, farmers organisations, environment organisations, industries
- other relevant organisations in rural areas: representation of the following sectors: economy, consulting, development agencies, rural movements, local parliaments, NGOs.

Euromontana:

It is necessary to select the actors according to different criteria, notably: their representativity, their

link with the local areas, their wide ranging needs from the network and generally their capacity to network.

Belgian national networking unit

The network of the future rural development plan will have to represent a wide and heterogeneous mix of actors: farmers' unions, associations and representatives of the forestry industry, the Natura 2000 network, environmental NGOs, scientific organisations, chambers of commerce and industry, LAGs, government agencies, etc.). Consequently, the general mechanism that drives this network must ideally be based on a partnership of professional organisations that are directly involved in the fields, sectors and themes addressed by the programme (agriculture, forestry, rural development, tourism). The mechanism established must allow scope to combine the various groups' approaches to reflection and organisation, given the wide range of areas of intervention covered by the programme.

The important participation of rural development institutions...

Managing authorities, ministries and other public structures are important actors in tomorrow's rural development network. Their active participation is essential for mutual enrichment, transparency of intervention and, certainly above all:

- coherence and complementarity in goals, objectives and projects;
- compatibility of procedures and administrative approaches.

A link EU 15 - EU 10 and even further...

Slovenian Rural Development Network

Participants to tomorrow's rural development network ought to be research organisations and the decision-makers at European and all other levels (to get informed, for consultation, to gather opinions on the elaboration of policy proposals, etc.)

Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie: involve more of the political sphere

A French LAG: more professional structures and more elected people

The close collaboration between EU 15 and EU 10 has often been put forward. Further to this, it is also the more systematic opening to third countries (notably developing countries and South America) that has been mentioned but no clear explanation on the advantages of such an opportunity has been given.

The challenge of managing a meeting between rural development and agriculture...

French Grand Est sub-national network

There is a role to play in bringing together agricultural (socio-professional) and rural (regional rural actors) development, which is essential not only to achieve the second part of the CAP, but also to achieve rural development and enable each of these aspects to find its rightful place. We must unite existing movements rather

than creating new movements, by inviting networks to establish new forums in which to meet.

Leave the doors open and progress step by step...

The major participants who it would be useful to involve in tomorrow's network are of general agreement. Yet, it is also stressed by many that, given today's rather low knowledge of how things will be tomorrow, there is the need for a flexible approach, leaving the 'doors open', and to always be able to involve new relevant spheres and actors.

Putting too much ambition on the rural development network from the beginning might lead to building a system too complex and difficult to implement. This might in turn lead to a failure or the implementation of a minimum set of activities with some participation but not real involvement by the actors.

Since people who are to be involved in the rural development network do not yet know how to work together, it seems preferable to start slowly, to have smaller groups meet around tangible issues on which people agree (for instance on thematic issues which concern them directly).

This could progressively create a habit of working together and the desire to address more sensitive issues.

Slovenian rural development network:

Rural development network should start with core organizations that are crucial for rural development and establishment of needed co-ordination and co-operation structures and mechanism. After putting in place basic structures and getting some experience with the functioning it will be able to broaden its membership. If starting very ambitiously it would possibly kill the idea, because the task of co-ordination will be too difficult.

A steering group and a platform for coordination and implementation...

The network, by the public that it involves, has 2 main missions implemented in parallel:

- a role of 'steering group': getting the right people together for a common definition of the strategies that are to be implemented within the framework of rural development
- a role of coordination and implementation: when the decisions are made on the main orientations that ought to be followed, the network should be able to implement the right tools to match the targets.

A.4.3/ Suggestions on specific issues regarding participation and target groups:

Austrian national networking unit:

Top-down network: The Leader network is a top-down network. It was not established by the LAGs. That means particularly at the beginning of the networking process the motivation of the majority of the LAGs to take part in networking activities is rather low and you have to spend a lot of time in convincing them to become active network partners

a) How to have LAGs and local actors participate more actively in the networks?

Find an advantage to participating in the network

Slovenian Ministry for Agriculture

It is necessary to create such conditions that participants of the networks will be convinced that a

rural development network is not only one of various administrative structures but a flexible and living organism which approaches efficiently rural development problems.

Develop a 'win-win' logic...

Euromontana:

The rural network will put in contact different networks with their own working logic. But, in order to reach its objectives, the rural network ought not only to 'gather around a table' these different networks but to make them go forward together. In order for this to happen, each member of the network has to find an advantage to get involved in this networking, with a "win-win" logic.

Have the managing authorities encourage participation...

Austrian national networking unit

We discussed the results of our self-evaluation with regional and national authorities. They promised us to encourage the "less-active networkers" in their region to be more active in networking.

Consider that the time of local actors is precious...

Time is a main issue for LAG representatives: the British national networking unit stresses that in this respect, finding the right format for publications is important. This can be applied to all the other tools: whatever the activity that the national networking unit (European, national or sub-national) is planning (events, publication, workshops, website...), the time that it will take for participation is important. The time spent in respect to the output is important too. The cost of regular participation is also an issue to be taken into account.

Be practical on simple issues...

Some very simple arrangements can motivate people to participate. For instance, some of the people interviewed have stressed that the place where the conferences are hosted is important simply because if it takes too long to go there and it is too complicated, potential participants will be reluctant to come. Thinking about the practical side and making the life of local actors easier can enhance the rate of participation in a significant way.

Better match the needs of the participants to the networks...

French Grand Est sub-national networking unit

When people do not participate, it is that we have not answered their needs. Good knowledge and proximity are the key words.

...How...

Matching the needs of the participants means that these needs are clearly identified and known. Several proposals came up in the answers: it can be achieved by building regular contacts by mail (Irish Leader+ Managing Authority), through consultation processes (UK, English Leader+ Managing Authority) or by building the network together with the actors that it will have to serve and in due time (French Grand Est sub-national networking unit: the sub-national networks ought to be defined and built at the same time as the European network. It is only in a second phase that the national network and the national networking unit should be defined in order to be a clear link.)

Communicate efficiently about what the networks can bring...

German national networking unit:

At a national level, the advantages of networking must be communicated and/or worked out, otherwise participation will be insufficient. Participation in the network can sometimes be seen as a dutiful chore, although networks are characterized by mutual advantage and not by hierarchical submission.

It must be clear for rural actors that participating in the network and the activities of the European, national or sub-national units will enable them to find direct solutions to problems they are faced with or to find new ideas to build new projects (locally or cooperation projects)

Slovenian Ministry for Agriculture:

Local actors could gradually cooperate more actively in the networks if they will become convinced about usefulness of their cooperation. This could be achieved most efficiently with some visible results of good practices.

Adapting the information to the different needs of the public...

German national networking unit

Building up network structures in time; identifying target groups and defining which degree of networking intensity for which target groups: for some, information will be enough (for several standard measures according to the EAFRD rules); for some, information and exchange are required, while for integrated measures (Leader) more thoroughgoing measures are necessary (above all on the national and sub-national levels, such as training sessions, methodological and theme events); organising counselling and coaching

...How...

A good website is put forward as being the major tool that can be developed for an efficient communication about what networking can bring to the different target groups (French and Irish Managing Authorities).

Good qualitative information is also needed (instead of less useful quantitative data) by making available information sheets, best practices... giving tangible reports about the results of the networking, the contacts made, etc. for a more direct access to knowledge.

An initial phase of education about the usefulness is seen as useful in some new Member States who have no experience of networking and where everything has to be proved.

Plan enough resources (time and money) for the participation to be possible and easier

Swedish Leader+ Managing Authority: If there is none for the local actor it is difficult to participate. French Grand Est sub-national networking unit: there is a need for prior planning of time needed to participate actively in the network.

b) Suggestions on how to involve non-Leader actors in the future rural development network

By going beyond Leader, though using the experience gained...

All agree that it is important not to present the rural development network as a 'simple' extension of today's Leader network and that the focus should be maintained on wider rural development issues (Irish Leader+ Managing Authority: 'Keep seminars/conferences general in nature'). The terms used could also be less typical to Leader (**French Grand Est sub-national networking unit: the Leader + jargon should be abandoned**).

Yet, the experience of Leader ought not to be forgotten. The French Ministry for Agriculture proposes to present Leader as a laboratory for experiences which can be useful to all rural actors.

By making clear what the added value for local actors is...

It has been outlined above that, for a better participation, it is necessary to clearly communicate how rural actors can benefit from networking. What is true in a general sense is even truer for non Leader actors and other actors not used to participating in a wider network.

UK, English Leader+ Managing Authority
Ensure that the focus is on wider rural development issues rather than Leader. Make clear what the benefits of networking are.

By identifying clear and concrete interfaces... and build on existing networks...

Given the complexity of the future rural development network, some suggest that each type of actor is given a clear indication about the interface (person, structure or institutions) which is following him (German national networking unit).

To build on the existing and recognised networks could also settle the new rural development network more easily by acquiring the participation of already experienced net workers (**French Grand Est sub-national networking unit**). The British national network units suggest involving non-Leader actors in a 'steering group' in order for them to participate from the beginning in the definition and working themes of the network.

By working in close link with the administrations following the non-Leader projects...

The Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie suggests bringing support to administrations by building dialogue with civil servants in charge of projects, training sessions etc., for a better knowledge about the possibility and the complementarity of the actions.

By starting up concrete (pilot) projects...

Networking can also be established through some tangible projects and actions with high visibility following the principle 'knowing by doing'.

c) Suggestions on how to manage a great number of participants to the future rural development networks (participants with different views, different expectations, different interests...)

By building a consensus on development goals...

The Slovenians have stressed both the importance of reaching a general consensus on rural development issues and on development goals for different types of rural areas. They suggest workshops and smaller working groups and thematic workshops and insist that the development of the network should be made in a progressive and flexible way (**Slovenian rural development network: 'not to start with a grand plan at the beginning'**)

By clearly defining the limits of what the network can bring...

If it is important for all actors who can potentially be involved to have a clear idea of what benefits they can gain from the network, it also has to be clear to all where the network ends and where the limits are to what it can bring. The UK, English Leader+ managing authorities proposes to establish clear terms of reference on this issue.

By working in sub-groups that regularly converge...

The **German national networking unit** stresses that, given the complexity of the rural development network, **'the entire network cannot and may not claim absolute status'**. It suggests to **'encourage specialised networks at a lower level than the general one and to organise regular events where the whole reality would be offered as an attraction in order to make the "spirit of rural networking in Europe" recognizable'**.

In quite a similar way, the **French Grand Est Sub-national networking unit** proposes to **imagine different places for networking with moments for convergence (based on existing networks representing all the target groups)**.

Part B - Definition of the outline of the networking units, their organisation, setting up and implementation

B.1/ Definition of the outlines and tasks of the networking units (decision making process)

B.1.1/ The specific case of the informal networks (LAG associations)

We have seen above that, early in the programme, some LAGs came together spontaneously to develop, in parallel to the official technical assistance structures defined in a top-down manner, some bottom-up groups for further exchange of experience, and also to play the role of pressure and lobby groups.

If these groups (LAG associations in all cases where they exist) have been quite active during Leader II where they represented many LAGs and were participating in the debate in many countries, their influence has declined at the end of the Leader II programme. Some now would like to be representative of a majority of LAGs (the number of LAGs being member is not as high as under the previous generations of the programme) or find a strong justification to their action. This fact is quite common in what concerns structures which have a 'political' (in the noble sense of the term) function. After having dealt with central issues that concerned most (not to say all) the LAGs, the current actions tend to cover concerns and support ideas of only part of the potential beneficiaries. This can lead to pressure and tensions internal to the association leading to a disengagement of some of the structures to be represented. .

If this has been observed clearly in some countries, some of the people interviewed in Member States where the LAG association is rather weak underlining that there is a space, and even the necessity, to have, further to an official structure providing support and technical assistance, an independent lobbying group that can work in close partnership with all structures and actors involved. Some representatives of Leader+ Managing Authorities stressed that either them or the national networking units had official tasks to fulfil and were under clear contracts. This put them in a position where it was difficult to say certain things or where they were not the most credible to bring forward some information. They regretted not to be able to work with a strong LAG association who would have been able to open up the discussions and propose new solutions.

In some Member States, the LAG associations have received some Leader financing to enable them to work (in France under one generation of the programme and in Greece under Leader+).

This makes it possible to me more active (by making easier the appointment of some staff) and could be considered more frequently tomorrow, keeping in mind that there is a risk that, being paid by the programme, the neutrality is not quite what it should ideally be.

B.1.2/ How have the official networks been established, from consultation to decision making process

Under Leader I...

The number of LAGs being rather low, there was no real need for 'official' networking units in many countries. Some groups did get in contact with each other, creating the 'informal' networks in some countries only, which came together slowly. A European networking unit was also established which played the major role in terms of building links, promoting the initiatives and informing about the experiences. These two types of networking units represented the first faltering steps of Leader networking.

Consultation processes: the informal networks which existed were in frequent and direct contact with the LAGs which enabled them to adapt their actions to the needs. In Ireland, the association of LAGs was early represented in the national monitoring committee enabling a very good circulation of the information from bottom to top.

Under Leader II...

Leader II was in a way the first generation where an official and complete networking device was developed with different levels (EU & national) and where, in parallel, the LAG associations were strengthened, and more and more structured and active.

The European Commission had defined main guidelines. These were used by decision makers (Ministries for agriculture in most cases) in the Member States as the basis to define in more detail the tangible working framework to be implemented for the national networking units.

Few countries have been exceptions to this organisational framework:

- in the Netherlands, after consultation with the 6 Leader II LAGs, it was decided that there would only be one informal networking unit;
- in the Lorraine region of France, a bottom-up initiative arose. LAGs asked a local structure (the 'Carrefour des Pays Lorrains') to organise a regional network with specific features complementary to the one developed by the national networking unit.

Consultation processes: different cases from no consultation to a complete process

In some Member States, the networking device and tasks of the networking units have been organised without any prior consultation of the target groups or participants to the network. This is the case for instance in Belgium. In Sweden also, there has been no prior consultation but the case slightly differs since the structures involved directly in the day to day work of the networking unit represent the target groups themselves. This is a sufficient (and to a certain extent more complete) compensation to the non consultation.

In other Member States the consultation process has been organised in an informal manner. In Austria, discussions have been carried out with rural development experts. In the Netherlands, LAGs have been directly involved in decision making process, having the possibility to express their needs in a complete manner.

