Thematic Group
Improving RDP Implementation

2nd Meeting
Brussels, 7 May 2015

REPORT

V1 – July 2015

INTRODUCTION TO THE DAY

About the meeting

The second meeting of the TG held in Brussels on the 7 May 2015 counted on the participation of some 30 delegates from across the EU. These included representatives from national Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, Network Support Units, EU and national-level organisations, advisors and EC desk-officers. Interestingly, the majority of participants had not taken part to the previous meeting.

Presentation

Thematic Group: Outcomes so far and purposes of the meeting

by Fabio Cossu (ENRD CP)

The introductory presentation from the ENRD Contact Point summarised the work undertaken so far by the TG highlighting areas of work and key outcomes.

In particular it reminded participants of the objectives and the roadmap of the TG, linking to current ENRD activities and the **ENRD seminar** envisaged in June 2015.

Key messages from the presentation and purpose of the second meeting:

- The work of the TG has been focusing on two areas: **1)** identifying and characterising those aspects of RDP implementation that deserve attention (and urgent action) for a successful rolling-out of RDPs; **2)** refining priority topics for the future work of the Rural Networks. Such topics were the ones previously identified by the Rural Networks' Assembly and Steering Group.

- As far as the first work strand is concerned, discussions at the first TG meeting contributed to identify three horizontal implementation aspects. These were the object of more in-depth reflection during the first session of the second meeting.

'Horizontal' aspects of RDP implementation

What is important and urgent to focus on for the successful implementation of RDPs ? How networks can intervene?

3 main themes / areas of intervention:
- **Communicating RD policy and programmes**
- **Formal and informal coord. mechanisms**
- **Raising administrative capacity and quality**

Priority themes and areas for future work

Based on the themes identified by the Rural Network Assembly. *What RDPs and Networks can do about them?*

3 Topics addressed and discussed:
- Sust management of natural resources
- Demographic change in rural areas
- Circular economy

- With regards to priority topics, three themes were addressed during the first meeting highlighting specific issues and possible actions for Networks. At the second meeting, the exercise was repeated for a different set of topics. These were decided on the basis of participants' choice.

- In the last part of the meeting participants were also invited to reflect on key conclusions, practices and issues that were shared during the day and that they considered important to share and discuss at the ENRD Seminar envisaged in June 2015.

BUILDING INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL START OF RDPs

Presentations:

RDP communication
by E. Thorpe
(ENRD CP)

Formal and informal coordination mechanisms
by E. Saraceno
(ENRD CP)

Building common understanding: 'reading together'
by J-M Markkola
(NRN Finland)

Raising capacity and quality
by P. Soto
(ENRD CP)

The first round of discussions focused on the three horizontal implementation aspects identified during the first TG meeting. Discussions were introduced by a series of short presentations by CP experts and TG members. These contributed to outline the three themes by: summarising key outcomes from the first TG meeting; providing additional reflection points and practical examples to illustrate the issues under discussion.

Two concrete examples that were originally shared during the first meeting were more extensively illustrated by TG members:

- From **Finland**: the experience of 'reading together' (*Lukukinkerit,* in Finnish), a series of discussion sessions and seminars bringing together relevant stakeholders in view of creating common understanding of RDP implementing legislation.

- From **Italy**: the conception and setting up of guidelines for the adoption of Quality Management Systems for RDP Managing Authorities.

Participants were then invited to explore the three themes more in depth by identifying specific issues and areas for improvements as well as inspiring experiences and approaches. Three discussion tables - one per theme - were set up around the same set of questions (see left

column). Finally, each group was asked to prioritise three main areas of intervention for the successful implementation of RDPs.

Outcomes of discussions - Summary

Communicating RD policy and programmes

Key issues

- It was agreed during the first meeting that communication is key to ensuring the successful roll-out of the RDPs. In this respect communications can not only provide targeted information to potential beneficiaries on access to support (tools and measures) but also increase the level of understanding of the rules and, going further, generate a common vision through increased focus on the expected policy outcomes.

