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DISCUSSION PAPER
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RURAL NETWORKS IN THE FUNDING PERIOD 2007-2013:
A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE EU POLICY INSTRUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Rural Networks have been implemented as an instrument to enhance EU rural development policies in the funding period 2007-2013. Gaps in European programme documents concerning the networks' purpose and their evaluation led to a survey of the National Network Units being conducted in 2010. Besides investigating how these gaps are bridged nationally, the survey aimed to provide an overview of the development of the networks, of the initial experiences and challenges faced in running the networks, and to assess their potential impact. Empirical findings show that the networks probably support rural development (policies) and create added value. However, ways of demonstrating this impact in quantitative terms are lacking. Member states tend to stick closely to the specifications provided by the Commission and rarely go beyond them even if they are inadequate – even though this is legally possible. As a result, one purpose originally envisaged for the networks, namely to contribute to improving governance, is neglected. The paper provides proposals for modifying EC Regulations so as to enhance rural networks' impact and points to the need for further theoretical research corroborating the networks' value and increasing their effectiveness.

JEL: Q18, (D85)

Keywords: National Rural Networks, Policy Instrument, Rural Development, CAP.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

NETZE FÜR DEN LÄNDLICHEN RAUM IN DER FÖRDERPERIODE 2007-2013:
EIN KRITISCHER REVIEW DES EU POLITIKINSTRUMENTS

Für die Förderperiode 2007-2013 wurden Netze für den Ländlichen Raum als Politikinstrument zur Aufwertung der EU Politik zur ländlichen Entwicklung aufgebaut. Unzulänglichkeiten in den EU Programmdokumenten im Hinblick auf die Zweckbestimmung und die Evaluierung der Netze gaben Anlass, im Jahr 2010 eine Umfrage unter den Nationalen Vernetzungsstellen durchzuführen. Es sollte einerseits der Frage nachgegangen werden, wie auf nationaler Ebene mit den regulatorischen Lücken umgegangen wird, andererseits zielte die Umfrage darauf ab, die Entwicklung der Netze zu erfassen, sowie erste Erfahrungen und Herausforderungen im Bezug auf das Management der Netze und ihre potentiellen Auswirkungen auszumachen. Die empirischen Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Netze wahrscheinlich die Umsetzung ländlicher Entwicklung(spolitik) unterstützen und einen Mehrwert hervorbringen. Allerdings fehlt es an Mitteln, diese Wirkungen quantitativ nachzuweisen. Ferner, da die Mitgliedstaaten dazu tendieren, sich stark an den EU Vorgaben zu orientieren und nicht über diese hinauszugehen, auch wenn sie unzureichend sind, wird das ursprünglich für die Netze vorgesehene Ziel, einen Beitrag zur Verbesserung von Governance zu leisten, allseits vernachlässigt. In dem Papier werden Vorschläge für mögliche Modifizierungen der EU Verordnungen gemacht, die die positive Wirkung der Netze verstärken könnten. Außerdem wird der Bedarf an netzwerktheoretischer Forschung zur Unterlegung des Werts der Netze für den Ländlichen Raum und zur Vergrößerung ihrer Effektivität herausgestellt.

JEL: Q18, (D85)

Schlüsselwörter: Netze für den Ländlichen Raum, Politikinstrument, Ländliche Entwicklung, GAP.

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List of Abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
DGAgri	Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EC	European Commission
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
EU	European Union
LAG	Local Action Group
NNU	National Network Unit
NRN	National Rural Network
RDP	Rural Development Programme

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the period 2007-2013, National Rural Networks (NRNs) have been introduced as a new form of intervention within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Establishing NRNs is obligatory for European Union (EU) Member States and is financially supported out of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The NRNs are regarded as Technical Assistance measures. To summarise the European Commission's (EC) Regulation, the main purposes of the networks are the transfer of information and exchange of experiences concerning rural development measures, and to provide technical assistance for LEADER¹ local action groups (LAGs) and inter-territorial and transnational partnerships (EC/1698/2005). In addition, the networks are mentioned in the Community strategic guidelines for rural development as being expected to contribute to the improvement of governance (Council Decision EC/144/2006), whereupon the term "governance", is not defined.²

There are many open questions concerning the networks, and the following three issues in particular call for attention: First, in contrast to most other EAFRD interventions, no intervention logic and no common evaluation system have been formally established for the NRNs at European level. Second, although the objective of improving governance is mentioned in the EC strategic guidelines for rural development in the context of the NRNs, this is barely reflected in the NRNs' own publications. Third, it must be stressed that there are significant differences in both absolute and relative terms between networks' budgets, i.e. in the percentage of each Member State's EAFRD budget envisaged for expenditure on NRNs (MARQUARDT et al., 2011). This raises the question to what extent Member States' expectations of their NRN and associated objectives vary.

This paper approaches these open questions aiming to identify gaps in the NRN system and assess its development potential. As there is scarcely any scientific literature on National Rural Networks, empirical investigations were carried out. This paper therefore relies on the results of a 2010 survey of responsible Network Units that was conducted with the aim of 1) drawing a clearer picture of Member States' intentions to implement their NRN; 2) obtaining an overview of the development of the networks as an intervention; 3) investigating the extent to which evaluation of the impact of the rural networks is carried out and what evaluation methods are used; and 4) gathering the experience of the older Member States (EU 25) in order to draw up recommendations for establishing NRNs in candidate countries and in Romania, where implementation of the Networks has been delayed. Furthermore, the paper raises questions and identifies gaps where further research is needed, and concludes by making suggestions for improving the NRNs' regulatory framework.

The paper is structured as follows: After providing essential background information on the concept of the National Rural Networks, a brief description is given of the methodology used, most notably the survey design. In Section 4, the findings are presented and discussed with a focus on the conducting of network activities and their impact, definitions of objectives for

¹ LEADER is an acronym for *Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*. This translates into English as *Links between the rural economy and development actions*.

² The term "Governance", traditionally used synonymously with "government", nowadays refers to new processes of governing (STOKER, 1998). It refers to the way in which stakeholders make decisions and solve problems. Even if here the broad context is obvious, namely rural development policies, "governance" can still refer to many kinds of decision-making processes. Moreover, the normative formulated objective to "improve" governance requires reference points for assessing "good governance". The contribution of rural networks to the objective of improving governance could, for instance, be a direct impact on decisions, for example on rural development strategies, or an indirect impact by spreading information on the way political decisions have been made to increase transparency.

the NRNs, and on the evaluation of network activities and their future as an EU intervention. Finally, conclusions and prospects for the future are presented.

2 NATIONAL RURAL NETWORKS

Networking in the form of exchanging experience, or establishing partnerships as an instrument for supporting the effectiveness of European policies is not a novel idea and has shown clear benefits (EC, 2001).³ In the field of rural development, too, the positive effects of networking – emphasised by many authors (LORIZ-HOFFMANN, 2008; LÜCKENKÖTTER, 2001; MOSELEY, 2003; DVS*, 2008) – have made them an important driver for rural initiatives: European experience with networks started with the LEADER programme in 1991 funded out of the Structural Funds. Under LEADER, support is given to the formation of regional partnerships, so-called Local Action Groups (LAGs), but also to networking in the form of exchange of experience and cooperation between regions.

In the funding period 2007-2013, the establishment of National Rural Networks (NRNs) has been made obligatory for Member States and is financially supported out of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The networks are regarded as EAFRD Technical Assistance and are seen as an instrument for enhancing the effectiveness of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs). For establishing and coordinating the networks Member States can draw on Technical Assistance funds (EC/1698/2005, Art. 68), which must be nationally co-financed. The NRNs, managed by a National Network Unit (NNU), were to be established by the end of 2008. An action plan was supposed to be in place by this deadline (EC/1698/2005; EC/1974/2006).

The organisational structures of the rural networks vary widely. In most Member States, there is one NRN, while in others there are also formally established regional networks. Sometimes the networks units have decentralised structures, e.g. regional offices. The NRNs' decision-making body – a Coordination Committee or Steering Group consisting of elected or selected members representing rural stakeholders (e.g. representatives of ministries of related sectors, national farmers' associations, environmental and social organisations), is generally chaired by the RDP managing authority.

