



*European Network for
Rural Development*

What do we know about Networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)?

DRAFT Discussion Paper
Version 2 (June 2012)



Connecting Rural Europe

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The opinions expressed in this discussion paper do not necessarily reflect or represent the views of the European Commission.

Executive Summary

This paper was originally prepared by the ENRD Contact Point as a Discussion Paper in preparation for the 15th NRN meeting on ‘Demonstrating the Added Value of Networking’ held on the 8-9 May 2012 in Finland. Following the NRN meeting this paper has been updated in order to integrate the outcomes and recommendations on networking for the 2014-2010 programming period.

The purpose of this paper is to help inform / ‘frame’ the discussions on rural development networking by:

- clarifying some basic concepts regarding networks, networking and rural development – including introducing the concept of ‘policy networks’. The word ‘network’ is widely used in many different ways and contexts in most people’s day-to-day life and it is vital to clarify exactly how we use this term in the context of EU rural development policy;
- highlighting some issues of relevance to the current performance of networking as a rural development policy tool. This includes observations on the overall status of network development in the EU-27 member States, plus some more detailed thoughts on the functioning of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), and;
- synthesising the outcomes of the various plenary and workshop discussions based on a set of pre-defined questions but also from demand driven discussions originating from the participants on a variety of issues
- elaborating the key messages and recommendations for strengthening and enhancing rural networks for the 2014-2020 programming period.

The establishment of national / regional network structures in the EU-27 Member States has been characterised by huge diversity – and a very uneven landscape of network development has emerged. The paper addresses various aspects of this diversity and highlights some of the potential issues / key learning messages that need to be taken from the current situation and applied to the planning of further network development in the 2014-2020 programming period. In addition it draws in on some of the key issues emanating from the NRN joint initiative on “demonstrating the added value of networking”.

Building on NRN discussions held in Finland and other related research and analysis a SWOT analysis has been developed assimilating the critical issues on what is working well and less well in networking covering the following areas:

1. Budget
2. Structure
3. Representation
4. Operational Mandate
5. Capacity and Management
6. Monitoring and Evaluation

The paper then continues to explore the European dimension of networking via a critique of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD).

In conclusion, a set of recommendations for further enhancement of networking has been integrated. This builds from the various workshop outcomes focused on identifying factors that influence the effectiveness and efficiency of networking as an RD Policy tool, and is presented for discussion.

1. Introduction

This paper was originally prepared by the ENRD Contact Point as a Discussion Paper in preparation for the 15th NRN meeting on ‘Demonstrating the Added Value of Networking’ on 8-9 May 2012 in Ahtari, Finland. The NRN meeting had the aim of *“building a shared understanding for forthcoming discussions on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of networking as a rural development policy tool in the EU-27”*.

Following the meeting in Finland further work has been carried out on this paper in order to integrate the [outcomes of the various discussions](#) together and synthesise the key points in relation to recommendations for the 2014-2010 programming period.

The 15th NRN meeting provided a very important exchange platform where more than 70 representatives from Managing Authorities, Network Support Units and Evaluators came together and worked on i) enhancing the current level of knowledge and understanding of networking in rural development policy, and; ii) identified ways to improve networking as a rural development policy tool in all EU Member States for the current and future programming period.

The purpose of this paper is to help inform / ‘frame’ the discussions on networking by:

- clarifying some basic concepts regarding networks, networking and rural development – including introducing the concept of ‘policy networks’. The word ‘network’ is widely used in many different ways and contexts in most people’s day-to-day life and it is vital to clarify exactly how we use this term in the context of EU rural development policy;
- highlighting some issues of relevance to the current performance of networking as a rural development policy tool. This includes observations on the overall status of network development in the EU-27 member States, plus some more detailed thoughts on the functioning of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD);
- synthesising the outcomes of the various plenary and workshop discussions based on a set of pre-defined questions but also from demand driven discussions originating from the participants on a variety of issues;
- elaborating the key messages and recommendations for strengthening and enhancing rural networks for the 2014-2020 programming period.

2. Networks, Networking and Rural Development

'Networks' and 'networking' are widely recognised and adopted as key tools for supporting and promoting sustainable rural development around the world. Consequently, there are many different types of rural development network driven by a great variety of goals and objectives.

In the United Kingdom and Ireland alone, a recent study¹ counted a total of 232 local, national and trans- / inter-national rural development networks, all of whom had an active online presence. The same study identified that the most important reasons for local people to access these rural networks were:

- To receive advice and information;
- To share local learning and experiences;
- To develop creative ways to solve local problems and needs;
- To identify sources of funding.

Overall, the research found that "*...involvement with rural networks provided users with a feeling of confidence when tackling a range of issues within their community*".

2.1 What are rural networks and networking?

There is **no single definition** of what a 'network' means in the context of rural development – consequently, the word 'network' is often used imprecisely to imply a rather vague and fuzzy concept. Greater care and precision is therefore required when discussing 'networks', 'networking' and 'network support units' – these are three very different concepts and the terms are not inter-changeable.

It is widely understood that all **rural networks are built upon a "web of interactions"** consisting of 'nodes' and 'linkages' where i) the 'nodes' are the rural actors and stakeholders (individuals / organisations) that form the membership of the network, and ii) the 'linkages' are the connections / relationships that exist between them. Some 'linkages' may be strong, others will be weak.

It is less commonly understood that networks are **only structures that exist to support the process of networking** - where the process of 'networking' is clearly defined² as "*...the sharing, exchange or flow of ideas, information, knowledge, practice, experience (and sometimes resources) between people and around a common interest, or opportunity, to create value*". Indeed, it is often emphasised that it is not networks themselves that are important, but the information and inter-relationships that flow through them. Or put another way, "*not everything that connects is a network*" - since networks are nothing without the networking processes within them!

Rural networks commonly exist with a very specific purpose – namely, to facilitate the flow of information and sharing of resources in order to promote interaction between, and action by, different rural actors and stakeholders in the pursuit of rural development. This is a very important function that is described in academic terms as "*the mobilisation of intangible intellectual assets through learning, innovation and the building of human and social capital*". Information for learning and innovation may flow horizontally (e.g. knowledge exchange between local businesses in an administrative territory); vertically (e.g. dissemination of research findings to foster innovation within a specific rural sector), or; various combinations of both.

¹ Miller, M. and Wallace, J. (2012). *Rural Development Networks – A Mapping Exercise*. Carnegie UK Trust, Dunfermline, UK – can be downloaded from here: <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/rural-development-networks--full-report> (last accessed 1 May, 2012)

² Gilchrist, A. (2009). *The Well-Connected Community: A Networking Approach to Community Development*. The Policy Press, Bristol, UK.