Finally, some Member States have opted for formalised consultation processes through steering committees, like in Ireland and France.

The Leader II period can be described as a period enabling each actor and each structure involved to 'test' which is the best way to proceed (in terms of organisation, of who to involve, on consultation processes...).

Under Leader+...

Except in some countries (like France), the system chosen for the definition of the tasks to be ensured by the national networking unit(s) has been quite close to the one of Leader II in terms of decision making process.

Further to the national networking units, some Member States decided to test the implementation of sub-national networking units. This is the case for instance in the UK where some country desks, although not initially planned, have been set up during the course of the programme. In France, it is five complete inter-regional networks that have been developed.

The European networking unit was maintained and found its full development since the device was complete and smoother running.

The experience gained in the previous periods of the programme lead to conceiving globally, and at each level, a more elaborate and organised system which is both more efficient and more complex, notably in terms of management, of distribution of tasks...

Consultation processes: Monitoring committees or steering groups were set up in many countries to follow the work and development of the networking units. These working groups involve representatives of the target groups and participants. This enables an ongoing consultation (i.e. in Ireland, the United Kingdom or France). For this ongoing group consultation is sometimes completed by more direct contacts with LAGs (i.e. in Ireland and France), with Ministries and Leader+ managing authorities (i.e. in Germany and the Netherlands) or with experts (i.e. in Belgium) or between them.

Evolution in the consultation processes for the definition of the tasks of the networking units...

The consultation processes have moved from close to nothing under Leader I to sometimes elaborate systems for a wide consultation, not only before the launch of the work of the networking unit but also during its life. This enables evolutions in the work carried out and support to be made available to better match the needs of the target groups on the general approach, as well as on precise tasks. For instance, in the UK, a consultation group has an input on the content and the format of the events. In France and in the UK, evaluation questionnaires are regularly sent out to the target groups (after event, with publications...) to have their opinion on the activities and on any changes that would be appreciated.

Basically, the consultation processes have three aims other than 'just' trying to better match the needs:

- reach a consensus around the direction that the national programme is aiming at,
- involve the people at an early state to ensure their active participation and
- animate the network for each one to participate actively and thus avoid sleeping partners.

The selection procedures...

Leader II has been a first step on this concern. Some open calls for proposals have been launched (in Finland, Austria, Ireland, the UK, France for one part of the tasks) and some more direct selections have been made (in Belgium, the Netherlands, France for the other part of the tasks). Under this generation of the programme, the influence of the managing authorities was quite strong on the implementation of the programme, including the type of technical assistance to be delivered, especially when the selection had been made without any call for proposal or clear terms of reference detailing the global actions to be carried out.

Under Leader+, selection procedures are close to being always linked to the rules concerning public tendering and competition between private companies. Calls for proposals have been organised more generally and the terms of reference have been defined with more experience. The basic functions to be ensured are detailed in the call for proposal. The implementation of the networking units and a more precise definition of the tasks is in most cases made along the way

by concertation between the national networking unit, the Managing Authority and sometimes the LAGs or experts.

This way of proceeding gives the national networking unit a greater autonomy under Leader+ than in the previous period.

B.2/ Implementing the networking units

B.2.1/ How to define a networking strategy and how to set up a network?

When asked this question, the people interviewed have given answers going in the same direction:

- the main axis of the global strategy of the European and national networking units have to be defined in the calls for proposals issued by the decision makers. These main axes are seen as the basis to define more precise working plans (for instance annual) and allow for some developments to match the needs of the target groups.

- It is important that, whatever their level of intervention, the networking units become active and quickly visible. This has a double aim:

- for the decision-maker by implementing the first actions that have been agreed on;
- by the beneficiaries by making readily available some initial usable tools --> for credibility and to build an early partnership

Some examples of the first tasks that have been implemented:

In Austria: - a start-up conference,
- start-up workshops and Leader festival
- a consultation

In Germany: - all the requirements from the guidelines
- workshops at federal level

In France, Grand Est sub-regional networking unit: meetings with the LAGs to decide what to do, how to organise the work and what to start with

B.2.2/ The structure for the networking units

Different types of structures...

The networking units are supported by different types of structures throughout Europe depending on the organisation and also, mainly, on the choices made. The following structures are represented:

- private companies (at European level, in Ireland, the UK, Austria and the Netherlands)
- partly state-controlled structures (in Belgium under Leader II)
- NGO (in Finland, for the LAG associations and in Sweden where it is a specific case since the national networking unit involved several NGOs who represent a wide variety of public interests)
- cooperation public-private sector (in Belgium, Flanders under Leader+)

Further to the structure of the networking units, it should be noted that external expertise is used in most cases in order to complete the skills.

Representatives from the Commission

It is not the structure which is important but a clear definition of the role of the organisation and the decision maker (Commission at European level, Managing Authority at national or regional level).

Even if, as put forward by representatives from the Commission, the structure is not as important as a clear definition of the roles, some trends can be outlined which show that each choice has positive but also negative aspects.

Private structures are usually more flexible and reactive as well as more public orientated. On the other hand, their staff costs are rather expensive.

Public structures tend to have an extensive freedom of action regarding content, receive direct support from the Managing Authority and / or the Ministry during negotiations, and are able to build a direct synergy with other public research departments. On the other hand, they sometimes tend to be slower and heavier than other types of structures.

Consortiums of companies are able to provide a comprehensive know-how, stimulate new ideas for networking processes. On the other hand, this type of organisation often presents a time consuming management.

The interest when public and private are put together lie in the closer link it is possible to build between the technical function and the administrative ones. This leads to a better coherence and the ability of providing better support to the target public.

Continuity...

There is often a continuity of the structure appointed as national networking unit (in Sweden, Austria, Germany, France, and the UK). This continuity is interesting on several aspects: notably for the in-depth knowledge of the subject that has been developed with experience; and for the existing contacts with the LAGs, the other rural development networks and actors, the relevant experts, the managing authorities. Since these structures are now in place over several generations of the same programme, they are well known by the actors for whom it is easy to identify a valid representative for their questions.

On the other hand, this continuity raises some problems, notably:

- . the quality of the service depends on one structure only, which works following its own specific method. The service it delivers over a quite long period (several years in all the cases) depends both on the working method and on the will that the structure has to adapt in changing to the needs of the public. A monopoly situation could lead to a poorer quality in the service delivered. This has not been encountered within the Leader programme but must be kept in mind;
- . it contributes to putting forward another major actor which is not the official administrative or political structure. This implies a risk of making things unclear for the public (internal to the network or external);
- . an easy amalgam is possible between the structure appointed and the network itself (see comments from representatives of the Commission below). It is essential that there is visibility of the European intervention in order to have a better visibility of the programme. The mandates have to be defined clearly and well in advance, and the general objective of the activities of the organisations behind the networking unit, have to remain clear at all times.

Representatives from the Commission

The importance of clearly defining from the outset the role and relationship of the Commission and the organisation which runs the European network. This aspect is considered more important than the nature of the organisation which runs the network. Under Leader I and to a greater extent Leader II (where AEIDL were distributing funding on behalf of the Commission through technical assistance for co-operation projects) the Leader network became increasingly identified as AEIDL (as an organisation) rather than as the Network (which was an instrument of EU policy, and managing EU funds, and which

happened to be managed by AEIDL). This led to confusion and diminished visibility of EU action.

B.2.3/ Method used and key elements for the process to be a success

Context: a wide variety of public and many different needs to match...

The first fact that many people interviewed stressed is that the participants in the Leader network, and moreover in tomorrow's rural development network have very different levels of experience. This leads to a very strong need to know the actors well (target group and other key actors) in order to match the needs of each one of them and of each level of experience.

Each participant in the network ought to have the feeling that his participation enables him to move one step forward every time. Further to matching the need, this also creates an incentive for further participation and for getting more involved in the process (including giving the network more time).

In order to better match the needs of the different levels, some interesting experiences have been carried out which consist in phasing the implementation of the network. Examples of phasing are proposed by the French Sud Ouest Sub-regional network and also by the German national networking unit:

- Phase 1: Consolidating the LAGs (Objective: shortening the start phase for the LAGs)
- Phase 2: Organisational structure of the LAGs (Objectives: Professionalization of the project management, effective work linked to the themes)
- Phase 3: Project development, management, marketing (Objectives: diffusion of successful approaches and structures, strengthening capacity for cooperation and collaboration in the network, building up partnerships, information and transparency in the field of regional development activities)
- Phase 4: Development of the LAGs after Leader+ (Objectives: future form of organisation and rendering the local actions groups independent, early orientation to further work without subsidies).

Method for the promotion of the idea of networking...

- There is a need for the networking units to develop relationships, within each participating structure, both with the technical team and with the decision makers. These individual contacts lead to the use of a common language and the creation of common objectives acting as a strong link between the actors and the networking units.

In Ireland, the networking unit's facilitators work with the LAG project officer and manager and the networking unit manager works with the manager and chairs of the LAG.

- A strong incentive is needed from the decision makers both in theory (by strong political message) but also in a tangible way (i.e. by a regular direct participation in some of the activities organised by the networking units). It is indeed important to build a strong vertical partnership complementing the horizontal one.

Some elements of global networking method...

The following elements of methodology have been proposed by the persons interviewed to make the networking units work:

- . promote the idea of networking in itself

A German LAG

For all levels: the difficulty is to get all persons in the LAG to think positive about taking advantage of all networking issues. There has to be more guidance (imposed?). It would be good to have this centralised in order to have a win-win situation for everyone.

- . organise study days, smaller meetings, transnational structured visits, conferences and thematic events
- . deliver services with short term benefits and not time consuming for LAG representatives before developing more intensive (and time consuming) activities which should only come in a second step
- . organise scientific committees
- . be up to date, and where possible one step ahead of what is needed
- . deliver direct technical assistance
- . structure the exchanges
- . broaden the use of the web: databases, forum

Austrian national networking unit - an innovative networking method

- 1) Regular thematic workshops and excursions: These workshops were always organised in cooperation with the hosting LAG . Workshops usually last one and a half day so that they always include some cultural and social evening programme for personal contacts. And: Usually the hosting LAG organises a field trip to interesting projects.
- 2) Thematic working groups: For LAGs who are interested in new and more innovative issues and who are willing to spend time to deal with these issues we established permanent working groups which had regular meetings. The issues of the 4 working groups: gender mainstreaming, new methods for regional development, Local Agenda 21 & sustainability, youth. The members of the thematic working groups somehow act as a "pressure group" for innovative issues within the Leader network and as reliable colleagues they support the diffusion of new know-how to other Leader areas.
- 3) Website with modern content management system: All LAGs have access to our website and can publish news, events and introduce project info in the online project database. Thus the LAGs had the opportunity to learn an innovative utilisation of the internet.
- 4) Specific advice services for Leader managers: Coaching & conflict management, advice for gender mainstreaming, advice for innovative cultural projects, moderation of start-up workshops for action 2 projects
- 5) Network of networks: Through an initiative of the Austrian Leader network unit the "Network of Networks" was established. Within this network experts of different network and coordination units (Regional Management Association, Local Agenda 21, Gender Mainstreaming, association of technology and

innovation centres, Interreg, Equal, association of nature parks, Leader network etc.) exchange their experiences and discuss possible cooperation. Thus the transfer of know-how among all these organisations was improved and LAGs have better relations and better access to organisations and programmes relevant for rural development. Besides this broader networking is the best medicine against something like a "Leader monoculture" which negates that there are many interesting and innovative things happening outside Leader.

Some keys for success in the method used by the networking units...

There is a need for:

- a clear initial order from the Commission and subsequently from the national or regional managing authorities in order for the framework to be as clear as possible from the beginning.
- identification of the key actors in order to define good communication / cooperation and coordination (including in terms of calendar) between the proper structures (Commission, managing authorities and national networking units) and clear distribution between different levels and different structures at the same level (i.e.: Managing Authority and national networking unit).
- frequent and direct contact between the networking units (notably at national and sub-national level) and the LAGs
- long-term planning. A system comprising multi-annual objectives and yearly work plans (with the possibility to introduce some adaptations when needed) seems a good solution for global vision, for anticipation and to increase participation.
- a professional team
- the advantages of networking to be clear to all
- to think about the longer term rather than just the life of the ongoing programme, even if some of the structures carrying the networking units have no certainty about what their role could be in the future.

There should be the possibility to develop organised mentoring schemes where 'older', more experienced Leader or rural development actors stimulate the participation of 'newer' ones and support them directly during the launch and follow-up of their own work.

Coordination between actors is essential. Each actor or structure involved needs to be there from the beginning to 'find his place'. Instead of imagining a system where the networking unit is set up for the whole duration of the programme, some propose to appoint as early as possible in the programming period a structure whose role would be to implement the first and more urgent tasks (communication about the programme and financing available, support to actors wishing to organise themselves...). An early appointed structure could work with the actors (i.e. potential LAGs) and develop a strong partnership between the networking unit and the (future) actors. This would leave time to better define the terms of reference for the more complete tasks to be done.

After some cases of consultation, the initial method to define which tasks are to be carried out but the networking units are somehow top-down (in order notably to answer the general expectations of the programme). At the sub-regional level (in France, Belgium and the UK), the networking units have been build on partnerships and through a collaborative method which varied according to the organisations developed.

In each case, there is a clear necessity to have the public order to meet the participative methods tested by some networking units (for a bottom-up approach). This represents both a real difficulty and a real challenge.

There is a necessity for close collaboration with the target group and with the other levels of networking. Subsidiarity has to be thought about in context of complementarity and global coherence.

Part C: The resources and tools for an efficient networking unit

C.1/ resources for the networking units

Below is a table giving some examples of the financial and human resources that some national networking units have at their disposal to carry out their actions:

Member States	Number of LAGs	Total cost of the Leader+ national networking unit for the whole period (Total public expenditure)	Cost of the national networking unit per LAG for the whole period	Human resource involved
Austria	56	EUR 1,270,000	28 571 EUR	No full time but experts of the companies involved in the consortium: 1,150 hours done by 2 experts
Germany 2002-05	148	1.6 million EUR	8 581 EUR	6 people
Belgium	Nat: 20 FL: 5 WA: 15	National: EUR 1,425,665 Flanders: EUR 264,965 Wallonia: EUR 1,160,700	Nat.: EUR 71 283 FL: EUR 52 993 WA: EUR 77380	<u>Flanders</u> : 1 person working 50%, 1 person working 60% and 2 consultant at one day a week during 45 weeks <u>Wallonia</u> : 6 part time jobs representing 2 full time jobs
France - national level	140	EUR 8,00 million	EUR 57 143	3 full time jobs + 4 part time jobs + trainees + external consultants and partners
Ireland	22	approx. EUR 1,2 million	EUR 54 545	3 full time jobs + a part time job
UK	57	about EUR 2,3 m	EUR 40 351	6 part time jobs + external experts (over 2.300 days on the whole period)
Sweden	12	about EUR 1.6 m	EUR 133 333	4 part time workers: 1 for 60%, 1 for 50%, and 2 for 30%

Financial resources...