Although the structures of NRNs differ, their common main purposes according to the Commission Regulation are the transfer of information on rural development measures, identification of good practices, organisation of exchange of experience and know-how particularly among (potential) beneficiaries, preparation of training programmes for LAGs and facilitation of inter-territorial and transnational partnerships (EC/1698/2005, Art. 68).⁴

The NRNs are supposed to be closely interlinked with the European Network for Rural Development (COURADES 2007), which ensures networking between NRNs and with other stakeholders such as the LAGs at EU level.⁵ Hence, according to SOUSA UVA (2008, p. 1), the

³ The EC has become aware of the benefits of networking in policy-making and highlights the further need to make resources available and to work more effectively in the common interests of EU citizens. "Open networks should form a scientific reference system to support EU policy-making" (EC, 2001, p. 19).

⁴ In other words, as noted on the website of the ENRD (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/>), the main role of the NRNs is "to support the implementation and evaluation of rural development policy. NRNs bring together a variety of rural stakeholders to promote communication and information exchange at the regional, national and European level." Note that here the spectrum of the NRNs' tasks has already been broadened and goes beyond their functions as defined in the EC Regulation, what might indicate that the distribution of roles within the ENRD has not been finally clarified yet.

⁵ The European Network for Rural Development, in addition to gathering examples of good practice and bringing stakeholders together, is also intended to carry out additional tasks including collecting, analysing and disseminating information on Community rural development measures and providing information on developments in rural areas within the EU and third countries. (EC/1698/2005.)

European network should provide "real incentives" for achieving the objectives established within the framework of the EC strategic guidelines for rural development (EC/2006/144). The common objectives, which should be achieved under the EAFRD, are organised in four axes focusing on: (1) competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; (2) environment and countryside; (3) quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy; and (4) the overarching LEADER Axis under which integrated regional rural development is supported (EC/2005/1698). Moreover, the networks are mentioned in the community strategic guidelines for rural development as being expected to contribute to the improvement of governance.

It is worth noting that besides the operational objectives mentioned above, neither an intervention logic nor an evaluation system has been defined for the NRNs in the common regulatory framework. For other EAFRD interventions, a Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) has been established (DGAGRI, 2006) including common indicators and evaluation questions. The CMEF is objective-driven, in other words it primarily sets out a hierarchy of objectives consisting of the four objective EAFRD Axes and subordinate objectives related to rural development measures and sub-measures. The hierarchy of objectives is complemented by a hierarchy of indicators. Although not formally laid down, it can be concluded that the main purpose of the NRNs is to support the implementation and evaluation of rural development policy (ENRD w.y.) and thus to increase the effectiveness of RDPs (and of disbursed funds) by improving governance.

In establishing an NRN, most Member States can draw upon their experience of the LEADER programme, for which they had established network units to serve LEADER activities alongside the general EU LEADER+ Contact Point in the period 2000-2006. However, networking in the current funding period, in which it is mainstreamed and has become an integral part of the CAP, differs in some aspects from the networks' activities within LEADER in previous periods: (1) the networks in the period 2007-2013 have a broader spectrum of rural development topics as the new networks are expected to deal with all four thematic EAFRD Axes. (2) The networks not only include LEADER LAGs but also organisations (e.g. foundations, NGOs), as well as ministries and subordinated agencies. (3) Establishing NRNs is mandatory for member states. (4) "Direct support" is provided to all stakeholders (JACOBS, 2008). This implies that not only new Member States but also older ones might face challenges with the implementation of their NRN.

3 METHODOLOGY

The survey conducted among the NNUs of the NRNs across the EU was conducted in April/May 2010. Questionnaires (see Annex A) were distributed via e-mail. They contained four parts: A) Activities of the Network Unit, B) Countrywide and Europe-wide Networking; C) Evaluation, and D) mixed questions on, for instance, the networks' impact on governance structures. The design of the questionnaires was developed on the basis of a literature review including network theory, experiences with networking in practice, research on governance and evaluation theory. The questionnaire deliberately included many open questions in order to gather in-depth information – this was possible due to the small target group known to be experts in this field. Out of 32 network units approached,⁶ 12 questionnaires were returned; the responses of one NNU had to be excluded from the data analysis. The modest ratio of questionnaires returned – one third (34.4%, or 37.5% respectively) can be explained by the fact that the ENRD Contact Point was conducting a parallel survey among the NNUs on the

⁶ The questionnaires were sent to the 32 national and regional network units listed on the "Contact list of National Rural Networks" on the ENRD website (www.enrd.eu; last accessed: 01.04.2010). Note that for the purpose of simplification, regional network units are also referred to as "NNUs" in this paper.

issue of evaluation. Furthermore, three of the networks only had a provisional network unit in place or none at all.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the survey findings are presented and discussed. We focus on the forms and activities of networks, their impact and evaluation, and on prospects for the networks in the next funding period. Particular attention is given to the definition of objectives for the NRNs and the relevance of governance in the context of the NRNs.

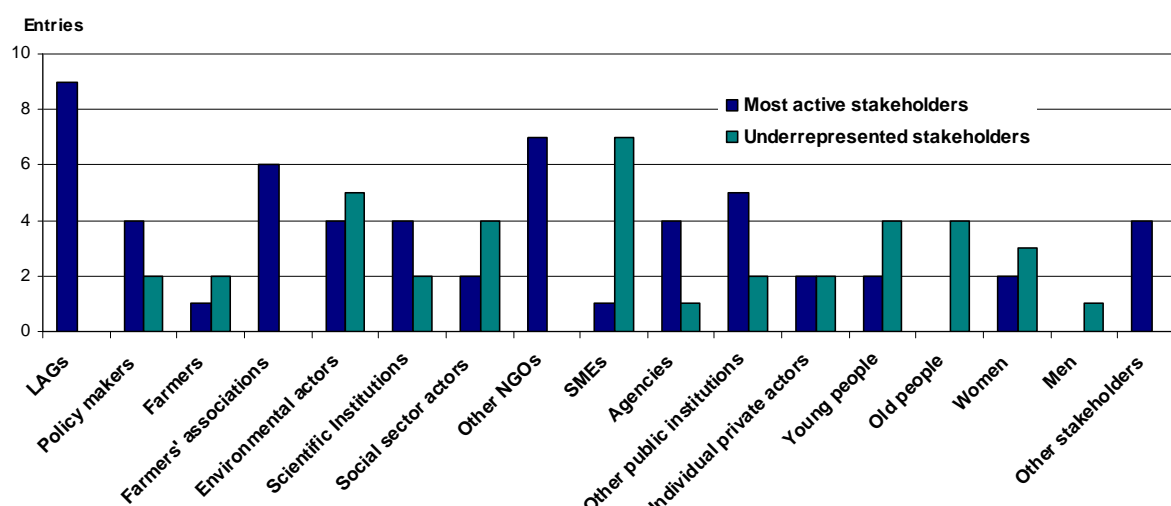
4.1 Forms of National Rural Networks

Nine National Network Units and two Regional Network Units participated in the survey. Of these eleven network units, eight are based within the ministry or another state agency and three are fully or partly outsourced. Within these two organisational categories, the form of network unit varies: For instance, if the network unit is based within the ministry, it may take the form of a self-contained department or it may legally be an additional body, but staff working in the ministry's rural development department or in the managing authority are generally in charge of running the network (this applies in the case of the Scottish NRN, for example). If a network unit is completely outsourced to the private sector, as is planned for the Romanian NRN, for instance, a consultancy firm is generally responsible for administering the network.

Generally, the composition of the networks is interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral, and includes representatives of organisations and a few individual private actors. Figure 1 lists the stakeholder groups that typically make up rural networks. However, as there is no common definition of a network member (in some member states only the actors in the decision-making body are considered members, while in others all actors receiving a newsletter make up the membership), the survey did not ask about the size of the networks or the share of certain stakeholder groups in the membership. Instead, questions were asked about network composition in terms of stakeholders participating in network activities. Two categories therefore had to be identified, first the most active stakeholders; and second, stakeholder groups which are under-represented in the rural networks.