Whatever the way that information flows, the ultimate value of rural networking must be judged by the i) **quality of the learning processes and experiences that are generated**, and; ii) their **impact upon stimulating the growth of economic development, creation of new job opportunities, enhancement of living standards, improvement of environmental management etc. in rural areas**.

2.2 What is a policy network?

There are two main forms of network:

- a) **Informal / organic / bottom-up** – these are normally sustained as a natural result of the interactions (e.g. regular meetings and word of mouth communication) between members. They are very important and can be highly influential, but commonly reach a threshold beyond which their activities are limited by lack of resources. Informal rural networks are not discussed further in this paper;
- b) **Formal / engineered / top-down** - these are devised and established by an external agency for a specific purpose. One specific type of formal network is the **policy network** which is created by a public authority / agency specifically to include actors in the formulation and implementation of a policy in a given sector.

Formally-constructed policy networks are increasingly important for policy-making and governance and recognised as a powerful tool to help solve many of the problems inherent to modern public policies³. For example, policy networks are claimed to:

- deal rapidly and in a flexible way with complex issues, including those with an international dimension;
- involve a wide range of stakeholders in policy debates thus increasing the quality and the acceptability of these policies;
- take advantage of information and communication technologies to extend the reach of policy-makers into the community.

Policy networks are widely used by the European Union and its Member States in all policy areas and for many functions. They are considered to be particularly important for providing the flexibility required to deal with the wide diversity and sometimes very fundamental differences that exist between administrative cultures and structures in the EU-27. In its 2001 White Paper on European Governance⁴, the European Commission committed to “*...a more systematic and pro-active approach to working with key networks to enable them to contribute to decision shaping and policy execution*”.

Since the 2001 White Paper was published there has been a proliferation of studies raising the question about the added value of networks within the EU policy process⁵. Some scholars argue that the key added value of policy networks is indeed their potential to improve the quality of governance – others argue that unless carefully managed, policy networks can work against the principles of good governance due to their potentially exclusive nature and vulnerability to lack of transparency and accountability.

³ Clarotti, G. (2001). *Report of the Working Group ‘Networking for a good governance in Europe’ (Working Group 4b)*. Work Area No. 4: Coherence and co-operation in a networked Europe, supporting document to *European Governance: A White Paper* (25/7/2001) – can be downloaded from: http://ec.europa.eu/governance/areas/group9/report_en.pdf (last accessed 1 May 2012)

⁴ Commission of the European Communities (2001). *European Governance: A White Paper*, COM (2001) 428, Brussels (25/7/2001).

⁵ Börzel, T.A. and Heard-Lauréote, K. (2009). Networks in EU Multi-level Governance: Concepts and Contributions, *Journal of Public Policy* 29(2), 135-152.

2.3 Networks and network support units (NSUs)

Most ‘formal networks’, including EU policy networks, are facilitated or supported by an identifiable “supporting entity” often described as a secretariat, coordinator, steering group or support unit. One common misunderstanding that is noted by many network experts⁶ is that too often the term ‘network’ is imprecisely used to identify the mechanisms that support a network, rather than used to describe the web of interactions that define the structure of the network.

This may seem a minor issue, but it is a symptom of a wider general problem with ‘formal’ networks – namely, that there is rarely a clear enough distinction between the network and its supporting entity / network support unit.

Network support units are (for very good reasons) commonly modelled on a hierarchical organisation or even a finite project. It can therefore be planned, managed and assessed as a discrete entity with clearly-defined aims, objectives, work plans and projected budgets etc. When people talk about ‘setting up’, ‘creating’ or ‘developing’ networks, they are usually referring to the network support unit – not to the network itself.

But it must be remembered that the structures and services provided by the network support unit are **not** the network - the network is the actors and stakeholders connected within the network and the relationships between them.

⁶ Hearn, S. and Mendizabel, E. (2011). Not everything that connects is a network, Background Note (May 2011), Overseas Development Institute, Cambridge – can be downloaded from:
<http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/6313.pdf> (last accessed 1 May 2012)

3. Networking as an EU Rural Development Policy Tool

Networking was a well-established principle in previous LEADER programmes with two complementary levels of formal networking established under both LEADER II and LEADER+:

- at national level with the implementation of National Networking Units (NNUs), and;
- at European level with the implementation of a European networking unit – the LEADER Observatory.

Based upon the positive experiences of networking in LEADER⁷ (and the important role that the LEADER networks played in stimulating new ideas and sharing the growing body of rural development knowledge and practice amongst rural actors and stakeholders), it was decided to introduce networking as an obligatory activity into Pillar 2 of the CAP for the 2007–2013 programming period. In accordance with Articles 67 and 69 of EAFRD Regulation No. 1698/2005, it therefore became necessary for:

- i) each Member State to establish a National Rural Network (NRN) which groups together the organisations and administrations involved in rural development at national / regional level, and;
- ii) the European Commission to establish a European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) for the networking of national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development at Community level.

The networks (national / regional rural networks in the Member States and the ENRD) established under Regulation No. 1698/2005 are **policy networks** and to-date the European Commission's perception of progress with their development and functionality has been positive. For example, in the 2011 report from the European Commission on the *Implementation of the National Strategy Plans and the Community Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development (2007-2013)* it is stated that⁸:

"The National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) have significantly contributed to the consistency in programming, notably by ensuring an exchange of information and practices between RDPs' managers and stakeholders and by carrying out joint analyses."

Consequently, it is clearly anticipated that networking will continue to be supported by the EAFRD in the next programming period (2014–2020) and there are proposals also for the introduction of an additional European Innovation Partnership (EIP) network.

⁷ Duguet, D. (2006). *Networking: The LEADER experience*. Study carried out for the LEADER+ Observatory Contact Point, Brussels - can be downloaded from:

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/pdf/library/methodology/networking_report.pdf (last accessed 2 May 2012)

⁸ EC (2011). *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of the national strategy plans and the Community strategic guidelines for rural development (2007-2013)*, COM(2011) 450 final, European Commission, Brussels (20/7/2011) - can be downloaded from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52011DC0450:EN:NOT> (last accessed 2 May 2012)

4. Diversity of Implementation – strength or weakness?

The establishment of national / regional network structures in the EU-27 Member States has been characterised by huge diversity – and a very uneven landscape of network development has emerged. See the [ENRD's 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise](#) for further details. The following sub-sections address various aspects of this diversity and highlight some of the potential issues / key learning messages that need to be taken from the current situation and applied to the planning of further network development in the 2014-2020 programming period.