The financial resources reserved for the implementation of the networking units vary a lot from one Member State to the other according to the number of LAGs and the choices made in terms of the goals of the Leader network.

From the figures gathered, the envelope ranges from just over EUR 1, 4 million in Belgian (for both Flanders and Wallonia) to EUR 8 million in France. These figures represent an envelope per LAG to cover the whole Leader+ period ranging from EUR 8,500 in Germany to over EUR 133,000 in Sweden which can be explained at least partly by the specific geographical characteristics of this country. The figures presented in the above table for France only concern the national networking unit. It has to be remembered that, further to these figures, the 5 sub-national networking units also have a specific budget to carry out their actions, therefore increasing the global national figure for France.

The following table gives some tangible examples of breakdown of the budgets according to the types of activities carried out:

Member State	Breakdown of budgets according to the types of activities carried out
Austria	EUR 1,270,000 of which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Publications (Magazine, Newsletter, Website, displays, public relation activities...): 30 % . Workshops, Seminars, excursions: 25 % . Thematic working groups, advice for LAGs, answering inquiries: 20 %

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . European Networking, support to cooperation: 15 % . Cooperation with other national networks: 5 % . Project management and cooperation with managing authority: 5 %
Germany	<p>EUR 1,6 million of which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EUR 930,000 personal (about 58 % of total cost) - EUR 650,000 material costs, incl.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . events: EUR 375,000 (about 23 % of total cost) . Leaderforum (magazine): EUR 120,000 (about 8 % of total cost) . publicity documentation: EUR 40,000 (about 3 % of total cost) . moderating cooperation: EUR 6,000
Belgium Wallonia	<p>Wallonia: EUR 1,160,700 of which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . 65% for (internal and external) staff costs . 6% for internal costs . 1% for material, . 3,75% for national travel costs . 2,58% for international travel costs . 10,25% for seminars . 8% for publications . 2, 67% for translations and . 0,5% for documentation and research
UK	<p>about EUR 2,3 m of which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . EUR 805,000 for workshops and conferences (34%), . EUR 293,000 for publications (13%), . EUR 102,000 for website (4%), . EUR 146,000 for best practise (6%), . EUR 146,000 for the promotion of cooperation (6%), . EUR 439,000 for thematic experts (19%), . EUR 146,000 for databases (6%), . remainder for translation to Welsh, contributions to reports, country level events (11%)

For all networking units, staff costs represent the major part of the budget (usually around 60%). Events and publications are the second major items of expense, publications depending a lot on the quality of the outcome either designed for the actors inside the network (meaning less efforts made on the presentation and quality of the design, paper, pictures...) or for a wider promotion and communication (meaning that the quality not only of the content but also of the presentation has to be further worked... and further paid!).

The distribution of the financial envelope in precise tasks from the beginning of the programming period (in the terms of reference leading to the selection of the national networking unit or in the contract between the decision maker and the networking unit for instance) can be very reassuring regarding the definition of the tasks to be implemented, objectives to be targeted.. If this guarantees, to a certain extent, a good use of public money in accordance of the will of the decision makers. It can also be very limiting when developments are necessary during the programme (change in the need) since these changes will be less easy if everything has been set and signed.

The national networking units have given very little comment on their satisfaction regarding the resources they have been awarded (or in a way not explaining what they would have preferred and why). In some specific cases, some LAGs have suggested that the resources of the national network unit in their Member State had been somehow restrictive, mainly in terms of the proximity of the networking unit and knowledge of their day to day work and individual situations. This has to be analysed regarding not only what the LAG says about this, but also regarding the participation of the LAG to the different activities proposed by the networking unit and the specific situation it might find itself in.

Technical resources...

When asked about the technical resources that are essential for a good functioning and efficiency of the networks, the following answers form a consensus of opinion:

- Information technologies: a good system for internet site and databases. This system ought to be quick, efficient, user friendly and multi-lingual. In parallel, an innovative and very dynamic use of the technology tools is central for communication to be smooth;
- Contacts with wider rural development networks, research institutes, resource centres, political spheres, etc. to be able to develop a horizontal approach to the (rural development) network.
- Good knowledge of European languages, cultures, contexts and history are put forward as being important since only they can lead to the creation of easy, professional and long-lasting network of people at the European level. They can also be central factors in the identification of potential partners needed by local actors or when bringing support to cross-border projects.
- Expertise should be available 'inside' the network and the networking unit as well as outside to complement the internal skills:

French Grand Est sub-regional networking unit:

In terms of technical resources needed: basic internal expertise as well as support from external national networks for a better efficiency

- Office and storage space as well as meeting rooms have been mentioned, notably to be made available by the European level networking unit. This raises a general question that cannot be answered here, of the space that can be left for initiative when networking units are appointed through public procedures which are, generally speaking very precise and which fix the activities at a very early stage of the implementation of the network.

Some of the national networking units interviewed, as well as some LAGs and even managing authorities, have stressed that there should be the possibility for the networking units, whatever their level, to develop in parallel, the actions defined 'top-down' as well as any other initiatives coming from them or from other actors of the network.

In terms of where to find the required skills for the network in order to be efficient, several proposals were put forward. Firstly, the general opinion is that some skills can be internal and other external, the most common situation being a balance between the work done by internal staff, and that done by external resource persons. In this case, good coordination is needed for a general coherence in the intervention and also for transparency: the networking unit should be the obvious structure even when external experts do the work.

A network is something which should live and where the needs are continuously and sometimes fast changing. The networking units ought to keep in mind this need for evolution, not only in terms of technical resources they use or develop, but also in terms of the available human resources.

Human resources and skills...

When asked about the human resources needed within a networking unit, the answers underline the skills and expertise needed and also the human qualities and other important staff issues. The major issues are listed here under:

- Expertise/ skills: on all themes related to rural development
- . for animation (of a network being both bottom-up and top-down)
 - . to communicate (inside the country but also outside)
 - . on editorial matters
 - . for marketing
 - . for public relations advice
 - . to organise events

- . on cooperation,
- . on evaluation
- . for training
- . on applicable action research, academic know-how which is based and rooted in practical expertise at ground level
- . for counselling
- . on administrative matters and procedures

Human qualities: the staff of the networking units ought to have an accessible approach, be friendly, show enthusiasm for the network and the projects developed by the actors, be service orientated, have a strong team spirit etc.

A good team Leader is essential.

As mentioned briefly above, the workload in the national networking units varies a lot from one moment to the other. The flexibility that is asked for in terms of technical resources is also needed when it comes to human resources. A solution to this issue has been found in different Member States where the national networking unit is part of a greater structure. When the workload is 'normal', Leader (and tomorrow rural development) represents only part of the activity but, when needed, it can become the main activity to which every member of staff participate over a limited time period.

Some networking units (at national or European) levels have organised their team around major 'rôles' which organise the skills around one person in charge for each major role. Under the persons in charge, it is possible to find, either:

- . members of staff who have specific competences. This creates excellent expertise but also leads to a risk that coherence and visibility are weaker. Another question is what happens in terms of organisation when there is less work on one specific theme and the specialized members of staff have less activity?
- . members of staff are versatile and can jump from one task to the other. This leads to a sometimes lower level of expertise which can be compensated by some external expertise. Yet, it is a very positive solution for internal organisation and for global coherence and visibility of the work done.

To find appropriate skills and for the networking units to have a very tangible approach, several people interviewed proposed to use the skills of representatives of LAGs or other rural actors either by taking their advice or, even more efficient, by employing them as members of staff. This solution is one to be kept in mind for building tomorrow's networking units.

Support from administration...

The administrations are seen as important partners of the networking process at European, national and, where relevant, regional levels. Their role is underlined as being the one of multipliers, promoters and communicators of the networking idea. These roles can, further to the 'obligation' defined in the European texts, enhance greatly the participation and the enthusiasm of the actors for the idea of networking.

The role of the administration and procedures that should be attributed to the life and work of the networking units is seen differently by the persons interviewed. There are two conflicting views. Some think that there should be a clear separation of mandates between the work done by the networking units (which should then not touch anything at all that has to do with administrative matters or procedures). Others think that there is a need for networking units to be able to cover both technical aspects and issues related to procedures in order to be able to have a coherent approach. If it should be clear that procedures are the prerogative of the managing authorities, it is relevant for networking units to have a clear idea of how these procedures are organised and

perhaps even on how some major choices have been made. This indeed enables the networking units to have tangible elements that will help them to bring relevant support to the local actors. It should even be possible to go one step further and to build a partnership between managing authorities (political spheres) and national networking units which would discuss choices to be made about operating procedures still under definition. Managing authorities are indeed sometimes quite far from the LAGs and will remain so for tomorrow's rural development actors. Discussing with the networking units, who have a more direct knowledge of the issues that LAGs are faced with, could lead to a better match, when possible, between the objectives and obligations set out in the texts of the European and national regulations, and the local situation.

Whatever type of organisation is chosen, it is important that there is a clear definition of the tasks of each type of actor (Managing Authority, networking unit, expert) and that there is good subsidiarity between the levels of intervention.

Resources for the LAG associations and tomorrow's non official networking units

In the case of the LAG associations (in France, Ireland or at European level), it is a little specific regarding the resources made available and needed

Minimum human resources are needed for the animation of the network, yet, the financial resources provided in most cases come only from the participation of the members of the association. This often limits the available resources making them insufficient to provide a long term team. This difficulty has sometimes been overcome, as mentioned above, by a direct contribution of Leader funding in the LAG association (like in France under Leader II or in Greece under Leader+) which raises the question of whether total neutrality is possible when the programme itself enables the activity of these 'informal' networking units. .

In parallel to the employed staff, the life and efficiency of the Leader association, if very much linked to the voluntary work and other tangible and 'free contributions' that enables the structure to do more than what its financial resources would allow, demonstrates of the contribution of the actors to the success of the process.

C.2/ tools for the networking units

C.2.1/ General tools and new technology tools for the networking units

a) general tools for the networking units

At European level...

The *Contact Point* has implemented a Strategy Advisory Group (SAG) gathering representatives of different national network units who are 'experts' in the field of Leader and rural development. This SAG has a role close to the one a steering committee would have. The SAG is a forum to discuss the development of the programme, the principal trends that can be observed, propose themes for research. This general tool ought to be continued, maybe in a wider sense, opening up the group, for instance to other type of experts and actors involved in different themes of rural development.

Further to this SAG, the other general tools proposed are the 'basic' networking tools:

- web site (multi-lingual and multi-cultural)
- publications: Leader Magazine, newsletters, dossiers, studies, analysis...
- international seminars where all Member States are represented. The importance of face to face communication is stated by many as the main component of the network. Regarding this, some Managing Authorities find it a pity not to be able to participate in Leader+ European events.
- examples of good practices throughout Europe (the results are mentioned as well as elements on how these practices have been developed and on the method used for their analysis)
- method for evaluation
- directory of people able to bring some support on specific issues
- helpdesk

- participation in external events

Position of French Ministry for agriculture on some of the products and services delivered by the Leader II Observatory:

Disseminating information about all EU actions in favour of rural development (factsheets published in seven languages), promoting innovative and demonstrative initiatives financed by Leader or by other sources, shaping and implementing the evaluation work attached to each national or regional Leader programme, leading the European network for rural development, providing technical assistance to the government agencies in charge of Leader in order to facilitate the circulation of information and transfer of expertise between them, offering technical assistance for transnational cooperation between LAGs and other actors.

At national level...

For the national networking units, the following tools have been mentioned:

- *tools for cooperation (where the activity at national level has increased under Leader+)*
- *events (again, for direct face to face contacts but at national level)*

Results of evaluation give the opinion of LAGs on the German national events:

Nearly all those questioned within the German national networking unit self-evaluation know the events offered by the German national networking unit and over 80 % have themselves already visited such events. About the same number evaluate the offer as being "very helpful" or "helpful" for their work, while not even 10 % say it was less helpful. The overwhelming number of those questioned receive important specialized information and tips for their work, and well over half could improve their knowledge and competence as regards method. The national networking unit's events appear to be extremely important for making contacts. For three quarters of those questioned, important contacts were made, many of which also later led to collaboration. As regards content, the national networking unit's events are evaluated positively. Almost three quarters of those questioned consider the content of the events to be "very good" and "good", while 15 % consider it to be "average" or "sufficient". Nobody scored the content of the events as being "bad".

- *magazines as well as short and precise newsletters (sometimes thematic)*

Results of evaluation give the opinion of LAGs on the German national publications:

LAGs opinion on the German magazine Leaderforum show how great a part is played for the actors by Leaderforum. Over two thirds of those questioned consider that Leaderforum supports their work at a local level. A good 60 % mention this journal as a source of information for research. The level of satisfaction here is very high: conception and

readable presentation, construction and comprehensibility receive 90 % "good" votes and less than 5 % "less good" votes. Individual sections are described by over two thirds of those questioned as "particularly interesting" or "informative". Here, project reports with hindsight are particularly appreciated. The weight given to the various sections clearly corresponds to the readers' expectations: over 90 % positive evaluations. Preparation and research of the documentation, choice of themes, news and the style of the articles all received the approval of over two thirds of those questioned.

