



European Network for
Rural Development

EU RURAL REVIEW
No 19

IMPROVING STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT



European Network for Rural Development

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

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Foreword

This edition of the ENRD's EU Rural Review considers why increasing and improving stakeholder involvement in rural development policy is so important and some of the ways in which stakeholder involvement can be enhanced and supported in practice. It pays particular attention to where rural policy networks can add value in this context.

This subject has been chosen for an EU Rural Review because of the importance placed on increased stakeholder involvement in the new rural development programming period 2014-2020 and the crucial role of rural networks in promoting and supporting stakeholder involvement in European rural development.

There will be a collective investment of around 500 million euros⁽¹⁾ in rural policy networking, 2014-2020 – covering both National Rural Networks (NRNs) in all 28 EU Member States and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD). The first objective of these rural networks is *to increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development*.⁽²⁾

Structure of the publication

- This EU Rural Review starts with an **introductory article** which seeks to define what we mean by stakeholder involvement in rural development, why it is so important and how it is supported by the EU. It discusses who the main rural development stakeholder groups are and why the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) are so important to their interests.

A set of three articles then explores some of the challenges and opportunities of increased stakeholder involvement in achieving the main objectives of EU rural development policy:

- Article 1 looks at the particular importance, challenges and opportunities for **engaging farmers, foresters, rural land managers and food-chain actors** in rural development policy.
- Article 2 considers how stakeholder involvement can and should contribute to achieving the **environmental and climate objectives** of rural development policy.
- Article 3 focuses on the need for effective and broad stakeholder engagement, through local initiatives to deliver **balanced territorial development**.

A second set of three articles then explores some of the channels for enabling effective stakeholder engagement:

- Article 4 looks at the wide array of **formal consultation processes** that seek to take on board stakeholder voices in the development and delivery of policy at different stages of the programming cycle.
- Article 5 reflects on the **communication channels** – both conventional and digital – that can be used as means of informing and reaching out to stakeholders, as well as facilitating exchanges between them.
- Article 6 analyses the role that **rural development networks** can play in facilitating and ensuring that stakeholder involvement really adds value to the quality of rural development.

The articles of this EU Rural Review reflect the ideas of various authors. It is also possible to take on board examples and points raised during a series of thematic group meetings and a European seminar on the topic of stakeholder involvement in rural development organised by the ENRD Contact Point in 2015.

(1) At the time of writing, the 2014-20 budget for the Rural Networks has not been finalised, but it is predicted to be of similar magnitude to that identified in the ENRD Review on Networking for the 2007-13 period.

(2) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD; Article 52 "European network for rural development"; and Article 54 "National rural network".



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Stakeholder involvement in rural development policy – an overview

This article provides an introduction to the topic of stakeholder involvement in rural development policy and sets the scene for the rest of this EU Rural Review.

It clarifies the importance of stakeholder involvement and how and why the EU is prepared to invest so much to support it. It also provides an overview of who the main rural development stakeholder groups are and their interest in the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

It argues that understanding the true value of stakeholder involvement means seeing stakeholders as active participants in all stages of the policy cycle from policy-making to better implementation on the ground.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT?

In general, stakeholder involvement means giving people a say in the decisions that affect their lives and a role in their implementation. However, it is essential to start here by clarifying what we mean by ‘stakeholder involvement’ in the specific rural development policy context.

Starting on the ground, the most direct and basic form of stakeholder involvement would seem to be through the **implementation of rural development projects**. Beneficiaries are directly engaging with the delivery of rural development policy by becoming involved in any project.

Even more interesting from a stakeholder engagement perspective are rural development projects based on collective actions involving multiple stakeholders. These joint or collective projects offer particular opportunities to use increased stakeholder involvement to deliver improved rural development outcomes.

However, increasing or improving stakeholder involvement in rural development clearly means more than simply improving the take up of standard measures of support or grants for projects.

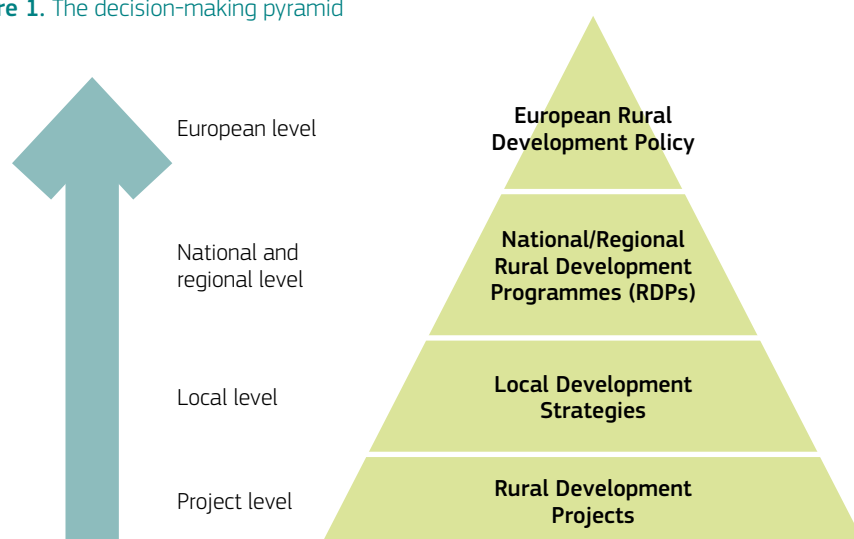
A higher level of stakeholder involvement sees participative **planning of local rural development strategies**.

LEADER, Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)⁽³⁾ and other local planning initiatives such as Local Agenda 21⁽⁴⁾ allow stakeholders to go beyond improving the delivery of individual projects to the design and implementation of integrated local strategies for rural development.

A higher level still sees stakeholder involvement in the **elaboration of regional and national level strategies** that provide the framework for the delivery of rural development projects and, where relevant, local development strategies.

The Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) are particularly important in this context (for more detail, see section below “Stakeholder interest in the Rural Development Programmes”). Effective stakeholder involvement at this level can ensure that the RDPs provide the right conditions, priorities

Figure 1. The decision-making pyramid



and opportunities for the effective achievement of rural development objectives on the ground.

An even higher level sees stakeholder involvement in the **definition of European policy and programmes**

that sits at the top of the decision-making pyramid. Effective engagement of stakeholders by policy-makers at this level can ensure that the policy adequately reflects the real challenges and opportunities in the sector.

WHO ARE THE STAKEHOLDERS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY?

Stakeholders are by definition people or organisations that have a “stake” in a matter, by being either involved in or influenced by it. In the rural development policy context, this covers all the groups concerned with policy delivery from the policy-makers to the (potential) project beneficiaries on the ground.

Given that rural development directly affects the quality of food, water, energy, leisure, biodiversity and other services, there is a sense in which it concerns everybody. However, when considering stakeholder involvement in rural development policy, it is more helpful to categorise people into groups to understand how their involvement can take place and what it can specifically contribute.

One of the first activities of the ENRD Contact Point in the 2014–2020 period was to conduct a rural development stakeholder mapping to inform and guide its work in supporting rural development networking. This mapping highlighted that, when it comes to analysing how stakeholders are aligned around rural development policy, three main broad categories can be identified:

- a. Policy and programme designers and implementers** – including political decision-makers and public administrators in national, regional and local authorities and European institutions; and including LEADER Local Action Groups.
- b. Interest group representative bodies and organisations** – including organisations representing

farmers, landowners, forest managers, rural businesses, actors along the food chain, environmental interests, research and innovation actors, rural communities, and disadvantaged groups, such as anti-poverty organisations. (Different groups are more interested and involved around some rural development actions and objectives compared to others).

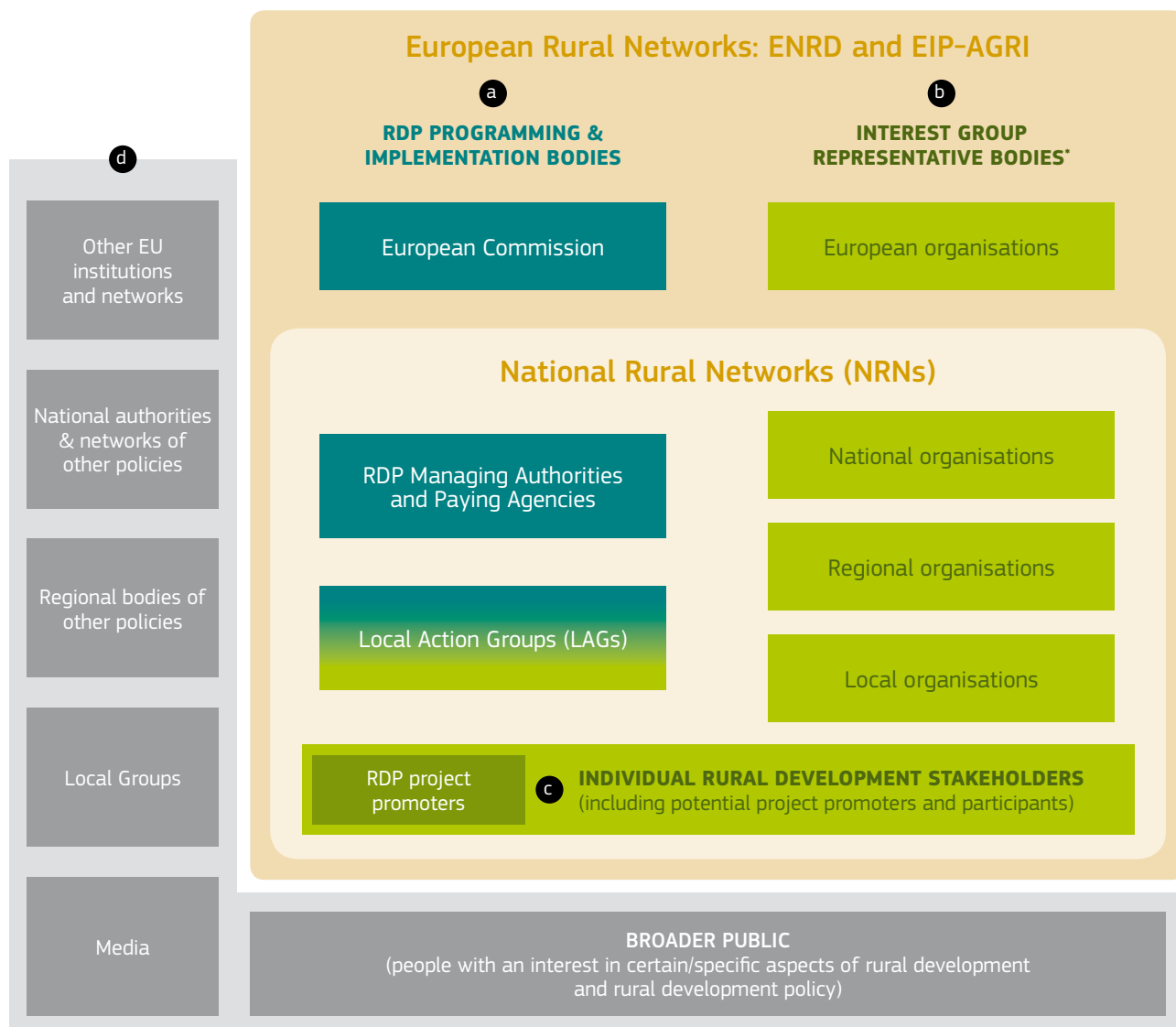
- c. Individuals involved in rural development actions on the ground** – particularly, potential and actual beneficiaries and participants in EAFRD projects, with farmers and land managers at the forefront. Some – but not necessarily all – of these will be represented by the bodies and organisations mentioned above.

(3) Integrated local development strategies are funded through LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) which now cover the vast majority of rural areas in Europe. However, these do not cover all the measures in the EAFRD nor, indeed, all the policies required for rural development.

(4) Since the United Nations Declaration on Sustainable Development in Rio in 1992, known as Agenda 21, many municipalities in both urban and rural areas have developed participative local strategies for sustainable development based on the UN principles – called Local Agenda 21 Strategies.

Figure 2. Rural Development Policy Networks – bringing rural stakeholders together

The chart below shows how the European Rural Networks provide a framework which brings together the diverse groups of rural development stakeholders, enabling them to develop mutual understanding and joint work, as well as reaching out to a broader concerned public.



*These organisations represent the socio-economic partners, civil society, research institutes and advisory service providers.

Rural development policy networks can play at least three complementary roles in bringing the three main categories of rural development stakeholders together:

1. Most importantly, they can act as a bridge between the public authorities (type **a** stakeholders) and all the other stakeholders involved or with an interest in

the implementation of rural development policy (types **b** & **c**).

2. They can support coordination, communication and capacity building among the complex chain of competent public authorities involved in the implementation of rural development (type **a** stakeholders);

3. They can help to build capacity and develop common positions

among the rural development stakeholders and their representative bodies (type **b** and **c** stakeholders) – here they can play a particularly important role in ensuring the weakest groups are heard.

In addition, rural networks can help reach out to a broader concerned audience, both within public bodies, civil society and the general public (**d**).



The valuable role of rural policy networks in improving stakeholder participation is explicitly recognised in the regulation

“As regards the Rural Development Programmes, Member States shall take account of the role that the national rural networks... can play involving relevant partners.”

Code of Conduct on Partnership, Article 5(3)⁽⁵⁾

“The networking of national networks, organisations and administrations involved in the various stages of programme implementation, organised in the context of the European network for rural development, has proven that it can play a very important role in improving the quality of Rural Development Programmes by increasing the involvement of stakeholders in the governance of rural development as well as in informing the broader public of its benefits.”

EAFRD Regulation, Preamble (40)⁽⁶⁾

The ENRD stakeholder mapping matches with the official definition of the EAFRD stakeholders as set

out in the Commission Delegated Act on the European Code of Conduct on Partnership for the European Structural and Investment Funds.

The Code of Conduct also identifies a category of competent public authorities,

alongside other groups of stakeholders representing different interest groups, including some of the more marginalised groups. This gives legal legitimacy to the approach to stakeholder involvement taken by the ENRD.

THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT STAKEHOLDERS as defined by the European Code of Conduct on Partnership

“For each programme, Member States shall identify the relevant partners among at least the following:

- competent regional, local, urban and other public authorities, including... other bodies organised at national, regional or local level and authorities representing the areas where integrated territorial investments and local development strategies funded by the programme are carried out;
- economic and social partners...;
- bodies representing civil society, such as environmental partners, nongovernmental organisations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination, including:
 - bodies working in the areas related to the planned use of the ESI Funds contributing to the programme...;
 - bodies representing the local action groups...;
 - other organisations or groups which are significantly affected or likely to be significantly affected by the implementation of the ESI Funds; in particular, groups considered to be at risk of discrimination and social exclusion.”

European Code of Conduct on Partnership, Article 4(1)⁽⁷⁾

(5) Commission delegated Regulation (EU) of 7.1.2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

(6) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD; Article 4 “Objectives”.

(7) Commission delegated Regulation (EU) of 7.1.2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

THE VALUE OF STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Stakeholder involvement can improve the quality of rural development policy and its implementation. This is true for all levels of government. Stakeholders bring knowledge, understanding, experience and expertise on rural development and related issues, as well as practical insight into the realities on the ground.

Stakeholder involvement can ensure that policy-making and implementation meet real needs in ways that make sense to the people most affected. Stakeholders can help policy-makers and administrators understand what the real issues are, what is likely to work and what not, what the greatest challenges are, where action can make the most difference and how.

Furthermore, as the decision-making pyramid shows, effective implementation ultimately relies on the delivery of projects and other actions by stakeholders on the ground. Involving these stakeholders at an early stage in the elaboration of

policies and programmes can avoid barriers to successful implementation later on.