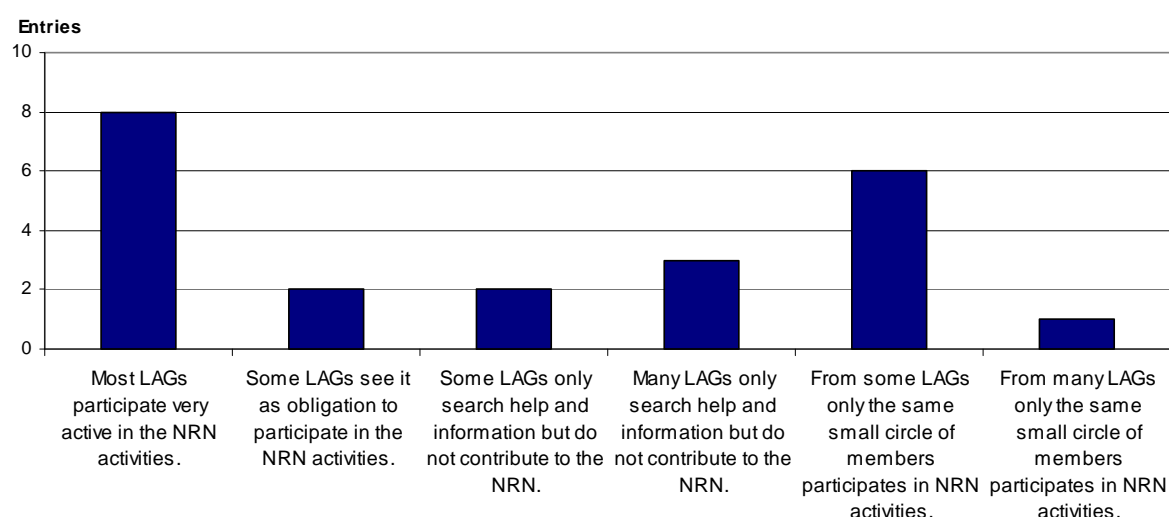
In all networks, LAGs are seen as some of the most active stakeholders (Figure 1). Other NGOs and farmers' associations are generally also active stakeholders in the rural networks. Environmental actors, on the other hand, do not play a uniform role; where they are present, they seem to have an active role in the network, but are also often declared to be under-represented in the networks. According to the network units, SMEs are also under-represented in the networks. The role of most other stakeholder groups, such as scientific institutions or actors representing the social sector, varies from network to network.

Figure 2 highlights that although the trend points to LAGs as being the most active stakeholder group, it is not possible to draw a general picture. Not all network units described the LAGs' participation in the networks as consistently active, and often only a small circle of members of a LAG participates in network activities.

Figure 1: Stakeholders' roles in the Rural Networks

Note: 96 entries given by 11 network units (Ticking several answers was possible).

Source: Own survey data 2010.

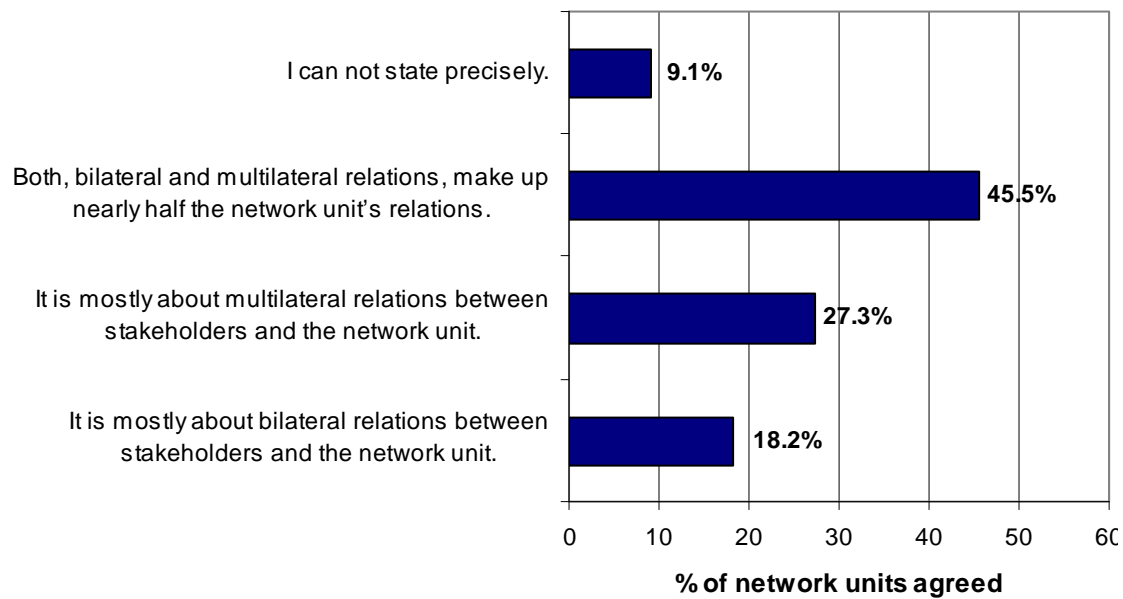
Figure 2: The role of the LEADER Local Action Groups in the Rural Networks

Note: 22 entries given by 11 network units (Ticking several answers was possible).

LAG = Local Action Group NRN = National Rural Network.

Source: Own survey data 2010.

A closer look at the ties, i.e. the links between the actors that make up the networks' structures, reveals that nearly half of the rural networks are characterised by having both bilateral relations (relations between the network unit and one rural actor) and multilateral relations (i.e. more than two parties are involved in group discussions, for example), to nearly the same degree (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Kind of relations forming the Rural Networks (assessed by the Network Units)

Note: n = 11, distributed to 11 network units.

Source: Own survey data 2010.

Only two networks claimed to consist mostly of bilateral relations and three claimed to consist mostly of multilateral relations.⁷ Moreover, most of the network units described the majority of relations as reciprocal, in other words actors who obtain information and support from the network (unit) also contribute to the network. It is worth noting that the intensity of the various actors' contribution differs significantly – while some network units stated that the network would not run at all without the support of particular members, other network units appreciated simple feedback. Hitherto only active direct or indirect (e.g. via media) personal interactions have been considered to be bilateral and multilateral or reciprocal relations, but not for instance the circulation of a newsletter, although this could also be considered as representing a set of bilateral relations. If the latter form of interaction were also counted, bilateral interactions would clearly predominate in the networks.

All in all, the prevailing opinion was that all NRNs have the character of a network and are thus more than a helpdesk. In contrast, whether rural stakeholders experience the NRNs as networks with open, flexible, and less centralised structures interlinking many actors was not so strongly affirmed by the network units. One limitation in this regard is that the NRNs remain highly centralised, with the network units as pivotal point. In the survey it was noted that the network character would be underlined by the fact that, due to their low degree of overall institutionalisation, rural actors experienced the networks as flexible compared to the RDPs, which conform to a strict legal framework. One survey participant quite rightly pointed out that stimulating networking with open and flexible structures also implies that new network members should be welcomed.

⁷ A comment made by a network unit in the survey revealed one important difference between bilateral and multilateral network relations: "Cooperation with stakeholders is bilateral and multilateral. Our objective is to increase multilateral communication, because it has bigger value added for implementing RDP and for contributing [to] rural development." The aspects related to the added value resulting from networking will be discussed more thoroughly in Section 4.3.

4.2 Running National Rural Networks

What does (organised) networking look like within the NRNs? Asking for the most fruitful networking activities resulted in a mixed list of responses. The most important category is seminars/workshops (Figure 4). This could indicate that the NRNs are effective not only as a result of their weak, largely unilateral or bilateral relations which allow information to be transferred easily, but particularly through events facilitating personal communication and with by trend more multilateral relations. Most survey participants cited concrete examples of seminars/workshops on specific topics, e.g. "support for the rural businesses" and "attracting funding to rural areas". The more conventional networking instruments – a website, newsletters or other publications – also seem to be relevant for running the NRNs. However, the internet does not necessarily boost networking as it conveys passive attendance or use of the network and its facilities.

Other activities mentioned can be assigned to one of two categories: 1) actions symbolising a "Community of networkers" and strengthening the feeling of belonging together, such as annual network member or LAG meetings, and 2) network management actions, for instance Steering Committee meetings or meetings of the network unit and the managing authority. The relatively high relevance of management actions may indicate that a certain degree of institutionalisation is an asset for running the rural networks successfully. The category "Other" contains individual projects, some of which may be described as "best practice examples of NNU activities"; for instance, a "Best of the Year Award" for the identification of good practice projects was mentioned.

