



Minutes from the first Coordination Committee Meeting 1st October, 2008, Charlemagne Building, Brussels

Present:

Chair: Ms. Dormal Marino, Deputy Director General of DG AGRI-European Commission, and then on her behalf J.M Sousa Uva, Director of Horizontal aspects of rural development, DG AGRI, European Commission.

Participants: Members of the Coordination Committee (see contact list distributed during the CC meeting) as follows:

- one representative from each Member State for the national competent authorities;
- one representative from each Member State for the national rural networks (NRN);
- one representative from each of the 12 organisations active in the field of rural development at Community level;
- one representative from the European organisation representing local action groups;
- Members of DG AGRI, notably of Directorate G - Horizontal aspects of rural development, of Unit G.3 - European Network and monitoring of rural development policy
- Members of the EN RD Contact Point.

For the next meetings, 2 representatives of the Leader subcommittee will be nominated.

1. Introductory words:

Mrs. Loretta DORMAL MARINO, Deputy Director General DG AGRI, welcomed the members of the Coordination Committee and reviewed the agenda of the meeting.

This Coordination Committee was convened in accordance with the Commission Decision 2008/168/EC setting up the organizational structure for the European Network for Rural Development. This first meeting is an important step in the preparation of the activities of the network, and in particular of the work programme for 2008-2009. A contribution to the choice and to the coordination of thematic work was also expected from the Committee. Mrs Dormal also stressed that it was important to aim at a high level of quality, and that the Committee had an important role to play in this respect.

2. Presentation of the objectives and structures of the European network, presentation of the Contact Point, by John Loughheed, Head of Unit G3, DG Agriculture and Rural Development (See the presentation attached)

Mr. John LOUGHEED presented the legal framework, structures and tasks of the European Network for Rural Development 2007-2013 and briefly introduced the EN RD Contact Point.

3. Experiences of national networks: presentations by representatives of national rural networks (NRNs) (See the 2 presentations attached)

Presentation of the Finnish Network by Päivi KUJALA:

Mrs. Päivi Kujala, Head of the Rural Network Unit, Finland, introduced the Finnish NRN. There are 2 Rural Development programmes in Finland: for the Finnish mainland and Åland, and there are two languages: Finnish and Swedish.

Presentation of the Italian Network by Alessandro MONTELEONE:

Mr. Alessandro Monteleone introduced the Italian NRN, which has been in operation for one year now, and which has a total budget of EUR 80 millions for the whole period.

Ad-hoc presentation of the Network of the Netherlands by Mr. Henk KIEFT: (there are no slides for this presentation). Mr. Kieft introduced the Dutch NRN as a part of the discussion. It was set up in October 2007 with a budget of EUR 4 millions. The NRN is outsourced to an external agency, but it has a good communication with the Ministry.

This has meant broadening the network from Leader:

- Cooperation with multifunctional farmers;
- Support in making the municipalities more professional and strengthening their knowledge;
- Social domain: to involve rural stakeholders (because so far has concentrated on agriculture/landscape mostly, but as yet not the social domain);
- Focus on themes: urban pressure (city – country relationship, with the focus to mobilize the demand in the cities), young people in rural areas, financing regional/local development funds.

4. The state of play of establishment of the national rural networks: an overview by the Contact Point, by Martin LAW, Group leader, EN RD Contact Point (please find the presentation attached)

Mr. Law presented a comparative analysis of the NRNs in the EU Member States.

5. Presentation of the draft work programme of the Contact Point, by István FEHÉR, Team leader, EN RD Contact Point (see the presentation attached)

Mr. Feher summarised the 1st year draft work programme of the EN RD Contact Point:

- Core functions and tools: The work-programme is structured around seven service codes and three core tools;
- The services of the Contact Point;
- Communication tools: Website + thematic exchange facility; seminars and conferences; publications etc.

6. Discussion with all members: (11.40 – 13.00)

Participants were given the floor to explain what their views and priorities are.

Some representatives of the National Networks took the opportunity of the discussion to provide information on their progress to date and the stage of development of their own network:

- The Cypriot NRN will be set up by the end of the year, the process of establishing the NRN is under way (administrative/legal framework and infrastructure: building, equipment is in place, the personnel are being selected).
- The Greek NRN is within the Ministry, and it covers all the four axes. GR would like to cooperate especially with other networks, which are located within the ministries/administration. Some questions were raised as regards the LAGs involvement in the networks, and the involvement of other organizations. Do the administrative

- bodies cooperate with each other? How exactly will they network? How exactly will the cooperation with the evaluation helpdesk be?
- The French NRN is under the joint responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture and the DIACT (Inter-Ministerial Department for the management and competitiveness of territories). It has been operational for 6 months. There are 26 national/regional level organisations.

