ENRD networking mapping

Working Document

August 2018

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1. Introduction

In order to deliver targeted support for the implementation of RDPs and to inform ENRD Contact Point networking activities, it is important to have clear and up to date information on the NRNs' current state of play. This survey has been conducted on a yearly basis and some of the questions put to the rural networks have changed each year. The ENRD Contact Point prepared the questionnaire and collected information, this was supported by experts at Member State level. The contribution and responses were not only drawn from MAs and NRNs, but also other relevant actors where possible, thus allowing a wider and deeper insight into the situation for each MS or region.

Across the 32 NRNs (28 MSs including two regional networking profiles submitted from Belgium and four from the UK), 25 were completed by Mid-April. A summary was circulated among Member States (MS) and the main findings analysis was presented at the 11th NRNs' Meeting. The remaining completed NRN contributions arrived by Mid-June and one MS (Bulgaria) had no functioning NRN in operation in Y4, therefore they reported 'no activity'. The main findings of the 31 completed surveys are summarised in this report.

2. Information on the state-of-play of networking activities related to RDP implementation

2.1. Lessons learned

Thirty of the 31 submissions provided an answer to the question "What have been the main lessons learned over the last 12 months?". Seventy lessons learned were mentioned, the most frequently recurring topics were communication, resource and LEADER/CLLD related learning.
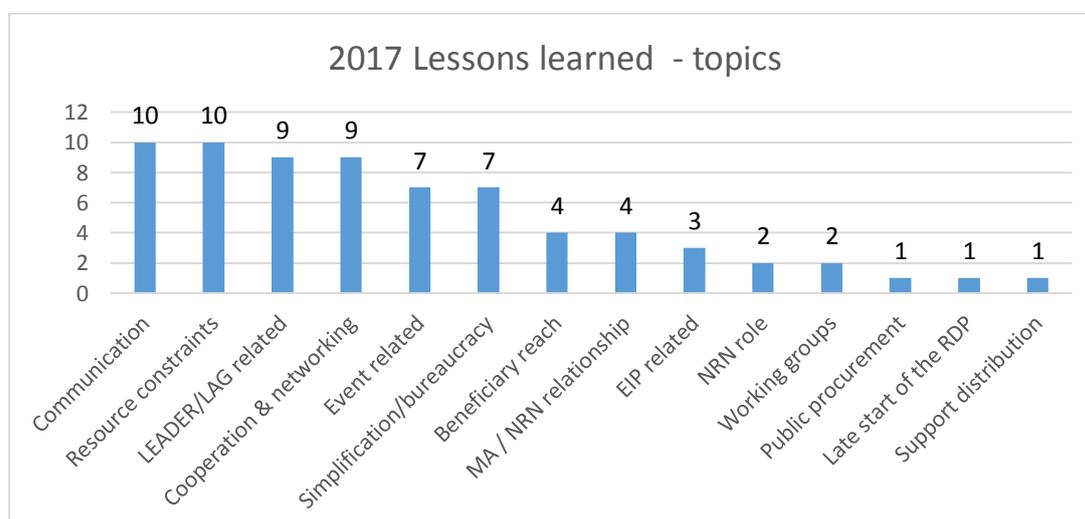
By way of an example of a communication related lesson, a key success factor for Measure 16 implementation in Greece has been the high level of engagement among agronomists and technical staff within regional administrations. These regional staff are in direct contact with farmers and can play a pivotal role in transferring information and can also act as antennae for the NSU. The most active agronomists have even formed their own network. A further reflection from Greece was that networking relies on personal relationships, so when NSU staff change this can have a negative impact

on the effectiveness of the network. In Austria a lesson identified was that target groups in the NRN task description are not reached to a consistent extent, this is due to a resource constraint and is also partly due to historical reasons (e.g. LEADER stakeholders have traditionally been much closer to the NSU than many farmers).

Some of the representative specific lessons that have been learned in 2017 are shown in the following table, these are grouped by the response subject type.

