

# Making networking a powerful tool for involving stakeholders in rural policy

*Edina Ocsko*

**Policy networks are usually seen as a ‘new mode of governance’ that allows more flexibility and more informal involvement of a wider set of stakeholders in policy design and implementation compared to more formal consultation processes.**

**In this article, we examine the specific characteristics of the rural policy networks (National Rural Networks) and the means by which they can best support the objective of increased stakeholder involvement in the RDPs.**

## Background

In general, policy networks are set up to support the delivery of a policy (or several interrelated policies) by directly involving stakeholders in policy design and implementation. Formally constructed policy networks are increasingly important for policy-making and governance and are recognised as powerful tools for tackling challenges faced by modern public policies.

Such networks are expected to involve a wide range of stakeholders in policy debates, increasing the quality and acceptability of these policies, and strengthening the links between policy-makers and those directly impacted by policies. As such, policy networks are essential tools for putting the ‘partnership principle’ of the EU into practice.

## Creation and mandate of National Rural Networks

Setting-up National Rural Networks (NRNs) was a formal obligation established by the EAFRD regulation both for the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods. The EAFRD Regulation states that *“Each Member State shall establish a national rural network, which groups the organisation and administrations involved in rural development.”*

National Rural Networks are policy networks, and as such their ultimate purpose is to improve rural development policy and programmes. Two of the main objectives of rural networks during the 2014-2020 programming period are to improve the quality of RDPs and increase stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development.

The EAFRD Regulation sets common objectives and obligatory tasks for NRNs. However, the governance structure, operational set-up, mandate and potential influence of networks on rural development implementation vary widely across Member States.

Depending on their role and mandate, networks can influence policies and programmes at different levels (including European, national, and local levels), as well as at different stages, i.e. policy design & programme planning, implementation and monitoring & evaluation.

Some NRNs are strongly embedded and have a key role in the policy-making process, whilst others do not. However, even those with a more marginalised role in terms of policy-making can still be very active in terms of promoting exchange of experiences and learning, co-operation and implementation of the RDP amongst stakeholders.

Although the rural policy networks are also formally constructed, they are generally seen to have more flexibility and more informal involvement of a wider set of stakeholders than the formal stakeholder consultations (presented in section 4 of this Rural Review). For instance, most National Rural Networks allow all types of stakeholder groups (including those that are often marginalised) to have an involvement in the network activities.

### **Influence at different stages of RDP implementation**

When and how networks may have influence on rural development policy also depends on the various stages of the rural development programming cycle. These different stages and how they relate to the different levels of decision-making (from local to European) are set out in the following table:

<b>Level of decision-making</b>	<b>Rural Development Programme context</b>		
	<b>Planning &amp; design</b>	<b>Implementation</b>	<b>Monitoring &amp; evaluation</b>
<b>European level</b>	EU-level RD policy design	(EU RD policy implementation)	EU-level evaluation
<b>National level</b>	RDP planning	RDP implementation	RDP evaluation & monitoring
<b>Local level</b>	Regional/local planning (including LAG Strategies)	Implementation of local strategies (including LEADER Local Development Strategies)	Assessment and evaluation of local strategies
<b>Project/beneficiary level</b>	Project planning	Project implementation	Project monitoring

## Design stage

During the programme planning and design phase, networks often play an important role in channelling diverse stakeholder views, perspectives and interests into the consultation process. Networks were often involved in the consultation process for the preparation of the 2014-2020 RDPs.

### **Engaging stakeholders in RDP design through the rural network**

In Lithuania, the Network Support Unit set up six consultation groups around the six thematic NRN committees that contributed to the development of the 2014-2020 RDP measures.

The six themes addressed were: 1. Rural policy issues; 2. Rural business promotion; 3. Rural youth; 4. Landscape and rural area planning; 5. Innovation and rural research; and 6. LEADER and community development.

## Implementation stage

During the programme implementation, networks can reflect on areas where improvements can still be made. On the one hand, networks are often involved in the work of the formal RDP Monitoring Committees that offer a space for influencing policy implementation. On the other hand, networks have direct impact on improving programme implementation through focusing on certain measures and targeted activities for specific stakeholder groups on the ground (see Austrian case below).

### **Improving the implementation of specific measures through stakeholder involvement via the rural network**

Many farmers applied for projects under the biodiversity measure in Austria, 2007-2013. However, the implementation raised practical challenges for farmers, whilst environmental experts found that the projects were not always beneficial for the environment.

Therefore, the Austrian Network organised five workshops for stakeholders from the Agricultural Ministry, agricultural chambers, farmers and environmental departments of the federal states, environmental experts and NGOs. During the meeting, participants discussed the key challenges and possible solutions were identified (linked to concrete examples and field visits).