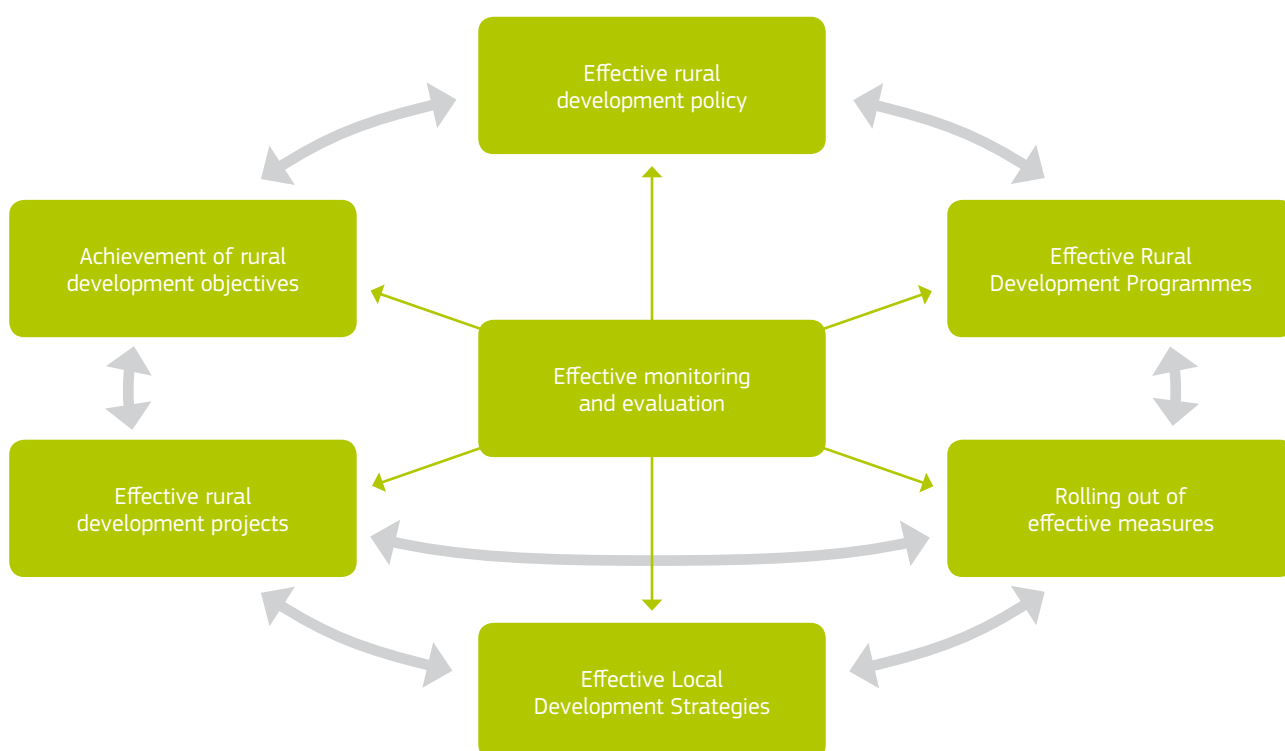
To comprehend the true value of stakeholder involvement, we need to understand that the delivery of rural development policy is a cycle, rather than a top-down flow. At each stage, positive stakeholder engagement can benefit both the next and the previous stage of the cycle through success and feedback.

Effective stakeholder participation is always a two way process – both policy makers and beneficiaries win from more effective policies adapted to real needs.

As this EU Rural Review goes on to explain, by contributing to improvements in the quality of policies and their implementation, stakeholder involvement can ultimately make an important contribution to achieving the three overarching objectives of European rural development policy⁽⁸⁾:

- a. fostering the competitiveness of agriculture” – see article 1
- b. ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources, and climate action” – see article 2
- c. achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities including the creation and maintenance of employment” – see article 3.

Figure 3. The positive cycle of Stakeholder Involvement



(8) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD; Article 4 “Objectives”.

THE EU SPECIFICALLY RECOGNISES THE VALUE AND CONTRIBUTION OF STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

“By involving partners in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects supported by EU funds, Member States will be better able to ensure that funds are spent where they are most needed, and in the best way possible.”

Foreword to presentation leaflet of Code of Conduct on Partnership,
László Andor, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2007-13⁽⁹⁾

“Partnership has a clear added value in enhancing the effectiveness of the implementation of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. It enhances collective commitment and ownership of Union policies, increases the available knowledge, expertise and viewpoints in the design and implementation of strategies and ensures greater transparency in decision-making processes.”

Introduction to presentation leaflet of Code of Conduct on Partnership

“Partnership must be seen in close connection with a multi-level governance approach... Involvement of partners helps to reduce coordination and capacity gaps in policy making between different levels of government, in terms of information, resources, funding, administrative and policy fragmentation.”

Explanatory Memorandum to the Delegated Act on the European Code of Conduct on Partnership



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IMPORTANTLY, EU REGULATION MAKES STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY A REQUIREMENT AND NOT JUST A SUGGESTION

“In accordance with the multi-level governance approach, the partners... shall be involved by Member States in the preparation of Partnership Agreements and progress reports and throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes...”

Common Provisions on the ESI Funds, Article 5(2)

“Partnership implies close cooperation between [stakeholder groups] at national, regional and local levels throughout the whole programme cycle consisting of preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.”

European Code of Conduct on Partnership, Preamble

STAKEHOLDER INTEREST IN THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

RDPs offer direct opportunities for rural development stakeholder involvement. But, the rural development stakeholder perspective does not limit itself to EU rural development policy or the RDPs. It is therefore important to explore some of the new ways the RDPs can create positive links with other relevant areas of policy implementation.

Rural development is influenced by a wide variety of actions, forces and trends, as well as a diverse range of local, regional, national and European policy areas. Potentially relevant policy areas include regional development, cohesion policy, maritime and fisheries, climate change, the environment and biodiversity, employment, social inclusion and anti-poverty etc.

However, other potentially relevant policies and programmes are usually managed by sectoral departments or ministries which do not distinguish the specific needs of rural areas. Rarely are there organised channels for specifically rural stakeholders to express their views and improve the quality of these broader policies directly.

Direct opportunities under the RDPs

Since RDPs are often the only explicitly rural strategies available in EU Member States, they provide particular opportunities for rural development stakeholders. Furthermore, the RDPs have significant financial resources attached. Approximately 161 billion euros will be invested in the RDPs, 2014-2020, including co-financing from the EAFRD and national public funds.⁽¹⁰⁾

The RDPs concentrate their investments very significantly on land and land management. Four out of the six Union priorities for rural development⁽¹¹⁾ refer mainly to the economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability of the agriculture, forestry and food sectors (Union Priorities 2-5).⁽¹²⁾

Fourteen of the twenty RDP measures are directed at farmers, forestry owners and other public or private land managers. In the 2014-2020 period these measures are predicted to account for around 75 % of the total investment.

Whilst farmers, foresters and landowners of different kinds are at the centre of the Rural Development Programmes, five measures also refer to the importance of involving other stakeholders: Knowledge transfer (Measure 1); Farm and business development (Measure 6); Basic services and village development (Measure 7); Cooperation (Measure 16); and LEADER local development (Measure 19).

The range of stakeholders for these measures can be understood to include: universities and research centres; rural entrepreneurs and SMEs; municipal administrations; village associations and NGOs; LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs); and in some

cases other concerned members of the rural population.

Provisions for coordination between funds and pillars

The RDPs offer the potential to become focal points for the coordination of other funds and policies from a rural perspective.

The requirement to ensure RDPs are coherent with the broader EU2020 Strategy means strengthening mechanisms for coordination with the other European Structural and Investment Funds in rural areas. The new provisions for multi-funded LEADER/CLLD strategies increase the opportunities and the need for involvement of a broader range of stakeholders in rural development actions.

Also, the common objectives and interactions between the first and second pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy have been strengthened. This increases the



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(10) Source: <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rural-development-2014-2020/country-files>

(11) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD; Article 5 "Union priorities for rural development".

(12) The other two Union priorities are broader and concern: knowledge transfer and innovation (UP1); and promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas (UP6).

opportunity for ‘smart’ combination of support from both sources for some of the key priorities such as support for young farmers, producer co-operation and environmental payments.

RDPs as levers for broader rural development stakeholder involvement

Certain measures within the RDPs offer specific potential for acting as catalysts and promoting involvement of a broader range of stakeholders even though they may not have the largest budgets. These include the measures for knowledge transfer and innovation as well as environmental measures. However, it is worth specifically mentioning three as they can help mobilise important “agents of change”:

- **Co-operation (Measure 16)**

The measure for co-operation has been considerably strengthened in the new programming period to become a very broad and flexible instrument. The inclusion of the EIP-AGRI⁽¹³⁾ Operational Groups offers specific opportunities to create links with the use of Horizon 2020 funds.

A wide range of types of co-operation are mentioned in the rural development regulation – including pilot and joint projects connected to tourism, mitigating climate change, environmental improvements, water

and forestry management, short supply chains of all kinds, biomass production, and the design and implementation of local development strategies. Eligible expenditure includes preparatory studies, animation and running costs, project costs and promotion.

If managed carefully, the co-operation measure can be used to develop collective solutions to issues which bring together the core farming and forestry stakeholders of the RDPs with those concerned with other aspects of rural development.

- **LEADER local development (Measure 19)**

The measure providing for “support for LEADER local development (CLLD)” specifically provides for involving a broad range of local stakeholders in the development and implementation of local development strategies (see Article 3 on Balanced territorial development).

The possibilities for co-operation between funds and multi-funded CLLD offer enhanced scope for involving new stakeholders and building bridges between rural and urban stakeholders.

- **Farm advisory services (Measure 2)**

Advisors can play a key role in supporting effective roll-out of other RDP measures by involving

stakeholders on the ground. They can provide technical, agricultural expertise alongside an excellent understanding of the funding possibilities of the RDPs, thus acting as a bridge between rural development policy and local rural development stakeholders.

If they assume a forward-looking and proactive role, farm advisors and advisory services can therefore be critical intermediaries in the process of building stakeholder involvement. They can be ‘foot soldiers’ of rural development policy implementation, meeting and bringing together the voices, opinions and experiences of various rural stakeholders on the ground and linking them with the possibilities provided by the RDPs.

Dr Efi Charalambous-Snow, of the Cypriot Farm Advisory Services, highlights another role of advisors: “The regional offices and their staff have very good relations with their local farmers. They represent a link between farmers and the national agricultural authorities. The farmers tell us what their needs and interests are and we then communicate that back to the different Ministry departments, such as the Agricultural Research Institute, for action.”

The following articles in this edition of the EU Rural Review explore and develop these ideas further. The articles examine ways in which stakeholder engagement can contribute to the achievement of the various rural development policy objectives and look at means for supporting increased stakeholder involvement in practice. The crucial role and contribution of rural networks is highlighted in particular.



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1. Engaging farmers and land managers in rural development policy

The potential for success in ensuring that agriculture is both competitive and viable under the new Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) will depend particularly on engagement with farmers, foresters and land managers, as well as their representative bodies and advisors.

In this article, we consider the relevance of rural development objectives for farmers and reflect on the challenges and opportunities for engaging farmers and other land managers in rural development policy.

The article focuses in particular on understanding ways in which farmers and other land managers can engage in different kinds of collective project to better achieve improved agricultural productivity and sustainability, as well as other rural development objectives.

WHY CAN EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF FARMERS IN RDPs BE A CHALLENGE?

A clear interest

EU rural development objectives are of clear and direct interest and concern to farmers, foresters and landowners given that they aim to support, inter alia, **competitive agriculture**, viable farms, sustainable agriculture, rural jobs and the vibrancy and prosperity of rural communities.

Rural development objectives look beyond basic agricultural

production support towards how rural actors, large or small, can develop **sustainable production**. Rural development funding can thus help farmers, foresters and landowners to **diversify their economic interests, reduce business risk**, as well as obtain financial support for contributing to **non-economic objectives in environmental, climate and social fields**.

Commissioner Hogan has already pointed out that “The new Rural Development Policy will be a key driver to encourage investments in rural areas and support business start-ups and innovation projects.”⁽¹⁴⁾ Nevertheless, there are still some obstacles to the effective engagement of farmers in RDP implementation.

(14) Speech by Commissioner Hogan to the European Parliament, 03 December 2014.

The two Pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy

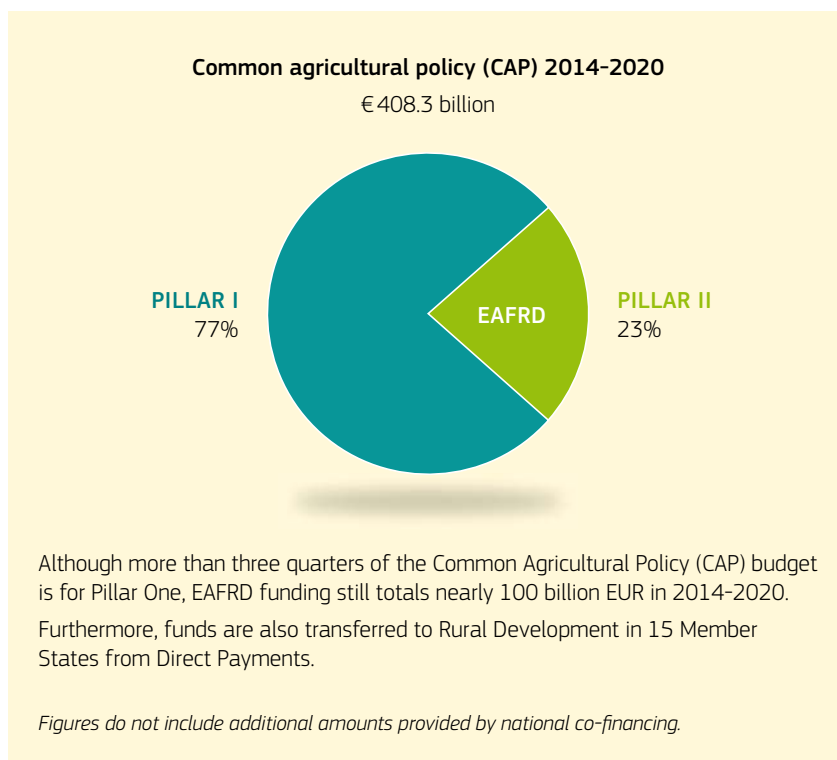
The very strength of the EAFRD in supporting the breadth of rural development objectives through a number of different priorities and measures can make it more difficult to understand and access for farmers on the ground.

Many large farmers' organisations have understandably focused in their representations on simplifying or ensuring access to direct payments for farmers under Pillar One of the CAP. There is still much to be gained from greater farmer involvement in the design and roll out of RDP measures to ensure they really respond to farmers' needs, are understandable and, as a result, are taken up by farmers and other land managers on the ground.

The principles underlying effective stakeholder engagement (as set out in the introductory article) assert that policy-making will be improved by engagement of the full breadth of rural development stakeholders. As key actors in the rural world, the range of land managers and producers cannot be absent from those discussions. Their knowledge, experience and opinions are vital for the most successful policy-making.

The diversity of producers

Another challenge in successfully engaging producers in the Rural



Development Programmes is the **diversity and complexity of the farming sector in Europe**. Local conditions and cultures differ extensively across European rural areas, with a whole range of farm sizes, sectors, ownership and management systems.

This means that one type of farmer or farmers' organisation cannot necessarily speak for the whole range of different stakeholder perspectives. However, it also makes the involvement of the many different types of farming and forestry

stakeholder even more important in order to get the policy and its implementation right.

