



Study on the ENRD and the NRNs' contribution to the implementation of EU Rural Development policy

Final Report

Written by ADE S.A., CCRI and OIR
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Study on the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and the National Rural Networks' (NRNs) contribution to the implementation of EU Rural Development policy

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ABSTRACT

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and National Rural Networks (NRNs) are part of the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy since the 2007-2013 programming period. The ENRD brings together stakeholders from across the EU and facilitates the exchange between national networks, organisations, and administrations with an interest in EU rural development. The NRNs are mainly established at national level in each Member State and bring together stakeholders involved in Rural Development.

The study highlights the causal mechanisms of networks and governance structures that contribute to the implementation of the EU Rural Development policy. The various activities carried out by the ENRD are deemed effective to involve NRNs in networking at EU level although participation is heterogeneous across Member States, notably due to language barriers. Capacity building and knowledge transfers enabled by ENRD activities improved the implementation of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and policy. The Evaluation Helpdesk's substantive support to the evaluation of RDPs improved the quality of evaluations but with little use in terms of policy learning. The organisational structure of NRNs' Network Support Units influence their efficiency; a hybrid system where policy coherence is provided by the Managing Authority and outsourcing parts of the activities is among the efficient models. The ENRD activities are coherent and complementary with the activities of the NRNs. The ENRD and the EIP-AGRI operated alongside each other with limited complementarity and synergies. Substantial EU added value is provided through stakeholders involvement and the provision of capacity building, in turn contributing to better RDP delivery and generating social capital. Finally, the network's activities were relevant to strategic needs and rural challenges.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Réseau européen pour le Développement Rural (ENRD) et les Réseaux Ruraux Nationaux (RRN) font partie du deuxième pilier de la Politique Agricole Commune depuis la période de programmation 2007-2013. Le ENRD réunit des parties prenantes de l'UE et facilite les échanges entre les réseaux, les organisations et les administrations nationales qui s'intéressent au développement rural de l'UE. Les RRN sont principalement établis au niveau national dans chaque État membre et rassemblent les parties prenantes impliquées dans le développement rural.

L'étude met en évidence les mécanismes des réseaux et des structures de gouvernance qui contribuent à la mise en œuvre de la politique de développement rural de l'UE. Les différentes activités menées par l'ENRD sont jugées efficaces pour impliquer les RRN dans la mise en réseau au niveau de l'UE, bien que la participation soit hétérogène, notamment en raison de la barrière linguistique. Le renforcement des capacités et les transferts de connaissances permis par les activités du ENRD ont amélioré la mise en œuvre des Programmes de Développement Rural (PDR). Le soutien substantiel de l'Helpdesk européen d'évaluation apporté à l'évaluation des PDR a permis d'améliorer la qualité des évaluations, mais avec peu d'utilité en termes d'apprentissage de la politique. La structure organisationnelle des Unités de Soutien au Réseau des RRN influence leur efficacité; un système hybride, où l'Autorité de Gestion assure la cohérence de la politique tout en externalisant une partie des activités, est considéré comme l'un des modèles les plus efficaces. Les activités de l'ENRD sont cohérentes et complémentaires avec les activités des RRN. L'ENRD et le PEI-AGRI ont fonctionné l'un à côté de l'autre avec une complémentarité et des synergies limitées. Une importante valeur ajoutée européenne est apportée par l'implication des parties prenantes et le renforcement des capacités, contribuant ainsi à une meilleure mise en œuvre des PDR, générant du capital social. Enfin, les activités des réseaux étaient pertinentes par rapport aux besoins stratégiques et aux défis liés à la ruralité.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	Definition
AECM	Agri-environment and climate measures
AIR	Annual Implementation Report
AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems
ARVI	Agency for Rural Development
AWP	Annual Work Plan
BMLRT	Bundesministerium für Landwirtschaft, Regionen und Tourismus (Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions, and Tourism)
BTD	Balanced Territorial Development
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CIVAM	Centre d'Initiatives pour Valoriser l'Agriculture et le Milieu rural
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
CMES	Common Monitoring and Evaluation System
CNS	Common Network Statistics
CP	Contact Point
CREA	Council for Agricultural Research and Economics
CS	Case Study
CSP	CAP Strategic Plan
CSR	Case Study Report
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG MARE	Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
DGER	Direction Générale de l'Enseignement et de la Recherche
DGPEE	Direction Générale de le Performance Economique et Environnementale des Entreprises
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EC	European Commission
EFSD	European Fund for Strategic Investments
EHD	European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development
EIP-AGRI	European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural productivity and Sustainability
ELARD	European LEADER Association for Rural Development

EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
ERCA	European Rural Community Alliance
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
EURN	European Union Rural Networks
FADN	Farm Accountancy Data Network
FARNET	Fisheries Areas Network
FAS	Farm Advisory System
FFG	Austrian Research Promotion Agency
FG	Focus Group
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GPW	Good Practice Workshops
GREXE	Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP
GTSE	Groupe de Travail Suivi Evaluation
H2020	EU Research and Innovation programme Horizon 2020
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
INRAE	Institut National de Recherche pour l'Agriculture, l'Alimentation et l'Environnement
ISMEA	"Istituto di Servizi per il Mercato Agricolo Alimentare"
JC	Judgement Criteria
LAG	Local Action Groups
LEADER	"Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale", meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions'
LINC	Logistics and Interpretation for Conferences
LTVRA	Long-term Vision for Rural Areas
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MA	Managing Authorities (at RDP level)
MAA	Ministère de l'Agriculture et de l'Alimentation
MCDR	Mobilisation collective pour le développement rural
MS	Member State
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRN	National Rural Networks

NRNP	National Rural Networks Programmes
NSPA	National Support and Procurement Agency
NSU	Network Support Unit
OE	Outsourced externally
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OI	Outsourced Internally
OG	Operational Groups
PA	Payment Agency
PAT	Projet Alimentaire Territorial
PNGRAT	Programme National Gestion des Risques et Assistance Technique
PREPARE	Partnership for Rural Europe
PSRRN	Programme spécifique Réseau Rural National (French NRN programme)
RA	Regional Antennas
RBAPS	Results-Based AGRI-environment Payments for Biodiversity
RD	Rural Development
RDP	Rural Development Programme
RN	Rural Networks
RnPAT	MCDR Project from <i>Terres en Ville (France)</i>
RRN	Regional Rural Networks
RwDR	Walloon Regional Rural Network (<i>Réseau wallon de développement Rural</i>)
SC	Steering Committee
SCAR	Standing Committee for Agricultural Research
SG	Steering Group
SGM	Steering Group Meeting
SH	Stakeholder
SP	Strategic Plan
SQ	Study Question
TA	Technical Assistance
TNC	Transnational Cooperation
TOR	Technical Specifications
TWG	Thematic Working Group
UWD	Umweltdachverband

AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BE-FL	Flanders (Belgium)
BE-Wal	Wallonia (Belgium)
BG	Bulgaria
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czechia
DK	Denmark
DE	Germany
EE	Estonia
ES	Spain
FI	Finland
FR	France
GR	Greece
HR	Croatia
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxemburg
LV	Latvia
MT	Malta
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SE	Sweden
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia
UK	United Kingdom
UK-E	England (United Kingdom)
UK-NI	Northern Ireland (United Kingdom)
UK-SC	Scotland (United Kingdom)

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Activities of the ENRD	<p>The activities of the ENRD include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of Rural Development; • Support on evaluation of RDPs; • Good practice collection and dissemination; • Thematic and analytical exchanges; • Information and communication on rural development; • Meetings, seminars and events; • Transnational cooperation; • LAGs and cooperation.
Activities of the NRNs	<p>The activities of the NRNs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good practices collection and dissemination; • Thematic and analytical exchanges; • LAGs and cooperation; • Networking for advisors and innovation services; • Dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results; • Information and communication on rural development; • Contribution to the ENRD.
Balanced territorial development (BTD)	<p>BTD of rural areas refers to the third CAP general objective. It aims for the socio-economic development of rural areas, fostering the conditions for safeguarding structural diversity and enhancing quality of life throughout the EU. This also involves territorial cohesion, while ensuring balanced and resilient conditions across all EU regions.</p>
Broader Public	<p>People with interest in certain/ specific aspects of rural development and rural development policy.</p>
Capacity building	<p>Capacity-building is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, abilities, processes and resources that organisations and communities need to evolve, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes. (United Nations, n.d.)¹</p>
Capacity development	<p>It is advised that the term capacity development is used in preference to traditional 'capacity building'. "Capacity development is understood as the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time."(OECD, EC).²</p>
Coherence	<p>The extent to which complementarity or synergy can be found within an intervention and in relation to other interventions. (DG AGRI, 2017)³</p>

¹ United Nations website, "Capacity building" <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building>.

² Ibid.

³ DG AGRI (2017) Technical Handbook for the CMEF 2014-2020.

Complementarity	The extent to which EU policies and interventions support and usefully supplement other policies (in particular those pursued by the Member States) or the fact that several public interventions (or several components of an intervention) contribute towards the achievement of the same objective. ⁴
Delivery methods	Within this study defined as variety of approaches/tools (e.g. website, social media, workshops, thematic groups, technical advice, ENRD seminars, events, etc.) used to deliver work programmes at ENRD and NRN levels.
Effectiveness	Effectiveness is defined as the extent to which objectives pursued by an intervention are achieved. Its evaluation requires being able to identify, and where possible quantify, changes because of the application of CAP instruments and measures to a particular situation, over a given period and in the context of multiple intervening factors.
Efficiency	Efficiency depicts the relationship between resources employed and the results achieved. This is considered with respect to the relevant objectives delineated in a given region via a planned intervention.
EIP-AGRI European Innovation Partnership "Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability"	- Launched by the European Commission in 2012, https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/node , EIP-AGRI is the European Innovation Partnership focusing on agricultural and forestry sectors. EIP-AGRI brings together innovation actors and creates synergies between existing policies. Its overarching aim is to foster competitiveness and sustainability in these sectors, thereby contribute to ensuring a steady supply of food, feed and biomaterials, and the sustainable management of the essential natural resources on which farming and forestry depend by working in harmony with the environment. (European Commission, 2013) ⁵ (Article 53 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013)
EIP-AGRI network	At the European level, EIP-AGRI network is run by the European Commission and has been supported since 2013 by the EIP-AGRI Service Point (by the EIP-AGRI Support Facility since 2021). It is an EU-wide network which supports EIP-AGRI activities by fostering exchange of information and interaction and by facilitating the inclusion of the different stakeholders. The EIP-AGRI Service Point acts as a facilitator in enhancing communication and cooperation between agricultural innovation actors. Through various actions and services, it promotes the setting between agricultural innovation actors, the setting up of Operational Group's and manages the sharing of experience and knowledge. The EIP-AGRI network is part of the European rural networking structures. (ADE, 2020).
EIP-AGRI OG	EIP-AGRI Operational Groups are funded under the RDP and project-based. Operational Groups bring together multiple actors such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmers; • Researchers; • Farm advisers; • Environmental groups; and • Other NGOs;

⁴ DG AGRI (2017) Technical Handbook for the CMEF 2014-2020.

⁵ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

	to investigate and promote enhanced, novel solutions to key challenges or goals for sustainable agri-rural development.
ENRD Contact Point	The Contact Point (CP) is one of two ENRD units of the ENRD with the Evaluation Helpdesk. The CP supports the operation of the ENRD. It coordinates thematic and analytic work, facilitates networking and exchange, and communicates the work and voices of the network.
ENRD European Network for Rural Development	<p>The ENRD is set for the networking of national networks, organisations, and administrations active in the field of rural development at EU level. It is a hub for exchange of information on how Rural Development policy, programs, projects and other initiatives are working in practice and how they can be improved to achieve more. It has two support units, the ENRD Contact Point and the Evaluation Helpdesk⁴.</p> <p>The ENRD aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) increase the involvement of all stakeholders; (b) improve the quality of RDP; (c) inform the broader public on Rural Development policy; (d) support the evaluation of RDPs. <p>(Article 52 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013)</p>
ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk	The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development was one of the two support units of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD). It provides specialist support to improve methods, tools, knowledge and understanding for evaluating RDPs and works under the guidance of DG Agriculture and Rural Development (current Unit A3 "Monitoring and Evaluation").
EU added value	There is EU added value when a European intervention produces results beyond what would have been achieved by Member States acting alone (EC, 2021. Better regulation guidelines).
EU Rural Development policy	The primary focus lies on the design and implementation of Rural Development policy at EU level and RDPs and future CAP strategic plans at national level.
Events	Events bring together whatever stakeholders; the ENRD CP organised 2 large scale events: the Rural vision week (2021) and about NetworkX (2019)
External coherence	Correspondence between the objectives of an intervention and those of other interventions which interact with it. ⁶
Innovation broker	Organisations/and or individuals that both act in a liaison role between the sources of new ideas and the users of those ideas in innovation networks and are also set up specifically to perform this brokering role.
Internal coherence	Correspondence between the different objectives of the same intervention. Internal coherence implies that there is a hierarchy of objectives, with those at the bottom logically contributing towards those above. ⁷

⁶ DG AGRI (2017) Technical Handbook for the CMEF 2014-2020.

⁷ Ibid.

M20.2 Rural Development "NRN/RRN support" measure	Measure M20.2 is one of the two RDP sub-measures of technical assistance (measure 20) which provide support for establishing and operating the NRNs (code: 20.2)
National Rural Networks (NRNs)	National rural networks interlink the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. Networking by the national rural network aims to ⁸ : (a) increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development; (b) improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes; (c) inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on Rural Development policy and funding opportunities; (d) foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas. (Article 54 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013)
Network Support Unit (NSU)	The central node of the NRN, charged with building up and supporting NRN operations. Runs most of the NRNs' networking activities. (European Evaluation Helpdesk, 2016) ⁹
Networking	<i>"Networking – and rural development networking is a prime example of this – is first and foremost about people. It is about coming together, developing new ways of thinking and operating, and building something new, together; something that is bigger than the sum of its individual parts; and something that benefits rural communities everywhere (ENRD CP 2019) (ENRD, 2019b)¹⁰".</i>
Networking activities ¹¹	Networking activities include NRN meetings, Thematic working groups, seminars, workshops, events (see other sections of the glossary)
Quality of RDP Implementation	According to the Thematic Group of 'Improving RDP Implementation' (ENRD, 2015c) ¹² , high quality RDP implementation includes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Addressing beneficiaries' real needs; 2. Strengthening coordination of all the stakeholders involved; 3. Ensuring higher capacity and quality of RDP management and administration; 4. Avoiding unnecessary complications in devising implementing rules; 5. Staying focused on the agreed results and being able to measure them.
Seminars	"ENRD seminars bring together the full diversity of stakeholders from across Europe to discuss latest thinking and the best ideas on a particular rural development topic. About two such seminars are

⁸ DG AGRI (2017) Technical Handbook for the CMEF 2014-2020.

⁹ European Evaluation Helpdesk (2016). Guidelines evaluation of national rural networks 2014-2020 <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/twg-02-nrn-july2016.pdf>.

¹⁰ ENRD (2019), Rural Networking in Action.

Rural Networking in Action | The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) (europa.eu).

¹¹ ENRD (2016). What is rural Networking?

¹² ENRD (2015). Improving RDP Implementation: ENRD Thematic Group Report https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tg_rdp_implementation_final_report_0.pdf.

		organised each year involving National Rural Networks, Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, Local Action Groups, European Organisations and more...". Seminars are output focused ¹³ .
Stakeholder involvement		<p>'Engaging individuals ranging from policy designers to project beneficiaries in all stages of the policy cycle: from policy-making to better implementation on the ground'. Relevant stakeholders therefore include policy designers, interest group representative bodies (organisations representing farmers, foresters, researchers, environmentalists etc.) and actors on the ground (European Evaluation Helpdesk, 2019)¹⁴</p> <p>The most direct and basic form of stakeholder involvement is the implementation of rural development projects. A higher level sees stakeholder involvement in the elaboration of regional and national level strategies that provide the framework for the delivery of rural development projects and local development strategies. An even higher level sees stakeholder involvement in the definition of European policy and programmes.¹⁵</p>
Stakeholder groups	main	<p>According to the ENRD, the main stakeholder groups can be divided into three broad categories (ENRD, 2022k)¹⁶:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy and programme designers and implementers: political decision-makers, public administrators in national, regional and local authorities (including PAs and MAs) and European institutions but also LAGs. • Interest group representative bodies and organisations such as economic and social partners, (i.e. organisations representing farmers, landowners, forest managers, rural businesses, actors along the food chain), bodies representing civil society in line with RD stakes (i.e. EU, national or regional NGO, environmental organisation), rural communities. • Local Actors on the ground: Local Action Groups, EIP-Operational Groups, agricultural advisory services, research and experimental institutes, evaluators, training bodies, agri-food and non-food chain organisations, etc. Some of these will be represented by the bodies mentioned above. <p>In this perspective, the main stakeholders of the ENRD include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Rural Networks (NRNs); • RDP Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies; • Local Action Groups (LAGs); • European organisations; • Agricultural advisory services; • Agricultural and rural researchers and; • Other interested rural development organisations and individuals.
Stakeholder mapping		A review of 'who is involved in the networks and how', which contributes to causal analysis of the links between objectives and effects and provides a basis for further study. Relationships between stakeholders are not analysed.

¹³ ENRD (2016). What is rural Networking?

¹⁴ European Evaluation Helpdesk (2019). TOOL 1.4 STAKEHOLDER MAPPING CHECKLIST https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tool_1_4_stakeholders.pdf.

¹⁵ ENRD (2015). EU RURAL REVIEW No 19: Improving stakeholder involvement <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publi-enrd-rr-19-2015-en.pdf>.

¹⁶ ENRD website, "Stakeholder involvement" https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networking/stakeholder-involvement_en.

Stakeholder (SH)	People or organisations who have a "stake" in a matter, by being either involved in or influenced by it (ENRD, 2022e) ¹⁷ .
Successful in reaching out to a stakeholder group	Through effective communication strategies, stakeholder groups are informed of key information including network events and publications. A necessary step in encouraging stakeholders to actively engage in the networks. ¹⁸
Support implementation of the RDPs	ENRD Contact Point regularly organises networking events on the topic of RDP implementation for stakeholders such as MAs, PAs and representatives of NRNs and EU institutions. Through the exchange of knowledge and experience of good practices, and supporting cooperation and capacity building, the objective is to achieve a common understanding of the RDP legal framework and implementation processes. ¹⁹
Territorial Development	Territorial development in the context of the CAP is the sustainable socio-economic development of rural areas, the promotion of conditions to safeguard the structural diversity of rural areas and the improvement of the quality of life of their inhabitants.
Territorial challenges	Social, economic and environmental problems, damage and decline in specific areas, particularly where negative conditions diverge furthest from the EU average.
Territorial engineering	The set of concepts, methods, tools and funding mechanisms made available to the actors in the territories to facilitate the design, the implementation and the evaluation of their project. (Lardon, 2016)
Thematic analytical exchanges and	<p>Thematic and analytical exchanges run by NRNs is an output indicator of the CMES (O26). It is broken down by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the number of thematic working groups set up; • number of consultations (e.g. between MA and NRN stakeholders on programme modifications; • others (trainings, web forums). <p>Of these, the focuses surveyed are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ LAGs including support to cooperation; ○ sharing and disseminating monitoring and evaluation findings; ○ advisors and/or innovation support services.
Thematic groups	The Common Network Statistics count Thematic groups. Official thematic groups are those that have a membership list and these members work on a specific topic. Thematic consultation has no membership, they are rather an ad-hoc events or a dedicated corner/workshop of an event organised on a specific topic.
Thematic work	<p>The thematic work developed by the ENRD Contact Point (CP) can be broadly divided into three main areas of Rural Development policy: a) competitiveness; b) environment; and c) social.</p> <p>The ENRD-CP has defined its work on these themes under the following headings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon Farming (new March 2022) • Sustainability Agreements (new March 2022) • Long Term Rural Vision

¹⁷ ENRD website, "In Brief" https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/about/brief_en.

¹⁸ European Evaluation Helpdesk (2019). TOOL 1.4 STAKEHOLDER MAPPING CHECKLIST https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tool_1_4_stakeholders.pdf.

¹⁹ ENRD website: "RDP Implementation" https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/policy-in-action/rdp-implementation_en.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEADER • Smart and Competitive Rural Areas • Greening the Rural Economy • Social Inclusion • Generational Renewal <p>Work under these themes can take different forms, including the creation of Thematic Working Groups of key rural development stakeholders on specific topics, the organisation of seminars and workshops, and the production of thematic publications and other information materials (ENRD, 2022b).</p>
Thematic working groups – ENRD-CP	Thematic working groups “bring together interested parties to discuss shared understanding, key messages and examples of good practice on a chosen topic. The groups usually meet 3-4 times per year and feed into the knowledge development outputs”. Thematic working groups are output based.
Thematic working groups – ENRD-EHD	<p>Thematic working groups (TWG) support the development of methodological guidance. They aim to address specific issues related to the evaluation of rural development programmes (RDPs). A thematic working group is a specific small group of named evaluation experts and is constituted to find practical solutions for a specific need or topic.</p> <p>Thematic working groups typically include the Evaluation Helpdesk’s permanent staff and external experts who work under the supervision of DG AGRI’s Unit C.4. DG AGRI in cooperation with the Evaluation Helpdesk, and in consultation with the Member States, decide which topics should be addressed through thematic working groups. The set-up, organisation and coordination of the thematic working groups fall under the responsibility of the Evaluation Helpdesk²⁰.</p>
Ways to involve stakeholders	<p>They can act as a bridge between the public authorities (one of the groups of stakeholders) and all the other stakeholders involved in or with an interest in the implementation of Rural Development policy (types b and c).</p> <p>They can support coordination, communication and capacity building among the complex chain of competent public authorities involved in the implementation of rural development (type a).</p> <p>They can help to build capacity and develop common positions among the rural development stakeholders and their representative bodies (type b and c) – here they can play a particularly important role in ensuring the weakest groups are heard. In addition, rural networks can help reach out to a broader concerned audience, both within public bodies, civil society and the general public.²¹</p>
Workshops	Workshops “are capacity-building events targeted at key invited stakeholders engaged in the implementation or evaluation of the Rural Development Programmes. They focus on improving technical delivery based on existing good practice ²² .”

²⁰ Source: website of the ENRD- EHD, https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/thematic-working-groups_en#:~:text=A%20thematic%20working%20group%20is,4.

²¹ DG AGRI (2017) Technical Handbook for the CMEF 2014-2020.

²² ENRD (2016). What is rural Networking?

1 INTRODUCTION

This is the final report of the study of the "contribution of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and the National Rural Networks' (NRNs) to the implementation of EU Rural Development policy"²³.

The study encompasses the tasks of the ENRD and the NRNs established under Articles 52 and 54 of the Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 (Rural Development Regulation). Links with the Common Provisions Regulation, other structural funds regulations and other CAP instruments will also be considered in the study, to the extent possible.

The study covers the EU-27 and the United Kingdom. It concerns the 2014-2020 programming period, with the 2007-2013 period serving as a benchmark.

The overall aim is to assess how the rural networks (ENRD) at EU level and the NRNs at national level contribute to the EU Rural Development policy. This policy, also called the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), concerns 118 Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) implemented at national or regional level in the Member States (MS) for the 2014-2020 programming period²⁴.

The study had four phases, as follows:

- Structuring: End of December – 2 February 2022;
- Observing: 3 February 2022 to 2 June 2022;
- Analysing: 3 June to 19 August/ 19 October 2022;
- Judging: 20 August/October to 19 December 2022.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 presents the description of the study topic, including the integration of networking in Rural Development policy, the presentation of the European networks and their governance structures, their intervention logic and a short historical overview of the objectives and activities.
- Section 2 details the methodology used in the study, as well as the limitations faced.
- Section 3 includes the replies to the 15 study questions (SQ), covering all six themes (causal analysis, effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value).
- Section 4 presents the conclusions, regrouped per theme.
- Section 5 presents the recommendations issued from the study analysis and conclusions.

The executive summary (in English and in French) and the PowerPoint are presented in separate documents.

²³ The study is commissioned by DG AGRI (*Reference AGRI-2017-0319. Order number AGRI-2021-0325*).

²⁴ France, Germany, Italy and Spain have numerous regional RDPs (from 3 to 30) (as well as BE (2), FI (2), PT (3), UK (4)).

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY TOPIC

2.1 Integration of networking in the Rural Development Policy

Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has sought to ensure a positive and supportive policy framework for farming and, since 2000, to aid the development of rural areas in a sustainable way. For over thirty years, the CAP has been through successive reforms which have gradually increased its market orientation for agriculture, while providing ongoing income support and safety net mechanisms for producers, as well as funding structural and environmental change. The 2nd Pillar of the CAP, introduced in 2000, progressively acknowledged balanced territorial development and encompassed it under rural development. Pillar 2 covers competitiveness, integration of environmental concerns (since 2000), quality of life and economic activities in rural areas (since 2007), then social exclusion and rural poverty (since 2014).

The challenges facing agriculture and rural areas are numerous and evolve over time. In 2006, they were mainly socio-economic (food security, declining productivity growth, price volatility, relatively weak position of farmers in the food supply chain), environmental (resource efficiency, soil and water quality and threats to biodiversity) and territorial (demographic, economic and social issues, relative poverty, socio-economic decline, and social exclusion) (European Commission, 2006). Since 2013, the environmental challenges have increasingly been taken into account and issues linked to climate change have become prominent (carbon sequestration, climate change mitigation...). Nowadays the digitalisation of rural areas is an important challenge to connect different territories efficiently and help reduce gaps. Since 2020, the Farm to Fork strategy, an important element of the European Green Deal, has set a framework for European policies to redesign sustainable and resilient food systems and rural development has a large role in this process. In the same period (2019), a landmark feature for rural development policy was the endorsement of the Long-term vision for rural areas (LTVRA). This initiative was launched by the European Commission, following the update of uncovered needs in rural areas (subsequent to Cork 2.0). Challenges include declining rural population, the lack of accessibility to basic services, the lack of quality jobs in those areas, climate change and environmental challenges (Slee, et al., 2021). Henceforth, the LTVRA, as highlighted in its Communication, puts a strong focus on specific needs and aims to encourage debates on their future, with the overarching goal of creating a shared, European vision on four key objectives: stronger, prosperous, connected and more resilient rural areas. To achieve these goals, an emphasis was put on the use of a participatory, innovative and multi-stakeholder approach (European Commission, 2021c).

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and National Rural Networks (NRNs) were first introduced into the CAP's Rural Development policy in the 2007-2013 programming period (European Commission, 2005). LEADER which had run as a community initiative (since 1991) was also mainstreamed in the EU Rural Development policy in 2007.

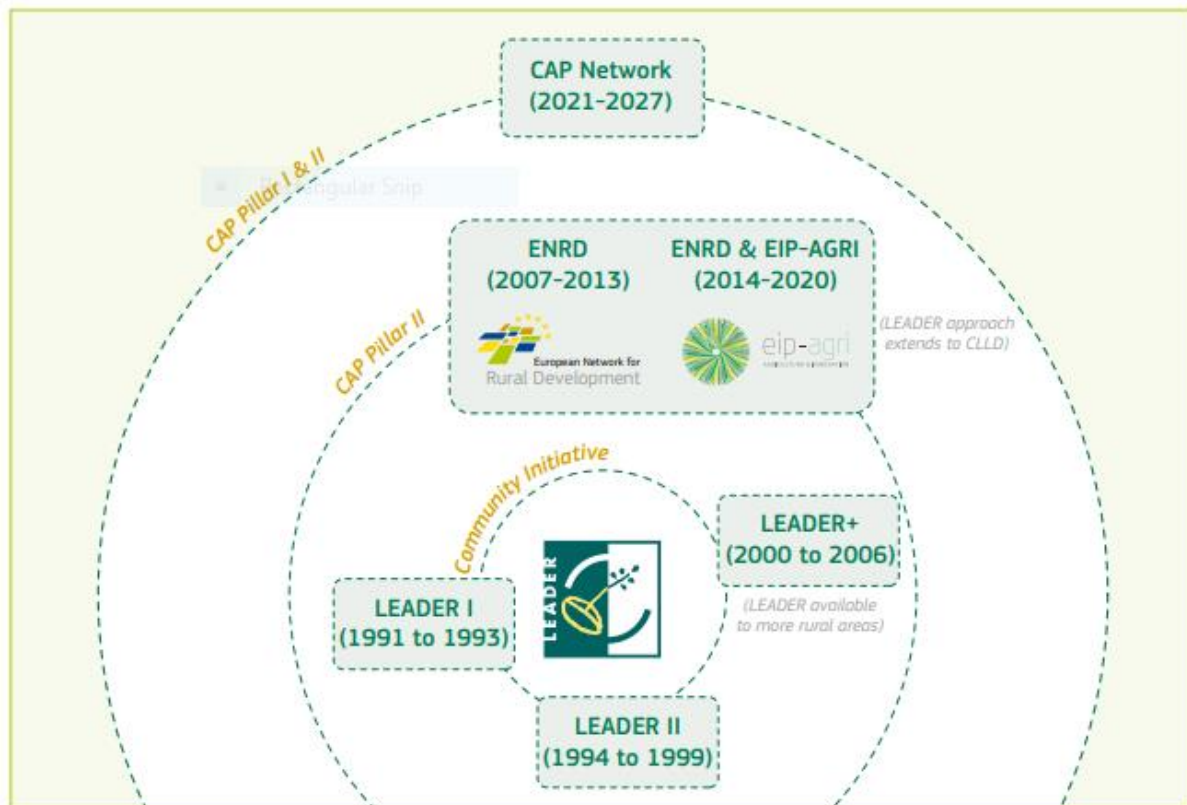
LEADER has led the way in demonstrating how networking is valuable to broaden the reach of Rural Development policy in rural areas. One of the important features of the LEADER approach²⁵ is to be bottom-up, meaning that local actors are involved in decision-making in their local area: selection of priorities and strategies (ENRD, 2022m). The challenges faced in rural areas are very diverse (see above), ranging from depopulation in remote territories to increasing pressure from cities in peri urban areas. LEADER considers that local actors are in the best position to tackle territorial and local challenges based on their capacity to create endogenous development. Its objectives were then to "draw on local initiative and skills, promote the acquisition of know-how on local integrated development and disseminate this know-how to other rural areas" (ENRD, 2019a).

Evaluations of the LEADER approach in the Community Initiative highlighted its successes. A growing acknowledgement that development occurs when people share or exchange ideas, information and resources, illustrated the important role of networks and networking in rural development (European Commission, 2005). This led to increased funding of LEADER since the mid-1990s. Cooperation and networking at larger scales than the local level also started

²⁵ LEADER is based on 7 principles.

to be promoted and top-down networking structures were created at the EU level, such as a Coordinating Unit and later the LEADER Observatory, to organise the cooperation between Local Action Groups (LAGs). In 2007, the NRNs and the ENRD were introduced in the Rural Development policy, following the bottom-up and networking approach of LEADER. These networks had the objective to support LEADER's approach by creating hubs that connected rural development stakeholders throughout first Member States and then the European Union (EU). They aimed at facilitating the exchange of knowledge and ideas among rural development stakeholders and ultimately help achieve Europe's rural development goals. Their networking activities "target the emergence of behavioural change, social change and the enhancement of human capital" (European Commission, 2005). The success of the Leader approach also influenced Cohesion Policy that introduced Community Led local Development (CLLD) and made LAGs beneficiaries of ERDF and ESF in 2014-2020 and is extending this for 2021-2027 programming period offering in addition this opportunity also to the "Just Transition Fund".

Figure 1: The evolution of rural networking at EU level



Source: (ENRD, 2019a)

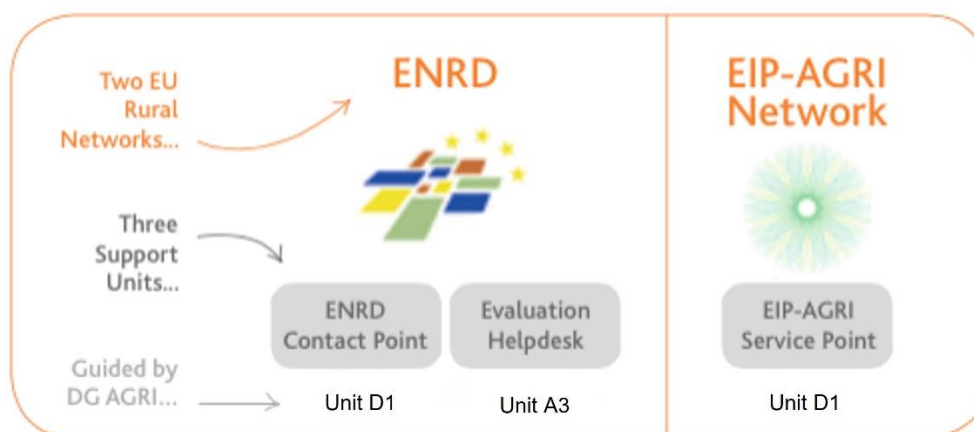
The ENRD and NRNs aim to facilitate interactions between rural development stakeholders, connect people (face-to-face or online), build relationships, create opportunities for discussion, inform on the RDPs and raise awareness. The ENRD and the NRNs are one of drivers among other instruments of change and tools for creating an environment favourable to a sustainable rural development. They stimulate local capacity to overcome territorial challenges and should lead to more effective development actions and innovation. Their main added value for Rural Development policy implementation relies on capacity building, improved stakeholder involvement and better Rural Development Programme (RDP) delivery.

The ENRD and the NRNs are formalised financed networks. Policy interventions aim to improve their performance. Spontaneous networks do not guarantee the continuity of networking activities and links because the latter only relies on voluntary contributions (Peters, R. ; Gregory, M., 2014). Moreover, spontaneous networks do not necessarily achieve a balance between strong and weak ties: by omitting marginalised groups, they might not be fully inclusive, missing out on potential benefits for both the left-out groups and for the networks themselves. Hence, policy interventions add value by improving network performance (including effectiveness, efficiency, inclusiveness, equity).

2.2 The Networks

At EU level, the **European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)** facilitates the networking of national networks, organisations and administrations. The ENRD works in parallel to the **European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI)** which focuses on innovation and knowledge transfer.

Figure 2: The ENRD and support units



Source: (EU Rural Networks, 2018)

The ENRD is supported by two support units, the *ENRD Contact Point* and the *European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development*.

➤ The **Contact Point**:

- supports ENRD operations, such as thematic work and analysis, network and exchange activities and communications.
- contributes to three out of the four ENRD objectives (see intervention logic in section 1.3): it aims to increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of Rural Development policy, improve the quality of RDPs and inform the broader public on the benefits of Rural Development policy.
- facilitates networking and exchange. It notably organises NRN meetings, Thematic Working Groups (TWG), seminars, capacity building workshops and events. For RDP knowledge development, the ENRD-CP undertakes various activities such as the collect of good practices and the analysis of rural development. These are often disseminated through a range of documents such as factsheets, brochures, thematic publications. Finally, the ENRD focuses on communication of information on rural development which often takes place through the ENRD website, newsletters, magazines and social media outlets (European Commission, 2013).
- works with **National rural networks** to facilitate exchanges at the EU level and supports them in implementing thematic and analytical activities in their respective Member States. The *ENRD-CP* organises European **NRN meetings** and further supports them through dedicated thematic workshops based on their needs and demands. Three NRN meetings were organised per year from 2015 onwards. These meetings were dedicated to collecting the needs of NSUs, promote networking between them, provide relevant information and contribute to capacity building of NSU members. These meetings are hosted by the NRNs and the topics are often proposed directly by them, based on their needs.
- conducts **thematic work** in relation to priorities identified by the Rural Networks' governance structure in concertation with stakeholders' needs. It relies on **Thematic Working Groups (TWG)** to explore specific rural development issues, identify good practices and produce policy recommendations. They cover a large range of subjects, such as smart and competitive rural areas, greening the rural economy or social inclusion (see section 2.4.1 and 2.4.2). These working groups support the implementation of workshops and seminars to help spread knowledge on the issues

at the EU level. The *ENRD-CP* ensures that information is relayed through its communication tools.

- supports **capacity building** and peer exchanges for rural development stakeholders, namely RDP **Managing Authorities** and **Paying Agencies, EC Desk officers, NRNs (NSU) and LEADER.**

Capacity building

In 2015, a **thematic working group** dedicated to "Improving RDP implementation" met three times and produced a final report, which supported the drafting of the 20th **EU Rural Review** dedicated to the same theme (2015 AWP). It led to:

- Identify key priorities and challenges in terms of programmes' delivery and performance.
- Identify and illustrate possible approaches and solutions to be adopted for addressing the recognised needs and opportunities, highlighting the possible role of rural networks.
- Raise awareness of practical and administrative constraints to delivery and highlight needs for further action.
- Share experiences in delivering approaches and distil factors for success (or failure).