*Source: 'Ameliorating the implementation of biodiversity areas on Austrian farms' - <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/fms/pdf/70E8F11B-D59C-2B4A-1365-446A9DEC60DD.pdf>*

## Monitoring and evaluation

Finally, networks can be actively involved in improving RDP monitoring and evaluation through stakeholder participation. One of the workshops during the NSU peer-to-peer training (organised by ENRD Contact Point) in May 2014, aimed to highlight useful practices of NSUs with regard to being involved in RDP monitoring and evaluation. The workshop demonstrated through concrete networking examples

that the role of NRNs in RDP evaluation goes beyond the simple dissemination of evaluation results.

### **Stakeholder involvement in programme assessment work carried out by the rural network**

In the early stages of the previous programming period, the Dutch NRN received several comments from people about complexities and bottlenecks associated with the procedures of the Dutch RDP.

To improve implementation of the RDP and facilitate work in the field, the network organised an interactive working session with policy makers, LEADER secretaries, the Government Service for Land and Water Management and regional offices. The aim was to discuss these complexities and develop possible solutions together.

At the end of the period, in 2013, the NRN decided to evaluate how far the results and suggested solutions were brought forward and to see what lessons could and needed to be learned. During the exercise, recommendations were made that were used for the development of the 2014-2020 RDP.

One of the main success factors of this exercise was that stakeholders identified problems and solutions collectively and these were owned by the working groups.

Source: *‘Learning by doing’* - <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/assets/pdf/added-value/NL-monitor-and-evaluate-together.pdf>

### **Beyond RDP implementation**

The scope of the NRNs’ work does not have to be limited within the framework of the Rural Development Programmes. Indeed, the EAFRD Regulation itself refers to ‘stakeholder involvement in the *implementation of rural development*’ without making direct reference to rural development programmes or policy.

This wider mandate can cover the broader rural and territorial development context.

<b>Level of decision-making</b>	<b>Wider rural and territorial development context</b>
<b>European level</b>	Links / influence on other EU policies or initiatives
<b>National level</b>	Links /influence on other national policies (e.g. social policy) or initiatives (e.g. Rural Parliaments)
<b>Local level</b>	Influencing local rural development/ Links to other local/regional programmes/ strategies & initiatives
<b>Project/ beneficiary level</b>	Working with grass-root stakeholder groups

**Michael Dower, coordinator of PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe**

*“Top-down people must recognise bottom-up, and see things from the stakeholders' perspective. The concerns of local people are often far wider than what may be called 'narrow' rural development. They include schools, health services, public transport, and many more things that are often outside the RDPs. If there is one word that matters in this game, it is connecting. And if we want to connect we have to understand where stakeholders are coming from. We need to grasp, and as far as possible apply, the crucial concept of broad rural development.”*

Looking beyond programme implementation and engaging with stakeholders outside the scope of rural development policies are seen as important tasks of various formal and informal rural networks. For example, the Walloon NRN highlighted the importance of issues not linked to RDP measures at the final NRN meeting of the 2007-2013 period.

Sometimes the same networking activities can feed into work on measure under the RDP and additional efforts outside of that context. This means that the boundaries between what is within the scope of the RDP and what is outside is sometimes blurred.

**The Swedish NRN**

The Swedish network sees its role as being an intermediary giving various stakeholder organisations the knowledge and tools to inform and motivate their members to better promote rural development more generally, including – but not limited to – the use of RDP measures.

One of their activities aims at better integrating immigrants in rural areas, who they see as an opportunity for depopulated rural municipalities. Therefore, the network helps immigrant groups to organise themselves in a better way, and provides national immigrant organisations with information about the concept of rural development and connects them with rural organisations.

In the same way, the Swedish Network supported the group of youth representatives of LEADER groups to be organised in a national sub-network. The Youth Umbrella Project has become one of the major successes of the 2007-2013 programming period that many other networks aim to transfer into their own practices.

## **Membership of national and regional rural networks**

### **The main stakeholder groups**

The overall mandate and role of a network also defines the set of stakeholders that it should engage with. Stakeholder mapping is a useful tool for this. Policy networks typically cluster stakeholders according to their level of involvement in policies and programmes.

In a different context, a *'Study on stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination in social protection and social inclusion'*<sup>1</sup> distinguishes between three groups of stakeholders: (1) decision-makers in charge of policy decisions, (2) secondary stakeholders who are intermediaries in the policy process, and (3) primary stakeholders who are those ultimately affected by the policy. The same distinctions have value in different policy contexts.

In practice, most National Rural Networks have a diverse membership including, farmers and farmers' associations, environmental organisations, various rural NGOs, local enterprises and businesses, LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) and local public authorities. Some of the networks accept individuals as members, while others only accept organisational stakeholders.