Stakeholder involvement needs to reflect the needs of different kinds of farmers and farming activities including: family and co-operative; young and old; forest and farm; mountain and island; livestock and vegetable; continental and Mediterranean; and so on.

There are particular issues between the voice and influence of small compared to large farms. Larger farms tend to be better connected and represented with advisory systems and representative bodies. However, many smaller producers who are capable and interested in engaging in rural development face challenges in their level of influence, access to markets and the role in the supply chain that they have. This is particularly true where they are not connected within a co-operative or other representative body.



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ENGAGING FARMERS IN IMPROVING THEIR COMPETITIVENESS

The key to engagement of (big or small) producers in the RDPs in order to improve their competitiveness is in advice and information at the appropriate level for the producer, and with the correct market orientation.

Farm advisors and rural networks have an important role to play here. It is important for them to consider the format, style and manner of engagement, particularly with producers in the most remote regions who may have long distances to travel to attend seminars or information events. An opportunity to inform farmers also occurs where there are farmer-to-farmer exchanges, such as producer groups and demonstration farms.

Raising awareness of RDP measures

A first level of engagement to increase the involvement of farmers and other producers in the RDPs is to work to improve their awareness and understanding of the measures for which funding is available, and how these are relevant to their existing and evolving work and business objectives.

This means, for example, better communicating to farmers the

EIP-AGRI OPERATIONAL GROUPS

Local farming, forestry and food will be particularly concerned with the 2000 Operational Groups that are expected to be set up to develop better links between farming and research under the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) network.⁽¹⁵⁾

EIP-AGRI Operational Groups are project-oriented and composed of those key actors (such as farmers, advisors, researchers, businesses, NGOs, etc.) that are in the best position to realise the project's goals, to share implementation experiences and to disseminate the outcomes. Many of these Operational Groups will start at local level.

Operational Groups tackle a practical problem or opportunity in the field of agricultural productivity and sustainability which may lead to innovation. The precise conditions to support innovation projects are set out in the national or regional Rural Development Programmes.

opportunities for using RDP funding to develop their businesses, potentially reduce their reliance on primary production and diversifying their economic interests, for improving their access to markets and markets with higher margins, and for reducing costs associated with inefficiencies.

It can also mean strengthening knowledge about markets and the production requirements relating to food quality. Without this support, many farms struggle to consider how they can modernise their facilities and increase the proportion of income

they receive from their value chain. The challenges of understanding and engaging with broader environmental and social objectives can be even greater.

Engaging producers in shortening their supply chains

The ability to differentiate products can give an advantage within competitive markets, and direct engagement with consumers provides opportunities for producers to highlight issues such as provenance, high quality and environmental benefits.



SHORTENING SUPPLY CHAINS THROUGH PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

A pilot scheme in 2004 to supply local food and drink to a school in East Ayrshire in Scotland considered how to 'disaggregate' supply. This means that rather than having to buy multiple product categories – meat, fish, cheese, vegetables, eggs and bakery products etc – from the same supplier as part of one overall contract (bundling), the school could use different producers for different products.

This approach saw benefits to a wide range of rural producers who could compete on quality and price for certain specific products. The approach was so successful, that it has led to a growth in supply to 40 primary schools, five nurseries and one secondary school conducted through

the full EU Procurement process in 2005, 2008 and 2012.

Through the approach, local/rural SMEs had been awarded a total of £400 000 of contracts by 2012 [equivalent to approximately €500 000 in 2012]. The evaluation of supply was based on 50 % price and 50 % quality. The standards set for the contracts led to menus being a minimum of 30 % organic food, 50 % local food and 75 % unprocessed.

The success of the venture has been illustrated by satisfaction among the schools, parents, pupils and the producers themselves, and greater opportunities are envisaged through the RDP in continuing to broaden the approach across Scotland.

(15) www.eip-agri.eu

For smaller producers in particular, RDP funding can support the development of new market channels including direct routes to the consumer such as farm sales, farm shops (both real and virtual), the setting up of local markets, and participation in external events, markets and collaborative retailing.

Short supply chains also exist where a single intermediary such as a processor, retailer, hotel or restaurant may present a route to the consumer (and may also present a potential route for larger producers or groups). Rural development policy can support shorter chains by bringing stakeholders together to discuss new opportunities and challenge existing ways of working.

Developing co-operation between producers

For many rural producers, the ability to access larger markets is dependent on their capacity to provide consistency of supply, quality and volume to meet market demand. These demands are often difficult or impossible for smaller producers unless they are able to collaborate effectively. Many need support in developing the kind of co-operation necessary to achieve mutual business benefits.

The options available under the RDPs, particularly through measures aimed at fostering co-operation and producer groups mean that small producers can have greater market influence or access when grouped together.

Farmers and foresters also learn well from each other, so consideration can be given to how farmers exchange information in co-operatives, or in less formal peer-to-peer networks. Existing groups can be engaged, particularly where there are strong links to practical outcomes.

Within less well-established groups, consideration needs to be given to



CO-OPERATION FOR MARKET DEVELOPMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS & AUSTRIA

Producers in two main cherry growing regions in the Netherlands and Austria developed a partnership to exchange best practice in product development and cultivation methods, but also to consider rural tourism.

The exchanges led to promotional outputs including billboards for farmers selling fresh cherries and cherry products, and cherry information pages in a tourist magazine and local newspapers.

The Austrian knowledge and experience also inspired a Dutch concept for a cherry museum, including an orchard to present several local cherry varieties, and the piloting of new cherry products, such as cherry sausage, cherry pâté, and cherry bread.


The project received 86.7 % of the overall budget (€185 622) from the RDP: 56.6 % from the EAFRD (€105 123) and 30.1 % from national funds (€55 873).



© European Union, 2013

the establishment of trust within the group in forming these exchanges, and in demonstrating the benefit of

working together for mutual benefit, e.g. access to funding or simplification in administration or application.



AGRICULTURAL CO-OPERATIVE ON MEDICINAL PLANTS IN PORTUGAL

A group of 12 farmers in the Fafe area of Portugal decided to work collaboratively in the face of tough market conditions. They formed the Co-operative of Agricultural Producers Fafe (COFAFE) to collaborate in the production of high-quality organic medicinal and aromatic plants.

The project enabled the farmers to purchase shared equipment, dry the plants, extract essential oils and then to market the fresh/dried plants and essential oils. Overall, this process enabled farmers to modernise their production, improve the quality of their products and increase their farms' incomes.

A total of €442 020 was received from the EAFRD, which together with €147 139 of national funding contributed 43 % of the overall project costs of €1 370 170.

ENGAGING FARMERS AROUND ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECTIVES

Finding economic and environmental benefits

Many farmers are highly motivated by environmental sustainability, but lack knowledge, skills or information on how to promote such objectives whilst delivering on the primary need to run a profitable business.

“Most producers want to produce more sustainably, most are interested in sharing knowledge where this leads to greater market access. All of them want to make their farms more viable and competitive, especially if they can receive a better price.”

Many producers want to modernise, where they can be sure of a market for their product, and most want to consider passing on their farms, where they know it will secure the future. But first they have to be enabled to secure the present.”

Patrick Holden, Sustainable Food Trust⁽¹⁶⁾

Engaging farmers effectively is essential for overcoming some of the real and perceived conflicts of interest that can arise around land use, where different actors will look for different benefits deriving from the land, including the production of crops, animal husbandry and environmental services provided by soil, water and landscape.



© Zymantas Morkvenas

The key to engagement of producers in this context is therefore in illustrating where they can meet their primary economic objectives in ways that also enable the achievement of environmental objectives.

Market demand for products demonstrating their environmental credentials offer particular opportunities here. The emergence of niche markets linked with the

strong interest in food provenance, the green footprint, high quality and food security create opportunities for producers to improve their environmental sustainability in a manner which can secure them a competitive advantage.

Agri-environment schemes

Getting farmers and other landowners to participate in agri-environment



GOING ORGANIC TO SUPPORTING MARKET DEVELOPMENT IN SLOVENIA

The Kosec family in Ormož in north eastern Slovenia took the decision to convert their 35 ha traditional dairy farm to organic production, raising indigenous breeds of cattle.

The investment made through RDP funds enabled diversification combined with good pasture management, a low intensity animal production system and full organic conversion. Most of the land was designated under the EU's Areas with Natural Constraints scheme, 80 % easily complying with organic farm requirements.

The result is an integrated organic veal production unit selling at premium prices through short chains (including to schools and nurseries). In co-operation with other producers, they have established a locally developed quality food brand “EKOMESO” (Organic Meat), while reducing costs by investing in farm building improvement.

The € 52 500 project received € 42 000 from the EAFRD, with the remainder from national funding.

(16) Speech by Patrick Holden of the Sustainable Food Trust, ARC 2020 Conference 10 February 2015.

schemes is particularly important given their direct influence over land use and practices. Furthermore, a critical mass is usually needed to achieve meaningful outcomes across a territory.

One of the main barriers to successful implementation of agri-environment schemes can be a lack of understanding on the part of land managers of what the schemes involve and what

advantages they can provide – including financial advantages.

Engaging farmers early in the development of such schemes can be crucial to their long-term success.



FARMER PARTICIPATION IN AGRI-ENVIRONMENT DESIGN IN ITALY ENCOURAGES UPTAKE

In 2009, the Lombardy regional authority decided to design a new agri-environment scheme specifically for rice fields in order to conserve crucial habitat for herons.

Involvement of rice farmers as main actors, alongside experts and regional officers, was an essential part of the design process. A significant role was played by the producer organisation (*Ente Risi*), which presented the proposal to farmers.

Several meetings with farmers were organised in the most important rice-growing areas and technical issues discussed with experts from University of Pavia present.

The requirements of the final scheme included creating a water course which is kept fully wet for the whole year; a ditch to provide an undisturbed habitat for bird nesting; and leaving rice straw until the end of February as a valuable resource for migrant birds.

A minimum 10 per cent of a grower's total area of rice fields had to be entered in the scheme, with farmers receiving €125 – €155 per hectare from RDP funds. The participatory approach seems to have contributed to a high uptake of 11 300 ha at regional level in the first year (2011).

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/agriculture/pdf/delivering_env_benefits.pdf

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVING PRODUCER ENGAGEMENT IN THE RDPs

Farm advisors

Agricultural advisors⁽¹⁷⁾ have a key role to play by helping to simplify the process of understanding the RDP measures, what can be done and where and how support is available. They can also help Managing Authorities to design them so that they are taken up by farmers.

The key for advising farmers around engagement with the RDP measures is understanding where market access is possible, reducing administration, mitigating risks and how the return to the farmer or the cost saving may make the investment of time and money worthwhile in what can be an unknown area. Farmers need the information to enable them to make decisions on investment and risk management.

There is also considerably more potential for using farm advisors in a

strategic way to strengthen existing linkages between farming and forestry stakeholders and other local actors.

Feedback from the ENRD Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement highlighted

that one of the keys to success is having facilitators/advisors that farmers trust. This can help overcome suspicions that farmers may have of new schemes.



FARM ADVISORY SERVICES IN CYPRUS

"We need farmers to produce our food and look after our countryside and farmers can do this work better with the help of guidance about new methods, and also about the support that is available for them."

"Being a network of local advisory offices... we often get involved in organising collective farm advice activities... Such activities might be running training schemes, arranging knowledge-transfer visits or other events. We also coordinate other centralised advisory work including publishing a quarterly magazine."

"[Also], the farmers tell us what their needs and interests are and we then communicate that back to the different Ministry departments, such as the Agricultural Research Institute, for action. An example of this is the way we linked up researchers with farmers who were experiencing problems with fusarium, in melons and watermelons. Our plant pathologists with the assistance of propagation specialists were then able to carry out applied research with the farmers to identify an innovative solution [which] overcame the problem and helped our farmers to regain their competitiveness."

Dr Efi Charalambous-Snow, coordinator, Cypriot farm advisory services



National Rural Networks

Learning from collaboration and networking can increase the quality of advice and guidance and improve the chances of success in engaging farmers effectively in the RDPs and around rural development objectives. Rural networks can directly provide advice and guidance to farmers and other land managers.

Rural Networks can also perform the crucial role of linking farmers and other stakeholders, for example marketing chain participants, financial organisations, environmental organisations, tourism organisations, researchers and consumers. Networking can particularly add value through creating trust and enabling regular and effective

FLEMISH RURAL NETWORK ENGAGES ON CAP

To ensure that farmers were well informed on the developments of the CAP, the Flemish Rural Network engaged with farmers through a number of workshops highlighting the support and measures under Pillars 1 and 2 in 2014. Seven workshops were delivered between September and November around Flanders, with further seminars specifically focussed on fruit and on vegetables.

The success in delivering these workshops, organised by the NRN and supported by industry experts, has led to a further tailored information session on greening and agri-environment measures delivered in Spring 2015. The network continues to engage and inform farmers and growers on issues such as LEADER and on developing innovation in rural areas.

communication between these different stakeholder groups.

The collaboration opportunity provided by working within rural networks enables stakeholders to share good practice

in designing and implementing RDP measures. It also increases the chances of identifying effective opportunities for collaborative diversification between different stakeholder groups.



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2. Stakeholder involvement to achieve the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action

Sustainable management of natural resources and climate action are at the heart of the rural development objectives 2014-2020. This article argues that this can only be achieved through active and broad stakeholder engagement.

Such engagement is necessary at one level to ensure that the full range of actors on the ground are taking the actions necessary to make a positive difference, rather than individuals working in isolation. However, it is just as importantly needed in all stages of policy and programme design to ensure that conflicts with other land use needs are avoided.

Stakeholder involvement means better informing stakeholders about sustainable management and also listening and taking on board their ideas and concerns around the implementation of the most appropriate actions for mutual economic, environmental and social benefits.

SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES IN THE RDPs

“Ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources, and climate action” is one of the three core objectives for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and hence the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) for 2014-2020.⁽¹⁸⁾

The “environment and climate change mitigation and adaptation” are also highlighted as cross-cutting objectives to which all RDPs must contribute, using their chosen rural development priorities and measures.⁽¹⁹⁾

At least 30 per cent of EAFRD funding for RDPs must be allocated

to farm and forest measures aimed at environmental and climate purposes.⁽²⁰⁾ The following table sets out the relevant Articles of the EAFRD Regulation and their associated Measure code under the Implementing Regulation.

The types of actions that can be funded via RDPs to support and

improve the sustainable use of natural resources and climate action are extremely varied. Such actions may also be funded under other broader RDP measures, for example those for co-operation and innovation according to the priorities and needs identified in the specific RDP.

Environmental/Climate-Related RDP Measures ⁽²¹⁾	Measure code ⁽²²⁾
EAFRD Regulation, Article 17: "Investments in physical assets... [including] non-productive investments linked to the achievement of agri-environment-climate objectives..."	4.4
EAFRD Regulation, Article 21: "Investments in forest area development and improvement of the viability of forests"	8
EAFRD Regulation, Article 28 : "Agri-environment-climate [payments]"	10
EAFRD Regulation, Article 29: "Organic farming [support]"	11
EAFRD Regulation, Article 30: "Natura 2000 [payments]" - but not Water Framework Directive payments	12
EAFRD Regulation, Articles 31 and 32: "Payments to..." [and] "Designation of Areas facing Natural Constraints"	13
EAFRD Regulation, Article 34: "Forest-environmental and climate services and forest conservation"	15

THE VALUE OF INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS

Better informed decision-making

As discussed in the introductory article, stakeholders can add value at all stages of the programming cycle. In the context of environment and climate objectives this ranges from the identification of needs, through the setting of priorities, to scheme design and implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation.

