



European Network for  
Rural Development

# Increasing Stakeholder Involvement in Rural Development Implementation

ENRD Thematic Group Report

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# INCREASING STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTATION

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## Executive summary

This reports sets out the main messages of the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on ‘Increasing stakeholder involvement in rural development implementation’. The report is structured in five sections as follows:

### 1. Introduction

The TG aimed to improve understanding of stakeholder involvement in rural development and the capacity of rural networking to support it. It met three times and was able to identify a number of principles around stakeholder involvement as well as relevant practices from Member States.

### 2. The legal basis for strengthening stakeholder involvement

In the current period, the ENRD and National Rural Networks (NRNs) have both a stronger mandate and an obligation to improve stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development policy. Significantly, the role of civil society stakeholders has also been strengthened.

The EAFRD Regulation and European Code of Conduct on Partnership set out why involvement is necessary, who should be involved, on what issues, how and when, and the specific role of rural networks in promoting stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development.

### 3. Making the rural networks’ formal mandate a reality

While the legal mandate described above is being applied rather unevenly across the Member States, many NRNs have already developed promising methods and tools, which could be extended. Managing Authorities must play an enabling role by empowering NRNs with clear responsibilities in line with their formal legal mandate, as well as adequate skills and resources.

NRNs can add most value in bringing the range of different stakeholder groups together in a common platform. But, stakeholder involvement needs to be linked to policy-making. Work with the MAs to improve horizontal or vertical coordination between institutional stakeholders and strengthened linkages with the Monitoring Committees can help in this regard.

### 4. Networking tools to improve stakeholder involvement

The task for European and National Rural Networks is to make better use of their existing tools, through experimentation, learning from others and the understanding that solutions must be adapted to the national reality.

A key message is that tools must be based on a flexible user-led approach and be implemented on the basis of an analysis of the ‘right’ entry point in the programming cycle to have most impact.

### 5. Conclusions & Recommendations

The final section sets out a list of bullet points summarising the main messages of the report on improving stakeholder involvement in rural development implementation. It concludes by highlighting the ongoing role for European networking to support this long-term objective, through exchange and peer-learning between Member States.

# 1. Introduction

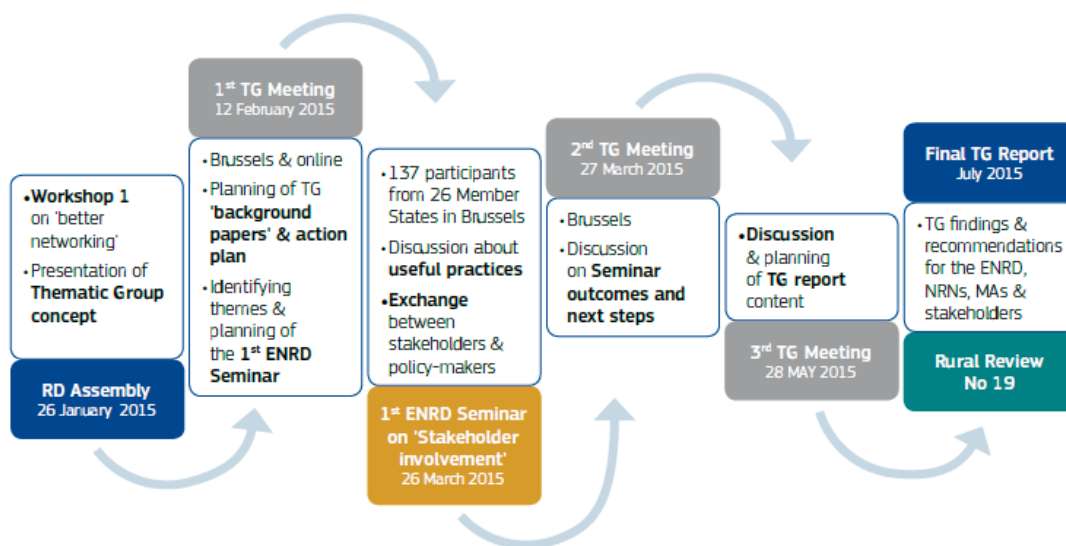
## 1.1. ENRD Thematic Group

This document is the final report of the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on ‘Increasing stakeholder involvement in rural development implementation’.

**The TG aimed to** improve understanding of stakeholder involvement in rural development and the capacity of networking as a tool to support it. Its work was based on exchanging views and experience among key rural development stakeholders via a series of meetings as outlined in the diagram below.

**Members of the group included** ‘grassroots’ stakeholders, as well as representatives of European and national stakeholder organisations, Managing Authorities and Network Support Units.

**TG meetings were supported by additional activities, including** a workshop at the Rural Networks’ Assembly, a dedicated European Seminar<sup>1</sup> and the ENRD publication ‘EU Rural Review No.19’.



**The TG identified a number of principles and key messages** around the value and importance of stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development, in the context of the NRNs’ strengthened legal mandate to achieve stakeholder involvement.

**It also identified a range of relevant practices**, which can provide interesting examples and learning. The results and examples that came out of the discussions can be found in the individual reports of the TG meetings<sup>2</sup>.

**The TG was able to make a series of initial recommendations** about how to make networking an effective tool for stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development.

<sup>1</sup> <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/en-rd-events-and-meetings/enrd-stakeholder-involvement-seminar-20150326>

<sup>2</sup> <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/thematic-group-stakeholder-involvement#keydoc>

## 2. The legal basis for strengthening stakeholder involvement

The regulatory framework for European rural development policy 2014-2020 establishes a **legally binding obligation for Member States and Managing Authorities to strengthen stakeholder involvement** in policy formulation and in all phases of the implementation process. In realising this task they are expected to make use of National Rural Networks.

