



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

Toivo Muilu, Niina Kotavaara

Department of Geography, P.O. Box 3000, University of Oulu, Finland, FI-90014
toivo.muilu@oulu.fi; niina.kotavaara@oulu.fi

Networking rural expertise

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyse emergence of rural expert networks and their function on the basis of an example network. The case study concerns the European Rural Development Network (ERDN). Networking has been regarded as a central model of action during this century for most of fields of society and economy. The European Union emphasizes the role of cooperation between the Member States, organizations and regions. In addition, the EU research framework programmes are based on existing or project-based research networks in most cases. The number of rural networks has risen rapidly during the last years at regional, national as well as international level. In countries dominated by rural areas, especially in those with small population and sparse population structure, the need for networking has been highlighted because of low and scattered number of rural development actors and experts. There is a need to unite the limited resources. Networking is also expected to create new innovations, increase productivity and save public resources. The ERDN originates from Poland in 2002, and since then, the network has expanded such that in 2009 it aggregated rural researchers from around 20 European countries. The empirical material of this paper consists of a web survey directed at participants of ERDN. The survey was carried out in the spring of 2009. The results suggest that the hard-core group of actors is rather small, but they have managed to create and maintain an alive and innovative network of rural researchers. Involvement among the participants seems to have increased during the years, although there are many of those who just “visit” the meetings only once. So far, the network has been relative easy to manage due to the relatively small number of participants but, however, the possible expansion of the network may lead to a need for a new kind of organizational structure. According to opinions of ERDN participants, the greatest future challenges for the network are connected to ideas on even more profound forms of international research cooperation and accomplishment of research applications and proposals.*

Keywords: *European Rural Development Network; ERDN; networks; rural expertise, rural research; social capital*

The idea of networking is probably as old as the mankind: by doing together, more can be achieved. Academic activities also have always been based on different networks and partnerships, which have stimulated creation and delivery of new ideas between actors and organizations. The European Union is based on networks from its starting point. Furthermore, research framework programmes are in most cases based on existing or case-specific networks of researchers. During the last few decades, new, electronic communication technologies have facilitated and consolidated implementation of networks. So, at the beginning of the new millennium, there was both push and pull for new ideas and forms of networking.

Networks and networking have been a research theme in many disciplines for several decades. Recently in economics and its neighbouring disciplines, for example, several extensive compilations have been published on the network economy and social networks (Grabher–Powell 2004; Casson–Della Giusta 2008). Networks are emphasized as one of the key factors also in rural development research at international, national and regional levels (Murdoch 2000; Green 2007). Several rural expert networks or other networks have been set up in different countries and at international level. In fact, the Google search “rural network” gives tens of thousands hits (in September 2009). One of the most important “official” rural networks in Europe is the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD, http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/enrd/index_en.htm), coordinated by the EC. In each EU country, there are national rural networks, such as the Rural Network of Finland (<http://www.maaseutu.fi/fi/index/maaseutuverkosto.html>), which cooperate with and through ENRD.

Another aspect for rural networking are voluntary-based expert networks, from which there are also a lot of examples at both international and national level, such as the International Rural Network (<http://www.international-rural-network.org/>) and the Nordic–Scottish University Network for Rural and Regional Development (Rennie 2004). The Rural Studies Network (Muilu 2007) and the Rural Policy Committee (<http://www.ruralpolicy.fi/en/>; OECD Rural Policy Reviews Finland, 2008) are national examples from Finland.

Contrary to the administrative and official rural networks, voluntary-based networks rely more strongly on social capital (e.g. Bourdieu 1986; Latour 1987; Carter 1996). Importance and meaning of social capital and relations for rural networking have been emphasized in several recent studies and publications. For example, Lee et al. (2005) have analysed networking in context of social capital and identities in European rural development in six case study areas in six countries. Lockie (2006) studied the complex social networks between different actors of agri-environmental policy in Australia. In many voluntary rural networks, there are indeed many kinds of demands and tensions inside the triangle of researchers, developers and policy-makers, which all have different expectations towards rural research (Moseley 2003, p. 89–105;

Muilu 2010, p. 79). Several articles in an international compilation book on rural governance, edited by Cheshire et al. (2007), touch social capital and networks. McAreavey (2009) also highlights the central role of community participation, involvement, social capital and trust in rural development. The classic theory of diffusion of innovations is a useful tool for understanding how ideas in networks spread out (Rogers, 2003; Jones and Miller, 2007).