The ENRD CP further conducted yearly several **workshops about the simplification and performance of RDPs**. These workshops covered various questions related to the improvement of RDP implementation²⁶. Participants to these workshops are mainly stakeholders from Managing Authorities, EU institutions and Paying Agencies (annual implementation reports Y2 to Y7). The results of each workshop are disseminated through summary fiches and dedicated website publications, which can then be used by programme managers to support their activities. From 2017/2018 onwards, workshops were focused on the future CAP Strategic Plans.

NRNs through their NSU were supported in their ability to increase SH involvement, improve RDP implementation and communicate widely. Throughout the years, more emphasis was placed on integrating the thematic work of the ENRD into NRN-centred activities, as well as on promoting enhanced NRN communication.

In 2019, the CP organised a seminar on key steps for CAP strategic planning and two follow-up workshops focusing on specific themes within the CAP strategic plans. It also organised the **NetworX event** to celebrate the first ten years of rural networking.

Lastly, the *ENRD-CP* collaborates closely with **LEADER Local Actions Groups** to promote Community-Led Local Development and strengthen their implementation capacity through thematic workshops. Throughout its capacity building activities, the CP focuses on facilitating peer exchange and ensures the dissemination of results through various communication tools (ENRD website, newsletter, magazines, and social media outlets).

- The **European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development (EHD)** provides specialist support on evaluating RDPs. The EHD contributes to the fourth objective (see intervention logic in section 1.3) supporting Member States and DG AGRI in their evaluation activities, by organising workshops, thematic working groups, capacity building and training activities as well as the development of methodologies and tools for evaluating the RDPs in their different dimensions, in particular:
 - Organises **thematic working groups** dealing with specific aspects related to the monitoring and evaluation of the RDPs. These groups are composed of experts from the EHD permanent staff and external experts, as well as DG AGRI and MS representatives. Topics for the TWG are decided within the GREXE (see governance).
 - **Elaborates guidance**, addressing specific evaluation challenges often as the result of thematic working groups. The guidance documents produced by the TWGs are a key output of the EHD, as it serves as guidelines for evaluators working on RDPs as the MS or regional level. Elaborated guidance is disseminated through capacity

²⁶ For instance, workshops on RDP Implementation, Selection Criteria, Measure 16, Investing in Rural viability and vitality, Agri- environmental Climate Measures (AECM), Areas facing Natural and other specific Constraints (ANC), Farm Resilience, Natura 2000, The future CAP, Addressing bottlenecks in RDP implementation and preparing for the Performance Review, Smart rural communities, Technologies to face climate change, Skills of the future, Supporting businesses to innovate, Attracting young farmers and fostering generational renewal in rural areas, Risk Management, Simplified Cost Options under the EAFRD.

building events conducted yearly in all Member States (EvaluationWORKS!), specific training to desk officers (DG AGRI), answering queries etc. Guidance is further disseminated via communication, factsheets, practical guidelines, synthesis and assessments.

- Besides this methodological guidance, the EHD also contributes to capacity building through various **workshops and events on evaluation methods and good practices** for Managing Authorities evaluation units, Paying Agencies, EC Desk officers, NRNs (NSU) and LAG's members as well as researchers and evaluators.
- Directly **answers specific evaluation queries** received from Managing Authorities or other stakeholders involved in RDP evaluation. Answers to most relevant or recurrent questions, are published online for stakeholders to consult.
- Supports the **communication and networking on evaluation-related activities** among the different actors and strengthening the exchanges of good practices among Member States; EHD also contributes to **NRN meetings**.

At Member State level, **National rural networks (NRNs) (or regional rural networks, RRN)** bring together the organisations and administrations active in rural development within EU Member States and regions.

NRN activities consist of thematic and analytical exchanges (which include meetings of thematic working groups), good practice collection and dissemination, the training of local action groups (LAGs) and provision of technical assistance to transnational cooperation, provision of networking for advisors and innovation services, the dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results, communicating information on rural development and contributing to ENRD activities.

2.2.1 European networks governance structure and core stakeholders

The ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network are governed by two formal structures according to Commission Implementing Decision 2014/825/EU (European Commission, 2014): the **Rural Networks' Assembly** and the **Rural Networks' Steering Group**.

The Assembly gathers up to 200 members once a year, providing direction, advice and a strategic framework for network activities and thematic work, and ensuring monitoring and assessment. It acts as a platform for the exchange of priorities and concerns among private and public stakeholders, thereby highlighting key issues to focus on in the upcoming year (ENRD, 2022c). It involves:

- governmental representatives (28 PAs and 28 MAs);
- civil and local representatives (28 LEADER LAGs, 25 EU NGOs, 3 regional/local authority organisations);
- innovation representatives (28 Agricultural Advisory Services, 28 Agricultural Research Institutes);
- NRN representatives (28 NRNs).

The Assembly also has two permanent sub-groups on:

- **Innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability** (EIP-AGRI, 2021) – a group, 'working with the EIP-AGRI Service Point (and EIP-AGRI Support Facility since 2021) to catalyse innovation and make EU agriculture and forestry more sustainable and more productive'. It is supported by the EIP-AGRI Service Point. This subgroup is attended by Managing Authorities, agricultural advisory service providers, agricultural research institutes, local authorities and civil society representatives. In total, there are 56 member organisations in this group.
- **LEADER and Community-Led Local Development** (ENRD, 2022f) – a large group of 96 stakeholders which aims to 'contribute to improving the quality of LEADER/CLLD implementation' through monitoring Measure and Transnational Cooperation projects, identifying common issues and good transferable practices and stimulating peer learning and capacity building. It is supported by the ENRD Contact Point.

The **Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE)** acts as a platform for exchange between the Commission and Member States, acting in lieu of a sub-group on evaluation. It is supported by the ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk. (EU Rural Networks Governance, 2019).

Thematic working groups and focus groups may also be set up to carry out individual, temporary assignments for the networks (ENRD, 2015a).

The Steering Group meets 2-3 times per year and aims to monitor the work of the EU RNs and ensure good coordination of thematic work. The Assembly selects its members, of which there are currently up to 48 from (ENRD, 2022d):

- 28 NRNs/Mas;
- 4 Evaluation authorities;
- 12 EU Organisations;
- 4 Agricultural Advisory Services/Research Institutes.

Main stakeholders include *policy and programme designers and implementers* such as NRNs, RDP Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies, Local Action Groups (LAGs), and *interest groups and actors on the ground* such as European organisations, agricultural advisory services and agricultural and rural researchers (ENRD, 2015b).

Other rural actors may less regularly participate in selected themes and events and networks often also include passive members, such as sections of the broader public, who have a general interest in Rural Development policy but do not actively participate.

2.2.2 NRN Membership and main Governance Bodies

2.2.2.1 NRN Membership

Of the 32 NRNs, for 22 the membership is informal and open to all interested parties, including individuals, organisations involved in agriculture and LAGs, enabling them to participate in network activities and/or decision-making. Ten NRNs are however only open to organisations working in the field of rural development (BE-Wal, BG, CY, DK, ES, FR, GR, LT, LU, SE). In France, applying organisations had to specify which of the seven sectorial colleges they wanted to join. Of these, five run a formal application procedure (BE-Wal, CY, GR, LT, SE). For example, the Swedish NRN requires potential members to state their fields of interest, competences and their level of involvement foreseen. Luxembourg is closed to new organisations (ENRD, 2022i).

2.2.2.2 Main Governance Bodies

The main governance structures of the NRN are those who provide the strategic framework with direction and advice for the yearly activities and thematic work. These are quite diverse across the EU as shown by the Y5 Screening on NRN Programming and Action Plans (ENRD, 2020b)²⁷. Some are like the European structure with an Assembly, a Steering Group and permanent sub-groups (France), others have simpler structures. Changes may have occurred since 2018.

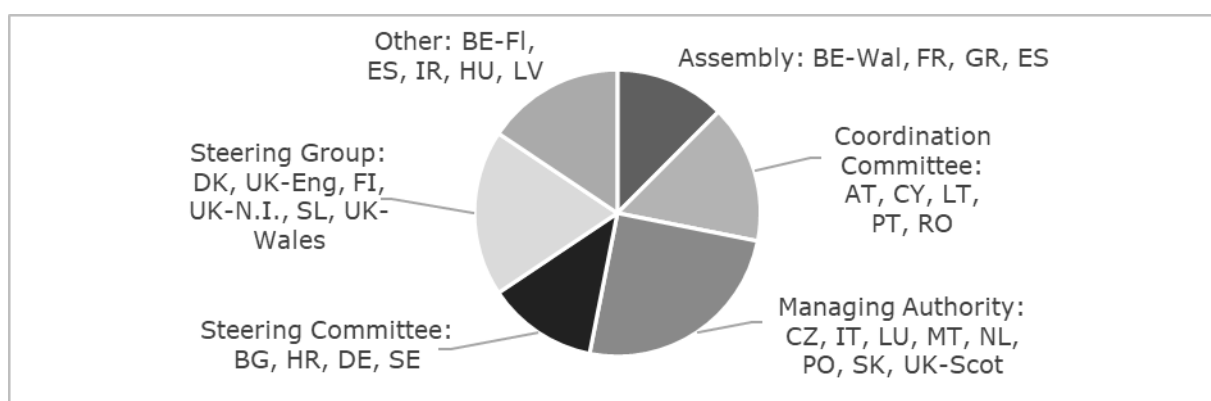
The **leading governance bodies of NRNs** can be grouped into six types:

- A formal **Assembly of representatives of all core stakeholders** participating in strategic decision-making. Four NRNs (BE-Wal, FR, ES, GR) have a formal Assembly (called Permanent Committee in Wallonia), where core stakeholders participate in strategic decision-making. In France, Spain and Greece, these are supported by a Steering Committee and sub-groups (notably LEADER and Innovation).
- **Coordination Committees** are a central governance body in five NRNs (notably AT). These can create thematic working groups on an ad-hoc basis.
- **Managing Authorities** taking the lead in signing off annual work plans and supervising all structures within the NRN is the case in eight NRNs; they are diversely supported.

²⁷ ENRD (2020). Y5 RDP Screening on NRN programming and action plans (2020) y5_rdp_screening_nrns_summary_report.pdf (europa.eu).

- **Steering Committees** taking the lead, usually consisting of a **small number of representatives of the core stakeholders** and tasked with monitoring, advising and approving NRN activities and programmes, including NRN Action Plans (in four NRNs).
- **Steering Groups** govern six NRN. They have different compositions. They may consist of members of the ministries tasked with implementing the RDP (DK). In Slovenia, they are composed of 19 members – 8 national public institutions such as MA, PA, public institutes, and universities, 4 economy and social partner institutions and 7 NGOs. Members of the NRN SG are officially nominated by the Minister of agriculture. Members provide feedback on the Action and Communication Plan of the NRN, NRN annual implementation plans and annual reports.
- The remaining NRNs feature a variety of other governance bodies.

Figure 3: NRN leading governance bodies



Source: Y5 RDP Screening on NRN Programming and Action Plans (ENRD, 2020b)

2.2.2.3 Organisation of NRNs

National rural networks (NRNs) bring together the organisations and administrations active in rural development within Member States and regions. They are mostly established at national level, with some organised at regional level. **Across the EU-28 there are 32 "NRNs"**: 26 Member States with 1 NRN each and 2 Member States, Belgium and the UK, with respectively 2 and 4 regional rural networks (RRNs). These RRNs are counted in the 32 because there are no national NRNs. Germany and France also have RRNs, but these are not counted as they also have NRNs.

At the central operations level is the Commissioning Party, often the Managing Authority of the RDP, but sometimes an organisation or coalition of governmental and civil society institutions, which sets up the NRN and commissions the **Network Support Unit (NSU)** to build up and operate the NRN.

NSU structures are heterogeneous at EU level; they have been set-up in various ways.

2.2.2.4 NRNs within the RDP or as specific NRN Programmes

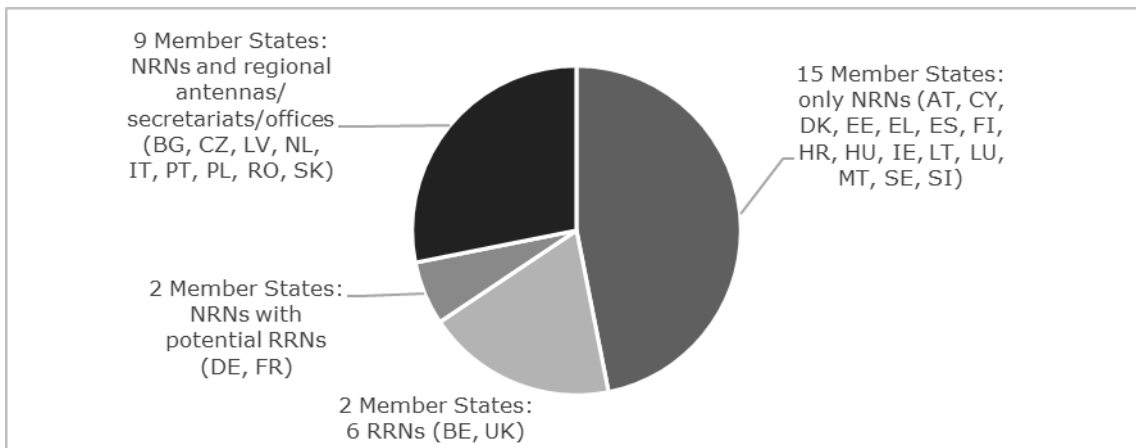
NRNs are funded by RDP measure 20.2., under Technical Assistance. **Usually, NRNs are implemented within their** respective national/regional **RDPs**. Three Member States in which RDPs are implemented at regional level have established **National Rural Network Programmes (NRNP)**, namely **Germany, France and Italy** (European Evaluation Helpdesk, 2016), financed through Technical Assistance.

2.2.2.5 NRN national/regional and NSU

Four types of national/regional/decentralised structures can be observed across Member States:

- 26 Member States have National RNs, of which three different categories can be observed:
 - NRNs established only at national level;
 - NRNs with regional antennas/secretariats/ offices;
 - NRNs and some RRNs associated with regional RDPs.
- 2 Member States have only RRNs.

Figure 4: National and Regional NRNs and RRNs

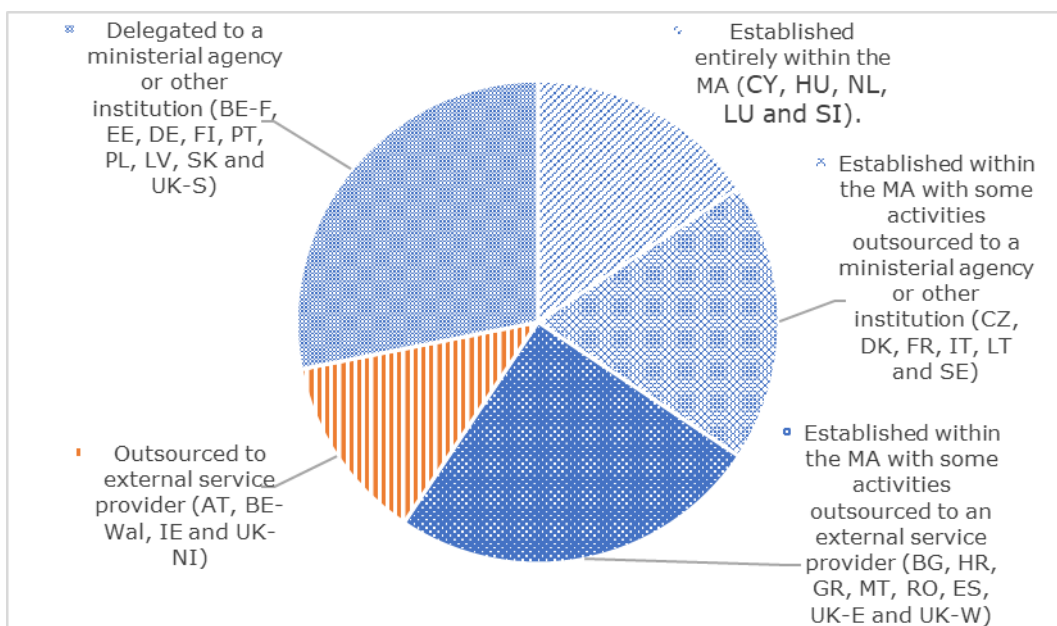


Source: 1st NRN Mapping Report - 2014-2020: Starting-up the NSUs (ENRD, 2015d); Y5 Screening of RDPs NSU set-up: in-house or outsourced NSU (ENRD, 2020b)

2.2.2.6 NSU set-up

To handle daily operations, the NRNs have Network Support Units (NSUs). Figure 5 uses data from 2018 (ENRD, 2020a) to show how NSUs have been set up in the different Member States.

Figure 5: NSU in-house or outsourced



Source: (ENRD, 2020b) Y5 RDP Screening on NRN programming and action plans

Member States may establish **NSUs within the Managing Authority (MA)** and/or **outsource partially or completely the NSUs' activities** to a ministerial agency or other public institutions, or to an external service provider.

Figure 5 shows that across Member States, NSUs are mainly established within the managing authority. Specifically:

- Six of the NSUs are set up within the managing authority only (CY, GR, *HU*²⁸, NL, LU and SI); these NSUs have **no single outsourced activities**;
- A group of 15 NSUs **outsourced** all or some activities **internally**:
 - Six managing authority operated NSUs (CZ, DK, FR, IT, LT and SE), and **have outsourced some activities** to ministerial agencies, or other public institutions (outsourced internal);
 - Nine MA-operated NSUs have been **completely delegated** to ministerial agencies or other institutions (BE-Flanders, EE, DE, FI, PT, PL, LV, SK and UK-SC).
- A group of 11 NSUs **outsourced** all or some activities to **external service providers (Outsourced Externally)**:
 - Seven NSUs based within the managing authority have outsourced certain functions or activities to external service providers (BG, HR, MT, RO, ES, UK-England and UK -Wales);
 - Four (*five since 2020*) NSUs are fully outsourced to external service providers (AT, BE-Wal, IE, *HU (since 2020)* and UK-Northern Ireland)²⁹.

2.3 Intervention logic

The intervention logic of the ENRD and NRNs illustrates causal relationships and show how, in theory, the inputs (network activities and governance) should lead to expected results and impacts.

EU Regulation N°1305/2013 (Article 52 and Article 54) (European Commission, 2013) forms the starting point, establishing the network at EU level (the ENRD) and the networks at national level (NRNs).

Four objectives are assigned to the European and to the national levels. Three objectives are common to both levels (in green in Figure 6 overleaf).

The ENRD has four explicit regulatory objectives in the 2014-2020 programming period (European Commission, 2013):

- 1) increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development,
- 2) improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes,
- 3) play a role in informing the broader public on the benefits of rural development policy,
- 4) support the evaluation of rural development programmes.

The first three objectives are strictly identical to the national level. At EU level, innovation is supported by the EIP-AGRI network. At national level, the networks (NRNs) ensure the role of innovation support or brokerage³⁰.

²⁸ Hungary's NSU was initially located in the Prime Minister's Service. It has been outsourced recently, in 2020, according to an interview with the ENRD.

²⁹ The NSU set-up has been recorded differently in the 2015 publication 'Starting-up the NSUs the state-of-play of National Rural Networks & Network Support Units'. There it is reported that six NSUs are entirely established within MAs, six NSUs are established within MAs but partially delegate tasks to a ministerial agency or other public body and nine were partially outsourced to an external provider. Four were entirely outsourced to a ministerial agency and six were entirely outsourced to an external service provider.

³⁰ Two major differences can be noted between the European and National levels. (1) At EU level, the support to innovation is not covered by the ENRD but by a different network structure, the EIP-AGRI network, whereas NRNs at national level cover fostering innovation. (2) A specific support to evaluation is included at EU level. This is materialised by a specific support unit, the ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk, providing support at EU level and to Member State at national level.

The NRNs also have four regulatory objectives. They aim to:

- 1) increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development,
- 2) improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes,
- 3) inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities,
- 4) foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas (European Commission, 2013).

To achieve these objectives, the ENRD and NRNs implement several networking activities, summarised in **Figure 6**.

A link is also made by the Common Provisions' Regulation. According to Article 54 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, each Member State shall establish an NRN, which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. **The partnership agreement referred to Article 5 of Common provisions** (see Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013) **shall also be part of NRN**, which include the following partners: competent public Authorities, economic and social partners and relevant bodies representing civil society, including environmental partners, NGOs, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination.

The **ENRD at EU level** has the Evaluation Helpdesk and ENRD Contact Point as support units. **32 national and regional level NRNs** (26 Member States national networks plus 2 and 4 regional networks for Belgium and the UK respectively) have the NSUs as their core operating units.

The ENRD governance structure is depicted, including the Assembly and the Steering Group consisting of representatives of various EU and national/regional stakeholder organisations, including governmental, civil and local, innovation and NRN organisations. It also depicts the permanent sub-groups on innovation and LEADER which operate under the Assembly. Although the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE) is not a permanent sub-group, it is also part of the governance structure (Keller G; Zona A, 2019)³¹.

The ENRD and NRN activities are shown, some of which are complementary at EU and national/regional levels. Activities of the ENRD solely are the analysis of rural development, evaluation support and transnational cooperation. Activities of the NRN solely are contributions to the ENRD, dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results and the networking of advisors and innovation services. Both the ENRD and NRN carry out meetings, seminars and events, thematic and analytical exchanges, information and communication on rural development, LAGs cooperation and good practices collection and dissemination.

A number of **specific results are expected** from these networking activities, such as:

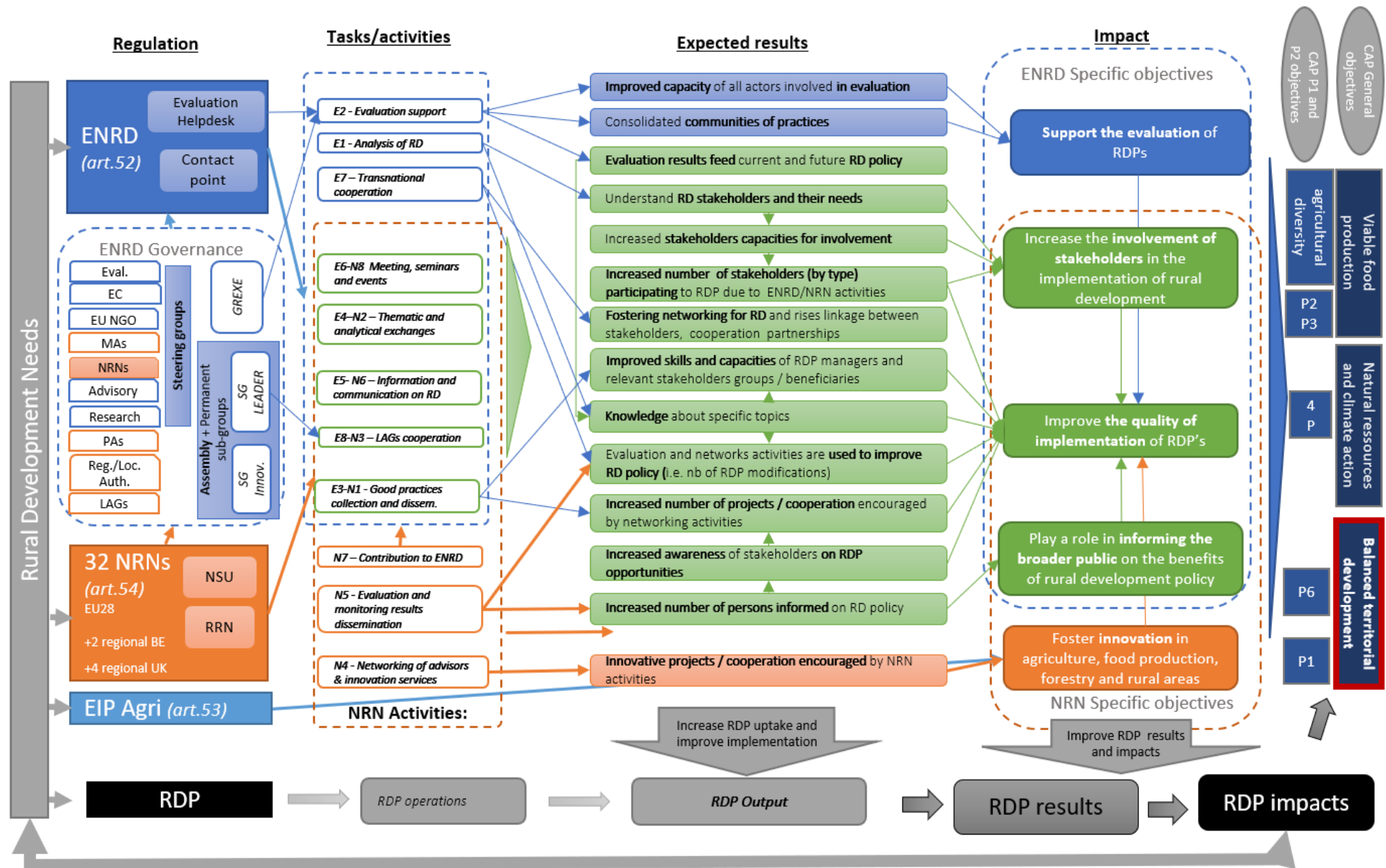
- Improved capacity of actors in evaluation and consolidated communities of practice;
- Greater understanding of RD stakeholders and their needs and an increased number of actors participating in ENRD/NRN activities;
- Greater knowledge regarding specific topics;
- An increased number of projects and levels of cooperation;
- An increased number of people informed about rural development policy.

The impact of these results is measured in terms of the achievement of the ENRD and NRNs' objectives.

Achievement of these impacts feed into improving RDP results and impacts and ultimately general CAP objectives, in particular balanced territorial development.

³¹ Indeed, given the existence of the Expert group on monitoring & evaluating the CAP called **GREXE** – it was decided to avoid creating a Sub-Group to deal with the RNs thematic work on evaluation.

Figure 6: Intervention logic of the ENRD and NRNs



Source: ADE based on regulation 1305/2013 (European Commission, 2013) and Strategic framework of European Rural Networks (EC; ENRD; EIP-AGRI, 2015)

2.4 Historical overview

2.4.1 Objectives of the 2007-2013 period

The ENRD and NRNs were first introduced into the CAP's Rural Development policy in the 2007-2013 programming period.

According to Article 67 of Regulation (EC) N°1698/2005 (European Commission, 2005), the ENRD had the **six following objectives**:

1. collect, analyse and disseminate information on Community rural development measures;
2. collect, disseminate and consolidate at Community level good rural development practice;
3. provide information on developments in the Community's rural areas and in third countries;
4. organise meetings and seminars at Community level for those actively involved in rural development;
5. set up and run expert networks with a view to facilitating an exchange of expertise and **supporting implementation and evaluation of the Rural Development policy**;
6. support the national networks and transnational cooperation initiatives.

The first three could be grouped under *Improving RDP Implementation*, the fourth and fifth as *Increasing Stakeholder Involvement* and the final aim as creating *A larger role for networking in cooperation and LEADER* (ENRD, 2012). The latter relates to NRNs and the ENRD's support of the LEADER approach which, having run for three programming periods as a 'community initiative', was earmarked for wider reach through its integration in mainstream RDPs (see section 1.1). **Specifically, the ENRD and NRNs would support the LEADER principle regarding 'networking of local partnerships'** (European Commission, 2005).

Article 68 of Regulation N°1698/2005 (European Commission, 2005) set out that EAFRD technical assistance funding should be used by the NRNs:

1. for the structures needed to run the network,
2. for an action plan containing at least the identification and analysis of good transferable practices and the provision of information about them, network management, the organisation of exchanges of experience and know-how, the preparation of training programmes for local action groups in the process of formation and technical assistance for inter-territorial and transnational cooperation.

2.4.2 Key activities and outputs

The findings hereafter come from ENRD factsheets produced following a series of workshops entitled 'Learning from the Past, Preparing for the Future'. Three workshops revolved around the key themes 'Improving RDP Implementation', 'Increasing Stakeholder Involvement' and the 'LEADER/CLLD Approach'.

In terms of 'Improving RDP Implementation', **ENRD activities** included (ENRD, 2011a):

- significant developments regarding the EAFRD project database which enabled the publication of 11 project brochures;
- the creation of four thematic working groups and six focus groups addressing public goods, innovation and LEADER as well as thematic joint initiatives;
- various publications such as "infosheets" and RDP summaries;
- 22 seminars and workshops on improving RDP design and implementation and 12 events on LEADER/CLLD, Networking and Communication.

Regarding 'Increasing Stakeholder Involvement', one million stakeholders had reportedly been mobilised by NRNs over the 2007-2013 period, alongside the creation of many networking tools such as social media outlets, website improvements, meetings, training sessions and initiatives to engage 'hard-to-reach' groups (ENRD, 2011b).

Key activities regarding the LEADER/CLLD approach included (ENRD, 2011c):

- 11 meetings of the LEADER Sub-Committee, mandated to advise and help coordinate ENRD activities relating to LEADER and help monitor the implementation of transnational cooperation projects;
- LEADER Gateway, an online support tool provided by ENRD with practical information and analyses;
- LEADER Focus groups of LEADER experts and LAG representatives with a bottom-up, participatory approach to collect data and develop summary reports;
- Various forms of support to Transnational Cooperation and Community-led local development.

2.4.3 Main themes in 2007-2013

ENRD and NRN activities do cover specific topics around which networking revolved.

Examples of main themes addressed are summarised in Table 1 (ENRD, 2022a). All examples have been taken from a comprehensive list of the activities by theme which can be found at [Themes - ENRD \(European Network for Rural Development\) - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/themes-enrd-european-network-for-rural-development).

Table 1: Example of themes developed by ENRD and NRN in 2007-2013

Theme	Activity
Agriculture	Conference: "The Present and the Future of Small Farms in the European Union" – was held on 8-9 July 2011 in Krakow, Poland. Seminar: 'Semi-subsistence farming in the EU: current situation and future prospects', in Sibiu, Romania, on 13-15 Oct., 2010. Review of the RDP support which was currently available for mountain areas and farming.
Environment	Screening exercise on how RDPs are tackling climate change in terms of mitigation, adaptation and renewables. A focus group of the delivery of Environmental Services.
Public Goods	Thematic Working Group and concluding seminar.
Youth and Young Farmers	Creation of a Youth and Young Farmers Gateway to offer relevant information and resources on the support offered.
Local and short supply chains	Study carried out by Italian NRN on short supply chains, ENRD brochure on EAFRD local food projects.
Forestry	NRN Forestry Thematic Initiative to promote the exchange of experience and practice relevant to improving the implementation of the forestry measures. Seminar on Small-scale Forestry Biomass led by the Finnish NRN. Study visit on public goods and services provided by forests organised by the Spanish NRN.
ICT	Seminar on ICT in rural areas, RDP projects
Social Farming	Joint Thematic Initiative by seven NRNs to improve the implementation of RDPs in support of Social Farming.
Community-led Local Development (CLLD)	LEADER approach in a multi-funded context: several seminars, workshops, conferences, an NRN Thematic Cluster on CLLD, policy and guidance publications.
Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Gateway	ENRD Focus Group analysing how Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) support Knowledge Transfer & Innovation (KT&I) in practice.

Source: ADE based on ENRD website, archived on 09/07/2014.

2.4.4 ENRD Self-Assessment of the 2007-2013 period

With the end of the 2007-2013 programming period came a **self-assessment of ENRD activities** implemented between December 2012 and March 2014. It was run by the ENRD Contact Point and DG AGRI services in charge of running the ENRD. It followed a structure which reviewed the ENRD's specific objectives, activities, inputs, outputs and results. Ultimately, it aimed to evaluate how well the activities contributed towards the objective 'to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of EU Rural Development policy (EAFRD) implementation' (EU Rural Networks, 2014). The following findings were drawn from the NRN Toolkit on the ENRD website under the section 'Building on Lessons Learnt' (ENRD, 2022j).

The self-assessment highlighted successes regarding the ENRD support structures over 2008-2012. These included the flexibility and responsiveness of management, such that the ENRD outcomes confidently represented the views of the network rather than DG AGRI, the range of dialogues which had grown to encompass many stakeholder interests and the partnerships created through outsourcing NSU services which promoted innovation and platforms for future cooperation. Successes in terms of activities related, on the other hand, to the range of ENRD services and mechanisms to encourage stakeholder engagement such as thematic working groups and focus groups and the collection and dissemination of project databases to demonstrate EAFRD funding in action (ENRD, 2022g). According to the EU Rural Review 14, networking had also been key to LEADER as it helped identify the successful initiatives and the initiatives needing improvements, facilitated the inclusion of local views and stimulated innovation among LAGs through access to wider sources of information and ideas.

Nevertheless, the ENRD Self-Assessment also identified several elements which 'worked less well' over the 2008-2012 period (ENRD, 2022h). In terms of structural challenges, it was deemed firstly that rigid structures prevented engagement among some stakeholders. In addition, the ENRD was poorly internalised within DG AGRI and the ENRD support structures had a limited mandate to directly engage with NSUs and MAs (leading to gaps in knowledge collection, exchange and cooperation). Finally, mechanisms to enable dialogue between EU and Member States regional networks were missing. In terms of activities, the lack of a clear intervention logic was noted, lack of engagement among certain stakeholders (leading to less knowledge generation and lower outcomes) and variability in the resourcing of NRNs (causing trouble for EU level coordination).

2.4.5 Objectives of the 2014-2020 period

Based on the lessons drawn from 2007-2013, the Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 carried forward the NRNs and ENRD under the same basic definitions. Nevertheless, the **explicit objectives of the NRNs and ENRD (see 2.4 Intervention logic) were streamlined** to those described above (Section 1.3 Intervention logic).

Meanwhile, the six 2007-2013 ENRD objectives were considered as ENRD tasks, albeit with the following notable changes:

- Support of evaluation processes and data collection and management was included as a further specific task.
- Specific actions were to be taken for the benefit of LAGs, including i) creating synergies with regional or national capacity building actions and experience exchanges and ii) cooperating with networking and technical support bodies on their local development activities and transnational cooperation.
- Thematic groups and/or workshops were specifically outlined as the means to facilitate expertise exchange and to support the implementation, monitoring and further development of Rural Development policy.

In addition, the 2014-2020 programming period enabled the **explicit acknowledgement of regional rural networks (RRNs)**, running in addition to or as an alternative to national networks. Among individual NRNs, changes were additionally made to organisational structures and to the use of financial and human resources.

2.4.6 Activities foreseen in the Regulation

The networks cover a number of activities in the 2014-2020 period based on article 52.3 a)-g) of Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013. As such, the activities of the ENRD include:

- **Analysis of Rural Development:** information on rural development action undertaken in the field is collected through surveys, needs assessments and analyses of the RDPs and disseminated via publications such as the Rural Review magazine, factsheets and project brochures.
- **Evaluation Support:** covers the numerous activities of the European Evaluation Helpdesk (see also section 2.2.1), including Thematic Working Groups. The EHD provides support regarding evaluation processes and data collection and management. This comes in the form of published evaluation guidelines and good practice examples, capacity building events such as workshops and electronic communications.
- **Good practices collection and dissemination:** good practices at EU level are identified and disseminated through project brochures, databases, Rural Inspirations Awards, etc.
- **Thematic exchanges:** With an aim to support RDP implementation and monitoring, Thematic Working Group (TWG) meetings and thematic seminars/workshops are organised and thematic publications produced. TWGs often come under the overarching themes of the ENRD but not all themes are covered by an TWG. TWGs are formed of a small number of key stakeholders, often experts on a particular topic, and meet 3-4 times per year to share their understanding and knowledge of a chosen rural development topic and related good practices. Where appropriate, DG AGRI staff and Member States representatives may also participate (ENRD, 2022) (ENRD, 2016). TWGs usually contributed to ENRD activities, often to a seminar or workshop on the same theme or the Rural Review thematic magazine. They also produce many of their own publications such as factsheets, good practice examples, toolkits etc. TWGs often conclude with the publication of a final report with findings and recommendations for the ENRD, NRNs, stakeholders etc.
- **Information and communication on rural development:** developments in rural development across the EU are disseminated in publications such as newsletters, the Rural Review and project brochures (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications_en) as well as online on the ENRD website (<https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/>) and through social media channels.
- **Meetings, seminars and events:** the ENRD organises TWG meetings, NRN meetings, workshops and conferences and thematic events and seminars. These activities differ depending on the stakeholders involved (broad or targeted), whether they are input based (TWG) or output based (seminars, events) (see glossary).
- **Transnational cooperation:** enabling the exchange of rural development actions and experiences with networks in third countries to support NRNs and transnational cooperation.
- **LAGs and cooperation:** Actions carried out specifically with LAGs in mind to create synergies with national/regional activities and to cooperate with networking and technical support bodies regarding local development activities and transnational cooperation. This can be implemented through LAG meetings, databases and toolkits³² as well as LEADER/CLLD capacity building events³³, subgroups and publications.

An up-to-date list of all TWGs can be found [here](#). The following TWGs were active in the 2014-2020 programming period (*elaborated in February 2022*).

³² For example the [CLLD Partner Search tool](#) providing cooperation offers.