Major points raised during the discussion:

- The challenge of the EN RD, as well as of the national networks, will be to put into practice the operation of the network. Links with the local stakeholders will have to be established. Reaching the final beneficiaries and communicating with them in way which could contribute to simplifying the understanding of the European RD policy will be a key of success of this network.
- The EN RD will have to contribute to highlighting the added-value of the Rural Development policy, notably for key stakeholders, who are not always convinced of its effectiveness.
- A risk was seen that the EU network would rely too much on the national networks, to provide information and relay information. An adequacy has to be found between the activities at EU level and the capacities of its Contact Point.
- The EN RD should work with the issue of simplification, also in terms of the EN RD itself: it should not become too complicated in terms of procedures and structures.
- A special attention should be given to farmers, as they are the primary target group of the RD policy, and to the multifunctional agriculture which is at the centre of the RD policy
- Complementarity with other existing networks will be an important aspect, notably at national level.
- The complementarity and role of the EN RD in regard to evaluation should be made fully clear.
- It was recommended to have at least one language of the new Member States used during the meetings of the Coordination Committee, and if possible, more than one language for the related documents.

7. The specific thematic activities for 2008-2009: Proposals for thematic priorities and organisation of thematic working groups, by Gaëlle Lhermitte, DG AGRI/G.3 (See presentation attached)

Ms. Lhermitte presented the proposed specific activities of the EN RD for the period 2008-2009, introducing the state of play of the EN RD and the current steps to be taken as regards the setting up of :

- the structures and the services and tools,
- the creation of thematic groups (Theme 1: "Targeting territorial specificities and needs in RD programmes"; Theme 2: "Agriculture and the wider rural economy"; Theme 3: "Public goods and public intervention (for later launch)"),
- specific seminars (seminar 1 on "Capacity building and the setting-up of national networks", seminar 2 on "Modernisation of semi-subsistence farms", and seminar 3 on "Innovation for the new environmental challenges"),
- and an expert group on "policy delivery and governance".

8. Discussion: (15.00 – 16.00)

Summary of major points raised:

- Several members of the Coordination Committee thought the proposals for specific activities for 2008/2009, including the themes of the thematic working groups, were globally interesting and could possibly be agreed upon. However they stressed that they would need to have more time to have a consultation within their own organization and to look more precisely at the proposals.
- A recommendation was made for the themes of the thematic working groups to be firmly linked into Community strategies (“How rural development programmes are addressing the Community’s strategic guidelines? How can strategies be introduced at MS level, so that citizens understand how strategies are taken forward?”). The choice should also take into account citizens/contributors’ information needs, and provide support for local administrations and farmers.
- Several members also stressed the fact that the environmental challenges represented a very important issue and that treating them only within a seminar is probably not enough. The Commission was invited to consider the creation of a thematic working group on these environmental challenges. Besides a request was made for a major involvement of civil society organisations in the seminar on new challenges.
- In relation to the theme of the proposed first thematic working group, a special attention was drawn on the fact that it should not become a “big mapping exercise”.
- With respect to the first envisaged seminar, a common methodology should be found. An adequate and balanced participation in the rural networks should be ensured and there is the need to be inclusive with respect to other relevant actors (for example, the involvement of DG Regio should be encouraged at EU level).
- The role of the Coordination Committee in regard to the work of the thematic working groups should be clarified. Will it help these groups in the development of their reflections?
- A concern was expressed about the risk that the Coordination Committee could become a “think tank” with political direction, which in the long run finds entry into EU guidelines and directives etc. It was stressed that it should rather be an operational body (starting from the analysis of the context of RD programme implementation) and avoiding political advice. This was immediately confirmed by the Commission.
- For the selection of the thematic working groups, it was requested to lay down some guidelines for the selection of the themes in the future, in order to ensure an open, transparent and non-academic procedure.
- The expected outputs of the thematic working groups should be reachable for a wide audience. The results shall be readable for all types of the beneficiaries of the RD programmes. This could be achieved by envisaging a specific objective in the mandate of the thematic groups.
- A proposal was made to take into account the changes in the first pillar of CAP, and how they affect the second pillar, as an important theme to be discussed. There was a clear enthusiasm about the first seminar envisaged for 2009 which was seen to be very important for the setting up of NRNs, and for the exchange of experiences between old and new member states.
- A question was raised about how the thematic work of the NRNs could contribute to the European wide thematic working groups.
- Another question was raised about the resources available (and on what scale) to undertake the work, notably within the thematic working groups.
- Simplification was proposed to be considered as a theme in itself.
- The theme of ‘public goods’ was seen as a sensitive theme , as it will be hard to keep this out of political arena, in the context of further CAP reform.

- A question was raised on the specific RD measures which would be examined by this thematic working group.

Commission's reply:

The concern now is to provide the conceptual aspects of the work and agree on the activities.

