



Report of the 8th meeting of the European Rural Networks' Assembly

Webinar, 7 December 2021

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Introduction

9.00 – 09.10
Chairman's
Introduction
Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

The Chair welcomed all participants to the 8th European Rural Networks' Assembly meeting and gave an overview of the agenda and objectives of the meeting. He invited Assembly members for their input throughout the sessions. The key objectives of the meeting were to provide updates on:

- the state of play of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, including the secondary legislation and process and timeline for approval of Member States CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) proposals;
- EU Initiatives, including the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and Horizon Europe;
- EU rural networking, including discussion on ideas for the future governance of the EU CAP Network.

Opening remarks and update on the state of play of CAP Reform and other EU Policy initiatives

9.10 – 10.30
Opening remarks
Wolfgang
Burtscher, Director-
General, DG AGRI

Wolfgang Burtscher, Director-General, DG AGRI provided opening remarks, confirming his appreciation of the activities of rural network stakeholders since the last Assembly meeting. He highlighted networking's contributions to the CAP reform process, rural innovation, the LTVRA, and the importance of CAP visibility where CAP monitoring and evaluation (M&E) remain key.

Mr Burtscher emphasised the role that networks can play in raising awareness of the benefits of the CAP. He urged Assembly members to continue their active support in wide dissemination of information on positive possibilities provided by CAP for all EU citizens. Recognising the challenge in finding the right balance between the different elements of sustainability, fairer distribution of funding but also greener CAP, the DG underlined the Assembly membership's members' potential to reach out to the full spectrum of CAP stakeholders and support preparations for the new CAP period and CSP design. Ambitious CSPs were encouraged which can achieve the reform's environmental aims for climate and biodiversity action as well as a reinforced focus on fairer distribution of funding. Communication will continue to be an effective tool for informing farmers and other stakeholders about the CAP's new performance model. Detailed dependable data sets are central for demonstrating and disseminating credible success stories on the CAP's overall performance.

The DG noted that the Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy relies significantly on the CAP to achieve success. The F2F's sustainability agenda is transforming EU food systems, and this includes through the helpful involvement of Assembly members. Their ongoing involvement in putting F2F into practice was welcomed and encouraged also for forthcoming initiatives on soils (Communication on Soil Health and the Soil law), the Communication on Carbon Farming, nature restoration law and revision of pesticides directive.

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Update on the state of play of CAP Reform and other EU Policy initiatives
Mihail Dumitru
Deputy Director-General, DG AGRI

The LTVRA aims complement F2F contributions to the European Green Deal (EGD) and the DG drew attention on long-term goals working to redress problems that risk resulting in rural residents feeling left behind. Demography and democracy in rural Europe depend on this work which is strengthening the countryside's resilience through portfolios promoting better infrastructure and related connectivity, in addition to diversified economic prosperity and sustainable production of farm and forest commodities. The EU's impending Rural Pact launch can catalyse further action and continuous engagement in the LTVRA strands. Within the Rural Pact, authorities at all levels will be called to share their good practices and experience to help achieve the goals of the Vision.

Research and innovation contributions to the LTVRA, F2F, and CAP performance are valued. The extent of the success flowing from CAP's innovation support was highlighted by Mr Burtscher, who reiterated his viewpoint on the need to increase the public's understanding about the broad benefits from the CAP's development of sustainable agri-food systems.

He concluded by noting his confidence in the continuation of effective CAP networking as an arena for providing transparent dialogue that help facilitate the new CAP's performance, as well as the closure of the current programming period. The work of the networks should continue and be reinforced. The launch of the new CAP Network is intended as soon as feasible in 2022.

A Q&A session underlined the scope for continuous strengthening of CAP stakeholder M&E capacity to harvest the policy's full impacts. This can include expanding M&E inputs from CAP practitioner knowhow and perspectives. Another intervention from the Assembly membership echoed the positive promotion of the CAP through some communication channels that can multiply accurate CAP messages but also the need to address criticisms through effective EU level communication. DG AGRI's response underscored the importance of concise, bespoke, and evidence-based information in this context.

DG AGRI's Deputy-Director, Mihail Dumitru presented an [Update on the CAP reform and relevant Horizon Europe developments](#). He recalled the reform process timeline. Recent approval of the CAP reform proposals establishes the policy's new green architecture and ensures ring-fencing of funding across both Pillars for environment, climate, and biodiversity. The social sustainability objective addressed at EU level including generation renewal, small farms, social conditionality, and the CAP's other rural resilience tools is also strengthened.

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In terms of next steps, secondary legislation clarifying CAP implementation detail is currently being completed. The most urgent secondary acts are expected to be adopted by the Commission before the end of 2021 and those remaining are expected to be adopted in the first part of 2022. Member States have to submit their CSP proposals by 1 January 2022. The Commission will assess CSPs and provide observations to Member States in time for the Plans to enter into force in 2023.