³³ Some LEADER/CLLD events were co-organised with DG MARE, REGIO, EMPL.

- [Capitalising on CLLD Experiences – Building Resilient Local Communities | The European Network for Rural Development \(ENRD\) \(europa.eu\)](#).
- [Achieving Results the CLLD Way: Putting the Method to Work | The European Network for Rural Development \(ENRD\) \(europa.eu\)](#).
- ["Implementing CLLD across the ESI Funds": Edinburgh, UK - 8-10 December 2015. | Maritime Affairs and Fisheries – FARNET \(archive-it.org\)](#).

Table 2: Thematic Working Groups 2014-2020

Overarching Theme	Thematic Working Group
Network Objectives	Improving RDP Implementation
	Increasing Stakeholder Involvement
Long-term Vision for Rural Areas	Long-term Rural Vision
	Rural proofing
	Rural revitalisation
Smart and Competitive Rural Areas	Supply chains
	Smart Villages
	Rural Businesses
Greening the Rural Economy	The EU Green Deal and Rural Areas
	Rural Bioeconomy: Mainstreaming the Bioeconomy
	Rural Bioeconomy: Bioeconomy and Climate Action in Rural Areas
	Promoting the Transition to the Green Economy
	Resource Efficient Rural Economy
	Sustainable Management of Water and Soils
Social Inclusion	No TWG mentioned
Generational Renewal	No TWG mentioned
LEADER	Making the seven LEADER principles work in practice for all LAG under CAP strategic plans

Source: ADE (2022), based on ENRD website

The activities of the NRNs consist of (European Commission, 2013):

- **Thematic exchanges:** National/regional level TWGs, thematic exchanges, events/workshops.
- **LAGs and cooperation:** providing training, study visits and networking opportunities for local action groups as well as technical support for transnational cooperation.
- **Networking for advisors and innovation services:** this can include cross-border exchanges, expert panels, dissemination of information, demonstrations, TWGs and training activities.
- **Good practices collection and dissemination:** good practices are identified and disseminated covering all RDP priorities.
- Dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results.
- Information and communication on rural development.
- Contribution to the ENRD.

3 METHODOLOGY

The work of the study covered four phases: structuring, observing, analysing and judging.

The **structuring phase** structured the fifteen study questions (SQs) through a literature, documentary, financial data and monitoring data review. The intervention logic of the 2014-2020 ENRD and NRN/RRNs was elaborated to gain a better understanding of how networks were expected to contribute to their specific regulatory objectives and to balanced territorial development.

Primary data was collected through six online surveys and seven case studies at EU and NRN levels respectively. The surveys targeted the following stakeholders:³⁴ 118 Managing Authorities (MAs), (33% responded from 23 Member States (MS)); 32 Network Support Units (65%, 21 MS); NRN stakeholders (SH) in the seven case studies (416 responses); members of the EU Rural Networks Governance structures (42 responses 21%); the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE), covering MA staff involved in evaluation and evaluators (35 responses); as well as 20 other networks involved in rural and local development at EU level for the coherence question (11 responses, 55%).

Seven case studies (Austria (AT), Belgium-Wallonia (BE-WA), Estonia (EE), France (FR), Italy (IT), Slovakia (SK) and Slovenia (SL), see Table 3) were selected through a clustering exercise based on statistical approach (k-means), grouping together networks with a comparable structure and operational set-up (i.e., NRNs within an RDP or specific NRN programmes covering all regional RDPs of a given MS; NSU within the MA or not, with internal (OI) or external (OE) outsourcing of activities). The Wallonia case study also included a stakeholder mapping through which the involvement and the participation of the NRN's stakeholders was illustrated. The clustering was based on **three criteria**, namely:

- The share of NRN in RDPs in terms of NRN total public expenditure in RDP (in EAFRD funding);
- The type of NSU set-up: NSU within the MA with potential internal or external outsourcing (3 modalities: NSU within the MA only and without any outsourcing; some or all activities outsourced internally (OI); some or all activities outsourced externally (OE)); NSU outsourced to external service providers;
- National/regional NRNs (i.e. centralised or decentralised) (3 modalities: NSU at national level only; NSU at national level with regional antennas/secretariats/offices or regional rural networks; regional rural networks only).

Table 3: Characteristics of the six clusters

Groups	Share NRN/RDP *	National/Regional	NSU set-up	Countries
1	Medium - Low	« National »: NRN but 2 with regional antennas	OE	AT, BG, HR, IE, RO, ES
2	Medium - Low	Regional: RRN	OE/OI	BE-F, BE-W, UK-Eng, UK-Scot, UK-W, UK-NI
3	Medium	National « decentralized »: NRN + RRN or NRN + regional antennas	OI	CZ, FR, DE, PL, PT, SK
4	High	National « decentralized » but 1 without regional antennas	OE/OI	IT, LV, MT
5	Medium - Low	National but 1 with regional antennas	Only MA	CY, GR, HU, LU, SI, NL
6	Medium	National: NRN	OI	DK, EE, FI, LT, SE

* Low: < 0.1%; Medium: 0.1 – 1%; High: > 1% ; OE outsourced external; OI outsourced internal

Source: ADE (2022)

³⁴ The response rates or the number of respondents, and the number of responding Member States are indicated in brackets.

The approaches and tools developed for the case studies and the study are summarised in the following figure.

Figure 7: Approaches and tools used for the study and the case studies

Evaluation as a whole		Case studies	
Desk review (literature and documentary)		Desk review (literature and documentary)	
Surveys: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MA/PA: 118 • NSU: 32 • SH surveys: 7 case studies • Governance: sent to the 200 members of the governance structures • Evaluation: sent to GREXE members and evaluators • Coherence: 20 Networks/Structures 		SH surveys in national language + additional survey in France and Italy	
Interviews at EU level		Focus groups and interviews at national and regional level	
Data analysis (CMEF, CNS, financial data etc.)		Data analysis (CMEF, CNS, financial data etc.)	
Case study reports			

Source: ADE (2022)

Second, the **observing phase** covered all data collection throughout the conduct of detailed case studies in the selected Member States and the conduct of the six surveys at European and Member State levels of different stakeholders. The Walloon case study also includes a stakeholder mapping through which the involvement and the participation of the NRNs stakeholders were assessed.

Third, the **analysis phase** covered answering the study questions and themes, supported by the analysis, case studies, surveys, qualitative and quantitative approaches. The triangulation of sources and approaches (literature and documentary review, surveys, case studies, interviews, focus groups) provided a robust assessment. Conclusions and recommendations were formulated in the **judging phase** and are based on findings of the observing and analysis phases.

This study presented some **limitations** to be considered which were mitigated as much as possible.

Networking is a process that connects people and organisations. The networks were set up in 2014 to early 2015. Capturing the process of implementation of the NRNs over the eight-year time period is important but difficult to grasp at the end of the period, while also considering staff turnover. This limit was considered by involving a team of experts who have extensive knowledge of several networks and their evaluation during the programming period and beyond.

The study faced limitations in terms of **availability of financial and monitoring data**. The three monitoring indicators of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES) linked to the National Rural Networks encompass many aspects under a single indicator and were interpreted and reported differently by the Managing Authorities. The ENRD established the Common Network Statistics (CNS) in collaboration with the NRNs. However, it is not mandatory for Member States to report on the CNS, leading to heterogeneous information about indicators and reporting of them across programming periods. These issues obstructed the comparison of monitoring data across Member States and programming periods.

Finally, NRN budgets represent a share of the total technical assistance budget dedicated to the Rural Development Programmes, set at the discretion of the Member States. In addition, internal resources made available to the Network Support Units by the Managing Authorities

are usually not counted and therefore difficult to identify; the budgets of regional networks that exist in some Member States (in all French RDPs, in a few German RDPs) are not always counted.

Thus, the efficiency of different networks could not be analysed by comparing costs to outputs. The analysis was conducted with a qualitative approach.

Furthermore, the Common Network Statistics (CNS) elaborated by the ENRD with the NRNs are not mandatory and thus partially reported, and present heterogeneous information across both programming periods, with a series of countries not reporting in the 2007-2013 period, changes in survey questions, some of which could be interpreted differently.

All these issues were addressed by triangulating approaches and sources of information and by investigating exact interpretations of CMES and CNS indicators in the case studies. Additionally, significant outliers were detected and excluded to enable proper interpretation of certain data figures.

Finally, the issue of external validity related to case studies selection must be considered. Although the selection of case studies was made by differentiating different network structures, each network is unique and some features and subtleties can be difficult to capture. This limit was considered in the analysis by carefully investigating and interpreting the different realities of the networks, such as their size, their proximity to actors on the ground, or challenges faced by a particular network.

4 ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND STUDY QUESTIONS

Each study question (SQ) is answered following the same structure. First, a section on the approach details the rationale and coverage of the SQ, the judgment criteria (established and used by the evaluation team), and the methodology (including sources and tools). It is followed by a summary answer, based on the findings developed under each judgment criteria and indicators in the third part. For readability purposes, the definition and comprehension of the key terms are not developed under each SQ but gathered in the glossary.

A

Theme 1: Causal Analysis

4.1 SQ1: Have the networking activities of the ENRD and NRNs increased various stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of the EU Rural Development policy and how?

4.1.1 Approach

4.1.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

This question covers the rural networks, the EU level with the ENRD (ENRD CP and EHD), and the national level with NRNs. The causal analysis focuses primarily on the question of "how?"

It is focused on article 52.2.a) and 54.2.a) of EU Regulation N°1305/2013 (European Commission, 2013), one of the Networks specific objectives (see intervention logic) to "*increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development*" which is common to the national and EU level.

Increased involvement of various groups of stakeholders in the design and **implementation of EU Rural Development policy** is pursued through the activities of the ENRD/NRNs. The question relates to the links between the ENRD and NRNs' networking activities and the increase in the number and types of stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of Rural Development policy at EU level and RDPs at regional/national level. The question considers this increase from a historical perspective in comparison to the previous period 2007-2013.

In the strategic framework of the EU Rural Networks (which is common also for ENRD-CP, EHD and EIP-AGRI Service Point), this objective is broken down into two operational objectives: (1) **Understanding RD stakeholders and their diverse needs** and potential for involvement in RDP implementation and (2) **increasing stakeholder capacity for meaningful involvement** by targeting exchanges, involving relevant stakeholders at the most appropriate level and improving their skills and capacity for effective involvement in the implementation of RDPs (see also SQ7).

The main stakeholder groups are divided into three broad categories³⁵

- **Policy and programme designers and implementers:** political decision-makers, public administrators in national, regional and local authorities (**including PAs and MAs**) and European institutions and **LEADER LAGs**.
- **Interest group representative bodies such as** economic and social partners, (i.e., organisations representing farmers, landowners, forest managers, rural businesses, actors along the food chain, researchers), bodies representing civil society in line with rural development stakes (i.e. rural communities, national or regional NGOs, environmental organisations, organisation representing youth, women or disadvantaged groups).
- **Actors on the ground:** potential and actual beneficiaries and participants in EAFRD projects, LEADER LAGs, farmers and land managers at the forefront, foresters,

³⁵ ENRD website, "Stakeholder involvement". https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/networking/stakeholder-involvement_en.

agricultural advisory services, research institutes, other stakeholders' relevant sector of economy and services, from evaluators. (ENRD, 2022k).

The question considers these **main RD stakeholders** with groupings that may differ slightly.

4.1.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC1.1: The various stakeholder groups and their specific needs are clearly identified / have been analysed.

JC1.2: The network activities improved stakeholders' capacities and skills for meaningful involvement.

JC1.3: Networking activities at EU and national levels have remained at a high level or have increased over time as has the number of stakeholders (by type).

JC1.4: The involvement of different groups of stakeholders in the design and implementation of EU Rural Development policy has increased due to the networking activities.

4.1.1.3 Methodology

The approach is based on triangulation of information and approaches from literature and documentary review at EU level and in case studies, monitoring data, surveys (MA, NSU and SH), case studies and interviews with ENRD-CP, ENRD EHD, NSU, MA, SH.

4.1.2 Summary answer

SQ1: Have the networking activities of the ENRD and NRNs increased various stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of the EU Rural Development policy and how?

The involvement of different groups of stakeholders in the design and implementation of the EU Rural Development policy has increased due to the networking activities

Overall, the surveys and case studies **provide evidence that the NRNs, and the ENRD-CP and ENRD-EHD networking activities have improved the involvement of various stakeholder groups** in the design and **implementation of European Rural Development policy**.

Among the different groups of stakeholders, **some have been specifically targeted** by networking activities: the **MA/PA, NSUs** which represent the NRNs at EU level, **LAGs and the bridging organisations for decentralised networks** (multipliers, RRN). The change in focus of the NRNs in the 2014-2020 programming period has also enabled the participation of new groups of actors, or the enhancement of their involvement in rural development policy, such as EIP Operational Groups at the national level, engaging with innovative farmers, advisors, and researchers. For the ENRD-EHD, in addition to DG AGRI and the MA with its specific evaluation unit/department, evaluators represent a specific category. Non-agricultural stakeholders and bodies representing the civil society (including environmental and non-profit organisations, representatives of ESI funds (ERDF-ESF-EMFF)) are underrepresented in the people actively involved in networking activities (see SQ9).

How?

First, the **regulation** stipulates an **obligation to establish rural networks** at the EU level and at the level of each Member State. For the first time, in 2014-2020 they were given **explicit objectives** i.e., *Increasing stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of rural development and improving the quality of implementation of RDPs*. **These objectives have structured the networks' action plans** at both the European and national levels.

Second, **financial resources** were **allocated to the NSU and for networking**, which enabled the implementation of the many and varied networking activities, as well as dedicated human resources within the MA.

Third, **networking activities promoted stakeholder participation** in policy implementation, notably through **capacity building** (SQ7). It generated **common understanding** of topics which in turn facilitated cooperation, knowledge transfer and resource sharing (SQ15).

The various groups of stakeholders are clearly identified (JC1.1) at EU level and at national level in all seven case studies (AT, BE-Wal, EE, FR, IT, SK, SI).

At national level, main stakeholder groups slightly differ depending on the status of the NRN (NRN covering numerous RDPs or a single RDP, Figure 9). NRNs in decentralised or larger Member States **focus on MA, regional support units** (RRN or antennas), **"multipliers" / "head of networks"**, and **national representative organisations** (the latter also tend to be focused on it for larger Member States in a single RDP). NRNs in smaller Member States/regions included in an RDP focus directly on representatives of actors on the ground. Main types of stakeholders are the LAGs, advisors, farmers (those involved in OG especially) and researchers.

At EU level (ENRD), the types of stakeholders are the same as at national level, except that they are representatives at the EU level (e.g. organisations representing farmers). The main stakeholder groups of the ENRD-CP are the NRNs represented by their NSU, the MAs, and evaluators for the ENRD-EHD and DG AGRI.

In the case studies, NRNs and the ENRD identify the needs of stakeholders through formal and informal channels (JC1.1). Formal channels include surveys, both after events and annually, data gathered used in designing the action plan, along with self-assessments during or at the end of the programming period. These channels are completed with informal exchanges and discussions with the MA and other stakeholders during various meetings, such as TWGs, seminars or governance meetings (Assemblies, Coordination of Steering committees or groups etc.). Needs are gathered along the way through in-person meetings and then **included in the action plans, defining yearly network activities.**

Needs analysis is updated periodically (see SQ12, JC12.3). The surveys show that NRN **activities address the specific needs of stakeholders well.** At the ENRD level, needs are also well-addressed, but more for the NSUs than for the MA.

EU and national networking activities remained at a high level or have increased (JC1.3) The data necessary to assess this judgement criteria were difficult to collect. Inconsistencies over time in the definition of indicators, in the countries providing data and NRNs' contrasting understanding of indicators provide disparate information. Nevertheless, judging by the available data, the **budget allocated to networking activities remained relatively stable** over the two programming periods, and **networking activities have been strengthened.**

The number of activities and participation in networking activities increased compared to the previous 2007-2013 period (JC1.3). More activities took place and new ones were introduced. LAGs remain the major category of stakeholders in most NRNs. The networks' activities were more focused on issues related to the implementation of the RDPs and, at the end of the period, on contributing to the definition of the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans. **New stakeholders were systematically involved** through support to innovation. This especially concerns advisors and researchers through Operational Group and linked activities, and farmers (a small minority of innovative farmers).

The network activities improved stakeholders' capacities and skills for meaningful involvement (JC 1.2). NRNs have been successful in reaching specific categories of stakeholders, such as MAs/PAs, LAGs, and national/regional/local administrations/authorities. The ENRD is successful especially in reaching institutional stakeholders (MA/PA, NSU), and representatives of LAGs. It is less successful in broadening the involvement of other stakeholders. (SQ 9). NRN and ENRD activities supported capacities and skills of these groups of stakeholders (MA/PA and LAGs) for meaningful involvement (SQ 7). ENRD-EHD were also successful to involve MAs and evaluators.

The ENRD and NRNs put in place different activities to enhance the implementation of RDPs and to include stakeholders in the process (JC1.4). The **main ones listed below were** common to all case studies:

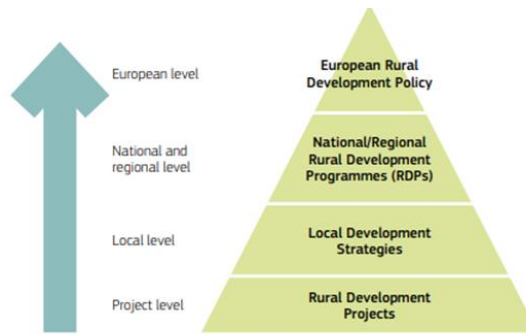
- **Capacity building and thematic exchanges** were more targeted on relevant topics to RDP implementation, and later on, the design of future CAP strategic plans.
- **Training and networking activities for LAGs were particularly invested** in all NRNs. They have enabled LAGs to acquire the necessary skills and networks to implement LEADER effectively and raise awareness of local actors on rural development.
- **Information and communication activities** on rural development, including on the opportunities of the RDPs, the dissemination of good practices, and examples of projects and organisation of seminars or events. These activities facilitated reaching a wide range stakeholder, up to and including the broader public, and contributed to improving the abilities of stakeholders to access RDP projects and funding, including small potential beneficiaries.
- **Cross-cutting innovation activities** were included as a specific task of the NRNs, and led to greater involvement of farmers (with a small minority of innovative farmers), advisors and researchers in all NRNs.

The networking activities often bring together actors who were not used to working together, which was important for fostering integrated, collaborative and innovative approaches.

4.1.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

Stakeholder involvement in a rural development policy context means "engaging individuals ranging from policy designers to project beneficiaries in all stages of the policy cycle: from policy-making to better implementation on the ground. In the specific rural development policy context, there are various levels of stakeholder involvement" (ENRD, 2015b).

Figure 8: The decision-making pyramid

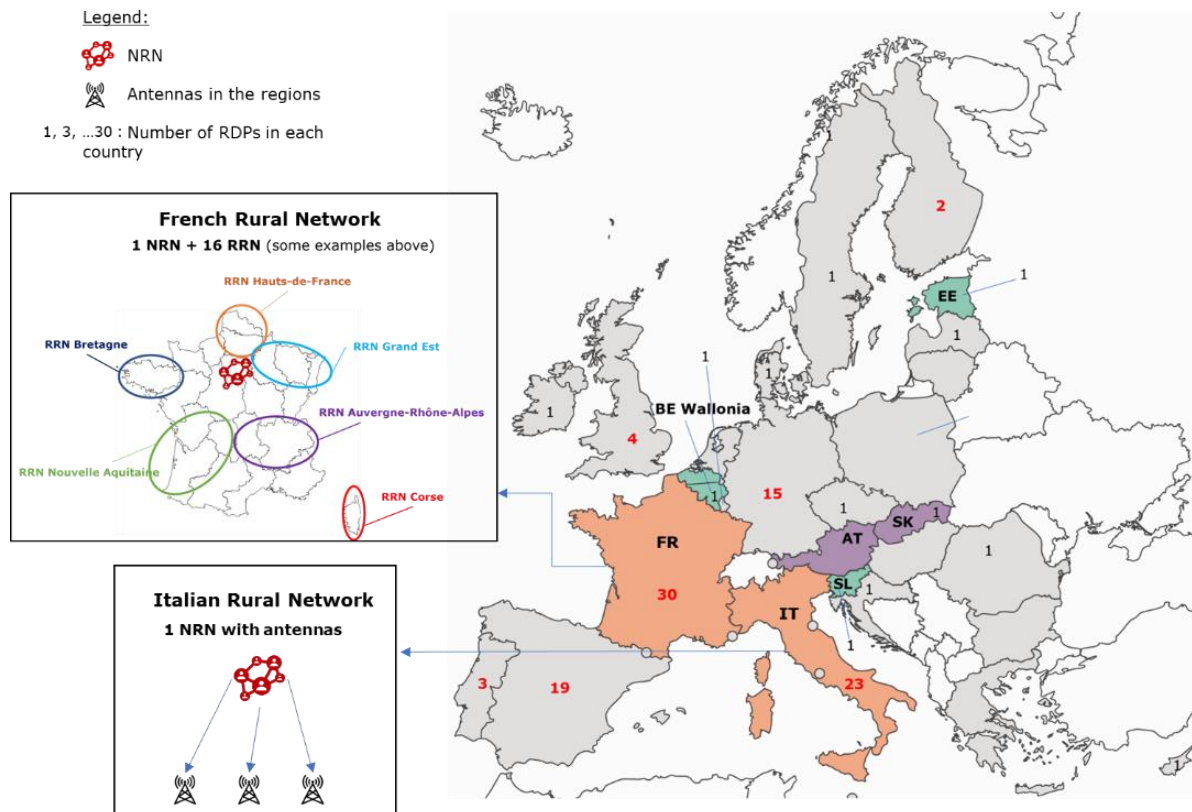


Source: EU RURAL REVIEW No 19: Improving stakeholder involvement (ENRD, 2015b)

The various stakeholder groups refer to the categories presented in section 4.1.1.1. According to Article 54 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, each Member State shall establish an NRN, which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. The partnership referred to in the Common Provisions Regulation shall also be part of NRN (see section 2.3).

The structure of the NRNs differs from country to country. The map on Figure 9 shows the number of RDPs per Member State and how the NRN with regional RDPs are linked to the regional Managing Authorities in the case studies.

Figure 9: Map showcasing the number of RDPs in each Member State and link of NRNs to regional level in case studies



Source: ADE (2022)

France and Italy have a specific National Rural Network Programme for their Member State. In France, the National Rural Network is in contact with 16 Regional Rural Networks (included in the regional RDPs), in the Italian the NRN includes regional antennas. There are no RRN in Italy. Considering these structures is important to understand the type of main stakeholders of each NRN and the relative proximity to actors on the ground.

➤ **JC1.1: The various stakeholder groups and their specific needs are clearly identified / have been analysed**

At national level

SH groups are clearly identified in all seven case studies.

Networks' main type of contacts varied across Member States according to the type of network:

- The NRNs in regionalised Member States³⁶ with NRN Programmes (NRNP) which cover multiple regional RDPs (16 to 27 according to the Member States) such as in the French and Italian case studies, addressed mainly regional Managing Authorities³⁷ and their regional support units (Regional Rural Networks or regional antennas);
- NRNs directly included in a RDP focused on 'multipliers' / 'heads of networks' (Austria, Slovakia) and the national representatives of regional stakeholders and regional/local administrations;
- By contrast, the NRNs in smaller Members States (Estonia, Belgium-Wallonia, Slovenia) closely connected with the Managing Authority and their administrations, approached directly the representatives of the actors on the ground.

Each case study has identified rural development stakeholders. The way NRNs regroup stakeholders is informative on how they address them. For example, the **Italian NRN** has put stakeholders in four main groups, namely sectoral (agriculture), horizontal (mainly institutional actors as MA and administrations), environmental and broader rural, and designed priorities and action plans for each of them. The **Austrian NRN** has defined some stakeholders as "**multipliers**" (institutional actors or head of networks who oversee the dissemination of information to other levels) to which NRN activities are focused. These multipliers are then in charge of disseminating NRN information to another category defined as "practitioners" (on-the-ground actors) which beneficiate from the network indirectly. The **Slovak NRN** has a long list of members, but the listing of members does not allow for a precise mapping of stakeholders as they are classified under the regional antenna to which they belong and not by the sector or category.

All groups of stakeholders are represented and involved in some way in every network.

France's main stakeholders are the NSU of the Regional Rural Networks, the regional Managing Authorities, the EIP correspondents in Regions, LAGs (through the LEADER advisory committee) as well as interregional and national SH involved in rural development (notably through the collective projects *MCDR-Mobilisation collective pour le développement rural*). Actors on the ground (farmers, associations, civil society organisations etc.) are directly in contact with their respective RRN.

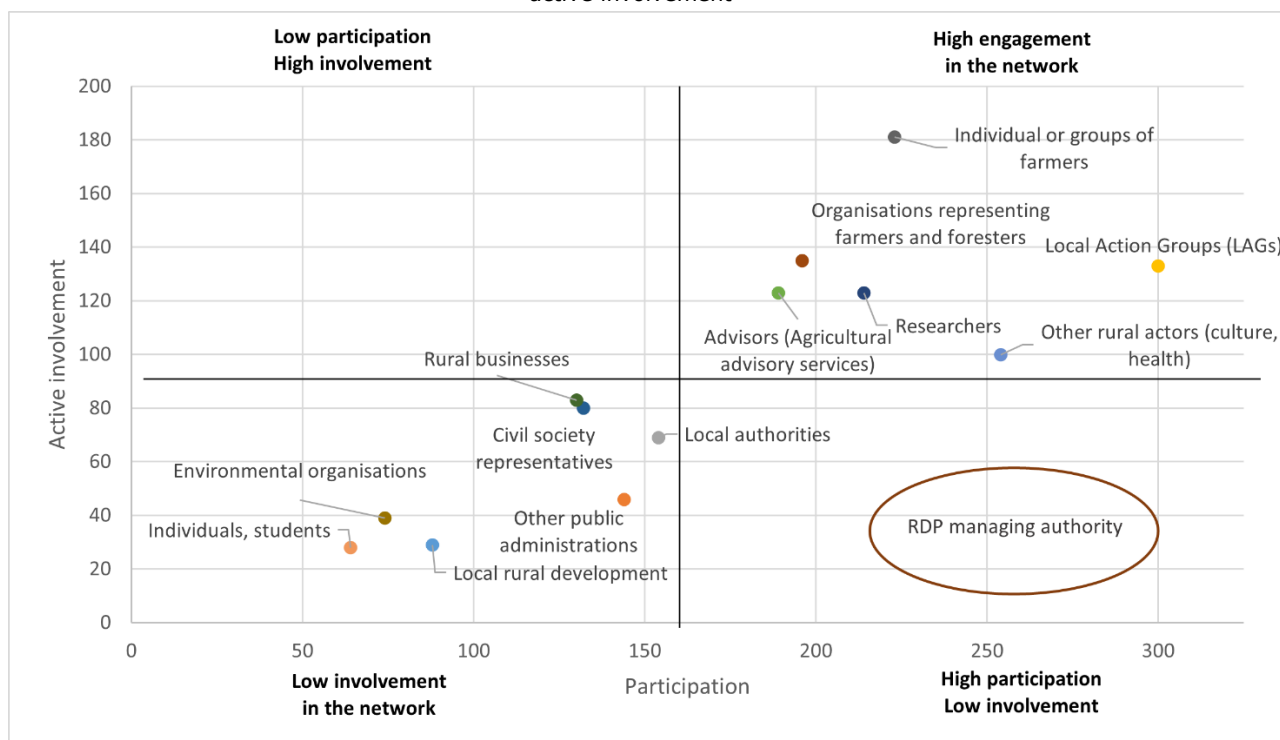
Wallonia's main SH are LAGs, organisations representing farmers and organisations working in the fields of culture and health, as well as researchers. Individual or group of farmers were the most numerous participants in the innovation roads and innovation desks organised by the Walloon Rural Network (see Figure 10).

³⁶ BE, Germany (DE), ES, FR, IT, UK plus PT and FI with more than one RDP.

³⁷ At the level of the MA, NRN's NSU are in contact with different departments, those in charge of the RDPs as a whole, but also services supporting the OGS (M16.1), LAGs (M19) and evaluation.

Figure 10: Stakeholders mapping of the Walloon Regional Rural Network

Representation of the different groups of actors according to their frequency of participation in the events and their active involvement



Source: ADE (2022), based on the annual monitoring of Walloon regional network (RwDR – Réseau wallon de développement rural) activities

In Italy, the main types of stakeholders differ between the national level and the regional antennas. Overall, they are organised in generic TWG and related activities covering different types of stakeholders.

“Horizontal” TWGs mainly cover the needs of institutional stakeholders (regional MAs, national and regional PAs, other sector administration, evaluators, etc.). Within the horizontal TWGs, the “regional antennas” provide specific support to the regional RDP MA through NSU regional offices and develop relations with regional/local stakeholders. Next to these horizontal TWG are sectoral (agriculture and AKIS related) TWG, environmental and broader rural ones, the latter including LAGs.

In Slovenia, the main stakeholders targeted by the network are LAGs and actors from the agricultural sector: farmers, organisations representing farmers and NGOs with a focus on agriculture and rural development.

All case studies identify the needs of stakeholders through formal and informal channels. Formal channels include surveys after events and annually for the designing of the action plan, as well as self-assessments during or at the end of a programming period. These channels are completed with informal exchanges and discussions with the MA and other stakeholders during different thematic meetings such as TWGs, seminars or governance meetings (Permanent Committees, assemblies etc.). These events are an opportunity for stakeholders on the ground to discuss directly with the NSU and MA. In decentralised networks like France or Slovakia, the regional networks or antennas oversee bringing up the needs of regional stakeholders treated at national level. In Italy, a forum (on-site and online) was organised between 2013 and 2014 to consult stakeholders and regional networks on their needs for the upcoming period.

Some of the networking needs expressed through interviews and surveys in 2022 were specific to a Member State or network, but some were common to all case studies, namely:

- Exchange of best practices;
- European benchmarking (explicit information on RDP implementation in other Member States notably for specific RD measures, EU policy updates);

At EU level

Overall, the types of stakeholders are the same as at national level, except that they are representatives at the EU level (e.g., organisations representing farmers, rural communities, etc.). Main stakeholder groups of the ENRD are the DG AGRI, the NRNs represented by their NSU and the MA. For the ENRD-EHD, in addition to DG AGRI and the MA with its specific evaluation unit/department, evaluators represent a specific category.

The needs of national stakeholders are assessed mostly through their NRNs. The ENRD reaches them indirectly through several NRN events aimed at improving NSU's capacity to reach all stakeholders on a local scale. ENRD identifies needs of NRNs through discussions during NRN meetings which take place three times a year. *"These were driven by needs identified through the internal networking profiles, the Common Network Statistics, NRN and NSU feedback and the Y3 NRN meeting innovation camp."* (CP AIR Y4). The ENRD and EIP-AGRI network also underwent two self-assessments in 2017 and 2019 which helped highlight the needs of stakeholders (Literature review section 3.2.1).

Needs evolved throughout the programming period. In 2015, they mostly concerned RDP implementation and access to information on rural development policies for all stakeholders. Some NRNs were launched in 2015 and needed personalised support during the MAs' learning phase. After the beginning phase of the programming, needs were more specific to an ENRD priority and were addressed through TWGs (Literature study section 3.2.2). The main needs identified in self-assessments and through interviews with the ENRD Contact Point were:

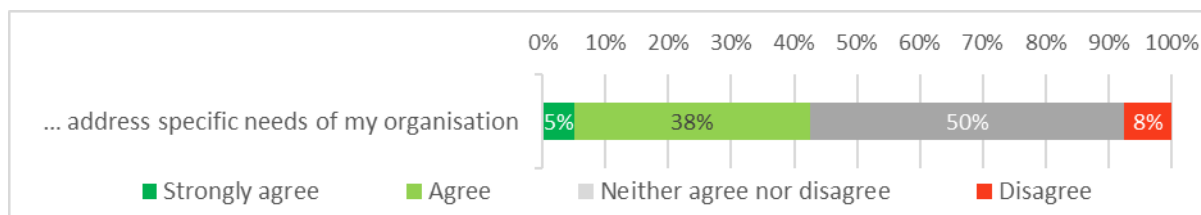
- The increase in good practices and knowledge on LEADER/CLLD;
- More materials translated in Member States' national languages;
- A more interactive format in the Steering Group and Assembly to enable more interactions between stakeholders.

The self-assessments of the network revealed that ENRD activities were successful in addressing the real needs of stakeholders (according to 74% of respondents, n=156).

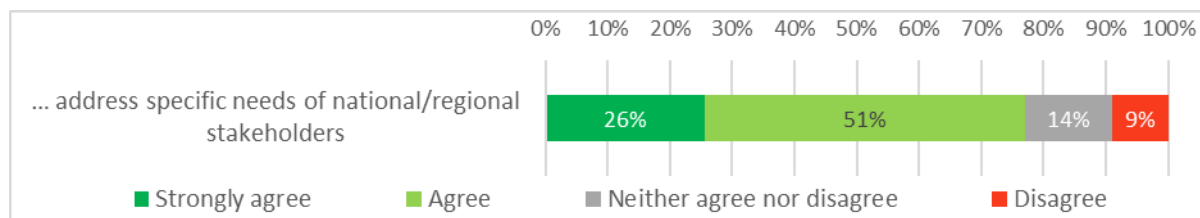
In the last years of the programme, the Covid pandemic created new challenges and needs in terms of communication and digitalisation. Events had to be reinvented to be held online and new ways of communication were quickly put in place (Literature study section 3.2.2).

The question if ENRD activities in a broad sense address the needs of MA/PA and the NRN (via NSU) was raised in the surveys conducted at EU level (see Figure 12).

- **For the MA/PA**, half of the respondents (50%) of MAs/PAs neither agree nor disagree that ENRD activities address their specific needs. 43% agree (38% agree and 5% strongly agree) consider their specific needs are addressed (especially from Eastern Europe). The 23 managing authorities that disagree or have no opinion are mostly (15) managing authorities of regional RDPs.
- **The large majority of NSU representatives** (77%) felt that the specific needs of national/regional stakeholders were addressed through the ENRD's activities, publications, and digital contents (referred to here as simply 'activities') which suggests that their needs had been considered. If the activities addressed stakeholders' needs, it is a sign that these needs informed such outputs from the ENRD.

Figure 12: MA and NSU Surveys - How much do you agree with the following statements? ENRD activities, publications, and digital contents...

Source: Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies Survey (ADE, 2022), Q20.1, n = 40



Source: National Unit Support Survey (ADE, 2022), Q16.1, n = 24

➤ **JC1.2: The network activities improved stakeholders' capacities and skills for meaningful involvement**

ENRD-CP especially is successful in reaching institutional stakeholders (MA/PA, NSU) and representatives of LAGs. It is less successful in fostering the involvement of other stakeholders. NRNs have been successful in reaching some specific categories of stakeholders, such as MAs-PAs, LAGs, and national/regional/local administrations/authorities (source: SQ 9).

NRN and ENRD activities supported capacities and skills of these groups of stakeholders (MA/PA and LAGs) for meaningful involvement (source: SQ 7).

➤ **JC1.3 Networking activities at EU and national levels has remained at a high level or has increased over time as has the number of stakeholders (by type)**

Preliminary remarks: Common Network Statistics (CNS data) indicators support this judgement criteria. A comparison over time has been done where the data allows it. Unfortunately, these indicators have many limitations to establish a comparison between the two programming periods. The CNS data are non-mandatory, and surveys have changed since their inception in 2012, both in the questions asked and the number of Member States who have responded. Many of the questions are widely open to interpretation which may account for some of the variation between responses. Nevertheless, certain CNS indicators from the 2007-2013 and 2016-2020 periods have definitions which are similar enough to allow for a comparison over time.³⁸ The results must be considered with these limitations in mind.

Results from the CNS

Across all the rural networks covered in the CNS, the data suggests increases between the programming periods in the following activities (Table 4):

- Number of networking meetings;
- Number of training activities and number of trainees;
- Collection, analysis, and dissemination of good practice, success stories and relevant experience³⁹;
- Number of study visits and field trips and number of participants;

³⁸ It should be mentioned that Poland's set of responses as were an outlier in this data. Some of the total figures for certain indicators are considerably less when Poland is excluded, suggesting that the Poland respondents interpreted the questions very differently to other rural networks, and these are noted in the table where the discrepancy is large. It is only possible to exclude Poland from the 2016-2020 data, however, so one cannot see the extent to which Poland's responses in 2007-2013 biased the data from that period (although it is likely that indicators were interpreted similarly to the second period).

³⁹ However, ten countries were included in the 2016-2020 CNS which had not been in the 2007-2013 CNS. When including the same countries across both periods, good practices is the only indicator which shows a decrease in 2014-2020 (from 17 118 to 15 293).

- Number of cooperation events and number of people at such events;
- Communication tools.

