

Executive Summary of the Final Report Rural Networks' Assembly 26 Jan 2015, Brussels, BE

The first-ever Rural Networks Assembly took place in Brussels on 26 January 2015. It brought together around 200 delegates representing: managing authorities, paying agencies, National Rural Networks (NRNs), regional/local authorities; EU organisations; LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs); Agricultural advisory service providers; and agricultural research institutes.

Aldo Longo, Director, Directorate H 'General Aspects of Rural Development and Research' in DG-AGRI, welcomed participants, highlighting the need to include all stakeholders in the Assembly in a balanced way to oversee co-operation between the ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks.

Mihail Dumitru, Deputy Director General in DG AGRI, presented the Assembly as the first concrete output of the EU decision to invest more on rural networks in 2014-2020. It provides a unique exchange platform to promote coordination, synergies and efficiency gains between the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI networks and will provide the strategic framework for their activities.

Representatives of DG AGRI presented:

- the Rural Networks' governance structure and Rules of Procedure, which were approved by the Assembly after some questions of clarification;
- the structure and nomination process of the Rural Networks' Steering Group, whose composition was proposed by the Assembly;¹
- the creation, composition and mandate of permanent sub-groups of the Assembly on the topics of: Innovation; and LEADER-CLLD (the discussion on the creation of a permanent sub-group on Evaluation was postponed until the 2nd meeting of the Assembly);
- The draft common Strategic Framework that has been developed for both Rural Networks and for which this Assembly must help identify the key themes; and
- Activities and meetings of the EU Networks planned for the first half of 2015. (Events planned by the Evaluation Helpdesk will be added to this calendar in due course.)

Commissioner Phil Hogan delivered a keynote message stressing the importance of the rural networks working together to help the Commission address important challenges facing agriculture and rural development. These include the need to ensure farming is still attractive to younger generations, to strengthen and diversify rural economies and to boost the innovation capacity of rural actors. The Commissioner invited all stakeholders to contribute ideas on how to simplify rural policy delivery for farmers and other beneficiaries.

Kersti Kaljulaid, member of the European Court of Auditors, delivered a keynote address focusing on the contribution that rural networks can make to better spending of rural development funds. Key issues include the need to foster a performance culture, develop capacity to reduce the error rate in rural development spending and harnessing the potential of EU funding to leverage additional capital.

¹ On this basis DG AGRI adopted on 3 February 2015 a Decision appointing the members of the Steering Group, whose first meeting will take place on 25 February 2015.



In the afternoon, participants split into parallel workshops focused on central elements of the common strategic framework. Summary outcomes of the workshops are:

Workshop 1: 'Better Networking with ENRD/EIP'

Participants identified a series of key needs and networking channels related to the three overarching objectives of: competitive agriculture; sustainable management of natural resources; and balanced territorial development.

They concluded that rural networks can contribute most by supporting the exchange of good practices, communication of positive perspectives and providing forums for thematic exchange.

Workshop 2 'Farmers in Innovation'

The group highlighted the importance of communicating to farmers that innovation in agriculture is an opportunity to solve problems in farming. They suggested various communications channels for achieving this as well as flagging the relevance of peer-to-peer learning.

Rural networks can support the exchange of good practice and the flow of information (notably to local levels) including via the translation of information into national languages. Networks can also help farmers to have a say in the identification of priority research topics.

Workshops 3&4: 'Networking Priorities'

The top five priority challenges/themes identified were: Management and performance; Simplification; Demographic challenges; Cooperation for diversification; and Monitoring and evaluation.

Networking can help address these themes through activities such as disseminating good practice, providing technical guidance, communicating to increase understanding of complex issues, bringing stakeholders together, and creating forums/platforms for exchange.

Workshop 5: 'What should come first in Innovation'

The following 12 topics received the most votes as priority themes for work on innovation: Sustainable and efficient input use; Knowledge transfer; Circular economy; Farming methods and systems; Bottom-up innovation; Market innovation; Knowledge systems; Short supply chains and rural-urban partnerships; Waste management; Social innovation; Climate change; and Soil quality.

Rural networks can support innovation through activities including: supporting more interaction between farmers and other innovation stakeholders; connecting H2020 and RDP innovation; supporting the spread of good practice (and learning from mistakes); and working with LAGs.

Workshop 6: 'Better communication with stakeholders'

Overall, the networks are most needed to support vertical information flows (in both directions), including the collection and dissemination of easy-to-understand RD policy-related information, good practices and stakeholders' activities.

More efforts are needed to support the dissemination and accessibility of the information available (including consideration of language issues) and active peer exchange.

The Assembly had the opportunity to discuss and add to these conclusions, before Aldo Longo closed the event by summarising some of the main themes that had emerged. He highlighted the spirit of inclusiveness of the Assembly that is a necessary condition for networking activities to meet the challenges for rural development 2014-2020.