There are multiple references in the relevant regulations as to **why** involvement is necessary, **who** should be involved, **what issues** require a consultation, and **when & how** consultations and involvement of stakeholders need to take place (see following sections).

Notably, the 'Partnership Principle' is now endorsed for all ESI Funds following the adoption of the Commission delegated act on a **European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)**.<sup>3</sup> The ECCP sets out the requirement for effective stakeholder involvement as well as guiding Member States in organising a meaningful partnership.

### 2.1. Why involvement is necessary

On the **importance of partnership**, the European Code of Conduct on Partnership states:

*“Partnership has been for many years one of the key principles of the implementation of the European Union’s shared management funds.... The partnership principle implies close cooperation between the Commission and public authorities at national, regional and local levels in the Member States, social partners and organisations representing civil society.”*

Partnership, if implemented effectively, is expected to have **clear advantages for both policy-makers and the ‘partners’**. As far as policy formulation and implementation is concerned, partnership has a clear added value in enhancing the effectiveness of the implementation of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds:

- It enhances collective commitment and **ownership** of EU policies;
- It increases the available **knowledge, expertise and viewpoints** in the design and implementation of strategies;
- It ensures greater **transparency** in decision-making processes.

This formulation in the ECCP expresses the advantages of participation for policy and policy-makers. But clearly, **participation is a two-way process**.

The members of the TG stressed the importance of being aware of “*what’s in it*” for other stakeholders. In general, this means that, in return for the ideas and time that they put in, **stakeholders must see tangible results** in terms of improvements in implementation, which better reflect their needs.

### 2.2. Who should be involved

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership also indicates **who the partners are that need to be involved** in programming and **the principles to follow in their selection**.

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<sup>3</sup> Adopted based on Article 5 of the Common Provisions Regulation for the ESI Funds.

Regarding the **identification of partners** for programmes, *Article 4* of the ECCP states that, for each programme, Member States shall identify the relevant partners among at least the following:

- a) **competent regional, local, urban and other public authorities**, including higher education, training and advisory service providers and research centres; public authorities responsible for the application of horizontal principles; and bodies representing integrated territorial investments and local development strategies.
- b) **economic and social partners**, including cross-industry organisations and sectoral organisations whose sectors are related to the planned use of the (EAFRD); chambers of commerce and business associations (including the representation of large, medium-sized, small and microenterprises, and the social economy);
- c) **bodies representing civil society**, such as environmental partners, non-governmental organisations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination (including local action groups).

There are major opportunities and challenges for improving participation **within** each of the three main categories described above.

However, the biggest improvements are likely to occur when **networks are able to function as bridges between** the three categories, bringing together the different interests, perspectives and roles. This, however, requires time and trust.

Regarding the **representativeness of partners** selected, *Article 2* of the ECCP emphasises that:

*“Member States shall ensure that the partners are the most representative of the relevant stakeholders and are nominated as duly mandated representatives, taking into consideration their competence, capacity to participate actively and appropriate level of representation.”*

### 2.3. On which issues

*Article 8* of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership specifies **the issues** for which Member States are required to consult the partners when preparing rural programmes, including:

- a) the analysis and identification of needs
- b) the definition or selection of priorities and related specific objectives
- c) the allocation of funding
- d) the definition of programmes' specific indicators
- e) the implementation of the horizontal principles
- f) the composition of the monitoring committee

This is a very comprehensive list and it has been seen that improving effective **participation in b) the definition of priorities and c) the allocation of funding is particularly important** and sensitive. Once again a step-by-step approach to building trust is recommended.

### 2.4. How and when

According to *Article 9* of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, Member States are required to provide **information on the involvement of partners in programming** especially regarding:

*“the actions taken to involve partners in the preparation of the programmes and their amendments... [as well as]... the planned actions to ensure the participation of the partners in the implementation of the programmes.”*

Stakeholder involvement in the implementation of programmes is particularly relevant now because this phase is currently starting, but it will last for the next seven years. The regulations <sup>4</sup> require that stakeholders are consulted **throughout all phases of implementation** including monitoring and evaluations.

Based on the new legislative framework, **formal stakeholder channels to enable stakeholder involvement** in rural development policy formulation and implementation processes can be identified at both the European and national levels.

#### At the European level

Stakeholders are largely involved in the formulation of policies through the **consultation procedure** with institutional partners and the **co-decision procedure** between the Parliament and the European Council.

During the implementation phase, the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network are platforms where stakeholders can continuously exchange on sustainable rural development and innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability. The activities of the two networks are governed by the **Rural Networks Assembly**, made of public and private entities active in rural development and innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability.

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<sup>4</sup> *Common Provisions Regulation n.1303/2013, Art.5*

The Rural Development Committee and the Civil Dialogue Group on Rural Development are other fora where the Commission exchanges with the Member State administrations and with EU-wide non-governmental organisations respectively.

### At the national level

The **Monitoring Committees** are the main arena where formal stakeholder consultations have taken place around the RDPs. These bodies operate during the implementation of programmes and their functioning is legally regulated.

The role that **National Rural Networks (NRNs) can play in stakeholder involvement has been recognised and strengthened** in the new programming period 2014-2020 (see following section).