The respondents emphasised that it is the task of the network unit and/or the managing authority to maintain contact with all actors interested in rural development, and that the networks should be open to everyone. In fact there is a tendency for (potential) beneficiaries of Axis 4 and Axis 3⁸ to be more involved or easier to engage in network activities. The reasons for this are, first, that actors who were involved in LEADER in the last funding period(s) are already accustomed to network activities; and second, as NNUs provide special services for LAGs, they are likely to have close contact with the NNUs in any case. Although LEADER still seems to be the pivotal issue in most networks, and although LAGs were identified as the stakeholder group for which the networks are of main importance, the other topical axes also gain importance. Some survey participants reported that over time at least some organisations interested in Axis 1 and Axis 2 activities become increasingly involved in the NRN.⁹ Notwithstanding, it appears to be difficult to cover the topics of all four thematic EAFRD Axes equally. One method of tackling this problem which has been adopted by a few NNUs is to establish four axis-related working groups. It also needs to be taken into consideration that the mere presence of a mixed stakeholder composition and the existence of multilateral relations in a network does not necessarily imply that there are relations among the different stakeholder groups. – It could also be just about non-interacting clusters of network members. Indeed, the responses to the question of whether/to what extent NRN activities can be described as multi-sectoral and/or interdisciplinary (e.g. collaboration of stakeholders from different sectors in projects or discussions concerning several EAFRD Axes), and whether such multi-sectoral and/or interdisciplinary projects or discussions are initiated by the network unit or also by other actors highlighted the fact that interdisciplinarity is aspired to but remains a challenge. As a trend, multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary activities are mostly stimulated by the network units. However, in this regard the situation in the networks varies considerably: one network unit

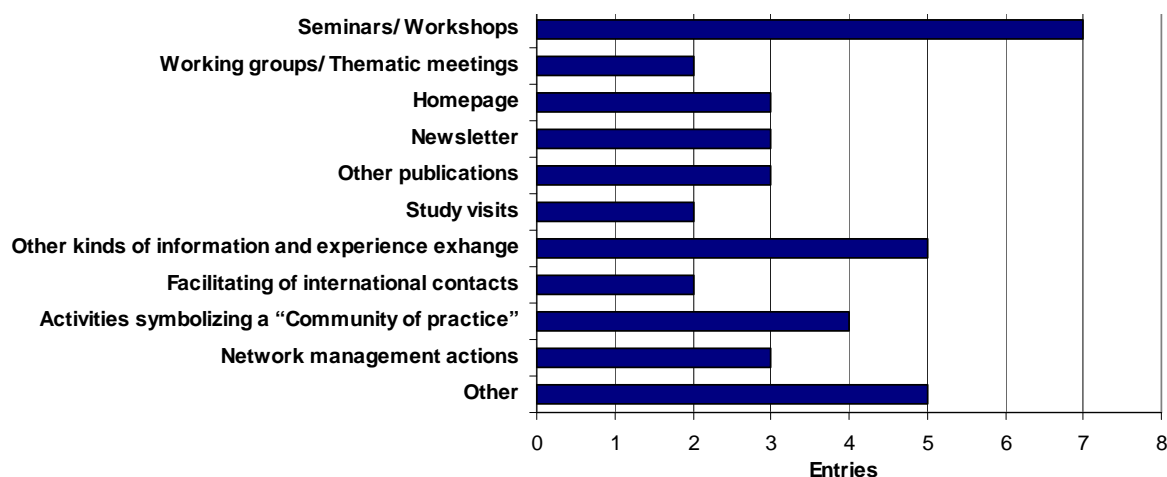
⁸ Note that (potential) beneficiaries of measures of Axis 3 (Improving the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy) are generally also interested in Axis 4 (LEADER).

⁹ Another reason mentioned at this point, which is more relevant for new Member States, is that it needs time until Axis 2 best practice examples, are present and so stakeholders are not as interested in networking as actors involved in activities related to other EAFRD Axes.

noted "no such activity has been implemented yet", while in other cases interdisciplinary activities are given "highest priority". Although mature network units pointed out that one of the main aims of the NNU is not only to cover all EAFRD Axes but to interlink the axes, we found that considerable effort is needed for cross-linking stakeholder groups and topics.¹⁰ Indeed, when network units were questioned directly about the challenges they faced within their work, achieving interdisciplinarity was listed as a key challenge.

Attractive challenges. Certainly, top of the list of challenges are some of the general obligatory tasks of the NNUs, namely providing technical assistance for transnational cooperation projects and identifying best practices; in the case of the latter, the absence of common criteria for selecting best practices was mentioned. Further issues include the integration of certain stakeholders and topics (mostly Axis 1 and Axis 2-related) as well as linking the four thematic axes. Moreover, maximisation of added value through network management was identified in the survey as a challenge, and more specifically maintaining cooperation between stakeholders and ensuring continuous communication in such a way that not only information is spread, but also duplications are avoided.

Figure 4: Most fruitful actions undertaken by the Network Units (self-assessment)



Note: 39 entries given by 11 network units (Ticking several answers was possible).

Source: Own survey data 2010.

Resources for networking. Although the amount of resources at network units' disposal varies drastically between Member States,¹¹ nearly all network units confirmed that their current budget is adequate; at least – as many NNUs emphasised – it is adequate for carrying out the planned activities (after the NRN budget was defined in the RDP). At this point it must be noted that there are major differences not only in funding but also in the contributions of network members to the NRNs which could compensate to some extent for a lack of financial resources (see also Section 4.1). One survey participant stated, for example, that many activities could only take place because of the numerous actors involved. There are also indications as to purposes for which more financial resources could be useful: evaluation was mentioned as one example. On the other hand, one network unit highlighted that although a larger budget allows greater flexibility in conducting network activities, a limited budget can promote more effective network activities.

¹⁰ As mentioned a few times within the survey, existing LEADER structures can function as a tool for stimulating interdisciplinary network activities, because LEADER LAGs are supposed to form multi-sectoral groups.

¹¹ The budgets foreseen for the NRNs vary from EUR 0.1 million (Luxembourg) to EUR 251 million (Spain) (absolute amounts include EAFRD contribution and national co-financing), or from 0% (Luxembourg) and 0.05% Austria to 1.74% of the Member State's EAFRD budget (% refers to the EU share of the EAFRD budget only). On EU average the budget amounts EUR 24.45 million, respectively 0.43% of the EAFRD budget (MARQUARDT et al., 2011).

Lessons learned. Looking at the advice given by the surveyed network units to new Member States required to or wanting to establish an NRN for the first time, there was high degree of congruence among the recommendations made. One important point that was mentioned repeatedly was the recommendation to outsource the network unit out of the ministry/state agencies, in other words to ensure the network units' independence from governmental bodies. Another point emphasised in several statements is stakeholder involvement in establishing the network (bottom-up approach).¹² Furthermore, it was experienced as advantageous to build as far as possible upon existing partnerships¹³ and familiar procedures and to introduce new elements gradually. For this reason it was recommended that the degree of institutionalisation should be considered; flexible network structures are needed, because they provide the possibility of being creative in the way network activities are delivered.

4.3 Effects of Network Activities on Rural Development (Policies)

All survey participants were convinced that the networks facilitate the implementation of rural development measures and enhance the quality of rural development projects. Their estimations were based on logical conclusions or informal feedback from network members – no formal evaluation of these issues had been conducted so far. Similarly, with one exception, all network units consulted stated that the networks' activities and discussions among their members have some impact on rural development policies. In this regard, the effect of feedback to the managing authority and other policy makers, and stimulating public debate were mentioned most frequently. However, respondents did not consider the networks to have a (major) influence on the policy-making process.¹⁴

Nearly all network units thought that the resources spent on the NRNs could not be invested more fruitfully in other technical assistance measures, whereby two survey participants stated that the NRN activities bring added value to technical assistance activities.

The term "added value" appeared in the survey responses independently of the question explicitly addressing this issue. For instance it was noted that the added value resulting from multilateral relations is higher than that of bilateral relations (see Footnote 7). However, in statements of this sort the term "added value" was not precisely defined; rather, individual examples of added value were provided. When asked directly, all survey participants agreed that the network activities brought added value for network members. Comments made by the survey participants show two main directions, one pointing to the additional resources which flow into the network (mainly contributions in the form of expertise of network members), which are then available to other rural actors, and another emphasising the added value resulting from the exchange of experience among complementary actors and obtaining new ideas.¹⁵ In both contexts it was

¹² One survey participant underlined the need for stakeholder involvement in the establishment of an NRN saying "Anchoring and pre-dialogue with the stakeholders is crucial for gaining legitimacy as a network. Only when the network is doing things and implementing activities of direct value and interest for the stakeholders will it be seen as a legitimate network and learning arena". Another respondent emphasised the need for "engaging and empowering stakeholders to network for themselves and take ownership of the NRN networking activities prioritised".

¹³ But there was also one recommendation to "Strongly involve networks of Axis 1 & 2 actors from the beginning and [to] look for their support". This is not necessarily a contradicting recommendation, but it is certainly a more challenging one considering the experiences described by some network units.