- web site
- good practices
- method for evaluation and cooperation
- databases (which are sometimes wished more interactive)
- opening on the world outside of Leader
- participation to external events
- providing documents for publicity work (from stickers to posters, leaflets, PowerPoint presentations...)
- Helpdesk around different topics

Tools proposed by the Austrian national networking unit: a good example of comprehensive and complementary responses and support to actors

- 1) Workshops and conferences,
 - 2) Study trips,
 - 3) Website with CMS offering access for all LAGs and administrations and enable them to learn new ways of using the internet/website as a working tool,
 - 4) Leader Magazine,
 - 5) Regular thematic working groups (gender, new methods, youth, ...),
 - 6) Coaching and conflict management and "Service Hotline" to answer inquiries of LAGs immediately,
 - 7) Start up workshops for cooperation projects (action 2) to support the development of national and transnational cooperation projects,
 - 8) Network of networks: Networking between different coordination and networking units on national level,
 - 9) Project Database: All LAGs have access via username and password to our online project database. Thus they can introduce data into the database regularly by themselves.
- Additional information: a) Regular electronic Newsletter (3 or 4 issues per year) with current information about LAG activities and events and funding programmes on European level relevant for rural development, b) Professional Excursions - Package offers: To improve and professionalise the exchange of experience the network unit has initiated and supported the development of specific offers for field trips by LAGs. So far 4 LAGs market their excursion offers in specific areas: renewable energy, timber construction and new regional architecture, multisectoral sustainable

development. The development and marketing of these offers are supported by a tool on the national Leader website.

b) New technology tools

Many answers to the interview stressed the importance of developing interactive and innovative use of new-technologies. This in all the following tools:

- web sites:
 - in some cases, the LAGs or other actors feed in the national databases directly, like in France and in Austria) or the sub-national structures complete and animated their own part of the national web-site (for instance in France)
 - some forums or pages are very active, dynamic and used on a daily basis by many actors. In Ireland for instance, where there are 22 LAGs, over 400 hits a day are counted on the web site
 - the technology of CMS (phone and open source technology for an easier access and possibility to implement the method on the websites of the LAGs for direct interface) has been used in some countries and could be further developed for easier and quicker interactivity
 - some national networking units have implemented, from their web sites, pages enabling direct collaboration
- e-bulletin
- video-conferences
- interactive video and DVD

Results of evaluation give the opinion of LAGs on the German Leader web site:

Almost three quarters of those questioned state that they visit the website (www.Leaderplus.de) at least once a month, whereas just 30 % say they do so every week. The form, functionality, user friendliness and information content are evaluated by around 90 % as "positive" or "satisfactory". The following contents are considered to be important:

- "general information on Leader+/ EAFRD (2007-2013)",
- the possibility of "search for Leader+ actors and/or projects" and
- "information on events organised by the national networking unit"

But "ordering publications" by the national networking unit and "information about legal provisions" and the online edition of Leaderforum are also appreciated.

C.2.2/ Tools for the gathering and promotion of good experiences and practices

At European level...

Concerning good experiences and good practices, the European level is stated as the reference point that ought to bring methodological support for the analysis of good practices and experiences.

It is also stressed that transferability of these good experiences and good practices in general is a central issue for the LAGs. Further to the presentation of good examples, people need examples that can apply to their own area. For instance one German LAG deplores that this element has not been taken into account enough in the European or even national publications.

It is indeed important that good experiences and practices which are promoted explain the conditions for success and for transferability of the actions in order to put forward only experiences that are directly applicable in other areas.

A common approach (at every level of networking and communication) is to put forward only the success stories stressing what has worked well. This is important in terms of communication, motivation and transferability. Yet, risks do exist on every area and in every local strategy that is implemented. The need has been underlined for a communication also about the frequently encountered risks and difficulties and on how to overcome them.

In terms of communication, the 'usual' good practise methods and tools need to be used according to the actors involved and for the particular theme selected. The fact that Leader actions have been promoted very little outside the Leader sphere has been pointed out as a weakness that could be easily avoided in the future.

At national level...

The British national networking unit has developed a series of 'how-to... guides' on operational issues which have been stated as very good tools for the promotion of good practices and method. In a general manner, publication and field visits are stated as having had a positive impact. Compiling a database which could be a resource of projects has also been stated as something very positive by the Irish national networking unit.

The Austrian national networking unit example of national tools for the gathering and diffusion of good experience and practices

1- Excursions - Package offers: Study trips are one of the best ways to transfer know-how and experiences and to create relations. Therefore the national network unit has supported the development of package offers for excursions in four Leader areas. These areas now are able to organise, market and implement excursions on a very high level (qualified speakers/project presenters, informative and well designed information material, new technology for communication, interesting social programme for participants). The common marketing of this offer has started recently. So we don't have experience regarding the cooperation project "excursions". But the four regions have hosted a lot of study trips already before the cooperation had started. And their experience is that the number of study trips to their areas has been increasing constantly and the feedback of the participants is very positive.

2- Specific thematic focus of Leader Magazine: Every issue of the national Leader Magazine has a specific focus (SME, Co-operation, Gender Mainstreaming, Youth or Learning regions etc). Experts deliver contributions about new methods and important issues of the focus (e.g. focus SME: innovation management in SME, cooperation of SME, sustainable development of SME, Corporate Social Responsibility etc). All LAGs are also invited to deliver contributions about successful projects. Thus the Leader Magazine works as a reference book which contains state-of-the-art information on the specific focus.

3- Project Database: Currently about 400 projects with contact data. Many LAGs use the database to get information and ideas for their work. The national Leader website has

about 200 hits by different visitors per day and the database is one of the most visited pages of the website.

4- Expert Database: Expert database contains information about Leader managers and their specific know-how and experiences. All LAG managers have access to the database and can introduce information about themselves.

5- Thematic Workshops: Presentation of successful projects always is part of the programme. Enables transfer of information and creates relations between LAG managers who are realising similar projects.

C.2.3/ Tools for cooperation

At European level...

The tools proposed at European level to promote cooperation tomorrow are the following:

- conferences on cooperation, cooperation fairs
- direct support to projects and actors (providing guidelines, acting as a facilitator...)
- partner search tool and databases on cooperation
- specially dedicated part of the web site
- transnational workshops for specific regions or partners
- facilitate visits from other Member States
- cooperation corners in each of the seminars, notably European
- distribution material promoting cooperation and of basic methodology (i.e. Leader II magazine or the methodological guide specific on the theme which stay references)

At national level...

At a national level, if the general objectives of a good promotion of cooperation and support to local actors wishing to develop this type of projects, the tools proposed are slightly different since somehow more technical and more tangible:

- more precise methodology material (i.e. Let's KISS cooperation guide produced by the Dutch networking unit, the cooperation methodology guide published by the French national networking unit...)
- regular information about people / structures looking for partners
- database
- communication on good practices
- material designed to enhance general motivation for cooperation
- preparatory work for transnational cooperation and direct technical assistance (from definition of the need for cooperation to the implementation of the project)
- regular meetings and workshops around specific issues

Example of the German national network unit's support for cooperation

Communication of partners on request and accompaniment; At the beginning of the subsidy phase, with events organised early on (2002, 2003) and exchange concerning specific projects; opening up contacts with neighbouring states (language problem, distance); Publishing cooperation searches (home and abroad) via various media (magazine, newsletter, database, etc.); Targeted searches and talks with LAGs when searching for cooperation, once there is agreement on the theme; The reader Experience and Method Manual (Erfahrungs- und Methodenhandbuch) for building up cooperation; Ambassadorial role abroad for German LAGs according to their project specifications and for their corresponding partner groups

there; In case of conflicts between the groups and/or the authorities, help in the search for solutions; Translations in order to give support in the case of problems in developing closer contacts between groups and the authorities; Making contacts in the new Member States, especially Poland, the Czech Republic and Lithuania; Database updates for continuing projects in contact with the groups and the competent offices on the Land level; Project descriptions for the internet site of the national networking centre, targeting here the publication of a list of the studies conducted in the Leader regions in order to help the LAGs to find partners with similar themes; Financial support for moderation services since August 2005. This counselling and support service applies to the field of interterritorial and transnational cooperation for projects under construction. From August to December, six moderations have been managed.

Remarks on the tools of the networking units for cooperation...

On cooperation

If the European tools exist and are known, their content is sometimes seen as poor and not always reflecting the richness of the work carried out, notably on tasks like capitalisation.

The direct assistance to LAGs in terms of cooperation (either technical, on methodology or financial as under Leader II) is also seen as very weak (or inexistent) whereas seen as one of the most important roles at European level. Decrease in resented quality between Leader II and Leader+ that can be explained by less experience of the team in the beginning of the activity but also by a very late start of the Contact Point. Other tools were already in existence elsewhere and LAGs had taken the habit to use these.

The general poor feeling about the visibility of the actions undertaken at European level (except for the more visible like seminars and publications) lead to a poor image not of the Contact Point (whose work and professionalism is often put forward) but of the Commission and its inability to take relevant decisions (to launch the European Observatory) in a short time.

Swedish national networking unit

At national level and even so more at European level we were late, long after the LAGs were approved and started. This gap has created a problem with legitimacy so we have to "force" ourselves into being a network unit for the LAGs instead of growing out of a common need.

There is also a clear need to invite people to start cooperation projects. There is usually a general interest for cooperation at first, but afterwards a need for support in order to change this interest into tangible projects. This can be done through communication about pros and cons of any cooperation process, by giving information not only information of a technical nature but also two other complementary types of information:

- material designed for the managers and decision makers of the LAG putting forward what impact cooperation can have on their area,
- material designed for the potential project holders (simple inhabitants, local companies...) who are not familiar with the technical Leader jargon. The cooperation guide produced by the British national networking unit is a very good example of simple, clear and very straight forward information of what it is possible to do under Leader+ action 2 and on how to do it.

When asked about how cooperation should be defined in the development strategy, positions differ.

For many decision makers (including the Commission who have written the rural development regulation for 2007-2013) cooperation should remain an opportunity, as it has been under Leader II and Leader+. For others, such as LAGs (especially in France where LAG technicians sometimes had difficulties in convincing their manager that cooperation was worth it), it could be useful to define cooperation as a compulsory part of the development strategy.

Whatever the position, there is a need for a strong presence of decision makers in the field of cooperation and for strong guidelines (including from the Commission), methodology and direct technical assistance for the identification of partners and the building of projects (from the European networking unit and only in a second step, from the national or sub-national networking units).

General remarks

At the different levels, there are similar tools. In order to ensure better visibility and global coherence, the European level ought to gather national and sub-national material and disseminate it more widely. The national (and sub-national) level should decline the European tools and adapt them to the national (or sub-national) features. This cascade of information would make it richer and more relevant.

Each level should find its place naturally (due to a clear prior definition of task distribution) in order for beneficiaries to find a clear interest in each level of networking.

There needs to be a general reflection at the European level (together with the national networking units) on how to organise the gathering of information, and to define who identifies and selects what is to be put forward.

The information required at the different level is often similar, i.e.: description of the areas involved in the programme, of the cooperation projects, of the best practices. It is important not to reinvent the documents to be used in each networking unit and at each level. It could be a solution for the Commission to set strong guidelines, questionnaires and forms to be used which the networking units could use as a common basis, and then adapt them to their specific situation or requirements. This would be interesting in terms of time gained, the coherence of the information gathered in the different databases, and in terms of not asking the local actors twice for the same type of information by following a different format.

Making the information available is one of the central tasks of the national networking units. In order to be efficient and useful, this information should be made easily available in a structured way. For instance, many national project databases have over 400 items (in Austria, France, and the UK). There is a need for the information to be 'easy access' which can be done by using key words (which would ideally be defined at European level and used by all the national and sub-national networking units and actors).

It is important to build tools targeted at the network itself but also tools for the outside world. The widening of horizons is a major challenge for cross fertilisation and wider communication about the rural development actions programme and what they can bring.

C.2.4/ Which tools for tomorrow for the networking units?

In extension of the tools developed under Leader+ and found useful, the following tools are proposed as to be developed by the future rural development networking units:

- web site:
 - . link between the networks active in the different Member States
 - . communication from the European network
 - . with different parts: parts with totally open access, parts for actors and others for professionals of the network

German national networking unit:

web channels are important in various languages

- databases of projects on cooperation (partners, projects), policies, areas, procedures, sectors...
- publications
- events to get people to meet, linked to axes and themes,
- thematic working groups
- assistance on transnational cooperation
 - . proactive expertise
 - . specific budgets (additional money)
 - . rules on the implementation of cooperation in the different Member States
 - . cooperation starter kits (basic information, methodology, and list of available and free experts on the theme)
 - . thematic meetings dedicated to cooperation
- support on the theme of evaluation
- production of content
- mentoring schemes for direct contacts
 - A German LAG proposes to allow to "create" (and fund) "ambassadors" coming from certain Member States or regions in order to enhance networking and cooperation.
 - The Austrian national networking unit proposes an action called "Portraits of Innovators": Besides the elaboration of criteria for good practices and the synthesis work it could be interesting to showcase the individual experiences and "philosophies" of charismatic "Innovators" because development and innovation does not depend only on strategies but often on highly involved people with certain abilities and visions.
- focus on implementation (tools, measures, methods) is most interesting for practitioners
- scientific committee

These tools are seen as having to:

- support rural actors, whatever their field of intervention
- improve the state of the art of rural development

Proposals for better diffusion of information, transfer of know how and methodological expertise between the future rural development networks...

The German national networking unit suggests involving the existing networks as multipliers.

The British national networking unit advocates the strengthening, in bigger countries, regionally based "country desk".

The Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie proposes to reserve a budget to be used for journalists to communicate about good practices developed by rural actors, including on the Leader axis.

Proposal on the balance to be found between 'physical networking' and 'distance / virtual networking'...

German national networking unit

Without (all the) face to face contacts, a network will be without effect for rural areas (trust can be built up only directly). In any case, for the future task of building up

a network for the entire rural area, a comprehensive web offer (with all information, interactive elements, etc.) is indispensable (keyword Web 2.0, to communicate "direct" by all means). The cost (in moderation) will, however, be very high; since a functional (virtual) network requires a great deal of input (forums with no participants deter users)

French Grand Est sub-national networking unit

Both forms are essential. There must certainly be more frequent physical contact at a local level, becoming more infrequent the further away you move. National meetings are currently accorded excessive importance, especially once the programme gets up to cruising speed (since 2005-2006, for example, we have really felt that we are mobilising the LAGs less). The notion of physical contact must be understood as both direct contact with LAGs (or other territories) and joint meetings. Once contact has been made, virtual networking becomes effective, because the human element behind it has been established..