## 2.5. The specific role of rural networks

The **legal basis for the ENRD and NRNs to improve stakeholder involvement 2014-2020** has been strengthened in a number of ways. Improving stakeholder involvement in rural development implementation has been **stated for the first time as an explicit objective of rural networks**. Rural networks are identified as **instrumental agents in the application of the ECCP**.

- **Article 52 of the EAFRD Regulation**<sup>5</sup> makes stakeholder involvement an explicit objective of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD):  
*“increase the involvement of all stakeholders, and in particular agricultural, forestry and other rural development stakeholder in the implementation of rural development”*
- **Article 54 of the EAFRD Regulation** makes stakeholder involvement an explicit objective of the National Rural Networks (NRNs):  
*“increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development”*  
*“The partnership referred to in Article 5 of the Common Provisions Regulation shall also be part of the national rural network.”*
- **Article 5 of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)** emphasises the role that NRNs may play:  
*“As regards the rural development programmes, Member States shall take account of the role that the national rural networks established in accordance with Article 54 of the [EAFRD] Regulation... can play involving relevant partners.”*
- **Article 17 of the ECCP** stresses that NRNs may play a key role in providing support for strengthening the institutional capacity of relevant partners.  
*“For rural development programmes, the support referred to in paragraph 1 may be provided through the national rural network...”*

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<sup>5</sup> Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)



Finally, the increased integration of the five ESI funds in the current programming period can extend the role of networks to the **coordination between the EAFRD and the other four ESI funds**<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. Making the rural networks' formal mandate a reality

One of the main questions that the ENRD TG on Stakeholder Involvement was concerned with is **how to make this new formal legal mandate a reality**.

Given the way that multi-level governance works in the European Union, a strengthened legal mandate at EU level requires that **Member States must transfer such a mandate into their implementing regulations, decisions and management practices**.

Experience suggests that the way this strengthened role of rural networks is implemented will vary widely across Europe. The ENRD's thematic work on Stakeholder Involvement has identified some key factors that can help to ensure that the mandate of NRNs is realised effectively.

#### 3.1 The enabling role of Managing Authorities

The manner in which National Rural Networks (NRNs) will implement their new roles depends very much on decisions taken by individual Member States and Managing Authorities.

##### Establishment of the NSU

In particular, there is **a range of models for organising the work of the Network Support Units (NSUs)** established for each NRN:

- At one extreme, the NSU work can be entirely undertaken within the Ministry/Managing Authority (MA)
- Within the 'in-house' models, the NSU may be set up in the department of the MA, or it may be a separate ('more independent') unit or department
- There are mixed models where core tasks of the NSU are carried out in house while other specific activities are outsourced
- There are models where the NSU work is outsourced to a public authority close to or controlled by the Ministry/MA
- In some cases the NSU is entirely outsourced to an independent private contractor

A preliminary survey realised by the ENRD Contact Point (CP) has revealed that **the great majority of NSUs have been established within the MA or within the realm of public administrations**.<sup>7</sup> This substantially 'in-house' position makes clear that MAs will play a key role in defining and enabling the tasks of the NRNs, including those linked to stakeholder involvement.

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<sup>6</sup> Cohesion Fund (CF), European Fund for Regional Development (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF) and European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)

<sup>7</sup> *1st NRN Mapping Report 2014-2020, page 3; ENRD, May 2015:*  
<https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/networking/nrn-mapping-reports>

The TG recognised that **there is no ‘right’ solution** - there are potential advantages and disadvantages to all these approaches.

Approach	Potential advantages	Potential disadvantages
<b>In-house NSU</b>	<p>Allow the NSU to get closer to public decision-makers</p> <p>Provide for excellent understanding of needs and opportunities related to improved RDP implementation</p>	<p>Competing priorities/tasks for NSU staff</p> <p>Reduced (real or perceived) independence, making it harder to win the trust of stakeholders</p>
<b>Outsourced NSU</b>	<p>More efforts required to work with and influence decision-makers</p>	<p>Easier to establish a reputation for independence and work with external stakeholders</p>

**NRN-MA joint working**

The same ENRD CP survey identified **ways of co-operating and joint working between the NRN and the MA**. This included the organisation of events, seminars, working groups and communication tasks.

**Co-operation of Finnish NSU and MA**

Although the NSU has moved from the Ministry (MA) to the Agency for Rural Affairs (PA); it has kept its close co-operation and daily contacts with the MA. The main formal link is the Steering Group. There are also working groups or “themed tables” (e.g. CLLD working group, national projects selection committee, LEADER themed table, RDP communication themed table) where the NSU is represented.

*Source: Questionnaire of the Finnish Rural Network for the NRN Mapping Report (2015)*

However, there are relatively **few examples of NRNs being directly used to help MAs improve concrete aspects of the implementation of rural development policy**.

**One strong exception is in the implementation of LEADER**, where quite a few NRNs have played an important role in improving delivery. For example, in Denmark the NRN assists with public consultations of guidelines and ministerial orders and organises meetings to improve LEADER implementation.



## ENRD Seminar Conclusions on MA-NRN linkages

Participants at the ENRD Seminar on Stakeholder Involvement insisted that **NRNs are tools that can help MAs to realise the partnership principle more effectively**. Participants identified **a number of ways in which MAs can enable NRNs** to better fulfil their mandate:

- There needs to be a **common understanding of the roles and responsibilities** of the NRN among institutional stakeholders, in particular the linkages and division of tasks between the MA and NSU.
- **NSUs should ideally be operational while the RDPs are being launched** (e.g. from the previous period) as they can play a crucial role in supporting stakeholder consultation during programme design.
- The resources and skills available to NSUs vary enormously. Policy-makers need to **allocate adequate financial and human resources** to enable networks to achieve their objectives. Some **continuity** also helps to ensure that knowledge accumulated over years is carried forward.