Effectively used, a broad-based stakeholder group can offer advice and act as a 'sounding board' to improve the design of relevant RDP measures, and also provide an influential support base throughout the life of the RDP.

Specialist organisations are likely to have up-to-date knowledge and data that could inform the design and evaluation of evidence-based measures for natural resources and climate action. The skills of specialist environmental stakeholders may also be used in providing advice to land

managers, or in impact evaluation studies.

At the same time, farmers, foresters and local communities bring to the table very detailed knowledge of local land and business management.

Effective engagement of these voices can lead to more informed choices:

- by the managing authority which chooses how to design specific

measures and where target them; and

- by potential beneficiaries who choose whether or not to apply for support.

Overcoming differences

However, the full value of involving stakeholders in working towards climate and environment objectives is not limited to the two-way process



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(21) Idem.

(22) Under Implementing Regulation (EU) 808/2014.



HIGH-TECH METHOD FOR STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

In the Gers Amont area of South-West France, high-tech web-based tools helped to involve farmers in effective decision-making around the implementation of agri-environment schemes and to thus overcome scepticism among arable farmers about joining the schemes.

One farmer said: *"It was important for me that many specific topics were discussed, thanks to the involvement of a large variety of different stakeholders."*

Under the leadership of the Agricultural Advisory Service, Farming and Water Management, stakeholders used the five step *Concert'eau* methodology to:

- define 60 possible scenarios of changes in farming practices;
- simulate the economic, social and environmental effects of 44 of these scenarios;
- compare different scenarios such as 'sustainable water use', 'good ecological status';

- set up a joint web platform presenting the scenarios to farmers; and
- help the farmers to choose the most suitable scenarios for their land.

Another farmer commented: *"This made it easier for local farmers to apply a range of possible agri-environment measures if, like me, they wish to do so."*

Stakeholder involvement increased take-up of the agri-environment scheme and the project coordinator, who was introducing this methodology for the first time, has continued to use it for other projects aiming to reduce nitrate and pesticide pollution of watercourses.

The first implementation of the methodology was 50 % funded by the EU's LIFE programme (total budget € 2 808 000) in the *Concert'eau* project, 2006-2009.

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=3100
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrKbU7M7Muc>

of information exchange between the Government (managing authority, paying agency) and individual stakeholders.

Actions to maintain or improve the state of the environment in rural areas, tackle environmental degradation or to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are likely to have implications for the work and economics of rural businesses. It is important to listen to and exchange between all views about the likely business impact and workability of proposed environmental actions.

Effective stakeholder involvement means bringing together and exploring the different and (potentially) conflicting viewpoints among the stakeholders themselves. This provides an opportunity to explain objectives and concerns, question different viewpoints and eventually to resolve some of the perceived conflicts through better mutual understanding.

Bringing the different viewpoints together to discuss the need for EAFRD support and the design and impact of possible measures will not just improve

the design of RDP environmental and climate measures. If done effectively it will help to broaden the understanding of RDP objectives and opportunities and provide an insight into the others' priorities and concerns.

Experience shows that if people or organisations with different viewpoints

are exposed to others' priorities and understand the reasons for them, there is a better chance of shared objectives and priorities, leading to more collaborative working at later stages in the programming cycle. This is likely to lead to more effective RDP implementation.



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WHO ARE THE KEY STAKEHOLDERS?

Previous articles in this EU Rural Review have highlighted the central place of farmers and other land managers in the design and implementation of rural development policy. However, achieving environment and climate objectives clearly implies the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, not least environmental, conservation and climate NGOs and other specialist organisations.

Who the key stakeholders are depends on the type of environmental and climate actions supported by the RDP, and who is affected or involved. As well as those with a particular interest in environmental and climate issues, stakeholders can include anyone involved or with an interest in land management, infrastructure and investment in the agriculture and forestry sectors, local tourism opportunities, renewable energy generation, water resources and energy efficient processing and transport of farm and forest products etc.

Given such breadth of interest, the key stakeholder groups for the measures relevant for natural resources and climate are likely to include:

- farmers, foresters, and other land managers, including managers of regional/local nature reserves and national parks
- environmental and climate NGOs
- experts from national or regional environmental, climate, agricultural and forest research institutes
- government agencies responsible for climate adaptation (flood and fire risk management)
- local supply and processing businesses and producers' associations in the agri-forest chain (including packaging and transport etc.)
- farming and forestry/woodland advisers
- tourism providers
- local rural communities in target areas

- representatives of Local Action Groups (LAGs), where not represented by the organisations mentioned above

Such a wide range of different interests and expectations of the RDP means that inevitably there will sometimes be conflicting priorities. This is all the more reason to engage widely!

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS FORMALLY RECOGNISED

The Common Provisions Regulation⁽²³⁾ and European Code of Conduct on Partnership⁽²⁴⁾ now formally recognise bodies representing civil society, such as environmental partners and non-governmental organisations as "relevant partners" for both the Partnership Agreement and the ESIF programmes (including the EAFRD).



BENEFITS OF COMBINING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WITH SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION

A UK project worked to bring together stakeholder interests around wild deer in the hills of northern Scotland in order to overcome conflict and improve deer management.

Conflict was arising because the deer provide employment through hunting and game meat production, and encourage tourism, but their grazing can damage the woodland biodiversity and they cause road accidents. The deer are not owned by anyone, but the right to hunt them rests with the landowner, so conflicts about deer numbers arose between neighbouring landowners and with other local and national stakeholders.

The project found that scientific evidence was used by national organisations, but not at local level where talking to

people and attending meetings are the most popular way of gaining knowledge.

The researchers concluded that government agencies have a key role to play in communicating science to practitioners, but also that the detailed local knowledge of the stalkers who guide the visiting hunters can be used to improve the scientists' predictions of deer movements.

The two groups co-operated in computer mapping, which helped to reduce conflicts about interpretation of evidence and build trust between stakeholders with differing objectives.

The project was funded by Research Councils and public authorities in the UK.

<http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/Irvine%2018/Irvine.pdf>

(23) Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 laying down common provisions on the [ESI Funds], Article 5.

(24) Commission delegated Regulation (EU) of 7.1.2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds, Articles 3 & 4.

HOW AND WHEN TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS?

There are many different ways of involving stakeholders, including open consultations, bilateral meetings, participation in advisory and steering groups, as well as involvement in scheme delivery and evaluation. Systems of stakeholder engagement may need to be adjusted to the different institutional and cultural contexts across Europe

A first step is to make sure that the National Rural Network (NRN) includes as wide a range of relevant and interested stakeholders as possible and to encourage their active involvement in NRN activities. The same applies for the relevant Operational and Focus Groups of the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture (EIP-AGRI).

There are opportunities for stakeholder involvement in formal RDP governance processes, notably within the formal 'partnerships' created to help with the development of the new Partnership Agreements, in preparing the RDPs and Annual Implementation Reports and within the Monitoring Committees (see Chapter 4).

However, obtaining a seat at the table is only part of the challenge. The most important point is to enable opportunities for a *meaningful* level of engagement. During the initial design and development of environmental and climate schemes this means allowing questions and concerns to be discussed and resolved at an early stage. This can avoid problems of uncertainty and lack of information leading to suspicion and negative opinions before a scheme is even launched.

A well-chosen group provides a managing authority with a range of different perspectives and experiences to be taken into account, and participation in the work of the group helps to build and retain joint 'ownership' of the scheme. This requires sufficient time for stakeholder engagement, allowing trust and an understanding of others' perspectives to develop, and a skilled group leader who is sufficiently motivated to overcome the challenges.

During implementation, stakeholders can be encouraged to provide

information on what is working and what is not (and encouraged to suggest why) and then be involved in discussions about any programme modifications that are needed. This feedback may be an informal process of engaging beneficiaries in self-assessment.

Feedback may also come from the more structured involvement of stakeholders who are already carrying out their own research relevant to assessing progress and effectiveness – for example, bird surveys by volunteers or farm business surveys. In such cases it may be useful to combine their data (both quantitative and qualitative) with formal RDP reporting.





SUPPORTING STAKEHOLDERS TO ACHIEVE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE OUTCOMES

For individual NRNs, the following questions may help to decide how best to work with their key environment and climate stakeholders:

How to identify the key stakeholders relevant for engaging on environmental and climate issues in different institutional contexts?

- The agricultural authorities may not be aware of the specialist environmental stakeholders.

Is it more effective to use different groups of stakeholders for different RDP priorities/measures/target areas?

- It is important to pick the appropriate range of stakeholders for environmental and climate measures in particular, because specialist and often local knowledge is available and valuable.

How to engage stakeholders who have a clear interest and

valuable knowledge to contribute, but who may not have a strong representative organisation or the capacity to engage actively?

- For example by using social research techniques to identify and give voice to apparent outsiders who may be able to improve the quality of the collaborative process.

How should different cultural backgrounds and experiences affect the choice of methods of stakeholder involvement?

- Factors that can affect the choice of methods include experience of past contact with agricultural authorities, sources of trusted advice and information for local communities, influence of the legal basis of land and resource use, differences in computer access and literacy etc.

What are the key bodies or groups that are a priority for stakeholders to sit on to enable effective engagement?

- This will depend on the specific governance structures put in place related to the RDP in question.

Can novel methods be useful?

- For example, using computer mapping and visualisation tools can make it easier to involve different stakeholders in discussion of options. Adaptive and flexible methods, such as field workshops and discussion groups, and scheduling meetings for evenings and weekends helps stakeholders to engage.

How to learn from the experience of other NRNs with similar environmental and climate priorities?

- The context of other countries and regions can seem very different, but in many cases the principles underlying positive experiences and practices of stakeholder involvement can be used as reference and inspiration for improving performance.



3. Intelligent, inclusive and sustainable territorial development

Balanced territorial development seeks to ensure that rural development benefits the full range of rural stakeholders and local communities. It is about diversifying rural economies to create jobs and opportunities in a range of sectors of activity, reducing poverty, and supporting vibrant local communities.

The local level is often the best theatre for bringing together the mosaic of stakeholders and projects that are required for balanced territorial development reflecting the extraordinary diversity of populations, territories, cultures and expertise.

LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) play a central role in many rural areas and offer useful lessons. Yet there are many other types of initiative and elements to the local jigsaw – the challenge for this period is to use the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) to unite them into a more coherent force.

INTRODUCTION

At a time when the new period of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), rural development policy and more generally economic, social and territorial cohesion policies are beginning, the mobilisation and creativity of all stakeholders is essential for unlocking new prospects.

Since the crisis, which struck in 2007, we have seen a significant rise in social and territorial inequality. The changes we are living through and the great difficulties experienced by many groups are not without consequence when it comes to increasing stakeholder involvement. In

many regions, these changes take the form of an increase in individualism and citizens losing faith in the ability of institutions to act.

However, this loss of trust is perhaps less true at the local level. Many local actors are investing to create a better

future. Proximity can promote listening and sharing. Could this be the magic of rural areas?

With great ingenuity, collective solutions may be found to confront these difficulties. A great deal of

responsibility lies with local actors, the stakeholders, to look for suitable solutions, to re-forge weakened social bonds, to restore hope and to build or strengthen new avenues for development.

One of the important roles of rural networks will be to discuss and exchange in the coming years on potential methods to involve all the voices that are vital to balanced territorial development.

USING RDPs TO SUPPORT BALANCED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

The Rural Development Programmes for 2014-20 contain a number of important tools around which it is possible to mobilise local stakeholders into far more cohesive alliances for balanced local development in this period.

RDP opportunities for economic diversification

Economic diversification of rural areas, non-agricultural job creation and support of marginalised populations are key elements of balanced local development. The RDPs provide opportunities in this regard through measures and sub-measures such as:

- Support for vocational training and skills acquisition (Sub-measure 1.1)
- Business start-up aid for young farmers (Sub-measure 6.1)
- Business start-up aid for non-agricultural activities in rural areas (Sub-measure 6.2)
- Support for investments in creation and development of non-agricultural activities (Sub-measure 6.4)
- Co-operation among small operators in organising joint work processes and sharing facilities and resources, and for developing and marketing tourism (Sub-measure 16.1)
- Support for diversification of farming activities into activities concerning health care, social integration, community-supported agriculture and education about the environment and food (Sub-measure 16.9)

These measures can support the diverse range of local economic actors in rural areas, including local

entrepreneurs, as well as tackling important social issues such as generational renewal within the agricultural sector.

Basic services and village renewal

In times of austerity, the 80 000 rural municipalities that exist in Europe face major pressure simply to maintain – let alone improve – the level of rural services. There are many inspiring examples of how municipalities have used the measures for basic services and village renewal contained in the RDPs for working with local inhabitants to promote social innovation and find new and more sustainable ways of maintaining the quality of life in rural areas.

EU RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY – UNION PRIORITY 6⁽²⁵⁾:

(6) promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas, with a focus on the following areas:

- (a) facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises, as well as job creation;
- (b) fostering local development in rural areas;
- (c) enhancing the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural areas.



DIVERSIFYING INTO MUSIC

EAFRD finance helped Martin McClean diversify the income base of his family's beef farm in Northern Ireland's Cookstown district. He was able to develop a successful craft business based on his personal passion for musical instruments.

Mr McClean is a highly skilled craftsman who has turned a passion for his niche craft into a successful business. He received RDP support to turn one of the farm buildings into a modern and fully equipped workshop facility and studio. He also received support to undertake training in business planning, budgeting and for the development of a marketing strategy to help him actively target his market and increase sales.

"After years of producing 'hit and miss' dimensional copies which sometimes worked reasonably well, I now have the... ability to reliably and repeatedly create instruments which embody harmony, sonority, strength, sweetness and an extraordinary dynamic range," says Mr McClean.

www.martinmcclean.com

(25) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD, Article 5 "Union priorities for rural development".

Measure 7 of the RDPs provides for support for “basic services and village renewal in rural areas”, covering important aspects of rural life including support for:

- investments in the creation, improvement or expansion of all types of small-scale infrastructure
- broadband infrastructure
- investments in the setting-up, improvement or expansion of local basic services for the rural population including leisure and culture...
- investments for public use in recreational infrastructure, tourist information and small-scale tourism infrastructure
- investments associated with the maintenance, restoration and upgrading of the cultural and natural heritage of villages...
- investments targeting the relocation of activities and conversion of buildings or other facilities located inside or close to rural settlements, with a view to improving the quality of life... of the settlement.



COST-EFFECTIVE MOBILE HEALTHCARE SERVICES IN RURAL FINLAND

The Mallu does the rounds project provided a mobile medical service to people in rural areas of Finland. The Mallu bus met important needs amongst rural populations as well as providing the social and healthcare authorities with vital information about rural healthcare needs.

The Mallu bus was introduced in 2010 by the South Karelia Social and Health Care District (Eksote). It sought to respond to the significant challenges in supplying cost-effective social services to dispersed populations, especially for the many rural areas experiencing population ageing.

Stakeholders were involved in the planning of the service provided, including via the development of the route in co-operation with village associations. Planning ensures a fixed route around a catchment area of eight municipalities taking in at least 100 000 potential patients.

The EAFRD provided €48 000 of the total budget of €112 000

www.eksote.fi/mallu



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BRINGING BROADBAND TO REMOTE AREAS

The ‘Fibre to the Village’ project worked to expand access to broadband for isolated rural areas of Sweden. The project organised study seminars to explore the needs of village communities and identify areas where the free market is failing to provide broadband internet access.

It then produced information and guidance on how villages can build their own networks, creating ‘village nets’ that are then financially viable for providers to hook into and service. The project organised training seminars in community centres covering technical and practical information, including accessing the required funding.

About 450 villagers and local administrators attended 17 seminars and 150 related workshops. From this, several villages and network companies have started to plan for an expansion of the broadband network in rural areas. About 40 follow-up projects were initiated in communities to put the ideas into practice.