Table 4: Comparison of CNS indicators between 2007-13 and 2014-20 periods⁴⁰

Indicator	Total numbers per period		Annual average per period	
	2007-13	2014-2020	2007-13	2014-2020
Number of.. (1) networking meetings (2007-2013) (2) events organised (2016-2020)	5 758	12 367 (10 928 excluding 10 MS)	823	3 092 (2 732 excluding 10MS)
(1) Attendance to networking meetings (2007-2013) (2) Number of participations at events (2017-2020)	835 483	4 441 191 (3 706 615 excluding 10 Member States)	119 355	1 110 297 (926 653 excluding 10 Member States)
Collection, analysis, and dissemination of good practice,... (1) success stories and relevant experience (2007-2013) (2) and project examples	17 118	17 896 (15 293 excluding 10 Member States)	2445	3 579 (3058 excluding 10 Member States)
Number of training activities	4 139	7 293 (6 464 excluding 10 Member States)	591	1 459 (1 293 excluding 10 Member States)
Number of study visits and field trips	760	1 151 (942 excluding 10 Member States)	164	230 (145 excluding 10 Member States)
Number of... (1) events to promote cooperation and to support groups to find potential cooperation partners (2007-2013) (2) cooperation events (2016-2020)	298	631 (579 excluding 10 Member States)	43	126 (116 excluding 10 Member States)
(1) Networking communication tools (2007-2013) (2) Communication tools (2016-2020)	1 580	15 888 (10 418 without Wallonia) (13 488 excluding 10 Member States)	226	3 178 (2 084 without Wallonia) (2 698 excluding 10 Member States)

Source: ADE (2022) own elaboration based on CNS (2014 Common Network Statistics Report, Synthesis Report 2007-2013)

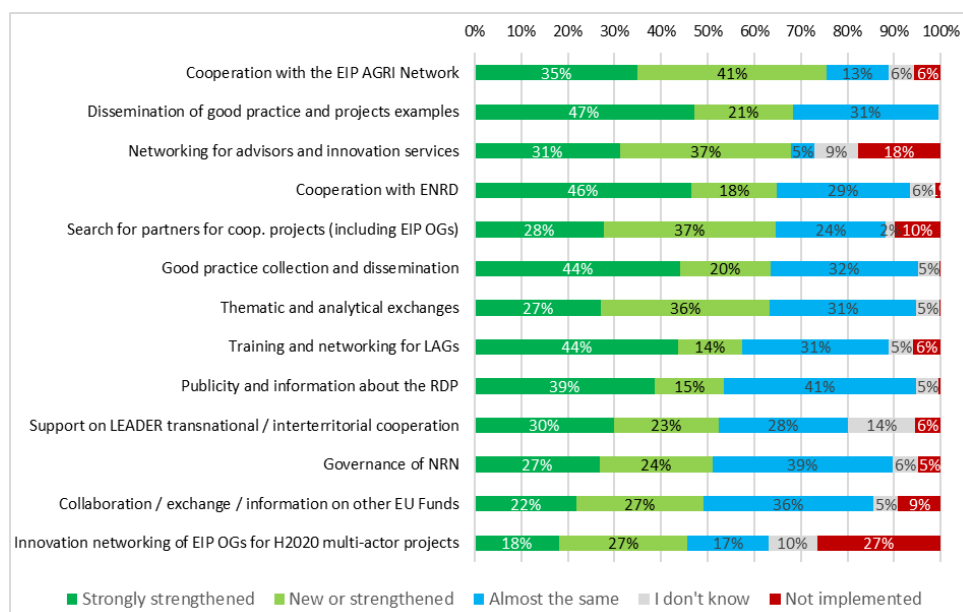
There were no indicators which could be compared between the two periods that were broken down by type of stakeholders.

Results from the surveys

The surveys for the NSUs⁴¹ asked two questions comparing the two periods. **More than half** of the respondents NSUs said **that the various networking activities are new or have been strengthened** during 2014-2020 period compared to 2007-2013.

⁴⁰ 10 NRNs were included in the 2014-2020 survey which had not been in the 2007-2013 survey: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia, Sweden, UK-Wales. A check was therefore done to see whether current programming period still showed increases when removing the data from those 10 NRNs. It still demonstrated increases for most indicators, for example, number of events organised was 10 928 rather than 12 367 (having been 5 758 in 2007 – 2013) and number of participants was 3 706 615 rather than 4 441 191 (having been 935 483 in 2007 – 2013). The only indicator which demonstrated a decrease after removing the 10 NRNs data was the number of good practice/project examples collected and disseminated: the figure for 2016 – 2020 was 15 293, a decrease from 17 118 in 2007 - 2013.

⁴¹ The survey was addressed to the 32 NSU at EU level; 24 NSU (75%) responded to the survey.

Figure 13: NSU Survey - Compared to the 2007-2013 period, have you strengthened the following networking activities during 2014-2020 period?

Source: NSU survey (ADE, 2022), Q6, n=24

Regarding change between the two periods which NSUs commented, 32% said that **activities were more targeted and new stakeholders were more numerous**. A small share of NSUs also said that **more training sessions had been held and had included new stakeholders**. However, the surveyed MAs/PAs, only 38% of respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) with the statement that NRN activities involved new types of stakeholders in the 2014-2020 programming period.

Budgets allocated to networking

In terms of the **budget allocated to networking activities**, available data led to the conclusion that the funding to network activities has remained relatively stable over time. Firstly, the 2007-2013 programming period saw a total of around **EUR 500 million committed** to the NRNs and ENRD (ENRD, 2012).

Indicatively, the **2014-2020 planned budget** amounts to at least **EUR 434 million**⁴².

This figure is based on available data at NRN and ENRD level. The **budget planned for NRNs** in 2014 amounts to EUR 358.6 million for all Member States (except Croatia and Hungary). Amounts spent on 31/12/2020 are available but not the amounts committed. These have been indicatively added for Croatia and Hungary to the planned budget (see footnote). At **ENRD level**, the planned budget for the ENRD-CP is EUR 45.1 million for ENRD CP. For the ENRD-EHD only spent data has been communicated, it amounts to EUR 10.1 million.

Most case study networks have increased (or maintained France) the NRN budget for the period 2014-2020 (EE and HR information to be provided).

- **JC1.4: The involvement of different groups of stakeholders in the design and implementation of EU Rural Development policy has increased due to the networking activities**

This last criterion aims to better understand the effects of networking activities at national and EU level on the involvement of different stakeholders in the implementation of European rural development policy.

⁴² The figures about planned budget at national and EU levels amount to EUR 393.5 million, with no data provided for Hungary, Croatia and the ENRD EHD. Data of spent amounts are available for the latter, respectively EUR 29 933 140, EUR 516 000 and EUR 10.1 million. These expenditures have been considered to calculate an indicative total amount.

An EU rural regulatory framework with explicit objectives

Whereas the 2007-2013 regulatory objectives were quite general and more like activities, Article 54 of **Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013** (European Commission, 2013) **attributed to NRNs explicit objectives specifically linked to the rural development** programmes (RDP). *Increasing stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of rural development and improving the quality of implementation of rural development programmes* are common specific objectives for both NRNs and ENRD-CP, as *informing the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities*.

These regulatory objectives have been considered by the networks to further orient their actions to the implementation of the RDPs and the challenges of EU rural development policy. For instance, the activities implemented in Estonia are generally linked to the RDP measures. In Wallonia, the strengthening of the link between the network's activities and the priorities and measures of the RDP has been a constant concern in the planning of the network's activities. In France, each component was designed with the aim to fit into RDP priorities and foster stakeholders' involvement in their implementation.

At NRN level

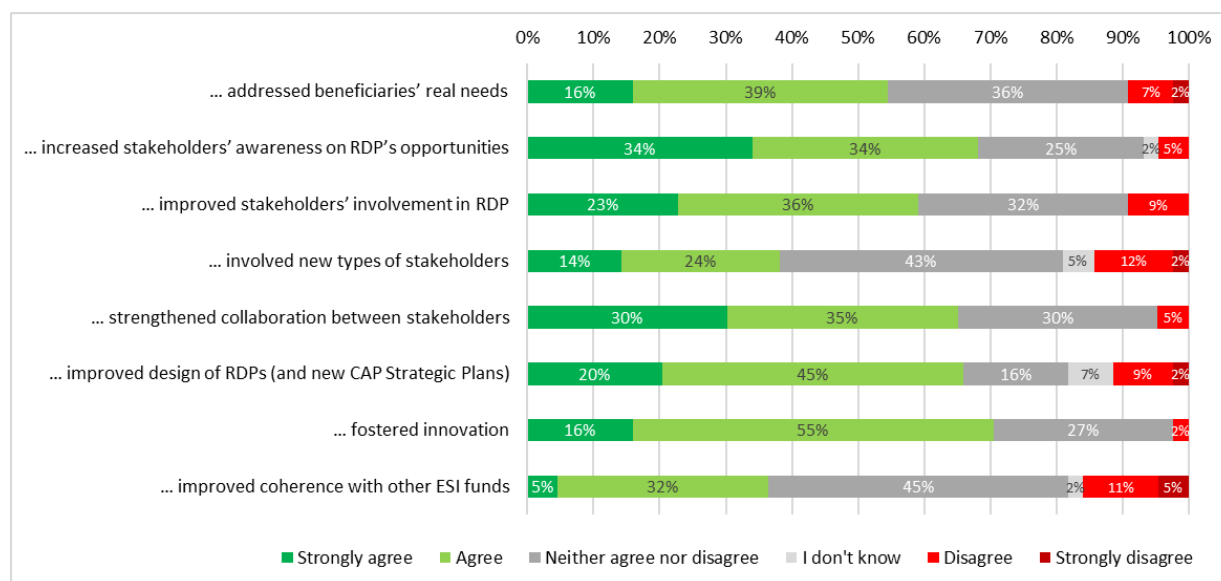
- Networking activities have improved the involvement of stakeholders in the design and implementation of the EU Rural Development policy

Overall, the surveys and case studies **confirm that the NRNs' networking activities have improved the involvement of different stakeholder groups in the design and implementation of European rural development policy**, although with some nuances.

The views of Managing Authorities and stakeholders are important to establish the causal link between network activities and involvement in the implementation of EU Rural Development policy.

A majority of Managing Authorities (MA survey Figure 14:) **consider** (agree or strongly agree) that **NRN activities have improved stakeholder involvement in RDPs** (50%), fostered innovation (71%), increased stakeholder awareness on RDPs opportunities (68%), improved the design of RDPs (and new CAP Strategic Plans) (65%), strengthened collaboration between stakeholders (65%).

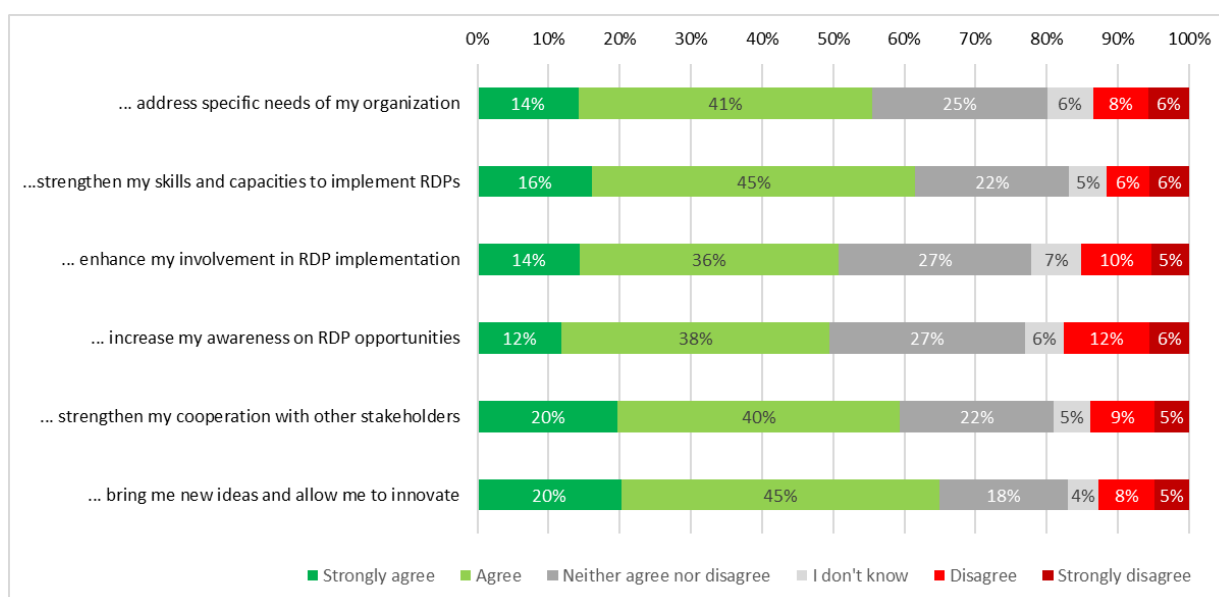
Figure 14: MA Survey - How much do you agree with these following statements? In the 2014-2020 programming period, NRN activities...



Source: MA survey (ADE, 2022) Q12, n=44

The survey of national stakeholders (SH survey Q12) confirms these findings with very similar results.

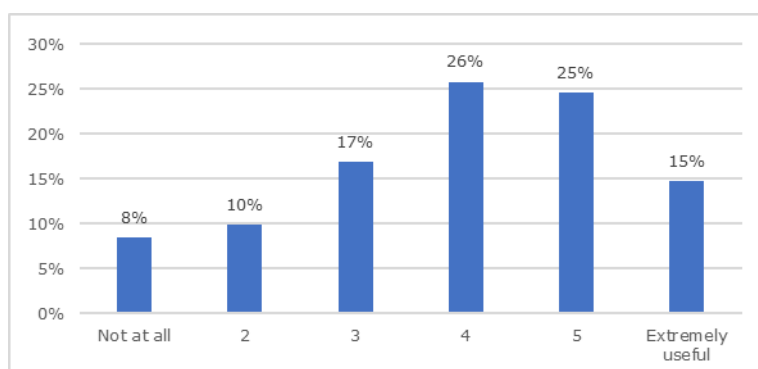
Figure 15: SH Survey - Do you agree with the following statements about the NRN activities (events, seminars, publications, digital contents, etc.) during 2014-2020 period? NRN activities ...



Source: Stakeholder survey (ADE, 2022) Q11, n=416

Most national stakeholders (66% rating 4 to 6 extremely useful) also consider that NRN activities and publications have been useful for their organisation's involvement in rural development policy.

Figure 16: National Stakeholder Survey - Overall, have the activities and publications of the NRN been useful for your organisation's involvement in rural development policy?



Source: National stakeholders survey (ADE, 2022) Q10, n=416

- The various activities implemented by NRNs have contributed to improving stakeholder involvement in EU Rural Development policy

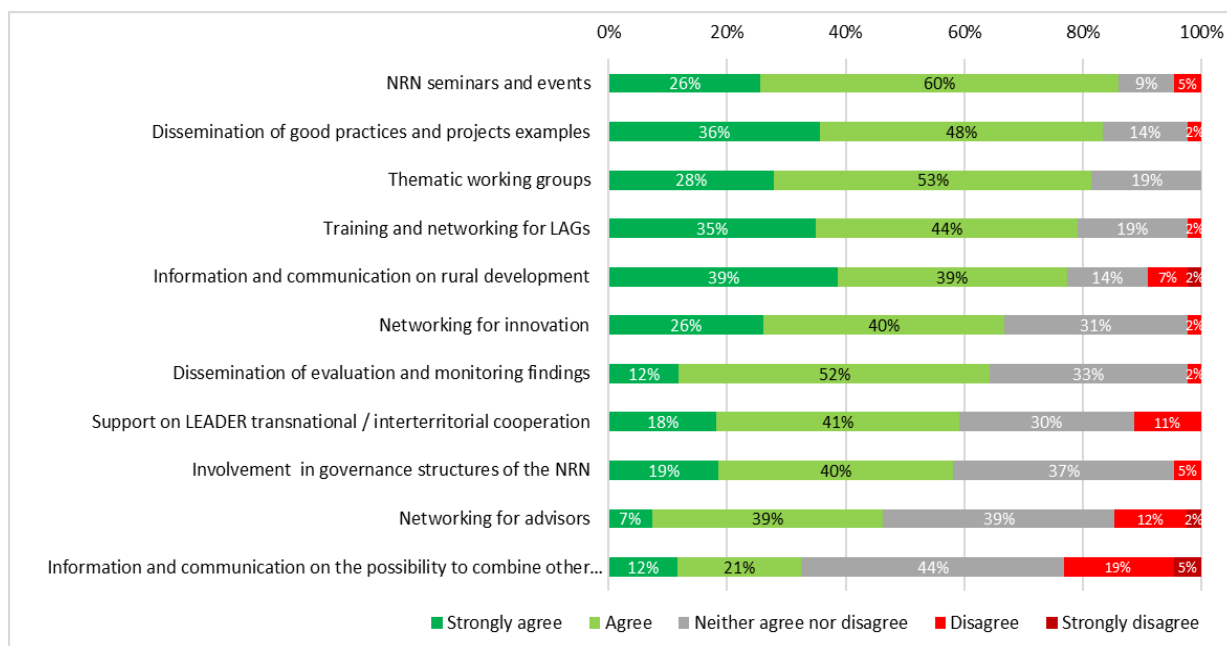
The NRNs contributed to increasing the involvement of stakeholders in RDPs implementation through awareness raising, capacity building and technical support, fostering analytical exchanges on relevant rural development issues, and promoting good practices.

Indeed, **NRNs put in place different activities to enhance the implementation of RDPs** and to include stakeholders in the process. The **main ones were** common to all case studies:

- **Information and communication activities** on rural development, including on the opportunities of the RDPs, dissemination of good practices and examples of projects and organisation of seminars or events which enables to involve large number of stakeholders;
- The specific support to LEADER implementation;
- The thematic capacity building and analytical exchanges;
- The cross-cutting innovation activities.

The managing authority survey (MA survey Q14, Figure 17) and the case studies show that most of the NRNs' networking activities have contributed positively to the implementation of RDPs.

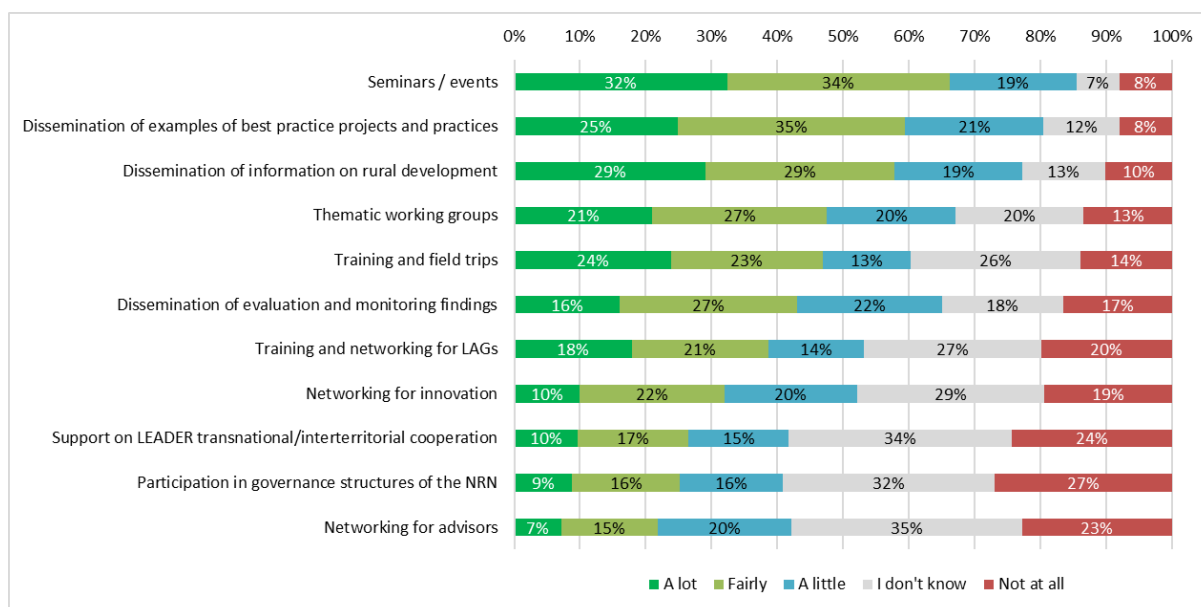
Figure 17: MA Survey - The NRN activities (2014-2020) contributed positively to RDP implementation. How much do you agree with this statement, for the following activities?



Source: MA survey (ADE, 2022) Q14, n=44

For the stakeholders, the dissemination of information, examples of good practice and seminars or events, which reach and mobilise a large number of actors, were the most important factors in improving their knowledge of rural development policy.

Figure 18: Stakeholders Survey - Have these NRN activities contributed to improving your knowledge/information about Rural Development policy?



Source: SH survey (ADE, 2022) Q12, n=416

The **case studies confirm that these activities** have been **the most important in involving stakeholders in rural development policy**. In Slovakia, TWGs, workshops, thematic exchanges, field visits and consultations played a key role in involving stakeholders in NRN activities, with seminars and info meetings attracting large numbers of stakeholders. In Wallonia, training and networking activities for LAGs, cross-cutting and innovation

activities, thematic and analytical exchanges, regular communication activities played a key role. In France, the MCDR and EIP-AGRI components of the network were key in ensuring broad inclusion of stakeholders in NRN activities and LEADER continues to be a central factor for the mobilisation of rural stakeholders. In Slovenia, TWGs, training and networking for LAGs, networking for both advisors and innovation, and information and communication on rural development to have contributed most to RDP implementation.

Some of the case studies also show that the **activities of NRNs remain mainly focused on policy designers and implementers**. This is also due to the structure of some NRNs which are based on relay organisations. In Austria, due to the focus on large stakeholder organisations, the involvement of local level actors is relatively limited. The most frequent/active stakeholders are groups closely tied to RDP implementation, in particular LAGs and regional/national authorities. In Italy, NRN involve various stakeholders, but more towards rural development implementers, such as MAs, rather than the potential beneficiaries and the civil society. In some cases, stakeholders consider the TWGs to be too targeted towards rural development implementers, such as MAs. In France, the NRN provided technical assistance to reinforce stakeholders' ability to manage EAFRD procedures and this effectively improved their ability to contribute to RDP implementation at the local and national scale. In Slovakia, MA and LAGs being the most involved and regional antennas played an important role too, as they are the first point of contact regarding stakeholders.

Training and networking activities for LAGs were particularly invested in all NRNs and were main contributors to stakeholders' involvement in RDP implementation in most cases, along with the managing authority and, to a lesser extent organisations representing farmers. They have enabled LAGs to acquire the necessary skills and network to implement LEADER effectively and raise awareness of local actors on rural development. Indeed, LAGs worked also actively, like in France, to involve local stakeholders in the implementation of RDPs. LAGs have also been sensitised to cooperation, like in Wallonia, enabling them to make the link with the different sectors of rural development.

The NRN activities **improved the abilities of stakeholders to access RDP projects and funding** in the 2014-2020 period. In Austria, this enables smaller actors, in particular environmental sectors, to access RDP projects and funding compared to the 2007-2013 periods. In Estonia, NRN activities have strongly increased stakeholders' awareness on RDP opportunities. In Italy, increasing the dissemination of RDP opportunities is the result that appears to have been most achieved. In Slovenia, one of the most impactful factors is the establishment of INFO points, which significantly broaden the availability of accessible information and support regarding specific RDP measures.

The activities of the NRNs, including analytical and thematic exchanges, have also **strengthened cooperation, between a wide range of stakeholders involved in rural development**. The Wallonia case study pointed out that the **main interests** of the network is its **transversality** and the possibility of bringing together actors who were not used to working together in an open framework, not institutionalised in terms of decisions. This makes it possible to advance territorial development on many aspects. In France and in Italy, the NRN fostered cross-regional collaboration in the implementation of RDPs and within-region cooperation between stakeholders involved in rural development. In most case studies, the NRNs has fostered dialogue between a wide range of strategic stakeholders for the effective implementation of RDP measures.

Changes in focus compared to the previous period resulted in new stakeholders involved in networking activities. Indeed, **innovation support has been included as a specific task of the NRNs**, with internal or outsourced support. This introduction of EIP-AGRI and innovation in a broader sense led to more involvement of innovative farmers (ADE, et al., 2020)⁴³, advisors and researchers in all NRNs. In Wallonia, the implementation of new measures also fostered the implication of actors from the health sector. In Estonia, scope was

⁴³ Despite the implementation success of the EIP-AGRI and Operational Groups, only a very small minority of farmers, those who are already reflecting on farming practices, engage in these projects. They are not representative of the large majority of farmers. The adoption of new farming practices confirms this: there is always a relatively small share of front-runners (pilots) who try out new things, while the majority of farmers rather wait to see the outcomes first, before they change source: ADE, CCRI (2020) Evaluation support study on the CAP's impact on knowledge exchange and advisory activities.

broadened with several additional stakeholder groups (especially advisors, innovation networks and their members, farmers organisation and farmers) have been involved compared to earlier period (most targeted to LAGs). In France, the 310 EIP-AGRI Operational Groups – which are completely new actors in 2014-2020 – worked also actively to involve local stakeholders in the implementation of RDPs.

Along with these common activities, **some Member States implemented specific activities** which contributed to involve stakeholders and improve RDP implementation. A rural development innovation award was organised in Austria to promote innovation and participation to RDP projects. A central feature of the **French NRN** is the **support to MCDR** (*Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural*), which are collective projects carried out by national or regional actors. The MCDR were specifically designed to support RDP implementation by encouraging new collaborations between actors around RDP priorities. Some MCDRs specifically relied on a network structure to increase involvement of stakeholders in RDP implementation.

MCDR (*Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural*)

A central feature of the French NRN is the support to MCDR (*Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural*), which are collective projects carried out by national or regional actors that contribute to the implementation of RDPs.

A first call for proposals was launched in 2015 and resulted in 16 projects being selected. They were directed by a leading structure which teamed up with up to 20 partners from various institutions and organisations. These projects were set up for a duration of three years and around one or several of the themes set by the NRN executive committee (agroecology, local food governance, urban-rural relations, social and solidarity economy, circular economy).

In total, 107 structures from various backgrounds (institutional, research, NGOs, etc.) were involved in the 16 projects. Several MCDRs were partly run by **ONVAR** (*Organismes Nationaux à Vocation Agricole et Rurale*), national agricultural and rural organisations of farmers oriented towards rural development (such as the national CIVAM and CUMA networks^{44,45}, the NGOs *Terre de Liens* and *Terres en villes*, etc.). They are often grounded in **collective and participatory approaches** to promote alternative farming practices or models of farm management.

A second call for proposal was launched in 2018 and resulted in 21 projects out of which seven were renewed from the first call for proposal for an additional three years. The themes for this new round were broadened to different issues such as forest management and woodworking professions, local development strategies in collaboration with LEADER and territorial cooperation, youth and rurality, adaptation to climate change, etc.

The MCDR strongly contributed to the thematic exchanges organised by the NRN and held multiple events to disseminate their findings and good practices to other network members. The RnPAT project from *Terres en Ville* presented local food projects within the NRN seminar (source: 2017 AIR). Other examples include a Massive open online course (MOOC) developed by Services Coop de France within their MCDR (European Commission, 2018), short presentation videos for each MCDR ("*Mon MCDR en 180 secondes*") used to promote their actions, and in general a high level of implication of MCDR participants to NRN events (European Commission, 2019).

The MCDR were specifically designed to support RDP implementation by encouraging new collaborations between actors around RDP priorities. Findings from each collaborative project was shared and disseminated in order to provide with recommendations for better RDP delivery. Some results were indeed taken into account in designing future rural development policies:

- The [RNPAT](#) project managed by Terres en Villes notes that their studies about the links between the EAFRD, territorial development and food have been taken into account for the PAT (*Projet Alimentaire Territoriale*, Territorial food projects) financing guide.
- [REUNIR-AF](#) noted that their findings about agroforestry had been incorporated to existing policies (CAP ecoregime, terms of reference of the *plantons des haies* project, AECM for instance).

⁴⁴ CIVAM "Centre d'initiatives pour valoriser l'agriculture et le milieu rural": non-profit actor working on the agricultural and rural development for 'a vital and cohesive countryside'.

⁴⁵ CUMA "Coopérative de mutualisation de matériel agricole": Farmers gathered in order to share agricultural facilities.

- [RENFORT](#) was able to report their results about forest management to the French Senate within the working group on forest and woodworking, which could result in a law proposal in the medium term.
- [TRESSONS](#) (*Territoires ruraux et économie sociale et solidaire, outils et nouvelles synergies*) was involved at the EU level in the inception of the social economy action plan for 2021-2030.
- [PORT@il](#) worked closely with four partners regions (Grand Est, Normandy, Nouvelle Aquitaine and Pays de la Loire) through their RRN and the lessons learnt from the project were used by these regions to structure their policy with regards to LEADER, *tiers-lieux* (literally "third-places", these are collective spaces used by the citizens to foster community-linkage and carry economic activities as well as social projects) and the social economy.

Moreover, French national network fostered bottom-up projects through the MCDRs, EIP-AGRI projects and LEADER LAGs, facilitated cooperation between rural development actors on RDP priorities and created publicly accessible tools for stakeholders wishing to contribute to rural development, both at the regional and national scale.

In Slovakia, Slovenia and Wallonia, TWGs were an important part of the network and largely contributed to RDP implementation by providing recommendations on specific themes. The NRN websites are an important tool to capitalise on those events and for SH to keep informed of RDP implementation and news of the network.

The governance structures played a relevant role in involvement of NRNs to involve wide range of stakeholders in rural development policy. However, in Italy and France participation to large governance committees and debates decreased over the period because of a meeting format unsuited to exchanges between stakeholders.

The networking activities also contributed directly or indirectly to the definition of the new CAP strategic plans 2023-2027. In Austria, NRN organised the stakeholder participatory process of the programming of the CAP Strategic Plans 2023-2027 were deemed as beneficial contributions of the NRN. In Wallonia, the network has indirectly contributed to the reflection on CSP through TWGs (i.e on ecoschemes) and innovation roads. In Italy, regional antennas organised activities related to the definition of national measures. CSP were discussed collectively between regional authorities. In Slovenia the NRN was involved in organising working groups for preparation of the CSP. In France the NRN financially supported event to inform stakeholders about the future CAP. Stakeholders were thus informed of the decision-making process but were not directly involved through the NRN.

At ENRD level

The ENRD-CP contributed to fostering capacity building and peer exchange related to rural development policy at three main levels: programme managers (Priority 1 of the CP - *Support to more effective and simpler programme implementation*), NRNs (Priority 2 of CP - *Strengthening NRNs and NSUs*) and LEADER (Priority 3 of CP support unit of DG- *Support to simpler and more effective rolling out of CLLD and LEADER*).

Stakeholder involvement was identified as a key theme at the start of the period, with a dedicated working group set up in 2015. This working group met three times during the year and its conclusions were incorporated to the 19th issue of the EU Rural Review on "Stakeholder involvement" as well as in a final report (AWP 2015). This remained at the centre of discussions between NRNs throughout the programming period (annual implementation report Y2-Y7).

The ENRD has implemented several activities to increase stakeholder involvement in RDP implementation and further EU Rural Development policy.

- **Seminars and Workshops:** The workshop on "improving stakeholder involvement in Monitoring Committees" was attended by participants from most Member States. Other workshops on improving stakeholder involvement were planned but were cancelled due to COVID (CP AIR Y6).
- **LEADER Participant Led Working Groups:** they gather all types of stakeholders to come up with recommendations to improve the implementation of rural development policies (CP AIR Y3).

- **NetworX**: It was the largest event of the period and was designed to highlight the added value of networking and cooperation in the implementation of rural development policies (EU Rural Networks, 2020).
- EU thematic Groups can also contribute to improve RDPs by opening themes to other groups of stakeholders.

During the second half of the period, the emphasis shifted on **fostering preparation of the future CAP strategic plans**, through activities designed for Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies (seminars, webinars, workshops). They covered a large range of specific topics concerning RDP delivery. These activities were considered useful for participants (**score of 3.1 out of 4 in Y5-Y7**) because of their practical orientation. (CP AIR Y7).

- Seminar on "key steps from CAP strategic planning" and two follow-up workshops focusing on generational renewal and farm competitiveness. An international congress on "exploring Eco-Climate schemes" was also supported by the ENRD in Y5 (**note of 3.1/4**).
- A seminar on the future CAP Strategic plans and a workshop on Agriculture and environment addressing the environmental aspects of the strategic planning process in Y6 (**score of 3.1/4**).
- Two seminars "designing the intervention strategy" (gathered 100 participants from all 27 Member States) and "getting the CAP strategic plans done: the voices of Regions and stakeholders" which involved the European Commission's Executive Vice President and the Agriculture Commissioner and reached over 1 700 participants and four workshops on preparing the CAP strategic plans in Y7 ("Designing Eco-Schemes" (attended by 100 people), "Operational design", "programming regional-level interventions", "designing interventions").
- The work under priority 5 of CP - *Promoting the transition to a green economy in rural areas*: Iso contributes to strategic planning by producing recommendations and good practices. In Y7, the TWG on "The European Green Deal and Rural Areas" held meetings on actions, strategies and themes of the European Green Deal that are relevant for rural areas and communities (organic farming, biodiversity, clean energy etc.). It resulted in factsheets summarising the TWG's recommendations for the CAP Strategic Plans.

The ENRD-EHD also contributed to the development of the new CAP strategic plan, notably through the Thematic Working Group 7- Preparing for the ex-ante evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plan, the provision of guidance and capacity building events (i.e. EvaluationWORKS!)

According to the self-assessments of 2017 and 2019 (EU Rural Networks, 2018) (EU Rural Networks, 2020), the EU Networks were successful in involving stakeholders in RDP implementation (75% of survey respondents agreed, n=156). The impact of ENRD activities on involvement of stakeholders is limited due to a difficulty to directly reach national and regional stakeholders.

NSUs and MAs are generally involved in the ENRD. They participate in events and thematic working groups. They also use and disseminate various productions within the national network. Surveys and interviews with the NSUs and MAs from each case study country highlighted the most useful activities of the ENRD: NRN meetings, EvaluationWORKS!, TWGs, Good practice, Workshops.

In the surveys conducted for this study, 45% of MAs (MA survey Q20) and 67% of NSUs (NSU survey Q16) consider that ENRD activities lead to a greater involvement of various stakeholders in rural development. They also consider that the thematic group 'increasing stakeholder involvement' has improved the implementation of the RDPs: 78% for NSUs (Q17) and 47% for MAs (Q21).

4.2 SQ2: How did the networking activities at both the EU and national levels help contribute to improving territorial development, through their activities supporting the implementation of the RDPs?

4.2.1 Approach

4.2.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

This SQ evaluates the causal mechanisms between the networking activities of the NRNs and the ENRD, on one hand, and the resulting contributions to territorial development via RDP implementation, on the other hand. This analysis focusses on the mechanisms for how these impacts came about, for the NRNs and the ENRD.

The scope of this SQ comprises the ENRD and the NRNs (through case studies). In cases of NRN structures as "networks of networks" (as in IT or FR), only the NRN is considered, including their relationship to the regional level but not the regional antennas or regional rural networks.

4.2.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC2.1: The networking activities undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs **address the real needs of their stakeholders.**

JC2.2: The **NRNs** initiated by their networking activities contributions to the implementation of RDPs.

JC2.3: The networking activities undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs have led to **improved RDP administration and management capacities**, via **knowledge transfer** between administrations and risk and opportunity assessment of management systems.

JC2.4: There is a link between the ENRD and NRN contribution to improved RDP implementation and territorial development, as perceived by the MAs/PAs/NSUs (ENRD) and the NRN stakeholders (NRN).

4.2.1.3 Methodology

The characteristics of the stakeholder networks of the ENRD and the NRNs are at the forefront of this SQ. To evaluate whether these networking activities contribute to improving territorial development, the project team analyses the characteristics of the NRN and ENRD activities:

- What types of activities were undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs?
- Which stakeholder groups did they include?
- Did the ENRD and the NRNs implement recommendations of the 2015 ENRD work package "Improving RDP implementation"?
- Did these activities have an impact of RDP implementation and, if so, how?

As such, the ENRD and the NRNs are analysed in terms of the mechanisms through which they foster RDP implementation and how the stakeholder groups are involved in these activities. Links with other ESIF are considered, when reviewing activities implemented in case studies.

The project team proposes to analyse the characteristics of the NRN and ENRD networks via the stakeholder mapping undertaken in the stakeholder survey and the MA/PA and NSU surveys. This analysis highlights which types of stakeholders are represented in the NRN and ENRD networks and in what activities they took part in. Subsequently, the contribution of these activities to RDP implementation are assessed by means of expert interviews in the case studies (for the NRNs) and at EU level (for the ENRD).

The link between improved RDP implementation via the (ENRD and NRN) networking activities and territorial development will be investigated in surveys:

- The case study analysis investigates to which extent and how networking activities target and address needs related to territorial development via improved RDP implementation.