## 3.2 Improving linkages between Monitoring Committees and NRNs

The TG discussions highlighted the importance of **clarifying and strengthening the links between Monitoring Committees (MCs) and NRNs**.

Links between the MC and the NRNs can be strengthened in two main ways:

- a) By ensuring NRN activities and MC work feed into each other
- b) By ensuring crossover between the members of the NRN and the MC

### Ensuring NRN activities and MC work feed into each other

In order to influence policy, it is important that network activities are aligned with the opportunities and obstacles identified for successfully implementing the RDPs in each country. There should be correlation here with the priorities identified by the MCs.

NRNs and NSUs may support the work of the MCs, including capacity building of stakeholders in the context of the preliminary work for MC meetings, addressing problems in calls for proposals and implementation of measures, and the monitoring and evaluation of programmes

NRN issues can be placed on the agenda of MC, and the MC regularly informed about NRN plans, and the progress of NRN activities. The outcomes of thematic working groups should be fed into the deliberations of the MC.

### Crossover between the members of the NRN and the MC

TG members highlighted the positive impact of having common members in the NRN (especially in governance structures, such as Steering Committees) and the MC. This can provide for synergies and cross-fertilisation of ideas and the outcomes of discussions between different formal platforms.

Stakeholders consulted in the formulation of the programmes should be **included as partners in MCs as well as in NRNs**, providing a formal continuity of stakeholder membership throughout the programming cycle.

#### **Linking NRN Steering Committees & other formal structures**

In Flanders, the NRN Steering Committee facilitates the work of thematic groups and the organisation of events and seminars. The Steering Committee includes formal institutional stakeholders facilitating access to decision-makers and partners who are in a position to propose changes to the RDP and implementation procedures through the Monitoring Committee.

It has been recognised that better links need to be created between the Monitoring Committee and NRN Steering Committee since they include some of the same members and may be useful in diffusing information and facilitating exchanges between the committees.

Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/s1\\_final-report\\_20150326.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/s1_final-report_20150326.pdf)

### **3.3 Activating Network Governance Structures**

There are various membership and governance models of NRNs. As far as the membership is concerned, **some NRNs have completely open memberships**. The network is simply considered to be all those people and organisations that participate in meetings and/or are on the mailing lists for publications.

At the other extreme **some NRNs have clearly defined members with rights and responsibilities**, which then elect a Steering Group and other working groups. In between these extremes, there are several variations of network governance.

No comprehensive analysis of the formal NRN governance structures has yet been carried out during this period. However, a notable finding of the NRN Mapping Survey of May 2015 was that **several (if not all) networks operate formal governance bodies, such as Steering Committees and Coordination Committees**. These governance bodies include various representatives of the NRN and sometimes operate at different levels and with different functions in a hierarchical way.

For instance, in France, the General Assembly includes all formal members and has a role to decide on the main directions. It meets once a year. The NRN Committee meets twice a year and counts 30-40 members. The Committee takes strategic decisions and follows implementation of these. An Executive Committee (of 9 members) meets once a month to implement decisions, allocate budget and manage external service providers and human resources.

The TG highlighted how important it is that these **networking structures and meetings should be focal points for developing joint action by stakeholders** rather than simply talking and voting shops.

### **The Rural Development ‘Sounding Board’ in England**

In England, an External Working Group (EWG) ‘Sounding Board’ of stakeholders was established to help with developing the 2014-2020 programme. The EWG includes a wide range of stakeholders from different sectors. The group meets around once a month and provides a platform for a more informal and open discussion among stakeholders about policy development.

It ensures a stronger ownership of the programme by stakeholders. The EWG has strong working relationship with both DEFRA (Managing Authority) and the NRN. Several members of the EWG are also sitting in the Monitoring Committee, creating a direct link between the outcomes of the two institutions.

Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/3rd\\_tg\\_england\\_nrn\\_sounding\\_board.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/3rd_tg_england_nrn_sounding_board.pdf)

Contact: Ed Dyson, England NRN, [edward.dyson@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:edward.dyson@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

### **3.4 Working with Stakeholder Organisations**

**Networks can add most value in bringing together different types of stakeholder groups** (sometimes with conflicting interests) in a common platform and facilitate exchange among them to help them break out from their ‘silos’.

Of great importance, but a particular challenge, is to **engage effectively with strong and organised stakeholders** who already have their own powerful channels for influencing policy, such as some farming organisations. Some NRNs have demonstrated success at working with such organisations to build wider alliances on certain rural development issues (see box below).<sup>8</sup>.

Stakeholders have a strong interest in being involved whenever ‘common topics of interest’ can be identified, such as food, environmental issues or innovation. In such cases, even those stakeholder groups that are normally strongly represented are willing to share and discuss. **NRNs should thus see themselves as federations or “networks of networks”** acting as bridges between different kinds of stakeholders.

#### **Experience of the Portuguese Network in working with farmers**

The Portuguese Network has identified some lessons from its efforts to explore different ways of working with farmers, as one of their main target groups:

- Some groups of stakeholders (such as farmers) are strongly organised and tend to work in ‘silos’
- Strong organised stakeholders have interest representation and access to the political level

<sup>8</sup> Specific recommendations on involving farmers’ organisations can be found in the Discussion 1 recommendations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> TG meeting: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/feedback\\_report\\_2nd-tg-mtg\\_090415\\_final.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/feedback_report_2nd-tg-mtg_090415_final.pdf)

- Strong organised stakeholders can bring knowledge, act as multipliers and help to strengthen the recognition of NRN initiatives
- NRNs are important for strong organised stakeholders as they can connect diverse stakeholders around common issues
- There are number of topics of common interest for stronger stakeholders and other stakeholders, such as food, health, environment, innovation
- In order to reach farmers, you need to meet them in person, go to their farms, business, organisations, activities and events, It is important to use the opportunities to engage them as “they may not come back again”. Networks can work with them in phases; time is part of the involvement process.

Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tbarata\\_presentation.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tbarata_presentation.pdf)

Contact: Teresa Barata, Portuguese NRN, [tbarata@dgadr.pt](mailto:tbarata@dgadr.pt)

A response by the Latvian NRN reflects this role of the NRNs: *“We are planning our collaboration with associations and unions, trying to improve linkages between different stakeholders, especially when they have slightly different objectives or if their linkages could be improved e.g. between: big and small farmers unions; the farming sector and LAGs; local farmers unions and the MA; LAGs-MA-PA. etc.”*

Another vital role for NRNs is to **support the least organised “hidden voices”** of rural development such as migrants, rural women and young people. It can also include those who are not usually involved and may have something different to say, such as artists and cultural workers, or urban consumers of rural products and services. Various networks have successfully worked with less-organised stakeholders (e.g. the work of the Swedish NRN with minority groups).

The work of the NRN should complement and build on the existing strengths of their members rather than trying to substitute or speak for them. The term “smart network specialisation” was used to express the idea that **NRNs should map the strengths and weaknesses of their potential stakeholders and intervene at the points where they can add most value.**

## 4. Networking tools to improve stakeholder involvement

Networks must **avoid simply ticking boxes for producing deliverables or organising events**. The need to take advantage of the opportunities they have to deploy various informal tools to complement the formal structures and processes in support of increased stakeholder involvement **connected to the real challenges of implementation**..

The following table presents relevant networking tools for ease of comparison and shows that **the ENRD and the NRNs have a similar range of tools** for supporting increased stakeholder involvement:

ENRD (Art 52,3)	NRNs (Art 54,3b)
<b>Collect, analyse and disseminate information</b> on action in the field of rural development	
Set up and run <b>thematic groups</b> ..	Activities regarding the facilitation of <b>thematic and analytical exchanges</b>
Collect, consolidate and disseminate at Union level <b>good rural development practices</b> ...	Activities regarding <b>the collection of examples</b> of projects...
Organise <b>meetings and seminars</b>	
In relation to <b>LAGs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• create synergies with national level capacity building</li> <li>• Cooperate with networks and technical support of other funds</li> </ul>	Activities regarding the provision of <b>training and networking for LAGs</b> particularly technical assistance for cooperation
Provide <b>information</b> on development in rural areas	<b>Communication plan</b> including information and publicity concerning rural development
<b>Provide support on evaluation processes</b>	Activities regarding the sharing and dissemination of <b>monitoring and evaluation</b> findings
	Activities regarding the provision of <b>networking for advisors and innovation support services</b>

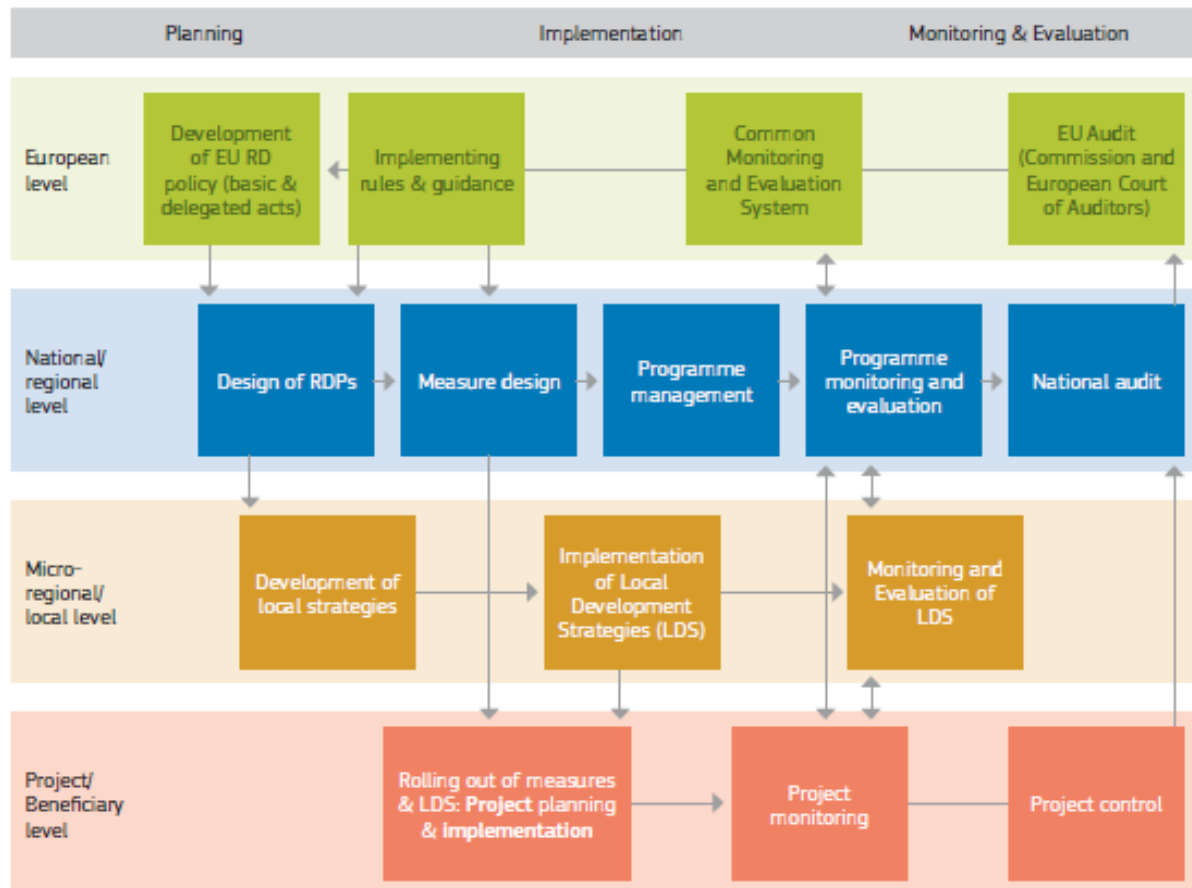
These tools are not exclusive so, for example, even though there is no specific mention of “collecting, analysing and disseminating information” on rural development in the case of NRNs – there is nothing to stop them from doing this.