British national networking unit

There is no substitute for face to face contact and the development of informal and on going contacts which this will bring. However, in large countries such as the UK, more emphasis on distance networking - and learning in the new network is worth exploring - through more inter active use of web sites and through other tools. However other approaches (giving enough notice for meetings, careful selection of venues, timing etc) will also do much to overcome the barriers to face to face networking

C.3/ Actions implemented under Leader+ to complement the networking action

Leader+ action 3 concerned all networking actions. In many countries, the budget allocated to this action has only been used to cover the activities of the national networking unit (case of Ireland, Sweden, England, the Netherlands and Germany).

In some other countries, Leader+ action 3 monies have also been used for other activities contributing, in parallel to the work of the networking unit, to the general networking goal.

For instance in Wales, some consultation groups have been financed.

In France, further to the national and sub-national networking units, 4 main types of activities have been financed:

- . some national studies*
- . activities specific to the national theme 'welcoming of new actors'*
- . communication activities: stickers, posters, photographs of rural areas...*
- . some work for consultation to prepare the future*

Financing activities other than the networking units enables to widen the work and subject treated and makes it possible to work punctually with other actors (i.e. national networks) to broaden the horizons. A steering committee is very welcome to follow closely all networking activities in order to ensure coherence between the different activities.

Special attention should be paid that the different structures involved have very specific tasks in order for all actors not to be 'lost' because of too many structures.

Part D - Evaluation of the networking units

D.1/ Different types of evaluations...

The mid-term evaluations and their updates all have a part which concerns networking issues. In Austria and Ireland, the national networking units have carried out self-evaluations.

The German national networking unit voluntary has launched a written enquiry

Since the German networking centre (national networking unit) works on the basis of an operational programme, the midterm review was carried out in 2003 (Update 2005). In order to support and complete the midterm review the Leader+ German national networking unit carried out a voluntary written enquiry with the local action groups in September 2005. The services provided by the networking centre were evaluated by the direct users (LAGs and Leader administration). The objective of this inquiry was also to point out the quality control and possibilities for further fine tuning of the service offer. 220 questionnaires were sent out. With a return of 65 %, the results can be considered to be representative. The information was collected via a standardized questionnaire providing evaluations according to a three-to-five scale or yes/no answers. There was also some scope for verbal supplements and explanations. The general benefits from the networking offer were given mainly as "exchange of experience and information" and "new ideas for one's own work", although "better self-analysis" and "motivation" were also mentioned. Over half of those questioned were able to "react in time to new developments" because they receive information over the present state of the structural policy; likewise, many receive "help in setting objectives and implementing their own projects". Less than 5 % of those questioned seemed to receive no benefit through offers of the German networking unit.)

In many countries, all activities of the networking units have been regularly evaluated through satisfaction questionnaires which seek feedback on all aspects (European networking unit, national networking unit in the UK, in France...)

D.2/ Is evaluation needed on a more regular basis...

To this question, the answers are a clear "no" from the Flemish and Irish managing authorities, the Belgian and French national networking units, LAGs in Finland and France. In some cases, even if no further evaluation is wished, the definition of common indicators is seen as something that could be positive.

For others, evaluations are needed on a more regular basis with various positions on what exactly these further evaluations cover:

- for the Swedish and Welsh managing authorities and for the Irish national network unit, it is important to make the evaluation more precise than the regular ones which are available. That is to say that the current evaluation is based on facts and figures but rarely goes into useful detail which reflects the workings of the network and what could be changed or improved. The need put forward is for evaluations to go beyond the simple facts and figures, and to take a real step back from what is going on, in order to consider tangible proposals for what to improve and do in a different way.
- the Austrian national networking unit would find useful more regular qualitative reports (going much deeper than facts and figures)
- the German national networking unit wishes to continue carrying out regular self-evaluation by the target groups in order to gather more precise information on objectives. With a similar approach, the Swedish national networking unit sees continuous evaluation as a way for constant improvement.
- for the Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie, it would be interesting to compare the objectives targeted and to place them in their particular context.

D.3/ A system to compare performance of the networking units...

There again, the answers on this issue range from "no", the German national networking unit stressing that it would not be meaningful since the contexts are so different, to "yes" through common indicators (Belgian networking unit) or to build a comparison table to introduce some kind of competition (UK, Welsh Managing Authority).

Apart from the case of the Welsh Managing Authority who thinks it is relevant to compare performance in order to introduce some kind of competition, in all cases, an event when not clearly formulated, is not seen as meaningful (or useful) to compare performances of the networking units, given the national contexts and features (**the Swedish national networking unit stresses that it 'would not give a fair picture of the performance'**).

Yet, many national networking units would like to know how the others work. Instead of talking about performance comparison, it would be more relevant to define some programmes for the exchange of information, for comparison of the strategies and methods used, and of the tools developed for cross fertilization between networking units.

The possibility to develop exchange programmes between staff in the national networking units (exchange 1 person between staff of similar position for some weeks or months --> 'turning' staff) has also been suggested as a positive possibility, even if conceived as difficult to implement.

D.4/ Hints for the evaluation of networking units in the future...

The following proposals have been made by the people interviewed for the planning of the evaluation process and method of tomorrow's rural development networking units. They tend to be an extension and sometimes improvement of the system carried out under Leader+ :

- . collective auto-evaluation
- . flexible methods adapted to the specific target groups
- . definition of monitoring and satisfaction indicators
- . regular surveys of the network users

D.5/ Comments on the evaluation of the national networking units...

Evaluation of the networking units are often understood very differently by decision makers and implementing structures since their view and their needs are very different.

- the decision maker wants to use the evaluation to check that what the networking unit does is compatible with the call for tender initially issued. This check is very basic in a way and very quantitative. It focuses mainly on the tools and if they are there or not.

- the structures implementing the networking units want to use the evaluation and its results as a monitoring tool to anticipate the new needs of the target group.

For instance, when decisions makers are happy that there is a web-site with a fixed content and some databases, networking units wish to know how many hits there are a day, which pages are the most read, and if the readers are happy with the content that they find...

This difference in approach means that evaluation of the networking unit, if to be used by them, ought to be conceived by them, and if possible, in partnership with decision makers.

Part E - Strengths, weaknesses and assessment of activities of the Leader+ networking units

E.1/ Efficiency

E.1.1/ Strengths and weaknesses of the work of the Leader+ networking units

Strengths of the work of the Leader+ networking units...

The following points have been outlined as being the strengths of the networking units developed under the Leader programmes, notably under Leader+:

- *organisation skills*
- *comprehensive, coherent and quality work under Leader II at European level (underlined by national networking units managing authorities, LAGs and other types of contacts)*

A French LAG

The work carried out by the AEIDL for the Leader I and II programmes was outstanding. It successfully established a relationship of trust and almost proximity with the LAGs, performing actions and releasing publications that met with the expectations of the LAGs and were helpful for the territories, particularly those that had little experience of rural development.

- *contacts and connections*
- *events*
- *support*
- *frequent continuity of structure between Leader II and Leader+ which enabled to maintain experience and confidence in collaboration with the networking unit.*
- *Opportunity for many LAGs to add a European dimension to their local activities*
- *national level: dynamic and flexible*
- *friendliness*

Weaknesses of the work of the Leader+ networking units...

On the other hand, the following weaknesses have been pointed out:

- *dependence on full participation of LAGs since this participation is not automatic or compulsory*
- *sometimes limited teams (in Finland, Belgium and Austria for instance)*
- *too late start*
- *difficulty to open up to the non-Leader world and sometimes too high opinion on Leader capacities*

- unclear advantages of the network, direct return from the time and money investment not clear for LAGs
- sometimes too limited mandate for content at national level and no space for innovation

Comments on these strengths and weaknesses...

The Leader I networks were smaller (in terms of the number of LAGs involved) and less experienced but the need was such that the participation was quite active and dynamic. Moving towards Leader+, the system became sometimes complex leading to less visibility and to misunderstanding of who does what, of where to find the required service and globally of what the whole system can bring.

Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie

The great number of participants makes the structure somewhat opaque. Better coordination between the Observatory and the national networks, with the tasks of each party being defined more clearly, would have been beneficial. Moreover, it would be a good idea to reduce the number of levels of intervention.

Some tools, structures or methods used and developed by the national networking units have not met the LAGs needs leading to a sometimes poor participation. This happened for some LAGs in France, especially of the most experienced ones which have very high expectations.

Some LAGs having gained a lot of experience have the feeling that they are one step further to what the networking units offer which is not at all motivating for them. There is a need for the networking units to adapt to the variety of levels of experiences of the public they target and also for something coming from the decision makers on the importance of networking, the advantages and expectations, including motivation of the more experienced to come and share their knowledge, and assist others in their projects, if possible planning enough financing to be able to pay for the participation of at least the less motivated ones.

A French LAG

The work carried out by the AEIDL for the Leader I and II programmes was outstanding. It successfully established a relationship of trust and almost proximity with the LAGs, performing actions and releasing publications that met with the expectations of the LAGs and were helpful for the territories, particularly those that had little experience of rural development.

Austrian national networking unit: Professional networking support on European, national and sometimes regional level enables good transfer of know-how and experience and fosters public relations and awareness raising for an innovative multi-sectoral rural development.

E.1.2/ Measures for better efficiency of the networking units...

To ensure a better efficiency of the networking units, consultation is again stated as being the first thing to be done more often.

Other points are also mentioned including the following:

- allocate more resources for networking, mainly to enable actors to participate on a more regular basis. Some even propose to include, at a local level, a compulsory allocation of local resources to participate in the network and its activities.

- make the participation in the networking activities compulsory (proposed notably by LAGs and LAG associations in different countries), keeping somehow in mind that obligatory participation does not work as efficiently (Dutch national networking unit). This means finding the right way to make people participate not only because they have to but because they get a direct benefit from it.
- train people on networking and on the use of the networking tools available around issues of interest. This approach has been successfully tested in the Netherlands where it led to the real (re-)activating of the national network). In Ireland too this has been tested around some themes (renewable energy, community planning, sustainable tourism, rural policy, technology, quality of life, rural knowledge economy). It has enabled the network to find a new energy. This proposal for training meets another common request which is to have actors and future users participate in the definition of the network and of the tasks of the networking units. These two issues could be seen as complementary and could be done in parallel mainly at the beginning of the programme but also all during a general consultation process.

-early start. The start of the activities of the networking units at the beginning of the programme is underlined as a strong need.

Swedish national networking unit
Tomorrow it should be necessary to start the program as soon as the program starts or just together with the approval of the LAGs in some way. Of course it is difficult if the LAGs themselves are to choose the network construction

This early set up and start of the networking units at the different levels is central in order to create coherence and lead to efficiency.

Many propose for this issue, to fix strict deadlines for the launching of networking units at the different levels.

Representatives from the Commission stress the importance of getting networks (both at European and national level) up and running as soon as possible in the new programming period. This is the stage when they have most to offer (e.g. to newly formed LAGS) and it is difficult for networks to find their place/give high value added if they come too late in the period (e.g. risk that they then have to compete with parallel informal networks, other information sources which have emerged to fill the gap).

It is a main challenge for the rural development network.

There again, introducing phases in the intervention could be positive. A first technical assistance structure could be set up from the beginning of the programme to assist the building and the first steps of the structures wishing to be involved in the programme of any rural actor. This would leave time for deeper consultation to define the complete organisation of the networking units.

E.2/ Assessment of the Leader+ networking units

E.2.1/ the main interests of Leader networking...

Leader networking has been an experience often described as very innovative and having been very interesting. The main points of interest outlined are the following:

The feeling of being part of a greater unit the promotion of common values and knowledge leading to the breaking of the feeling of isolation, common in many rural areas and enabling to find

inspiration for new ideas, new projects and new actions. In its way, the Leader network has contributed to developing a tangible feeling of belonging to Europe.

- the network has offered the possibility to exchange and to learn from each other enabling a better development of the projects and areas represented and sometimes leading to the finding of common answers and solutions. This exchange has concerned both tangible examples of actions and methodology.

Swedish national networking unit

The thrill for LAGs of experiencing that others in other regions (countries) have the same type of problems and are interested in the way they themselves have found solutions and want to learn from them as well as they themselves can learn from the others

By the variety of the public involved (from local actors to the European Commission with LAGs, managing authorities, representatives of networks active in other fields...), the Leader network has lead to building vertical partnerships acting as a tool for mutual understanding and better general work conditions.

In some countries (for instance Finland, Sweden and Ireland) Leader networking is also seen as having contributed to the development of new markets, enabling some local actors to find new export channels for their products.

Cooperation in its present stage is also considered as only having been made possible because of the support it has been given by the networking units.

Promotion of what is done in the rural areas is also put forward as one of the benefits of Leader networking, communicating information about innovative actions implemented and thus contributing to breaking the often 'old' image of rural areas.

Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie

The value (...of the Leader network...) lies in the exchanges and meetings between parties who share common concerns. Networking enables them to put their actions and reactions into perspective. Exchanges can also provide support and comfort when you see that others are facing the same challenges.

There is a convergence in the points of view gathered on the support that should be given by the different levels of networking units to enhance these benefits:

- . the European level should focus mainly on assisting the development of transnational partnership and on training and learning processes (for instance working on basic methodology to be made available for the good launch and implementation of projects in different areas)
- . the national level's main preoccupations should be concerned with organisational development and wide communication about the programme. Peer support and accompaniment for day to day work ought also to be their role where there is non-available at the sub-national level.

A French LAG

Networking is more efficient and useful for 'newer' LAGs with less experience: they need to see how the others have done, to learn about experiences, to find advice and methodology... More experienced LAGs need from the network more strategic information, for instance on how to prepare

the future... This difference is important to be taken into account including if some mentoring schemes are developed.

E.2.2/ the most interesting Leader networking experiences...

The most interesting experiences that the people interviewed remember are listed below. They concern different types of actions with different goals and objectives but most of them are transferable in other contexts and could be reproduced within tomorrow's rural development network since their impact has been significant.

The major national conferences involving a great number of representatives are thought as being the central moments that enable an exchange on a subject, and to draw the lessons of what has been done to date. For this matter too, the major European events are mentioned as having to be done regularly tomorrow.

In Sweden, a 'competition' has been created called "the Leader of the year". It is described by the national networking unit as "an annual nomination process where all 12 LAGs nominate one project each. A jury then selects first the top four projects and after that the winner. The 12 projects are promoted in a booklet and are all presented as good practice. This process is a lot of interest all over Sweden where there are Leader-areas". The management unit stresses that "all nominated projects over the years are paid special attention to on the web site".