The theoretic idea of social capital as a resource for rural networks is an important background idea also in this article, although the viewpoint is empirical. We analyse here one rural expert network from an insider's point of view, or the actor level. The case study concerns the European Rural Development Network, hereinafter ERDN (not to be confused with ENRD of the EU). ERDN was established in Poland in 2002 based on an idea which emerged from discussions with the Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Austria. On the web site of the ERDN (<http://www.erdn.eu/>), its main objectives are described as follows:

- establishing the wide basis for the co-operation of Polish and European scientific units in the framework of the extending EU, devoted to the analysis of the state, perspectives and strategies of action with respect to the development of rural areas in Poland and in Europe;
- integration of efforts and competencies of various Polish and European research institutions in the jointly conducted work in the area of rural development;
- exchange and promotion of scientific experiences and achievements of the participants of the Network in the area of the issue analysed;
- forwarding the international scientific co-operation in the scope of rural development and farming, in particular undertaking steps devoted to preparation of the applications for co-financing of the scientific research within the 6th Framework Programme of the EU,
- undertaking initiatives for establishment of an all-European network.

There were six founding member organizations of ERDN in Poland and key associated institutions from Austria, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Romania, and the Slovak Republic. The most important event of ERDN are the annual meetings, which have been organized in Poland (several times), Romania, Austria and Hungary from 2002 onwards. People from several countries have participated in the meetings, and the total number of partner countries is near 20. Most of the papers presented in the meetings have been published as annual volumes, which also are available from the web site of ERDN. Furthermore, some proposals for joint research projects have been drawn up and submitted to the EU and other organizations (<http://www.erdn.waw.pl/>, Voicilaş 2008).

The aim of the paper is to analyze at the individual actor level, which factors were behind each actor's participation in ERDN in the first place, why do people still continue to participate in the operation of the network, what kind of challenges and problems have they met, and how do they perceive the future of ERDN. Finally, a typology of the respondents is made.

Methodology

The Webropol web survey (<http://www.webropol.com/>) was organized for the actors and participants of ERDN in April–May 2009. The aim was to reach as many people as possible of those who have taken part in ERDN meetings or other activities since the establishment of the network in 2002. E-mail addresses of the target group were kindly delivered by two Polish promoters of ERDN, Konrad Czapiewski and Zbigniew Florianczyk. The addresses were also searched for and cross-checked from the authors' old e-mails concerning the meetings since 2004.

The first e-mail inviting the target group to answer the survey was sent on 22 April 2009, and it included in total 118 e-mail addresses. It soon turned out that there were some technical problems in the implementation of the international web survey, e.g. 41 of the addresses were “boomeranged” and some respondents were unable to open the Webropol programme partly due to firewalls in the computer systems both at the authors' home university and in different countries. The final number of accepted answers was 47, after two request e-mails to all addresses and several individual messages. This would give a response rate of 39.8% if calculated from the original number of e-mails sent (118). However, it was not possible to check precisely how many of the e-mails were actually received successfully and therefore the response rate is probably somewhat higher, i.e. clearly more than 40%. The response rate can be assessed to be quite normal for an international web survey, and the number of respondents is sufficient for this study.

The questionnaire was divided into four main sections: (1) background information of the respondents, (2) background and motivation for participating in ERDN, (3) evaluation of action and effects of ERDN, and (4) challenges and proposals for development of ERDN. The key idea was to keep the survey as easy as possible to answer, and therefore the five-level Likert scale statements (Likert 1932) and open questions were utilised.

However, some limitations of the data must be acknowledged: the number of respondents is quite small ($n=47$), which means that the data gathered does not necessarily represent evenly all the actors of the ERDN. Especially, it must be taken into account that a significant proportion of the respondents have participated in the network meetings only once and within the past couple of years.

Results

Background information of the respondents

The average age of the respondents was 41.5, even though the range was very wide, between 27 and 65 years of age. In addition, most of the respondents (72%) had a post-graduate qualification. The network seems to be only slightly male-dominated: a little over half of the respondents (57%) were male.