## 4.1 Adapting networking tools to stages of the programming cycle

Networks can improve stakeholder involvement in rural development policy formulation and implementation at different stages and different levels. To do this, **networks need to adapt the tools they use to the different stages of the programming cycle.**

**The chart below shows potential ‘entry points’** for networks to influence rural development policies at the planning, implementation and monitoring & evaluation stages; and at different levels from the local project up to the EU.

Programming Cycle – Entry points for Rural Networks



It is **very important that networks can contribute to the consultation process** at an early stage in the programming cycle i.e. during the design of the RDP. One of the main challenges in this regard is that networks are often not operational or operate with limited capacity during the period of transition between programming periods.

Germany was an example of good practice here. They **ensured that the NSU was still in place and at full capacity during the transition phase from one programming period to the next.** ‘In-house’ NSUs (i.e. those set-up within the MA) also often continued their work from one period to another with little or no disruption.



**NRNs commonly use various forms of discussion, consultation and coordination groups and other exchange platforms** to support stakeholder involvement. These can help to build a common understanding and hence improve the formulation and implementation of rural development policy. They can be used at different stages of the programming cycle.

#### **Engaging stakeholders through consultation groups**

In Lithuania, the Network Support Unit set up six consultation groups alongside 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.

*Source: Rural Review 19*

The Finnish example below shows how networks can use a simple and cost effective method to support stakeholder involvement at the start of the implementation phase.

#### **Reading Together in Finland**

In Finland, a series of sessions and seminars were organised when the new RDP legislation was developed in order to build common understanding among key stakeholders. The main objective was to have legislation that is clear and unambiguous, and reflects practice.

The 'reading together' sessions brought together stakeholders at different levels: (1) within the central administration (MAs and PAs), (2) between provincial and central administrations (national MA & PA and provincial MA); and (3) between the provincial administration and LAGs. In the framework of the various sessions the drafts of the Implementing Acts and Decrees were read and discussed together.

The NRN also organised a roadshow of five events in the fall of 2014 that gathered some 300 people. The purpose of the roadshow was to have a dialogue between stakeholders and the ministry. The Ministry presented the drafts of the legislation and ideas for RDP implementation. Stakeholders could give direct feedback.

*Source:* [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/2b.tg\\_150507\\_reading\\_together\\_jmm\\_v2.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/2b.tg_150507_reading_together_jmm_v2.pdf)

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## 4.2. Adapting networking tools to different stakeholder needs

Networks have a number of (non-exclusive) strategic options for **targeting different types of stakeholder with specific tools and methods** according to their particular needs profile. In particular, the TG identified the following two stakeholder categories:

- a) institutional delivery stakeholders
- b) rural development stakeholder interest groups

In addition – and more ambitiously, **networks should also try to improve the connections between these different categories of stakeholder.**

### Institutional delivery stakeholders

Horizontal exchanges among stakeholders with the same responsibility can play an important role in improving policy delivery through mutual learning (especially at the European level). For instance, **meetings and exchange targeted at MAs who face similar implementation challenges** can benefit all.

The TG highlighted the need to improve coordination between **regional RDPs**. Similarly, some of the participants in the separate ENRD Thematic Group on Improving RDP Implementation requested **specific meetings and exchanges among PAs and auditors** across various Member States.

**Targeted training workshops** can be organised on very specific topics of common interest for certain delivery stakeholders. The ENRD Contact Point has successfully organised such workshops on topics including simplified cost options and use of financial instruments targeting MA stakeholders. They show the potential of such approaches, which can be replicated at national level.

**Regular NRN meetings organised by the ENRD** serve the purpose of exchange of experience and mutual learning among NSUs and other stakeholders. At the national level, **LAG meetings or meetings of advisory service providers** may serve a similar purpose.

**Exchange platforms and coordination groups can play a particularly important role** when there are multiple implementing bodies involved in policy implementation at different vertical administrative levels in a multi-level governance system. This is typically the case of LEADER/CLLD, where several administrative bodies (i.e. MA, PA and LAGs) need to interact. The introduction of the multi-fund approach in some Member States has added the MAs of other interlinked policies to this mix.

#### CLLD Coordination Group, Sweden

The former CLLD Coordination Group in Sweden included 6 LAG managers and 6 LAG chairmen who were elected regionally. During the 2014-2020 programming period the Coordination Group has been extended, through adding FLAGs, the MA, PA and other fund (ESF and ERDF) stakeholders. The new Coordination Group also includes some national organisations (such as the Federation of Swedish Farmers and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation).