Lesson learning subject	Specific 2017 lesson that has been learned
Beneficiary reach	Target groups reached to variable extent, partly for historical reasons
	Very important to have direct contact with grassroot stakeholders
	Difficult to engage with RDP schemes as focus is on spending
Communication	Feedback from regional partners is crucial
	Need to target communication to specific needs and thematic interests
	Face to face meetings are the most effective communication method
	NRN members are not consulted on RDP implementation
	Repeat important messages through multiple channels
	NRN must be visible with clear targets and responsibilities and good communication
Cooperation & networking	Team work and cooperation are important
	Collecting good practice examples relies on cooperation with advisors
	M16 success due to engagement of agronomists and regional technical staff
	Measuring networking impact on rural development is a difficult task
	Sharing experiences contributes a lot to improve RDP implementation
EIP-AGRI related	EIP-AGRI delivery is challenged by high bureaucracy
Event related	Limit to the number of seminars and excursions that can be organised
	Joint PA and LAG regional seminars helped solve implementation problems
	Peer to peer and thematic meetings work well with facilitated networking
	Some of the most successful events organised with the LAGs' representative organisation
LEADER/LAG related	LEADER and LDS quality depends on equal opportunities, LAG competencies and TNC
	Governmental bodies more and more recognise the expertise of the LAGs
	LAG actors need further training and examples from other MSs
MA / NRN relationship	The NRN is part of the Ministry which makes it less able to influence public policies
	Need for greater interaction between the NRN and MAs to utilise NRN potential
NRN role	NRN plays a key role in rural area development
Public procurement	Public procurement processes can cause difficulties
Resource constraints	Real networking is not possible given the existing resources
	Staff turnover harms networking
	Complexity/size of RDP is challenging because of limited capacity within the MA and NSU
	Developing case studies is resource intensive
Simplification/bureaucracy	Project funding and structures are too complicated
	High levels of bureaucracy, there are significant concerns about simplification
	RDP with great complexity makes it difficult for the NRN to reach all areas of intervention
	Difficulties around the RDP such as long turnaround times and complicated regulations
Working groups	WGs need more animation, and to focus on fewer issues

2.2. Significant achievements

Across the 31 submissions, 93 examples were given for the question "Please describe your most significant or interesting achievement over the last 12 months. i.e. what are you most proud of?".

Almost one-third (28) of the achievements reported related to the delivery of events, including thematic workshops, seminars, conferences, study tours and rural fairs.

In Spain, the NSU has increased its contact with stakeholders in 2017 through the development of meetings and workshops, creation of thematic working groups, better communication and more computer-based applications. Through this, their thematic work now better matches stakeholder needs, NSU staff are more accessible, and communication has improved in all areas. The capacity to deliver the work plan has improved, while the creation of a LEADER Cooperation Working Group allows problems to be tackled together by all LAGs.
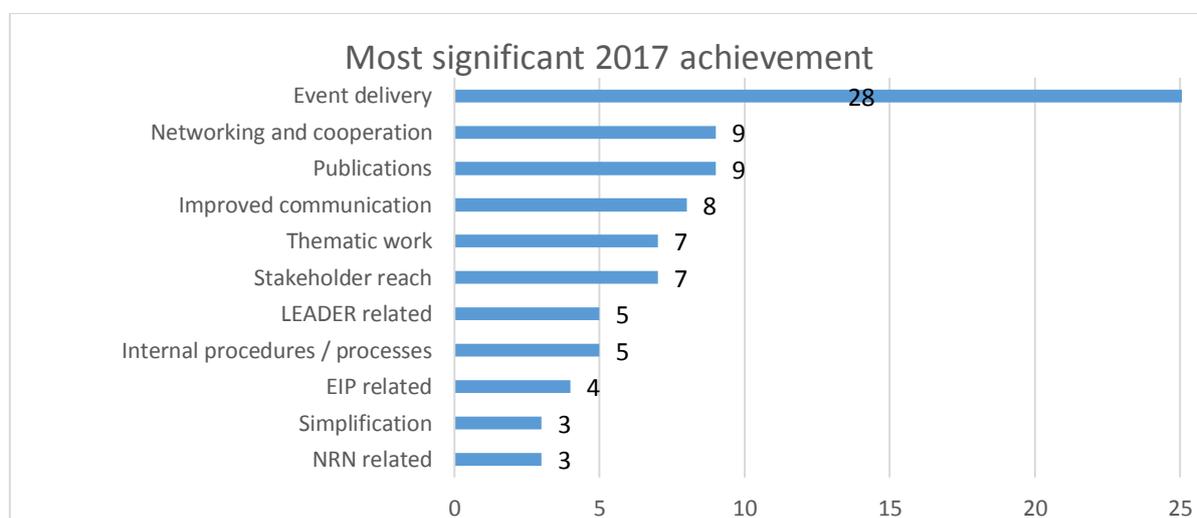
A wide range of achievements were cited in Italy. Simplified and standard cost options have been introduced, a database now presents the results of more than 30 audits from all Italian regions, and the NSU has created a new regional reporting system together with a system to support entrepreneurs write an online business plan to access RDP support. Thematic webinars for local administrations have been delivered by the Italian NSU and cooperation and exchange activities were organised with the Polish administration on regional EAFRD delivery.