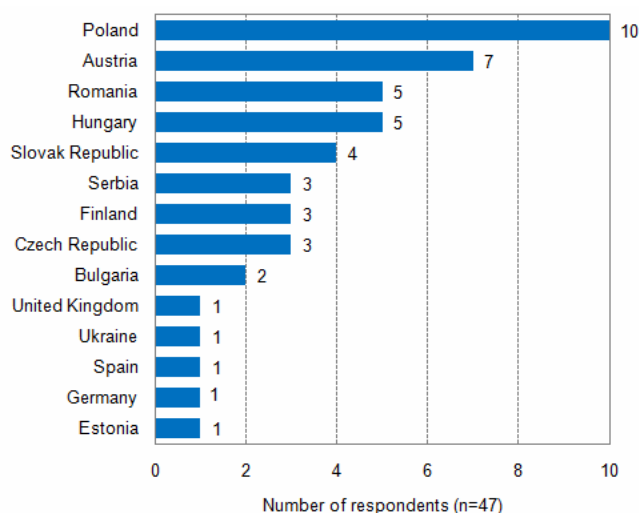


Figure 1. Countries of the present posts of the respondents

Source: Webropol survey, April–May 2009

Answers were received in total from 14 different countries, mainly from eastern central Europe, which is natural when considering the origins of the network (Figure 1). The two most represented individual fields were (agricultural) economics (43% of the respondents) and geography (26%). The rest of the respondents represented other human, planning and methodological sciences (around 21%) or physical sciences (around 15%). The majority of the respondents seem to work at a research organization other than university.

Usually a respondent had taken more than one role in the network. Most of the respondents had acted as a speaker in an ERDN meeting (76%) or participated in a meeting without a paper or a poster (37%), and only few of them were founding members (16%) or had organized network meetings (15%).

Background and motivation for participating in ERDN activities

The hard-core group of the ERDN actors seems to be relatively small, and majority of the actors are actually quite new to the network. This is, of course, not too surprising since we deal with a relatively new network. More than every third (36%) respondent had heard of the ERDN or participated in an ERDN meeting for the first time within the past couple of years (2008–09) and nearly two-thirds (60%) of the respondents had participated in an ERDN meeting only once. Most of the respondents had heard of the network or participated in a meeting for the first time in 2005–07, and only every fifth (21%) in the early years (2004 or before) of the network action.

It seems that most of the ERDN actors participate in local ERDN meetings and, in most cases, it does not lead to any greater commitment to the network. That is probably one of the greatest challenges of the ERDN, because,

naturally, the network cannot work without committed actors. Good news is, however, that the network has the potential to regenerate continuously with new members that come in every year. In the last couple of meetings also more papers have been submitted than it was possible to accept for presentation.

In an unstructured and informal network, such as the ERDN, participation is mainly voluntary, and, as shown before, therefore sometimes quite occasional. In addition, information about the network spreads mainly through personal relations. Nearly four out of five respondents (79%) heard about ERDN first through a personal contact, such as a colleague, and only about tenth (11 %) through the Internet or an e-mail bulletin. In addition, almost all respondents (85%) had participated in the network mainly voluntarily, and only a small group (11%) due to a request or a command of a boss or a background organization.

At the general level, the motivations for participating in the ERDN activities can be divided in three categories: (1) own will/personal interest, (2) a command of a boss or a background organization, and (3) a request by the network. Usually respondents did not mention just one, but several motivations for participating. The most common of them was exchanging knowledge and/or experiences (mentioned by 49% of respondents), getting new contacts (40%) and looking for cooperation, e.g. new projects or research opportunities (30%). Many were interested also in the topical issues discussed in the network, development of the research area, or participating in conferences and other network activities.

“... to present the results of my work to an European audience, to widen the network activities of my institute, to find potential project partners, to learn about research activities in other countries, to get personal connections to other researchers in my fields of work...”

Especially for those who have been members of the network for some time now, motivations have changed in the course of time, resulting, among other things, from the transformation of the network itself.

“The idea of scientific network organization was very interesting and promising. In the beginning of 2002 there was a lot of discussion about advantages of forming scientific networks. Generally one group of arguments was related to professional knowledge enrichment and the second with better position to have an access to finance resources. In may case on the very beginning I was motivated mainly by the first group of arguments. While the Network became strong I was more focus on the opportunities of being in network to have an easier access to EU research funds. More recently the “professional knowledge exchange” is more important. It might be partly explained with rather indirect successes of the Network in organizing EU funds for research. Because of the ERDN member relation and the atmosphere during the meetings I fell very comfortable to present my research during meetings. There is no classification that some papers are “cutting edge” and others falling behind. That makes the platform that in truth links the scientists across the EU.”

Activities and effects of ERDN

Conceptions of the present structure, activities and effects of ERDN were inquired through eight “positive” statements. The respondents had also an opportunity to state grounds to their opinions in free form, but only less than a half provided additional information. The themes of the statements concerned general and internal matters of ERDN and personal views (Figure 2).

