

Connecting networks through clusters

Clusters are networks that unite stakeholders with mutual interests to work together to achieve benefits that could not be possible by the individual cluster member working alone. National Rural Networks (NRNs) have recognised these benefits and continue to build on their history of cooperation through regional clusters connecting rural Europe.

Clustering is synonymous with networking and a broad spectrum of different cluster types exists in relation to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). These involve thematic groupings such as those using [Horizon funds for Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment](#), or the CLUSTER so-named for its work, [advanCing youth and women social inClUSion in The MEdeRRanean](#). Geographic cluster examples include the [Eastern European Food Clusters Network](#) (mentioned in the EU-funded [European Cluster Collaboration Platform - which offers useful networking opportunities for ENRD Thematic Group work](#)), the [Alpine Space Interreg social innovation cluster](#), and the NRN clusters.

NRN clusters are informal groupings which can be both geographic and thematic. The Nordic-Baltic NRN cluster has been a pioneer for geographic NRN clusters since its launch in 2008. NRNs from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden created their first

cluster initially to cooperate on involving and supporting young people in rural development projects. They also shared knowledge about the new Fisheries Local Action Groups that were being established in their countries.

This Nordic-Baltic cluster inspired a Mediterranean NRN cluster which started meeting in 2012 with

NRN colleagues from Italy, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, and Malta. Their mutual

interests related mainly to agri-food initiatives and macro marketing of Mediterranean product quality.

Thematic NRN clusters were also formed during the early European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) period to network understanding in emerging topics such as social farming, together with more mainstream CAP activity like forestry and rural entrepreneurship. These clusters were

the forerunners for future ENRD thematic groups and comments from NRN staff involved in the early clusters explain the rationale behind their collective actions.



Ave Bremse

Estonian Rural Network

"We were setting up our networks for the first time and we all had a lot to learn. The natural thing to do was to pick up the telephone and ask our neighbours what they were planning – and so our cooperation began."

Hans-Olof Stålgren

Swedish Rural Network

"We have a common history, a common identity, and a common future, so it's appropriate that we work together on common solutions to our common issues and challenges."

Such quotes remain very valid today for the next generation of NRN clusters that are evolving with an eye on the new CAP period. These latest NRN clusters are building on the same Nordic-Baltic and Mediterranean regions. An Atlantic cluster and a Central-Eastern cluster are also starting to meet. As a result of the clusters' current online meetings, they have discovered there are common interests in CAP fields ranging from LEADER to eco-schemes. Cluster conversations also found common ground in experiences with preparing CAP Strategic Plans and it is expected that Pillar I topics will become more prevalent during cluster activity within the future EU CAP network.

Success factors for the Member States' CAP clusters will include their ability to address high impact topics. This helps to incentivise commitments. Other ingredients for effective clusters include a suitable critical mass as well as effective organisational arrangements. Online meetings help provide the latter via regular cost- and time-efficient cluster gatherings. Cluster outcomes can also benefit from a central or rotating organiser and inputs from EU-level knowhow helps add-value to clusters' peer learning processes.

You will be able to follow our work with the Member States' national CAP networks clusters on our website and in the next editions of Rural Connections. Keep an eye on news from the NRN meetings to see how clusters evolve within the new CAP networking arena - where they will be able to strengthen their capacities even further to focus on high impact topics benefitting rural Europe.