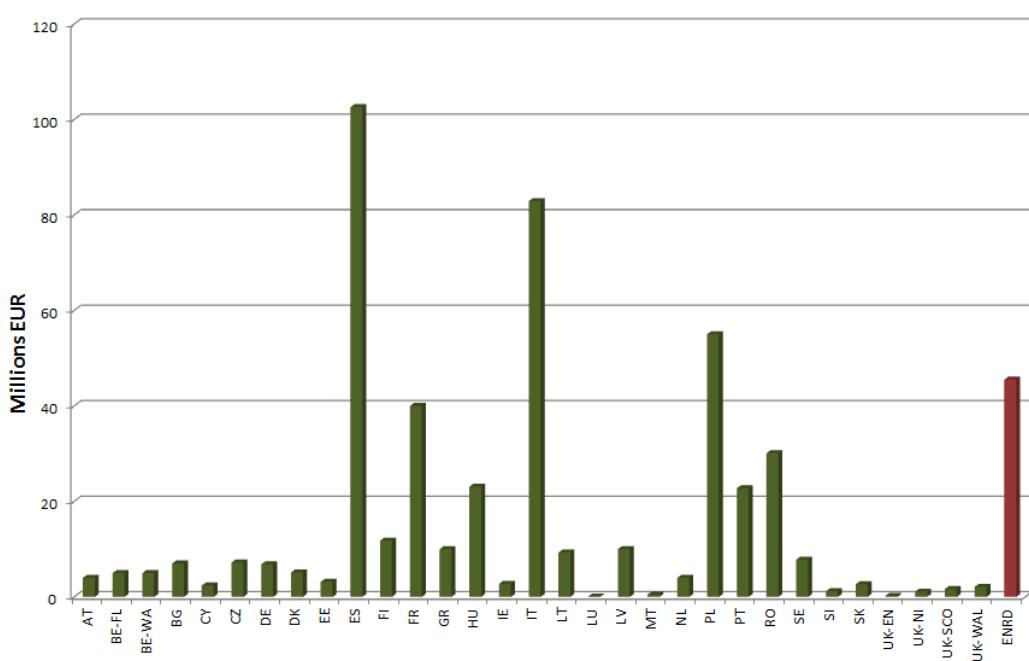
The key issues addressed are:

1. Budget
2. Structure
3. Representation
4. Operational Mandate
5. Capacity and Management

4.1 Budget

Total public expenditure across all EU-27 Member States upon the operation of policy networks established in accordance with Regulation No. 1698/2005 (including the ENRD) amounts to over 515 million EUR (best available data November 2011) during 2007-2013 – of which an estimated 268 million EUR is support from the EAFRD and 247 million from national budgets. The public funding allocated to networks varies greatly from one MS to another with Luxembourg having the smallest budget and Spain the largest over the lifetime of the programme (see Figure 1). The budgets allocated are purely based on Member State decisions and no clear formula linked to size of territory, population, regionalisation, RDP budget and actions planned exists. EAFRD co-financing rates also vary greatly from 80% in Bulgaria and Romania to 0% in Luxembourg – average is around 52%.

FIGURE 1: Total public expenditure (millions of EUR) committed to NRNs for 2007-2013 (best available data November 2011)



For most of the network support units (NSUs), staff costs represent the major component of the budget. However, at this stage no real assessment has been undertaken to establish what minimum critical mass the NSUs should have in order to ensure their smooth, efficient and effective running. It is clear that in many cases the budget allocations for NSUs are quite restrictive and this is impacting upon the number of employees that an NSU can afford, the status of those employees, (i.e. whether they are full time or part-time) and whether they can secure people with the skill-sets that are required to complement the various networking activities undertaken.

The issue of resources obviously extends to the operational aspects of the networking activities themselves with limitations upon the tools, techniques and initiatives that an NSU can adopt to achieve its commitments, promote its visibility and deliver its products. It is very obvious, for example, that the most interesting networking initiatives linked to contacts with wider rural development networks, research institutes, resource centres, etc. are most often carried out by those NSUs that have a secure and sound financial allocation. It is especially obvious that some NSUs are not fully and effectively engaging in networking initiatives at European level because of the significant budget constraints they are facing.

This situation is compounded by the fact that the regulation itself has no provisions on principles such as proportionality. This has resulted in some Managing Authorities (MAs) slicing the financial allocations for NSUs in order to address other priorities for their Technical Assistance budget.

4.2 Structure

The majority of Member States have established Network Support Units (NSU) at national level to animate their NRNs and to implement their respective annual work plans (AWPs) or programmes. In the case of the UK and Belgium the regional networks of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Flanders and Wallonia have been given higher prominence with only nominal representation / co-ordination at national level.

The operational costs of most NSUs and their associated annual work plans (AWPs) are funded under the Technical Assistance budget of the relevant rural development programme (RDP) – with the exception of 4 Member States with regionalised RDPs (Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) where the MAs have chosen to operate and finance NSUs in the framework of a programme document (NRN-P).

The operational set up of the NSUs varies greatly across the EU-27. Some Member States have decided to install the NSU within public administration, whilst others have chosen to procure technical assistance contracts with external service providers. In the case of NSUs situated within public administration, a further distinction can be made between those that are part of the MA structure and those where the provision of networking services has been delegated to a public sector agency or institution affiliated to the MA (e.g. the national agricultural advisory service).

No assessment or evidence-based judgements have been made about which structure or model of NSU (in-house vs. outsourcing) is most efficient and effective – although the question is often asked! There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to both approaches that are influenced by national context, the NSUs financial allocation and the way that public administrations are set up and managed.

However, one cause of particular concern is the vulnerability of those NSUs which are located within MAs to changes in staff and resource allocation. Such changes have been observed in several NSUs during the last few years and have been triggered by various factors, but in all cases they have destabilised and depleted the capacity of the NSU to the point that networking activities (implementation of the AWP) are hindered and the growth / maturing of the network is slowed.

4.3 Representation

A variety of different approaches exist amongst the NRNs regarding the inclusion / representation of rural stakeholders in the network. These approaches range from ‘open access’ to more formalised and/or rather restricted participation. This diversity of approach is largely a reflection of the different ways that Member States have interpreted and shaped their application of the “partnership principle” outlined in the EAFRD regulation⁹. Although it is also apparent that i) there is a lack of understanding amongst some Managing Authorities about the role of networks and networking, and; ii) that this lack of understanding is manifested in networks which have restricted access and are therefore not truly representative.

Two main types of stakeholder representation appear to have evolved in the current programming period. In 19 Member States, the NRN appears to be rather formally established (e.g. by delegation). Whilst, in the other 8 Member States a more informal approach to NRN membership is practiced whereby anyone representing a stakeholder group involved in, or concerned by rural development, is usually considered a member and as such is admitted to participate in the activities of the NRN.