- In this regards, improving the communication process is vital. Despite electronic communication dominates, keeping face-to-face communication flows allows for a more effective transfer of information and shared understanding. The **Finnish example** is a clear example of the kind of results that can be obtained in this regard with relatively small effort.

- The example also points out the relevance of *ensuring vertical communication flows* among the different levels involved in the implementation of programmes (i.e. national authorities, regional and/or provincial authorities, local authorities and LAGs). Moreover, a positive spin can be provided by establishing *more informal platforms* for exchange and the TG expressed the need to create more of these even within formal contexts.

- *Early involvement of stakeholders* and potential beneficiaries in particular ensures that they are getting the right information at the right time. This proves to be essential to avoid 'information asymmetries' during the launch of the programme and measures especially when delays in programme's approval make it difficult to put out information in a timely fashion. This is one of the main issues MAs and NRNs are facing since they are asked to do communication too quickly after implementing rules are approved.

- *Targeting and prioritising* communications can help to address some of the issues related to time, resources and outreach. In some context it might be needed / appropriate to focus on a specific section of beneficiaries (in **Poland** for example a major focus is put on farmers as the largest group of beneficiaries). *Generating synergies with the 'network of communicators'* (advisors,

professional organisations, chambers of agriculture) can also contribute to 'achieve more' with more focused communication.

- When it comes to the content of communication, experiences have highlighted that *it is never too late to start communicating about 'good practices'*. Providing concrete examples of what can be achieved through the RDP support in the early stage increases understanding of the policy's potential and provides clear direction to beneficiaries on the use of measures.

Area for improvements

(1) Strengthen the EU - national (two-way) communication. Information directly generated at the EU level needs to 'come down' to the national level and generate more engagement with the local stakeholders. This also requires that channels (both formal and informal) are established for stakeholders to provide feedback to the EC directly and/or that information is provided to them on what these channels are. In this regard, the role of RDP Monitoring Committees as formal platform needs to be accurately considered.

(2) Provide more guidance on RDP implementation through best practices

(3) Improve timeliness of communications by prioritising content and target groups and involving 'multipliers' (particularly necessary at this stage due to the late approval and start of programmes).

Formal and informal coordination mechanisms

Key issues

- Effective coordination mechanisms - alongside with communications - were pointed out as necessary to ensure that RDPs respond to the customers' need and stay focused on the expected outcomes. *Both formal and informal coordination are needed* to ensure stakeholders are kept involved in the implementation of programmes. However key issues exist in both cases that would need to be addressed. In short, these start with a full recognition (mainly from public authorities) of their role and effective organisation.

- For example, on the aspect of formal coordination, a specific shortcoming of the RDP Monitoring Committees was identified in that such fora are often used to generate political debate about

measures rather than on focusing on practical aspects related to their implementation.

- A major need discussed in the context of coordination relates to ensuring *compliance with EU rules* and addressing issues of 'uncertainty and 'insecurity' when it comes to applying legislation. This is a urgent need felt at all levels as the key question is whether interpretation and application of legal provisions are coherent and well integrated along the whole delivery chain (EU-national-regional-local). This issue is exacerbated by the presence of *different layers of laws and regulations* which add up moving from the EU to the regional level.

- Another issue very much linked to this aspect is the *existence of a multiplicity of bodies intervening in the delivery of RDPs* and the need to 'link' them to ensure a coherent approach to the implementation of the programmes. A lack of proper mechanisms and tools to address this 'internal coordination' aspect was lamented during discussions. In some contexts the lack of competences or the shift of competences within the public administration was mentioned as one possible obstacle in this respect.

Examples of how such issues can be addressed come from **Spain** where **working groups** involving national and regional-level authorities are established to share and discuss practical implementation aspects on single measures (e.g. eligibility criteria, definition of minimum requirements etc.). **Road shows** across the country are also dedicated to generate shared understanding and practices about EIP-related measures.