2.3. Challenging aspects of work

When asked "As networks, which aspect of your work has been difficult or challenging to implement over the last 12 months, i.e. what could you have achieved given reasonable resources (human, financial etc.)?" 63 challenges were mentioned. Not all of these have been due to resource constraints, as shown in the table, which contains some of the examples given. Other similar examples were given, so the table is a representative summary of examples.

Challenging issue	Resource dependent? (Stated or implied)
NRN brand position and volume of content produced	Yes
Planning of outputs and outcomes	Yes
Attendance at European level meetings	Yes
Engaging the agricultural sector	Yes
Communication activities	Yes
Development of thematic topics (e.g. short supply chains)	Yes
Limited knowledge of social farming	Yes
Distribute RDP M&E results in appropriate formats	Yes
Collaborative decisions and communication difficult within regionalised structure	Yes
Limited training and events delivered by the EIP-AGRI network	Yes
Organisation of a member assembly meeting	Yes
Translating ENRD and EIP-AGRI products	Yes
NSU/NRN activities are ad-hoc	Yes
LAG management turnover (leaving due to extreme delays has reduced capacity)	Yes
Website development (architecture, security and content delivery)	Yes
Potential beneficiaries' awareness about the conditions for calls, long-term issue	Yes
Sharing of good practice	Yes
Developing case-studies	Yes
Synergies with similar organisations	No
Clarity with MA over roles and responsibilities	No
Change in regional NSU structure has made communication more difficult	No
Internal procedures (e.g. MA approval for travel)	No
Cooperation with MA	No
NRN's complex governance system	No
Trust between the NRN/NSU and LAGs	No
Clarity over PA responsibilities	No
Delays due to appeals following calls	No
Gaining recognition amongst traditional rural communities	No
NSU location within government restricts flexibility	No

3. NRN operational challenges and future plans

3.1. NRN membership

From the 30 responses to the question "Has NRN membership changed in the last year? If so, how?", 16 said that membership had not changed, nine said it had, while five said that the question wasn't relevant as the NRN membership is informal or open. Some examples from those who said NRN membership had changed in the last 12 months are shown in the table.

MS	Change in NRN membership
Croatia	Yes. Five new members (mostly LAGs) joined the NRN in 2017, with the NRN committee deciding on membership. There are now 309 members.
Ireland	Yes. There is a target to increase membership by 20% each year. This was met last year.
Portugal	In 2016, 1 098 members signed up, and in 2017 only 51. The difference is ascribed to the registration of members who wanted to be able to apply for Operational Groups. The number of members has grown to around 2 100.
Slovenia	Slovenian NRN has an open membership. In the past 12 months some of the members opted out of membership, but on the other hand, there are many new members.
Sweden	The number of member organisations is increasing. At the present time 98 organisations are members of the network and around 10 of them are new within the last 12 months.