Of course, the inclusion / representation of stakeholder groups in the network is only the starting point for building a network’s connection with its stakeholders. NSUs must also have the capacity, resources and motivation to fully and effectively **engage** with stakeholders, especially those key actors of direct relevance to the priorities of the NSU annual work plan (AWP). Amongst other things, the NSU must therefore be able to place the right people in the right place at the right time in order to contribute to networking initiatives and engage efficiently and effectively ‘on-the-spot’ with stakeholders.

4.4 Operational Mandate

The operational mandates of the EU-27 NSUs vary considerably. They are influenced to a great extent by the flexibility and decision-making of the relevant Managing Authorities, and in some cases also by the political influence of National Authorities.

The ultimate responsibility for an NRN lies with the Managing Authority – this is clear. But the degree of autonomy that an NSU has from the MA can be a very sensitive issue and can lead to debate about when, how and on what an NSU has mandate. There are no common, clear and exhaustive guidelines on this issue and conflict is known to have arisen between some NSUs and the Managing Authorities on critical decisions regarding actions and initiatives linked to consultation, planning, programme delivery and communications.

There are many different examples of operational mandates given to the NSUs by their Managing Authorities (MAs). These range from MAs that have set-up the NSU, agreed a multi-annual work plan and then largely left the NSU alone to implement the planned activities – to cases where the AWP agreed for the NSU is subject to continued scrutiny and modification by the MA and/or b) the NSU requires on-going approval from the same MA for procurement required to implement the AWP.

From the activities reported by the NSUs as part of the *2011 NRN Mapping Exercise*¹⁰, it is noticeable that that most of the actions and the activities undertaken by the NSUs are limited to communication and training activities. In a few instances only this mandate is extended to programme implementation. The

⁹ See Article 6 of Regulation No. 1698/2005

¹⁰ ENRD (2011). *Findings of the 2011 NRN Mapping Exercise: Final Synthesis Report*. A report (November 2011) from the Contact Point of the European Network for Rural Development, Brussels - can be downloaded from: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=0DF4FA1F-09F1-5D17-923B-63AADB56186A (last retrieved 2 May 2012)

lack of clearly identified and designated networking functions within Regulation No. 1698/2005 itself may also, in some cases, have contributed to uncertainties about how exactly an NRN should assist in RDP implementation. In the case of the 4 Network Programmes (NRN-Ps) this issue is less pronounced given the more detailed framework and intervention logic that the NRN-Ps are required to follow.

4.5 Capacity and Management

In keeping with the diversity observed in budget, structure and operational mandate etc., the capacity of the NSUs is also highly variable and there are concerns that in many cases the capacity of the NSUs to engage with new issues and new stakeholders is already exceeded. This is apparent, for example, in the differing levels of engagement by NSUs in activities at a European level, including the ENRD Joint NRN Thematic Initiatives which have suffered from “patchy” participation by the NSUs and associated experts.

The financial limitations imposed on many NSUs through the respective budget allocations have obviously driven many units to rationalise on human resources, capacity and skills. This means that the basic internal resources and expertise that many NSUs possess also need to be complemented with the support of external technical expertise in order for an NRN to deliver comprehensive services. There must be a balance between the work done by internal staff, and that done by external resources. Good coordination, versatility and flexibility are required for a general coherence in the interventions and also for transparency in decision making and management.

A network is something which should live and where the needs are continuously and sometimes fast changing. The NSUs and MAs must keep in mind the need for network evolution and growth, not only in terms of the technical resources they utilise or develop, but also in terms of the available human resources. It is important therefore that the competences and skills of the NSU staff also evolve and grow (as well as diversify) in line with the development and maturity of the network and networking processes.

With this in mind, it is important that NSUs focus upon building their own internal technical and management capacities. This should also not be overlooked when outsourcing certain functions or services, especially in the case where NSUs are delegated to external bodies. Internal learning processes, such as ‘self-assessment’, are very important and should be further encouraged within all NSUs.

5. SWOT of the current performance of networking as an RD Policy Tool (outcomes of the 15th NRN meeting)

During the [15th NRN meeting](#) in Finland in May 2012, extensive discussions were undertaken with Network Support Units, Managing Authorities and Evaluators all focused at identifying potential issues / key learning messages that can be extrapolated from the implementation of the current programme together with suggestions on how the provisions of the future programmes can be strengthened and enhanced to address these issues.

This process was very important in support for the preparations of the framework on networking in the 2014-2020 programming period.

The key issues addressed related to the network form and networking function with specific attention given to the following key areas:

1. Structure
2. Representation
3. Operational Mandate
4. Budget
5. Capacity and Management
6. Monitoring and Evaluation

5.1 Outcomes of discussions

Following up on the discussions undertaken in Finland a “**SWOT Analysis**” (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat Analysis) has been prepared, building and integrating key statements from the participants of the meeting. This SWOT has been prepared in the form of a matrix linking to the key elements mentioned before. Furthermore, suggestions and possible recommendations emanating from the SWOT have been summarised as proposals in an attempt to try and address the issues/ key findings influencing the effectiveness and efficiency of networking.

5.2 SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats)

Structure of the Network			
Strength	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Networks with a Leader history are better placed as stakeholders already know about the NSU and its functions	When the structure of the network limits who can access it this will influence the knowledge about it. Missing links between the functions of the NSU and the resources required	Rotating presidency within the network members Distinction between the remit and reach of the core team and delegated services	Structure & maturity: “open” vs “closed” memberships, and new/young networks can be a threat for the success of a network Diversity in functions amongst NSUs makes it difficult to elaborate a common framework
Some strong steering boards	Lack of assessment of regional needs Lack of clearly defined objectives Lack of organizational/strategic planning Inadequate skills and capacity of staff.	Stronger steering groups which are more participative and engaged in networking processes	Administrative burden and restrictions instilled by MAs Limitations originating from the Implementing regulation