- Such level of complexity is particularly relevant, but not exclusive, to MS with regional programmes. One clear example of such issue brought up in discussions relates to *ensuring a more coherent approach to the definition of selection criteria*. Dealing with the consistency of different approaches is a major problem that needs to be addressed through improved coordination mechanisms at the national and regional level. In **Germany** '**regional innovation offices**' offer support to consistent implementation of EIP measures throughout the Country.

Areas for improvement

(1) Reaching the same level of understanding among stakeholders involved in policy delivery, both 'vertically' (EU-national-regional-local) and 'horizontally' (within administration at the same

institutional level). This is particularly relevant for new policy instruments and rules.

(2) Dealing effectively with the multiplicity of intermediate implementing bodies (and different rules or approaches)

(3) Addressing regional-level bottlenecks in terms of implementing procedures.

Raising administrative capacity and quality

Key issues

- Capacity building for programme managers is considered key to improve the quality of RDP implementation. Both content (technical knowledge) and tools (e.g. IT tools and information channels) can be substantially improved and there's consensus around the value of 'knowledge transfer' actions such as direct exchanges among administration staff, trainings and good practices' sharing.

- From the experience of evaluators - and confirmed during the discussions – a gap emerges between the desired outcomes of the policy ('what needs to be done') and administration cultures ('how to do it'). It was argued that *implementing bodies lack knowledge* about the challenges related to the on-the ground implementation of the policy, which makes also difficult to understand what improvements can and need to be made in the process.

- Stakeholders' involvement in the evaluation of the policy and the way it is administered can be a way to establish feedback mechanisms towards the administration. However this happens to a little extent so that there's an increasing need to *involve all actors of the delivery chain in evaluation schemes*.

- Any activity aiming at raising administrative capacity and quality should identify 'the right people to be trained'. *Following the '20/80 rule'*, training should focus on that limited number of people (20%) who generate the most (80%) in terms of outcomes. MAs PAs, LAGs, civil society groups and auditors all have an impact in the way the policy is administered and delivered to beneficiaries. These are the stakeholders that training need to focus on. *Loss of institutional memory* within the administration also affects capacity so that training should take into consideration potential phases of staff turn-over.

- One aspect deeply influencing the quality of delivering systems is *the way in which administration interact with the 'client'* and the level

of assistance it is capable of providing. Lack of preparation and 'soft skills' due to limited experience as well as motivation can strongly affect the client's experience and the way the policy as a whole is perceived.

• The primary role of technical assistance (TA) is to improve know-how and build capacity so *that improvement in quality of policy implementation goes hand-in-hand with the improvement of TA delivery*. NRNs as main instrument of technical assistance under the EAFRD have a clear role to play in this respect and can contribute to improve 'transparency' of TA spending[1].

• Overall, the efforts put in improving the capacity of the programmes' administration and management should not add unnecessary layers of complexity to the systems.

Areas for improvement

(1) Promote shift of mentality within RDP implementing bodies towards simplified management approaches and evaluate 'simplification' (suggestion: use of 'simplification questionnaire' to identify critical steps of the current delivery system and required changes in the service provision to the client, e.g. one-stop-shop to grant access to relevant information).

(2) Explore adoption of quality management systems (including establishing indicators for monitoring success)

(3) Improve staff (soft) skills and motivation to provide good 'customer service', encourage better understanding of needs and issues in policy implementation at all levels.

Group discussion questions for selected areas of improvement: *What need to be done?* *How to do it and by whom?*	**Drawing initial recommendations for different stakeholder groups** Based on the priority areas of intervention identified by each group, participants were asked to put forward **practical suggestions for improvements** and identify the relevant stakeholders that would need to generate the expected outcomes. In this exercise, participants were divided in different groups with the aim of bringing together around the same table representatives of: i) national authorities (MAs, PAs, NSUs); 2) EU and national organisations; and, 3) advisory services.

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[1] On this see also recommendations from ECA's Special report 04/2015 "Technical assistance: what contribution has it made to agriculture and rural development?": http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR15_04/SR15_04_EN.pdf

A summary of the outcomes of the discussion are summarised in **Annex 1** where proposed actions, relevant actors and possible constraints are provided per area of improvement. Only six areas of intervention were prioritised among those identified in the previous round of discussions (i.e. two areas per theme). Out of these, discussions focused on five.