Commission's replies and complementary points of information:

- The tasks that the European rural network has to accomplish are indicated in Art. 67 of the Regulation 1698/2005, and these will not be exceeded. Art. 67 is the starting point for the mandates of the different groups to be set up. In particular the intention is not to develop policies but to work on specific issues which will enhance the improved operation of instruments and provide practical support. The scope of the seminars is to serve the RD policy implementation (with regard to all 4 axes).
- There is no intention to create some "theoretical think tanks". The thematic groups will work on agreed themes and operative objectives. Their work will be based on concrete experiences coming from the implementation of the RD programmes, which nevertheless can bring support and provide background information to the policy process.
- Broad proposal for thematic groups' work has been proposed, but each group will refine their own specific goals and contribute to a better definition of their mandates. Themes proposed by the EC should be considered as the first ideas, but the members of the thematic working groups, can contribute to develop these ideas.
- Collaboration among different actors is seen as a basic aspect of the work of the EN RD, and other DGs than DG AGRI will be involved at EU level. The network should not be restrictive.
- With respect to the resources, the total budget available is EUR 8 millions per year of which a large part will go to the Contact Point. Logistics and additional services (e.g. translation and printing of publications) will be paid separately. The members of thematic groups (meeting at least twice per year in Brussels) will have travel expenses paid and the Contact Point can be requested to provide experts to do some support work.
- The Contact Point's annual working programme is currently being finalised.
- Members of the thematic working groups have to be chosen accordingly to the objectives of the thematic group, depending on their expertise and experience. It is necessary to provide as soon as possible proposals about names together with CVs. It is suggested to use the next two weeks to consider proposals in order for the Commission to finalise the mandate of the thematic groups by the end of the month. Only 20 members would be needed for the first 2 thematic working groups, therefore the members are requested to carefully consider their proposals for the members of thematic working groups, and not to make proposals if no good candidates are available.
- Finally the Commission came to the conclusion that, **considering the comments made by the CC members, with an overall positive feedback about the work programme of the first year, the work programme can be adopted with slight adjustments. Coordination Committee members were therefore invited to provide feedback regarding the proposed themes and specific activities 2008/2009, and to possibly propose members for the thematic working groups by 24 October 2008.**
- **With regard to the thematic working group three on "Public goods", a later start date has been considered and feed-back would be accepted until 01/11/2008.**

9. Rules of procedure of the group of experts

The members of the Coordination Committee were provided with the rules of procedure, based on the standard rules of the Expert Groups for consideration.

The EC stated that it was possible to mention individual positions in the minutes of meeting on demand, as account has to be taken of article number 9 of the draft rules of procedures, which aims at preserving the anonymity of group members.

Main elements of the discussion:

- It was proposed that the summary minutes should be translated to other languages than EN, because it is difficult to circulate the EC working documents amongst the organisations of the members of the Coordination Committee, if they are only available in one language.
- One meeting per year was seen as not enough, and would not ensure the effective work of the Thematic Working Group. The possibility offered to have more than one meeting should be used.
- Clarification was requested on the nomination of members of the Coordination Committee and their substitutes.

Commission's replies:

- The chair recognized that having the documents in other languages would be helpful for the members of the Coordination Committee, but account has to be taken of the resources available.
- The Committee must be assembled "at least once a year" according to the draft rules of procedures, but more meetings could be envisaged. The next meeting is scheduled for the end of March/ beginning of April 2009. The definite date will be fixed as soon as possible.
- As for the nomination of members, each member organisation of the Coordination Committee should indicate two persons (one member of the Coordination Committee and one substitute). Any change must be communicated to the Commission by the Member State /organization.
- The two members from Leader sub-Committee could be selected during the first meeting of the Leader sub-Committee envisaged to take place on the 26. November 2008. On this occasion it will be decided at a later stage if these two members will be always the same persons, or if there will be any kind of rotation.

10. Conclusions and next steps.

The legal framework, structures and tasks of the European Network for Rural Development 2007-2013, and the EN RD CP were introduced to the members of the Coordination Committee. A comparative analysis of the NRNs in the EU Member States was prepared and presented by the EN RD CP, as well as a summary of its 1st year draft work programme.

Concern was expressed that in order that the NRN could fulfil their tasks, significant institutional participation is needed: cooperation of stakeholders; involvement of stakeholders on a wider scale (farmers, social domains, local actors); links with formal/informal networks; inter-institutional cooperation (especially in MS where there are regional RD programmes); and international cooperation.

The proposed specific activities of the EN RD for the period 2008-2009 received positive feedback although the members of the Coordination Committee raised the question if it would be possible, after a consultation within their organisation, to submit written comments on the proposed themes and the envisaged time-frame for the experts' activities.

Therefore, in the next three weeks, Coordination Committee members should provide feedback regarding the themes proposed. **Any comments and proposals about the themes of the thematic working group 1 - 2 must be sent to the Commission by 24th October 2008, or for the thematic working group number 3, by the 1st of November 2008.**

Members of the thematic working groups have to be chosen accordingly to the objectives of the thematic group. The members of the Coordination Committee were invited to make proposals about names and CVs of experts who could provide good expertise and experience to the group, by the 24th of October 2008.

The first meeting of the Leader sub-committee is planned to take place on the 26 November 2008, in Brussels.