This particular experience has an implication in terms of wide promotion about what is done in rural areas, but also motivates local actors into communicating about what they do and more generally in the activities of the network.

In the UK, some presentations have been organised by the national networking unit (and carried out by experts) in a way meant to challenge the groups in the way they operate. Even if sometimes seen to be provocative, this enables local actors to exchange information on not only the projects and results of their work, but on the methods used and on the way they work. This step back from their day to day work is very rich in terms of results in the longer term, leading to improved or more effective performance.

Once the Leader network have been in place (the operating Lags, and the networking units set some work to be done), its activity sometimes became autonomous. The LAGs propose the themes to be examined; the actions to be carried out; and develop their own communication tools etc.

This autonomy, instigated at first by the presence of the networking units, has then been able to continue in two different manners:

- either with continuous technical assistance provided by a networking unit. In France for instance, in the Auvergne region, the regional organisation, together with the regional supporting units, has been flexible and innovative. The LAGs, not numerous, were able to define the common actions they were willing to carry out themselves. "If this regional bottom-up network has been efficient, the part reserved for the inter-regional networking unit has not worked well and, in retrospect, seems quite useless" says a French LAG from this region.

- or without any external assistance. The Austrian national network unit has experienced the *living network*: "as a result of four years of networking good relations between many Leader managers have evolved. Now many activities for exchange of experience and cooperation or mutual support take

place self-organised by LAGs and without assistance of the network unit" and draws the following analysis: "An advanced network shows a very high degree of self-organisation. It is not mainly animated by a network unit but by the network partners themselves. The network unit should only be a service unit that acts on behalf of the network members and not the main animator of the networking process."

The French National networking unit talks about its own, positive Leader networking experiences:

- the Fleurance cooperation fair, which was organised within a very loose format,
- the method for capitalisation in France then in Europe,
- the cooperation support network in France (which brought together all the key actors in cooperation to give a boost to the intervention and therefore the action of LAGs),
- Italian publications, the Austrian or European magazine under Leader II,
- gathering British best practices to promote effective communication,
- the methodological guide for cooperation in Europe under Leader II and in France under Leader+.
- the Walloon newsletter.

E.2.3/ the most interesting benefits and results of Leader networking...

The most interesting benefits of Leader networking has been expressed, further to what has already been said above, through the following key words:

- awareness of opportunities
- acquisition of skills
- making possible to broaden the cultural horizons and discover other national contexts which enable to overcome the cultural barriers (i.e.: the importance of private participation in the Northern countries is something very new to some Southern European countries).
- exchange on the future

Irish national networking unit

- **Building relationships around which new projects can be built**
 - **Time to reflect on your own achievements**
 - **Morale boost for employees and communities, both in hosting visitors and visiting projects.**
- support on the theme of cooperation:
 - . between administrations in the same Member State but also at the European level.
 - . between LAGs around one common issue.

Analysis of the Leader II programme from the French Ministry of agriculture:

All the action taken has had an immediate effect in developing exchanges, particularly for LAGs that do not belong to regional networks, but also as a source of information (Gal'axie, advisory service). The initiatives implemented in 2000 and 2001 also concerned the end of Leader II and the Leader+ programme (in particular through the organisation of inter-regional meetings).

One of the strong points of the Leader programme in general and the French national network in particular is the ability to generate or strengthen partnership initiatives.

On this point, although the network is still young, it has nonetheless given rise to the establishment of various types of partnerships:

- an operational partnership between the national network unit and the LAGs and heads of the regional networks,

- an institutional partnership between a number of national actors, particularly involving the steering group or DATAR⁴ and the Ministry of Agriculture, worked especially well throughout the programme.

The Leader II programme was modest in terms of capitalisation and method, but useful:

- for learning how to work in a network - the Leader programme is the only territorial development programme that has an effective network,

- in terms of exchanges and breaking through the isolation of the LAGs,

- a lot can be learnt from this experience in order to optimise future Leader+ projects, or indeed any other development initiatives implemented.

Analyse from the Austrian national networking unit on the Leader programmes:

- 1) Transparency: Members of the network get a comprehensive overview on innovative activities in rural development
- 2) Easy and quick access to up-to-date information on innovative rural development issues (gender, new methods, system development etc.)
- 3) Motivation and profiling: Active members of the network motivate each other and gain motivation and a positive image by presenting their activities in publications (magazine, website) and events of the network unit
- 4) Cooperation enables a better utilisation of regional resources
- 5) New and better utilisation of new technologies (advanced CMS of the Leader website)
- 6) Personal development: Leader managers benefit from the network by specific offers for their personal development (Coaching). New relations to other Leader managers also contribute to the personal development of network members.
- 7) New horizons: As part of the national and European network Leader managers can extend their know-how on an international level. To act on an international level also contributes to the development of self-confidence and to open-mindedness necessary for an innovative rural development.
- 8) Administrations on regional and national level who involve themselves in the networking process get closer

⁴ (which became DIACT in early 2006): French national structure responsible for the implementation of the Leader programmes in France

relations to actors and activities "on the ground" which improves their know-how. Furthermore these close relations between administrations (funding authorities) and LAGs creates an atmosphere of mutual trust which contributes essentially to a successful implementation of funding programmes.

Furthermore, Leader+ has enabled, in some of the bigger countries (in France and the UK officially and in some regions of Germany) to implement sub-national networking in a more formal way than what had been done in the past with interesting results in terms of :

- . adaptation of European and national work to a more local context
- . proximity of the contact people for a better efficiency.

Continuity of the structures supporting the networking units both at European and national (sub-national too where relevant) is also an element seen as boosting efficiency of the networking units through the habits that exist of working together.

Setting up a network is indeed something long and the balance which make things work is sometimes fragile. Changing an element as central as a networking unit (whatever the level), after 2 to 3 years or even after a whole programming period, can compromise the long term process. This is to be taken into account, in parallel of the fact that rules related to public tendering cannot lead to guaranteeing that the same structure will play the same role over time.

E.2.4/ the main difficulties of Leader networking...

The following points have been stated as being the main problems and difficulties encountered concerning networking within the Leader programme:

The budget for the national networking unit sometimes limited which sometimes lead to the appointment of too few staff, the implementation of limited action and some restrictions in the development of appropriate and specific tools which require a lot of time and energy. We have seen that the budget of the national networking units varies greatly from one Member State to the other. Yet, generally speaking, each structure is aware that it could do better if it had more time and more resources. This is suggested in many cases, even when, in most of them, the service delivered is seen as of good and satisfactory quality by the users.

Some national and the European networking units have been set up very late in the programme making it very difficult for them to gain legitimacy, especially in areas where another level or other types of network (i.e.: active in other fields or 'specially created' like the LAG associations had organized to 'fill in the gap'). Time and reasonable delay for the creation of all networking unit is of prior importance.

Cooperation, notably transnational cooperation has not managed to reach the ambition initially set. The reasons put forward to explain this fact are the following: the rules of the game sometimes unclear and seeming difficult for local actors, language and cultural barriers, the orientation of the work of the LAGs and the local priorities coming first. The British and Irish national networking units also underline some technical inconsistencies: "because of the different emphasis from country to country it can be difficult find shared projects which can be funded. There are also difficulties with respect to the time it takes for all partners to get their elements of the project approved."

Some of the answers received pointed out as a central difficulty the poor (or inexistent) flexibility of the networking units, especially at the European level. The Belgian Fondation Rurale de

Wallonie expressed this with the following sentence: "we lament the Observatory's excessive lack of autonomy at the European level".

Many stress that, further to the questions of interest, resources etc, LAGs and future rural development actors can only take part in the activities proposed by the networking units if the following conditions are fulfilled:

- if their interest in doing so is clear. Persuading LAGs and rural actors that it is worthwhile to attend should be the major preoccupation of the networking units at its launch or whenever conceiving an action in order to build motivation and awareness of the direct benefits that networking can bring.

- if they have time and money

Irish national networking unit

Time and Commitment: One of The main difficulties relate to time constraints. The main priority of any Leader group is to their community and their main effort is directed towards getting projects underway and completed. Networking activities and co-operation take a lot of time and does not always reach tangible results quickly. Therefore unless the manager has a personal interest and commitment to transnational partnership it is difficult for the organisation to make it a priority.

- if the local strategy of the LAGs is built

L Van de Poele

The start of non local activities (linked to cooperation of networking) has been slow but there is of course an explanation for this: first you have to develop your own programme before thinking about participating in networking activities or to cooperate with neighbouring LAGs (inter-regional) and from there going to international cooperation

E.2.5/ what could the ideal network be like...

Words from Managing authorities:

Belgian Flanders Leader+ Managing Authority

A unit which collects information and knowledge about rural development; that spreads information to all persons concerned in different ways.

Irish Leader+ Managing Authority

One which is responsive to the needs of the local action groups but factors in the requirements of the E.U. and the national authority when implementing their work plan

UK, Welsh Leader+ Managing Authority

One which is thought provoking and encourages fundamental thinking. Also produces expert advice on specialist subject areas.

Words from national networking units:

- a network which would be a real animator of rural areas

- one in which all can get involved

- one based on existing NGOs (in order notably for Leader not to be an isolated sphere)
- a bottom-up network that would be defined by the users, maybe also financed by them and which would use the support of technical assistance units
- one which would be free from administrative and management aspects
- a network with 2 complementary units: one bringing support and one representative of the actors and able to play a lobbying role

Words from LAGs:

- one supportive and designed as to make every day management easier for actors
- a network which would be less time consuming (for instance proposing a lower number of meetings, with a better coordination of the different levels involved)
- one which would contribute to building a real relation of trust between participants

Words from another national network, the Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie:

Leader II was the ideal network, with its methodological tools, seminars and exchanges. The participants were put in touch with each other at every level: local actors, academics, consultants, experts, and so on.

Part F - rules to set for tomorrow's rural development network

F.1/ In terms of distribution of task...

Many think that the distribution of tasks ought to be made first by the Commission and then, in a second complementary step, by the managing authorities after consultation of the key partners at national and regional levels.

Slovenian rural development network

The tasks and responsibilities of different members should be defined in accordance with the role they play in rural development and their capacity to perform the tasks. For example: public advisory services for agriculture and for forestry should be responsible for their tasks, but also at the same time 'obliged' to co-operate with other members of the network, to coordinate activities and share information within the network, etc.

Some new organizations would probably need to be established or support will be needed that some broaden or adjust themselves to new situations (like in case of introduction of Leader in Slovenia). Since the network development will be an evolutionary process, flexibility is needed and changes will be necessary at least at the first phase.

F.2/ In terms of coordination of the different levels...

When suggesting the coordination needed between the different levels of networking for the future, the words mentioned are:

- complementarity and subsidiarity,
- hierarchy (notably from representatives of the New Member States). On this specific point, the *German* national networking unit stresses that **hierarchy is the contrary to the networking concept which is based on self commitment. To this regard, hierarchy (from the Managing Authority and Commission) is to be seen as to set the guidelines and to play the role of referee if needed.**
- contractual relation (from the British national networking unit),
- targeted interfaces

The French Ministry for Agriculture puts forward an example of coordination within the scope of cooperation:

Cooperation can be structured in a complementary manner between the local, regional, national and European levels. It falls to the local level to bring cooperation projects to life; the regional level to facilitate the emergence of such projects, help set them up and monitor them; the national level to facilitate the establishment of partnerships (putting potential partners in touch with one other, getting the most out of cooperation experiences); the European level to get the most out of cooperation experiences, put partners in touch with one other, offer methodological support and support cooperation upstream.

F.3/ In terms of cooperation between networking unit and Managing Authority...

If it is clear to all that the managing authorities ought to be the pilot of the national networking unit, the need for close collaboration between the two and regular cooperation is underlined.

Austrian national networking unit

Common elaboration of an annual working programme for networking and regular meetings to control the efficient and successful implementation of the annual networking programme according the overall networking strategies. Representatives of the managing authorities should take part regularly in networking activities on the ground to get an "idea" of the needs of local and regional actors and to emphasise the necessity of networking and the importance of networking within the Leader axis.

This close coordination is seen as having to be achieved through regular direct contacts, mutual information and intensive but flexible collaboration.

F.4/ In terms of connection between networks:

There again, regular contacts and meetings are seen as essential as well as regular contacts and meetings. The definition of interface, thought very useful for the users and target groups of the network to know who to contact on which issue is there again stressed as very useful for the representatives of networks active in different fields to be able to communicate in an efficient way through clearly identified contact persons.

The organisation of regular activities common to several networks working in different fields or on different themes is also seen as a means for people to acquire the habit of working together.

In every case, the important central role of the European networking unit is underlined.

Austrian national networking unit

The connection between networks is a big strategic issue. We should start a big project on European level with the objective or title "network of the networks" to communicate that an innovative rural development is not only a matter of Rural Development Plan and Leader. One of the main tasks should be the elaboration of a concept or strategy for a professional interface management.

F.5/ In terms of other rules needed:

A French actor :

Make actors aware of how crucial their ACTIVE participation in the network is. Establish leadership rules at all levels (European, national, local) to facilitate their involvement. Make the network 'readable' by the European institutions (annual report to the Parliament, mobilising the network's actors, exchanges organised with other institutional levels).

Euromontana:

The idea of linking the different levels is crucial. Each level must have a clearly defined sphere of action to avoid overlapping with other levels. A clear structure between the different levels will lead more easily to effective networking. For this reason, we must keep the number of levels to a minimum. On the other hand, at the purely European level, Euromontana considers that there is already a series of networks whose mission is to provide guidance, report back and issue information on difficulties encountered at the European level. For several years now, these networks have been collaborating either with other European organisations representing slightly diverse interests (Euromontana collaborates with the CPMR - Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions) or with infra-European networks. Euromontana strongly encourages the setting up of a coherent and effective structure, building on the existing networks and, as a first step, drawing up an inventory of those organisations that are in place, their complementarity, their competencies, their representativeness and their effectiveness. The next stage would be to think about improving what is already there by strengthening the weak points of the existing structure. This process could very well be supported by the Advisory Committee on Rural Development of DG Agriculture. This would offer the benefits of (i) limiting the cost of developing completely new networks, and (ii) capitalising on experience acquired over a number of years and the relationships of trust that already exist between the structure and their member organisations. It should be noted that a preliminary measure of the effectiveness of

networks to which membership is voluntary (such as Euromontana) could easily be the number of members joining and leaving the organisation.