The assessment and approval of CSPs will be a collaborative process based on partnership. The Commission intends to publish the observation letters to ensure full transparency and give possibility to react. The Recovery & Resilience Facility's current state-of-play was presented. Complementarity with additional Next Generation Fund and cooperation with ESIF funds will also play a role to improve resilience and recovery also for agriculture and rural areas.

State Aid developments were also explained by the DDG who summarised financial clearance arrangements for non-agricultural investments, LEADER, and Operational Groups. Other rural innovation opportunities from Horizon Europe were promoted with living labs and lighthouse examples that help best communicate the effort to improve farmers' and rural society life.

Mr Dumitru closed his presentation by inviting Assembly members to actively participate in the CAP-related work. He applauded the rural networks as proven platforms for developing and sharing useful knowhow that can improve the CAP's implementation.

The ensuing Q&As included a request for CAP flexibility to extend to all actors in agri-food value chains, which DG AGRI took note of and then (in a follow-up response) clarified the amendment process for CSPs. This Q&A session also allowed for an Assembly member to reflect on Rural Semester discussions and a separate intervention questioned whether adequate time was available for communicating CSP novelties to prospective beneficiaries. DG AGRI gave an overview of the relevance of advance CSP knowledge for CAP applicants' business planning purposes and outlined how Member States' CSP consultations during the design and finalisation phases could address this need.

The Chair summed up the Assembly's opening session reiterating the importance of the networks as place to explain the CAP reform.

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Update on the LTVRA

11.00 – 12.00
LTVRA update
Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

The Rural Pact will be a framework for cooperation and engagement of all the levels of governance and all the actors in achieving the shared goals that are laid down in the LTVRA Communication. Assembly members were one of the first groups to discuss the Rural Pact process in detail, and outcomes will inform the Pact's development. Other Commission Services, the Committee of the Regions, and the European Economic & Social Committee are preparing input. A European Parliament hearing is planned for 16-17 March 2022. Findings from two ENRD Thematic Groups on rural revitalisation and rural proofing will feed into the Rural Pact's development.

Assembly members discussed specific questions about the Pact covering how to: formalise involvement; share best practice; and involve national networks.

Consensus was not reached for formalising involvement because this was considered potentially restrictive. Less formal dialogue exchange formats might be more successful to create engagement, especially for young people. This should be an interactive process to promote innovation and new methods of cooperation. It will be vital to involve administrations and authorities at all levels in the process. Good pilot examples were considered useful, and the ENRD Thematic Groups can be a vehicle for these. Lessons from the [EU Pact of skills](#) can also be useful. Regional, national, and transnational options for contributing were proposed.

A question concerning the visibility of Pact outcomes confirmed the importance of transparency. Potential outreach possibilities through establishing Pact antennae to multiply dissemination opportunities from EU level to village level were suggested. EIP Operational Groups, Smart Villages and LEADER were noted amongst these. Resourcing and capacity building was also requested for the purposes of ensuring no one becomes left behind during Pact communications.

National responsibility for the Pact should be confirmed for multi-sector coordination purposes. Good practice in such Pact planning at national level was identified through examples from Ireland and France.

Assembly discussions around network roles observed challenges in achieving practical cross-cutting actions that effectively blend sectoral interests and achieve mutual synergies. Nevertheless, the national and regional networks remain suitable frameworks for achieving Pact goals due to the networks' critical mass of sectoral expertise, outreach channels, and stakeholder integrity.

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	Further information featuring Assembly feedback on the three Rural Pact questions were captured in a detailed set of virtual flipcharts .
Update on framework for networking under the future CAP & Update on Rural Networking support and activities	
<p>12.00 – 13.00 Update on framework for networking under the future CAP Giuliana Keller, DG AGRI</p> <p>Update on Rural Networking support and activities</p>	<p>The Assembly meeting's update on CAP networking was presented by Giuliana Keller, who confirmed that the main CAP regulation was now approved thereby establishing networking arrangements at EU and national levels. Article 113 has become Article 126 in the approved act, and this sets out tasks and objectives for networking. These closely reflect the regulatory proposals and refer to benefits from building on existing networking capacity at Member State level. National CAP network mandates will include involving stakeholders, supporting CSP implementation, CAP visibility, M&E, innovation, and contributing to the future programming period. Information about the draft secondary acts was presented and different transition dates were clarified. No interruption in EU-level support to national networks has occurred and new contractors are now in place for the four Lots of the EU CAP Network.</p> <p>Team Leaders for each of the four Lots now contracted to provide support to networking at EU level presented their new teams and support activities.</p> <p>A presentation by Lot 1 - CAP Implementation - Team Leader Jorge Ramirez introduced the Ruranet delivery team noting the continuity and expansion of expertise to cover both CAP Pillars. Lot 1 is still operating as the ENRD Contact Point until the EU CAP Network is launched. ENRD thematic work is progressing related to the CAP general objectives including LTVRA, food systems, and LEADER. Support concerning the rural environment and network clusters is also in the pipeline.</p> <p>A presentation by Lot 2 – Innovation - Team Leader Pacôme Elouna Eyenga from CAP Europe Innovation Consortium described the EIP-AGRI Support Facility, highlighting the name change (previously Service Point) and his new team's broad coverage of both thematic and geographic expertise. Continuity of staffing also supports their remit which is focused on knowledge building and knowledge exchange. Information was provided about recent seminar on innovation in forestry as well as forthcoming workshop on farm data, . Assembly members were invited to disseminate the call for Focus Groups experts covering nutrients, pesticides and water. Furthermore, the workshop on organic farming and stand alone brokerage event to take place in the first half of 2022 we presented.</p>