- The survey disseminated in the NRNs' networks highlights the perception of the contribution of the activities to territorial development.
- The MA/PA survey and the NSU survey collect an overall assessment to which extent territorial development needs have been met via improved RDP implementation.

Sources include the following surveys:

- EU survey to NSUs, MA/PAs, and other ENRD stakeholder groups on the characteristics and impact of involvement of NRNs in ENRD activities;
- Survey to NRN stakeholders on involvement in the NRN activities and impacts of activities.

The stakeholder mapping at case study level was also used along desk research on NRN and ENRD activities, feedback from events as collected by ENRD and NRNs and interviews:

- Case study interviews with NRN and MA/PA representatives;
- EU-level interviews (ENRD-CP);
- Stakeholder interviews at EU level and case studies including about link with other ESI funds.

4.2.2 *Summary answer*

SQ2: How did the networking activities at both the EU and national levels help contribute to improving territorial development, through their activities supporting the implementation of the RDPs?

JC2.1: The networking activities undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs address the real needs of their stakeholders

The ENRD-CP actively consults on the needs of ENRD stakeholders, and adapts activities based on the needs identified. This is done by engaging with MS representatives (mainly NSUs, MAs and LAGs), and DG AGRI on an annual basis through interviews and irregular, more informal exchanges. Furthermore, ENRD activities, particularly the **capacity building events, are demand driven, based on needs identified in RDP implementation**. However, the case study analyses highlight certain factors, such as language barriers and relatively generic content, as limiting the extent to which the output addresses their needs. The EHD activities are addressing evaluation needs: the guidance notes for evaluators and the good practice workshops were highlighted as particularly useful for evaluators and MAs. The added value of these activities was highlighted in Italy, where evaluators made extensive use of these materials at national level. However, EHD materials were identified as quite complex and theoretical in some case studies (Austria, BE-Wallonia, France), limiting their usefulness across all stakeholders. The EHD has been able to respond to stakeholder needs over the 2014-2020 period, leading to content adaptations based on stakeholder feedback. However, the one-size-fits-all approach to evaluation and EHD guidance may not be fully appropriate given the different reporting needs of the European Commission and different Member States in evaluation of RDP implementation.

NRNs collect stakeholder needs and adapt their outputs through various formal and informal feedback processes. These processes include formal processes, such as structured surveys conducted at regular intervals on stakeholder needs and the effectiveness of the outputs (e.g. Austria), self-assessments (e.g. Wallonia), and feedback collection via governance bodies or via thematic working groups. The majority of analysed NRNs have proven themselves to be relatively flexible in terms of targeting these recognised needs by having sufficient autonomy in organising activities. As such, the networking needs undertaken by the ENRD and by the NRNs are well-targeted and address stakeholder needs in a comprehensive manner.

JC2.2: The NRNs initiated by their networking activities contributions to the implementation of RDPs

The NRNs implemented networking activities which improved RDP implementation in an effective manner. The main mechanism includes capacity building events targeted and general outreach on RDP funding, as well as wider rural development networking. The case studies of the NRNs identified two major mechanisms needed to improve stakeholder participation in RDPs. First is improved outreach and publicity on RDP opportunities, both targeted and general, to increase stakeholder

awareness of them. Second is the implementation of thematic and networking events to improve stakeholders' capacities to take part in RDP measures.

This is **strongly tied to LEADER support activities**, where the NRNs analysed in the case studies foster networking and technical exchanges among the respective stakeholder groups. NRNs also support in questions around the technical implementation of LEADER, by providing capacity building to LAG managers, and supporting trans-national cooperation (TNC) by finding potential cooperation partners. The NRNs' roles in supporting EIP-AGRI implementation vary significantly across the analysed NRNs, with some NRNs featuring a strong role in implementation (such as capacity building of OGs and among implementing bodies like MAs). In other RDPs, the NRNs' roles were tied to dissemination of good practices and awareness raising, with the MAs retaining a significant role in implementation.

Generally, the NRNs roles in supporting monitoring and evaluation is identified as limited across the case studies. NRNs do not have an explicit role in evaluation, except disseminating results of evaluations. The analysed NRNs focus on it, with some NRNs taking a stronger role in supporting monitoring and evaluation (e.g., via dedicated projects and TWGs).

JC2.3: The networking activities undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs have led to **improved RDP administration and management capacities**, via knowledge transfer between administrations and risk and opportunity assessment of management systems.

The ENRD and the NRNs were very effective in undertaking capacity building activities supporting MAs/PAs in RDP implementation. At ENRD level, peer-learning and thematic exchanges on implementation experiences are highlighted as a contributing factor in supporting MAs in RDP implementation. This was also found for the EHD activities, which contribute to good practices in evaluation. Similar approaches are implemented in NRNs, with larger NRNs in MSs with multiple regional RDPs being able to foster similar exchanges among regional MAs. NRNs of MSs with only one RDP can provide targeted capacity building activities; although in these cases, the NRNs' roles are relatively small in comparison to in supporting capacity building in LEADER. Exchanges and capacity building across ESIF remains low to non-existent across the analysed NRNs.

Support to risk assessment in RDP management mainly occurs at ENRD level, with selected activities to foster common learning among PAs (such as a conference and publications). The NRNs seem to have not taken up this activity. Conversely, the role of NRNs in providing direct support to RDP implementation outside of LEADER via TA is low. Examples of NRNs undertaking TA roles include dedicated RDP communication (e.g. in SI) and specific support on implementation of measures (e.g. in IT).

The capacity building activities of the NRNs and the ENRD have led to improved implementation capacities among actors involved in RDP implementation. Depending on the structure of the NRN and the RDP, the type and role of this support may vary.

JC2.4: There is a link between the ENRD and NRN contribution to improved RDP implementation and territorial development, as perceived by the MAs/PAs/NSUs (ENRD) and the NRN stakeholders (NRN)

The ENRD effectively contributes to improving RDP implementation by fostering exchange and peer-learning, as well as in the dissemination of good practices, as identified in the MA/PA and the NSU surveys. Peer-to-peer exchanges and evaluation materials produced by the EHD also contribute to increasing the quality of evaluation, which in turn, may positively affect RDP implementation if findings from the evaluations are taken into account by programme actors. Conversely, the surveyed NRN stakeholders point a positive contribution of the NRNs to improved RDP implementation, highlighting particularly the effectiveness of NRN seminars, the dissemination of best practices, and the dissemination of general information on rural development. For actors directly involved in RDP implementation, the MA/PA survey highlighted particularly the thematic events and seminars, dissemination of good practices, and the TWGs.

The link between ENRD and NRN activities and improved territorial development is indirect. Contributions to improved RDP implementation by the NRNs and the ENRD are observed by the respective stakeholder groups, as highlighted in surveys⁴⁶. These improvements to RDP implementation can translate to improved territorial development, via the vehicle of a higher quality of RDP implementation and improved stakeholder participation.

⁴⁶ Namely the MA/PA survey, the NRN stakeholder survey, and the NSU survey.

4.2.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

- [JC2.1: The networking activities undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs address the real needs of their stakeholders](#)

The ENRD networking activities are tailored to their stakeholders' needs

The ENRD-CP **tailors their networking activities to the needs of the main stakeholders**, the NSUs, MAs, LAGs, and DG AGRI. As per an interview with the ENRD-CP, most years (except two out of the past seven years), the ENRD-CP conducts a stakeholder assessment process on networking needs. In this process, the ENRD-CP engages with all Member States, including, at least, one interview per year, in addition to regular contact throughout the year. The interview is undertaken in a formal context, assessing needs and opportunities. This interview could include confidential information (e.g. what are blockages in terms of network implementation, or in terms of the relationship between the MA and NRN). The regular contacts are more informal, in terms of setting, and amounts to three or four exchanges per year per Member State. This feedback mechanism provides insights also into the types of connections between different stakeholder types. It leads to a fairly comprehensive understanding of the relations which is used to refine the ENRD activities. It also drives most of the content of the NRN meetings. Further, the European Rural Networks have undertaken two self-assessments (2017 and 2019), which include a comprehensive stakeholder survey on each of the network bodies, including the ENRD's. The value of this approach is also underlined by NRN and MA representatives in the case studies. In the case of Austria (CSR: Austria), the needs of the MA were assessed in this process, resulting in dedicated ENRD-CP activities around the specified need (namely, networking and exchange on gender mainstreaming).

However, the overall objective of the ENRD to provide relevant content and activities for 27 Member States and 32 NRNs can come at a cost of providing specific content, specific to Member State and regional needs. This is illustrated by findings of the MA/PA survey (Q20, n=40), in which only 43% of surveyed MAs and PAs deem the ENRD activities and outputs as "addressing the specific needs" of their organisations. MAs and PAs interviewed as part of the case studies (such as AT, BE, IT) highlight a high appreciation of the ENRD outputs, but, generally, deem it unspecific or generic, to an extent. This was emphasised by stakeholders of the Austrian NRN, while generally attributing a high importance to ENRD activities, also noted a lack of specific focus in the activities as they had to be relevant across all 27 Member States. This was highlighted especially in the context of networking activities with an environmental focus, as Member State specificities seem particularly high in that field (CSR; Austria). The lack of specificities was also highlighted in the case study of the Walloon (BE) NRN by the MA, deeming it generally relevant but too distant from the on-the-ground situation (CSR: Wallonia – BE).

Another important function of the ENRD is to provide guidance and other activities related to evaluation via the EHD. The evaluation content produced by the EHD is generally relatively useful to evaluators and MAs (see SQ6, JC6.2), signifying well-tailored activities. The most useful activities are the guidance notes for evaluators, the good practice workshops for MAs and some of the "EvaluationWorks!" events. However, the complexity of the EHD materials can be an issue, reducing their overall relevance. This was identified particularly in the case studies of Austria, Wallonia (Belgium) and France. However, an issue affecting the overall usability of the EHD activities is the "one-size-fits-all" approach to producing them (see SQ6). The approach may not be fully appropriate given the different reporting needs between European Commission and Member States in evaluation of RDP implementation.

The language barrier between the NRN and the ENRD activities was highlighted to be an issue in the case of the Slovenian and French NRNs. A further issue is tied to the selection process of the thematic foci of the TWGs. Italian stakeholders (CSR: IT) point to being inadequately consulted on the choice of foci, as the initial selection (or long-list) of TWG priorities was decided between the ENRD-CP and the EC, as opposed to a survey collecting NRN/MS needs.

The NRN networking activities are tailored to their stakeholders' needs

The NRNs employ **stakeholder assessment methods to collect and identify needs in an overarching approach to tailor their activities to stakeholder needs**. The exact process to collecting stakeholder needs varies between the NRNs.

The case studies of the NRNs revealed two principal avenues to collecting stakeholder feedback. (The approach to assessing stakeholder needs is also detailed in JC1.1.) In the case of the most analysed NRNs (see Table 5), a major avenue of assessing and collecting stakeholder inputs are governance bodies, such as steering groups or governance meetings. These bodies involve or represent NRN stakeholders and provide feedback on the NRNs activities. Stakeholder surveys are also employed to assess stakeholder needs and tailor activities, however, the frequency and structure of this process varies between the NRNs. Some NRNs implement highly regular stakeholder surveys (in particular the Austrian NRN, which implements annual stakeholder surveys), or the Walloon (BE) NRN, which implemented a survey at the beginning of its three-year contract. Other NRNs (i.e. the SI NRN) implements surveys in a more irregular approach, focusing on specific thematic needs.

Table 5: NRN approaches to stakeholder needs assessment

Member State	Process
AT	Annual stakeholder survey, feedback collection after every event, thematic working groups composed of key stakeholders. These mechanisms provide input for the annual work plans.
BE—Wallonia	Self-evaluation every three years (survey), steering committee input.
EE	Collection from events, irregular collection via questionnaires and e-mails, two dedicated surveys.
FR	Extensive process during set-up of NRN, input in governance meetings from stakeholders.
IT	Stakeholder input as part of steering committee, regular meetings with regions.
SK	Annual assessment: regional antennas relay information which is used to develop the annual work plans, irregular surveys.
SI	Steering Group as the main mechanism and irregular stakeholder surveys.

Source: Case study reports (ADE, et al., 2022)

In the case of the Austrian NRN, stakeholder needs are comprehensively considered when devising the annual work plans and stakeholder feedback is an important element of quality control and when devising or implementing activities (CSR: AT). This relatively continuous level of adapting NRN activities to stakeholder needs can also be identified in the case of the Walloon (BE) NRN, with ongoing consultation activities and resulting changes to the activities (CSR: BE – Wallonia). In the case of the Italian NRN (CSR: IT), the NRN retains a high degree of autonomy which enables the NRN to target evolving needs and implement relevant activities.

Formal assessment processes are most widespread across the NRNs analysed in the case studies. In Slovenia, the participation of key rural stakeholders as part of the Steering Group enables the stakeholders to cooperate with the NRN in the implementation of activities and generally lead to their needs being taken on-board (CSR: SI). However, some needs remain unaddressed by the Slovenian NRN despite this mechanism, such as violence against rural women as was proposed by a key stakeholder (ibid). In the Slovakian NRN, the regional antennas function as “on-the-ground” actors to identify relevant needs and relay this to the NRN (CSR: SK), a process which was identified as relatively effective. The process is similar in the French NRN (CSR: FR), with close cooperation between the NRN and the RRNs via the governance structure to identify evolving needs and address them.

The ENRD's activities have involved a comprehensive set of stakeholders to devise new communication tools & have led to the development of sound communication strategies.

The **ENRD-CP functions as an enabler the development of new communication tools**, facilitating exchange on communication tools. The ENRD-CP developed a communication strategy at the beginning of the programme period, based on stakeholder input on

communication tools and the discussions around the Thematic Group Report "Improving RDP Implementation". In the perception of the ENRD-CP, this communication strategy was echoed by the NRNs when setting up their strategies (ibid). However, a review of the case study reports does not necessarily highlight strong replication (CSR: FR, BE – Wallonia).

As part of the ENRD activities, the ENRD-CP **fosters exchange and common learning on communication tools** among NRNs. The COVID-19 restrictions proved an accelerator of pre-existing communication trends and led to an increased uptake of smart delivery tools in ENRD and NRN activities; however, the extent varies along the NRNs. In the perspective of the ENRD-CP, there is some degree of interdependence between the ENRD and the NRN communication strategies and tools. This interdependence manifests itself in terms of the ENRD-CP taking on innovative approaches from NRNs and vice-versa (see SQ5, JC5.3): NRNs also implemented tools the ENRD-CP uses, such as mentimeter.com to collect feedback.

Peer-to-peer meetings between the NRNs and facilitated by the ENRD-CP are the main mechanism with which stakeholders are involved and new communication approaches are discussed (ibid). An example of this process is the discussion of the use of podcasts to reach stakeholders in very remote rural areas. Generally, specific communication tools and approaches are necessary to reach target groups. This type of discussion is fostered in the peer-to-peer exchanges between the NRNs and the ENRD-CP. Furthermore, the ENRD has implemented a significant number of activities involving stakeholders on communication tools and activities (see SQ5, JC5.3).

Communication tools and approaches to communicating rural development (RD) issues are transversal elements in many ENRD events and activities. Thematic events often include some degree of emphasis on communication approaches relevant to the topic at hand, as desk review of the ENRD events illustrates.

As illustrated above, the main mechanism with which communication tools (such as social media, podcasts etc.) are developed and adopted are peer-to-peer exchanges between the ENRD-CP and the NRNs. This exchange fostered the uptake of innovative communication tools, though the COVID-19 pandemic provided a key accelerator in this regard (Based on interviews at EU level).

The NRNs' activities have involved a comprehensive set of stakeholders to devise new communication tools & the NRNs' activities have led to the development of sound communication strategies.

The NRNs, analysed as part of the case studies, established communication strategies at the beginning of the programming period, outlining key communication activities. However, with COVID-19, the NRNs were required to rapidly adapt their approaches to communication and organising of events. While the networks did manage to switch to virtual modes of communication and activities, this required rethinking of communication approaches and also had implications on the quality of outreach of the NRNs. Further, the levels of digitalisation among stakeholders (i.e. in terms of equipment and licenses) provided initial difficulties in some NRNs (SI). The switch to virtual activities increased the inclusivity of events and the number of participants (in FR, AT, BE – Wallonia), but generally also reduced the perceived degree of interaction in the activities (SK, AT, BE – Wallonia). In other cases (IT) the switch to virtual activities led to fewer activities being implemented by the NRNs.

The NRNs employ various communication tools to increase awareness around RDP implementation and issues affecting rural areas, ranging from websites to print and digital magazines, various degrees of social media usage, and newsletters, as highlighted by the analysed case studies. Examples include the use of television in Wallonia (CSR: BE – Wallonia), YouTube in Wallonia (BE) and France (CSR: FR, BE – Wallonia), as well as the featuring of the NRN in print media (CSR: AT).

The use of communication tools and approaches varies along the NRNs assessed in the case studies. Primary tools are "conventional" media, such as websites, newsletters, and magazines. The use of social media varies, with some analysed NRNs (i.e. the Austrian NRN) not using social media due to their governance structure. In the case of the Austrian NRN, the NRN has to get approval on communication materials (such as newsletters) from the MA. As this is a relatively lengthy process, it does not lend itself to using social media (CSR: AT).

Largely, the uptake of social media is high, with all other NRNs analysed as part of the case studies reporting some degree of usage, generally emphasising the use of Facebook. The performance of these communication tools is monitored via indicators and generally assessed regularly (e.g. CSR: SK, SI) or assessed in evaluations (CSR: IT).

The inclusion of stakeholders into the set-up of the communication approaches is relatively low across the analysed NRNs. However, the NRNs employ various forms of self-assessment, varying from highly structured surveys on the performance of communication tools (CSR: AT), to more general feedback collection via steering groups (such as in CSR: SI) or governance meetings (e.g. in CSR: FR).

➤ **JC2.2: The NRNs initiated by their networking activities contributions to the implementation of RDPs**

The NRNs undertook thematic and analytical exchanges improving implementation of the RDPs

Capacity building via the organisation of thematic and analytical exchanges is organised by NRNs to support RDP stakeholders in their abilities to implement the RDP. Depending on the specific role of the NRN within the wider governance framework of the RDP, the types of support offered by the NRNs vary, in that regard, as an analysis of the conducted case studies illustrates. The main mechanisms, identified from that review of case studies, are presented here.

Capacity building and knowledge transfer among RDP officials via thematic events and seminars is a mechanism with which the NRNs can contribute to improving RDP implementation. The sharing of implementation experiences between different MAs and PAs at EU level, such as on the ENRD TWG on improved RDP implementation, was highlighted as an important vehicle to improve RDP implementation in Member States (see SQ5, JC5.1). Similar mechanisms, organised by NRNs, can be observed at Member State level as well. In larger networks, such as the Italian or French NRNs, the NRNs were able to foster exchange between regional MAs, via dedicated geographic or thematic seminars in IT (CSR: IT) or via the NRNs in FR (CSR: FR). For Member States with a lower number of MAs, this mechanism of fostering exchange between individual MAs or PAs, seems not applicable as the case studies of SI, SK, AT, or BE–Wallonia indicate. In these cases, the EU-level seems relatively more important in terms of common learning on RDP implementation. This is also reflected by O26, which illustrates a significantly lower participation of larger Member States with regional RDPs (see Figure 25).

NRNs implement targeted support on specific issues to RDP bodies and stakeholders via thematic seminars and training workshops. Examples of this include the provision of gender mainstreaming training seminars at federal and regional level to the MA and implementing bodies by the Austrian NRN (CSR: AT). This can also be observed in the case of the dedicated support the Walloon (BE) NRN offers to LAGs in terms of capacity building (CSR: BE–Wallonia).

NRNs have been largely effective in improving knowledge on rural development policy among stakeholder groups, as highlighted by the results of the stakeholder survey (see Figure 21). Among the most important NRN implementation methods, in this regard, are seminars (66% of respondents assessing a positive contribution), dissemination of best practices (60% of respondents likewise assessing a positive contribution), and general dissemination of information (58% of respondents assessing a positive contribution). Least contributing implementation methods are the more specialised activities, including support on TNC, networking for advisors and innovation, as well as governance events.

The NRNs led to improved stakeholder participation in the RDPs

The case studies of the NRNs identified two major mechanisms to improve stakeholder participation in RDPs. The first mechanism being targeted and general outreach and publicity on RDP opportunities to increase general stakeholder awareness on the measures. Another mechanism is the implementation of thematic and networking events to improve stakeholder capacities to take part in RDP measures.

The NRNs implement outreach and awareness-raising activities to increase the visibility of RDP opportunities. In the case of the Slovenian RDP, the NRN disseminates RDP information to the wider public (CSR: SI). Further, the NRN supported the appointment of regional contact points to increase the geographic coverage of NRN activities. This has increased the geographic reach of the outreach activities (ibid). However, in the other analysed NRNs, the main function of the NRN communication seems to be to increase awareness of funding opportunities among NRN stakeholders, not necessarily the wider public. Despite this, some NRNs have implemented dedicated activities to reach out to potential beneficiaries and increase RDP participation. This includes the Slovakian NRN: the NRN, through its regional antennas, organised a significant number of events including large numbers of on-the-ground actors (such as farmers) as participants (CSR: SK). The French NRN began implementing training sessions for RDP procedures in 2014 to support application processes. By 2018, an online tutorial was also made available (CSR: FR).

An avenue for improving stakeholder participation in the RDP is capacity building to increase the abilities of stakeholder to access RDP funding or to take part in RDP processes. A prominent mechanism to increase stakeholder capacities and agency in terms of the RDP is via their involvement in the programming of the CAP Strategic Plans 2020+, as was the case in Austria. The Austrian NRN organised the stakeholder participatory process (CSR: AT). In Slovenia (CSR: SI), the NRN also organised events for the preparation of the CAP Strategic Plan 2020+. Conversely, TWGs of the Italian NRN were also involved in the programming processes of the CAP Strategic Plan 2020+ (CSR: IT).

Another way to improve stakeholder participation in the RDP is the implementation of thematic seminars targeted at stakeholder groups to increase their awareness on RDP implementation or thematic knowledge needs. In the case of the Slovenian NRN, such activities were deemed very effective in increasing general stakeholder awareness on the RDP (case study: SI). Similarly in the Walloon (BE) NRN: general events including thematic exchanges, working groups, publications, and interaction with other stakeholders contributed to capacity building for all stakeholder groups (CSR: BE – Wallonia). In the case of the Austrian NRN, stakeholder events reduced conflicts between stakeholder groups (particularly environmental and agricultural stakeholders) and increased awareness of needs of the other stakeholder groups (CSR: AT). Furthermore, the events improved the abilities of environmental stakeholder groups to access RDP funding independently (ibid). In the case of the French NRN, thematic events and seminars on RD issues organised by the NRN contributed to reinforcing capacities of stakeholders involved by enabling exchanges between stakeholder groups (CSR: FR). The activities carried out by the Italian NRN (seminars, study visits, national thematic workshops, etc.) also encouraged the involvement of new actors, such as union representatives and have increased their capacities in terms of the CAP (CSR: IT).

The NRNs conducted LAG networking and cooperation efforts improving implementation of the RDPs

Among the NRNs analysed as part of the case studies, the support to LAGs and TNC was identified to be the most common technical assistance function of the NRNs (see also JC2.3). Indeed, the NRNs consistently undertake multiple functions to support the implementation of LEADER and TNC, including the organisation of networking events, thematic workshops and seminars, production of guidelines and toolkits, as well as other modes of direct support.

Networking events are organised by NRNs in the form of annual conferences (such as in AT or BE – Wallonia). General thematic events targeted at LAGs can also fulfil this function, with LEADER stakeholders in the Austrian case study highlighting the value of informal exchanges on technical experiences with LEADER implementation as valuable aspects of the networking events. Furthermore, these events strengthen networks between LAG managers and other LEADER stakeholders, providing entry-points for cooperation projects. Networking events with stakeholders from other Member States can be beneficial for knowledge transfer and common learning: the German, Austrian, and Luxembourgish NRNs organised a series of field trips together, including study visits to LAGs in the hosting Member State and thematic exchange (CSR: Austria).

To fill specific knowledge needs among LAGs and other LEADER stakeholders, the NRNs organise thematic workshops and seminars, as well as practical demonstrations, such as study tours. The Italian NRN organised events focussing on specific thematic and geographic aspects (CSR: IT) to target knowledge needs on LEADER among regional actors, such as MAs. These meetings targeted knowledge needs and fulfilled a networking function by connecting regional stakeholders. These knowledge and experience sharing events provide a critical avenue for improving capacities in LAG managers (e.g., AT, BE-Wal) on specific issues. However, organising events on relatively complex measures such as LEADER can be challenging: LAG managers in the Austrian case study highlight the importance of selecting speakers with adequate knowledge on LEADER in addition to the thematic field they are presenting, as otherwise the events lack in overall relevance (CSR: Austria). Organising study tours with practical examples of LEADER implementation was highlighted in the case studies of the Slovakian and Slovenian NRNs as good approaches to build capacity among LAG managers.

Capacity building and support to LAG managers is also undertaken in specific approaches, outside of general networking events and conferences or thematic workshops and seminars. The French NRN provides support in applications to LAGs (CSR: FR). Supporting LAGs in finding cooperation partners is also an important targeted activity, such as in the Austrian, French, or Italian NRNs (CSR: IT, AT, FR). Other modes of targeted support are implemented by the LAGs to develop capacities, such as via ad-hoc seminars on relevant issues in the Austrian NRN or training activities organised by the French or Walloon (BE) NRN (CSR: BE – Wallonia, FR, AT).

The NRNs fostered networking for advisors and innovation services improving the implementation of the RDPs

The main mechanism of the NRNs to foster innovation was by supporting the implementation of EIP-AGRI. The role of the NRNs in EIP-AGRI implementation varied across the analysed NRNs and ranged from awareness raising of EIP-AGRI (e.g., in SI), to more active support, primarily the development of guidance (e.g., in FR) and support to setting up Operational Groups (OGs), e.g., in AT.

The overall roles of the NRNs in fostering innovation is provided in SQ6. An overview of the main mechanisms with which NRNs support EIP-AGRI implementation in the respective RDPs is detailed in Table 6.

The functions an NRN can take in supporting the implementation of EIP-AGRI vary strongly with the roles it was given by the MA. In Member States where significant competences were devolved from the MA to the NRN in terms of EIP-AGRI implementation, support functions are correspondingly stronger, including dedicated support in setting up Operational Groups (AT) and fostering the interlinkages between regional MAs to support the overall implementation (FR). In France, the NRN supported the 27 regional MAs in the overall implementation of EIP-AGRI by developing a common understanding of EIP-AGRI concepts and later, directly supporting implementation. This was essential, as the introduction of regional RDPs and the, resulting, devolution of competences to regional level necessitated common learning on implementation approaches to avoid substantial heterogeneities. As such, NRNs can have a strong mechanism in fostering overall innovation in RDP implementation. The NRNs can provide a common implementation perspective on EIP-AGRI via increased networking between implementing bodies in complex systems. NRNs may also (as was the case in Austria) via knowledge transfer on EIP-AGRI project approaches and support to the set-up of Operational Groups, improve the quality of the projects implemented under EIP-AGRI, thus fostering innovation in the RDPs.

In Member States where the MA retains significant implementation competences in EIP-AGRI, innovation support functions are weaker, and tend to focus on the dissemination of good EIP-AGRI practices (e.g., SI). Accordingly, the contribution mechanism to the implementation of EIP-AGRI is indirect, using general networking and outreach activities. In these cases, the increased awareness around EIP-AGRI and the availability of good practices can improve the implementation of the associated measure.

Table 6: EIP-AGRI implementation in the case study NRNs

NRN	Innovation support	Mechanism to innovation
AT	Dedicated EIP-AGRI unit within NRN	Support in setting up Operational Groups, networking support, dedicated events.
BE – Wal	Dedicated innovation broker function, no implementation of EIP-AGRI	RDP measure 16.1 is not implemented in Wallonia. However, the NRN significantly developed so-called “innovation roads” (three over the period) with comprehensive support to the concept of innovation and the emergence of three Operational Groups recognised by H2020.
EE	Dedicated EIP-AGRI unit within NRN	Good practice dissemination innovation networking and cooperation with EIP-AGRI.
FR	Dedicated EIP-AGRI unit within NRN	Support at regional level , establishing a link with the Regions that are new MA of RDPs , by raising awareness of the new concept of EIP-AGRI and Operational Group , developing a common understanding of these concepts, later addressing their needs in order to succeed in the implementation; support at national level , linking the CAP and agricultural research including with H2020, which implied linking stakeholders from two different directorates of the MAA (DGER and DGPEE on the current organisation chart), with the EU level , making a link with the EIP-AGRI Service Point at EU level and H2020.
IT	Dedicated EIP-AGRI unit within NRN	Awareness raising (regional workshops and seminars) on EIP-AGRI targeted at potential Operational Groups and beneficiaries, developing of guidance documents (innovation toolkit).
SK	Dedicated EIP-AGRI unit within NRN	Good practices and dissemination, support to TWG, events.
SI	EIP-AGRI unit within MA	Support to EIP-AGRI implementing unit by showcasing best practices, dissemination of calls and co-organising events.

Source: ADE, CCRI, ÖIR, CREA (2022), based on Case study reports

The NRNs analysed in the case studies also implement general activities to increase innovation in RDP implementation, generally by raising awareness on innovative projects and good implementation examples. These NRN activities include the organisation of thematic seminars and exchanges to showcase good and innovative project examples. The collection of good RDP projects plays an essential role in this regard (see CSR AT, SI, and SK). Examples of valuable and/or innovative approaches are made accessible via project databases. General good practice collection in RDP implementation, for example in the case of the Italian or French NRNs, fulfils a similar function as the project databases in other NRNs. Dedicated and targeted innovation support can provide another avenue to improve RDP implementation, as is the case in the French NRN (by supporting innovative approaches in LAGs) and Italy (via a dedicated TWG and the production of studies on innovation needs).

The NRNs activities in disseminating of monitoring and evaluation results led to improved implementation of the RDPs

Monitoring and evaluation of RDP activities can support implementation in the long run by providing a structured learning and reflection process and enabling RDP bodies to tailor policy design and implementing rules based on evidence on the efficacy of RDP implementation. The role of NRNs is limited in the monitoring and evaluation processes and is, generally, restricted to the dissemination of evaluation outputs as part of thematic events. Among the NRNs analysed as part of the case studies, the vast NRN activities related to monitoring and evaluation is mostly restricted to dissemination via seminars and/or publications (website, newsletters etc.) in the case of the Austrian, the Slovenian, the Slovakian NRNs, and (to an extent) the Walloon (BE) NRN. The contribution mechanism to improved RDP implementation is, in principle, similar to general knowledge exchange seminars or exchanges, as NRNs may increase general stakeholder awareness on the outcomes of evaluations. However, since the role of the NRNs is very limited in the overall M&E process, the impact an NRN may have via this avenue on RDP implementation, remains limited.

However, some NRNs carry significantly more dedicated M&E functions and have a stronger lever to improve RDP implementation, generally via the set-up of dedicated TWGs. This is exemplarily demonstrated in the case of the Italian NRN (CSR: IT), which operates an M&E TWG. This TWG provides support to regional MAs in terms of M&E support and the collection of good M&E practices. Another network with a significant role in M&E is the French NRN (CSR: FR), which also set up a TWG on M&E. Via this process, the NRN was able to support wider RDP evaluation processes throughout the programme period.

There are also more specialised mechanisms with which NRNs can contribute to RDP implementation via activities in the field of M&E. The Walloon (BE) NRN, in addition to general dissemination activities, provides support to LAGs in terms of their self-evaluation processes (CSR: BE – Wallonia), such as the definition of common indicators. In the case of the Slovakian NRN (CSR: SK), the NRN provides general data for M&E activities.

- **JC2.3: The networking activities undertaken by the ENRD and NRNs have led to improved RDP administration and management capacities, via knowledge transfer between administrations and risk and opportunity assessment of management systems**

The ENRD and the NRNs have engaged in capacity building via knowledge transfer between MAs/PAs

A core activity of the ENRD is the organisation of technical workshops, **supporting knowledge transfer and capacity building between MAs and PAs**. These workshops are usually demand-driven and based on specific stakeholder needs around the implementation of RDP policies. Some of the topics may also be requested by DG AGRI. The horizontal DG AGRI unit supporting RDP implementation in the 2014-2020 period relays needs identified on specific issues, such as simplified cost options. The focus of these exchanges is on deeper discussions on RD policies, organised as peer-to-peer workshops and as input-based workshops (ibid). The impacts of ENRD activities on the implementation of RDPs in outlined in SQ5. (Based on interviews at EU level).

The mechanism of peer learning via ENRD activities is highlighted as effectively aiding capacity building in MAs and PAs in the case study reports. In the case of Austria (CSR: AT), the MA participates in TWGs with a focus on issues directly tied to RDP implementation. The TWGs enable the MA to exchange on RDP implementation issues with other MAs from the EU-27. This was also highlighted by NRN stakeholders in the case of the Italian NRN (CSR: IT) for ENRD events and by the MA and NSU in the Walloon (BE) case study (CSR: BE – Wallonia).

A key mechanism identified by the ENRD-CP improving the efficacy of capacity building and knowledge transfer in these thematic meetings is the availability of European Commission representatives, either directly or indirectly, as part of these exchanges (Based on interviews at EU level). The availability of DG AGRI experts involved in the design of the relevant policies can convey a deepened understanding and resolve MA/PA questions. If the DG AGRI experts are not available for meetings, the ENRD-CP relays contact information to the MAs/PAs in question. The ENRD-CP also provides good and bad practices on RDP implementation, to illustrate application cases of specific issues.

The EHD supports capacity building among MAs and evaluators in the context of evaluations via its activities (see SQ6). The most impactful activities (see SQ6, JC6.3) of the EHD were guidance notes for evaluators and good practice workshops for MAs in terms of producing good practices in evaluation. As with other ENRD activities, events centred around peer-learning proved effective in supporting capacity building, as illustrated by findings from the Estonian, Slovenian, and Walloon case studies. The main contributions of the EHD activities (see SQ6, JC6.1) were increases in skills and knowledge among evaluators and MAs, as well as capacity building among MAs.

Knowledge transfer between **RDP bodies and to RDP bodies, as well as capacity building are core activities of NRNs**, as the NRNs analysed as part of the case studies indicate. This is undertaken generally via dedicated thematic events and exchanges organised by the NRNs. These capacity building activities have been successful, as identified in the MA/PA survey (Q11, n=44), with 77% of respondents assessing a positive impact on MA skills and capacities.

The NRNs have engaged in capacity building and knowledge transfer by organising thematic meetings supporting capacity building on specific issues, as well as general capacity building activities. This was the case, e.g., in the Austrian NRN (case study: Austria) which implemented several federal and regional workshops on gender mainstreaming in RDP implementation. The Italian NRN (CSR: Italy) organised meetings focusing on specific themes or geographic areas with MAs, connecting various regional MAs. This enabled regional MAs to share implementation experiences and fostered common learning and capacity building. In other networks with a strong emphasis on RRN, the role of the NRN in supporting capacity building among RDP actors varies. In France (CSR: France), the NRN supports the RRNs in their activities of capacity building among regional MAs.

The involvement of other ESIF stakeholders as part of NRN networks was observed to be low throughout the analysed case studies. Despite the implementation of LEADER/CLLD multi-funding in some of the case study RDPs (such as SK or AT – Tyrol), interactions with stakeholders from other ESIF are minimal or non-existent. This is elaborated to a higher extent in SQ 14. In the case of SK, the NRN only has a mandate to engage with EAFRD stakeholders, despite multi-funding in LEADER/CLLD (CSR: SK); in AT, there is little engagement from other ESIF stakeholders, despite them being a target group (CSR: AT). However, NRNs can contribute to capacity building among other-ESIF actors. This is exemplified by the Italian NRN (CSR: IT), which contributed to capacity building among other-ESIF actors as part of the National Strategy for Inner Areas development. The NRN organised activities aiming at improving skills and knowledge on the rural development policy on the part of the various stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of the Strategy (PAs, Regional Operational Programmes' MAs, Local Authorities).

The ENRD and the NRNs have supported risk assessment of RDP management systems

The ENRD-CP organised thematic exchange to support peer learning, also around risk assessment of RDP management systems. This is the primary mechanism with which the ENRD-CP can foster improved RDP implementation in that regard. The ENRD-CP organised a conference in Finland with all PAs to facilitate exchange and common learning on this matter. The exchanges included discussions to support a common understanding of risk management in RDP implementation among PAs, exchange on which parts of processes create risks, and at what levels risks are observed (ibid). This is especially relevant for the implementation of RDP measures featuring a high degree of innovative approaches (especially LEADER), as these measures tend to be riskier and PAs can be fined for non-performance – such as in the case of LEADER implementation (ibid).

The supply of these exchange forums provides an avenue for RDP actors, especially PAs, to learn from other experiences and promote innovative solutions while minimising the risk they incur. Further, the ENRD has published practical examples on this issue, such as the 2018 publication “A risk-assessment approach for RDP implementation” (ENRD, 2018a).