However, the level of engagement of networks with different types of stakeholders varies widely. Traditionally, NRNs engage with some of the groups more closely and regularly than others. According to a recent survey that the ENRD carried out among Network Support Units, 33% of the respondent NSUs mentioned LAGs, 23% farmers' unions and 12% public administrations as one of the three core target groups they work with.

LEADER Local Action Groups are often easier to connect with, as they play a key role in rural development in most Member States, and they most often form a stakeholder network themselves around common objectives and shared values. LAGs are also a specific NRN target group explicitly mentioned by the EAFRD Regulation.

Furthermore, in many Member States formal LEADER networks were the predecessors of National Rural Networks. As a result, most NSUs organise regular activities for LAGs, such as trainings and various other events.

Some of the networks also regularly engage and co-operate directly with farmers and farmers' associations. For instance, during the previous programming period the Slovak NRN organised regular farmers' markets in various regions in order to support direct producer-consumer linkages.

One of the main challenges for many NRNs, however, has been to engage with the less organised or harder-to-reach stakeholders and stakeholder groups that have, nevertheless, a key role in rural development implementation. Groups, such as environmental organisations were among the groups that NRNs less frequently engaged with.

### **Quality over quantity**

A research article by Proven et al. (2008) emphasises: *"As the number of organisations in the network gets larger, shared governance becomes highly inefficient, [...] The problem of network complexity is especially acute when participants are spread out geographically, making frequent meetings of all participants difficult or impossible."* Open or unlimited membership is not necessarily the most efficient way of organising a network, as it allows a wide membership where many members play a passive role.

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<sup>1</sup> INBAS GmbH & Engender asbl (2010). *Results of the study on stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in social protection and social inclusion – Executive Summary*. Study funded by Progress (European Commission, DG EMPL). Source: <http://www.stakeholders-socialinclusion.eu/site/en/outputs/exsu-e>

In preparation for the 2014-2020 programming period, several NRNs put special emphasis on identifying groups that are open and willing to work with the network.

### **Identifying potential members for the NRN in Flanders**

In 2014, the Flemish NSU focused on directly approaching various stakeholder groups, including stakeholders previously not involved in the work of the network, to get to know their needs and disseminate information on the new RDP.

During this process, the NRN collected a lot of new information and found members that were open to be engaged in the network as well as in the new stakeholder committee.

*“This process takes up a lot of time but it is very rewarding,” says Nele Vanslembrouck at the Flemish NRN. “You get stakeholders that are interested and committed to be involved in the work of the network and the [Monitoring] Committee rather than only those that are nominated member organisations.”*

### **Choosing the right methods and tools to engage stakeholders**

While it can be reasonably expected that a network connects its stakeholders in an effective way; engaging stakeholders in the activity of a network is still one of the most challenging tasks for those involved in network coordination and management.

Which methods and tools to apply will very much depend on the specific context and purpose of stakeholder engagement, as well as the resources available within the network.

The ‘*Study on stakeholders’ involvement in the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination*<sup>2</sup> offers an interesting perspective in this regard. It classifies stakeholder engagement activities according to the degree of involvement, ranging from the one-way provision of information, through a two-way process of communication and involvement, to full engagement of stakeholders as equal partners.

The five levels identified are:

- *to inform*: one-way dissemination of information to stakeholders on a specific issue;
- *to consult*: to inform and get feedback from stakeholders, a two-way information channel;
- *to involve*: gathering stakeholders’ views and ensuring that their concerns and views are understood and considered;
- *to collaborate*: to work with stakeholders as partners through a process, including analyses, development and decision-making;
- *to empower*: to place final decision-making in the hands of stakeholders.

National Rural Networks have carried out a myriad of activities with regard to informing, consulting and involving stakeholders in rural development implementation. These range from information campaigns to thematic workshops.

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<sup>2</sup> As above.

During the 2007-2013 programming period the most common forms of thematic exchanges developed by NRNs have been permanent *and ad hoc* thematic working groups. These groups generally brought together diverse stakeholders to discuss, analyse and share information on common issues, often resulting in recommendations related to RDP implementation and programming.

The **‘Women in Rural Development’** thematic working group of the Northern Ireland Rural Network aimed to increase involvement of women in the RDP.

As well as discussing a range of issues affecting women in rural areas, it put in place a series of events and products showcasing women who took advantage of RDP opportunities. It aimed thus to encourage other women to do the same.

The Swedish Network used the method of **‘virtual think tanks’** widely during the 2007-2013 programming period to engage stakeholders in shaping rural development policies.

Virtual think tanks (structured phone-meetings with strict rules) helped the Swedish Network to bring a diverse set of stakeholders together that are located far from each other.