The project received €42 250 from the EAFRD out of a total budget of €53 810.

THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF LEADER/CLLD

In this period, there is a major opportunity to forge these different strands of rural development and the stakeholders concerned with them into more cohesive and coordinated local strategies. Central to such initiatives is clearly the measure to support integrated local development strategies under LEADER/CLLD.

Stakeholder involvement in balanced local development

Since 1992, LEADER has implemented the principles of the bottom-up approach and the mobilisation of local stakeholders in the rural development context. Today, it remains the only EU-wide initiative where stakeholders both design their local strategies and select local projects.

During 2014-20, the budget for LEADER is expected to increase from €8.9bn to €9.4bn of public expenditure and cover the vast majority of rural areas in Europe, through around 2 400 Local Action Groups (LAGs). The 5 % minimum of the EAFRD to be allocated to LEADER is a show of faith in the capacity of local stakeholders to do better than if the decisions were taken at higher levels.



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Importantly, under the new Common Provisions Regulation for the European Structural and Investment Funds⁽²⁶⁾, the LEADER approach can also be applied using the ERDF, the ESF and the EMFF via the concept of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).⁽²⁷⁾

LEADER/CLLD provides an important impetus for mobilising and coordinating with the stakeholders concerned with other funds.

Strengthened civil society participation in the LEADER partnerships and the tens of thousands of local actors involved can be considered a spearhead for local development in rural areas.

Managing Authorities and Local Action Groups across Europe are now exploring new ways of putting these recommendations into practice and there is great scope for sharing their experience.



PARTICIPATION IN A LEADER LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (LDS)

A LEADER Local Action Group (LAG) from the Jerte Valley, Spain started a participative process to prepare their Local Development Strategy for the next period just after the summer of 2013 – before the EU Regulations or Programmes had been finalised. The partnership set up a broad “development panel” to coordinate the work of seven thematic working groups involving stakeholders concerned with: young people and community organisations; women and equality; culture and education; agriculture and the environment; entrepreneurship, employment and training; sustainable tourism; and caring and social services.

Each working group sent out a simple questionnaire and discussed four main questions: What have we achieved? What remains to be done? What are the priorities for the future? And what new ideas are there for putting these into

practice? They also organised a contest to get ideas from all the village schools and several events for older people. The results were then discussed in a Valley-wide assembly.

This work provided the basis for the SWOT, needs analysis and identification of priorities for the local strategy. However, once the details of the regulations, the programmes and the budget are known, the community will again be involved in adapting the strategy, preparing the action plan and deciding on the funds to allocate to different priorities.

In the previous programming period already, the working groups developed scenarios for the kinds of projects that should be funded, with indicative budgets. The stakeholders from the different working groups then negotiated and came to an agreement about the overall distribution of funds and the priorities of the local development strategy.

(26) Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund...

(27) According to the recent screening of Partnership Agreements carried out by the ENRD Contact Point, 16 Member States will allow other funds to be used to finance CLLD and another four Member States may also do so.

Challenges in the evolution of the LEADER approach

The understandable desire to generalise the approach across virtually all rural areas can work contrary to the principles of a bottom-up approach. In certain cases, LEADER groups have been set up without the necessary capacity building in participatory approaches for LAG teams, members of the partnership and programme managers.

Growing administrative complexity has led many technical teams to spend more time on administrative

tasks and thus to spend less time on the ground supporting project promoters.

LEADER has also become increasingly institutionalised – with management often handled by a local administration or territorial unit. In the worst cases, LEADER becomes nothing more than another financial instrument – an additional pot of money.

The Common Provisions Regulation introduces a number of changes to help overcome these barriers. Firstly, the importance of animation, capacity building and broad participation is explicitly reinforced and the budget

that can be used for these items has been increased.

Secondly, the European Commission has introduced a number of initiatives to simplify procedures at all levels (including simplified cost options, the use of umbrella projects and so on).⁽²⁸⁾

Finally the participation of private and civil society stakeholders in the partnerships has been strengthened. No one group of stakeholders is allowed to have more than 49 % of the votes on the partnerships. Private and civil society stakeholders must make up at least 51 % of the votes for selecting the partnerships.

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

A number of lessons learnt from the results and difficulties encountered in the past can be drawn for this new programming period. They can be used to identify a number of success factors for effective stakeholder involvement in rural development policy.

These lessons can apply to all territorial development policies, from the level of individual villages to whole regions, or even – as in the case of mountainous areas for example – the inter-regional level. They also apply to agricultural and environmental policies.

Involving as many as possible

According to the specific context in each country, the process for mobilising stakeholders can vary from one area to another. However, it is always a measure of success. In certain countries, there is a long history of civil society involvement. This is particularly the case in Nordic countries, with their village action groups. These practices have spread, notably to certain countries in Eastern Europe.⁽²⁹⁾

In other countries, collaboration is instead organised via institutions. But there can still be a rich pool of local associations in various fields of activity, which can provide the starting point for citizen involvement.

Tapping into citizen initiatives

In response to the crisis, new initiatives appear and bring hope. Some are challenging because they call existing situations into question. Some are

created outside of institutions, whilst others benefit from their support. They can include: entrepreneur networks, local exchange systems, the sharing economy, citizen mobilisation via social networks, cultural initiatives, crowd funding and citizen engagement around issues such as renewable energy and the circular economy.

Clustered around these initiatives are engaged, dynamic citizens who rally to



THE RURAL MOVEMENT IN DENMARK

The Danish Village Association – Landsforeningen af Landsbysamfund (LAL) was established in 1976 as the 'village movement'. Its membership and activities focus around the village organisations. It also works closely with the Municipalities, and with the inter-relations between villages and Municipalities. In this sense, it is the closest to the local communities. LAL has focused on a wide range of projects to support village action and lobbying the government on behalf of rural communities.

www.lal.dk

The Council of Rural Districts – Landdistrikternes Faellesraad (LDF) was formed in 1997 as a 'rural forum' for the many rural NGOs. LDF was set up to work primarily at a national level, and to connect to the local level through the medium of their member organisations. LDF is a strategic body, working closely with the government to provide a focus on the diverse interests of rural development.

www.landdistrikterne.dk

(28) See the section on How to make CLLD safer, faster and easier for local action groups in the European Commissions Guidance on CLLD for Local Actors http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/guidance_clld_local_actors.pdf

(29) www.ruralcommunities.eu/index.asp?pageid=348369

develop their area. They can become a source of new initiatives and true 'stakeholders' within local partnerships.

By looking out for these emerging initiatives, supporting them in becoming a reality, making them known, strengthening them by networking and learning lessons from them, a virtuous circle is created or strengthened, which can provide both solutions and hope.

The growing role of social networks

Traditional communication based on formal meetings and top-down information is no longer sufficient. It often only reaches the best informed or organised people or groups.

Social networks are playing an increasing role in information being circulated wider and faster. New participative websites are becoming more common and digital applications are constantly developing to provide new ways of participating in and animating debates and allowing a much larger audience to become involved.

The gradual creation of a collective project

Effective stakeholder involvement in promoting balanced local development



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does not happen overnight. It takes time to mobilise stakeholders and to ensure their 'buy in' to a common project.

Buy-in increases greatly when the collective project has a long-term vision, has meaning, makes people want to participate and is part of a coherent development strategy.

Diversity of voices is a strength

Differences of opinion and different visions of the future provide richness to debates on how local development can be achieved in rural areas. Many

approaches are possible. Such conflicts should not be hidden, but deserve to be fully and openly discussed.

It is important that all the voices are included in the debate, not least those of less-organised or marginalised groups, including young people, immigrant populations and people experiencing poverty. From there, it is important that these debates are able to end up with clear, explicit and shared choices.

ECOLISE – A EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

In cities, towns, villages and rural areas across Europe, small groups of people are coming together on their own initiative to develop and implement practical, local initiatives to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of their communities.

The common characteristic of these groups is that they are established and driven by local people (bottom-up) and guided by the desire to take action within their own communities to respond to the threat of climate change and ecological degradation.

The number of these groups is increasing at an impressive rate, with over 2 000 groups now known to be active, but with the real number more likely to be double.

The focus is on promoting economic and social practices that value, protect and enhance natural and social capital,

thereby helping to strengthen resilience and overcome existing environmental, economic and social problems. These local groups are action oriented, with a clear focus on bringing about positive change within their own geographical areas.

Through their actions, they are also creating a platform for wider behavioural change within their communities, challenging existing beliefs and practices and establishing a supportive environment for new norms to emerge and develop.

Visit: www.ecolise.eu or read "Europe in transition: Local communities leading the way to a low-carbon society" produced by www.aeidl.eu.



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4. The added value of the ‘formal’ stakeholder consultation process

We often hear ‘formal’ stakeholder consultation processes described as time-consuming and bureaucratic, undertaken without adequate information, real representation, or time to discuss and report back. Too often they are carried out as a formality with no chance of influencing well-established mechanisms of non-transparent decision-making.

We will argue here that this negative view may be challenged and that there are formal tools in the current regulations and procedures that could allow a more effective participation by different stakeholders in policymaking.

We will examine how formal stakeholder consultation fits into the partnership principle in Europe, how it works in theory and practice, with some examples, and how it can be made more effective in the coming years.

THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE

The general theory behind partner consultation is that it provides a common arena where different positions of stakeholders may be openly expressed, confronted and discussed, acknowledging differences between public and private views, but also between different types of stakeholders.

For example the views of an environmental organisation representative in the formulation of a measure may be quite different from that of a farmer organisation representative. Instead of competing for influence in a non-transparent way, a formal consultation allows all stakeholders to intervene openly.

Managing authorities can hear all the arguments – which need to be informed and convincing for the general interest – acknowledge agreements and disagreements, offer compromises and in some cases reach a shared understanding of objectives and priorities, implementation difficulties and lessons learned.

The *formal* nature of the discussion is important here since it gives legitimacy to public decision-making and in no way precludes other informal exchanges between stakeholders.

Formal stakeholder consultation has been included in European regulations since the 1988 reform of the EU Structural Funds. Stakeholder consultation was included as an integral aspect of the partnership

principle, which provided the key framework for the functioning of the EU multi-level governance system.

The partnership principle evokes a peer relationship between partners, with different roles attributed to each in the design, implementation and supervision of rural policy.

The parity status of partners was an important innovation in terms of European governance. This differed

from the typically more centralised organisation, often quite hierarchical, of individual Member States, between the national, regional and local levels.

These principles have underpinned successive programming periods until today. However, the stakeholder consultation component has never been implemented in a fully satisfactory way, as many evaluations and stakeholders have pointed out.

EVOLUTION OF THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE

While the two key components of the partnership principle – the public partners and the private stakeholders – have remained constant over the years, important changes have been introduced during its “evolution”:

- On the one hand there has been a gradual consolidation of **public institutional partnerships**, which has become the key feature of the EU multi-level governance system, with a more clear definition of who does what in such partnerships.
- On the other hand, the **stakeholder consultation procedures** have been formalised in detail, shifting from a suggested – and only loosely defined – good practice to a well codified obligatory task, well integrated in the functioning of the public institutional partnership.

Back in 1988, the partnership principle was described as consisting of “close consultations between the Commission, the Member States concerned and the regional and local level, with each party acting as a partner in pursuit of a common goal” and having to “cover the preparation,

financing, monitoring and assessment of operations”.

This partnership also involved a “consultation with economic and social partners, exemplified as chambers of commerce, industry and agriculture, trade unions, employers”. Both the vertical chain of public actors and the horizontal dialogue with private stakeholders were included in the EU’s understanding of partnership.

The “official institutional partnership” between public partners was a formal requirement for the joint management of the Structural Funds and well-articulated. However, the participation of private stakeholders was left more vague and only suggested as a good practice to improve the quality of interventions.

Since 2014, the **Code of Conduct on Partnership**⁽³⁰⁾ has provided the most recent formulation of the partnership principle. It has strengthened, expanded and articulated in much greater detail the consultation procedures with private stakeholders.

In the current regulations, partnerships are understood as “close co-operation between public authorities, economic and social partners and bodies

representing civil society at national, regional and local levels throughout the whole programme cycle consisting of preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation”.⁽³¹⁾

Rather than being a suggestion, the updated partnership principle makes stakeholder involvement an obligation and gives a much stronger role to civil society. It serves as the legal framework and informs how stakeholder involvement needs to take place at each stage of programming. It provides indications on the criteria for selecting partners and representativeness, obtaining information, making all voices heard, providing capacity building, networking and the dissemination of good practices.

The motivation for such formal strengthening is that whenever such consultation takes place genuinely and effectively the programmes are more effective. The decision-making processes, although they remain the sole responsibility of the public partners, are more knowledgeable and transparent. Stakeholders are better informed and empowered, policies better understood and used.

(30) Commission delegated Regulation (EU) of 7.1.2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

(31) Idem, p.6 – See also the information boxes within the introductory article in this Rural Review.

THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY-MAKING

The Code of Conduct on Partnership ensures that the partnership principle is the key rationale for the 2014–2020 programming period. According to the current regulations, formal stakeholder consultations, within the framework of the partnership principle are required for:

- Preparation and implementation of the Partnership Agreement for all the ESI Funds
- Preparation of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) for the EAFRD
- The Monitoring Committees of each RDP
- Evaluation of programme findings

The partnership principle at EU level

In the **Common Strategic Framework** (CSF) establishing the strategic priorities for the EU as a whole, the partnership principle guides both the dialogue between the EU and Member States' managing authorities during its implementation, as well as the EU level co-decision procedure in designing all the regulations.

In the formulation and approval of the regulatory package for the ESI Funds, the decision-making follows a legislative procedure and a consultation procedure. When the Commission takes the initiative to make a regulation proposal, it is submitted to the Council (where Member States are represented) and the Parliament (with directly elected deputies) for amendments and approval (through co-decision). Only then the amended text becomes law.

In drafting its regulation proposals, the Commission follows an internal consultation between Commission services (the inter-service consultation).

Also, the Commission assesses the potential economic, social and environmental impact of its proposals with a separate working group, consults interested parties (NGOs, local authorities, representatives of the different funds' stakeholders, civil society), may establish parallel expert groups and launches open public consultations on its website.

Later in the process, during the different phases of implementation of RDPs, the Rural Development Committee at EU level assists the Commission in its supervision role. These procedures imply that there are formal stakeholder consultations of different public and collective private actors also at EU level, when regulations are prepared.

To maintain an open and transparent dialogue with representative associations of civil society in matters related to the Common Agricultural Policy, including rural development, the Commission has set up a number of Civil Dialogue Groups. These have the task of providing assistance in

matters related to the formulation and implementation of rural policy, promoting exchange of experience and good practice, advising on policy and delivering opinions when requested.

There are currently 13 civil dialogue groups working on different aspects of agriculture, for example on arable crops, direct payments and organic farming. One of them is specifically on rural development. Member organisations are appointed on the basis of responses received to a call for applications. The intention is to give a balanced representation of interests in a particular sector, whether of a social or an economic character. In practice it works as a stakeholder advisory group at EU level.

The partnership principle at Member State level

In the **Partnership Agreements** prepared at Member-State level (covering all ESI Funds), as well as in the **Rural Development Programmes** (EAFRD), the partnership principle includes formal stakeholder consultations.



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The two documents involve a different set of representatives in each case. The procedures followed should be transparent and in accordance with the institutional and legal framework of the concerned Member State. Partners should also have access if required, to support in their institutional capacity.

The results of such consultations, and how they have been taken into consideration in the programming documents needs to be reported back to the Commission. At the same time, the Commission should facilitate the exchange of good practice and mutual learning on effective implementation

of partnership, in particular through the establishment of Community of Practice on Partnership covering all ESI Funds.