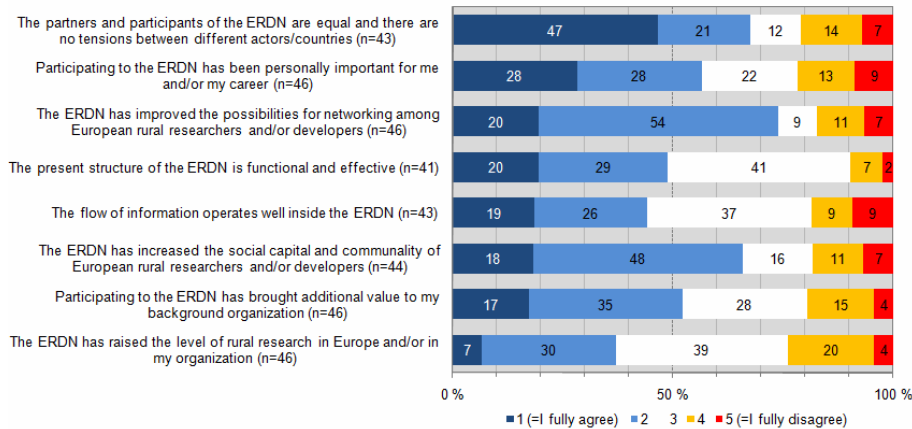


Figure 2. Opinions on the action and effects of ERDN

Source: Webropol survey, April–May 2009

The respondents were generally quite favourable for the present form of ERDN since they agreed or fully agreed with five out of eight statements. On the other hand, as regards three statements, the largest group of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with them (category 3, illustrated in white in Figure 2). This is probably linked to the finding that most of the respondents had participated in ERDN meetings only once, which means that they were not yet very familiar with the network at the time of the survey. This is evident especially for the statement “The present structure of the ERDN is functional and effective”, in which 41% of respondents selected category 3, even though in this statement also almost a half of the respondents agreed or fully agreed with the statement.

The most positive responses concerned the statement on that the actors of ERDN are equal and there are no tensions between them. As many as 68% of the respondents either agreed or fully agreed with this statement. In addition, of a total of 18 open answers, none were critical.

“As far as I can judge after 2 years of participation the scientific platform is beyond any type of discrimination.”

“This is largely a freewill endeavour and so there are little, if any tensions, but the lead is with those who wish to and do contribute.”

“No discriminations based on gender, age, nationality, religion, culture was ever recognised.”

The second highest number of “I fully agree” responses was provided to the statement that ERDN has been personally important to the respondent. The network is voluntary-based and most of the participants are seeking for professional connections among similar colleagues from different countries. The few critical answers to the question on the personal importance of ERDN were, for example, “it is not crucial” or “not so much”, and most of the open answers were positive. The statement saying that ERDN has brought additional value to the respondents’ background organizations received somewhat more critical responses although the majority (52%) agreed with the statement.

“Monitoring ERDN activities is among most important duties and I utilize the knowledge gained during meetings directly in my professional work.”

“Now I have the chance to get international recognition for my work and also the possibility to measure the quality and level of my scientific products (articles, presentations etc.). Also is very important for any researcher to publish articles abroad in important scientific publications/volumes. Now I have this chance (since 2007). For the local networks is an open gate for getting in touch with other practitioners as the ERDN participants can facilitate this.”

“I appreciate constant and recurring personal contacts with international researchers for discussions and information exchange. Some members have become friends. Presentations and publications for an international audience are necessary for my career.”

“My background organisation is now known among some researchers and developers in this network.”

“...international contacts, cooperations with other institutes, joint project applications, host of conference, invitations to international conferences forwarded by ERDN participants.”

“Most of my organisation is not interested in international link.”

ERDN seems to have succeeded very well in creating rural networking possibilities (74% agreed or fully agreed) and social capital (66%) among the participants. This is a promising result since it is closely connected to the very idea of the ERDN. Many said that the network is still small and in its early stage, but they were trustful about the future.

“Surely because it makes the networking easy during the seminars. However I think ERDN is not very well known in public.”

“ERDN contributes to networking, but it seems to have a small reach only (just a few research institutes are involved).”

“It helped both to understand the researchers from different countries as well as the importance of the problems they are dealing with.”

“Not for the European researchers in general, but for the participants. As ERDN is a small community the personal contacts are very close, which means an advantage in my mind.”

The most critical responses were provided to the statement that ERDN has raised the level of rural research in Europe and/or in the respondents' organization. This result is not surprising and is mostly linked to the (still) rather small number of participants. It should be noted, however, that even in this statement the proportion of positive replies (37% in total) was much higher compared to disagreements (24%). The highest proportion (39%) were those who were uncertain about their opinion.