	Lack of capacities and skills (within NSU and MA)		
Representation			
Strength	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Networking links directly and indirectly rural stakeholders with policy makers	Difficulties in reaching certain target groups such as practicing farmers	With the maturity of a Network, the stakeholders and the general public increase their understanding of rural development policy due to their involvement in the implementation process	Cooperation between the different institutions (both at national and EU level) should be closer and more open
Bridging the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches	Difficulties to encourage participation/ involvement of stakeholders	Networking can provide a sense of belonging to whoever engages in the process	There is no exchange of information amongst NRNs on how issue associated with membership are being dealt with in the different Member States
Good bottom-up participation of stakeholders	Large variety of target groups and stakeholders with limited reach of the network	Opportunities for a stronger involvement of stakeholders in networking	
Open (inclusive) network participation	Unclear picture of who are the real target group/s	The governance model/s adopted play a crucial role on the success that the network can manage to achieve	Neither the form of membership nor the governance model give any guarantee about what is the more effective catalyst that enhances participation of stakeholders
Use LAGs as vehicles that can disseminate and inform on network activities	Poor level of participation		
More strategic approach by demand driven networking	No clear indications or guidelines on the form that network membership should consist of		
Operational mandate			
Strength	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Networking is a tool for policy implementers to achieve their objectives	There is unclarity and confusion regarding the role of rural networks in policy implementation	Networking can create new innovative ways of reaching rural stakeholders and involve them in better ways	There is a lack of definition and difficulty in translating the terms "network" and "networking"
Networking has a critical role as a facilitators in order to enhance dialogue between the authorities and the stakeholders	Networking is not necessarily a tool that can lead to a better understanding of the actual policy	Delegate responsibility to stakeholders' for specific actions (with respective resources)	Communication (clarity) of the Regulation needs improvement with specific definitions of the terms and provisions
	Lack of common objectives for networking	Guidance and mentoring from Commission and ENRD	Administrative challenges
	Difficulties in finding common goals and activities at Regional and National level	Continuous training about Networking	Transition between programming periods is not clear on how it will be tackled
	Lack of synchronization in timing (RDP-NSU) with regards the setting up and running of the network in	Enhance linkages between NSU and MA in order to ensure a common understanding of the roles, decision making	

	respect to the delivery of the RDPs	processes and strengthen governance	
	Poor coordination/cooperation between NSUs and MAs	Building Social Capital through networking	
Budget			
Strength	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
More experienced NSUs that can carry out more realistic projections on the real financial needs to the NSU and Network	No common methodology to define needs	Integrate a strategic provision in the regulation for the consideration of networking at NSP stage	Insecure funding/Unstable budget subject to revisions by MAs
	Limitation on how much funds can be used to support the running and of the NSU imposed by the implementing rules	Networking can be incorporated in the ex-ante assessment in order to define the objectives, actions and activities that can justify the budget need	Proportionality aspect is not considered in the regulation thus countries with small programmes have very limited technical assistance resources
	Lack of guidelines on Technical Assistance use and eligibility	Harmonisation of certain activities with MA such as communication, promotion and facilitation of RDP implementation	Bureaucracy and delays from the MAs and PAs to approve expenditure
	Budget allocation is not linked with the delivery of a set of priorities and objectives		Competing priorities for technical assistance by other programming obligations such as Monitoring and evaluation and IT
			Complex procurement regulations which require specific skills and knowledge to administer
Capacity and management			
Strength	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Networking creates a sense of team work which enhances cooperation and synergies for knowledge transfer not only between various stakeholders but also between countries		Time will help to achieve a mature, cooperative and productive network	Instability/Loss of staff for various reasons such as political changes
			Political instability linked to political changes that might mean change of priorities
			Most IT systems run by the MAs are too rigid that have an impact on the efficiency of NSUs
			Lack of transparency/information flow about the progress of program implementation (in outsourced NSU)
			Lack of flexibility in some network action plans/programmes
			Threat from the transition between the current and future programme with the risk of institutional memory loss
Monitoring and Evaluation			
Strength	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Better dissemination of experiences and sharing of information at EU level	Lack of clear targets and goals for NSUs	Improved capacity and knowledge through further training	No provisions in the current regulation on monitoring and evaluation
Networking as a tool should be seen as a cross cutting	Network activities contribute least where most money goes (Axis 2)	Better cooperation between NSUs, MAs and evaluators	Lack of time to define an appropriate evaluation framework for the current period

activity across all programme objectives			
Use of "success stories" to describe what result / outcome / impact (real or perceived) was actually achieved through networking activities	No common monitoring and evaluation framework exists	Networking can deliver more value in the impact of rural development actions through greater activation, stimulation of rural actors & innovative techniques	Adoption of monitoring models should be based on the facility to integrate & interpret the information required and available
	No clear guidelines that facilitate assessment of network performance exist	Self-assessment should be an important part of daily work carried out by the NSUs	There is limited evaluation culture/motivation amongst the NSUs
	Evaluation not connected to RDP objectives	Make use of "Relevant experience" as an indicator of both success and failure	Late start of most of the networks
	Lack of indicators showing the importance of "soft" activities performed by NSUs such as training, guidance, animation activities, facilitating cooperation or project development	An intervention logic provides an ideal framework to develop a clear concept and action plan with correlated indicators	Missing data/information that is currently not being collected by NSUs
	Lack of focus on quality of networking activities	A simple M&E framework with clear output, results and impact indicators linking it to the objectives of the RDP	Lack of human and financial resources
	Clear objectives, indicators and means to fulfil these objectives that have not been set from the beginning	Strategic intervention logic for the NRN to support, sustain and build the social capital.	Never oversee the maturity and stage of development of the network when assessing the results achieved
	Lack of stakeholders perception in assessing the effectiveness of networking		

6. The European Dimension – the ENRD

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) was established and its mandate defined within EC Regulation 1698/2005. The ENRD's core function is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural development policy (EAFRD) implementation. Network management and selection of members is undertaken by DG AGRI. A Network Support Unit, known as the ENRD Contact Point, provides services to support the majority of network activities. This is outsourced to an external contractor (Kantor Management Consultants). The work of the support unit is defined within annually agreed contracts (3.5 million EUR per annum). Network activities are defined within an ENRD Annual Work Plan, proposed by DG AGRI/ENRD CP each year, finalized in consultation with the ENRD Coordination Committee members which includes representatives from all major network stakeholder groups (MAs, NRNs and European organisations involved in rural development).

ENRD activities have evolved over the four years of its operation, from an initial top-down initiative, gradually maturing to engage a wider range of Member State stakeholder interests, issues, needs and (changing) priorities. When considering the structure, activities, results and potential impact of the ENRD a clearer picture is now emerging about what aspects have worked well and what aspects have worked less well.