As highlighted above, such procedures are now explicitly described in the **European Code of Conduct on Partnership**, considered as an integral part of the regulatory package. It establishes the legal basis for a stronger role of partners in the formulation and implementation of ESI Funds, including the EAFRD, providing detailed guidance to Members States on how and when these should be applied during programming.⁽³²⁾



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WHO ARE THE FORMAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY STAKEHOLDERS?

Partners in a consultation need to be adapted to the issue discussed. For example, the partners involved in the preparation and implementation of the Partnership Agreement need to include stakeholders involved in the use of all the ESI Funds. For the RDPs, only the stakeholders involved in the use of the EAFRD need to be involved.

In the specific case of RDPs, the identification of stakeholders by the Code of Conduct includes, as a minimum requirement:

- the competent regional authorities and national representatives of local authorities active in rural development policies of the Member State concerned;
- economic and social partners; and
- civil society bodies, environmental organisations, NGOs, bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination.

Different stakeholders should propose representatives who are informed, have discussed their position, report

back on the positions taken by other stakeholders, and are able to provide continuity in their representation task.

RURAL NETWORKING AND THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE

“Each Member State shall establish a national rural network, which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. The partnership referred to in [the Common Provisions Regulation and the Code of Conduct] shall also be part of the national rural network.”

EAFRD Regulation, Article 54 “National rural network”⁽³³⁾

“As regards the Rural Development Programmes, Member States shall take account of the role that the national rural networks [...] can play involving relevant partners.”

Code of Conduct on Partnership, Article 5

“The managing authority shall examine the need to make use of technical assistance in order to support the strengthening of the institutional capacity of partners... so that they can effectively participate in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes... For Rural Development Programmes [this] support... may be provided through the national rural network.”

Code of Conduct on Partnership, Article 17

(32) Commission delegated Regulation (EU) of 7.1.2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds, p.6. See also above and the information boxes in the introductory article in this Rural Review.

(33) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD; Article 54 “National rural network”.

THE ROLE OF MONITORING COMMITTEES

The Monitoring Committees are the main arena where formal stakeholder consultations have taken place around the Rural Development Programmes. These bodies operate during the implementation stage of programmes and their functioning is legally regulated.

Within the framework of the overall regulation and the Code of Conduct, the membership of the Monitoring Committee for each RDP is decided by the Managing Authority concerned.

Once it has been established, the Monitoring Committee defines the rules and procedures for its own functioning. The key aspects in this context are:

- how voting rights are distributed among members;
- the quality and timeliness of the information received by members on agenda items for meetings;
- the open availability of preparatory documents for the wider public;
- the ex-post publication of the meeting minutes;
- the arrangements for organising working groups;
- how to deal with possible conflicts of interests for partners; and
- how technical assistance resources should be used.

Monitoring Committees typically meet twice a year and discuss and approve implementation progress reports before they are sent to the Commission.

However, there is in practice a great variety in the ways chosen by Managing Authorities to organise and use Monitoring Committees. Two examples from Ireland and

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Germany (presented here in boxes) give a flavour of the variety of approaches taken.

In assessing how German RDPs had worked, the Commission services state that “although the involvement

of NGOs, environmental, economic and social partners is usually satisfactory in the Monitoring Committees of all German RDPs, their role has been very different from programme to programme.”⁽³⁴⁾



IRELAND MONITORING COMMITTEE FOR THE 2014-2020 RDP

Organisation of work:

- Meets at least once a year
- Reviews RDP implementation and evaluations
- Issues an opinion within four months of the decision approving the programme or any amendment to it and on selection criteria for funding; and
- Participates in the National Rural Network (NRN)

Composition:

- Farming and rural bodies
- Regional/local government
- Environmental and equality interests
- Relevant Government Departments and bodies
- The Managing Authorities of the ESI Funds
- The EU Commission participating in an advisory capacity

Source: Irish Draft 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme



MECKLENBURG-VORPOMMERN, GERMANY MONITORING COMMITTEE FOR THE 2007-2013 RDP

Organisation of work:

- Meets frequently, five to six times per year
- Has a real say in decision-making on proposed projects
- Public and private partners have the same number of votes
- The participatory system includes working parties and other consultative bodies

Composition:

- High-level representatives from the private sector –trade unions, employers, small enterprises, chambers, farmers, environment and social welfare associations

Source: The European Code of Conduct on Partnership, Section 3, Good Practices (p.18)

CONSULTATION STRUCTURES FOR RDP PREPARATION

Consultation of stakeholders in the preparation of the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) is just as important as consultation on their implementation.

For the preparation of RDPs, stakeholders should be consulted, inter alia, on:

- the analysis and identification of needs;
- the definition or selection of priorities in relation to specific objectives;
- the elaboration of a strategy;
- the allocation of funding to the different measures;
- the definition of indicators; and
- the implementation of horizontal principles (social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination);

Given that Monitoring Committees are often only established under the RDPs to support their implementation, these bodies often do not provide the necessary structures to enable stakeholder involvement in the preparation of RDPs.



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As a result, other consultation structures are used, such as official ad hoc meetings by invitation, or position papers prepared by different stakeholders.

The Commission Services' initial assessment of the development of Rural Development Programmes Germany, 2014-2020 found that

“Generally partners should be more involved especially at the critical stage of programme development (not only after decisions have already been adopted) where the voice of partners is not sufficiently heard... this could strengthen the programme's acceptance at the local and regional level.”⁽³⁵⁾

HAS THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE WORKED IN PRACTICE?

The partnership principle has developed from a great European innovation to something that is better accepted and understood, often influencing national procedures. However, this process and the development of truly effective stakeholder consultation takes time and capacity building for public administrators.

Nevertheless, despite the common framework, it should not be very



In the **Emilia Romagna Region in Italy**, RDPs were managed separately from other regional investment programmes in the 1990s, with different managing personnel, structures, and consultation, monitoring and evaluation procedures. The administrations were even in separate buildings.

Over time however, the two administrative worlds have gradually merged, with some EU practices filtering through, integrating with regional ones. The co-funding procedure and state aid regulations have further strengthened the gradual merger of different administrative and funding cultures.

According to the Managing Authority, stakeholder participation has now become a standard and accepted practice.

(35) COM, 2012, Position of the Commission Services on the development of Partnership Agreement and programmes in Germany for the period 2014-2020 p. 34.

surprising that Member States have implemented the principle in very different ways.

This is largely due to the very different institutional arrangements in place to start with: centralised or decentralised; different types of bodies as managing authorities in different sectors; different administrative backgrounds and procedures etc.

On the stakeholder side, the partners may also be more or less empowered

and organised, adopt conflict and competition strategies rather than reaching consensus through

negotiation, and disregard the voice of local and small communities or minorities.



In **Spain**, there were no relevant programmes with the logic of the Structural Funds before joining the EU. This meant that as the country started to develop these programmes for the first time, the EU's partnership principle and consultation procedures were adopted quite rapidly from the beginning and informed all rural regional policies.

The Leader Community Initiative, is an excellent case of this: the local public-private partnerships embodied in Local Action Groups became so successful, that Spain decided to replicate it as national programme with the PRODER initiative.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PROMOTE POSITIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE?

The Code of Conduct on Partnership is an excellent input for promoting a more positive and widespread implementation of formal stakeholder consultation in different Member States. It codifies the knowledge accumulated so far on the matter and diffuses it openly, making it a reference for all partners.

Furthermore, and most important, it indicates new areas in which partnerships may be improved, such as the involvement of partners in the evaluation of programmes, the need

for capacity building in this area, the role that the Commission and existing European networks could play in the dissemination of good practices and exchange of experiences – particularly relevant in the current stage of preparation of programmes.

An additional aspect that could be explored to promote a better implementation of the partnership principle is that of connecting better the different forms of consultation at different institutional levels in the EU. Each institutional level – EU, national,

regional, local – has developed its own specific consultation methods, but these rarely communicate with each other or are considered together. Each partnership system, whether it works well or not so well, is self-contained.

It is important to understand the different procedures for consultation and how these influence the participation of stakeholders at different levels. The question here is not so much to exchange practices, but to know the outcomes of consultations at EU, national, regional and local level, and what feedback they provide in terms of policy needs and decision-making.

In this task the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and the National Rural Networks (NRNs), which have played a modest role in consultations so far, could provide a precious support in facilitating exchanges and information between different types of stakeholders. They could offer capacity building for organising consensus and provide informal support for improving participation where it is currently weak – as in the case of the preparation phase of strategies and programmes.





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5. Using communication to inform and engage

Communication can be used as a strategic tool to support and improve stakeholder engagement. Done effectively, it can help different types of rural development stakeholders understand why, when and how they can benefit from engaging in the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

Good communication is essential for ensuring stakeholders find out about the opportunities available to them through the RDPs and how they can take advantage of them in practice to develop different types of rural development activity. It is also essential in the arranging of consultation processes to ensure that stakeholders know how and when to engage in the programming cycle.

Good communication of the messages emerging from stakeholders can also be an important element of getting voices heard by RDP decision-makers. Social media offers significant new and evolving potential in this regard.

OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION ON THE RDPs

Communicating RDP information has always been practised by Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks (NRNs), Local Action Groups (LAGs), and other rural stakeholders. Even greater emphasis is now placed on communication aimed at potential beneficiaries for the 2014-2020 programming period.

The EAFRD Regulation states that:
*“The **Managing Authority shall be responsible for...** ensuring publicity for the programme, including through the national rural network, by **informing potential beneficiaries,***

professional organisations, the economic and social partners, bodies involved in promoting equality between men and women, and the non-governmental organisations concerned, including environmental

*organisations, **of the possibilities offered by the programme and the rules for gaining access to programme funding** as well as by informing beneficiaries of the Union contribution and the general public*

on the role played by the Union in the programme.”⁽³⁶⁾

The EAFRD Implementing Regulation⁽³⁷⁾ specifies more details on “information for the potential beneficiaries” that Managing Authorities must provide:

“The Managing Authority shall ensure that potential beneficiaries have access to the relevant information, including updated information where necessary, taking into account the accessibility of electronic or other communication services for certain potential beneficiaries, on at least the following:

- a. the **funding opportunities** and the launching of calls under the RDPs;
- b. the **administrative procedures** to be followed in order to qualify for financing under a RDP;
- c. the **procedures for examining applications** for financing;
- d. the **eligibility conditions** and/or criteria for selecting and evaluating the projects to be financed;

- e. the names of persons or **contacts at national, regional or local level** who can explain the way RDPs work and the criteria for selecting and evaluating the operations;
- f. the **responsibility of beneficiaries** to inform the public about the aim of the operation and the support from the EAFRD...;
- g. the **procedures for the examination of complaints...**”

Feedback from previous RDP experiences highlights some basic

success ingredients here. Namely, that in order for communication to be effective the communicators need to deliver the right messages. These need to be expressed in a clear and easy-to-understand way, at the right time, and using appropriate media.

Testing the effectiveness of engagement-based communication in pilot situations before launching a full-scale campaign is another valuable piece of advice from RDP communicators.

NRN COMMUNICATION PLANS

New for the 2014-2020 programming period is the requirement of National Rural Networks to draft their own Communication Plans.

“EAFRD support... shall be used... for the preparation and implementation of an action plan covering [inter alia] a communication plan including publicity and information concerning the rural development programme in agreement with the Managing Authorities and information and communication activities aimed at a broader public.”

EAFRD Regulation, Article 54 “National rural network”⁽³⁸⁾

EFFECTIVE AND TARGETED COMMUNICATION PLANS

Joined-up planning

Cost savings and extended outreach services are among the potential benefits when different communications activities are designed to add value to each other. Duplication is often prevented by establishing good working relations between Managing Authority and NRN communication staff.

Joint planning of communication campaigns can also involve other RDP stakeholders, including LAGs or Monitoring Committee members. Outcomes from this partnership approach provide more efficient approaches to engaging desired stakeholders in different ways for the partners’ shared and/or individual purposes.



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(36) Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 on support for rural development by the EAFRD, Article 66 (1) (i).

(37) Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014 laying down rules for the application of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 on support for rural development by the EAFRD, Annex III, Part 1, 1.2.

(38) Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 on support for Rural Development by the EAFRD; Article 54 (3) (b) (vi).



Tapping into existing external communication channels is a very beneficial and efficient means of disseminating content to a wider audience. You do not have to reach all your stakeholders directly if you can access organisations or channels that feed down to your target stakeholders. Such 'multipliers' include the communication tools of stakeholder organisations and topic-specific websites, blogs and publications, agricultural and rural media such as newspapers, radio and TV.

Targeting stakeholder groups

Breaking down a communication plan into its core target groups and related objectives is a good practice method for managing successful stakeholder engagement and highlighting areas of shared objectives between different partners.

Tailoring communication activities to RDP stakeholders' specific requirements first involves establishing a good understanding of the target groups. Each group should be defined, with an accompanying dedicated set of information actions being designed to encourage their involvement as and when intended. Some engagement actions may be common to all stakeholders and other operations may need to be more specifically targeted.

For example, farmers are an important target group for RDP communicators and RDP Managing Authorities know the agricultural sectors that they support. This knowledge can be harnessed to design communication actions that speak to farmers 'in their own language' using tried and tested information channels.

It is important throughout to view RDP communication as a two-way process, since consultation with relevant stakeholders helps to improve the overall impact

PIANETA PSR – ONLINE NEWSPAPER OF THE ITALIAN NRN

Pianeta PSR is a monthly online newspaper with around 18-20 articles per issue. It provides a means for those in the rural development sector to keep up with news, best practices, legislative rules, new opportunities and case studies. The newspaper uses innovative forms of communication such as stories of rural development written by farmers themselves, stories that present experiences of the Rural Development Programme in other countries, and a 'young farmers' help desk'.

Pianeta PSR has closely followed news about the Common Agricultural Policy reform, providing quick, comprehensive and specialised information in simple language.

Pianeta PSR provides much-needed specialised information in a way that is accessible to everyone, and gives particular support to young farmers. Since its launch in July 2011, Pianeta PSR has reached more than 138 000 unique users and the number of visitors has risen by 40% each year.

The initiative was awarded third prize in the 2014 CAP Communication Awards.



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THE FLEMISH RURAL NETWORK (BELGIUM) TARGETS YOUNGER FARMERS

The Network aims to inspire participation, uncover bottlenecks for business start-ups, and increase knowhow about working in agriculture among young farmers. It has made this group a specific target within its Communication Plan.

"Our activities concerning young farmers include organising events to inform and network young people who are interested in agriculture as a career. We also run seminars especially for young farmers or agricultural students about the Common Agricultural Policy and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. In addition, we use publications, our website, and videos to give Flemish young farmers a channel to express their feelings and thoughts about the current Flemish situation regarding agriculture." Alexander Spriet, Flemish Rural Network

Collaboration with the Walloon Rural Network led to a national debate about young farmers' involvement in Belgian rural development and topics such as generational renewal, education and co-operation.

of communications activities. Stakeholders themselves are normally very well placed to advise RDP authorities on how best to engage with them. Listening to stakeholders is a communication skill that should therefore be nurtured and mainstreamed by everyone interested in the engagement process.

Stakeholders also need to make use of good and effective communication techniques to get their messages across to policymakers. It is not enough to produce and publish information. Efforts need to be made to reach out to target audiences and draw them to a website, printed publication or other communications material.

COMMUNICATING TO INFLUENCE POLICYMAKERS

The 'AgriClimateChange'⁽³⁹⁾ initiative developed a technical toolkit to quantify improvements in an individual farm's carbon footprint. To get this known and understood by policymakers, it developed an effective communications strategy combining web-based materials and outreach events.