¹⁴ With regard to this question, the effect of bringing the managing authority, paying agencies, other implementing bodies and (potential) beneficiaries together to discuss RDP-related problems was mentioned several times. This, however, could be described as NRNs having an impact on the technical implementation of the RDP, rather than an impact on the more strategic policy-making process.

¹⁵ One example of this kind of added value is given in the following statement: "All NRN activities have added value especially if participants are from grass-root level – they have [the] possibility to visit other places, to get new ideas, take something from other good practice, get to know what happens behind the corner and maybe somewhere far away. And at the same time – they can introduce about their good experience others to

also noted that the NRNs' activities are also relevant for the ENRD and other NRNs as they also benefit from transferred experience and information.

Looking at the overall added value resulting from a network, however, it should be noted that only one network unit estimated the added value resulting from the network activities to be as high as the input of the network unit, which is paid out of EAFRD resources. Many felt that it was difficult to weigh up these things and that they lacked the means to evaluate these results of networking. From an external perspective it would be crucial to provide evidence that the added value is as high or higher than the value of funds invested in sheer networking activities.

4.4 Improving Governance – An aspired objective?

Although improving governance is one of the Commission's strategic objectives and rural networks are one of the two instruments for achieving this objective in the EAFRD context,¹⁶ the way in which NRNs present themselves on their own websites and the survey results both suggest that this objective is not a priority of the network units. A closer look at the framing conditions at European level shows that the EC has not defined governance – a term which is applied in several fields and for which no commonly agreed definition exists (BLUMENTHAL, 2005) – within the strategic guidelines for rural development. Neither do these guidelines make reference to any working paper (e.g. EC, 2001) that could potentially lead to a common understanding of the objective of improving governance among the actors involved in EAFRD activities.¹⁷ Moreover, this objective has not been sufficiently translated into the binding Rural Development Regulation (EC) 1698/2005, which forms the main basis for the Member States' RDPs. It also transpires that actors at national level apparently orientate at the European specifications even if they are insufficient. Thus, Member States have not formally operationalised the objective to improve governance either.¹⁸

The majority of the network units have not established their own definition of the term "governance" and may not even have the objective of improving governance formally on their agenda. Nevertheless, more than half of the network units consulted were convinced that the existence of their rural network contributes to the improvement of governance. Other survey participants were not sure as yet, but optimistic that this will prove to be the case. In fact, one participant stated elsewhere on the questionnaire – perhaps without thinking about the term governance – what others were unable to express: "New network structures are established and have become stronger and well-integrated in[to] the decision[-making] process". This may be seen as an indication that the NRNs are having some impact on governance structures.

show what they are doing and inspire other for activities. The best added value is that participants start to think about cooperation and how they can develop working together".

¹⁶ The second instrument funded under the EAFRD that is intended to contribute to improving governance is LEADER, whereby LEADER focuses on improving local governance.

¹⁷ Note that at European level the objective of improving governance is not only absent from the legislation, but the DGAgri has also not determined to mention this objective in the presentation of the NRNs on the website of the ENRD (www.enrd.eu).

¹⁸ One could argue that the Member States are obliged to formulate their National Strategic Plan, which is one basis for the RDPs, in accordance with the strategic guidelines set out at European level, and that they also have to consider the European priorities when elaborating their RDP (EC/1698/2005, Articles 20, 36, 52, and 63) and hence it is the responsibility of the Member States to establish improving governance as an objective to be achieved by the NRNs. This is of course true. Evidently, however, this only works to a limited extent, although National Strategic Plans and RDPs are approved at European level. One reason for this may be that not only this objective has not directly been picked up in the EC Regulation; but also activities linked to the aim of improving governance are absent from the list of actions to be carried out as a minimum within the NRNs (EC/1698/2005, Article 68, 2.b). In contrast, in the context of the LEADER Axis the objective "improving governance" has been translated among others by determining the framing conditions for decision making and for partnership composition inter alia by picking up the term "endogenous development" and referring to related guidance documents.

4.5 Relations between Network Units

The National Network Units are linked through the ENRD, which is run by its own network unit/Contact Point accountable to the EC Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DGAgri). Despite perceiving some disadvantages (Table 1) or room for improvement, nearly all surveyed network units stated that they benefited from the work of the ENRD. They acknowledged in particular the provision of information and the establishment of contact between the NNUs and the thematic working groups. However, the opinion was also expressed that sometimes the volume of information provided is excessive. In addition, they would like to have more opportunities for becoming involved in critical discussions, working groups and in decision making, and they felt that the visibility of the ENRD should be increased. One survey participant noted in this regard that the lack of visibility of the ENRD is also due to a lack of advertising activities by the National and Regional Network Units.

Table 1: Benefits for the National and Regional Network Units resulting from the European Network for Rural Development (from the Network Units' point of view)

Main advantages	Main disadvantages
The ENRD ensures the exchange of information and experience	Contributions are rarely solicited
The ENRD brings the NNUs together – Organisation of meeting for NNUs	The ENRD does not make the NNUs and their work visible enough
The ENRD provides support on different issues	The ENRD itself is not visible enough
The ENRD provides information on specific topics	Volume of information is sometimes too great
Participation in the thematic working groups brings direct value	Participation in activities at European level is only possible for a limited number of actors
	Regional Network Units do not have enough opportunities to join in discussions, and they have insufficient decision-making power.

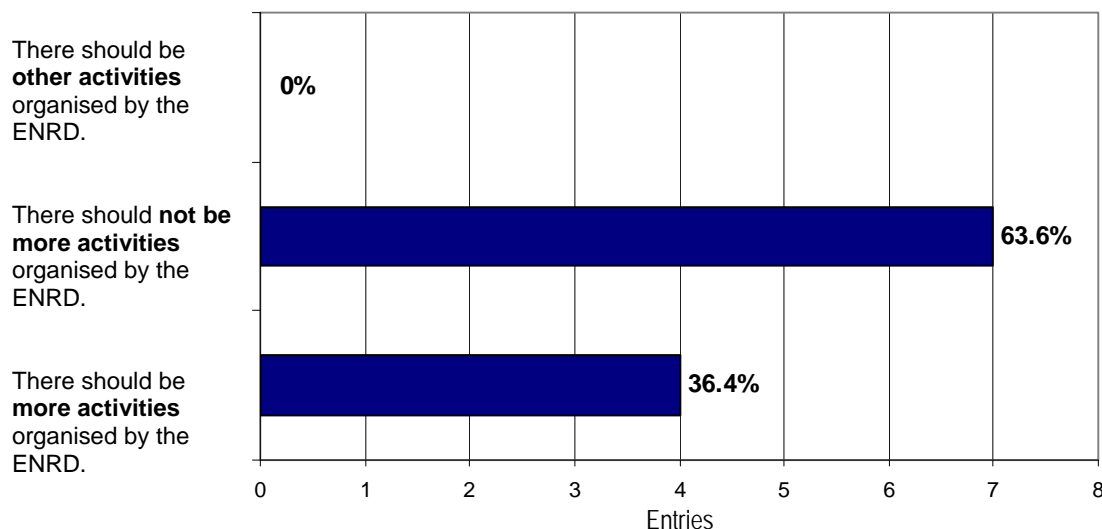
Note: ENRD = European Network for Rural Development;
NNU = National Network Unit.

Source: Own data 2010.

Generally, the network units were almost completely satisfied with the activities organised for them. However, the network units find it hard to provide representation at all meetings, "especially when dates and agendas are confirmed at the last minute". For this reason, the survey participants tended towards the view that there should not be organised more activities for the NNUs by the ENRD (Figure 5). In addition, comments and associated suggestions were made with regard to the ENRD's relations with other actors. These statements strongly correspond to the aforementioned "lack of visibility of the ENRD". The function of the Contact Point could be underlined in a better way and communication between rural actors and the ENRD should be more direct and less reliant on the NNUs as a "bridge". As a comparison, the relationship between the former LEADER+ Contact Point and the LAGs was mentioned. It was also suggested that it might be useful to organise more events at European level for stakeholders other than network units.¹⁹

¹⁹ For further statements evaluating the ENRD/the work of the ENRD Contact Point see Section 4.7.

Figure 5: Network Units' opinions on the activities organised by the European Network for Rural Development



Note: n = 11, distributed to 11 network units.

ENRD = European Network for Rural Development.

Source: Own survey data 2010.