The Coordination Group has been organised in several smaller sub-groups on: dialogue with the MA; organisation of national and regional meetings; quality of

administrative routines and IT systems; and the EMFF in CLLD. A small task force of LAG managers and chairmen is working on a 'start-kit' for LAGs.

*Source: Presentation of Nils Lagerroth, 3<sup>rd</sup> TG Meeting:*

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/3rd\\_tg\\_clld\\_coordination\\_group.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/3rd_tg_clld_coordination_group.pdf)

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### Stakeholder interest groups

The NRNs have a strong role to act as bridges to bring together the various rural development stakeholder interests through appropriate **platforms, meetings and exchange**.

This can involve overcoming real or perceived conflicts of interest between e.g. farmers, processors, tourist operators, environmental organisations, social NGOs etc. with the aim to **develop shared understanding and common positions** between them.

The TG stressed that **conflict management** is a key part of these platforms, and made a number of suggestions on how to overcome these:

- ✓ Participation should be based on a commitment to follow through activities and report back
- ✓ The debate should start from a common shared interest rather than the points of difference
- ✓ Nevertheless, differences and conflicts of interest should be dealt with transparently
- ✓ The expected outcomes of the groups should be agreed early on
- ✓ Networks should aim to support the debate through key facts, evidence and background information

### 4.3 Thematic working groups on RDP implementation

The NRN Mapping Survey of May 2015 suggested that **thematic working groups are probably the most-used tool** by networks for allowing stakeholders to dig deeper into what does and doesn't work in rural development implementation.

Thematic Groups can take a variety of forms and employ many different methods. It is important to **be innovative and constantly adapt the methods and format to the real needs of different stakeholders**.

While it is extremely important to provide the opportunity for creative brain-storming and "thinking outside the box", it is **crucial that outcomes of the thematic groups feed into the policy-making process**. This is to avoid the risk that the Thematic Groups become 'talking shops' with no real conclusions or impact on policy design or implementation.

### **Swedish NRN Thematic Working Group on the Environment**

A Thematic Working Group was set up by the Swedish NRN to support the implementation of environmental measures. The Thematic Group included a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers and agricultural boards and associations, environmental NGOs and associations, and other specialised organisations such as associations of beekeepers, beef producers and sheep breeders.

The thematic group provided views on the objectives of the future RDP, identified conflicting objectives, bottlenecks and need for simplification of environmental measures, and gave suggestions for future environmental measures. Results of the working group were fed back to policy-makers. One of the channels used was a seminar organised in the Swedish Parliament for MPs, and a report was prepared including a cost-benefit analysis regarding different environmental measures.

*Source: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/3rd\\_tg\\_thematic\\_group\\_on\\_env.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/uploaded-files/3rd_tg_thematic_group_on_env.pdf)*

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To be effective, **networks need to take a clearly user or demand-led approach** in the delivery of their thematic work. This is easier to say than it is to do, not least because of the diversity of stakeholder needs and interests. For example, grassroots stakeholders are likely to be interested in a wider range of issues and policies than those that are covered by the RDPs and less interested in the minutiae of regulatory implementation.

### **Ideas & suggestions for improving thematic work**

- ✓ The issues and themes chosen should **complement or contribute to issues identified in the formal channels for stakeholder participation**, such as Monitoring Committees
- ✓ At an early stage, members of working groups need to **unpack, clarify and agree what they would like to achieve together** – what they would like to change. This could be improving the implementation of a particular RDP measure and/or it could involve policies that fall outside the programmes.
- ✓ This means **involving the right people at the right time (early)**. One of the main weaknesses of many thematic working groups is the absence of the people who can take or influence implementation decisions. They do not have to be present all the time, but it is important to understand the level of support from decision-makers and the real scope for change. Another big weaknesses is often the absence of the very people on the ground who are the subject of the work (e.g. young or Roma people living in rural areas, farmers, rural entrepreneurs, etc.)
- ✓ **Shorter, smaller working groups are usually better for developing concrete proposals** and more detailed actions. Larger seminars and conferences are more useful for mobilising support, getting people onto the same page and disseminating results. They are often less effective in making detailed recommendations.
- ✓ At both EU and national level, it is necessary to identify and **respond to the groups of stakeholders who have the energy to actually do something about an issue**. These can often be grouped into the ‘pioneers’ and ‘those interested in learning’. The two groups can form ‘Communities of Practice’ on a particular issue, where the promising ideas and proposals of the pioneers are discussed, adapted and transferred among participants. The successes achieved by these more committed actors can then be rolled out to others.

#### **4.4 The strategic use of communication and good practices**

A first strategic recommendation of the TG is that the specific **NRN Communication Plans need to be synchronised with the broader RDP Information and Publicity Strategies of the MAs**. This is to ensure harmonisation and mutual support towards shared communications objectives and the optimal use of limited resources.

More generally, it is essential to **clearly differentiate and target different publics, information needs, channels and providers**. For example, networks can help potential beneficiaries understand the benefits of different measures and access them more easily on the one hand and explain rural development policy to a wider public on the other.

**The provision of clear and timely information is a necessary condition for effective stakeholder involvement.** This ‘one-way’ flow of information (e.g. down from the NRN or MA to beneficiaries) can be the starting point of stakeholder involvement. **However, genuine stakeholder involvement is based on exchange and information flows in multiple directions.**

As part of their wider communications efforts, **networks need to provide platforms and structures to enable peer-learning and exchange.**

One form of peer-learning is the sharing of good practices. However, **networks need to actively engage to help ensure that good practice examples have genuine potential to influence policy implementation.** This means thinking strategically about the identification, collection and dissemination of good practices on particular topics at the right time in the programming cycle.