6.1 ENRD Structure - what is working well? And less well?

Key aspects of the *ENRD structure that have worked well* include:

- The development over time of a more flexible and responsive management structure, increasingly willing to listen, learn, gradually adapt, modify and grow with the network.
- The broad grouping of EU rural development stakeholder interests within the ENRD Coordination Committee, promoting a dynamic, multi-faceted policy dialogue that has gradually intensified to cover all aspects of rural development policy, as well as a broader range of stakeholder interests.
- The network structure has provided access to DG AGRI and other officials (at national and regional level) to i) engage them in policy dialogue; ii) exchange experiences, and; iii) use this information and insights to gradually introduce improvements in the rural development policy implementation framework at EU, Member State and regional level.
- Outsourcing of the majority of network support unit services has allowed the gradual development of an active partnership between DG AGRI and the contractor, promoting innovation, encouraging the development of new products and services and critically, providing a framework within which to broaden and deepen the communication and exchanges on rural development policy.
- Establishment of a large pool of consultancy resources to fund a wide range of technical support and expertise allowing a high degree of flexibility and adaptability in support of almost all aspects of ENRD activities and priorities.

Key aspects of the *ENRD structure that have worked less well* include:

- The ENRD's formal and somewhat rigid structures (CC, LSc, TWGs) often prevent the engagement of a wider group of stakeholders and rural development practitioners in some activities.
- The scope of ENRD work was initially limited by DG AGRI. However, over time (as the network has matured) the ENRD has been empowered to create more opportunities for open exchange and debate amongst members and targeted stakeholders. It is now understood and increasingly acknowledged that outcomes from certain ENRD activities do not necessarily need to reflect the views of the Commission, but can simply be the many and varied voices of the network.

- Establishment and running of the ENRD has been a “steep learning curve” for both DG AGRI and the Contact Point with many challenges initially related to less than optimal levels of knowledge, understanding, engagement, and/or coordination within the network.
- “Internalising” the ENRD within DG AGRI was challenging and it took some time to fully and effectively engage with the geographical / horizontal units.
- The limited mandate of the Contact Point to directly engage with, and/or provide direct support to, individual NRNs, NSUs and MAs has allowed gaps in knowledge collection, exchange and cooperation to develop, thereby limiting the potential impact of European initiatives in many areas.
- Lack of mechanisms or mandate to develop an effective dialogue between European and Member State *regional* networks.

6.2 ENRD Networking Processes - what is working well? And less well?

Key aspects of the *ENRD activities that have worked well* include:

- Gradual expansion and adaptation of the range and diversity of ENRD products and services in response to network feedback (with many available in six languages), providing more opportunities for engagement and information exchange with a wider range of rural development stakeholders.
- Experimentation with a variety of mechanisms to engage network stakeholders in policy dialogues and support policy analysis activities (including case studies, working groups and focus groups) which have often provided unique and practical insights into specific policy implementation issues. Outcomes from these initiatives have, on occasion, had a direct influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of EU rural policy design and refinement (namely for LEADER and some aspects of implementation mechanisms, rules and procedures). Evidence based findings have also provided important insights to guide design of future rural development programmes.
- Collection, collation and dissemination of relevant experience project examples, providing a growing repository of information to guide, inspire and demonstrate EAFRD funding in action.
- Gradual expansion of the range of communication products and channels to enhance exchange of experience including both on and off-line products and services.

Key aspects of *ENRD activities that have worked less well* include:

- The lack of a clear intervention logic, hierarchy of objectives and performance criteria to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of ENRD activities, results and impacts.
- A certain lack of visibility regarding the use of the work of Thematic Working Groups or Focus Groups in the policy formulation process has some created some frustration amongst key stakeholders in the ENRD.
- Lack of engagement of many stakeholder groups in ENRD activities due to lack of capacity, resources and/or commitment / interest has resulted in the generation of less common knowledge and fewer outcomes than originally anticipated.
- Variance in resourcing of MS NRNs/NSU's has often led to problems of coordination and participation at EU level, often compounded by lack of continuity in staff participation/availability, limited technical capacity or access to appropriate technical support to effectively support or deliver core networking functions.

7. The Added Value of Networking

As already noted, there have been many academic studies - representing a great diversity of theoretical and practical approaches - asking questions about the added value of networks in relation to EU policy processes¹¹. Overall, there is broad consensus in the literature that policy networks do have great potential to add value – provided that stakeholders in the network “possess relevant resources and sufficiently trust each other”.

Yet demonstrating this added value in concrete terms remains elusive.

During discussions with network representatives at the 11th NRN meeting in Bad Schandau (Germany)¹² in April 2011, it was proposed that all NRNs jointly work together within the framework of a common methodology to demonstrate the “added value” of networking. The objective of the Joint Action was to pool the resources of as many NRNs as possible to illustrate and communicate the current state of knowledge and understanding regarding the added value of networking in rural development policy – notably at national / regional level. For example, the NRNs already have material from their self-assessment activities and 2010 mid-term evaluation reports which is relevant to demonstrating the added value of networking, but this information has not to-date been effectively collected and shared at an EU level.

An on-line survey of the NRNs was initiated on 28/10/2011 to identify what “common network statistics” could be collected and aggregated at European level. Response from the NRNs (a total of 20 NRNs replied) was very good and the preliminary results of the survey – plus the status of the NRN Self-assessment Toolkit and the proposed steps for the “demonstrating added value” methodology - were presented during the 13th NRN meeting in The Netherlands on 10/11/2011. During the meeting, the NRNs were also engaged in a workshop discussion about the identification of networking success stories and case studies.

A short note introducing the NRN Joint Action on “Demonstrating the Added Value of Networking” was sent to all NRNs on 31/12/2011. Based on the results from the preliminary survey on “common network statistics”, quantitative data was requested from the NRNs for compilation and aggregation at EU level under 4 main headings:

- Network communications, including meetings and participation;
- Knowledge exchange, including good practices;
- Training, and;
- Cooperation.

All data was collected retrospectively from the networks for the period from the start of activities (e.g. 2007) until the end of 2011. No new data collection was proposed. A total of 20 network support units contributed data¹³.

¹¹ Börzel, T.A. and Heard-Lauréote, K. (2009). Networks in EU Multi-level Governance: Concepts and Contributions, *Journal of Public Policy* 29(2), 135-152.

¹² http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en-rd-events-and-meetings/meetings/en/11th-nrn-meeting_en.cfm

¹³ Note that ENRD data has not yet been incorporated

The data collected on “common network statistics” is summarised as follows:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Network communications | • A total of 5 356 meetings involving 286 574 participants (19 networks from 2007-2011) |
| Knowledge exchange | • The collection of 5 562 ‘Good Practices’ related to RDP project implementation (19 networks from 2007-2011)
• A total of 3 214 790 website visitors (as above) |
| Training | • A total of 1 931 training events involving 79 224 participants (16 networks from 2007-2011) |
| Cooperation | • A total of 1 193 co-operation events involving 33 168 participants (15 networks from 2007-2011) |

Despite the methodological issues associated with its collection and aggregation of data, this summary data does provide a simple ‘snapshot’ of the overall level of networking activity supported by the EAFRD during the first 4 years of networking operations.