At European level, all NNUs come together regularly to discuss issues of common interest, for instance supporting the transnational cooperation projects of LAGs. The survey investigated the extent to which the network units interact beyond these formal meetings and conduct joint activities. The results show that networking among the network units is dominated by informal relations allowing mutual support and discussion on certain issues. Similarly to the LAG networks (MARQUARDT et al., 2009), formal relations and joint projects play a minor role. As binding memberships, the working groups at European level and a few joint projects between NNUs such as joint organisation of a study tour were mentioned. One cluster that catches the eye is the Baltic Network, in which many network units seem to be engaged.

4.6 Definition of Objectives for the National Rural Networks

The main purposes of the NRNs – or rather, their operational objectives or actions under the objective "Technical Assistance" [transfer of information on rural development measures, the identification of good practices, technical assistance for LAGs, etc. (see Section 2)] were defined at European level and have had to be translated into a more concrete action plan by Member States. However, although, according to the surveyed network units, these obligatory tasks are manageable with a comparatively low budget (Section 4.2), the resources envisaged for running the NRNs vary significantly from one Member State to another (Section 1; Footnote 11). Expectations regarding aspired achievements and/or the effects resulting from network activities will therefore differ. In contrast, the survey revealed that only three of the eleven network units consulted stated that they had defined individual objectives that went beyond those stated in the EC Regulations. In fact, the additional objectives named were not too extraordinary.²⁰ If networks with a large budget have not extended the spectrum of NRN objectives or actions, it may be assumed that the frequency and perhaps also the intensity of the activities performed is greater whereupon it remains unclear, however, whether this applies to investments in networking or in technical assistance arranged by the network units.

²⁰ For instance, one objective explicitly mentioned was that the ENRD as an actor should be included in the NRN's "comprehensive range of stakeholders" to successfully exchange information on RDP implementation and bring about the aspired benefits of the network.

Although the question about the networks' objectives did not bring new ideas as expected, it nevertheless proved useful to have posed it: One of the three NNUs which had set its own objectives specified something that is neglected in the formal European documents, namely first, the aim "to facilitate an efficient implementation of [the] RDP", and second, the objective of "a wide diffusion of its added value". The term "added value", likewise absent from the related EC guidelines and Regulations in the context of rural networks, points to the relevance of designing a technical assistance intervention as a network. Indeed, generating added value through network structures is not formally laid down as an intervention logic for NRNs. Nevertheless, survey quotations presented in the previous sections indicate that some NNUs want to achieve more than the common tasks or manage the network in a particular way which they believe to be more fruitful. Therefore, although not explicitly stated and probably not explicitly set down on paper, the survey revealed that the network units act in ways that go beyond the formally defined (obligatory) aims. This becomes particularly obvious when looking at the challenges listed by NNUs (see Section 4.2), but also in other statements made in the survey (see e.g. Footnote 7).

The failure to translate the objective of improving governance into the rural development regulations, and the consequences of this, have already been elucidated in Section 4.4. "Improving governance" and "generating added value" are both terms that are not easy to define precisely. It is therefore understandable at some level that it is tried to avoid using these terms in binding regulations. Nevertheless, it is possible to give substance to such terms by agreeing on a common interpretation.²¹ By doing this, all Member States would then have to try to achieve the set objectives and develop a strategy to do so (instead of touching on certain objectives – e.g. "generating added value" – half-heartedly or achieving them accidentally). In this context defining common sub-objectives can be helpful. For instance, in the case of the objective "generating added value", by bringing the individual statements made within the survey into a more coherent system, we can identify sub-objectives such as a) increasing dissemination of information; b) enhancing the network members' contribution to the NRN; c) ensuring a diverse network composition in which members complement each other; and d) applying an integrated horizontal focus to part of the network's activities. An additional effect of setting objectives formally is that progress in achieving them must be evaluated. This could indeed present a challenge (see Section 4.7), but it could also act as an incentive.

All in all, it is likely that by formulating a list of common objectives or by extending the list of mandatory activities, the effectiveness of the NRNs could have been increased.

4.7 Evaluation of Network Activities

The survey revealed that evaluation is an issue still associated with many question marks. Moreover, it was directly indicated that advice on evaluating network activities is appreciated. The methods envisaged for evaluating network activities vary: one third of the participating network units apply either a form of self-evaluation, external evaluation or a mixture of both. Generally it seems that the majority of the network units were only to a limited extent prepared for an overall evaluation at this point in time.²² In terms of indicators, the responses

²¹ Such an agreement could be arranged in a manner akin to the establishment of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 90 of Regulation (EC) 1698/2005.

²² Note that four Member States (Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) are obliged to evaluate the results and impacts of the NRN specifically because they have set up an extra national programme for their NRN as they have regional RDPs for the other rural development measures. Therefore, these four network units are supported by the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development in setting the Terms of References and the framework for their evaluation. An NRN Monitoring Initiative was established in the first half of 2010 (http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/national-rural-networks/joint-nrn-activities/nrn-network-monitoring-initiative_en/en/nrn-network-monitoring-initiative_home_en.cfm). The other network units have greater flexibility as regards how and to what extent they evaluate their network activities.

ranged from having no indicators (as the network activities would be evaluated externally), to "the same as those that are applied to Technical Assistance"²³ or even "many indicators". However, even though a range of indicators was suggested by a few network units, these are not likely to reflect the impact of network activities. Instead most network units focussed on outcome indicators, e.g. *number of publications*, and sometimes on result indicators e.g. *number of website visitors*.²⁴ It is common practice to assess the network units' performance in terms of "customer satisfaction"; for instance, each organised event is evaluated and feedback formally requested. One network unit noted several interesting examples of indicators, including *quality of information and its dissemination to the right target [group]; increase and improvement in networking skills, of skills of the network members; dissemination of relevant experiences and impact on rural development projects and policies*. Unfortunately, however, concrete units of measurement were not specified.

Less than half of the network units were satisfied with the indicators originally set. Interestingly, on this point the standard set by the survey participants for personal satisfaction with the chosen indicators varies – one network unit is dissatisfied with its indicators because they do not go beyond the obligatory indicators generally applied to Technical Assistance, which do not cover assessment of the impact of networking (see Footnote 23); another, meanwhile, declared itself to be satisfied with its indicators and commented "Following my knowledge, there are no official indicators for evaluating networks", which could be interpreted as "we have fulfilled our obligations".

Mention was made several times that it is hard to measure the impact of network activities and resulting soft values. It therefore came as no surprise that less than half of the network units consulted were able to suggest common indicators and evaluation questions which could be applied by all network units to evaluate the effects of networking. Moreover, proposals made were again not very concrete (e.g. the *added value of network activities*), and some of the actors surveyed demonstrated the problem, saying that it is hard to collect the data needed for making adequate statements. Some proposals in this context, however, included the *number of collaboration projects between network units*, the *performance of search tools for cooperation projects*, *number of homepage visits and workshops* and whether the *topics of seminars meet the actors' needs*.

The statements made by the network units concerning the issue of evaluation suggest that there will be little baseline data on the indicators ultimately selected and applied to assess the initial situation of the networks. Evaluation data will therefore have to be collected retrospectively. The fact that NRNs are not included in the CMEF may ultimately have (at least) two consequences: 1) a lack of baseline data; and 2) due to the lack of common indicators, results of the evaluation of the NRNs will hardly be comparable.

The question relating to indicators or evaluation questions for evaluating the work of the ENRD did not throw up any new ideas. Mentioned was also made of the *number of translated publications*, the *number of ENRD publications presented on national websites*; the *synergies between all DGAgri units*; and a rather ambiguous indicator *whether NNUs follow the advice and*

²³ Similarly, one network unit stated: "We do not have any separate indicators to evaluate NRN activities and the ones coming from RDP measure "Technical Assistance" do not serve the networking purpose and objectives."

²⁴ Note that while output indicators measure activities directly carried out within programmes (in physical or monetary units), result indicators measure the direct and immediate effects of the intervention (in physical or monetary units) and provide information on changes, for example in the behaviour, capacity or performance of direct beneficiaries.

*suggestions of ENRD.*²⁵ One possible evaluation question suggested was to investigate how far the ENRD is involved in solving problems related to RDPs.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of robust indicators for assessing the effects of networking (besides positive feedback from some rural actors), nearly all of the network units consulted were satisfied with their work and achievements, at least – as some NNUs added – considering the limited time and/or the limited experience. The network units were similarly satisfied with the work of the ENRD, particularly as regards the provision of information.²⁶ On the other hand, the performance of the Contact Point was criticised for frequent delays, poor communication structures and the failure to stimulate networking. But most survey participants took into consideration the background conditions of the ENRD in their judgement of the Contact Point's work, including its limited resources. This may be the reason why most of the respondents were satisfied overall despite their criticism.