The general tasks, that each one of the different types and levels of structure involved in networking has to implement is, in theory quite clear. French actors make the following summary on this point:

European networking unit: Encourages fields of analysis and a European dynamic via studies, communication, seminars and involvement in supporting Leader cooperation (setting up tools which are common to the whole network, in the form of a website and databases, for example).

National networking unit: Coordinates networking activity at the national level, liaises with the Observatory within the State, handles communication and national analysis of rural development regulations.

Managing Authority: oversees the managerial structure and training in the regulatory fields, publicises its decisions regarding implementation of the programme and any developments.

There is also a general consensus on the need that the technical distribution of tasks should be well and early defined in order to avoid any overlap or duplication of work. Several proposals are put forward all stressing the importance of transparency and complementarity. Some only suggest 'voluntary' processes, in consultation and driven by the good will of all (working groups, steering groups, intelligent approach...). Others tend to speak in priority about hierarchic relations and contractual relations, proposing that the Commission defines the distribution of tasks, possibly after consultation of Leader (and rural development) actors, or that the Commission proceeds to this definition together with only the managing authorities.

A network is seen as being about building links, about every actor and structure finding its place. Flexibility and 'freedom of movement' are therefore 2 ideas for the success of a networking process, which are difficult to make compatible within a hierarchical relationship concerned only with contractual matters.

Yet, given the complexity of the system to be implemented (a very wide variety of actors, and the numerous levels...), the rules of the game are compulsory and could perhaps be defined commonly between the different actors to be involved in the future process.

The idea of a **steering group** underlies many answers to promote the idea of a system allowing regular consultation of local actors and experts on the different axis of the rural development network.

A French actor:

Appoint leaders for each field of activity or theme and each tool: sharing of common tools should be organised at the European level and methods and a code of conduct for the programming of activities must be commenced in order to avoid schedule congestion and redundancy in surveys, for example.

Both national networking units and managing authorities are part of the network. The national networking unit acts on command (and under the orders) of the Managing Authority but each one has a specific role to play and a specific job to do for which it has the required specific skills.

If in some new Member States the temptation is high for the Managing Authority to be also the national networking unit, this situation could be compromised in terms of efficiency, of neutrality, of quality of the service provided (**you can't lead a network just like that!**), and of trust, since the actors will be able to develop regarding a structure that pays for their projects and which also controls them.

It is therefore important given the objectives, roles etc., that at each national level, three tasks are clearly represented:

- the role of the Managing Authority;
- the role of the national networking unit;
- the role of lobbying.

If the national networking unit and lobby functions could, not ideally, be represented by the same structure, the Managing Authority should be absolutely independent from either of the two others for clear separation of functions.

Finally, a major concern of Leader networking actors is to avoid creating new structures which will have to prove their existence by doing sometimes too much. Wherever possible the existing structures should be used, and adapted as necessary in order that they can work together.

Part G - Further suggestions put forward for a more efficient rural development network

The following suggestions have been given by the persons interviewed on what could help in developing a more efficient and coherent device for tomorrow's rural development networking units in a situation much more complex than today. These proposals and ideas go in many directions. It has been decided to present them as they have been given in order not to distort the thoughts and to leave the reader free to make his own interpretations.

G.1/ Suggestions on the support to be given to administrations in charge of the future programmes to facilitate cross information

German national networking unit

To organise decentralized and specialized networking units further to the central ones would probably be too expensive, but events for the regional networks would be worth a try

Slovenian Rural Development Network

Networks will:

- **be a partner of administration in providing the most viable information on programme implementation at national and local level**
- **be able to propose changes, adjustments, etc.**
- **create the so called non-standard and flexible data bases, which will give cross information about most urgent rural development problems in different types of rural areas.**

G.2/ Suggestions on how to organise the future network and networking units to facilitate cooperation between rural actors and rural areas in Europe

UK, English Leader+ Managing Authority

Co-operation projects take time and experience to implement. The pressure put on actors for quick expenditure (with the automatic decommitment 'N+2' rule) can mean that less time is spent on co-operation because it is easier to implement other projects. It is therefore essential that networking units are in place as soon as possible to offer advice, partner search etc particularly for groups that may be new to Leader.

French Grand Est sub-national networking unit:

It is essential for networking units to have this mission at the intra-national and European levels. If the infra-national level is in direct contact with the European level, the process will no doubt be more effective. It is not a question of doing away with the national level, but of giving it a coordinating and facilitating role which relies in part on the existing networks.

UK national networking unit

- determine the purpose and objective of "co-operation between rural actors and areas in Europe" and communicate about this purpose and objective,
- ensure coordinated support at national and European levels and ensure that support is practical in addressing the real barriers which inhibit cooperation,
- ensure synergy with other European instruments which facilitate notably transnational actions.

Slovenian Ministry for Agriculture

In order to make work more efficient, future networks could organize special exchange of data and views regarding various rural development problems in different types of rural areas. This would also facilitate the adjustment of rural development policies to specific situations.

Slovenian rural development network

- Organize different working groups on the base of some common characteristics or interests
- Organize special exchange of data and views regarding various rural development problems in different types of rural areas.
- Support organization of international events
- Disseminate information about rural actors and rural areas in Europe
- Help to overcome language barriers.

G.3/ Suggestions on how to use the future networks as tools to strengthen the bottom-up initiatives, especially in the new Member States

German national networking unit

By communicating about good practices, pointing out concrete advantages of cooperation;

By finding experienced coaches from regions in the "old" Member States, supporting bottom-up initiatives in the "new" Member States or other regions;

By organising and financing a "road show" by these "bottom-up experts"

UK national networking unit

By ensuring an appropriate degree of decentralisation of capacity and focus for the national networking units.

Slovenian Ministry for agriculture

By organising actions aimed at strengthening bottom-up initiatives. In the new Member States it is necessary to facilitate the exchange of information about the rural development problems at local level. The exchange of best practices would of course be very useful too.

Slovenian Rural Development Network

Strengthening bottom-up initiative, especially in the new Member States, is a central issue for which it is necessary to:

- establish a Leader network as a separate network supporting local actions and initiatives
- financially support the Leader network so that it can offer adequate professional support to LAGs and local actors
- make the Leader network an strong partner in national rural development network
- facilitate the exchange of information about rural development issues at local level
- provide for exchange of experience and best practices related to promotion of bottom-up initiative from the comparable 'old' states to the 'new' one, and to what can help getting support within national debate

G.4/ Other general suggestions on tomorrow's rural development networks

Representatives from the Commission

Some issues to consider for future networks 2007-13

- Need for a broader range of expertise within European and national networks to address full range of RD issues
- May imply need for more staff at EU-level to interface with this larger network, to avoid bottlenecks in its work
- But wider network raises new challenges: e.g. if start from an open network principle that no-one (or no

organisation) is excluded, can involve potentially large number of participants. Will there be a need to channel network participation via recognised organisations?

- How to draw line between what is role of network and the role of 'technical assistance' normally undertaken by programme Managing Authority e.g. for tasks such as advising potential beneficiaries; giving details on aid schemes...Where does one role stop and the other start.
- Issue of whether access to all network services be free to any participants e.g. also to private consultancy companies? for all publications, etc..
- The wider remit of networks post 2007 raises challenges of how to best structure network (by Axis? But what about cross-cutting issues...) and how to encourage active participation between a much wider range of potential participants who may have differing perspectives (e.g.. in simplistic terms Leader networks have tended to bring together a group of organisations who all tend to support the Leader approach and so could be more consensual; this may not be the case in wider RD network.
- How to maintain a clear space/contact point for LAGS within the wider networks, so the benefits of Leader networking are not diluted.
- How to effectively promote and support transnational co-operation projects within EU and beyond
- Unlikely to be a 'one-size fits all' model for future networks, given the diversity of national structures and situations e.g. MS where Leader/rural networking is already well-developed compared to situation in many of the new Member States where the Leader concept itself is still relatively new. Size (financially) and scope may need to vary between MS but there should be certain core elements common to all MS networks to help facilitate exchanges at European-level.
- Need to get networks off the ground early, including in EU-10 and BG/RO

Dutch national networking unit

Build an institutional exchange programme with developing countries. This means that the Commission should have funds to support developing country, notably in their initiative to cooperate with LAGs of 'axis 4'.

A French LAG

While the network is good, we must not make too much of it. The network should be there to help rather than increase the load, or even distract the LAG from its project with meetings, seminars, questionnaires to be filled out etc. The more levels, the more demands, and the more the system becomes weighed down. We must try to distribute the demands

across the appropriate levels (in a spirit of subsidiarity) and not increase the tools or release huge amounts of funds in favour of structures that, in order to justify themselves, will increase demands and exert pressure on the ground, creating a vicious circle. We must not delude ourselves: while we are trying to network and capitalise, decisions are being taken elsewhere, based on different criteria and much earlier. So, we should remain modest!

A French LAG

In France, there are many national networks linked to rural development. The challenge is to link all these networks within the framework of a single French rural network. We should also think about the place that exists in all that for a Leader network.

Belgian Fondation Rurale de Wallonie

- Meetings of LAG Chairpersons at the national and/or regional level should be encouraged in order to develop the rural lobby dimension.

- A competition could also be organised at the European level between LAG projects. There could be different prizes: for work with young people, women, the economy, innovative aspects, influential aspects and more. This would give greater recognition to the value of local projects.

L Van de Poele

The involvement of non-Leader actors will be very important notably in peri-urban areas in order to develop a better relationship between rural and urban.

Slovenian Ministry for Agriculture

At time of globalisation, the values could be one of the important issues regarding the promotion of rural development.

Country sheets presenting the organisation of some Leader+ national networking units

The above document: shows the results of the surveys carried out; draws out a methodology from the analysis of these results; and give a series of proposals for the future. Apart from this theoretical element, many of those interviewed were keen to understand how things had been done in terms of networking in several countries, and to have concrete facts and figures for some of the National Networking Units (NNU) active under the Leader programme.

Consequently, this section is based on case studies which describe the NNUs implemented in four different countries. The countries chosen reflect the different national organisations possible under the Leader programme, as well as the different ways that these structures function while carrying out the work of Leader NNUs. The choice also reflects a selection of one 'simpler' country and three more complex ones, since it is easier to simplify and adapt a more complex model to a simple national one, rather than the other way round!

On this basis the networking units of four countries: Sweden, Spain, France and Germany, have been selected.

In terms of the Leader programme, Spain, France and Germany can be considered to be three rather complex countries. For example, in France, the Leader+ programme has been managed at a national level, at the regional level under Leader II. For both Spain and Germany, Leader II and Leader+ have been managed at the regional levels. In the case of all three countries there are a large number of LAGs (over 140 in each case) which results in a specific administrative organisation in each country. For these three national contexts which at the same time can be considered to be quite similar, three quite different operations are in place, and these are described below.

Sweden has been chosen for two main reasons. Firstly because the Leader organisation is rather simple compared to the other countries chosen, and secondly because the partnership which has been built at the national level is interesting in terms of: people involved; their legitimacy; and the fact that they represent a very wide variety of rural structures and actors.

These four case studies are organised in two complementary parts:

- the first part looks at elements of Leader in the national context: general organisation of the programme; the history and definition of the Leader network; and of how the networking unit has been set up.
- the second part gives concrete information about the resources which were necessary to set up and run the NNU (financial, technical and human resources, plus details about the structures involved).

- A/ Leader+ national networking in **Sweden**..... page 76
- B/ Leader+ national networking in **Spain**..... page 79
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A/ Leader+ networking in Sweden

A.1/ The main characteristics of Leader in Sweden⁵

There is one national Leader+ programme in Sweden. The LAGs, selected by the Managing Authority are responsible for the choice of projects which are to be supported within their territory.

Key points concerning the network

- a country with specific geographical characteristics: very wide and sparsely populated
- a strong Leader experience
- 12 LAGs which cover quite wide areas

A.2/ History of how the official Leader+ networking unit has been set up in Sweden

- *Under Leader+:* Call for proposal.

B.1/ After the communication from the European Commission to the Member States, who has decided how Leader networking would be implemented at a national level?

A national partnership (kind of working group) was constituted to work on the main guidelines of the Leader+ networking unit. This enabled the discussions to involve contacts from the network, representatives from the Managing authorities and from the national Leader+ monitoring committee. The document used as a basis for discussion was the guidelines from the European Commission. The involvement of representatives of the network has been deemed sufficient. This work has thus been carried out without any further consultation of the actors to be involved in the Leader+ network.

This prior work has lead for the managing authority to suggest how the network would function which enabled the Managing Authority to write a call for proposal which was quite detailed notably on the strategy that the networking unit would have implement and on the way it would have to start their work.

A non governmental organisation has been awarded the role of Leader+ networking unit. The networking unit is like a network itself since several non-governmental organisations are involved in the board of the NGO which all have interest in the rural sector. In the beginning, discussions with the Managing Authority involved all 10 member organisations of the consortium. Progressively, discussions were held with only five active parts in the consortium together with the LAGs. They are the Rural Economy and Agricultural societies (HUSH), The Popular Movements Council, The University of Agriculture and The Farmers Union and the Local Cooperative Centres.

In terms of administrative matters, the contract concerning the implementation of the networking unit is signed between the Managing Authority and only one main organisation in the consortium, the HUSH federation.

A.3/ Tangible elements on the resources the official networking unit has at its disposal and the of the type of structure involved

Financial resources:

The budget reserved for the activity of the national networking unit represents 2 % of the Swedish total Leader-budget. This amounts to about EUR 1, 6 million.

⁵ Extract of the country datasheet available from http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/memberstates/index_en.htm

This amount is more or less evenly distributed over all the years (about EUR 266 000 per year) with a slightly bigger amount at the start (to launch the activities) and a smaller amount for the last year.

The national networking unit thinks that it has not been quite enough to give an ambitious dimension to the analysis part of their work.

Technical resources

- Publication expertise
- IT-competence in order to be able to offer a good web site with functional Content Management System (CMS) and a good database
- Expertise in the field of analysis since this should be one of the main tasks of the national networking unit, the only one to be able to work effectively on this field

Human resource

Leader+ networking unit employs four part time workers representing just fewer than two full time workers:

- 1 working at 60% of its time,
- 1 working at 50% of its time,
- 2 working at 30% of their time (including one administrator).