GETTING PRIORITIES RIGHT FOR THE FUTURE THEMATIC WORK OF THE ENRD

Presentations:

RDPs 2014-2020 some facts & figures
by F. Cossu
(ENRD CP)

Local food, short supply chains and rural-urban linkages
by D. Lamb
(ENRD CP)

Empowering Advisory services & Knowledge Transfer
by M. Kuegler
(EUFRAS)

Pillar 1 - Pillar 2 linkages
by C. Canenbley
(EC - DG AGRI)

The third session of the meeting was dedicated to exploring and refining priorities themes identified by the Rural Networks' Assembly and the Steering Group as priority for the work of EU Networks in 2015.

Following discussion on a first set of themes (*see report of first TG meeting*) participants were confronted with another set of themes whose selection was based on the preference they expressed ahead of the meeting. The three themes discussed were:

1. **Local food & short supply chains**
2. **Empowering advisory services & knowledge transfer**
3. **Linkages between CAP Pillar 1- Pillar 2**

Discussions around the above themes were introduced by short presentations from CP experts, TG members and EC officers offering a perspective on possible key issues and example of activities to be carried out by rural networks. These were complemented by a short presentation of RDPs' budget allocations by relevant focus areas and measures (based on preliminary data deriving from the 2014-2020 RDPs approved at the date of the meeting).

Each theme was discussed separately. Participants were asked to articulate specific issues and identify linkages with possible networking actions or RDP interventions.

Please see **Annex 2** *for a detailed summary of the discussions per theme.*

Update on preparations for the ENRD seminar and next steps

In the last session of the meeting the ENRD CP provided an update on the state of preparations of the ENRD Seminar on the '*opportunities to improve RDP implementation*' and an outline of the draft agenda.

It was reminded to the participants that the seminar's agenda was built upon the initial findings of the thematic group and that recommendations put forward by TG members at the previous meeting were taken in consideration in order to define both topics and methodology.

TG members were invited to reflect upon key messages or particularly expiring examples discussed during the day that would deserve the attention of a wider public.

It was also reminded that the outcomes of the seminar would be discussed at the occasion of the third and last TG meeting (second half of June) in order to develop recommendations to be featured in the TG final report.

Annex 1: Initial recommendations for different stakeholder groups

Area for improvement	What needs to be done *Practical suggestions for improvement*	Who should do it and how	Possible obstacles
Targeted & timely communication to beneficiaries	- Develop a sound publicity and information strategy (as requested by the EAFRD regulation) - Ensure targeted communication through: a) early identification of target groups; b) drawing a list of key stakeholders	Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies and National Rural Networks together 1. Identify the audience 2. Identify the message Ask the audience about the info they need (e.g. through surveys, public fora)	(Not addressed)
Informal & vertical communication (EC <—> National level / Monitoring Committee <—>Stakeholders)	- Organise farm trips and study visits for public authorities and the members of the MC - Sharing of 'champion' projects - Secondments of administration staff to the local level, or between regional and national levels, or across countries including the possibility for MA/PA staff to visit rural areas/farms.	- Network Support Units to organise such activities - LAGs to be involved in order to showcase their work	- Risk of becoming a superficial activity, so there is the need to carefully plan and choose the right farm/speaker - Topics addressed in this way can be too narrow - Some people may not wish to share their projects for fear of competition (giving ideas away) - Time and resource constraints (not enough staff available)