3.2. Consulting with stakeholders

When asked "How does the NRN / NSU consult with their stakeholders? Please give examples of how this has taken place over the last 12 months" the most frequently stated means of consultation across the 31 submissions were Events (11), Meetings (11), Newsletter (11), Website (10) and Thematic Working Groups (10). Some respondents focussed on consultation at a strategic level (e.g. Spain), others at a grass-root level (e.g. Malta), some made their comments highly evaluative, stating what needed to improve (e.g. The Netherlands) or what was working well (e.g. Finland).

The means of consultation that were mentioned a minimum of five times are shown in the table below.

Means of consultation	Member State
Events (conferences, seminars, study visits, workshops, consultations)	UK_Wales, Cyprus, France, Czech Republic, Estonia, Be_Flanders, Slovakia, Germany, Be_Wallonia, The Netherlands, Portugal
Meetings	UK_Scotland, Lithuania, France, Spain, Be_Flanders, The Netherlands, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Sweden, Portugal
Newsletter	Austria, Slovakia, Malta, Germany, Croatia, UK_Scotland, UK_Wales, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Portugal
Website / Webpage	Slovakia, Austria, Romania, Germany, Finland, Croatia, France, Cyprus, Slovenia, Portugal
Thematic Working Groups	Cyprus, Finland, Austria, Poland, Be_Wallonia, Be_Flanders, Ireland, Latvia, Sweden, Portugal
Social media	Slovakia, Romania, Poland, UK_Scotland, Finland, Portugal
Monitoring Committee / Coordination Committee	Austria, Italy, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Portugal

(Some respondents appear to discuss communication tools rather than consultation methods, but for consistency all tools and methods stated were included in the analysis.)

In France, institutional communication and consultation takes place through an assembly and themed committees. The NRN website has been renewed to facilitate interaction, and the NSU now includes time for more dialogue during participative workshops to enable a less top-down approach.

The Finnish NSU uses electronic work platforms very effectively (e.g. the 'Viima' interactive participative tool) to gather feedback on annual action plans, while to avoid "speaking to the same people" the Scottish NSU now engages in less formal consultation and more outreach through partner organisations. The range of tools being employed by NSUs was cited as in response to the differing stakeholder types and their preferred methods of communication. For many NSUs the ambition with digital tools is to draw people towards their main source of information – the website.

3.3. Future plans

When asked to share their plans for the next 12 months, nine NSUs were yet to finalise their action plans. Across the remaining 22 submissions, some NSU responses list objectives (e.g. Finland, Germany) while some others list specific activities (e.g. Austria, France).

The most frequently mentioned topic or theme for the next 12 months activity was Innovation / EIP-AGRI implementation or LEADER, with both mentioned 13 times. This was followed by RDP implementation (7), agriculture (5), forestry (3) and food production (3).

One of the most detailed action plans reviewed is from Austria, which has five themes with associated activities. For example, under the innovation theme the NSU will act as an innovation broker, deliver webinars, and implement an agricultural innovation strategy. In BE_Flanders events and meetings are planned on a wide range of themes including start-up support, 'Europe nearby' and agri-environmental good-practices from other MSs
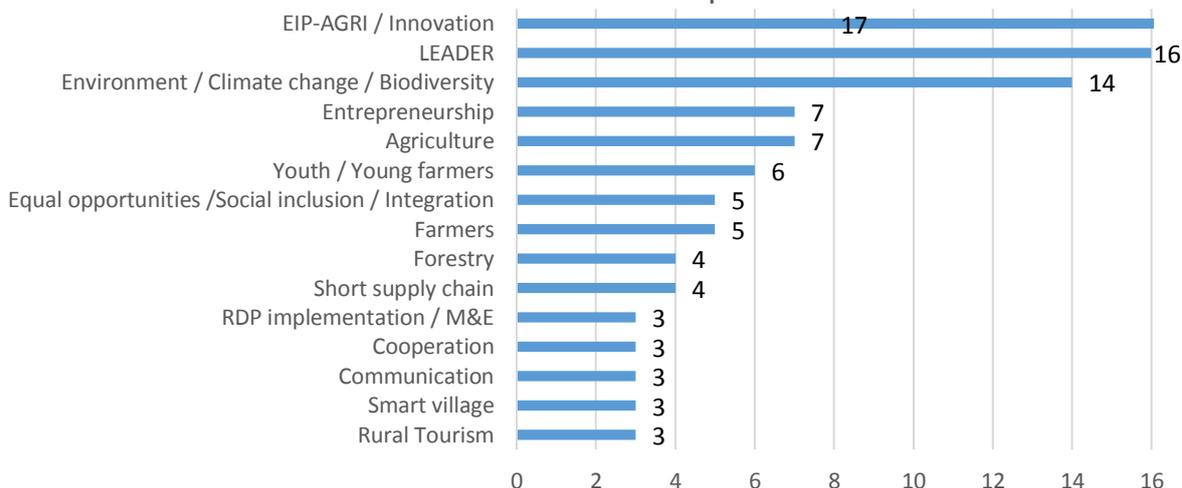
4. Thematic activity