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[The presentation by Lot 3](#) – Evaluation - was introduced by Olivier Chartier from Ecorys who explained the Evaluation Helpdesk’s new consortium structure and strengths. Staff continuity is likewise a feature of Lot 3 and the Team Leader Hannes Wimmer presented a [review of recent Helpdesk activity](#) including new ENRD website content in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank. The Lot 3 contract had only recently been signed and future work was being programmed. This would include supporting Member State actions to report on CSP net contributions and provide evidence for CAP performance communication.

[A presentation by Lot 4](#) – Logistics and Communication - Team Leader Nicolas Esgain introduced the CommUnity for Europe consortium citing its experience and background in EU communication promoting citizen involvement in the EU project. Lot 4 are now managing ENRD communications including the website and event logistics which were previously provided by the Contact Point. A new visitor facility, website, and visual identity for the EU CAP Network are being prepared. Lot 4’s mandate engages the full range of EU CAP Network stakeholders including youth.

A Q&A session confirmed that the new website for the EU CAP Network will be a single-entry website communicating outputs from all Lots collectively. Events and related staff participation will continue to take account of the pandemic situation. DG AGRI took note of, and will consider, an Assembly member’s comment about the languages for content to be provided by the EU CAP Network website.

Ideas for the governance of the EU CAP Network

14.30 – 15.30
Ideas for the governance of the EU CAP Network
Tatjana Borbas, DG AGRI

The Chair introduced this session explaining that consultations through the networks and during the [Rural Networks Steering Group in October](#) are helping to shape the new EU CAP Network’s governance framework. Assembly opinions were sought to support the Commission’s official proposal for the secondary legislative act that is guiding the new governance structure. Membership of the future governance structure will be considered later.

Tatjana Borbas from DG AGRI presented [ideas for the future governance of CAP networking](#). This featured options for an Assembly, a Steering Group, and permanent subgroups covering both CAP Pillars and sectoral interventions. A smaller and operational Steering Group could be a coordination body, considered as a network’s “steering board” rather than “representative body”. Subgroup members could advise and feed into the Steering Group. Additional Assembly members could be included in the Steering groups to ensure vertical linkages across the governance structure and for the exchange of information. Three permanent subgroups could cover CSP implementation, innovation and LEADER/CLLD, with Expert Group on the implementation of

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the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation (regarding M&E) could continue to be the equivalent of the permanent subgroup for evaluation.

Assembly comment and feedback on these options was generally positive, including on the smaller and more operational Steering group. It was considered important that the governance continues to network a broad range of CAP topics. Balance across both CAP Pillars is needed to correctly reflect the policy's agricultural roots. Flexibility for different staff from member organisations to attend meetings was proposed, as was reducing duplication between the Assembly and Steering Group. The involvement of NRN Clusters was tabled for consideration.

A [virtual whiteboard](#) collated feedback on this agenda item during the Assembly meeting and additional comments were invited to be sent to agri-networks-steering@ec.europa.eu by 17 December 2021.

Outlook

15.30– 16.00

Outlook

Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

The Chair invited AOB contributions, but none were put forward.

Assembly members were reminded that their contributions to the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) are welcomed. Youth and female contributions are particularly welcome to improve gender and age representation.

An announcement about DG AGRI's internal reorganisation informed the Assembly that changes would take place to the networking support unit from 16 January 2022. Mr Milouchev will remain the responsible Director. Antonia Gamez Moreno will become the Head of Unit responsible for EU CAP Network matters. Her deputy will be Hugo Almeida.

The Assembly meeting closed with the Chair thanking members for their active participation and encouraging them to continue conveying positive messages about the CAP because the policy has the best intentions for agriculture, rural Europe, and the environment.

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