It developed a user-friendly website, supported by outreach to key stakeholders through breakfast meetings with MEPs and other EU lobbying methods, which helped the project to secure a growing amount of high-level interest from policy makers.

The project's communication to DG AGRI led to them being invited to present their findings at EU meetings of Agricultural Ministries. María Fuentes, DG AGRI's climate change project officer noted that, "Projects like AgriClimateChange contribute in an effective way to a greater awareness of the issues and possible solutions, as well as sharing experiences in different contexts and farming systems."

Further successes of the project's communication strategy led to its work informing new EAFRD guidance materials covering climate change for 2014-2020. Its website won a prize in the 2014 'EU Awards' for outstanding communication achievements.

WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

Websites

Websites have become most organisations' main tool for communicating with their audiences. They can provide a repository of relevant news, information and guidance on any topic. They can also provide platforms for exchange and discussion between interested stakeholders.

This can work very well for engaging an organisation's main and known stakeholder groups. However, a challenge often remains getting new people onto your website in the first place or successfully publicising new information made available online.

Social Media

Social media are now an established, fast and cost-efficient medium for reaching out to larger audiences and engaging them on a (new) topic. A 2010 study⁽⁴²⁾ confirmed that social media have become important news

REACHING STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH AN ONLINE EXCHANGE PLATFORM

The RBAPS project (promoting Results-Based Agri-Environment Payment Schemes) has developed a dedicated EU engagement platform around agri-environment schemes.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The platform provides a wealth of communication tools to reach out to farmers, environmental bodies and Managing Authorities on practical issues of implementing such schemes.

It includes a collection of video guidance tools that feature people's real-life personal experiences from the field, a blog discussing stakeholder questions and good practice examples.

The video material was also posted on a popular EU farming website⁽⁴¹⁾ that acted as a communications multiplier, significantly increasing the distribution of this communications content – with over 8 500 additional 'hits' in its first two months.

multipliers, with 75% of people who find news online getting it forwarded through either posts on social networking sites or e-mail.

Taking advantage of this trend, rural development organisations have started to successfully use social media to complement their primary communication channels, such as

(39) www.agriclimatchange.eu

(40) http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/rbaps/index_en.htm

(41) www.agri.eu

(42) Pew Research Center (1 March 2010), "Understanding the participatory news consumer".

websites and publications – directing their audiences to these sources of information. Additionally, they are easily able to expand their audiences due to the ‘viral’ nature of social networks.

A social media strategy

Apart from being an increasingly important communications tool, social media channels are an invaluable listening tool in view of the vast opportunities for two-way communication they provide. Social networking sites are easily accessible forums for stakeholders to exchange with the organisation and among themselves. They provide the space to both reach out to a broader audience and bring together more specialist audiences to engage in higher-level exchanges.

Using the right platforms for the right content and generating meaningful discussion and exchange can only occur provided that a social media campaign is properly conceived. This needs to take account of the opportunities and limitations of each channel, and match up the potential audience with the main messages.

In this context, the most appropriate social networks to engage stakeholders in terms of popularity, user-friendliness, professionalism and space for discussion appear currently to be Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Twitter

Twitter in its capacity to provide real-time information is useful for disseminating ‘breaking news’ with a short shelf life. However, unless stakeholders follow rural development updates in a systematic way, information can easily be lost in a sea of tweets.

Furthermore, Twitter does not provide enough space for meaningful discussions with and among stakeholders, but rather



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for short and to-the-point exchanges of news and updates.

Still, successful engagement and discussion among stakeholders does occur on Twitter via the so-

called Twitter chats – scheduled and moderated events using a specific hashtag (#) bringing together decision and opinion makers, experts, and grassroots’ stakeholders.



Follow @ENRD_CP on Twitter

TWITTER CHATS

[EUFoodChat](#) is an online community providing a platform for European citizens to debate with experts, policy makers, trade associations and industry representatives on ‘hot’ topics related to food and agriculture.

Kicked-off in 2013, the chat ([#EUFoodChat](#)) has covered topics such as CAP reform, food taxation, EU quality systems etc. One of the latest chats hosted by the community on the topic of family farming engaged 250 farmers and farmers’ associations and reached close to half a million people.

Equivalents of the [#EUFoodChat](#) on national level include the Irish [#AgchatIRL](#), the British [#AgchatUK](#), and the German [#AgchatDE](#).

Other popular global Twitter chats on agriculture include [#AskAg](#), [#AgriChatWorld](#), as well as chats organised around specific topics such as the international year of soils ([#IYS2015](#)), world food day ([#WFD2015](#)), rural development ([#RuralDevelopment](#)), EU RDPs ([#EU_RDP](#)) etc.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn groups are excellent platforms for discussion and exchange not only because they provide the necessary space and user-friendly layout, but also because LinkedIn has won itself a reputation for being the “*de facto* tool for professional networking”.⁽⁴³⁾

A variety of discussion groups on agriculture and rural development exist bringing together policy makers, journalists, food and farming associations on international, European, national and local levels to debate on ongoing policy developments and issues.



Join the ENRD discussion group

LINKEDIN GROUPS

The ENRD Contact Point has recently launched an [ENRD discussion group](#) with the aim of engaging rural development professionals in sharing news and analyses, and networking with each other.

The [CAP Communication Network](#), managed by [DG AGRI](#), provides a platform for exchange of good communication practices across Member States.

Additionally, the [Common Agricultural Policy Network](#) is a group managed by [Agra Europe](#), a print and online publication focusing on the EU CAP, stirring debate among reporters and food companies, agribusiness and policymakers.

On a global scale, the [Rural Development Group](#) offers an opportunity to anyone involved with rural development to exchange and network with over 15 000 like-minded individuals from around the world.

Facebook

With over 890 million daily active users⁽⁴⁴⁾, Facebook is the most popular social networking site whose distinct advantage is the possibility to share visual content with large and diverse audiences.

More and more international, European, and national associations and organisations dealing with agriculture and rural development matters get on Facebook to give more visibility to their activities. This can aim at an organisation's primary stakeholders, but also to achieve a multiplier effect and reach out to broader audiences.



Follow the ENRD on Facebook

FACEBOOK PAGES

[Agri.eu](#), a network of European farmers, posts daily news, farming classifieds, and events on its [Facebook page](#) reaching out to around 10 000 European farmers. An example of its equivalent on a national level, [Fermier.bg](#), a network of Bulgarian farmers, has engaged 45 000 farmers through its [Facebook page](#).

Furthermore, individuals dealing with rural development policy and delivery can exchange and debate on LEADER- and RDP-related matters in the ‘[Friends of the LEADER approach](#)’ group.



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USE OF EVENTS

Beyond specific communications tools such as publications, videos, websites and social media, other activities can also have an important communications element. For example, events can provide a means of getting key messages over to stakeholders, increasing their understanding of a topic and motivating their participation.

A relatively common approach is to hold an awards event, which brings together rural development stakeholders to profile good examples of rural practice and celebrate achievements. This typically aims to support the transfer of good practice to rural development practitioners as well as highlighting the achievement and possibilities of the programmes to new audiences.



NORDIC-BALTIC LEADER COOPERATION AWARDS GALA

In 2013, the seven Rural Network Support Units from the Nordic-Baltic Region (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) initiated the Nordic-Baltic Leader Transnational Co-operation (TNC) Awards Gala.

The event brought together Local Action Groups, National Rural Network Support Units, Managing Authorities, representatives of the European Commission and other rural actors from different countries. Each of the 21 projects selected had representatives at the Gala.

The event served to highlight the importance of transnational co-operation for rural development in the Nordic-Baltic countries. As well as providing a means of communicating good practice to key rural development stakeholders, the event was covered positively by local media

<http://maainfo.ee/index.php?page=3668>

Other approaches that have been tried with varying degrees of success include the organisation of photograph exhibitions. These have been seen as a useful way of conveying important

messages about rural development to a broader public as well as raising awareness of the reality of rural life in Europe.

MONITORING PERFORMANCE

Monitoring and learning about the effectiveness of communication in engaging and encouraging the involvement of stakeholders is important for the systematic improvements to communications practice that can deliver long-term success.

Information on subscriptions to publications and attendees at events are useful outreach indicators. Even more potential is offered by web-based analytics, which can provide a wealth of useful data on website visits, downloads of publications, interactions with social media channels etc. The Scottish Network Support Unit turned to external expertise for training to improve

its understanding and use of such analytics.

However, good communication is not just about simple outreach numbers – it is about improving awareness, changing behaviour and stimulating engagement. Assessing these elements is more difficult, especially to establish a positive correlation between a change and the communications that might have encouraged it. Getting feedback from target groups can help improve understanding of which tools are working and why.

As well as keeping a record of informal feedback, formal stakeholder surveys can be used to get qualitative information on communications

impact. These have to be carefully designed to gather valuable information without overwhelming potential respondents. A balance is needed between the feedback wanted and what it is realistic to obtain.

Such monitoring must be programmed during the planning phase of communications activities so that the right tools and indicators can be put in place to track progress and flag where minor adjustments or more radical rethinking is required to communications strategies.



6. Making networking a powerful tool for involving stakeholders in rural policy

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Policy networks are usually seen as a ‘new mode of governance’ that allows more flexibility and more informal involvement of a wider set of stakeholders in policy design and implementation compared to more formal consultation processes.

In this article, we examine the specific characteristics of the rural policy networks (National Rural Networks) and the means by which they can best support the objective of increased stakeholder involvement in the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

THE ROLE OF POLICY NETWORKS

In general, policy networks are set up to support the delivery of a policy (or several interrelated policies) by directly involving stakeholders in policy design and implementation. Formally constructed policy networks are increasingly important for policy-making and governance and are recognised as powerful tools for tackling challenges faced by modern public policies.

Such networks are expected to involve a wide range of stakeholders in policy debates, increasing the quality and acceptability of these policies, and strengthening the links between policy-makers and those directly impacted by policies. As such, policy networks are essential tools for putting the ‘partnership principle’ of the EU into practice.



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CREATION AND MANDATE OF NATIONAL RURAL NETWORKS (NRNs)

Setting-up NRNs was a formal obligation established by the EAFRD regulation both for the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods. The EAFRD Regulation of 2014-2020⁽⁴⁵⁾ states that “Each Member State shall establish a national rural network, which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development.”

NRNs are policy networks, and as such their ultimate purpose is to improve rural development policy and programmes. The EAFRD Regulation sets common objectives and obligatory tasks for NRNs. Two of the main objectives of rural networks during the 2014-2020 programming period are to improve the quality of RDPs and increase stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development.

Although the rural policy networks are formally constructed, they are generally seen to have more flexibility and more informal involvement of a wider set of stakeholders than the formal stakeholder consultations (presented in article 4 of this EU Rural Review). For instance, most National Rural Networks allow all types of stakeholder groups (including those that are often marginalised) to have an involvement in the network activities.

The governance structure, operational set-up, mandate and potential influence of networks on rural development implementation vary widely across Member States. Some NRNs are strongly embedded and have a key role in the policy-making process, whilst others do not.

Depending on their role and mandate, networks can influence policies and

programmes at different levels (including European, national, and local levels), as well as at

different stages, i.e. policy design & programme planning, implementation and monitoring & evaluation.



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A CLEAR NRN MANDATE ON STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

As described in the Introductory article of this EU Rural Review, rural networks have a clear mandate and role in involving relevant partners in Rural Development Programmes during the 2014-2020 programming period. This mandate is stressed in the Code of Conduct as well as the EAFRD Regulation.

Nevertheless, one of the main recommendations of the ENRD Thematic Group as well as the 1st ENRD Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement was to make this mandate more effective in practice. More specifically:

- NRNs need a clear operational role from MAs to **act upon stakeholder requests**. Among others, NRNs can play a key role in the consultation processes related to rural development policy, and therefore, should ideally be operational at the stage of the RDP development.
- Policy-makers need to **take the partnership principle seriously**. NRNs, if used effectively, can provide valuable support with regard to reinforcing the partnership principle within the policy-process.
- **MAs need to connect with rural reality** (find channels to hear rural stakeholders' views) and NRNs can serve as valuable tools for making various stakeholder voices heard.
- MAs should be aware that NRNs act most efficiently as tools for policy-making when they have **sufficient level of independence and adequate resources**.

Source: Final Report (April 2015) of the ENRD Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement (26 March 2015).

(45) Article 54 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

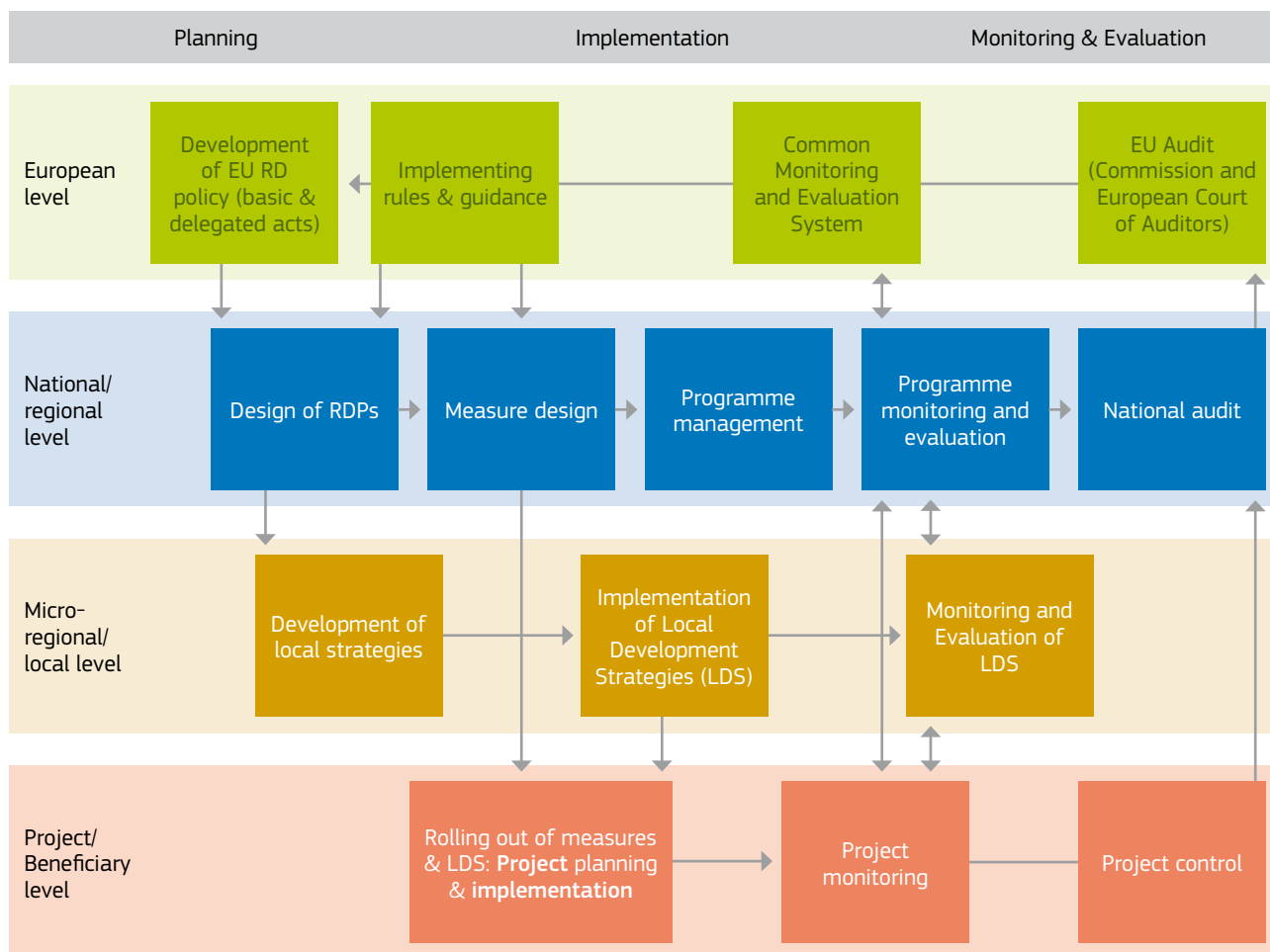
INFLUENCE AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF RDP IMPLEMENTATION

When and how networks may have influence on rural development policy also

depends on the various stages of the rural development programming cycle. These different stages and how they

relate to the different levels of decision-making (from local to European) are summarised in the chart below:

Figure 4. Programming Cycle – Entry points for Rural Networks



Planning stage

During the programme planning and design phase, networks often play an important role in channelling diverse stakeholder views, perspectives and interests into the consultation process. Networks were in some cases involved in the consultation process for the preparation of the 2014-2020 RDPs.