4.1. Themes to address in 2018

In response to the question "What themes is the NRN addressing in 2018? Please describe current and planned 2018 activities by each theme", 22 MS submissions provided an answer.

2018 Activities *(stated ten or more times)*

Activity	Count
Workshop	33
Conference	20
Working group	18
Field trips	18
Seminar	14
Meetings	14
Events	12
Capacity building / Training	12
Collection/dissemination of information & knowledge	12
Brochure, publication and magazine	10

2018 Themes stated multiple times

Theme	Count
EIP-AGRI / Innovation	17
LEADER	16
Environment / Climate change / Biodiversity	14
Entrepreneurship	7
Agriculture	7
Youth / Young farmers	6
Equal opportunities /Social inclusion / Integration	5
Farmers	5
Forestry	4
Short supply chain	4
RDP implementation / M&E	3
Cooperation	3
Communication	3
Smart village	3
Rural Tourism	3

4.2. Stakeholders to involve

In response to the question "Which stakeholders should you involve to support or add value to your thematic activity in 2018, and how?", 22 of the 31 respondents offered an answer.

Stakeholders mentioned four times were the MA, the PA, and EIP-AGRI stakeholders, groups or networks. Stakeholders mentioned three times included farmers, LAGs, NGOs and NRN members, while a range of differing stakeholders were all mentioned twice:

- environmental organisations / interest groups
- public audiences
- LEADER working / thematic group members
- village / community representatives
- scientific institutions
- rural youth

Whilst many responses did not offer a clear answer to how stakeholders will be engaged, some specific examples were given. In Poland the membership of the Innovation thematic group is being adjusted to ensure better representation from research institutes. The establishment of three task forces to cooperate with EIP-AGRI Focus Groups is also currently underway in Poland. In Finland, the NSU believe in involving rural youth and so the NSU started a new campaign with a young YouTube star, Joona Hellman. Rather than trying to reach a target group directly the NSU involves existing umbrella organisations or social structures to deliver messages through them.

4.3. Most successful delivery formats

Twenty-three of the 31 submissions received offered an answer to the question "What are the most successful formats for delivering the thematic activity, and why?".

As shown in the table below, the most popular formats for delivery were meetings and workshops of various types.