Additionally a total of 98 ‘success stories’ were collected from 26 networks in 22 Member States. According to researchers, “Networks can play important roles in creating public value if they are understood for what they do rather than for a set of abstract functions externally ascribed”¹⁴. And the 98 success stories collected **do** give a valuable insight into what the EAFRD funded networks are actually doing and how the relative success of these activities is perceived and explained by the managing staff of the network support units.

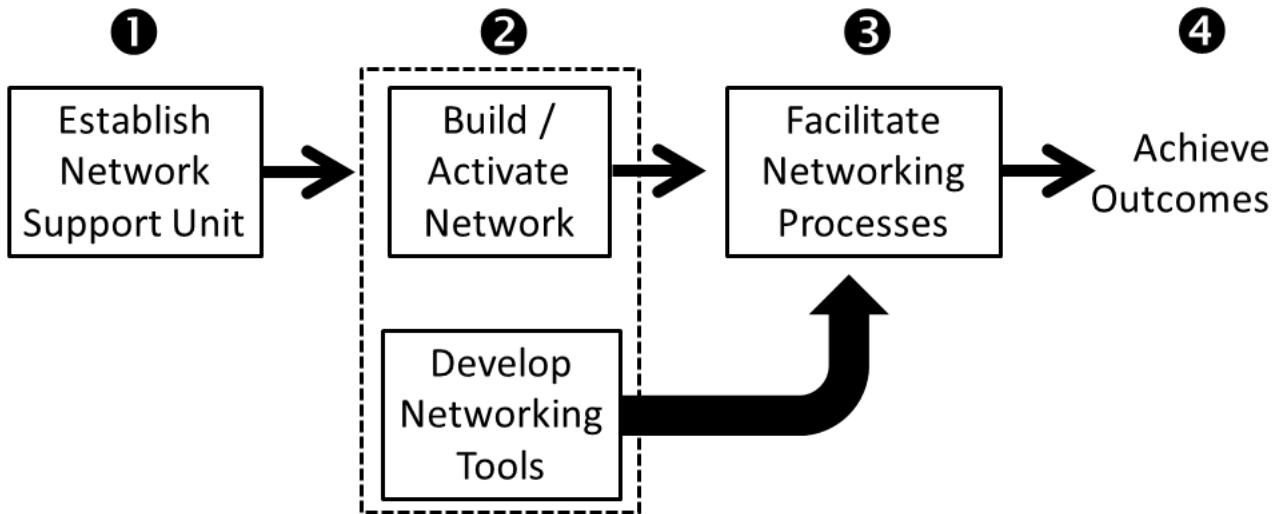
The success stories collected are descriptive / narrative and qualitative. Although prepared using a common template, they are also very diverse – a clear reflection of the diversity of the networks themselves, notably in relation to the networks’ varying states of growth and maturity.

Indeed, it is quite apparent that the ‘success’ perceived and described by individual network managers is a ‘relative success’ that is dependent to a large extent upon the ‘relative state’ of growth and maturity of individual networks.

Figure 2 presents a simple overview of the generic ‘steps’ associated with the establishment and functioning of an NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period. It must be remembered that NRNs in the EU-27 are all at very different stages of progress through these steps with a resultant huge diversity in capacity and activity being observed in the NRNs. There are some relatively mature NRNs who are well advanced with the facilitation of networking processes and increasing concerned, for example, with the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes – whilst there are other NRNs where the establishment of the NSU has been delayed and the network and associated networking tools are only just being built-up and developed.

¹⁴ Agranoff, R. (2003). A new look at the value-adding functions of intergovernmental networks. Paper prepared for Seventh National Public Management Research Conference, Georgetown University (October 9-11, 2003)

FIGURE 2: Simple overview of the generic steps associated with the establishment and functioning of an NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period



The ‘success stories’ collected from the NRNs can be clustered and linked to the main stages of development in Figure 2 above as follows:

Stage of Development	Type of network ‘success story’
Establish Network Support Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed work plans • Formal meetings • Training design/delivery • Basic website development • Basic communication plan
Build Network and Develop Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues-based working groups • Gathering of evidence-based relevant experience • Dissemination of interesting products / info • More flexible work plans / resource allocations • Stakeholder communication / training, mapping & planning • Engagement / exchange with other networks / entities
Facilitate Networking Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth of informal meetings • Targeted promotion of useful products • Diversified range of communication products • Capacity building of other networks / stakeholders

As Table 2 shows, when the number of ‘success stories’ received is counted against the stage of network development it is apparent that the majority of network successes perceived and explained by the NSU staff relate to building networks and developing network tools (66), whilst fewer relate to establishment of the network support unit (15) and / or the functions of networking (15).

Furthermore, if the definition of the added value of networking is accepted as that proposed by some experts¹⁵ – namely, “producing solutions and results that otherwise would not have occurred through single hierarchical organisations” – then it is apparent that only relatively few of the ‘success stories’ collected are close to describing the *real* added value of networking (i.e. that associated with the unique functions of networks and networking, rather than the day-to-day operation of network support units).

This is a logical and acceptable conclusion given the common observation by experts that networks take time to develop and must be allowed to mature before judging their performance. It also highlights the importance of being cautious about not expecting too much demonstration of added value from new networks (such as the NRNs and ENRD) before they have been given time to grow and develop – in other words, **don’t expect** them to “run before they can walk”.

TABLE 1: *Summary of ‘success stories’ of the added value of networking (total of 98 received)*

Main clusters of ‘success stories’	NSU-related	Network Development	Networking
Detailed work plans	15	66	
Formal meetings			
Training design/delivery			
Basic website development			
Basic communication plan			
Issues-based working groups			
Gathering of evidence-based relevant experience			
Dissemination of interesting products / info			
More flexible work plans / resource allocations			
Stakeholder communication / training, mapping & planning			
Engagement / exchange with other networks / entities			
Growth of informal meetings			
Targeted promotion of useful products			
Diversified range of communication products			
Capacity building of other networks / stakeholders			15

¹⁵ Agranoff, R. (2003). A new look at the value-adding functions of intergovernmental networks. Paper prepared for Seventh National Public Management Research Conference, Georgetown University (October 9-11, 2003)

8. Future Challenges

Based upon the experiences of the ENRD , the following key challenges have been identified for enhancing the future use of networking as a rural development policy tool:

1. The need to establish basic minimum performance criteria for all network support units that will assist in guiding and prioritizing network activities and resource allocations.
2. More direct acknowledgement of the enormous variance in the structure, capacity, resources, experience and maturity of existing networks and the need to take this into account within the ENRD annual work plans and to adapt support services and products to cater more directly for these differences (i.e. one size doesn't fit all).
3. The need to establish a more flexible, integrated and technically strong network support framework at EU level (acknowledging the importance of both formal and informal frameworks), possibly through the gradual expansion of ENRD membership and the more proactive promotion of the network within DG AGRI.
4. The need to establish minimum levels of network capacity at national and regional levels, ideally linked more directly to the number of rural citizens in specific regions, thereby ensuring the establishment of a critical mass of network support structures that can work more directly with and benefit from ENRD activities.
5. The need to further link the chronology of ENRD activities more directly with the policy agenda to maximize the use of policy analysis findings and practical insights in rural development policy and programme design and development.
6. The importance of much stronger links with other policy networks (e.g. FARNET) and 'communities of practice' (e.g. the rural development research community).