NRNs generally provide forums of exchange on good implementation practices among RDP stakeholders (see JC2.2). Risk assessment in RDP management systems concerns primarily PAs and MAs, being the bodies in direct contact with the systems. From the analysis of the case study NRNs, the NRNs seem **to not have taken on this function of providing risk assessment** support throughout the programming period. Adjacent activities were organised, such as by the Italian NRN (CSR: Italy), promoting exchange and good practices among PAs and MAs via workshops, focus groups, study visits etc. As elaborated above, risk assessment of RDP management systems was supported via peer-learning at EU-level by the ENRD-CP.

The NRNs have supported the MAs/PAs by providing support and technical assistance

The role of the NRNs in directly supporting MAs and PAs in RDP implementation via technical assistance is relatively consistent across the NRNs analysed in the case studies. The main incidence of direct technical assistance by NRNs occurs in the support of LAGs and TNC (case studies AT, SI, BE-Wal, FR, SK). The specific mechanism on how this support is provided is detailed in the previous judgement criterion (see JC2.2).

However, NRNs provide direct support in the form of technical assistance. This is the case in the Slovenian NRN, which disseminates programme information to the wider public (CSR: SI).

This function is largely in-line with the overall network's role in promoting, informing and animating partners for enhanced and efficient implementation of the RDP. The French NRN supports stakeholders in RDP implementation by providing technical assistance (CSR: FR). Specific cases of the NRN fulfilling other technical assistance roles can also be observed in Italy (CSR: IT), where the NRN provided support and technical assistance in improving collaboration between the main institutional, national and regional stakeholders involved in the broadband investments. Further (ibid), the Italian NRN provides general technical assistance via its thematic working groups in supporting public bodies, often blurring the line between networking activities and conducting technical assistance activities.

- **JC2.4: There is a link between the ENRD and NRN contribution to improved RDP implementation and territorial development, as perceived by the MAs/PAs/NSUs (ENRD) and the NRN stakeholders (NRN)**

The ENRD's contribution to improved RDP implementation is perceived by the end-users of ENRD outputs

The ENRD provides significant contribution to the improved implementation of RDPs, as perceived by the end-users of ENRD outputs, namely the MAs/PAs and the NRNs. Particularly ENRD thematic events, capacity building events, best practices, as well as the TWGs were highlighted in the MA/PA survey as contributing to improved RDP implementation (see Figure 23, also JC5.1). Among the TWGs, the ENRD TWG on "improved RDP implementation" and "smart villages" were likewise assessed as particularly effective in supporting RDP implementation (see Figure 25, also JC5.1). The other end-user group of ENRD outputs, namely NRNs, also attribute a high degree of effectiveness in terms of improving RDP implementation to ENRD outputs (see

Figure 24, also JC5.1). This concerns particularly ENRD publications, LEADER/CLLD networking, and the dissemination of good practices.

The surveyed NSUs (Q16 N=24) point particularly towards the ENRD activities and outputs facilitating the exchange of expertise, with 84% of respondents highlighting this impact. The majority (70%) of NSU survey respondents also highlight a beneficial impact on RDP implementation. This is also echoed by the respondents of the MA/PA survey (Q20 N=40) which highlight particularly the facilitation of exchange of expertise (indicated by 77% of respondents), as well as the strengthening of skills and capacities (indicated by 67% of respondents).

The NRNs' contribution to improved RDP implementation is perceived by the end-users of NRN outputs

The end-users of the NRN outputs were surveyed as part of the NRN stakeholder survey across the seven NRNs analysed as part of the case studies. The surveyed stakeholders were asked to assess whether the implementation methods of the NRNs had a positive impact on their RDP knowledge. The surveyed stakeholders (Q12 N= 416) point especially to NRN seminars, the dissemination of best practices, and the dissemination of general information on rural development as the three most positively assessed activities in the context of increasing knowledge on rural development policy.

The EU-27 survey of MAs and PAs (Q14, N=44) highlighted similar findings, when asked to assess the impacts of NRN activities on RDP implementation. The NRN activities, highly assessed by most of the surveyed MAs and PAs were the NRN seminars and events (86% agreeing with an NRN contribution), the dissemination of good practices (84% agreeing), and the thematic working groups (81% agreeing). However, the surveyed implementing bodies attributed relatively more negative assessments of the NRNs' contributions particularly in the field of networking and information dissemination on other ESIF and the fostering of rural-urban links (24% at least disagreeing that the NRNs contributed), as well as networking for advisors (13% disagreeing). This illustrates a certain degree of heterogeneity in terms of the contributions of the NRNs along their activities to RDP implementation. Further, the MA/PA survey assessed thematic contributions as perceived by the MAs and PAs along the thematic areas. The survey highlighted the NRNs' contributions particularly in terms of knowledge exchange and innovation (P1 - 86% of respondents agreeing with a contribution),

environment and natural resources (P4 – 66% of respondents), as well as in terms of economic development of rural areas (P3A/P6 – 61% of respondents).

The contribution of the stakeholder organisations was also assessed in the stakeholder survey (see Figure 15). Stakeholder respondents across the seven case studies highlighted particularly the NRNs' roles in fostering their ability to innovate and providing inspirations, strengthening skills and capacities in RDP implementation, and strengthening stakeholder cooperation. These results highlight the significance of the mechanisms discussed in JC2.2 (particularly on innovation support and thematic exchanges) and JC2.3 (in terms of capacity building) in terms of supporting RDP implementation, and conversely, in improving balanced territorial development. The link to improving balanced territorial development, however, rests on the exact contribution to RDP implementation the networks have made and as such, varies, across the Member States. As such, relatively diverse contributions have been made, generally by improving RDP implementation targeting rural needs.

4.3 SQ3: How did the European Rural Networks' governance structure (Assembly, Steering Group and permanent Subgroups) contribute with its activities to fostering networking for rural development?

4.3.1 Approach

4.3.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

SQ 3 assesses the mechanisms by which the governance structure of the European Rural Networks contributes, through its networking activities, to rural development.

This SQ covers the governance framework of the European Rural Networks (ENRD and EIP-AGRI) and how this structure contributes to fostering networking for rural development. The analysis also covers the following governance bodies:

- European Rural Networks' Assembly;
- European Rural Networks' Steering Group;
- Subgroup: Innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability;
- Subgroup: LEADER and Community-Led Local Development;
- The Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE).

4.3.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC3.1: The bodies of European Rural Networks enable the implementation of networking activities for rural development.

JC3.2: The European Rural Networks' governance structure is appropriate in ensuring the fostering of networks for rural development.

4.3.1.3 Methodology

Information on the governance structure was collected via desk research of materials on the European Rural Networks, such as background documents on the structure of the networks (e.g. EC, ENRD, and EIP-AGRI (2015)) (EC; ENRD; EIP-AGRI, 2015). Furthermore, the project team collected and analysed information from website/social media postings on the networks' activities. By conducting a survey of the members of the governance bodies of the European Rural Networks, the project team assessed the characteristics of the networks' functioning.

The information collected on the governance structure and the outputs were complemented by qualitative assessments via EU-level interviews. Information on the mechanisms of the governance structure and their implications on the networking activities is collected in a stakeholder survey targeted at members of the Rural Networks.

The interviews collect the respondents' assessment of the interlinkages between the individual bodies of the European Rural Networks (including the interlinkages with DG AGRI).

Interviewees were asked to assess the types of relationships between the bodies in addition to the implications of these interlinkages on the networks' activities.

4.3.2 Summary answer

SQ3: How did the European Rural Networks' governance structure (Assembly, Steering Group and permanent Subgroups) contribute with its activities to fostering networking for rural development?

JC3.1: The bodies of European Rural Networks enable the implementation of networking activities for rural development

The Assembly and the Steering Group are effective in their roles of providing guidance and steering to the ENRD and EIP-AGRI. They function as overarching validation and guidance bodies. The annual meetings of the Assembly generally feature content and governance centred discussions and presentations. Membership of the Assembly is fixed for the duration of the period. As identified in the governance survey, participation varies, with some inactive members. During the 2014-2020 period, no mechanism was applied to replace consistently inactive or non-participating members. The Steering Group meets two to three times a year and provides a more targeted forum to oversee the activities of the ENRD and EIP-AGRI. While the Steering Group may be adequately effective in overseeing network activities in general, only a small share of respondents to the governance survey (28%) deemed the Steering Group effective in coordinating the two networks.

The two permanent subgroups on Innovation and Leader provide a targeted and smaller forum of networking. This enables the subgroups to share implementation practices and contribute to the implementation of, respectively, the EIP-AGRI and LEADER. The subgroup on innovation facilitates dialogue and bottom-up innovation well, and benefits from including stakeholders outside of the European Rural networks (Horizon 2020). It has evolved from initially collecting information on innovation needs and priorities towards more content-intensive formats which enable the discussion of the needs, feeding into EIP-AGRI priorities. The subgroup on LEADER plays an important role in bridging the gap between LAGs and LEADER actors, and EU-level structures, which is important for developing an understanding of EU policies. The Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the Common Agricultural Policy (GREXE) plays an important role in furthering the understanding of evaluation in RDPs among programme stakeholders.

There are substantial benefits of the format of the subgroups and the GREXE, as they enable a more targeted and detailed discussion, thematic exchange, and peer-learning among specific stakeholder groups. There is no equivalent group for the ENRD activities on RDP implementation in the 2014-2020 governance structure, but related discussions took place in the Steering Group.

The two networks, the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI Network, are highly effective in their respective roles of providing a forum for exchange on rural development policy and supporting competitive and sustainable farming. However, there are limited synergies, and there is a low degree of co-operation between the two networks (see SQ13). This was also identified in the governance survey, in which only a minority of respondents deemed the co-operation complementary or synergetic. The contracted support units (EHD, ENRD-CP, EIP-AGRI Service Point) supporting the network activities were co-ordinated by three separate units at DG AGRI in the 2014-2020 period. While co-ordination between the units was good, this did not translate in close co-operation at operational level between the support units (see SQ13).

JC3.2: The European Rural Networks' governance structure is appropriate in ensuring the fostering of networks for rural development

Overarchingly, the governance structure is appropriate in terms of supporting and fostering networking for rural development. This is highlighted by the respondents of the Rural Networks governance survey, who attribute a generally positive assessment to the appropriateness of the Rural Networks' strategic framework. The Steering Group and the Assembly work well in terms of providing a robust and functional oversight mechanism. It was not effective, however, in terms of promoting synergies and complementarities between the networks, as identified in the governance survey. Furthermore, the low degree of synergy between EIP-AGRI Network and ENRD are observed, despite the single strategic framework.

The lack of dedicated subgroup for activities related to the implementation of the RDP shifts the more detailed discussions of ENRD activities into especially the Steering Group and to the Assembly. A

review of the agendas and the Assembly reports highlighted a relatively strong representation of ENRD-CP (or wider ENRD affiliated) speakers, compared to the EHD or EIP-AGRI. Significant contributions to fostering networking for rural development include the facilitation of co-operation between stakeholder groups, fostering networking between partners across MSs, reinforcing capacity building and peer-learning, dissemination of good practices, as well as exchange on RDP implementation experiences.

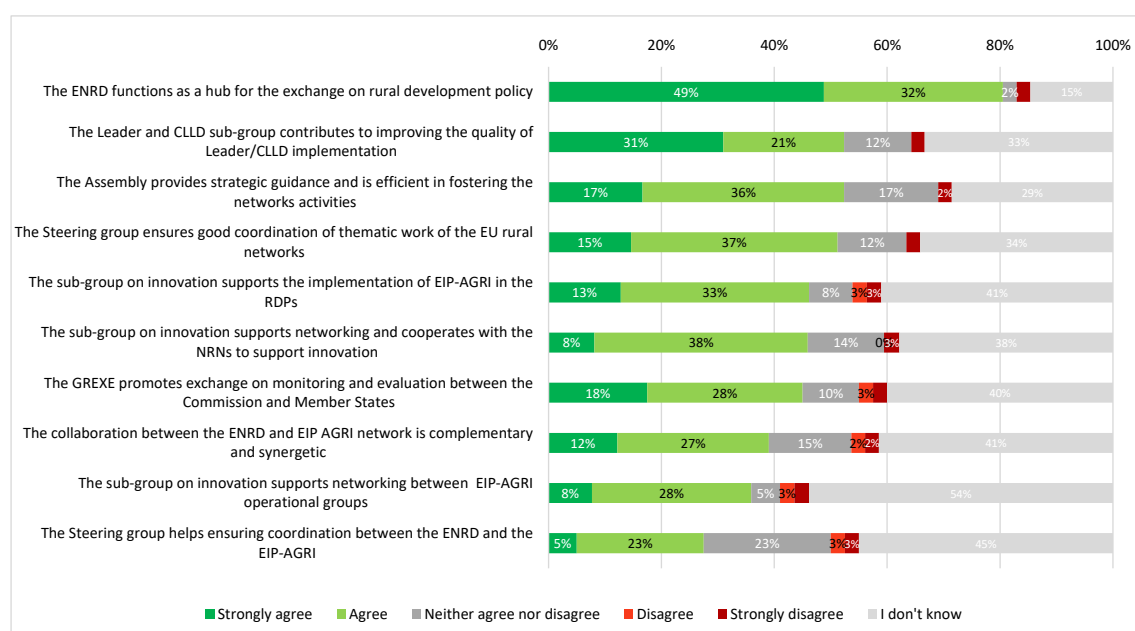
4.3.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

- **JC3.1: The bodies of European Rural Networks enable the implementation of networking activities for rural development**
- ***The Assembly functions as an oversight body of the Rural Networks***

The European Rural Networks are governed by the Assembly and the Steering Group which provide the overarching, formal structures of the networks. The Assembly is composed of approx. 200 members, including representatives of MAs/PAs, innovation entities, government bodies, as well as interest groups. The Assembly (ENRD, 2019e) contains 25 agricultural advisory service providers, 22 agricultural research institutes, 25 civil dialogue groups, 23 LEADER stakeholder bodies, 28 MAs, and 28 NRNs or affiliated bodies. It meets once per year and undertakes activities at strategic level, including advice and guidance for network activities and thematic work, as well as ensuring monitoring and assessment of network activities.

The Assembly implements one key activity: the annual Assembly meetings. With these meetings, the Assembly fulfils its role in providing **strategic direction, guidance and advice to the work of the two European Rural Networks** by highlighting emerging issues and important topics in rural development practice. This is reflected by the results of the governance survey (Figure 19), with more than half of respondents at least agreeing with this assessment. An interview with the ENRD-CP highlighted this role in greater detail: the Assembly is a forum for discussion of the programmes of the networks in a given year, providing validation and nuance. It focusses more on delivery mechanisms of the network activities, rather than its thematic priorities.

Figure 19: European rural networks Governance survey – Functioning of the Rural Network bodies



Source: European rural networks Governance survey (ADE, 2022), Q3, n = 42; Note: the response "I don't know" was largely answered by respondents not present in the respective body or group.

A review of the available agendas of the Assembly and the associated Assembly reports between 2015 and 2022 (ENRD, 2022c) provides insights into the format and structure of the Assembly meetings. The Assembly meetings differ in terms of agenda between the years;

however, they maintain some degree of thematic parallels and, generally, feature a strong content-focus with a high number of discussion items in relation to the available time.

In terms of format the Assembly meetings tend to contain a part focussed on presentations, generally followed by some mode of participation (e.g. via question-and-answer sessions), and more participative elements, such as workshops. Besides the formal introduction and closing, each Assembly meeting contains an update of the activities of the Rural Networks. There are often also presentations on issues relevant to the CAP or wider rural development policy. The more participative elements of the Assembly include workshops, such as on governance structure or policy-related aspects such as RDP implementation.

A review of the Assembly agendas indicates a high degree of representation of speakers from the ENRD or the ENRD-CP and to a lesser extent from the EHD or the EIP-AGRI. This was also emphasised in an interview with the EIP-AGRI support unit and the EHD. However, in terms of thematic foci of the discussion elements, care is paid in the organisation of the event to always include relevant items from GREXE or EIP-AGRI in the discussions and presentations, even if these are not presented by the support units, but rather by representatives of DG AGRI or integrated in other discussion items. This relatively stronger focus on the ENRD can also be explained by the thematically more diverse range of activities of the ENRD, being related to rural development, rather than the narrower focus of EIP-AGRI on a single measure of the RDPs. (Based on interviews at EU level).

The members of the Assembly can provide suggestions for specific discussion items. As per an interview with representatives of DG AGRI involved in the process, only a limited number of suggestions are made by members, signalling general satisfaction with the discussion items (Based on interviews at EU level). Each Assembly meeting is prepared via at least two preparatory meetings. In these meetings representatives of DG AGRI in contact with the respective network support units, the ENRD-CP, the EHD and the EIP-AGRI Service Point) are present (ibid.). The three support units are represented either directly, or indirectly (via the DG AGRI representatives). However, prior consultation between the relevant desk officer and the support units ensures involvement of the support units' assessments. The overall organisation process is managed by the ENRD-CP (ibid).

However, there are also drawbacks, potentially limiting the functioning of the Assembly's role in providing steering and oversight of the rural networks. The membership of the Assembly was set up at the beginning of the 2014-2020 period via an expression of interest mechanism with fixed membership for the duration of the period. This may lead to an issue of overrepresentation of more "involved" stakeholder groups. As the results of the governance survey show, some surveyed stakeholders point to a degree of inactivity, as not all members show up consistently. Some respondents of the governance survey (Q4, Q5) highlight Assembly as "too formal" in terms of format and one respondent point to a need to include more women and young people. Further, some stakeholders deem the frequency of events could be increased to improve its overall functioning (Q5). This is also supported, to extents, by interviews with the support units: a refreshment mechanism (i.e. by replacing inactive members) could be beneficial to entice participation.

➤ ***The Steering Group ensures good coordination of thematic work of the EU Networks***

The Steering Group (SG) meets more frequently than the Assembly, generally two-to-three times a year. Its overall purpose is to oversee the work of the Rural Networks, as well as ensuring thematic coordination. This is provided by a more focussed and detailed discussion and decision forum, in comparison with the Assembly. The composition of the membership is decided by the Assembly, which selects its 48 members. The membership consists of 2 advisory services providers, 2 research institutes, 17 civil dialogue groups, 14 MAs, 14 NRNs, two organisations representing regional or local authorities, and four bodies steering evaluations.

A review of the agendas and the report of the 17 Steering Groups meetings (ENRD, 2022d) between May 2015 and May 2022 reveals a targeted and focussed discussion forum. The Steering Group meetings contain governance related discussion items, such as presentation of the planned activities of Rural Networks and preparations of the Assembly meetings if close

to an upcoming meeting (e.g. discussion or selection of agenda items). In addition, the Steering Group also provides a forum to reflect on the implementation of network activities (e.g. the outcomes of the Rural Networks' self-assessment) and governance arrangements. The discussion and reflection of thematic rural development issues or the CAP is also an important element, usually implemented in more participative formats (e.g. via group discussions or workshops).

The Steering Group, as a more targeted oversight body, is effective in its activities. As part of the governance survey (see Figure 19), the majority of respondents agree with the statement that the Steering Group ensures good coordination of the thematic work of the Rural Network. The overarching role of coordinating thematic work, in the perception of the ENRD-CP, is carried out by the Steering Group (Based on interviews at EU level). However, that role has shifted over time: at the beginning of the programming period, the ENRD consulted the Steering Group on potential themes and topics of activities. This changed, as the ENRD more strongly consults stakeholders and collects relevant themes from them. These themes are collected and brought by the Steering Group, in which they are discussed in break-out rooms.

However, only 28% of respondents (see Figure 19) agree that the SG is ensuring coordination between the ENRD and EIP-AGRI. The issue of limited synergies between the two networks was also emphasised in the self-assessment of the Rural Networks. While a strong effort persists in ensuring interwoven activities (e.g. the incorporation of outputs from EIP-AGRI OGs into ENRD activities when thematically relevant), it is not perceived as such by stakeholders.

➤ ***The permanent subgroup on innovation supports the implementation of EIP-AGRI in the RDPs***

The subgroup on innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability is supported by the EIP-AGRI Service Point to disseminate innovative practices and increase innovation uptake in agriculture and forestry. The subgroup consists of 21 MA or NRN representatives, 13 EU stakeholder organisations, and 22 agricultural research organisations and services.

Members of the Rural Networks provided assessments of the effectiveness the Subgroup on Innovation in the governance survey (see Figure 19). Of the respondents, 46% at least agreed that the subgroup supports networking on innovation between NRNs and that it supports the implementation of EIP-AGRI in RDPs. However, fewer respondents were assessing the subgroups impact in terms of networking Operational Groups as effective – only 36% of respondents assessed a positive impact of the subgroup in that regard.

The main objectives of the subgroup are: supporting the implementation of the EIP-AGRI in RDPs, identifying common issues, problems and good practices, supporting networking between EIP-AGRI Operational Groups, providing input for the work programme of the EIP-AGRI network, and cooperating with NRNs to support innovation. Respondents of the governance survey (see Figure 19) generally attribute moderate satisfaction to reaching these objectives. When assessing only responses from members of the subgroup in the survey, satisfaction rates are substantially higher, with the majority of this subset indicating a good performance. The subgroup consists of fewer members than the Assembly, enabling a more targeted dialogue on issues related to EIP-AGRI. It includes stakeholders, generally not part of the ENRD network, such as the Horizon 2020 researchers. Initially in the programme period, the subgroup was set up to collect innovation needs and priorities from the Member States. By the end of the programming period, the subgroup evolved to a more content-intensive format, with the Service Point collecting stakeholder needs through their website and assembles a longlist of needs. This longlist is subsequently discussed in the subgroup, acting as input for the overall EIP-AGRI priorities. The subgroup emphasises a bottom-up approach to innovation and plays an important role in the implementation of M16.1 and 16.2, by providing support, via networking support and thematic exchanges. (Based on interviews at EU level).

Rural network members surveyed as part of the governance survey identify several aspects as potential improvements to the subgroup and its overall position within the Rural Networks. One stakeholder pointed to increased interactivity, for example via polls or exchanges on

projects in the context of the subgroup. Moving AKIS to a higher level (such as to the SG or the Assembly) or into a dedicated body within the Rural Networks would also improve the functioning of the subgroup.

➤ ***The permanent Subgroup LEADER/CLLD contributes to improving the quality of LEADER/CLLD implementation***

The subgroup on LEADER/CLLD aims to improve the implementation of LEADER/CLLD and TNC by identifying common issues, sharing of good practices, engaging in capacity building, and stimulation peer learning. It is composed of representatives of 28 MAs, 28 NRNs, 28 LAGs, and 12 EU stakeholder organisations. Between 2015 and 2022, the subgroup organised 10 meetings.

As per the presentation of the subgroup's activities in the 17th Steering Group (EU Rural Networks, 2022) the large membership of nearly 100 stakeholders improves the understanding of LEADER implementation, particularly by incorporating Member State insights. Peer-learning and a fostering of a common understanding of LEADER implementation were mentioned as key outputs of this subgroup. A review of the subgroup reports highlights the wide range of topics discussed with a strong focus on Member State perspectives, providing a highly relevant approach given the wide variety and diversity of LEADER implementation across the Member States and even between RDPs.

This observation is also echoed by the governance survey. Surveyed members of the Rural Networks (see Figure 19) point to effectiveness of the subgroup in improving LEADER/CLLD implementation in the RDPs: 52% of respondents at least agreed with that assessment. The subgroup fulfils a specific role in terms of improving the implementation of LEADER/CLLD. LEADER is a stakeholder activity at ground level, involving local and regional actors. At EU level, the ENRD interacts mainly with the NRNs in their networking activities, with the NRNs engaging in networking activities with LEADER actors. As such, the LEADER actors tend to be underrepresented at the EU level. The subgroup provides LAGs and LEADER actors a key mechanism to short-circuit this hierarchy and engage at EU level along relevant needs (ibid). These needs can relate to the understanding of EU policies (e.g. the Green Deal, Farm to Fork strategy etc.). The value added of the subgroup was also highlighted in the case study of the Austrian NRN: the MA perceived the subgroup as helpful in terms of their own efforts to implement the RDP (CSR: AT)

➤ ***The Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE) contributes to improving practices in monitoring and evaluation***

In the governance survey, members of the Rural Networks were asked to assess whether the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE) contributes to improving exchange in monitoring and evaluation practices between the Member States and the EC. The expert group discusses both Pillar I and Pillar II evaluation issues, however, the focus lies on Pillar II.

Respondents of the governance survey were, in comparison with other assessed bodies, more reserved on the impact of GREXE in promoting exchanges on monitoring and evaluation practices. Approximately 46% of respondents agreed with the statement that GREXE contributes to improving practices in monitoring and evaluation (see Figure 19), with 6% disagreeing, a comparatively negative assessment in relation to the other bodies or groups in the survey. In the governance survey, when asked to characterise their participation and involvement in GREXE, members of the Rural Networks characterised their participation as relatively active, providing and disseminating information on evaluation. The overall format seems relatively formal, with a strong emphasis on exchanges and questions-and-answers on evaluation practices between the Member States, as well as with representatives of the European Commission. Exchange also occurs informally outside of the direct venue of this group, as highlighted by respondents.

In the 2019 Rural Networks self-assessment report (Rural Networks, 2020), the networks report a high degree of satisfaction with the work implemented by GREXE. The survey conducted by the networks indicates 67% of GREXE participants deemed the ENRD evaluation activities helpful in building capacities among actors.

➤ ***The ENRD serves as a hub for exchange of information on rural development policy, programmes, projects, and other initiatives***

The ENRD fulfils a specific role in providing a neutral and diverse platform for discussing RD issues, as highlighted in the 2019 self-assessment (EU Rural Networks, 2020). Among the Rural Network stakeholders surveyed as part of the governance survey, 81% agree (with 49% strongly agreeing) that the ENRD serves as a hub for exchange of information on Rural Development policy, programmes. According to stakeholder feedback received by the ENRD-CP, it fulfils that role. An interview with the ENRD-CP highlighted several mechanisms in which the ENRD aims to fulfil that role. The ENRD generally also functions as a disseminator of rural policy information: in the 2019 self-assessment survey, 81% of respondents highlight the ENRD's role in increasing awareness on the benefits of the EU's rural development policy (EU Rural Networks, 2020). Furthermore, the report finds that the ENRD's activities led to greater stakeholder involvement in RD and addressed stakeholder needs. However, respondents of the self-assessment survey also point to the need to balance ENRD events between targeting specific stakeholder groups (such as PAs or LAGs) and more general mixes of stakeholders. Events with a greater degree of stakeholder or geographic targeting could enhance the involvement of new and existing stakeholder groups. The report also points to the need to build trust between Pillar I and Pillar II actors to support the implementation of the CAP. (Based on interviews at EU level).

The ENRD, as opposed to the EIP-AGRI, does not have a dedicated subgroup to discuss its activities. Given the substantial benefits of providing a targeted discussion forum to reflect on thematic issues, foster peer-learning and exchange, the ENRD stakeholders could stand to benefit from having such a forum. Further, an interview with the EIP-AGRI Service Point indicated a degree of displacement of ENRD related discussion points to the Steering Group and the Assembly, perhaps due to a lack of dedicated subgroup to discuss these items.

Due to resource issues, some Member States and NRNs do not participate significantly in ENRD activities, with the ENRD-CP attempting to support the smaller NRNs in improving their capacities to take part in events and activities. Peer-to-peer events have contributed to the network function of the ENRD. Common learning and knowledge transfer as well: e.g., the French NRN was partnered up with the Romanian NRN to transfer knowledge on specific issues, including how to better involve regional stakeholders in network activities (Based on interviews at EU level). However, ENRD stakeholder note issues which may limit the overall function of the ENRD-CP as a hub. A primary issue is the language barrier. This was highlighted in the case studies of the French and Slovenian NRNs (CSR: FR, SI). The further dissemination of ENRD-CP outputs can also be limited by this issue, as the case study of the Austrian NRN illustrates: the ENRD outputs need to be translated into the Member State languages before they can be disseminated (CSR: AT). This issue was also noted in the EHD activities: At the beginning of the programming period, the language was more accessible, evaluation terms were explained. Towards the end of the programming period, more technical terms are used, making it more difficult for stakeholders to follow (Based on interviews at EU level).

➤ ***JC3.2: The European Rural Networks' governance structure is appropriate in ensuring the fostering of networks for rural development***

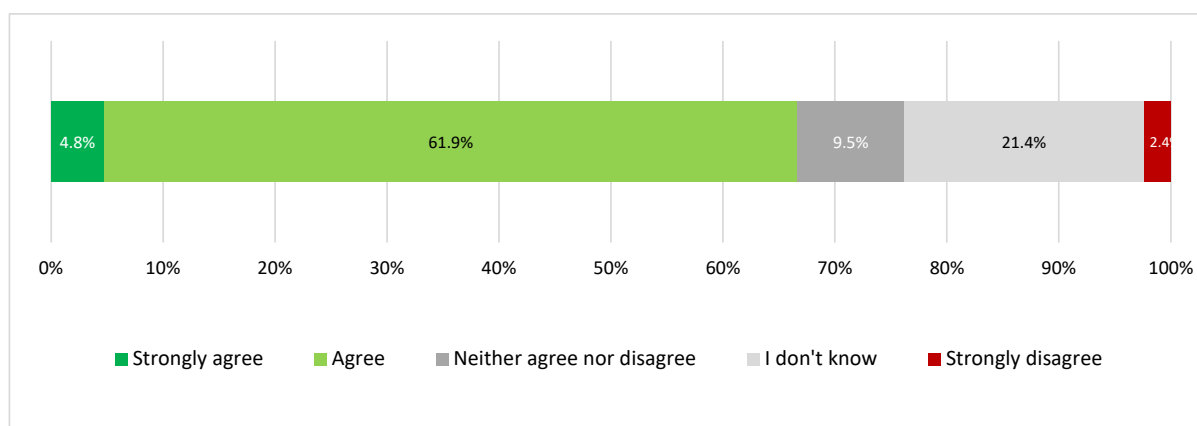
The bodies of the European Rural Networks have cohesively contributed to improving networking activities for rural development

The European Rural Networks have contributed to improving networking for rural development. The contributions of the EIP-AGRI and the ENRD are substantial in fostering networking activities at EU level. The 2019 self-assessment of the Rural Networks attributes success to EIP-AGRI in terms of establishing a dialogue between farmers and researchers and implementing needs-based activities (EU Rural Networks, 2020). However, respondents also highlighted the need to establish stronger dialogues and networking at national level with support of EIP-AGRI, as well as further stakeholder dialogues on needs. Further, the network was assessed as quite effective in diffusing innovation to support the implementation of the RDPs (ibid). In the 2019 self-assessment, a significant majority (77%) of Rural Network stakeholders attributed success to the ENRD in improving rural development policy quality

(ibid). ENRD contributions include the organisation of capacity building events and wider enhancement to stakeholder participation (see also SQ5 for more details).

The general effectiveness of the bodies of the European Rural Networks in contributing to networking for rural development was also underlined in the governance survey. The Rural Network stakeholders surveyed as part of the governance survey are deeming the common Strategic Framework of the EU Rural Networks appropriate and operational (see Figure 20).

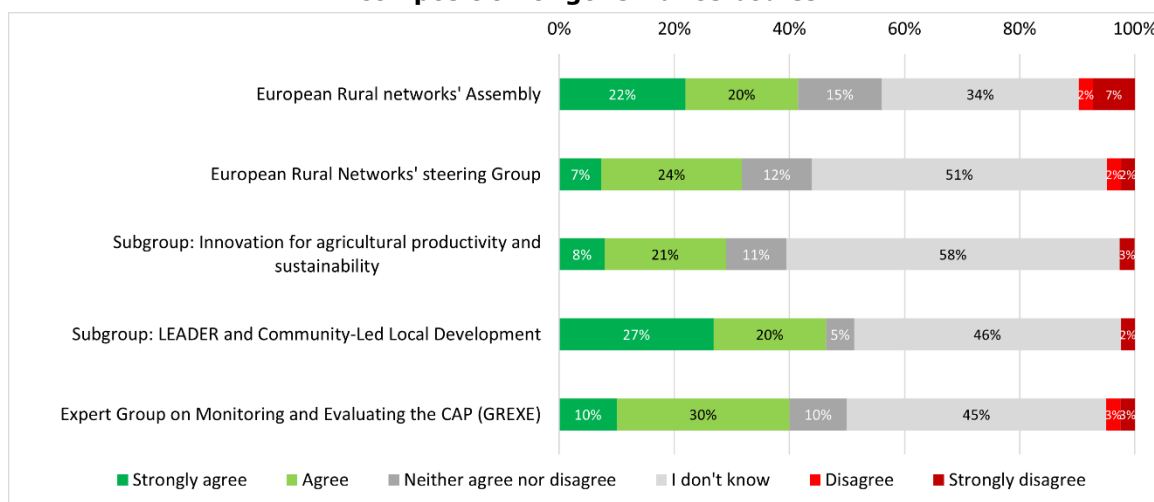
Figure 20: European rural networks Governance survey - The common Strategic Framework of EU Rural networks is appropriate and operational



Source: European rural networks Governance survey (ADE, 2022), Q8, n = 42

The governance survey assessed the satisfaction of the Rural Network stakeholders with the composition of the various bodies of the networks. The results of the survey are presented in Figure 21. While stakeholders⁴⁷ generally point to some degree of satisfaction with the composition of each governance body, there are specific shortcomings highlighted by the survey and interviews. The respondents replying with “I don’t know” are, largely, not members of the respective body or group.

Figure 21: European rural networks Governance survey - Stakeholder satisfaction with the composition of governance bodies



Source: European rural networks Governance survey (ADE, 2022), Q4, n= 42; Note: the response “I don’t know” was largely answered by respondents not present in the respective body or group.

Respondents of the governance survey highlight issues such as there being too many representatives and overrepresentation of certain stakeholder groups, underrepresentation of women and young people, as well as a high degree of passive participation. Additionally, LAGs are not represented in the Steering Group, as highlighted by stakeholder responses.

⁴⁷ The surveyed stakeholders include a wide array of rural development stakeholders, but heavily include MAs (16 out of 42 respondents) and NRNs (8 out of 42 respondents).

Lack of capacities to participate in Assembly meetings was also raised as a potential reason for inactive members by DG AGRI: smaller actors may be constrained in terms of finding time to adequately prepare for meetings or to take part.

The governance survey collected the main contributions of the Rural Networks in terms of fostering networking for rural development from the stakeholders of the governance bodies. The main contributions, as identified by the governance stakeholders were:

- The facilitation of cooperation between stakeholder groups and improving networking between partners, particularly across Member States via events, study visits, and conferences. This was valued also among dedicated groups of stakeholders, such as between NRNs and MAs/Pas;
- Capacity building and peer-to-peer learning between rural development stakeholders on relevant issues in rural areas;
- Dissemination of general good practices, such as for NRN implementation or evaluation;
- Exchange on good RDP implementation practices and experiences, to improve the delivery of RDP measures and policies, particularly also related to responding to specific challenges in RDP implementation.

These observed contributions highlight the Rural Networks' roles in strengthening networks between rural development stakeholders, and thereby, contributing to enhancing stakeholder cooperation and connecting new partners. Further, these networks enable capacity building and peer-to-peer learning between rural development stakeholders on issues in rural areas, as well as on RDP implementation experiences and practices (see also SQ5 for the ENRD's role on capacity building).

- ***The individual bodies of the European Rural Networks are operating in a cohesive manner, avoiding duplication of activities or overlap of responsibilities***

The analysis of agendas and reports of the Steering Group and the Assembly meetings between 2015 and 2022 reveals a well-structured oversight mechanism. Discussion topics of the Assembly meetings are prepared by the Steering Group and, conversely, elements discussed in the Assembly may be discussed in more depth in the Steering Group (such as on governance questions). However, this degree of duplication is rather by design to ensure appropriate steering of the Assembly's activities.

Thematic duplications may occur between the networks, such as events on similar or the same topic, but this is to ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives. However, as the subgroups and GREXE specialise on distinctly different topics, the overlap between activities or the degree of duplication between the bodies is low.

- ***The collaboration between the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network is complementary and synergetic***

The surveyed members of the Rural Networks are relatively more reserved in their assessments of the complementarities and synergies between the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network (see Figure 19). Only 39% of surveyed stakeholders assess the cooperation between the two networks as complementary and synergetic. This low degree of synergies is also emphasised in the 2019 self-assessment.

At the level of the European Commission, coordination activities are undertaken to enhance synergies and complementarities between the networks. In an interview, the representatives of the European Commission remarked that coordination between the individual DG-AGRI Units overseeing the activities of the service points functions well. The support units are consulted for the preparation of the Assembly or Steering Group meetings and are involved, either directly or indirectly in the preparation of the events. This occurs via prior consultation between the support unit and the respective desk officer at the DG AGRI unit.

This perceived lack of synergies and complementarities, highlighted by governance stakeholders in the self-assessment and in the survey of this study, is also shared by the interviewed representatives of the ENRD-CP and the EIP-AGRI Service Point.