Challenges and proposals for the development of ERDN

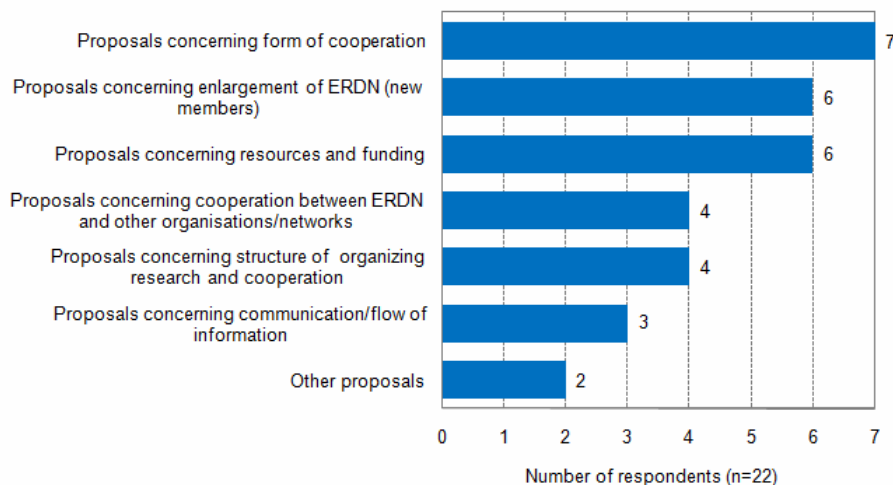


Figure 3. Proposals for alternative or better ways for organizing international (European) rural development research

Source: Webropol survey, April–May 2009

What kind of problems have the participants met in ERDN? How should the network be improved? What does the future of ERDN look like? These themes were probed through five open questions.

Only eight respondents (19%) out of 44 told that they had met some kind of problems in their participation in ERDN. No single serious problem could be detected from the replies; the responses dealt with individual problems, such as lack of finance or time. Notably more respondents had proposals for alternative or better ways for organizing international rural research, since 22 (60%) of those 37 who responded to the question had some ideas (Figure 3).

Some of the replies were very general, but also some, more concrete suggestions were made.

“Regular workshops (4 per year) with topics agreed upon at the previous annual meeting, e.g. evaluation of individual measures of the RDP.”

“Strengthening of cooperation between the older and new member states of the EU would probably influence positively the effectiveness of the ERDN activities. My impression is that participants from new member states (+Austria) are stronger engaged in the activities. However, in my opinion ERDN could benefit from information and experience exchange and any deeper research cooperation with organisations from other older EU member states. One reason is that research institutions in EU-15 are more experienced as the Eastern European ones, with regard to research (i.e. applying and developing recent economic theories and research methods), research transfer (publications in recognised journals, etc.) and applying for research funding. Thus, stronger research cooperation between “West” and “East” Countries within ERDN could be a win-win situation for both sides.”

“I would opt for a somewhat broader and deeper collaboration within ERDN, involving, e.g., a symbolic institutional fee, so that “members” would participate in events on “membership” conditions, and some obligations could be entrusted with them.”

“Maybe affiliation and organization of meetings with other European networks.”

A great majority agreed with the idea of increasing cooperation at national and international level with research networks in the field of rural, urban and regional research (82% of those 34 who responded). Almost as many (81% of 37 respondents) would like to see more cooperation in research applications between ERDN partners. Many did, however, have doubts about practical implementation of these good ideas. There always seems to be a lack of active coordinators or “primus motors” in real research cooperation, for example. Also the threat for increasing bureaucracy and other administrative barriers were highlighted.

“Cooperation is always good but there are limits because of time consuming and overview, until now ERDN works with a minimum of personnel and financial input and is somehow friendly and like a big family. When it should get larger more organisational work and bureaucracy is necessary, the “nice” “friendship” appearance could get lost.”

“It is important to have a clear objective for such cooperation(s); e.g. identifying a research problem, looking for collaboration partners (with shared interests) and joint work on a research application is one example of such an objective. Strengthening of cooperation between networks without having an overall and clear defined objective or strategy does not work in reality.”

“The inter-institutional scientific cooperation and networking (on the base level) is one of the most important problems in my country. The institutions are more, unfortunately, in the position of competitors. Everything is about people. It is necessary to go from step to step. From the national network to the international one, from the monodiscipline network to multidiscipline one. And, it is very important to find the optimal size of networks.”