9. Some recommendations to improve rural networks in the future

In the current period (2007-2013), there has been a lack of clarity on objectives and a lack of initial guidance to set up rural networks. In the next programming period (2014-2020), the draft basic Act proposes much more specific objectives and tasks for rural networks. But there is still a need to identify where further guidance and clarity would be needed.

Insights and observations from all stakeholders at the NRN meeting contributed to a better understanding of the function of networking, identified the key elements that have an influence on what is working well and less well and guided the elaboration of recommendations on how to strengthen current and future networking.

The following points are a summary of the proposed improvements linked to the six intervention areas as a conclusion from the 15th NRN meeting as follows:

9.1 Network Support Units

In order for Member States to establish Network Support Units (NSUs) that are able to animate and implement their respective annual work plans or programmes in an efficient and effective way there is the need for:

- More clarity on what kind of structure/s and set-up can be adopted by Managing Authorities for the establishment of the NSU;
- A detailed informative handbook elaborated at EU level that should inform Managing Authorities on what could be the minimum requirements in terms of resources required so as to ensure effective operation. This could contain information on what is the minimum adequate number of staff and competences required in order to run the NSU and network and what are the desired skills and capabilities that can complement the delivery of the action plan or networking programme;
- Specific provisions that will ensure that NSUs and networks are developed in a way that they can effectively deliver on the wider policy objectives.

9.2 Structure and representation

Various interpretations on the ‘partnership principle’ outlined in the EAFRD regulation exist amongst the EU Member States. This has resulted because of the insufficient clarity of the respective article. The result was that various approaches to membership were adopted by Managing Authorities and where there was a lack of understanding on the role of networks and networking the result was restricted membership. In order to improve on this issue there is the need for:

- A more “open” membership to encourage participation/ involvement of stakeholders and ensure that the large variety of target groups and stakeholders all have a right to contribute or benefit;
- More clarity on the role and function of regional offices/networks;
- A clear role in accompanying policy implementation as an objective for the network in order to enhance and strengthen the links between rural stakeholders and policy makers. This will also have an effect on cooperation between the different institutions (both at regional, national and EU level) by linking them more closely;
- ENRD to ensure there is knowledge sharing amongst the NRNs on how this issue is being dealt with in different Member States.

9.3 Operational mandate

The mandate of NSUs varies considerably amongst the EU-27 and is influenced to a great extent by the flexibility and decisions of Managing Authorities. To ensure that there is a better common understanding amongst the key stakeholders it is recommended that there are:

- Clearly defined objectives, roles and functions for network support units, national rural networks and the networking function;
- Clarifications and elaboration on the link of the NRN with the Monitoring Committee and the respective Monitoring and Evaluation function;
- More synergies and less replication of certain functions within the regulation such a “communication” with the function of the Managing Authorities;
- Clear guidance for transition between the current and future programming periods (and transition rules where appropriate);
- better synchronization in timing (RDP and NSU set-up).

9.4 Budget

The budget allocation for the NRNs is based on Member State decision and there is no clear formula linked to size of territory, population, regionalisation, RDP budget and action plans. This resulted in huge operational constraints for some networks because insufficient financial resources. In order to ensure that the NSU has the appropriate financial resources it is proposed that there is:

- Development of a common methodology that can guide Managing Authorities to define operational needs;
- Provision for an NRN fiche in the RDP to secure funding linked to objectives, actions and activities including also the operational aspect of running the network programme/plan ("max. 25% for the structure needed to run the network");
- Removal of the limitation imposed by the implementing rules on the operational budget of the NSU;
- Provision for Networking to be incorporated in the ex-ante assessment;
- Consideration of the “proportionality principles” in the resource elaboration of networking in respect to Technical Assistance budgets;
- Clear and detailed guidelines on Technical Assistance eligibility and use for Networking activities.

9.5 Capacity and Management

It is seen that in many NSUs human resources, skills and capacity vary and relate directly to the financial resources available. This has an effect on the performance of the network and its development. In order to ensure that a network is supported effectively in its evolution there is the need to:

- Make provision in the network operational plan to cater for continuous training and capacity build-up of the staff;
- Maintain a minimum institutional capacity within the network support unit and not outsource completely;
- Have more monitoring from the Commission (through desk officers and annual reporting);
- Allow some degree of autonomy and flexibility in working programmes/plans of Networks.

9.6 Monitoring and evaluation

The current EAFRD regulations do not specify the need for monitoring and evaluating the performance of networks in respect to the programme objectives. This is only obligatory for the Programme networks. The need for assessing the outcomes of networking is widely acknowledged and therefore there is the need to:

- Have clear objectives, indicators and means to fulfil these objectives set from the beginning of the programme and develop an intervention logic for the NRN
- Improve capacity and training even with the support of evaluators
- Include clear provisions for evaluations on the networking function
- Make use of qualitative assessment with the use of “success stories” to describe what result / outcome / impact (real or perceived) was actually achieved through networking activities
- Develop clear guidelines
- Include self-assessment as part of NSU work
- Develop indicators that can show the importance of what are perceived as “soft” activities performed by NSUs (training, guidance, animation activities, facilitating cooperation or project development, etc.)
- Make use of “Relevant experience” as an indicator of both success and failure and the lessons to be learnt from them
- More consideration of “quality” in networking activities
- Never oversee the maturity and stage of development of the network.

It is proposed that these recommendations are used as a basis for the planned ENRD Networking workshop planned to take place in September 2012 in Brussels. This shall ensure a practical and detailed outcome for the workshop and a set of solid recommendations to guide the future programming period with respect to Networking.

Finally we would like to thank all the contributors (NSUs, MAs and Evaluators) that have supported us with their valuable experiences, knowledge and information in a journey that has taken us from the joint NRN initiative on demonstrating the added value of networking up to the 15th NRN Meeting.