The EIP-AGRI Service Point highlighted relatively low cooperation with the ENRD. Exchanges were, however, more frequent with the EHD (including workshop attendance and bilateral meetings), as well as content-related activities (development of guidelines "Evaluation of Innovation in Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020").

The representative of the ENRD-CP notes that the degree of separation between the two networks is decreasing, with the networks slowly conducting similar activities in terms of their scope. The scope of the activities of the two networks was initially substantial, with the ENRD focussing on implementation and policy translation activities, and EIP-AGRI focusing relatively more on advisory activities and research, and work on specific challenges. Due to the differences in scope, the networks of the ENRD and EIP-AGRI are relatively different, with the latter focusing more on fostering exchange and interactions between researchers and advisors in the H2020 community, as opposed to rural development stakeholders, which the former concentrates on. These differences in network characteristics can impede cooperation efforts. Content synergies have also been increasing since the beginning of the programming period, with the ENRD picking up outputs of EIP-AGRI (e.g., on short supply chains) and using them as inputs for ENRD-CP activities.

However, on the thematic side of the implementation of activities, care is paid to ensure active inclusion of ENRD and EIP-AGRI outputs in the other network's activities. This may take the form mentioning the other network's activities in newsletters or highlighting activities in events. An example of the latter is the inclusion of EIP-AGRI OG findings in ENRD events on bioeconomy. (Based on interviews at EU level).

B

Theme 2: Effectiveness

4.4 SQ4: To what extent has the ENRD managed to involve NRNs in the networking at the EU level and how has this improved NRNs' role in fostering rural development and hence in contributing to the general CAP objective of balanced territorial development?

4.4.1 Approach

4.4.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

This question includes **3 sub-questions** following a causal chain.

The first sub-question concerns the **effectiveness of the ENRD in involving NRNs in networking** at EU level. It thus relates to the first specific objective of the ENRD, which is to *involve stakeholders [including NRNs] in the implementation of rural development* (see intervention logic section 2.3).

The question concerns the NRNs, the **NSUs** first as they represent the NRN at EU level. And to a lesser degree other representatives of NRNs in particular MAs. NRNs are **involved in different ways in networking** by the ENRD at EU level, especially through **NRN meetings**, capacity building events, **thematic working groups**, **thematic workshops**, seminars, or events. Output indicator O26 - *Number of ENRD activities in which the NRN has participated (...out of which NRNs had an active contribution)* supports in principle this first sub-question.

The second sub-question follows the causal chain by asking **how this involvement** in European networking has **enabled NRNs to strengthen their role in promoting rural development at national or regional level**. This "how" concerns both the process and the topics.

The third sub-question concerns the link to the overall CAP objective of balanced territorial development, supported by the role of NRNs in rural development. This is addressed by considering the rural development priorities and Balanced territorial development (BTD) themes. The themes are based on the 6 priorities of rural development to which will be added the themes put forward by the ENRD at EU level and the specific themes of the BTD (generational renewal, etc.).

The focus of SQ4 is placed on the ENRD-CP. Indeed, regarding evaluation, the NRNs are in charge of dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results. As such the link of the NRNs with the ENRD-EHD is not so tight. The involvement of stakeholders in EHD events and the contribution of the ENRD-EHD is discussed under SQ6.

4.4.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC4.1: The **ENRD-CP has succeeded in involving/mobilising all NRNs** in networking activities at EU level.

JC4.2: **NRNs' role in fostering rural development has been improved** due their involvement in networking at EU level.

JC4.3: **Significant progress has been made** on some themes at national level which can be directly linked to the participation of NRNs in networking activities at EU level.

4.4.1.3 Methodology

The approach is mainly qualitative, based on triangulation of information and approaches from literature and documentary review (including ENRD-CP annual reports) at EU level and in case studies, monitoring data (CMES O26), surveys (MA, NSU and SH), case studies and interviews with ENRD-CP, ENRD EHD, NSU, MA, stakeholders.

4.4.2 Summary answer

SQ4: To what extent has the ENRD managed to involve NRNs in the networking at the EU level and how has this improved NRNs' role in fostering rural development and hence in contributing to the general CAP objective of balanced territorial development?

Overall, the ENRD-CP succeeded in involving NRNs (especially NSU, MA and LAGs) in many networking activities at EU level, but with heterogeneous participation across Member States. NRNs' roles in fostering rural development have been improved to a good extent, contributing to balanced territorial development through the topics covered.

JC4.1: The ENRD-CP has succeeded in involving all NRNs in networking activities at EU level

The ENRD-CP implemented many networking activities (NRN meetings, thematic working groups, seminars, workshops, events) throughout the programming period, in which NRNs (especially NSUs, but also MAs, LAGs) participated. Overall, there was a good level of participation from MAs and NSUs and positive feedback from participants, although this involvement was very heterogeneous. Certain issues such as language barriers and accessibility to decision-making processes and exchanges, restrict the involvement and participation in European networking (surveys; case studies). The language barrier makes participation in events and the use of disseminated material more difficult for some Member States.

The same findings appear regarding active participation to those networking activities (through presentations, facilitation of working groups, poster presentations, etc.). There is disparity in participation across Member States, with an average of 53% in active participation.

Over time, participation in NRN meetings has increased in both the number of participants and of Member States. Regarding evaluation, NRN (MA and their administration, NSU, evaluators) participate in the yearly EvaluationWORKS! Events (see SQ6).

JC4.2: NRNs' roles in fostering rural development have been improved due their involvement in networking at EU level

The surveys and case studies do not necessarily reflect the full extent of linkages between European-level networking and NRN-fostered rural development, because of the heterogeneity of the NRNs **in how close they are to the RDP and to local actors. Nevertheless**, evidence indicates a supportive relationship between EU networking **and** the NRNs' fostering of rural development through a range of mechanisms, themes and formats in which EU networking took place. Mechanisms were mainly supported by ENRD seminars and events, workshops strengthening skills and developing the capacity of those involved in rural development (notably LEADER/CLLD, and social inclusion), good practices and examples of projects, as well as thematic working groups, especially those focussing on Smart Villages and Long-term Vision for Rural Areas.

The beneficial nature of these activities strengthened the role of the NRNs within Member States and supported the quality of their activities. Improving the credibility of the NRNs and the quality of their events enhanced their contribution to rural development.

ENRD activities are broadly thought to have supported NRNs' roles as enablers of rural development. The activities which were successful at the ENRD level and at the NRN level sometimes mirrored each other, suggesting mutual inspiration and information-sharing.

JC4.3: Significant progress has been made on some themes at the national level which can be directly linked to the participation of NRNs in networking activities at the EU level

The analysis presented in the case study reports reveals a link between networking activities at the EU level and progress on certain themes at the national level. European networking laid the foundation for enhancing dialogue, sharing knowledge, and facilitating the exchange of expertise, all of which were reported in the case studies to have advanced progress on the topics which were discussed in these forums. The key topics identified in the case studies were the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, Smart Villages, Generational Renewal and, to a lesser extent, Rural Businesses and Social Inclusion.

European-level networking provides NRNs with activities and outputs that are often shared at the national level and encourages new approaches for the NRNs to test at the national level. It also plays an important role in encouraging the NRNs to provide and share inputs and findings from their own countries with ENRD members. Some NRNs have also organised European-level events, demonstrating initiative and a sense of ownership in the benefits of networking when experienced at the EU level.

4.4.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

➤ **JC4.1 The ENRD-CP has succeeded in involving all NRNs in networking activities at EU level**

ENRD-CP implements different networking activities involving NRNs

ENRD-CP organised many meetings, workshops and events considered as "networking activities" to bring NRNs together. These include NRN meetings (three per year), informal monthly NRN meetings within geographic clusters (since 2020), Thematic Working groups (in total, 15 TWG over the 2014-2021 period, meet three to four times per year), events, workshops; on various rural development topics to involve NRNs. (see Table 7 for details on ENRD-CP activities)

Table 7: Overview of ENRD-CP networking activities and participation

ENRD Priority	Type of events	Nb of events	Nb of participants	Out of which (%)				Average nb of MS	Usefulness (Average rates)*
				NSU	MA	LAGs	Local authorities		
More effective programme implementation	Workshops and seminars	24	1977	1%	42%	0%	1%	21.8	3.2
Strengthening NRNs and NSU	NRN meetings	18	1188					21.8	3.24
	NRN workshops	11	659					18.8	3.26
Simpler and more effective rolling-out of CLLD	LEADER subgroups meetings	8	184						3.24 (global)
	LEADER workshops	13	920						
	Thematic Labs	7	316						
Smart, Resilient and inclusive rural areas	TWG meetings and workshops	21	952	14%	11%	5%	1%		3.4 (global)
	Other events	6	1174	9%	11%	10%	2%		
Transition to green economy	TWG meetings and workshops	22	867	7%	14%	2%	0%		3.2
	Other events	7	546	8%	20%	2%	1%		3.18
Demographic change and Social inclusion	TWG meetings and workshops	7	530	18%	18%	6%	2%		3.28
Total		144	9313	5%	15%	3%	1%		

(*) Usefulness of events outcome from 1 (poor) to 4 (Excellent) (ENRD-CP result indicators)

Source: ADE (2022), based on ENRD-CP annual report – output and result indicator

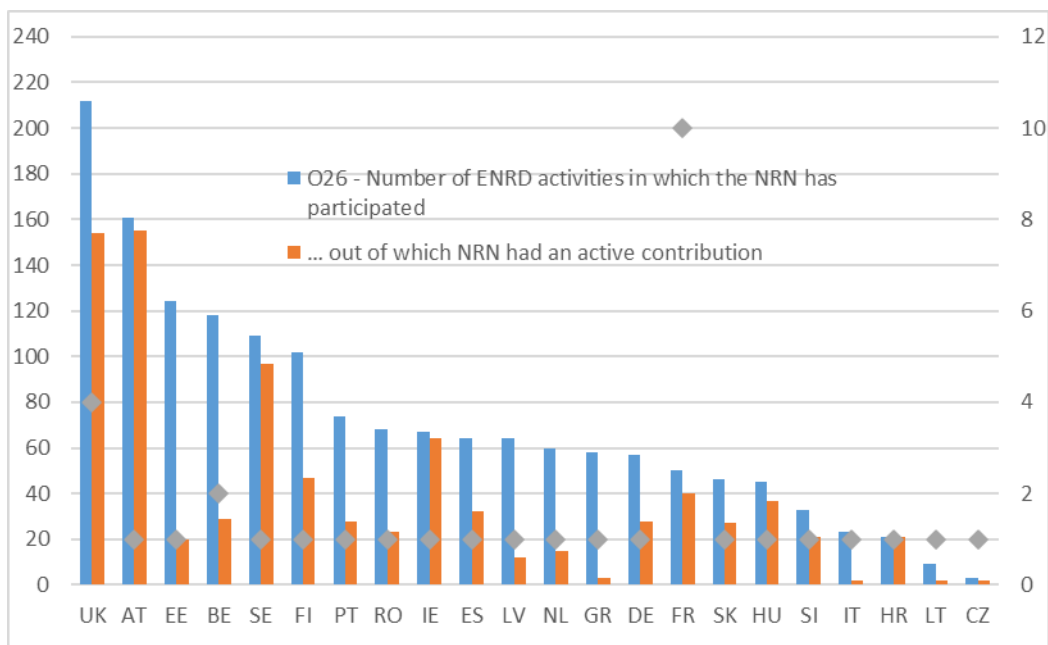
The surveys designed for NSUs (Q14, n=23, Figure 35) and MA/PAs (Q18, n=40, Figure 31) revealed a good level of involvement in the ENRD activities, especially from NSUs. The participation increased over time both in terms of number of participants and Member States.

The activities in which the greatest number of respondents were involved are NRNs meetings (99% participation from NSUs and 55% from MAs), general ENRD-CP seminars and events (with 87% NSUs and 70% MAs), ENRD-CP workshops (Capacity Building) (87% NSUs and 58% MAs), ENRD-CP TWG (65% NSUs and 45% MAs) and Leader/CLLD networking and cooperation (64% NSUs and 55% MAs). Support for transnational cooperation ENRD activities is more specific with 58% participation from NSUs and 10% from MAs.

NRNs have participated widely in the networking activities organised at EU level by ENRD.

CMES output indicator O26 reports the number of ENRD (CP and EHD) activities in which the NRNs have participated and out of those, to how many activities the NRNs actively contributed (e.g. through presentations, working groups). In terms of absolute number, it reveals each Member State participated to ENRD activities through the programming period, but the level of participation across Member States is very heterogenous, from Czechia with 3 attendances to UK with (see Figure 22). The average per Member State is about 60 involvements in ENRD activities (which corresponds to around 9 by year⁴⁸). The median being 59 and the standard deviation 37, indicating a big dispersion across Member States. Nevertheless, the case studies and analysis show heterogeneity and gaps in the reporting of these data by Member States which should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 22: Number of ENRD activities in which NRNs have participated



Source: ADE (2022), based on RDP AIR 2020 data,

◆ Indicator O26 reported more than in one RDP in UK (4), Belgium (2) and France (10, including regional RDPs). Cyprus, Bulgaria, Luxemburg Malta, Poland did not report O26.

Surveys and CSR confirms those findings, Member States are largely involved in ENRD-CP activities, especially in NRN meetings, events, and seminars. Despite the good level of involvement, both NSUs and MA/PAs reported a lack of communication and dissemination of information from the ENRD-CP on activities and results, especially about what is happening in other Member States. Moreover, many Member States mentioned the need of translated publications and activities, which has been brought up in five of the seven CS as well.

Regarding evaluation, many NSU participate in the yearly EvaluationWORKS! Events (see SQ6).

⁴⁸ CCS AT and EE are above with 23 and 18 respectively, while FR, SK, and Wallonia are just under the yearly average with about 7, SI and IT are less involved with respectively 5 and 3 participations to ENRD activities per year.

The NRNs have participated with active contribution to the networking activities organised at EU level

The second component of CMES output indicator O26 again revealed heterogeneity across Member States concerning active participation⁴⁹ to ENRD activities during the programming period. Talking in percentage, UK-England and Croatia stand out with 100% of active participation, followed by Austria, Sweden, Ireland, Slovenia, Hungary and France with more than 80%. At the bottom, Italy and Greece reported respectively 9% and 5% (only 2 active participations recorded), while the average among Member States is 53%, which indicates overall a good level of implication from most of NRNs. These data from RDP AIRs should also be interpreted with caution given that this indicator is reported by the MAs themselves in a heterogeneous manner.

CNS indicator number five⁵⁰ reported NRNs contribution to ENRD CP & EHD & EIP-AGRI SP altogether, counting the number of information items provided. Again, there is a discrepancy among Member States, but not as for active participation, as Italy stands out with 530 (about 132 per year on average) information items provided at EU level, while Czechia and Denmark reported none. Excluding Italy which biases estimates upwards, the average is 35 per Member State, or about nine per year on average. This shows that many Member States do contribute to European Networks. Among those contributions, more than half are examples of good practices and case studies. Those information items have remained constant overtime for most Member States with numerous good practices' examples.

The case studies show that Member States have hosted several European events, demonstrating their desire to be involved in ENRD activities. Austria organised a two-days international LEADER seminar "Acting locally in a changing world" (143 participants) with very good feedback and created strong links with other NRNs (mainly Germany). Wallonia organised a meeting of the European TWG "bioeconomy and climate action", which carried out a prospective work on rural territories and provided input at EU level and organised a workshop "NRNs going local". Wallonia is also well represented at the "rural inspiration award" given its size. France hosted several European events: AECM seminar, an innovation summit, a NRN meeting, participated actively in dissemination of good practices with MCDR and intervened on thematic issues such as Rural Agenda or gender equality, but also has given advice on how to implement webinars. Slovakia co-organised a NRN meeting.

➤ *JC4.2 NRNs' role in fostering rural development has been improved due to their involvement in networking at EU level*

Preliminary remarks about case studies and survey responses:

Assessing the level of involvement of NRNs in EU networking and the size of the role they can play in fostering rural development should take into account their **heterogeneity of connectedness to a RDP and to ground-level actors**. For example, where countries have national rural networks as well as many regional rural networks (such as France and Italy), it is more difficult to identify, from case study evidence, the rural development that concretely took place at the regional level, especially when there are multiple RDPs in the Member State. In these instances, the main stakeholders of the NRNs are likely to be the MAs and representatives from the regional rural networks.

Even with Austria, where the NRN communicates with on-the-ground stakeholders such as farmers organisations through 'multipliers', and Slovakia, where there is still the level of 'antennas' between NRNs and local actors, understanding the link between EU-level networking and fostering rural development is not immediately evident. The case study countries where NRNs actively engage with local actors more, such as Wallonia, Estonia and Slovenia are more likely to illustrate the direct effects of European networking on fostering rural development.

In addition, the survey responses would have been influenced by the fact that **certain key respondents were missing**, such as the UK networks and the Hungarian network, who had been some of the most active participants at the EU level. Finally, in terms of the category, 'national stakeholders', responses were only gathered from the 7 case study countries, in which Italy was overrepresented, constituting 48% of all respondents. LAGs were the most represented actors from each Member State, except Slovenia, where individual or groups of farmers were most represented.

⁴⁹ Through presentations, facilitation of working groups, poster sessions, etc.

⁵⁰ It is available from 2017, thus for a period of four years out of seven.

Thus the surveys do not necessarily reflect the full picture of NRN-rural development linkages; but the case studies and responses to specific questions still offer new evidence on the effects of EU networking on the NRNs' role in rural development.

A core aim for the ENRD-CP in organising the networking events is to enable the exchange of knowledge and good practices, to achieve a shared understanding of the implementation processes of the RDP (ENRD, 2022). This is one way in which NRNs' role could have been improved (see SQ 5). However, the fostering of rural development extends **beyond RDP implementation** and can be achieved **through promoting rural development and empowering stakeholders who are responsible for rural development activities**.

Generally, networking at the EU level did improve NRNs' role in fostering rural development. Feedback from the MAs surveys corroborates this. **The EU-level networking provided information, inspiration and the exchange of expertise which could be adopted for and used to catalyse the NRNs' activities**. In doing so, the NRNs' activities could foster rural development.

Activities which were effective particularly in supporting rural development were noted in survey responses as well as in the case studies. **ENRD seminars and events** were considered especially important. Those which participants found very useful were focused on preparing the future CAP strategic plan (CP AIR Y7). Other activities focused on **strengthening skills and developing the capacity of those involved in rural development** including RDP implementation. For example, the ENRD organised several capacity building events in 2016 which covered LEADER/CLLD and social inclusion. **Good practices and examples of projects** were appreciated by NRNs who had disseminated them to their own networks.

Thematic working groups (TWG) were also channels which effectively supported rural development. In the 2014-2020 period, the topics for these groups were designed to support RDP implementation and monitoring. Two of the most referenced thematic working groups by the NRNs were the Smart Villages (which replaced the Smart and Competitive Rural Businesses working group) thematic working group, and the Long-term Rural Vision thematic working group. Especially with the latter, the thematic working groups demonstrates a comprehensive **response to the most pressing issues in rural development**. The Smart Villages and Rural Vision themes were also the subject of workshops, which, as the case studies for Estonia, France and Slovakia show, effectively connected local and European-level stakeholders. Other Thematic Working Groups introduced new themes relevant to rural development including EU Green Deal and Rural Areas, Promoting the Transition to the Green Economy, Rural Bioeconomy; while LEADER and CLLD, and supply chains, were topics which were maintained throughout both periods.

MAs as well as NSUs across the surveyed Member States also thought that RDP implementation was improved by the "Greening the Rural Economy" and "Increasing stakeholder involvement" TWG topics. The promotion of these topics bear relevance beyond just RDP implementation, however, as they provide information on themes which are key to stakeholders' active work in rural development.

The French case study showed the benefits which European networking brought to rural development in a context of multiple rural networks. The success of the Atlantic Cluster, thanks to which capacity of the involved NRNs increased, illustrates the importance of implementing channels for Member States to communicate around shared rural development issues.

These activities **strengthened the role of the NRNs within Member States and supported the quality of their activities**. Improving the credibility of the NRNs and the quality of their events **enhanced their contribution to rural development**. The NSU survey confirms that RDP quality and implementation have been improved by ENRD activities. But the ENRD's ability to position NRNs well to foster rural development was limited due to not meeting certain needs of stakeholders (expanded upon hereafter), and a **lack of involvement of more stakeholders responsible for rural development** (which becomes more difficult when rural development is decentralised and/or there are multiple RDPs as explained earlier).

However, **the survey and case study findings indicate a supportive relationship between EU networking and the NRNs' fostering of rural development.** Several mechanisms thus enabled the exchange of expertise and information, which added to the NRNs' ability to promote and enhance rural development at the national level.

Did networking activities meet the needs of NRNs?

The extent to which NRNs were able to foster development as a result of networking at the EU level is tied to whether or not the ENRD activities met NRNs' needs. . **When needs are addressed from the EU level and solutions filter down, NRNs are more empowered to foster rural development through NRN activities.**

The MAs had indicated that **certain needs were more important to RDP implementation than others.** The four most important for them are: **environment/natural resources (biodiversity, soil, water), economic development of rural areas, generational renewal, and knowledge exchange and innovation.**⁵¹ The thematic work of the ENRD relates in many ways to these needs: Greening the Rural Economy directly addresses the environment/natural resources need; the topic of rural business caters for the economic development needs; the TWG topic of increasing stakeholder involvement relates to the need of knowledge exchange and innovation; and the topic of generational renewal is covered by a dedicated TWG. In the 2014-2020 period, there were several needs expressed by case study countries which the ENRD responded to. For example, the exchange of best practice and dissemination of information is often appreciated. Additionally, information on European benchmarking and RDP implementation was also well-received. However, in terms of this leading to better rural development, there was a missing link raised by some NRNs, who suggested that **more specific and concrete information was needed** about the rural development measures taken in other Member States or how other Members States dealt with difficulties of RDP implementation. For instance, Wallonia's NRN requested more information on the modalities of RDP implementation and access to a systematic comparison.

As mentioned in JC4.1, several countries stakeholders express the need for materials to be accessible in their own first language. Countries with several RDPs, or comparable population percentages in rural areas or number of agricultural holdings (which would suggest interest in rural networking), demonstrate **low active participation in ENRD activities compared to the number of national activities held by the NRN.** This fact could be explained by an imbalance in the ease of expression which the language barrier imposes, and/or cultural differences in the decision-making processes. In terms of active participation, England and Croatia actively participated in 100% of the events attended. Those showing greater than 80% are Austria (96%), Ireland (96%), Slovenia (89%), Hungary (82%), and France (80%). **A disconnect might be taking place, therefore, between the extent of networking at the EU level and that at the national level.** NRNs' ability to foster rural development could have been more supportive and been better promoted had the barrier of language not limited their active involvement in ENRD activities.

A common case of needs not being met was seen when local actors and ground-level stakeholders felt **not have adequate ways of communicating meaningfully to structures at the EU level.** In response to being asked what recommendations they might have to improve networking for rural development implementation at the national and EU level, one Italian NSU member's response was, "At EU level - ensure representation in the ENRD governance structures is not monopolised by public bodies... At national level - ensure participation in the governance bodies of the NRN of a variety of entities, not just public bodies hierarchically dependent on one another."

Another NSU response which illuminates the importance of meaningful engagement in the ENRD activities for NRNs was the following: "Whether the ENRD's activities have an impact on the improvement of the RDP is determined by whether a Member State representative participates in these working groups and how he disseminates information about this activity at national level. This, too, requires additional resources." These perspectives along with the fact that only one third of the MAs believed that the ENRD activities addressed their specific

⁵¹ Without counting responses from Italy: Economic development of rural areas, environment/natural resources, knowledge exchange and innovation, generational renewal.

needs, and that there have been decreasing levels of participation to ENRD activities from Italy, show that **more can be done to make European-level events more useful and relevant to NRNs**. The case study thus recommends that the ENRD has better communication with the NRNs in the planning phase.

Beyond Italy, all surveyed members states' NRNs were able to express recommendations to improve EU networking, specifically for rural development implementation. From the MAs, recommendations were to deliver better communication, more information, dissemination of activity and results; improved exchanges, and interaction among Member States; and having publications in native language (corroborating views expressed in five of the seven case studies). NSUs agreed with all of these recommendations and added improved evaluation and monitoring to the list. Therefore, to facilitate the NRNs' ability to foster rural development, the **ENRD should address these areas which NRNs have indicated as lacking in terms of empowering their role in promoting rural development.**

The needs of NRNs are generally met by the ENRD activities; however, certain issues like language and the accessibility to decision-making processes and exchanges restrict the extent to which NRNs can foster rural development based on their participation in European networking.

What are the Views of NRNs (NSUs, MAs/PAs) on the main achievements of their participation?

Overall, the sources indicate that the NRNs' roles in fostering rural development improved thanks to the involvement at the EU level. However, there are important differences in how successfully certain activities were carried out in different Member States.

80% of NSU respondents agreed that ENRD activities, publications, and digital contents improved RDP implementation, suggesting a direct link between their participation and the implementation aspect of rural development. As discussed under JC4.1, the surveys revealed that NSUs felt that ENRD workshops and general seminars and events were useful. The Italian case study showed that most NRN respondents felt that activities enhance knowledge exchange and expertise among stakeholders (especially on the environment and innovation).

Evaluation-related activities were generally considered to have contributed to RDP implementation. The level of involvement was mixed: 43% of survey respondents were involved (58.33% without Italy's responses) in them, and 35% (50% without Italy's responses) were involved in the Evaluation Helpdesk TWG. Wallonia was an exception in this case, demonstrating a high level of participation, while Italy showed low participation. Looking beyond the generally positive response, there were varying opinions, depending on the stakeholders, about the evaluation-related activities' contributions to RDP implementation: in Estonia, the MAs felt they played a strong role, whereas the NSU believed it was not as central to RDP implementation as LEADER/CLLD networking and the dissemination of good practices, indicating that evaluation tasks were held more so by the MAs. **Therefore, the structure and roles and responsibilities of the NRNs are important in determining to what extent certain types of activities at the EU level had direct consequences for rural development promotion, relating to and extending beyond RDP implementation.**

The ENRD activities which NRNs expressed appreciation for were reflected in how they (the NRNs) offered similar activities in the 2014-2020 period to national stakeholders. As shown in the response to JC 1.3, the CNS demonstrate growth in the number networking meetings (and attendance to these meetings), the number of events to promote co-operation and the number of networking communication tools. While the collection, analysis and dissemination of good practice remained stable, they accounted for more than half of the contributions from NRNs to the ENRD CP, EHD and EIP-AGRI SP. **This illustrates a two-directional flow of activities between the European and national networks with the aim to strengthen NRNs' role in rural development support.**

NRNs can be understood, then, as enablers of rural development. For example, Austria can be considered as a Member State in which the ENRD's and NRN's objectives were fulfilled. Survey responses showed that the networking activities enhanced respondents' networks and

knowledge-sharing, which in turn, opened access to new insights on specific rural development issues and inspired initiatives to address these issues. Furthermore, more than half of the NSU respondents said that there are new networking activities or that networking activities have been strengthened during the 2014-2020 period, and so the aspects of networking which were already improving NRNs role in fostering rural development are likely to have been enhanced as well.

The ability to increase NRN stakeholders' ability to foster rural development was supported by the **dissemination of ENRD publications, which were used often and across many different stakeholders**. Those which NSUs used the most were the period publications and publications on good practices, while MAs took advantage of the evaluation guidance documents and thematic publications/reports. **Although considered useful, the extent to which these publications from the ENRD could promote rural development was constrained** in two ways. Firstly, with the factsheets on RDP implementation, the content tended to be at a high level, regarding thematic information rather than detailed guidance about specific measures and sub-measures for more difficult topics such as organic farming. Secondly, the information items are often drafted first in English and then translated into some (but not all) Member States' languages, which might result in certain messages not being communicated effectively. Based on the 2016-2020 CNS, there has been an increase since 2016 in the number of information items translated by the ENRD CP, but the number of items translated by EIP-AGRI SP has increased more rapidly. There is thus room for the publications to have a greater effect in supporting NRNs' role in fostering rural development.

It is important to recognise that while the ENRD has succeeded in mobilising NRNs, this does not translate into them (the NRNs) necessarily reaching all actors. The fact that the CNS only measured activities to engage hard-to-reach groups for the 2007-2013 is a limitation to seeing how much the networks could translate what was developed at the EU level towards on-the-ground stakeholders, with the most reached groups being the MAs and the LAGs. Furthermore, only 38% (43% were neutral) of respondents (44%, with 33% as neutral, without Italy) agreed that NRN activities involved new types of stakeholders. This suggests that **while the type of activities delivered by NRNs improved, it cannot be concluded that all important actors were reached**, limiting the promotion of rural development progress.

Therefore, the ENRD activities are broadly thought to improve RDP progress. The activities which were successful at the ENRD level and at the NRN level sometimes mirrored each other, suggesting mutual inspiration and information-sharing.

It is therefore useful to see that activities at the national level had the objective of fostering rural development, **which was realised the most when the ENRD activities that inspired them worked well between ENRD members**. There are still gaps in the content of the publications provided by the ENRD which will limit their usefulness to on-the-ground actors. However, the NRNs' ability to foster rural development is also compromised by not reaching all relevant actors (which is not related to their participation in European networking but rather their national-level forms of promotion).

- [**JC4.3 Significant progress has been made on some themes at national level which can be directly linked to the participation of NRNs in networking activities at EU level**](#)

BTD of rural areas refers to the third CAP general objective. It aims at fostering the socio-economic development of rural areas, fostering the conditions for safeguarding structural diversity and enhancing quality of life throughout the EU. According to the 2021 evaluation on **the CAP's impact on territorial development of rural areas**, the CAP contributes to the development of rural areas by reducing social and economic imbalances. Notably, it does so by contributing to rural areas' attractiveness through the support for basic services, such as transport, digitalisation, farm modernisation and productivity growth. These contribute to village renewal in rural areas, greater gross value added and employment in rural areas, and generational renewal. (ADE, CCRi, ÖIR, 2021).

NRNs activities are expected to contribute to this objective through networking activities: Networking enables stakeholders to meet people working on similar topics and potentially

form partnerships. Furthermore, these activities entail a learning component through knowledge sharing among SH. This reinforces the idea that the NRNs should be perceived as **enablers** of rural development. While it is difficult to isolate the effects of networking activities and therefore infer causality, a link can be established using qualitative methods, hereby case studies, survey analysis and literature review.

First, the analysis of case studies shows that, overall, a link can be established between networking activities at the national level and rural development on some topics⁵².

In Austria, ENRD focuses on specific issues within a broader topic: thanks to this focus, NRNs can **dig deeper into a topic, enhancing dialogue and knowledge sharing** on these issues. According to the CSR, ENRD activities led to discussions among groups of stakeholders which would not have necessarily engaged with each other otherwise and helped identify contacts at EU level. In Austria, this was most apparent in the case of environmental and agricultural actors: these interactions led to a **better understanding** of one another, potentially contributing to **enhanced collaboration/inspiration**. Themes related to **gender** and **long-term vision** were also particularly significant in the case of Austria and led to progress being made on these.

In Estonia and Slovenia, from NSU and MA perspective, several ENRD CP outputs, including TWG topics, were shared at national level and have contributed to Smart villages concept, discussions over the long-term vision of rural area, social inclusion etc. ENRD activities and outputs are seen as useful and are often shared at national level, **facilitate exchange of expertise** and lead to **greater involvement of** stakeholders in rural development.

In Slovakia, the NSU survey's respondents agreed that all topics contributed to long term vision for rural areas, Smart Villages and social inclusion, among others. TWG on supply chain, rural businesses and generational renewal helped too. Interaction with other networks brings inspiration and is an encouragement to share and try out new approaches back home.

Similar conclusions are highlighted in CSR Wallonia; the NSU and MA surveys both show that the respondents agree that ENRD TWG have improved RDP implementation at national/regional level on topics related to long term vision for rural areas, Smart Villages, Rural Businesses, or social inclusion. Furthermore, the Walloon regional rural network (RwDR) involvement in European networking activities has contributed to strengthening its credibility at regional level, inspired the network and enabled a faster evolution of its activities. Controversially, MA and NSU surveys show that respondents do not agree that ENRD activities led to greater involvement of various stakeholders in rural development.

In Italy, the NSU and the MA surveys show that most respondents agree that ENRD activities enhance the exchange of knowledge and expertise among stakeholders, particularly on themes related to the environment and innovation. Nonetheless, as highlighted in JC 4.2, greater communication/insights from the NRNs in the organisation of ENRD event would lead to more relevant insights for the networks.

As for the French NRN, it became more involved in thematic events, notably regarding evaluation, but also smart villages, bioeconomy, the linkages between local actors and national or regional policies, the future of the CAP (long term vision workshops in 2021), but also related to innovation and supply chains, such as the "Conférence nationale des territoires" (2016) which focused on topics related to smart supply chains and digitalisation. The **networking** aspect of ENRD activities is an important feature of its contribution to fostering rural development and building capacity for the NRN, as it facilitates exchanges with other networks and therefore leads to greater collaboration. ENRD activities have also contributed to progress on specific themes for the case of France, (for example attracting young farmers and entrepreneurs to rural areas in a workshop in Ireland, 2019, discussing smart villages, covering the long-term vision on rural areas). Finally, the inclusion of LEADER into the network has also facilitated cooperation among stakeholders through thematic events, MCDRs and EIP.

⁵² Important to note that the activities/themes and their effects highlighted by the interviewees/survey respondents and therefore in this section, may be subject to a recall bias, as surveys were filled in at the very end of the programming period (2014-2020 extended to 2022).

Second, it is important to note the **role of NRNs in the organisation of EU level events** leading to **knowledge sharing with other networks** by providing inputs. For instance, the Austrian NRN pushed a topic at EU level, which led to the organisation of the ENRD Workshop on **Combatting Rural Depopulation: creating new opportunities for vibrant rural areas (May 2019)**.

Another striking example is the participation of the French NRN in the dissemination of good practices and project examples at EU level by promoting MCDR results and showcasing their operating mode; NSU members report being invited to present MCDR and lessons learned with other Member States. MCDRs are therefore a success and contributed to strengthen the links between actors across regions, as well as to thematic issues.

The involvement of the French NRN also led to the hosting of European events, such as the AECM seminar in Paris (2016) and a European workshop on gender equality in 2022 (preparation stage). This involvement is further portrayed through the NRN's contributions to the French Rural Agenda on thematic issues such as rural development and gender equality. The RNPAT project also notes that their studies on the links between EAFRD, territorial development and foods were taken into account for **the *Projet Alimentaire Territorial (PAT) financing guide***.

The analysis of CSR therefore shows an overall positive effect of the participation of NRN in **networking activities at EU level on some themes related to BTD**. The key contributions of these networking events are knowledge sharing which lead to idea generation, as well as enhanced collaboration among different stakeholders or networks. In most CSR, the most significant progress was realised on **smart villages and long term vision for rural areas**, which in turn contribute to balanced territorial development.

Other themes which have progressed due to networking activities according to CSR as well as MA survey relate to **supply chains, bioeconomy and generational renewal**. However, the experience of Italy is more contrasted, with the key take-away that greater inputs from NRNs during the preparation of events would be relevant to fostering the pertinence of the addressed topics and therefore make more significant progress on BTD.

Table 8: Themes developed at national level linked to activities at EU level and to Balanced Territorial Development

Topic	CS Country	Example of event, non-exhaustive
Smart Villages	EE, SI, SK, BE-Wal, FR	Designing the building blocks for Smart Villages Strategies in a specific geographical or thematic context (Finland, 2019)
Long term vision for rural areas	AT, EE, SI, SK, BE-Wal, FR	ENRD TWG on Long Term Vision for Rural Areas
Generational renewal	AT, SK, FR	Combatting Rural Depopulation: creating new opportunities for vibrant rural areas (2019)
Supply chains	AT, SK, FR	Jobs, growth and investment in the agri-food supply chain and the wider rural economy, workshop, Cork 2.0 Conference (2016)
Gender	AT, FR	European workshop on gender equality (2022)
Social inclusion	AT, EE, SI, SK, BE-Wal	Access to services, ENRD workshop (2020)
Rural businesses	AT, SK, BE-Wal	Adding value locally: rural areas and global value chains, workshop, Pre-conference event of 11 th OECD RD Conference (2018)
Environment	FR	ENRD workshop on Agri-environmental Climate Measures (AECM) (2016)
Bioeconomy	FR, BE-Wal	TWG on bioeconomy (2020) (biomethanisation)

Source: ADE (2022), based on case study reports

4.5 SQ5: To what extent have the activities of the ENRD contributed to support the implementation of the RDPs and how?

4.5.1 Approach

4.5.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

The SQ assesses to what extent the activities of the ENRD have been effective in contributing to the implementation of RDPs and explores the means of doing so. To do so, the project team takes stock of the ENRD's activities in the support of the implementation of the RDPs and of the extent to which the ENRD has been successful in supporting RDP implementation.