Implementation stage

During programme implementation, networks can play a key role in improving RDP implementation at project and programme levels. At the programme level, networks can contribute to the development of specific measures and calls, and later reflect to the Managing Authority on areas where improvements can be

made in the programme. For instance, several NRNs are involved in the work of the formal RDP Monitoring Committees that offer a space for improving policy implementation.

At the project level, networks have a remit to improve the take-up of certain measures (e.g. through communication activities and information events to potential beneficiaries).



ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN RDP DESIGN THROUGH THE RURAL NETWORK

In Lithuania, the NRN's Network Support Unit set up six consultation groups around the six thematic NRN committees that contributed to the development of the 2014-2020 RDP measures.

The six themes addressed were:

1. Rural policy issues; 2. Rural business promotion; 3. Rural youth; 4. Landscape and rural area planning; 5. Innovation and rural research; and 6. LEADER and community development.



IMPROVING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIFIC MEASURES THROUGH STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT VIA THE RURAL NETWORK

Many farmers applied for projects under the biodiversity measure in Austria, 2007-2013. However, the implementation raised practical challenges for farmers, whilst environmental experts found that the projects were not always beneficial for the environment.

Therefore, the Austrian Network organised five workshops for stakeholders from the Agricultural Ministry, agricultural chambers, farmers and environmental departments of the federal states, environmental experts and NGOs. During the meeting, participants discussed the key challenges and possible solutions were identified (linked to concrete examples and field visits).

Source: 'Ameliorating the implementation of biodiversity areas on Austrian farms' - <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/fms/pdf/70E8F11B-D59C-2B4A-1365-446A9DEC60DD.pdf>

Monitoring and evaluation

Finally, networks can be actively involved in improving RDP monitoring and evaluation through stakeholder participation. In fact, one of the key mandatory tasks of the 2014-2020 NRNs is 'sharing and dissemination of monitoring and evaluation findings'.

One of the workshops during the NSU peer-to-peer training (organised by ENRD Contact Point) in May 2014, aimed to highlight useful practices of NSUs with regard to being involved in RDP monitoring and evaluation. The workshop demonstrated through concrete networking examples that the role of NRNs in RDP evaluation goes beyond the simple dissemination of evaluation results.



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STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT WORK CARRIED OUT BY THE RURAL NETWORK

In the early stages of the previous programming period, the Dutch NRN received several comments from people about complexities and bottlenecks associated with the procedures of the Dutch RDP.

To improve implementation of the RDP and facilitate work in the field, the network organised an interactive working session with policy makers, LEADER secretaries, the Government Service for Land and Water Management and regional offices. The aim was to discuss these complexities and develop possible solutions together.

At the end of the period, in 2013, the NRN decided to

evaluate how far the results and suggested solutions were brought forward and to see what lessons could and needed to be learned. During the exercise, recommendations were made that were used for the development of the 2014-2020 RDP.

One of the main success factors of this exercise was that stakeholders identified problems and solutions collectively and these were owned by the working groups.

Source: 'Learning by doing' - <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/assets/pdf/added-value/NL-monitor-and-evaluate-together.pdf>

BEYOND RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES (RDPs)

The scope of NRNs' work does not have to be limited within the framework of the RDPs. Indeed, the EAFRD Regulation itself refers to 'stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development' without making direct reference to RDPs or policy. This wider mandate can cover the broader rural and territorial development context.

"Top-down people must recognise bottom-up, and see things from the stakeholders' perspective", says Michael Dower, coordinator of PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe and member of the Rural Networks' Assembly. "The concerns of local people are often far wider than what may called 'narrow' rural development. They include schools, health services, public transport, and many more

things that are often outside the RDPs. If there is one word that matters in this game, it is connecting. And if we want to connect we have to understand where stakeholders are coming from. We need to grasp, and as far as possible apply, the crucial concept of broad rural development."

Looking beyond programme implementation and engaging with stakeholders outside the scope of European rural development policy in this way is seen as an important task of various formal and informal rural networks. At the final NRN meeting of the 2007-2013 period, the Walloon NRN highlighted the importance of issues, themes and stakeholders within the work of the NRN that are not directly linked to RDP measures.

The Swedish network also sees its role as being an intermediary giving various stakeholder organisations the knowledge and tools to better promote rural development more generally, including – but not limited to – the use of RDP measures. For example, they have done a lot of work with immigrant groups, who they see as an important opportunity for depopulated rural areas.

In the same way, the Swedish Network supported the group of youth representatives of LEADER groups to be organised in a national sub-network. The Youth Umbrella Project became one of the major Swedish successes of the 2007-2013 programming period that many other networks aim to transfer into their own practices.

MEMBERSHIP OF NATIONAL AND REGIONAL RURAL NETWORKS

The main stakeholder groups

The overall mandate and role of a network also defines the set of stakeholders that it should engage with. Stakeholder mapping is

a useful tool for this. Policy networks typically cluster stakeholders according to their level of involvement in policies and programmes (e.g. policy makers, implementing "intermediaries" and those ultimately affected by the policy).

In practice, most NRNs have a diverse membership including, farmers and farmers' associations, environmental organisations, various rural NGOs, (local) rural enterprises and businesses, LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) and local public authorities. Some of the networks accept individuals as members, while others only accept organisational stakeholders.

Many see NRNs as 'networks of networks'. During the ENRD Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement (held in Brussels on 26 March 2015), participants stressed the importance of strengthening co-operation between the NRNs and other networks and stakeholder organisations active in rural development. Among others, there is a need to create complementarity



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between the work of NRNs and farmers' organisations, environmental organisations, LAGs and LAG networks, and national rural parliaments.

The level of engagement of networks with different types of stakeholders varies widely. Traditionally, NRNs engage with some of the groups more closely and regularly than others. According to the 1st NRN Mapping survey of 2014-2020⁽⁴⁶⁾ carried out by the ENRD Contact Point, 90% of the respondent Network Support Units (NSUs) mentioned LAGs and 60% farmers and farmers' organisations as one of the three stakeholder groups they engage the most with.

LAGs are often easier to connect with, as they play a key role in rural development in most Member States, and they most often form a stakeholder network themselves around common objectives and shared values. LAGs are also a specific NRN target group explicitly mentioned by the EAFRD Regulation. Furthermore, in many Member States formal LEADER networks were the predecessors of NRNs. As a result, most NSUs organise regular activities for LAGs, such as trainings and various other events.

An example of direct engagement with farmers and farmers' associations

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL MEMBERS FOR THE NRN IN FLANDERS

In 2014, the Flemish NSU focused on directly approaching various stakeholder groups, including stakeholders previously not involved in the work of the network, to get to know their needs and disseminate information on the new RDP.

During this process, the NRN collected a lot of new information and found members that were open to be engaged in the network as well as in the new stakeholder committee.

"This process takes up a lot of time but it is very rewarding," says Nele Vanslembrouck at the Flemish NRN. "You get stakeholders that are interested and committed to be involved in the work of the network and the [Monitoring] Committee rather than only those that are nominated member organisations."

comes from the Slovak NRN, which has organised regular farmers' markets in various regions in order to support direct producer-consumer linkages.

One of the main challenges for many NRNs, however, has been to engage with the less organised or harder-to-reach stakeholders and stakeholder groups that have, nevertheless, a key role in rural development implementation. These include environmental organisations and those representing disadvantaged or minority groups.

Quality over quantity

A research article by Proven et al. (2008)⁽⁴⁷⁾ emphasises: "As the number

of organisations in the network gets larger, shared governance becomes highly inefficient [...] The problem of network complexity is especially acute when participants are spread out geographically, making frequent meetings of all participants difficult or impossible." Open or unlimited membership is not necessarily the most efficient way of organising a network, as it allows a wide membership where many members play a passive role.

In preparation for the 2014-2020 programming period, several NRNs put special emphasis on identifying groups that are open and willing to work with the network.

EU RURAL NETWORKS 2014-2020: A NEW GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE TO INCREASE STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN NETWORKING DECISION-MAKING

The European Commission put in place a new governance structure for European rural networks in November 2014.⁽⁴⁸⁾ This system defines a new prominent role for RDP stakeholders within **the Rural Networks' Assembly**, the body that has replaced the ENRD Coordination Committee (which was in place 2008-2014).⁽⁴⁹⁾

While the role of the ENRD Coordination Committee (that included 69 members) was similar to a standard expert group of the Commission; the Rural Networks' Assembly 2014-2020 is a far more inclusive platform, with a more proactive and ambitious role. The new governance structure provides that the full range of network members, and not the Commission alone, decides the priorities for European rural networking activities – covering both the ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks.

The Assembly includes 196 representatives of different stakeholder groups, covering the "governmental" (MAs and PAs) "civil" and "local" (EU-wide organisations, Local Action Groups) and "innovation" (Advisory Services and Research Institutes) sectors. It is very important that all the members of this Assembly and their constituent groups at the national and regional levels should be able to see their contributions reflected in the results, and develop a sense of ownership of the policy.

In addition to the Assembly, a **Rural Networks' Steering Group** of 48 representatives oversees follow-up of the activities of the European rural networks and ensures coordination of the work of the **Assembly's subgroups** established on themes such as innovation and LEADER/ CLLD.

(46) Starting up the NSUs, The state-of-play of National Rural Networks and Network Support Units, 1st NRN Mapping Report – 2014-2020 (May 2015), http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/nrn_mapping_rpt_2015_final_2.pdf

(47) Provan, K.G., and J. Sydow (2008). Evaluating inter-organizational relationships. Referenced in Schalk (2011). *Paper to be presented at the 2011 Public Management Research Conference, Maxwell School at Syracuse University, NY, USA, June 2-4.*

(48) Commission Implementing Decision 2014/825/EU, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:JOL_2014_334_R_0014&from=EN

(49) Commission Decision 2008/168/EC.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT METHODS AND TOOLS TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

While it can be reasonably expected that a network connects its stakeholders in an effective way; engaging stakeholders in the activity of a network is still one of the most challenging tasks for those involved in network coordination and management. Which methods and tools to apply depends on the specific context and purpose of stakeholder engagement, as well as the resources available within the network.

National Rural Networks have carried out a myriad of activities with regard to informing, consulting and involving stakeholders in rural development implementation. These range from information campaigns to thematic workshops.

Examples of **information activities** include events entitled *‘Well farmed. A portion of agriculture on your plate’* organised by the Flemish Network in five of the Flemish provinces aimed to raise awareness about agriculture and horticulture.

Examples for more engaging **stakeholder exchanges** are permanent and ad hoc thematic working groups developed by NRNs during the 2007-2013 programming period.

These groups generally brought together diverse stakeholders to discuss, analyse and share information on common issues, often resulting in recommendations related to RDP implementation and programming. For instance, the Network Support Unit of the Northern Ireland Rural Network established a *‘Women in Rural Development’* thematic working group. The group aimed to increase involvement of women in rural development through discussions and events highlighting women who took advantage of RDP opportunities, and encouraging others to do so.

Some of the most challenging activities are those aimed at **empowering rural development stakeholders**. The Swedish Network used the method of ‘virtual think tanks’ (structured phone-meetings, with strict rules) extensively during 2007-2013. This method helped the Network engage stakeholders located in geographically disperse locations to input and help shape rural development policies. On a number of occasions the Managing Authority requested the NRN to organise ‘think tank’ sessions to gain specific stakeholder input into policymaking.

ENRD THEMATIC WORK ON STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

One of the core themes of the ENRD at the start of the 2014-2020 period has been around the core rural policy objective of ‘Increasing stakeholder involvement in rural development’.

For this purpose, the ENRD Contact Point developed an ‘integrated work package’ that includes a range of activities aiming to explore this subject in mutually reinforcing ways, including: the ENRD stakeholder mapping; Thematic Group meetings; a European Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement, and this edition of the EU Rural Review.

Based on the experience accumulated during various exchanges and events, a **Thematic Group report** identifies useful lessons and ways in which networks can improve the involvement of stakeholders in rural development.

For further information on the work of ENRD see the Thematic Group webpage: <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/thematic-group-stakeholder-involvement>, and the outcomes of the 1st ENRD Seminar: <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/en-rd-events-and-meetings/enrd-stakeholder-involvement-seminar-20150326>

THE IMPACT OF RURAL NETWORKING

The challenge of demonstrating effectiveness

The NRN Guidebook produced by the ENRD in 2014⁽⁵⁰⁾ concluded that *“Despite the various challenges that NRNs had to face during the 2007-2013 programming period [...] there is consensus among*

‘rural networkers’ that networks can, and in most cases do, make a valuable contribution to rural development.” Nevertheless, rural networks have often been criticised in the past because the added value they bring to the improvement of Rural Development Programmes is difficult to demonstrate.

The Guidebook continued by recognising that: *“the added value of networking is often not understood outside of the ‘networking circle’. Therefore, networks are facing a particular challenge of demonstrating the added value of networking.”*

It is important to keep in mind that networking is a tool but not an ultimate aim in itself. *“The RDP sets specific targets, such as better land management, but our Network does not produce these directly,”* says Hans-Olof Stalgren from the Swedish NRN. *“We are only an intermediary in the process that enables stakeholders, for instance through capacity-building, to produce results.”*

The overall impact and results (i.e. effectiveness) of networks will need to be measured against the rural development objectives, including that of ‘increased stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development’.

NRN self-assessment and evaluation are key tools to assess and demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of a network. To be as effective as possible, it is important that this self-assessment and evaluation work is developed early on in the work of the network,

so that appropriate self-assessment frameworks can be established.

Limitations on capacity

The efficiency of stakeholder involvement activities will not only depend on the available financial resources and the number of staff of the network, but also on the specific skills and level of experience of those responsible for the management and coordination of the network. The level of commitment and experience of network members is another crucial factor.

This is a challenge that many of the rural networks face in their everyday operations. During the recent NSU survey carried out by the ENRD⁽⁵¹⁾, NSUs highlighted that limited resources often stand in the way of acting efficiently with regard to stakeholder involvement and achieving other network objectives. Many NSUs are located within the Managing

Authority of RDPs, and operate with only one or two full-time-equivalent staff that also have responsibilities for other RDP-related activities.

Looking to the future

European and national networks and other stakeholder organisations need to work jointly in order to create complementarity, resource efficiency and to avoid the duplication of efforts and work. One of the main tools to achieve this is exchange and dialogue among a wide range of rural development stakeholders.

This article and this EU Rural Review – as well as future Communications efforts of the ENRD – aim to contribute to the development of these discussions and these exchanges.



(51) See 1st NRN Mapping Report – 2014-2020 (May 2015), http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/nrn_mapping_rpt_2015_final_2.pdf

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