The Swedish Network unit is an integrated part of an organisation working with rural development. This organisation is dealing with other things than Leader+ which means that the staff can be flexible from time to time depending on what is on the agenda.

In terms of skills, the Swedish national network unit thinks that the following are essential: an experienced team leader and somebody with media and IT competence.

Structure

As stated above, it is a non governmental organisation which is running the Leader+ national networking unit. This organisation involves several non-governmental organisations in its board but there is a main organisation that the MA has made the agreement with.

B/ Leader+ networking in Spain

B.1/ The main characteristics of Leader in Spain⁶

There are 18 Leader+ programmes in Spain: one national and 17 regional ones.

The Leader+ National Programme supports Local Action Groups which are located in two or more autonomous regions. It finances also networking activities carried out by the Promotion and Animation Unit (Célula de Promoción y Animación).

The 17 Leader+ regional programmes are implemented in respective autonomous regions and meant for the local groups whose total territory is situated within one region. The regional programmes allow for actions 1, 2 and 4 and not for action 3 since the network activity is supported by the national programme.

While the Local Action Groups are selected by committees composed of national, regional and local authorities' representatives, the project selection is carried out by the LAGs themselves. However, the co-operation projects financed under regional programmes require a joint approval of the regional authorities and the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In the case of the LAGs foreseen in the national programme, the formal approval is given by the Ministry, which, however, consults the relevant regional authorities for opinion.

There is also in Spain another Leader type initiative, called PRODER, which has a common support regime as well as identical methodology and networking instruments. The 12 PRODER schemes (with 162 local programmes) are included in the Structural Funds' programming for rural development, managed on the regional level and financed by national and Community funds. Moreover in Galicia there are 10 Leader type local programmes (AGADER), financed only by national funds.

Key points concerning the network

- an important number of LAGs (145)
- the presence of Leader like areas with identical methodology and networking instruments (162 PRODER + 10 AGADER in Galicia).
- 1 national programme + 17 regional programmes --> 17 managing authorities + the central Ministry for Agriculture

B.2/ History of how the official Leader+ networking unit has been set up in Spain

The Ministry for Agriculture adopted the criterion to include networking within the national Leader+ programme. Subsequently, Royal Decree number 2/2002 established the definition and start-up of a rural development promotion and organisation cell, whose aim is to promote networking in rural areas.

Within the process of creating the national Leader+ programme, joint consultations were carried out. These also concerned the national definition of the areas to be covered by action three and of the organisation of the network. Furthermore, in order to define the objectives of the networking unit to be set up, the Ministry for Agriculture consulted the groups by way of surveys. An advisory committee was also created and met to agree upon the general objectives of the network.

The selection of the structure carrying the Leader+ networking unit was then made directly, the contract having been awarded to the state-owned enterprise Tragsatec, which is regarded as an Administration resource and which presented all the required characteristics.

⁶ Extract of the country datasheet available from http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/memberstates/index_en.htm

B.3/ Tangible elements on the resources the official networking unit has at its disposal and the of the type of structure involved

Financial resources:

The Leader+ official networking unit spent *7,5 million euros for the entire period which represents just over 51,700 euros per LAG.*

The allocated budget was deemed to be sufficient.

Technical resources

- Up to date new technology equipment including a sufficient server for the exclusive use of the Rural development promotion and organisation cell, the corresponding Internet connections, software, an e-mail server with 30 user licences for users;
- On-line telephone help-line for consultations from groups, associative networks, institutions and private individuals in general;
- the use of external expertise in the various thematic areas addressed at workshops and seminars;
- the use of external resources for designing, page makeup, copying and distributing the magazine of the LEADER+ Rural development promotion and organisation cell. This quarterly magazine has a circulation of 18,000 copies for each issue.

Human resource

The Leader+ networking unit employs 6 full-time staff plus 3 temporary staff. Their education levels are graduate engineers, university graduates, agricultural engineers, geographers, sociologists and economists.

Structure and functions

The rural development promotion and organisation cell is a structure created by the Ministry for Agriculture to manage the network at a national level, headed by the Ministry's rural development department. The technical team belongs to Tragsatec, a state-owned company regarded as an Administration resource.

The functions of the "rural development promotion and organisation cell" are as follows:

- provide and promote a telematic network that facilitates communication among all participants in the rural development network;
- publish a publication as support material for communication among all members of the network, and which promotes and helps diffuse all other activity undertaken by the rural development promotion and organisation cell;
- searches, analyses and information on a national scale regarding good practices in the promotion of rural development;
- organise meetings of Local Action Groups and other rural development actors in order to share local and regional experiences.;
- improve the training of personnel who work in regional development centres that are dependents of Local Action Groups;
- analyse and diffuse experiences and changes that occur when applying policies of equal opportunity for young people and women in rural environments,
- promote actions that enhance society's image of the rural environment and the need to preserve it.

B.4/ A Spanish LAG association, the REDR

History

The first LEADER I LAGs were created in Spain in 1991. In 1993, the first Regional Networks (such as the one of Andalucía) were formed, as the associated LAGs felt the need to have a spokesperson to represent them to Public Administrations. Subsequently, in 1995, the Spanish Network for Rural Development (REDR) was constituted. It is a non-profit association (private

entity) comprising various regional networks and many associated Leader+ LAGs, later joined by Development Groups from the PRODER Leader like national programme. In 1999, REDR joined the association of 'informal' networks from other Member States in the European Leader Association for Rural Development (ELARD). This budget available enables the association to have three employees: a manager and two technicians

Financial and human resources

This Spanish association of LAGs has an annual budget of about EUR 275,000.

Up to 2005, all of the funding came from membership payments. As of 2005, the association has been receiving funds from the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture. REDR also participates in public tenders issued by other entities and institutions who provide funding.

C/ Leader+ networking in France

C.1/ The main characteristics of Leader in France⁷

The Leader+ programme in France is implemented at the national level. It was developed by DATAR together with the Ministry for Agriculture. LAGs were selected following two calls for applications, on the basis of a two-step procedure: firstly, a regional pre-selection with a thorough technical evaluation, and secondly, the final decision taken by a national selection committee, composed of institutional and socio-economic partners as well as national associations. Cooperation projects are approved by a national selection committee which meets four times a year.

Key points concerning the network

- an important number of LAGs (140)
- a regionalised country with 1 national Managing Authority different from the Ministry of Agriculture
- 1 national and 5 inter-regional formal networks working together
- action 3 covering actions other than networking

C.2/ History of how the official Leader+ networking units have been set up in France

The French Leader+ national programme presented networking in a way structured at two complementary levels: the national level with one national networking unit and, in parallel, at sub-national level in a way not clearly defined (the programme says that this second level will be either regional -with 20 regions covered by the programme- or concern several regions each).

The French national steering committee (which gathers experts and representatives from different Ministries concerned with the programme, from the Regions, from the European Commission, and from other national networks or partners) has defined, at the beginning of the implementation of the programme, the main tasks the networking units would cover and the way things would be organised. This led to the launch of a call for proposal to identify who would implement the national networking unit, which would be left as one of its first tasks to launch a survey (by the LAGs and other types of actors) and to analyse which level would be the most appropriate for sub-national networking, and which tasks ought to be done at each level.

The Managing Authority thus launched a call for proposals which led to the awarding of the national networking unit contract to a private company called RCT.

The study concerning Leader+ sub-national networking carried out by the national networking unit led to defining the five geographical areas where the sub-national networking unit would be relevant, and the tasks that they would implement.

The Managing Authority decided that the sub-national networking units ought to be more than service providers and that they were to prove their involvement in the programme as well as their capacity to be strong partners. Therefore, it was decided to propose to finance only part of their activities where it was possible for them to co-finance some of their tasks. A call for proposal was launched with this idea in mind, and presenting main guidelines of the work to be done, but leaving the door open to any specific approach that would be relevant at the considered level. This led to contracts between the Managing Authority and structures involved in these five sub-national networking units (either one unique structure per sub-national network or several structures per network, depending on the choice made locally in terms of organisation).

Concerning consultation, the first place for discussions is the national steering committee where representatives of LAGs and actors are represented. The national networking unit also started its

⁷ Extract of the country datasheet available from http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/memberstates/index_en.htm

work with a telephone survey in order to better define the tasks it would implement to meet both the requirements of the call for proposal and the needs of its target group. Also, when working on the definition of the sub-national networking units, the LAGs have been questioned on what their expectations were. Finally, when setting up the sub-national networking units, contacts have been made with the LAGs in order to be sure to work with and for them.

In parallel with the national and sub-national networking units, Leader+ action 3 in France also covers activities whose aims are to contribute to the network. These activities are selected along the way by a national programming committee and are carried out by different types of actors. They concern, for instance, national studies and expert work, activities specific to the national theme 'welcoming of new actors', activities linked to communication and promotion (stickers, posters, photographs of rural areas...), some work for consultation to prepare the future etc.

C.3/ Tangible elements on the resources the official networking unit has at its disposal and the of the type of structure involved

Financial resources:

The budget allocated for the French national networking unit is EUR 8 millions to cover a five and a half year term and is more or less evenly distributed over this period.

The national networking units thinks it is capable in terms of animating the network, but not quite competent to carry out a complete work on capitalisation.

No precise figures can be given concerning the sub-national networking units since their activity and budget can vary from one year to the other.

Human resource

The national networking unit employs:

- 3 full time workers
- 3 responsible for thematic activities, and who work close to half of their time
- a general coordinator working one third of their time
- trainees
- other consultants for specific purposes
- external service providers who are partners in the process

In terms of competences, the following are underlined as being essential: animation, organisation, logistics, coordination, writing capacity, new technology knowledge (internet site, databases...), design, management, language, expertise in local and rural development etc. Also diverse skills cover the various themes related to territorial development, and expertise and know-how in the field of animation and communication.

Structure

The French national networking unit is implemented by a unique private company which works in partnership with others in specific areas (i.e. communication, new technologies...) and with thematic experts.

D/ Leader+ networking in Germany

D.1/ The main characteristics of Leader in Germany⁸

The German Länder (except for Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen) have their own Leader+ programme. There are therefore 13 regional programmes and one national, which is specific to the programmes' network activities.

The selection of development plans and LAGs (called 'Leader-Regionen') is under the responsibility of the managing authorities of the Länder. Individual project proposals are selected by LAGs themselves but they can be implemented only after a formal approval by the competent managing or paying authority of the Länder (this differs from one programme to another).

The cooperation projects follow the same procedure with the exception of one Länder where, additionally, a committee intervenes as an intermediate selection body.

Regionen Aktiv is another 'Leader' type initiative available to German rural areas and which is fully financed from national funds. It is also possible for both: a 'Region Aktiv' and a Local Action Group to operate in the same area.

Key points concerning the network

- high number of LAGs (148)
- a regionalized Member States with 13 regional programmes
- only 1 official networking unit at national level
- a specific financial axis for the national network

D.2/ History of how the official Leader+ networking unit has been set up in Germany

The Leader+ guidelines from the Commission were used as the basis for discussions as well as the draft German Leader+ programme. Consultation was organised by the Federal Ministry for Food, Farming and Consumer Protection which involved Ministries of the Federal Länder as well as other organisations like the economic and social partners. This led to a precise definition of the tasks to be implemented by the national networking unit.

These tasks were then transferred from the Ministry to a project group in the Federal Institute for Agriculture and Food [Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung, BLE] which had been directly selected.

This group, which had also carried out the Leader II national networking unit in Germany, used its experience to define a strategy from the tasks defined by the Federal Ministry for Food, Farming and Consumer Protection. An enquiry was also made on the needs of the local or regional actors, and the needs of the target groups, especially LAGs, were up in front.

D.3/ Tangible elements on the resources the official networking unit has at its disposal and the of the type of structure involved

Financial resources:

From 2002 to 2005, the amount reserved for the implementation of the German national networking unit is EUR 1, 6 million.

Technical resources

- Internal:
- editorial and journalistic qualifications
 - know-how in organising events (logistics and content)
 - technical and personal IT resources
- External:
- trainers for events (method and content)

⁸ Extract of the country datasheet available from
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/memberstates/index_en.htm

- counselling (with specialist reference to themes that are central, with reference to procedures...)
- dialogue partners in the Federal Länder.

Human resource

The German national networking unit started with 2 people in 1997, which became 4 by 2000 and 6 to cover the 2002 - 2006 period.

The competences outlined as central are the following: capacity for communication (including mixed groups as regards culture and language), openness and flexibility, analytic capacities, capacity to develop diverse kinds of know-how for the network (such as working together with experts in different fields), and various specialized capacities (for the team to be interdisciplinary).

Structure

As seen above, the German national networking unit is implemented by the unit "Rural Structural Development" in the Federal Institute for Agriculture and Food [Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung (BLE)]. Until 2003 the Network Unit worked as a project group in another unit, until it became an own administrative unit. Planning to become the National Rural Network for 2007-2013 with broader tasks, the unit was renamed.

The BLE is an institution under public law which combines the tasks of the former Federal Agency for Agricultural Market Organization (BALM) and Federal Office for Food and Forestry (BEF). The Administrative Council represents economic, administrative and consumer interests.

Resume

Member States	Number of LAGs	Specific characteristics of Leader networking	Total cost of the Leader+ national networking unit over Leader+	Cost of the national networking unit per LAG over Leader+	Human resource involved
Sweden	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a country with specific geographical characteristics: very wide and sparsely populated - a strong Leader experience - 12 LAGs which cover quite wide areas 	about EUR 1.600.000	EUR 133.333	4 part time workers: 1 for 60%, 1 for 50%, and 2 for 30%
Spain	145	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an important number of LAGs (145) - the presence of Leader like areas with identical methodology and networking instruments (162 PRODER + 10 AGADER in Galicia). - 1 national programme + 17 regional programmes → 17 managing authorities + the central Ministry for Agriculture 	EUR 7.500.000	EUR 51.700	6 full-time staff + 3 temporary staff
France - national level	140	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an important number of LAGs (140) - a regionalised country with 1 national Managing Authority different from the Ministry of Agriculture - 1 national and 5 inter-regional formal networks working together - action 3 covering actions other than networking 	EUR 8.000.000	EUR 57.143	3 full time jobs + 4 part time jobs + trainees + external consultants and partners
Germany	148	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high number of LAGs (148) - a regionalized Member Stated with 13 regional programmes - only 1 official networking unit at national level - a specific financial axis for the national network 	EUR 1.600.000	EUR 8.581	6 people