On a number of occasions the Managing Authority requested the NRN to organise ‘think tank’ sessions with stakeholders in order to get their input for policy-making. Therefore, the method empowered stakeholders to reflect and directly influence policy.

## ENRD Thematic Work on Stakeholder Involvement

During the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the new programming period, the ENRD has been working on the broad rural development objective of ‘Increasing stakeholder involvement in rural development’.

For this purpose the ENRD developed an ‘integrated work package’ that includes a range of activities aiming to explore this subject. The integrated work package includes a range of activities that strongly build on each other, with the aim of fully understanding and engaging key stakeholder needs:

- An ENRD **stakeholder mapping** (see Introduction article) was a first step aimed at identifying and clarifying the key stakeholder groups for the European network and some of issues through which these groups can be better engaged in European rural development.
- An **NRN Mapping Survey** was targeted at all Network Support Units and face-to-face interviews were carried out with European stakeholder organisation representatives to understand their circumstances, positions and priorities.
- A **Thematic Group on Stakeholder Involvement** worked to bring together representatives of ENRD stakeholders to share experience and identify best practices on how to increase stakeholder involvement in rural development

through a harmonised and coordinated effort of networks. The Thematic Group is also expected to inform the work of the ENRD in the coming years.

- This edition of the **ENRD Rural Review** was developed in the context of the integrated work package on stakeholder involvement, notably taking on board input and examples from the thematic group work.
- A **Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement** (26 March 2015) brought together nearly 150 participants, including some 60 grass-root stakeholders to exchange about needs, key issues and methods of involving stakeholders in rural development implementation.

## The impact for rural networking

### The challenge of demonstrating effectiveness

Rural networks have often been criticised in the past for not bringing sufficient added value to the improvement of rural development programmes. However, the NRN Guidebook produced by the ENRD in 2014<sup>3</sup> concluded that *“Despite the various challenges that NRNs had to face during the 2007-2013 programming period [...] there is consensus among ‘rural networkers’ that networks can, and in most cases do, make a valuable contribution to rural development.”*

The Guidebook continued by recognising that: *“the added value of networking is often not understood outside of the ‘networking circle’. Therefore, networks are facing a particular challenge of demonstrating the added value of networking.”*

The overall impact and results (i.e. effectiveness) of networks will need to be measured against the rural development objectives, including that of ‘increased stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development’.

In order to achieve and assess increased stakeholder involvement in rural development, rural networks need a clear understanding on what this entails in practice (i.e. what are the key areas where rural development implementation can be improved and which stakeholders need to be involved for this), what the main challenges and constraints, as well as the most useful methods and tools are to overcome these.

NRN self-assessment and evaluation are key tools to assess and demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of a network. To be as effective as possible, it is important that this self-assessment and evaluation work is developed early on in the work of the network, so that appropriate monitoring frameworks can be established.

### Limitations on capacity

The efficiency of stakeholder involvement activities will undoubtedly depend on available network resources (both human and financial). As a research paper on ‘Linking stakeholder involvement to policy performance’<sup>4</sup> states: *“maintaining*

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<sup>3</sup> ENRD (2014). *NRN Guidebook*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

<sup>4</sup> Provan, K.G., and J. Sydow (2008). Evaluating inter-organizational relationships. Referenced in Schalk (2011). *Paper to be presented at the 2011 Public Management Research Conference, Maxwell School at Syracuse University, NY, USA, June 2-4*

*relations with multiple stakeholders is costly, and there are natural limits to the time, energy, and financial resources of public managers who organise stakeholder involvement[...] Opportunity costs exist as well, because investments in external networking divert time and resources away from other important managerial tasks.”*

This is a challenge that many of the rural networks face in their everyday operations. During the recent NSU survey carried out by the ENRD, NSUs highlighted that limited resources often stand in the way of acting efficiently with regard to stakeholder involvement and achieving other network objectives. Many NSUs are located within the Managing Authority of RDPs, and operate with only 1 or 2 staff that also have responsibilities for other RDP-related activities.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that networking is a tool but not an ultimate aim in itself. *“The RDP sets specific targets, such as better land management, but our Network does not produce these directly,”* says Hans-Olof Stalgren from the Swedish NRN. *“We are only an intermediary in the process that enables stakeholders, for instance through capacity-building, to produce results.”*

### **Looking to the future**

European and national networks and other stakeholder organisations need to work jointly in order to create complementarity, resource efficiency and to avoid the duplication of efforts and work. One of the main tools to achieve this is exchange and dialogue among a wide range of rural development stakeholders.

This article and this Rural Review – as well as future Communications efforts of the ENRD - aim to contribute to the development of these discussions and these exchanges.