

Representing the 'strong'? – The role of networks working with farmers

How to reach strongly organised groups of stakeholders, especially farmers?

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1. There are many types of stakeholders

- Spread in different territories
- Organised in different networks or sector based groups
- Different voices, different specificities
- Participate in RD in different levels (EU, national, regional, local)

2. Some groups of stakeholders are strongly organised and work as “silos”(e.g. farmers, environment or, even, territory) – Is a problem, a fact or an opportunity?

- Dynamics focused in the sector– ability to discuss policy measures
- Normally interested in very specific themes related to their activity – ability to discuss policy measures
- No time to discuss issues with new/different stakeholders – very focused meetings
- Information circulates inside, in closed circle, and most of the time in a vertical way (top-down, but also bottom-up) – access to political level
- In spite of being very well informed, individual actors (e.g. farmers) usually act as a body: discuss with peers and then delegate the power of decision to their representative structures – empowerment to policy negotiation

3. Strong organised stakeholders are important to their stakeholders.

- Represent their groups in forums of policy making and negotiation – access to political level
- Are seen as reliable and trustworthy – empowerment to policy negotiation
- Disseminate information (political, technical, organisational, financial...) and give feedback from policy discussions – access to political level
- Provide dimension and have impact in stakeholders' lives – economic relevance
- Help to create a sense of belonging – identity values
- Opportunity to share information and knowledge, collaborate and network – policy discussion

4. Strong organised stakeholders (like farmers' networks) are important to other NRN stakeholders (they open doors to sector-specific issues).

- Being networks of networks, when they participate in NRN they bring with them a large number of individual stakeholders, helping to reach the grass root stakeholder/farmer – partners of the policy discussion process
- If the topics/needs are really relevant to them, farmers and their networks are very much able to work with other stakeholder groups – partners of the policy discussion process
- As well known players in policy discussion forums they may contribute to strength the impact and the society recognition of NRN initiatives – partners of the policy discussion process
- May also enlarge or change the focus of the discussion (as any other stakeholder) – ability to discuss policy measures
- Those that have economic power may facilitate other stakeholders' access to information, technology, innovation, knowledge, markets, consumers, public in general – economic relevance

5. NRN are important to strong organised stakeholders (linking platforms, good listeners and facilitators).

- NRN may be the string that connects stakeholders around common issues (building solutions and meeting challenges together) – facilitating policy discussion
- Stakeholder diversity helps to understand different points of view – better policy discussion
- Neutral, NRN “do not defend”, promote informal approaches – facilitating policy discussion and delivery
- Ability to collaborate, cooperate and to promote joint actions– facilitating policy discussion and delivery
- Encourage sharing experiences and knowledge – better policy making and delivery
- NRN use existing networks (building on experience and diverse perspectives)– facilitating policy discussion and delivery

6. NRN are important to strong organised stakeholders (addressing their needs).

Stakeholders (may...) need NRN to solve conflict situations, to face new challenges, to deal with changes in the context:

- Unusual issues or problems
- Different/new stakeholders
- Horizontal themes (training, capacity building, innovation, sharing relevant experiences, information)

NRN can act like neutral platforms to share new ideas or to make agreements (broker role, someone in the middle to link and facilitate relationships/partnerships)

7. Looking at good experiences (1): Strongly organised stakeholders are only interested in their own matters? Not quite true.

Examples of themes/topics that link different interest groups:

- Food and healthy consumption habits
- Needs of training and education – farmer organisations work together with universities
- EIP-AGRI operational groups
- Farmers organisations create specialized departments to deal with environment issues
- Local associations work together with farmers organisations (associations and cooperatives) to face new opportunities in building and delivering local development strategies
- Farmers, schools and local authorities jointly implement short supply chains
- An environment association, a farmer organisation and a public agricultural body work together to assess the effectiveness and impact of some environmental RDP measures in fostering biodiversity

8. Looking at good experiences (2): Grass root stakeholders of strongly organised stakeholders are not involved in decision processes? Not quite true.

Examples of situations:

- Meetings and member internal assemblies are strongly participated by farmers
- Seminars and workshops to discuss policy measures are also strongly participated and are the basis to build common positions
- Common problems/challenges/projects mobilize farmers' attention (e.g. climate change, supply chains, environment issues, crops/product tourist routes, territorial brands)

9. Keys to success in strongly organised stakeholder involvement

- Work together to solve a close problem that has impact in stakeholders' lives
- Need to work locally/ in proximity to farmers
- Find tangible solutions that address concrete needs
- Use collaborative tools, create partnerships
- Work with targeted groups
- Choose the right stakeholders
- Keep them interested and talk to/with them in their own language
- Divide and define roles
- Use step-by-step approaches with landmark projects – show results
- Stakeholders must trust and feel they are listened

10. How to reach strongly organised stakeholders: Networks evolve, mature

- Go talk to them, meet them in their farms, business, organisations, activities or events
- Use the opportunities even though they are unexpected – they may not come back again
- But do not need to do everything at the same time...
- Networks can work by phases: first those who are more open to participate, then open up towards others
- Begin by disseminating information, knowledge and experience
- Then listen to stakeholders needs in each moment and adjust (with them) answers and approaches
- Time is part of the involvement process