Area for improvement	What needs to be done *Practical suggestions for improvement*	Who should do it and how	Possible obstacles
Getting the same level of understanding (particularly linked to new RDP measures)	- Promote 'reading together' approaches and informal exchanges bringing together the relevant stakeholders (MA, PA, NRN's stakeholders, civil society)	- National Rural Networks and Managing Authorities should be the initiators - Such activities have to be tailored to the specificity of the country's administrative culture but would need to keep an informal character as far as possible. Examples already exist such as: *road shows* (ES); *think-tanks* (FI). - Bringing together people should also be done at the local level: municipalities could initiate this, together with other local actors (LAGs)	(Not addressed)
	- Provide access to relevant information	- Should be ensured by PAs and Mas (e.g. '*hotlines*' to get first-hand information on each measure managed internally by the Paying Agency in BG) - Public discussion fora on the internet - Use of local advisors and other multipliers to ensure outreach of information - Provision of information at the local level should be more 'mainstreamed' in MA communications	(Not addressed)
Coordination of multiple implementing bodies (and rules)	Provision of online resources	- Managing authorities and other implementing bodies (e.g. governmental agencies) to share information about procedures and practices put in place (examples) - The ENRD CP at the EU level + NRN at the national level could for example develop a list of all implementing bodies to facilitate exchange among them (not only who they are but also what they do).	- Info is partially available from MS (for example through the EIP-AGR,I about responsibles for EIP-related measures) but language barriers prevent the exchange of experiences across countries - Implementing agencies change frequently

Area for improvement	What needs to be done *Practical suggestions for improvement*	Who should do it and how	Possible obstacles
Move towards a simplification approach	- Analysis of the existing procedures and rules - Organize 'common reading' sessions and interpretation of rules together with relevant actors (particularly useful for PAs) - Establishing and nurturing informal contacts among EU-MA-PA-NRN - Promote the adoption simplified cost options at the EU level	- NRN to organise involving and empowering PAs, MAs, Auditors, regional administrations and members of the MC. Need to be followed through (not one-off) to ensure action is taken on the matter. - NRN has a concrete role in identifying best practices about simplification of rules and procedures e.g. between regions in a given MS (they should have an overview of who is performing well) - Workshops to bring people together (also across MS) to identify obstacles to actual simplification. - Develop and make available 'Questions & Answers' on hot issues (grouping them by topic and promoting more widely). - Possibly involve 'out of the box thinker' and external experts (e.g. staff from different Ministries, lawyers, administration experts and agricultural measure experts) to find creative solutions	- A strong focus on reducing error in policy spending and concerns about financial correction can potentially lead to more complexity - Each implementation level (and layer of rules) adds complexity to the whole delivery system - National law requires complex accounting

Annex 2: Outcomes of discussions around thematic priorities

Local food - Short supply chains - Rural-urban partnership - Small farms

Summary of discussions: Discussions on the theme with the TG members focused on practical aspects related to the development of relationships among the actors of the food supply chain. The key issues identified mainly relate to bringing together relevant actors, including consumers, in order to jointly overcome common obstacles such as the existence of different standards and rules or barriers in accessing wider markets. The potential support of RDPs was clearly identified in providing *knowledge transfer and innovation tools*, particularly through multi-actor cooperation initiatives. In this context there's also *a clear role for Networks in facilitating the exchange of experiences across countries both in terms of projects and procedures*.

Programming stage	Key issues & needs	RDP implementation aspects	Networks' actions
Measure implementation	Bring together pilot initiatives in short supply chains which address public procurement issues Joint working between actors in the chain and mutual recognition of standards; defining the short supply chain Consideration of demand side issues & lack of access to volume markets	Potential for new pilot initiatives in each country on public procurement (call for new projects) Project development for remote rural areas - developing added value for producers and enabling producers' organisations Bringing together local actors and looking at the activity of advisory services, training provision and investment to meet the regulatory requirements. Establish operational groups on short supply chains and making sure the calls for groups reflect this Linking consumers through the cooperation measure, developing producers cooperation Using LEADER and other instruments to develop supply side capability	Transnational cooperation to address barriers and identify mutual solutions Potential for work on wider mutual recognition of standard - breaking down barriers created by the misinterpretation of hygiene rules. Sharing and developing projects across countries. Bring together good practices in short supply chains; share examples of successful agri-food networks Knowledge exchange to develop innovation and new initiatives Using the wider networks to develop capability and improve market access through project sharing and new project development.