4.8 Prospects for the National Rural Networks

The continuation of networking in the upcoming funding period was strongly affirmed within the survey. Aside from one abstention, all consulted network units advocated the establishment or continuation of NRNs in the next funding period. This opinion was backed up by emphasising the importance of their communication function, their contribution to the transfer of good practices and the networks' horizontal and comprehensive focus interlinking the EAFRD Axes (only realised by some NRNs so far), as well as the added value resulting from network activities. Interestingly, a key argument put forward by one survey participant in support of maintaining the NRN was: "Our independency from the Ministry of Agriculture has given us considerable freedom to address issues, bottlenecks and improvements at different levels of government. Although our criticism is not always welcome, it has led to an improved implementation of the RDP". This reveals that – whether intended or not – the NRNs can have some impact on governance structures and (hence) on the process of implementing the RDP. Moreover, it suggests that the networks have the potential to function as more than a platform for information and exchange of experience and more than a vehicle for providing technical assistance to LAGs. The NRNs can perform the function of improving the policy delivery process through constructive discussions.

One response to the question about the future of the networks shifted the perspective from a more egocentric, nationally oriented one to a common perspective, stating that the establishment of (funded) rural networks "is not a simple yes-no question, as the need for/benefit of an NRN post-2013 will depend on existing networking opportunities within each Member State, i.e. some countries may have other mechanisms through which stakeholders can exchange ideas, experience and practice about the rural development programmes without having to create an independent NRN. This has the potential to help integrate the rural development programmes/policy, etc., into other policy and delivery mechanisms which serve/deliver in [the] rural area". Thus, flexibility in terms of the institutional set-up of the networks is needed to enable the NRNs' function to be embedded appropriately into the existing institutional context.

²⁵ These indicators suggest that up to now the roles of the actors directly and indirectly involved in ENRD activities and the relations between them have not been defined adequately. (See also Footnote 4.)

²⁶ One response to the question regarding satisfaction with the ENRD's work, highlighting pros and cons was: "Yes because they give us the opportunity to meet other networks and exchange experiences/information; No because their information/communication system is not enough efficient (Intranet is missing, some useful web tools aren't in place, the way of choosing developed themes and shown actions in their publications isn't enough transparent, UE [European Union] publications are not translated and it is difficult to recommend them to our local stakeholders); No because we have not enough formation on the thematic working groups at UE level".

5 CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The National Rural Networks (NRNs) funded under the EAFRD are likely to have a positive impact on rural development. In the view of the network units which are in charge of managing the NRNs, this is primarily a result of the transfer of relevant information and experiences concerning rural development measures. In some areas of rural development policies such as LEADER, the network activities will become more perceptible than in others, and network units still face a number of challenges, such as involving and interlinking relevant stakeholder groups or conducting network activities with a horizontal focus. Nevertheless, according to the network units, rural networks are a more effective instrument than other technical assistance measures for supporting the implementation of Rural Development Programmes. The network's functional development potential was already apparent in some Member States where the networks are used to improve policy delivery through discussions among the administration, (potential) beneficiaries and other actors.

Nonetheless, there still exists a clear need for systems to evaluate the instrumental effects of NRNs. The survey results reveal that although the network units are convinced of the positive effects of NRNs, they are unable to provide evidence to underpin this. This applies particularly to the impact of networking, which is often described as added value. Consequently, it will be hard to corroborate formally the assumed value of network activities. Moreover, there are two important factors that provide increased motivation for establishing an evaluation system for the networks: 1) it will be important to provide evidence on the impact of the NRNs in the post-2013 CAP discussions to ensure that the networks stay on the rural development agenda in the future; 2) given that indicators and evaluation questions for measuring the impact of rural networks were certainly not deliberately omitted from the EC rural development guidelines and in the associated Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), the CMEF will have to be improved in this regard for the upcoming funding periods.

Many issues concerning the NRNs have apparently been neglected at European level, and this has decreased the networks' effectiveness: the NRNs have been disregarded in the CMEF, but an intervention logic and numerous definitions relevant for making the networks instrumental – for instance a definition of "good practice" or of "governance" – are also lacking. This circumstance is not without consequences, as many Member States strictly follow EC guidelines and specifications, i.e. they follow the rules, but do not formally go beyond common objectives. Hence the impact of the networks is limited due to the absence of clearly set targets. In some cases, a common definition certainly would only have been helpful for inexperienced Member States. This applies for instance to the identification of "good practices". A more serious issue, however, is the absence of any intervention logic with overall objectives and sub-objectives for the network activities. If an intervention logic had stipulated for instance "achieving added value", this objective would have been set out clearly and pursued with greater strategic focus, and outcomes would be required to be measured. Indeed, as some network units strive to organise network activities as effectively as possible, they do in fact sometimes – consciously or unconsciously – generate added value. In terms of governance, not only did the EC omit to provide a definition of the term but also the strategic objective of improving governance has been inadequately translated into the rural development regulations. Apparently the objective of improving governance is not a priority either at European nor at national level, and it has not been formally picked up in the network context by most Member States.

Nevertheless, the survey findings show that improved governance²⁷ may in fact come about as a "side-effect" of network activities if these are carried out in a certain context, namely in

²⁷ Results have shown that network activities can have an impact on the way decisions are made. But as there is no common definition of governance in the context of rural networks, national criteria for measuring improved governance still need to be established.

discussions on improving the policy delivery process involving governmental and non-governmental bodies. However, as neither discussions of this sort nor improving governance are set out as an obligatory action or objective of NRNs, whether NRN activities will have an impact on governance structures will depend on the political situation within Member States.

All in all, it is likely that the effectiveness of the NRNs could have been increased (or would increase) by formulating a list of common objectives or by extending the list of activities which are required to be carried out within the rural networks.

The fact that a common understanding of aspired achievements is needed for effective Europe-wide networking does not imply that common objectives and definitions need to be set exclusively at European level. In networks, where "power is not manifestly centralised" (DAVIES, 2005, p. 146), it is more appropriate to negotiate and agree on objectives. Moreover, the survey revealed that room for manoeuvre is needed for Member States to adapt network activities to their own situation, particularly to the horizon of experience in networking, the available resources for the network, the network members' willingness to contribute to the network and to the existing institutional framework.

Some lessons regarding establishing rural networks have been learned so far. It can thus be hoped that the experienced actors will prevent the inexperienced actors in new Member States and candidate countries to avoid similar failures. In this regard, two important points were identified in this study:

- The network unit should be established as an institution/organisation independent of the agricultural ministry or other governmental bodies. Such a neutral position would facilitate discussion on improvements in the implementation process of Rural Development Programmes and – if necessary – allow constructive criticism of the agricultural administration.
- The rural networks should be developed in a bottom-up manner, with adequate stakeholder participation. This can help to generate a sense of ownership among network members which in turn is likely to result in more active participation.

Considering that the rural networks are running as a CAP intervention in this form for the first time, and considering the progress made at European level and in some Member States within only six months since the survey was conducted, and in view of the background conditions in terms of enhancing network activities (see e.g. Footnote 22), it is likely that many of the challenges identified within this paper will be tackled step by step. Nevertheless, to overcome some of the challenges, such as the evaluation of network activities, or the impact of certain network properties like the degree of institutionalisation, much work is needed. Some recommendations may prove to be supportive in this regard:

- Common and individual national objectives for network activities should be clearly defined.
- Stakeholders' roles within the European and the national network context need to be developed jointly over time.
- An evaluation system for assessing the impact of network activities needs to be developed.
- At the latest for the upcoming funding period, the provisions the EC Regulation concerning the networks should be improved to ensure that NRNs become a more effective instrument whose impact can be traced/identified systematically from the outset. This would help to convince those not involved in NRN activities of the added value of rural networks as a policy instrument.

- There is a need for further research. For instance, the impact of having a particularly large or small budget for network activities has not been clarified; for example, the question of whether there is a saturation point after which it is more useful to invest resources in other EAFRD measures and rely on network members' contributions has not yet been investigated. In this context, insight into the functionality of non-funded networks and into principles of reciprocity and of social capital could prove helpful.