“The network of ERDN gives a good basis and I think there should be more cooperation in international research. Again the question is capacity, carry out a good research needs time!”

“It is hard to answer as I really don’t know what is the track record of the ERDN as umbrella organization. From my point of view there are different barriers: – bureaucracy at organizational level – differences in national accounting systems – influencing project financial management aspects – lack of time for dealing with project writing and implementation as researchers – lack of experience in project management at international level.”

“Yes. I should welcome it. But, it is very important to find the leader of the potential project. The participants (institutions) of ERDN have a very different (not only personal) power. Some institutions are represented only by one or two persons with interest in rural development. It is very difficult to imagine these institutions in the position of the project leader.”

Types of respondents

Based on the research data, it is possible to formulate a general picture of the actors participating in the ERDN. Categorization of the respondents is based on careful analysis of the research material with adequate statistical methods, for example, cross tabulation, χ^2 test and cluster analysis. The respondents are categorized into four different groups according the level and intensity of their commitment to the ERDN. The level of commitment has been divided in two categories, personal level and organisational level, based on whether the major motivation for participating in the network is personal interest or the participant’s home organization’s interest. Also the intensity of commitment to the network has been divided in two categories: strong and weak. The four groups represent the extreme types of respondents, and a significant share of the respondents are placed somewhere in between these groups. Each respondent can belong to more than one group at the same time (Table 1).

Almost a half (49%) of the respondents are so called “*visitors*”, who have participated in ERDN meetings only once and the participation has not led, at least yet, to any greater commitment to the network. “Visitors” have participated in the network meeting, however, out of their own free will and they have had personal motivation for participating; most commonly, exchanging knowledge and/or experiences (43%), getting new contacts (30%), and seeking possibilities for cooperation (30%). Some of the “visitors” have even very precise goals for their participation. Most (70%) of them have acted as a speaker in an ERDN meeting, and a third (30%) of them have participated in a meeting without a paper or a poster. Usually

they had heard of ERDN or participated a meeting within the past couple of years. Almost half (43%) of the “visitors” think that participating in ERDN has been personally important to her/him and/or to her/his career.

Table 1. Extreme types of actors of the ERDN categorized by the level and intensity of their commitment to the network. A significant share of the actors are placed somewhere in between these groups. Percentage values stand for the shares of respondents that belong to the group. Each respondent can belong to more than one group at the same time

		INTENSITY OF COMMITMENT TO ERDN	
		weak commitment	strong commitment
LEVEL OF COMMITMENT TO ERDN	personal level	<p>“VISITORS ” 49% of respondents</p> <p><i>“I wanted to look at this kind of R&D seminar which was unknown to me before that. I was also looking for new contacts and networks in the area of development of rural livelihoods”.</i></p> <p><i>“... One of my research topics are analyses of agric. markets in Poland and Romania in the last time. [...] Thus, one motivation for participating at ERDN conference in Sinaia/Predeal (2007) was to get insights in the research of the Romanian colleges and learn the opinions and expertise of the representative from other sectors (business, government, NGO) especially on challenges and opportunities for the Romanian agric. market and rural areas. - Establishing or strengthening contacts, especially with Romanian colleagues - First time visit to Romania (= desire to experience the Romanian countryside)”</i></p>	<p>“ACTIVE USERS OF THE NETWORK” 19% of respondents</p> <p><i>“I believe this is a useful vehicle for (a) networking, (b) improving my own knowledge and (c) generating knowledge for the wider good.”</i></p> <p><i>“ to have alive contact with the other people from different countries - to get more knowledge about rural areas in the other countries - To change information's about my country and the other countries - To learn more about the way to solve some problems with the methods of an expertise's to the government or to the EU rural commission“</i></p>
	organisational level	<p>“COMMANDED BY BOSS OR BACKGROUND ORGANIZATION” 11% of respondents</p> <p><i>“Firstly, I substituted my colleague at the ERDN meeting due to his absence. After that I considered to participate in the next meeting of ERDN but due to working requirement it was not possible.”</i></p> <p><i>“first motivation was request second was interest for the themes and value for my work”</i></p>	<p>“DEVELOPERS OF RESEARCH AREA” 9% of respondents</p> <p><i>“Basically, I find international networks necessary for the development of research work (and this certainly applies in the case of Finnish rural studies!). I've been active in the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) for some fifteen years and find now that the ERDN is a novel (and in a way, an additional) platform for cooperation.”</i></p> <p><i>“I trust in this idea. I consider that such a network is necessary on European level. ERDN meetings and activities are a good opportunity to extend the research area, meet people, exchange the experience, makes the distances shorter and the cooperation faster.”</i></p>