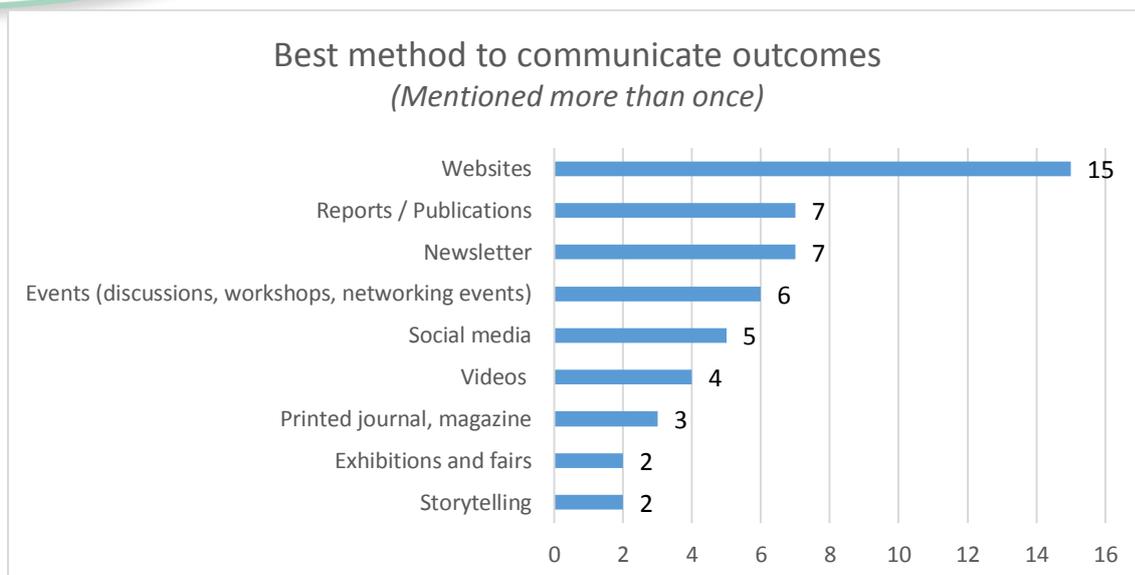| Format for thematic activity delivery *(mentioned more than once)*	Frequency
Meetings	7
Workshops / Seminars / Forums	6
Working Groups / Thematic Working Groups	3
Events (unspecified)	2
Field Trips / Peer to Peer Exchanges	2
LEADER Learning Network	2

As seen in the table, there was wide variation in the answers received, so it was not always possible to regroup or standardise the information received.

In Finland, Thematic Working Groups are the most successful format as their action plans bring strategic vision and efficiency into implementation. In BE Flanders the LEADER Learning Network and interactive stakeholder meetings have been successful, as the latter allows topics to be identified with stakeholders who are really interested in the given topic. Finally, in Lithuania Temporary Working Groups have been successful. They meet on a regular basis for a defined period (e. g. once a week for ten weeks), with an aim of producing an output (e. g. guidelines) by the end of the period.

4.4. Methods for communicating outcomes

Twenty-four of the 31 submissions received offered an answer to the question "What are the best methods for communicating the outcomes? How do you assess this?"

Methods that were mentioned multiple times are shown in the following graph. The main method mentioned is the website – measured by the activity in this area which consistently supersedes other methods, according to feedback and website 'hits'.

Best method to communicate outcomes
(Mentioned more than once)

Method	Value
Websites	15
Reports / Publications	7
Newsletter	7
Events (discussions, workshops, networking events)	6
Social media	5
Videos	4
Printed journal, magazine	3
Exhibitions and fairs	2
Storytelling	2

5. Conclusions

The summary shows that rural networks face common challenges – many cited resource constraints and difficulties in connecting with stakeholders, including the Managing Authority, but by contrast they can be resourceful with their existing tools and through consultation with stakeholders.

The main methods the NSUs use for their networking activities are through events, other varying types of communication and networking, and through their websites as the main tool for communicating outputs. Some NSUs already recognise the value of cooperation with other NSUs in developing improved activities and have developed new activities to consistently improve delivery and beneficiary reach.

The outcomes show an increase and focus in network activity and engagement, and the thematic activity can be reflected in future activities of the European rural networks, where the most highly cited topics were Innovation, LEADER and Climate Change and Environment.

The responses can and will be used to feed into the future activities of the ENRD Contact Point, including the proposal for a major networking Conference where many of the areas that NRNs would be willing to share could be presented. These issues have already been discussed and shared in existing activity, such as the 11th NRN Meeting in Prague and workshop on NRN communication, where topics included event delivery, cooperation with agricultural stakeholders, digital mapping, storytelling and digital media. Other examples can be used in thematic activities, continuing to develop best practice and peer to peer exchanges.