Empowering advisory services & knowledge transfer

Summary of discussions: Discussions with the Thematic Group highlighted the need of i*ncreasing awareness around the potential role of advisory services in the context of EAFRD support and RDP implementation*. A number of issues were put forward by the TG which range from a more general need of identifying subjects, roles and existing connections, to more concrete programming aspects. In this regard, advisors are to be considered not only 'beneficiaries' of EAFRD support but vehicles through which RDP implementation can be improved. This can happen for example through better understanding of beneficiaries' needs from RDP authorities and a better understanding of RDP rules from beneficiaries. In this two-way flow of information in which advisors are central, *Networks could establish stronger linkages among relevant actors and facilitate a wider exchange of knowledge and practices*.

Programming stage	Key issues & needs	RDP implementation aspects	Networks' actions
Horizontal	Lack of linkages between advisory services, NRNs and research community Lack of advisory services in some regions	More regular and steady connection between MAs and the advisory services Advisory services actively liaising and connecting different operational groups. Set a minimum share of RDP budget to be allocated to the development of advisory services.	NRNs to establish connections with advisory services Networks at the EU level can map out and report on existing connections between NRNs and advisory services.
Rolling-out measures	Advisors can play a key role in 'promoting' RDPs, 'translating' rules and making RDP measures 'more attractive' to potential beneficiaries. Adequate knowledge and 'soft' skills to provide a good service to the final beneficiary		Increase awareness on the role and potential of advisors (or where necessary on the lack of advisory services).
Measure implementation	Move away from advisory services as solely providers of assistance for accessing funds (e.g. filling in demands for support)	Set compulsory requirements for accessing certain forms of support, making the use of advisory services mandatory	Collect good practices at national and EU level Consider advisors as one of the networks' stakeholders and as such involve them in

| | towards real knowledge transfer actors | | networking activities (in a focused and timely fashion) |

Pillar 1 - Pillar 2 linkages

Summary of discussions: Discussions with the Thematic Group highlighted that a number of different linkages between the two CAP pillars exist that go beyond the interaction AEC measures - 'greening'. These relate for example to: support measures to structural aspects of agriculture (e.g. young farmers and small farms); risk management and; knowledge transfer and innovation. *Such links should be further assess* in view of rethinking the issue of simple demarcation in favour to increased coordination and synergies between the two pillars. However reality suggests that the focus of administrations (particularly of PAs) is on avoiding irregularities and comply with procedures. This generates pressure on RDP managers and lead to drastic decisions such as 'abandoning' the implementation of measures whose management can possibly lead to problems and irregularities. Rural Networks are called to encourage more ambitious approaches through *identifying and sharing examples of good management systems and solutions for better coordination.*

Programming stage	Key issues & needs	RDP implementation aspects	Networks' actions
Administration & management	For administrations: strong concerns in terms of controls and possible irregularities (e.g. double funding) For beneficiaries (farmers): issues of clarity or rules and low acceptance Strong need of guidance in order to fully comply with rules. Opinion of auditors is sought. Different system of payments (centralised for P1 *vs.* decentralised for P2); synchronisation of controls and sanctions. Delay in payments. PAs particularly work under time	Mapping and analysis of RDPs provisions at national and regional level. Possibly by 'topic' /group of measures (including: forestry; N2000; and non-productive investments measures) Assessing complexity of linkages	Identify and share examples of effective management systems Provide examples of good coordination (e.g. through IT systems) particularly for PAs.

	pressure: difficult to establish good management systems.		
Measures design & implementation	Fear of irregularities wins over a more 'holistic' approach to P1- P2 linkages. Move away from simple 'demarcation' and think more in terms of 'synergies' Questions on advisors' capacity in understanding coordination issues between Pillars and providing adequate support to farmers	Drastic decisions such as 'cutting' RDP measures (saving only those that are more easy to manage) and excluding possibilities for support; lack of ambitions	Identify key success factors for improved coordination (e.g. combination with knowledge transfer measures, AEM + advisory services)