Source: Webropol survey, April–May 2009

Almost a fifth (19%) of the respondents can be seen as “*active users of the network*”. They participate in the network activities mainly out of their own interest. They have several personal motivations for participating and goals

they want to achieve by using the network. The “active users of the network” have participated in ERDN meetings at least twice, some of them even six times, since the early years or the middle period of the network’s existence. They have also had several roles in the network: some of them are founding members, over half of them have organized ERDN meetings, and almost all of them have acted as a speaker in a meeting. So it is fair to say that their commitment to the network is quite strong. Except for one respondent, all of them (89%) think participating in ERDN has been personally important to her/him and/or to her/his career.

Actors “*commanded by boss or background organization*” (11% of respondents) have not participated in the ERDN out of their own free will initially, instead, their boss or background organization has requested or commanded them to participate in the network. They all have participated in ERDN meetings only once, usually as a speaker in a meeting, and only one respondent expressed his willingness to participate again. Their commitment to the network is therefore quite weak, although some of them had also personal interest in participating. Over half of them (60%) think that participating in ERDN has brought additional value to her/his background organization, and over half of them (60%) think that participating has not been personally important to her/him and/or to her/his career.

The last, and the smallest group, of actors are called “*developers of the research area*” (9% of respondents). These people often have both organizational and personal motivation for participating in the ERDN. Usually development of the research area is their main goal, or at least one of the goals. Some of them are founding members or organizers of meetings and have participated in the network action several times since its early years. Some of the people in this group are new to the network and have participated in meetings only once so far. However, because of the nature of their motivation, their commitment to the network can be seen quite strong.

Discussion

Networks are probably here to stay also in rural development and research. At the regional, national and international levels, the rapidly increasing number of networks has led us to think about the European Rural Development Network as an international example of rural expertise networks from the actor or participant point of view. At least five major interrelated conclusions can be drawn from this study.

Firstly, the importance of “primus motors” in the early stages of networking cannot be overemphasized. In contrast to top-down, official networks, voluntary-based networks are not created on administrative decisions and commands. Voluntary networks are born out of nowhere either, but they need someone with a good idea and a like-minded group of colleagues around who share this idea. The role of social capital is crucial in this stage, since as Lee

et al. (2005, p. 281) state, „Good networks are inclusive, facilitating collective learning, allowing sharing of success and generating wider social acceptance.“ A new network can be seen as an innovation which needs to be diffused among potential partners. In the innovation adoption curve by Rogers (2003), the group of innovators forms only 2.5% of all the adopters of innovations. In international voluntary networks such as ERDN, the role of innovators is especially important since cooperation across administrative, mental and physical borders and language barriers is never an easy task. ERDN is (so far) a small-scale success story in this sense, thanks to the sustainability of the original ideas and involved coordinators and organizers of the meetings.

Secondly, the next stage of a network's development is critical. In ERDN, the core, and the most active group, of innovators is small, and almost a half of the participants are “visitors”. In Rogers' (2003, p. 272) model they are classified to early adopters and early majority. This imbalance of adopters is probably the case in many, or at least in the most similar, networks and societies, and may be seen as a general challenge for the future of voluntary networks. In any case, there is a need to think over whether the present structure and size of the network is sufficient or whether there is a need for further expansion. In the latter case, potential new participants may be found both via national contacts of present participants and by sending targeted invitations to new countries.

The third conclusion is closely connected to the previous ones. In some open answers in our survey, some concerns were expressed towards the possible problems which might emerge if the ERDN expanded, although naturally no exact limits for the growth were given. The network is mostly based on voluntary involvement and work, and financing granted from national sources is limited. Would ERDN lose something from its' present informality and social relations between the actors if it expanded towards a larger structure? Is there a threat of bureaucracy? Who has time and resources to coordinate the expanding network? These were some questions raised by the respondents.

Fourthly, young network actors are, naturally, essential to continuance of any network. In the beginning, a network needs an experienced group of actors or innovators with good relations with other potential network actors. According to our survey this was perhaps the most important single background factor in the creation of ERDN: the core group had good knowledge about each other. However, in the long term, young actors are a precondition for development and regeneration of the network. At the moment, the situation in ERDN is quite promising: the actors of the network seem to be quite experienced people, but there are already a significant number of young people involved.