Furthermore, there is a great need to **go beyond the simple identification of EAFRD project success stories.** This need can be broken down into three aspects:

- a) It is essential to **consolidate the messages and learning** coming from the good practices rather than simply accumulating more examples
- b) **Good practice examples should also cover methodological issues**, such as how institutional stakeholders are tackling certain common implementation bottlenecks, measures and issues
- c) **Information about failures and lessons learned** can arguably be just as useful for influencing future implementation decisions

The Walloon Network indicated the ‘capitalisation of good practices and making recommendations’ as one of the main tools to work with various stakeholder groups.

#### 4.5 Capacity building for stakeholders

One of the obligatory tasks of NRNs (as described above) is the provision of **training and networking for LAGs.** LAGs are intermediary implementing bodies of rural development policy, with a key role in developing and implementing Local Development Strategies, therefore, they have a key strategic role in rural development policy implementation. NRNs can, and have fulfilled a key role in building the capacity of LAGs in order to improve LEADER implementation (e.g. support for LDS development, support for LAG evaluation, etc.).

**Capacity-building and the provision of guidance** is also a crucial element of the ENRD work programme (especially for NSUs that are multipliers for the ENRD’s work). For example, during Year 1 of its operation the ENRD contributed to a range of workshops that aimed to build capacity among specific stakeholder groups (e.g. the workshop on simplified cost option for MAs).”

## 5. Conclusions & Recommendations

At the beginning of the 2014-20 programming cycle, there is an important window of opportunity for productively increasing the involvement of stakeholders in the *implementation* of rural development. European and National Rural Networks can play a central role.

### A stronger legal mandate for rural networks on stakeholder involvement

- The new regulatory framework for 2014-2020 establishes a **legally binding obligation for Member States (MS) and Managing Authorities (MAs) to strengthen stakeholder involvement** in all phases of rural policy formulation and implementation.
  - The European Code of Conduct on Partnership specifies **which partners Member States should involve** in, *inter alia*, rural development policy-making and implementation. It notably gives increased priority to civil society stakeholders.
  - In parallel, **NRNs and the ENRD have, for the first time, been set the explicit objective to ‘increase stakeholder involvement in rural development’**.
- These two obligations are not and should not be disconnected. In realising this task, **MAs are expected to make use of the NRNs**.
- However, up to now, **the formal mandate provided to NRNs has been interpreted rather unevenly across Member States**.
- **MAs need to play an enabling role by empowering NRNs** with clear responsibilities in line with their formal legal mandate, as well as adequate skills and resources.

### Rural networks’ role and potential to support stakeholder involvement

- **Many NRNs have already accumulated very useful expertise in the field of stakeholder involvement**. There are particularly useful examples of Rural Networks carrying out this role, in particular with the implementation of LEADER.
- Networks can significantly improve the **horizontal and/or vertical coordination between stakeholders**. For example, there is particular scope for sharing good practices among the regional authorities of regionalised countries, managing authorities across Member States, and bringing auditors into the learning cycle (e.g. through exchange with PAs).
- Networks also have an important role to play in creating a **shared understanding and common positions among stakeholder groups with different interests** to everyone’s benefit.
- One of the biggest challenges remains to **create bridges between these different categories of stakeholder**, more specifically between the broad social needs expressed by civil society stakeholders and the technical realities of policy implementation.

- It is essential to maintain **genuine links between stakeholder involvement and better rural development implementation**, rather than slipping into involvement for its own sake. Thematic groups and other networking tools add most value when there is direct link with policy-making.
- **Improved linkages between the activities of NRNs and Monitoring Committees (MCs)** can ensure both that the outcomes of network activities feed into the policy debate and provide important outreach relays for the work of the MC.
- There is also scope for **improving the synergy of the work of the network governance structures with the formal structures** such as the MCs.

### Network tools to support stakeholder involvement

- Both European and National Rural Networks have a fairly similar “menu” of tools and activities that they can use to improve the effectiveness of stakeholder involvement. It is not so much a question of inventing new tools as **using existing network tools to better effect**.
- There is major scope for **experimentation across the entire range of networking tools** – and particularly, in the more targeted use of thematic working groups, communication tools, good practices and more technical workshops and guidance.
- However, administrative arrangements and institutional procedures are very specific and **it makes little sense to try to generalise or push for ‘one size fits all’** approaches on the subject of stakeholder involvement.
- Building the necessary trust and the development of networking expertise takes time. **A step by step approach is necessary for improving stakeholder involvement** (particularly) in institutional contexts where there has been little or no experience in participatory practices.
- To be effective, it is essential to **identify the ‘right’ point of entry in the programming cycle** considering the different opportunities for stakeholder involvement at stages from design throughout the implementation process.
- It is also important to **adopt a flexible user-led approach in each context**, adapting to the needs of the priority stakeholder groups.
- There is much to be gained from **ensuring that networks are operational over the crucial transition period between programmes**, so that stakeholder involvement can be supported in the crucial stage of RDP design
- **European networking and exchange can help promote stakeholder involvement** by supporting the sharing, improving and extending of some of the most interesting practices that have already been applied in certain parts of Europe. Many of these practices are relatively inexpensive and surprisingly obvious. Such examples can have a significant impact on promoting institutional and behavioural change in favour of improved stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development.