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Legislation

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Commission Regulation (EC) No 1974/2006 of 15 December 2006 laying down detailed rules for the application of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

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ANNEX

A Questionnaire used in the survey of National Network Units

Survey among the National/Regional Network Units for Rural Development

"Evaluation of Network Activities"

Dear members of the National/Regional Network Units for Rural Development,

We would like to invite you to take part in this survey. The main objective of this survey is to learn about your experience in networking in the context of implementing rural development policies. The Institute of Agricultural Development in Central and Eastern Europe (IAMO) conducts a study in which we address the question of how network activities can be evaluated. Furthermore, we want to look at the role of the rural development networks - the National/Regional Rural Networks (NRNs)²⁸ and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) - in policy processes. Last but not least, we are also collecting information on experiences with networking for supporting stakeholders which intend to build up rural networks. Thus, we would appreciate your contribution to this survey!

We are fully aware of your time restrictions, and have therefore condensed the number of questions to a minimum. We are happy to provide you with detailed information on the survey results as soon as they are available.

General information on your network unit

Country/Region: _____

Contact Person: _____

E-mail: _____

Phone: _____

Is the network unit settled in a state agency or has its organisation been outsourced?

- ☐ It is completely settled within a state agency.
- ☐ All the organizational functions have been outsourced (State agencies are only responsible for decision making processes and representing the network).
- ☐ Parts have been outsourced and parts of the organization have remained in hands of state agencies.

²⁸ In the following the abbreviation "NRN" is also used for the Regional Rural Networks.

A Activities of your National/Regional Rural Network (NRN)

1. Has your NRN set any individual objectives beyond the commonly defined objectives in the EC regulations?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, which one(s)?

2. Who was involved in the elaboration of the network's (initial and yearly) Action Plan(s)?

3. For which stakeholder group do you think is the NRN particular important?

4. Are the four thematical EAFRD-Axes²⁹ covered equally within the programme of the NRN?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If necessary, comment:

5. According to your experiences made so far, what are the most fruitful activities organized by the network unit?

6. In your opinion, does the existence of the NRN facilitate the implementation of rural development measures or improve the quality of implemented rural development measures?

²⁹ EAFRD Axes refers to the four thematic axes under the European Agricultural Funds for Rural Development (1) improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; (2) improving the environment and the countryside; (3) the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy; and (4) Leader.

☐ Yes ☐ No

If necessary, comment:

7. What are the main challenges for the network unit for fulfilling its tasks as described in regulation EC/1698/2005, Article 68, paragraph 1 and 2b?

8. Do you think the activities of the NRN and the discussions among its members have impact on rural development policies in your region or country?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, explain your opinion!

B Networking

1. Is "networking" in which your network unit is involved in mostly about bilateral relations, i.e. networking between a stakeholder and the network unit, or is it more about multi-lateral relations, i.e. more than two parties are involved e.g. in a group that discusses actual problems?

- ☐ It is mostly about bilateral relations between stakeholders and the network unit.
☐ It is mostly about multilateral relations between stakeholders and the network unit.
☐ Both, bilateral and multilateral relations, make up nearly half the network unit's relations.
☐ I can not state precisely.

If necessary, comment:

2. Do stakeholders who ask for help from the network unit or search information also contribute to the network?

☐ Yes, most of them also contribute. ☐ No, most of them only search for help or information.

If necessary, comment:

3. Which stakeholder groups are most active within the NRN operations?
Ticking several answers is possible.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> LAGs | <input type="checkbox"/> Policy makers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Farmers | <input type="checkbox"/> Farmers' associations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental actors (e.g. NGOs) | <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific institutions (Universities, Research institutes) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Actors, representing the social sector | <input type="checkbox"/> Other NGOs, foundations etc. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SMEs | <input type="checkbox"/> Agencies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other public institutions | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual private actors |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Young people | <input type="checkbox"/> Old people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women | <input type="checkbox"/> Men |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other stakeholder, namely _____ | |

4. Which stakeholder groups are underrepresented within the NRN activities?
Ticking several answers is possible.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> LAGs | <input type="checkbox"/> Policy makers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Farmers | <input type="checkbox"/> Farmers' associations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental actors (e.g. NGOs) | <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific institutions (Universities, Research institutes) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SMEs | <input type="checkbox"/> Agencies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Actors, representing the social sector | <input type="checkbox"/> Other NGOs, foundations etc. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other public institutions | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual private actors |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Young people | <input type="checkbox"/> Old people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women | <input type="checkbox"/> Men |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other stakeholder, namely _____ | |

5. In how far would you describe the NRN activities as multi-sectoral and/or interdisciplinary (e.g. collaboration of stakeholders from different sectors in projects or discussions concerning several EAFRD-Axes)? Are such multi-sectoral and/or interdisciplinary projects or discussions mostly initiated by the network unit or also by other actors?

6. How would you describe the participation of the LAGs in the NRN?
Ticking several answers is possible.

- ☐ Most LAGs participate very active in the NRN activities.

- ☐ Some LAGs see it as obligation to participate in the NRN activities.
- ☐ Some LAGs only search help and information but do not contribute to the NRN.
- ☐ Many LAGs only search help and information but do not contribute to the NRN.
- ☐ From some LAGs only the same small circle of members participates in NRN activities.
- ☐ From many LAGs only the same small circle of members participates in NRN activities.

If necessary, describe more detailed:

7. All in all, considering the previous questions, do you think, the NRN has "network character", or could you also call it a general help desk/info point on rural development?

- ☐ Yes, it has network character. ☐ No, it has not network character.

Please, comment:

8. Do you think the rural stakeholders experience the NRN as a network, with open, flexible, less centralized structures interlinking many actors?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, comment:

9. Do you think there is added value evolving from the NRN activities for the participants?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, explain your statement:

10. Do you feel that the input of the network unit is as high as the added value resulting from the participation of other stakeholders in the NRN?

- ☐ No, it is not as high; the effort of the network unit is lower than the added value.

- ☐ Yes, the effort of the network unit is similar high as the added value.
- ☐ No, it is not as high; the effort of the network unit is higher than the added value.

If necessary, comment:

11. Do you collaborate closer (beyond the general common activities at European level) with some other network units? If so, with which one(s) and in which subject(s)?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, with which network unit(s) and in which subject(s)?

12. Do you think your network unit (not the rural stakeholders in general) benefits from the existence of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)? If necessary comment separately to the subunits of the ENRD.

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, comment:

13. Do you think there should be more or other activities organized by the ENRD?
Ticking several answers is possible.

- ☐ There should be more activities organized by the ENRD.
- ☐ There should not be more activities organized by the ENRD.
- ☐ There should be other activities organized by the ENRD.

Please, comment:

C Evaluation

1. Which indicators and/or evaluation questions have been originally set for evaluating the NRN activities, including the work of the network unit?

2. For evaluating the NRN activities and the work of the network unit, do you follow a scheme of self-evaluation or are you/will you be evaluated externally?

☐ We apply a scheme of self-evaluation.

☐ Our work will be evaluated externally.

If necessary, comment:

3. Are you (still) satisfied with the originally set indicators for evaluating the NRN activities?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please, comment:

4. Which indicator(s) and/or Common Evaluation Question(s) would you suggest for the European-wide evaluation of NRN activities?

5. Which indicators/evaluation questions would you suggest for evaluating the work of the ENRD?

6. Are you personally satisfied with the achievements which the NRN has made so far?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please, comment:

7. Are you personally satisfied with the work of the ENRD?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, comment:

8. In your personal opinion, what is the most important indicator for underlining a successful implementation of the LEADER-Axis?

9. Do you evaluate the development of *governance* among stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in NRN activities? If so, how? If not, why not, and do you have any suggestions how to measure the governance?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, comment and/or make suggestions:

10. How would you evaluate the development of *governance* within LEADER if you should answer the questions set in the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Axis 4?

D Mixed questions

1. In your opinion, has the existence of the NRN lead to improved governance?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, comment:

2. Do you think there should be National Rural Networks in the upcoming funding period, too?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If necessary, comment:

3. Is the current budget, which is at your network unit's disposal for the period 2007-2013 sufficient?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If necessary, comment:

4. Do you think the resources spent for the NRN could be more fruitfully invested in other Technical Assistance measures?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please, comment:

5. From your experiences, which advice would you give countries, which establish a NRN the first time?

6. It would be very kind and helpful, if you could name the institution and/or the contact person dealing with the measures under the LEADER-Axis within the mid-term evaluation of the Rural Development Programmes!

Institution: _____

Contact person: _____

E-mail: _____

Phone: _____

Additional comments on your part and any feedback are welcome!

Please send the **completed questionnaire** back directly by e-mail or print the document and send it by post to the address below until May 10th, 2010.

Thank you for your collaboration!

For requests, please **contact**:

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