Finally, some expectations and prospects for the future of ERDN were formulated in the replies. Most of the participants were fairly satisfied with their experiences in the network and would like to see even more profound forms of international research cooperation, not only inside the present ERDN but also with other networks of researchers. The most desired activity was increas-

ing the number of joint research applications and proposals submitted to, for example, the European Union framework programmes. ERDN has proved to be a functional platform for international cooperation in rural development research, and there is already evidence that the problem of finding willing coordinators to research projects is not an insolvable question.

This study pointed out that ERDN has successfully gone through a path from a small group of rural experts to a relative wide and vital international rural expert network. The actors are quite satisfied with the present structure and results achieved so far. In the future, however, the network may face challenges connected to e.g. increasing competition of financial resources directed to rural development research both at national and international level, and also to proliferating number of other rural networks. More and more demands are placed on international research cooperation, and in this sense, we may conclude that ERDN is on the course to deepening cooperation.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Academy of Finland (project 124800) and the Thule Institute of the University of Oulu for providing financing for this study. Thanks are due also to the respondents of our web survey.

References

- Bourdieu P., 1986, The Forms of Capital, [in] Richardson J.G. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, 241–258, Greenwood Press, Westport.
- Carter S., 1996, The Indigenous Rural Enterprise: Characteristics and Change in the British Farm Sector, *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 8, 345-358.
- Casson M., Della Giusta M. (eds.), 2008, *The Economics of Networks*, The International Library of Critical Writings in Economics 221, An Elgar Reference Collection.
- Cheshire L., Higgins V., Lawrence G. (eds.), 2007, *Rural Governance – International Perspectives*, Routledge Studies in Human Geography.
- European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/enrd/index_en.htm (as in 1st October, 2009).
- European Rural Development Network (ERDN), <http://www.erdn.waw.pl/> (as in 1st October, 2009).
- Grabher G., Powell W. W. (eds.), 2004, *Networks*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar.
- Green G. P., 2007, *Workforce Development Networks in Rural Areas*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar.
- International Rural Network, <http://www.international-rural-network.org/> (as in 1st October, 2009).
- Jones B., Miller B., 2007, *Innovation Diffusion in the New Economy: the Tacit Component*, London, Routledge.

- Latour B., 1987, *Science in Action – How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.
- Lee J., Árnason A., Nightingale A., Shucksmith M., 2005, *Networking: Social Capital and Identities in European Rural Development*, *Sociologia Ruralis* Vol 45:4, 269-283.
- Likert R., 1932, *A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes*, *Archives of Psychology* 140, 1–55.
- Lockie S., 2006, *Networks of Agri-Environmental Action: Temporality, Spatiality and Identity in Agricultural Environments*, *Sociologia Ruralis* Vol 46:1, 22-39.
- McAraevey R., 2009, *Rural Development Theory and Practice*, *Routledge Studies in Development and Society* 19.
- Moseley M. J., 2003, *Rural Development - Principles and Practice*, SAGE Publications.
- Muilu T., 2007, *Rural Studies Network of Finland – a National Approach to Networking Rural Expertise*, [in] Voicilas D.M., Tudor M. (eds.), *Values and Challenges in Designing the European Rural Structures – Research Network Experience*, 21–31, *Rural areas and development vol. 5*, European Rural Development Network, Institute of Agricultural Economics Romanian Academy, Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics, National Research Institute.
- Muilu T., 2010, *Needs for Rural Research in the Northern Finland Context*, *Journal of Rural Studies* 26, 73-80.
- Murdoch, J., 2000, *Networks – a New Paradigm of Rural Development?*, *Journal of Rural Studies* 16, 407-419.
- OECD Rural Policy Reviews Finland 2008, Paris.
- Rennie F. (ed.), 2004, *The Nordic–Scottish University Network for Rural and Regional Development*, *Proceedings of the 2003 Annual Conference*, Inverness, Scotland.
- Rogers E. M., 2003, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Free Press, New York.
- Rural Network of Finland (in Finnish), <http://www.maaseutu.fi/fi/index/maa-seutuverkosto.html> (as in 1st October, 2009).
- Rural Policy Committee, <http://www.ruralpolicy.fi/en/> (as in 1st October, 2009).
- Voicilaş D. M., 2008, *The Experience of the European Rural Development Network (ERDN): from Idea to Practice*, *Agricultural and Rural Development*, Year V, no.1-2, 39-44, Institute of Agricultural Economics, Romanian Academy.
- Webropol, <http://www.webropol.com/> (as in 1st October, 2009).