This SQ considers the following RDP stakeholders (also referred to as actors):

- National Rural Networks (NRNs);
- RDP Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies;
- Local Action Groups (LAGs);
- European organisations;
- Agricultural advisory services;
- Agricultural and rural researchers and;
- Other interested rural development organisations and individuals.

4.5.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC5.1: The ENRD is implementing activities to foster the implementation of the RDPs.

JC5.2: The delivery methods chosen by the ENRD have supported RDP stakeholders in the implementation of the RDPs.

JC5.3: The ENRD activities have led to improved implementation capacities among RDP actors.

4.5.1.3 Methodology

The project team makes an inventory of all ENRD activities to support the implementation of RDPs. Data on the ENRD delivery tools (website and social media, publications, thematic working groups, events, etc.) are gathered from the ENRD. In addition, the project team reviews ENRD self-assessments for complementary information on contributions to RDP implementation. Indicators are an important source of information (particularly O26 in terms of the degree of NRN involvement in ENRD activities) This information was enriched by an EU-level interview with a representative of the ENRD and DG AGRI. The impact of the ENRD contributions (including of the Evaluation Helpdesk) was also assessed in the survey to the MA/PAs, via targeted questions on the way the ENRD contributions have helped RDP implementation.

4.5.2 Summary answer

SQ5: To what extent have the activities of the ENRD contributed to supporting the implementation of the RDPs and how?

The concept of improving RDP implementation was elaborated by the ENRD-CP⁵³ and includes the following aspects: address beneficiaries' real needs, strengthen coordination of all the stakeholders involved (including vertical coordination), ensure higher capacity and quality of RDP management and administration, introduce smart delivery tools to avoid complications in implementing rules.

JC5.1: The ENRD is implementing activities to foster the implementation of the RDPs

The ENRD is effective at implementing a wide array of activities to foster the implementation of the RDPs. The NSU and MA/PA surveys particularly highlight the ENRD seminars and events, LEADER/CLLD networking, and the dissemination of good practices as important tools to foster RDP implementation. Surveyed MAs/PAs and NSUs generally deem the ENRD effective in supporting improved RDP implementation. This was also echoed in case studies, highlighting the added value of

⁵³ It was elaborated in several thematic working groups in 2015 run by the ENRD CP.

peer-exchanges and peer-learning (e.g. in Austria). The demand-driven nature of these events seems particularly relevant, as it enables to ENRD-CP to respond to evolving needs.

While there seems to be a general consensus that ENRD activities are effective in supporting the implementation of the RDPs, the picture is more nuanced when examining how exactly this has been undertaken, i.e. analysing each activity separately. ENRD seminars and events are particularly popular and are also considered a key contributor to RDP implementation. However, the level of participation of individual Member States in ENRD events is relatively heterogeneous (see O26). Feedback is more nuanced with the more targeted ENRD activities, i.e. activities organised in relatively niche fields.

While generally considered beneficial in improving the quality of evaluation (see SQ6), the EHD activities, such as EvaluationWorks! are not rated as favourably as other ENRD activities by both MAs/PAs and NSUs. Likewise, support for transnational cooperation (TNC) is also not deemed as effective by respondents of both surveys.

JC5.2: The delivery methods chosen by the ENRD have supported RDP stakeholders in the implementation of the RDPs

The various delivery methods chosen by the ENRD have supported RDP stakeholders directly involved in the implementation of the RDPs, i.e. MAs. Other stakeholder groups relevant to RDP implementation are involved to a lesser extent, such as PAs. The MA/PA and NSU survey findings highlight differences in the perceived relevance of ENRD material. While generally assessing ENRD outputs as very beneficial in terms of improving RDP implementation, NSU respondents attribute a higher effectiveness to the ENRD than the MA. Respondents more directly involved in RDP management (i.e. the MAs and PAs) were comparatively more reserved on the ENRD's contributions, particularly in terms of the ENRD addressing their needs.

JC5.3: The ENRD activities have led to improved implementation capacities among RDP actors

The extent to which the ENRD activities have led to improved implementation capacities among RDP actors was assessed by the degree of implementation of five key recommendations in the 2015 ENRD Thematic Group Report on Improving RDP Implementation⁵⁴. Across most of these elements, the ENRD was highly effective.

The ENRD supported the **uptake of smart delivery tools**, particularly by engaging in peer learning processes with NRNs on communication tools. The ENRD-CP also set up a **communication strategy** in a timely manner at the start of the programming period. A further essential contribution to support RDP implementation was via **capacity building events** among MAs. The capacity building events were organised as demand-driven activities centred around peer-learning, and effectively addressed needs from MAs and NSUs. Additionally, dedicated peer-learning events, to improve the ability of NRNs to deliver their activities have proved important as well, particularly on smart delivery tools.

On the other hand, ENRD contribution to **improved risk assessment and management** in RDP implementations was relatively low, and included a dedicated PA conference and related publications. ENRD contributions to fostering the **implementation of vertical coordination and empowerment of monitoring committees** among NRNs was restricted to the collection and discussion of good practices. There was little evidence of changes in governance structure due to ENRD recommendations or activities in the NRNs analysed as part of the case studies.

Overall, ENRD contributions to improving RDP implementation were substantial, signifying a good degree of effectiveness. Most effective, in this regard, were the organisation of peer-learning and exchange events on RDP implementation.

Taking into consideration the evidence gathered to answer this study question, it appears that the ENRD's activities may effectively foster and improve the management and the implementation of the RDPs providing that:

- The engagement and involvement of national RDP actors in ENRD activities (e.g. TWG, meetings and events) is safeguarded. They are key to the dissemination of the output of these activities.

⁵⁴ Namely:

- The ENRD has developed a communication strategy at the beginning of the programming period;
- The ENRD has engaged in capacity building via knowledge transfer between MAs/PAs;
- The ENRD has supported risk assessment of RDP management systems;
- The ENRD has supported the introduction of smart delivery tools;
- The ENRD has supported the NRNs in implementing vertical coordination among RDP stakeholders and empowered monitoring committees.

- It is ensured that a more geographically balanced representation of RDP actors is involved in / takes part in ENRD activities. A prerequisite for the effectiveness of the ENRD activities is the ability of participants to be able to express themselves in English.
- The NRNs and/or MAs dedicate sufficient resources to translate key ENRD outputs into the national language so that this content can be further disseminated to rural stakeholders.
- The shift to smart delivery tools is broadly undertaken, accepted, and adopted. While the Covid-19 pandemic may have hampered the work of the RDP implementors and of the ENRD, it may also represent a catalyst for change.
- The communication, dissemination and exchange potential of social media platforms are better harnessed across NRNs.

4.5.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

➤ JC5.1 The ENRD is implementing activities to foster the implementation of the RDPs

Evaluating the extent to which activities implementing by the ENRD are fostering the implementation of the RDPs is linked to two main aspects, namely (1) the use, uptake by and participation of RDP actors and stakeholders in the proposed ENRD activities and (2) the actual contribution and effectiveness of these activities in fostering (i.e. improving) RDP implementation.

The types of activities proposed by the ENRD cover a wide range of materials, documentations, and options for exchanges and networking.

The following list provides an overview on the types of examined ENRD activities:

- NRN's meetings;
- ENRD Thematic Working Groups;
- Evaluation Helpdesk Thematic Working Groups;
- ENRD Workshops (capacity building events);
- EvaluationWORKS!;
- ENRD general seminars and events;
- Good practice workshops (evaluation related activities);
- Leader/CLLD networking and cooperation;
- Support for transnational cooperation;
- Dissemination of good practices and projects examples;
- ENRD monitoring and evaluation related activities;
- Evaluation guidelines;
- ENRD publications and website.

As per the MA/PAs survey, the ENRD general **seminars and events** is the most popular activity, i.e. 70% of the respondents were involved in ENRD seminars and events. The second activity which involved the most responding MA/PAs (57.5%) is **ENRD workshops** (capacity building events), followed by **NRN's meetings** and **Leader/CLLD networking and cooperation** (respectively 55% of the respondents were involved). The activity for which respondents declared being the least involved in is **support for transnational cooperation**.

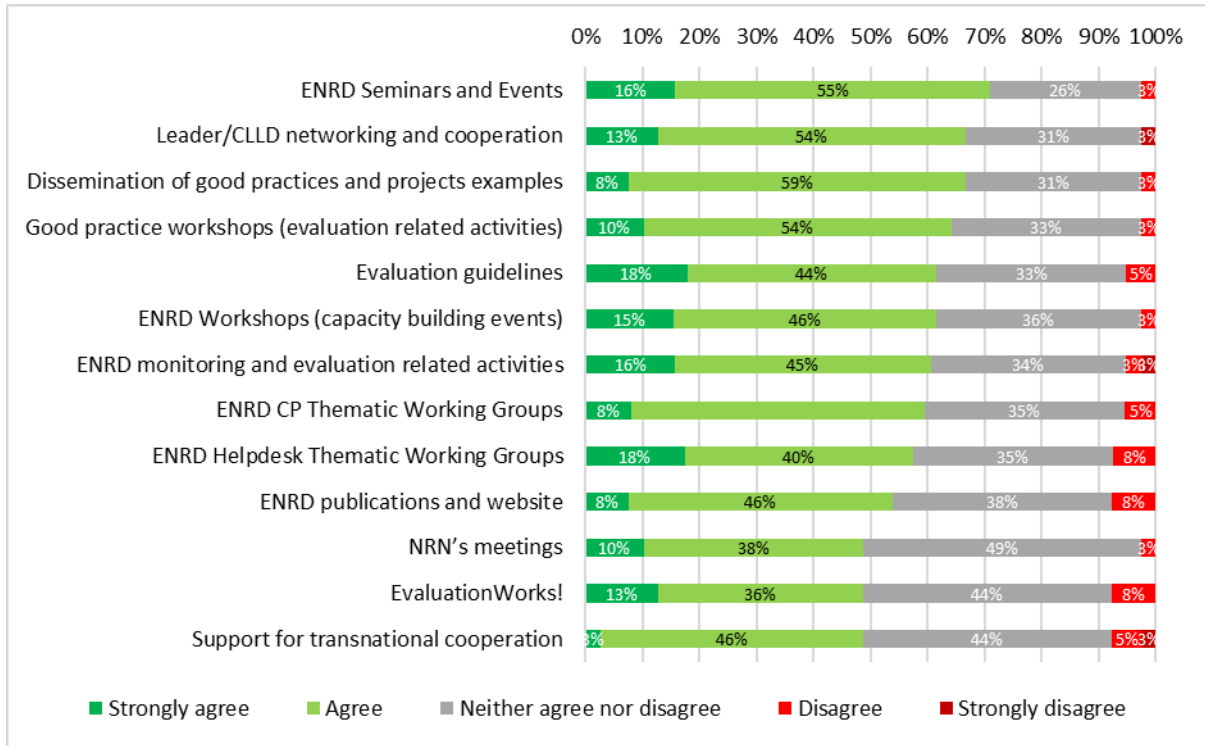
A similar pattern can be observed when examining the NSU respondents, as 88% of the respondents were involved **ENRD workshops (capacity building events)** and 87% in ENRD **general seminars and events**. The ENRD activities for which NSU respondents were the least involved in were the **ENRD evaluation related activities** (45%) and the **Evaluation Helpdesk Thematic Working Groups** (37%).

The participation in ENRD events is substantial for NRNs, although this differs greatly from country to country, as illustrated by the Figure 22. As indicated in SQ2 (JC2.2), this may be linked to the fact that, within larger Member States having regional programmes, such meetings can be "internally" organised without needing the intervention of the ENRD.

As per the MA/PAs survey, in general, 53% of the respondents agree (11% strongly agree) that the **ENRD activities improve RDP quality and implementation**. The NSU responses also confirm this as 80% of the respondents similarly support this statement.

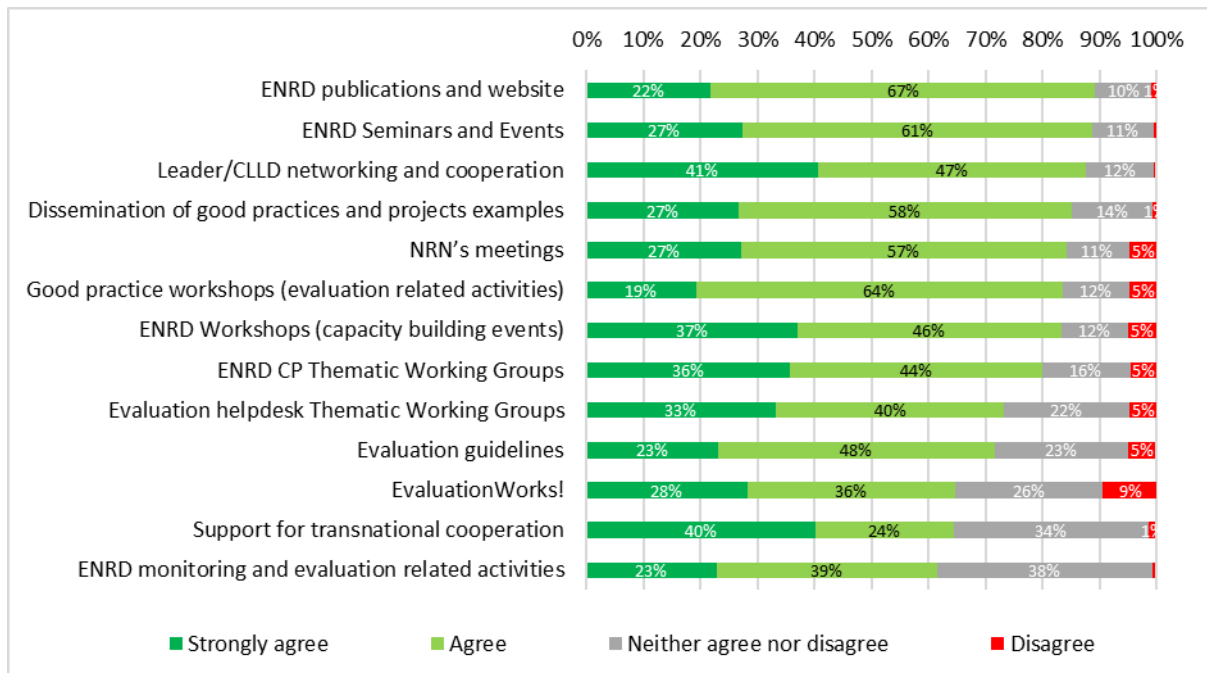
Providing further specific details, the following figure indicates the extent to which MA/PA respondents consider that the various ENRD activities have improved RDP implementation.

Figure 23: MA/PA Survey - ENRD activities' perceived contribution to improving RDP implementation



Source: Managing authorities and Paying agencies survey, Q22, n=40 (ADE, 2022)

Figure 24: NSU Survey - ENRD activities' perceived contribution to improving RDP implementation



Source: Network Support Unit survey, Q18, n=18 (ADE, 2022)

Figure 23 shows that **ENRD seminars and events** are considered as the main contributors to RDP implementation improvement (as per MA/PA respondents). This is confirmed by the NSU survey respondents (

Figure 24). As previously mentioned, these events are also the most popular activity involving the highest number of representatives from MA/PAs, NSUs⁵⁵ and NRNs. Such seminars and events can therefore be considered very effective in terms of RDP implementation improvement given the wide uptake of this activity and its perceived impact.

As mentioned above, the second activity which involves MA/PAs the most is **the ENRD Workshops (capacity building events)**. Nonetheless, the same respondents do not really consider this activity as being particularly conducive to the improvement of RDPs: the activity is only ranked the fifth activity (out of thirteen) contributing to RDP implementation. This would imply that the MA/PA respondents value their involvement in this activity for other purposes than support for RDP implementation.

Another activity which is considered as being one of the most effective in improving RDP implementation is the **dissemination of good practices and project examples** (as per 67% of the MA/PAs respondents). However, interestingly, good practices (ENRD publications and digital content) and project databases are two of the ENRD outputs the least used and/or disseminated by MA/PAs. In the NSU survey, 85% of the respondents also agree to strongly agree that the dissemination of good practices and project examples improves RDP implementation, a type of ENRD output which they however also use and/or disseminate.

The dissemination of information is particularly important as indicated by an NSU respondent who commented that whether or not the ENRD's activities have an impact on the improvement of the RDP is determined by the attendance of a Member State representative in these activities (e.g. in working groups) and how he/she disseminates information about this activity at national level. Along those lines, as pointed out by the AT NRN, travelling to the ENRD event's meeting place is sometimes very time and resources consuming, which may deter Member States representatives from attending and therefore hinder the dissemination of ENRD activities outputs (CSR: AT).

While the dissemination of good practices and project examples may be carried out via different means (e.g. newsletters), the **ENRD-CP social media platforms** seem to be rather underused. Indeed, the platforms are amongst the least used and/or disseminated as 60% of the MA/PA and 31% of the NSU respondents never or rarely use and/or disseminate them. The interview with the ENRD CP provides further clarification on this point. The use of social media has substantially evolved over the programming period, from a very limited use to a more prominent way of reaching out to NRNs. Moreover, the interviewee also indicated that certain social media channels were more broadly used at national level (e.g. Facebook by the NRNs) while others (e.g. Twitter by the ENRD) were used to exchange at EU-level, across countries. While the use of different platforms is not questioned, the communication and exchanges may be hindered.

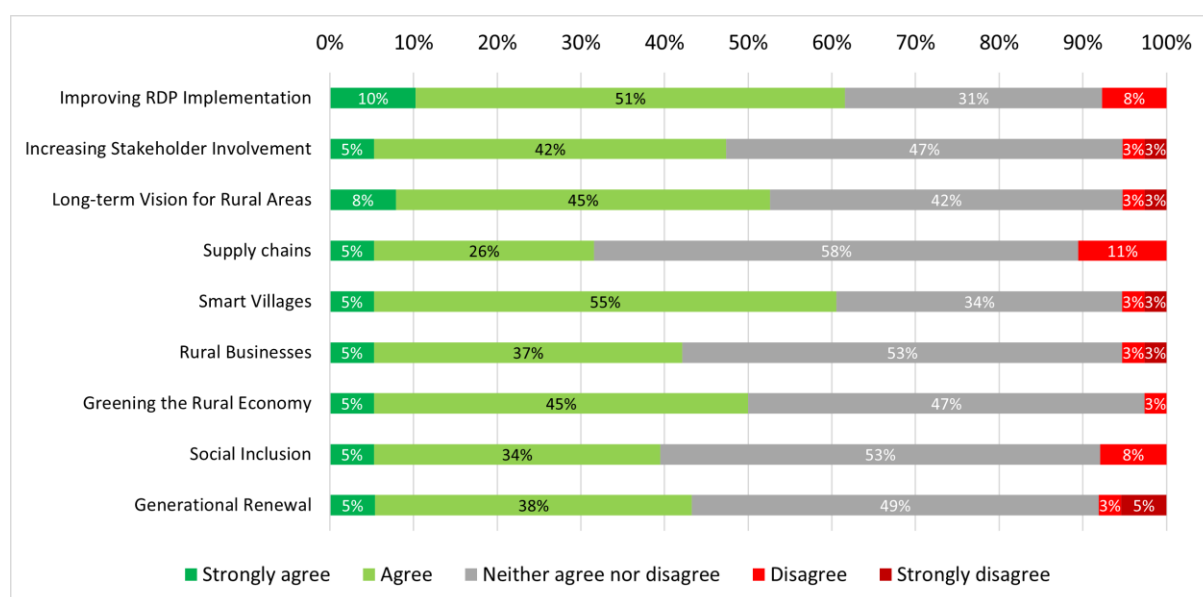
Slightly more than half of the MA/PA respondents (54%) indicate that **the ENRD publications and website** improve RDP implementation, which is relatively low compared to the other activities. The ENRD website as well as ENRD thematic publications and reports are still relatively largely used and/or disseminated by the MA/PA respondents. On the contrary, the NSU respondents (89%) consider that the ENRD publications and website largely improve the RDP implementation. However, an important aspect raised by an NSU respondent points at the reduced effectiveness and impact of ENRD publications given that they are not available in the various national languages. Some NRNs (e.g. in France) have been active in translating and sharing ENRD outputs to make it more accessible to rural development stakeholders, but the resources to do so are not necessarily available to all NRNs (e.g. the AT NRN only has limited personnel dedicated to ENRD activities). The language barrier is also an important factor limiting the participation and active contribution of national stakeholders in various ENRD activities (CSR: FR, SI, SK, AT). The interviewed Austrian MA likewise added that the key challenge is to manage the wealth of information available and select the most relevant pieces to be translated (CSR: AT).

⁵⁵ For the NSU respondents, by far, the highest level of involvement is naturally in NRN's meetings.

Less than half of the MA/PAs respondents consider that the **NRN's meetings** and **EvaluationWorks!** contribute to improve RDP implementation. In turn, the NSU respondents (84%) agree to strongly agree that EvaluationWorks! contributes to a lesser extent to improving RDP implementation but, unsurprisingly and contrary to the MA/PA respondents, find that the NRN's meetings effectively contribute to RDP implementation.

Further information and possible explanation on the limited role of EvaluationWorks! is provided in the Italian case study as representatives from the Italian NSUs pointed out that, in this programming period, the needs' assessment performed by the EHD to select the topics to be addressed in the annual work plan and to organise the capacity building activities at national level (EvaluationWorks!) was less effective than it used to be in the previous period (CSR: IT). In some cases (CSR: BE -Wallonia, SK), EvaluationWorks! is however particularly valued, especially when the MA does not internally have the resources (or a department specifically focussing on evaluation) to steer the evaluations.

Figure 25: MA/PA Survey - ENRD Thematic Working Group topics' contribution to improved RDP implementation at national/regional level.



Source: Managing authorities and Paying agencies survey, Q21, n=39 (ADE, 2022)

As illustrated in the figure above, 51% of the MA/PA respondents agree (10% strongly agree) that the **ENRD Thematic Working Group** focussing on the improvement of RDP implementation does contribute to this objective. 78% of the NSU respondents agree to strongly agree on the role of this thematic working group on the improvement of RDP implementation. Both respondents' groups agree that the other ENRD Thematic Working Group on Smart Villages also contributes to improve RDP implementation. The topics which contribute the least to the improvement of RDP implementation, as per MA/PA respondents, are supply chains and social inclusion.

Finally, as mentioned by survey respondents (MA/PA and NSU), a general remark regarding the evaluation of the effectiveness of the ENRD's activities on the improvement of the RDP implementation must be made in the light of the **COVID-19 sanitary crisis** which affected and paralysed (inter alia) the EU. Given that the ENRD activities rely to a large extent on direct exchange and contacts between stakeholders, and the RDP implementation itself was slowed down or halted by the pandemic, it is important to highlight that the effectiveness of some of the ENRD's activities may have been hindered. The number of face-to-face activities was drastically reduced (especially in 2020) as indicated in all case studies. The AT NRN representative also emphasised the importance of physical meetings for networking purposes, which unfortunately could no longer take place for a given period (CSR: AT).

Nonetheless, as stressed by the ENRD CP interviewee, the pandemic also acted as a catalyst for change, increasing the number of virtual meetings and communication tools promoted by the ENRD and taken up by the NRNs. Although difficult to precisely assess and quantify, the ENRD activities and their delivery methods may have therefore been positively affected by

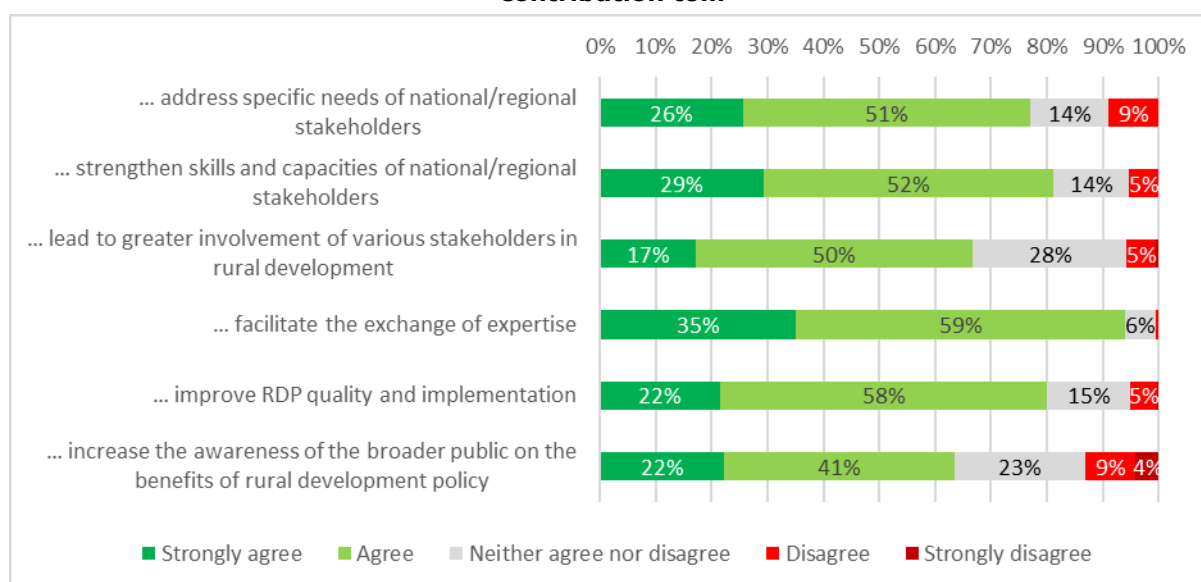
the pandemic. Moreover, it may be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of a given activity of which format has changed (and the impact of this change) over the course of the programming period (e.g. physical compared to virtual meetings).

➤ **JC5.2 The delivery methods chosen by the ENRD have supported RDP stakeholders in the implementation of the RDPs**

As discussed in the previous section, the diversity of topics addressed through the ENRD activities, e.g. by the ENRD Thematic Groups (Figure 25) intend to support RDP actors and stakeholders in the implementation but also evaluation of the RDP. The diversity of delivery methods, i.e. approaches/modes/tools used to spread information and foster exchanges, also intend to ensure that the needs of the stakeholders are effectively addressed in order to improve RDP implementation.

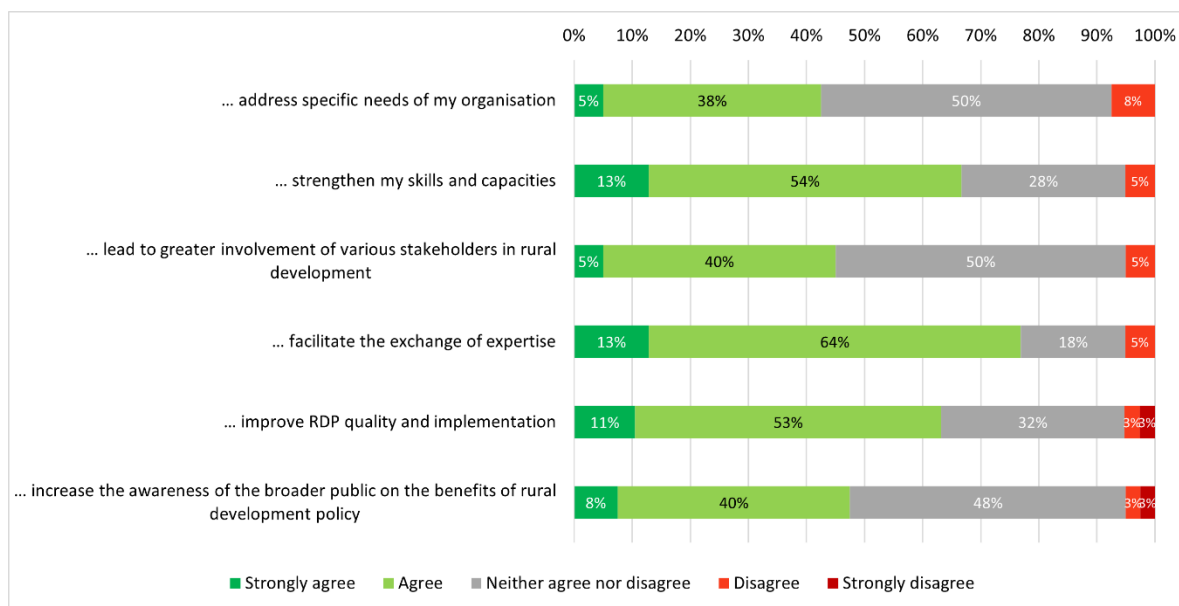
The following figures illustrate the extent to which MA/PAs (Figure 26) and NSU (Figure 27) perceive the role played by ENRD activities, publications and digital content in supporting actors and stakeholders implementing RDPs. The improvement of the RDP implementation is assessed via the strengthening of skills and capacities of national/regional stakeholders, the greater involvement of various stakeholders in rural development, facilitating exchange of expertise and the increase of the awareness of the broader public on the benefits of rural development policy.

Figure 26: NSU Survey - Improvement of the RDP implementation via the ENRD activities' contribution to...



Source: Network Support Unit survey, Q16, n=24 (ADE, 2022)

A majority of MA/PA respondents indicates that the ENRD activities have not explicitly (i.e. considering respondents who strongly disagree, disagree or do not agree or disagree) addressed their specific needs (58%), nor led to a greater involvement of various stakeholders in rural development (55%), or increased the awareness of the broader public on the benefits of rural development policy (53%). From the NSU respondents' side, the answers are more nuanced, respondents seemingly being slightly sceptical regarding the role of ENRD activities in terms of increasing the awareness of the broader public on the benefits of rural development policy and greater involvement of various stakeholders in rural development. In this regard, an NSU respondent indicated that ENRD publications and digital content is rather addressing "technicians" (i.e. stakeholders able to understand technical jargon) instead of a broader public.

Figure 27: MA/PA Survey - Improvement of the RDP implementation via the ENRD activities' contribution to...

Source: Managing authorities and Paying agencies survey, Q20, n=40 (ADE, 2022)

The ENRD implements several actions which were relatively effective to enable the ENRD to function as a hub for discussion of rural development policy:

- Peer-to-peer exchanges between NRNs and other Member States actors are a main vehicle to foster effective networking.
- Joint ENRD-CP activities with stakeholder groups (COPA-COGEA, CEJA): side-by-side activities to reach stakeholders who are not targeted by/involved in the ENRD/Rural Networks.
- Targeted work with stakeholder bodies to ensure their voices are heard at EU level. This connects the EU level to the Member State level via these stakeholder organisations.

However, smaller NRNs are more difficult to address since they often lack the resources to effectively engage in these activities (ibid).

➤ **JC5.3 The ENRD activities have led to improved implementation capacities among RDP actors**

The extent to which the ENRD activities have led to improved implementation capacities among RDP actors is assessed along the degree of implementation of five key recommendations of the 2015 ENRD Thematic Group Report on Improving RDP Implementation. As such, the assessment follows these criteria:

- The ENRD has developed a communication strategy at the beginning of the programming period.
- The ENRD has engaged in capacity building via knowledge transfer between MAs/PAs.
- The ENRD has supported risk assessment of RDP management systems.
- The ENRD has supported the introduction of smart delivery tools.
- The ENRD has supported the NRNs in implementing vertical coordination among RDP stakeholders and empowered monitoring committees.

The development of a communication strategy and the introduction of smart delivery tools

The ENRD developed a communication strategy at the beginning of the programming period in consultation with ENRD stakeholders. The strategy was a product of the recommendations of the 2015 ENRD Thematic Group Report and featured the introduction of new delivery tools for communication activities. In the perception of the ENRD-CP, the approaches outlined in the ENRD communication strategies were, to an extent, echoed in by the NRNs in their

communication strategies. However, the review of case study NRNs does not necessarily indicate a high degree of replication (such as in the case of BE – Wallonia or FR).

The ENRD, however, has been effective in introducing smart delivery tools and supporting peer-learning on communication approaches and uptake among NRNs. Over the programme period, the ENRD-CP has implemented a significant number of activities involving stakeholders on communication tools and communication activities, as desk research of the ENRD website reveals. An example of this is the “ENRD Workshop on NRN Communication” which was organised in 2018 (ENRD, 2018b)⁵⁶ with over 70 participants. The meeting featured 16 best practice presentations of NRN communication approaches and foster common learning between the participating NRNs, as well as dedicated presentations from communication experts. Another good example illustrating this regular exchange between NRNs and the ENRD on communication tools and their application in networking was the “ENRD Workshop for National Rural Networks on Valorising and Communicating Successful Projects” in 2020 (ENRD, 2020a)⁵⁷ which focussed on the successful dissemination of best practices of RDP implementation and highlighted the Rural Inspiration Awards.

This exchange is supported in the shape of peer-learning and peer-to-peer events between the ENRD-CP and the NRNs. This results in an interdependency in terms of common learning between the ENRD and the NRNs. For example, in 2015 the ENRD implemented mentimeter.com as an assessment tool which is now in widespread use across the NRNs. There is significant exchange being implemented between the ENRD-CP and the NRNs on specific communication tools, not necessarily as part of a structured process (ibid). Key discussion points include the questions of how these tools work, the effectiveness of tools, as well as active trials of these tools.

COVID-19, as elaborated above, proved an accelerator necessitating a shift to virtual formats, changes in moderation styles and settings of events. Due to this external influence and the peer exchanges provided via the ENRD, NRN quality of communication has improved over the programme period. By the time of writing, there is a faster uptake of communication tools and technologies across the NRNs. The process to take new solutions up has sped up significantly, also due to the external needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some NRNs still apply more traditional tools in their outreach programmes, such as print and digital media (newsletters, magazines, or websites etc.). The ENRD also worked to support the development and uptake of other smart delivery tools, such as the LEADER and the NRN toolkits (ibid).

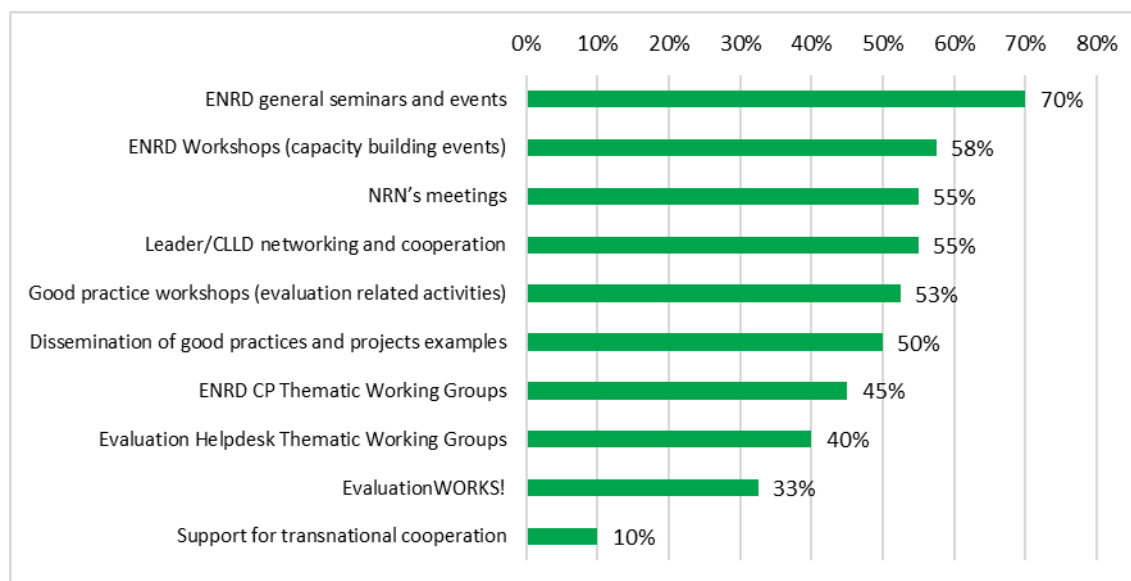
Capacity building and knowledge transfer and risk assessment in RDP management systems

Capacity building and knowledge transfer are core activities of the ENRD. As highlighted in the literature review, the ENRD developed 112 RDP summary fiches and 12 focus area fiches in 2015, at the start of the programming period. Further, the ENRD produced 16 measure-centred reports and 100 good practices (CP AIR Y2). These good practices and examples were well-received by the ENRD stakeholders, with the 2019 self-assessment report highlighting a positive impact on RDP implementation for 78% of respondents. These tools were maintained over the course of the programming period. By the end of the programming period, the ENRD activities in the context of improved RDP implementation shifted to a forward-looking perspective, emphasising the development of the CAP strategic plans, with dedicated activities targeted at MAs.

The MA/PA survey undertaken by the project team assessed the extent of MA/PA participation in ENRD events (see Figure 28). The survey outcomes identified widespread participation in, especially, general ENRD events and seminars (70% of respondents participating), but also in thematic events closer to RDP implementation. This concerns capacity building workshops (57.5% having participated), LEADER/CLLD networking and cooperation events (55% indicated having participated), and good practice workshops on evaluation activities (52.5% of the surveyed MAs/PAs participated).

⁵⁶ ENRD (2018). ENRD Workshop on NRN Communication. https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-nrn-communication_en.

⁵⁷ ENRD (2020). ENRD Workshop for National Rural Networks on Valorising and Communicating Successful Projects. <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-national-rural-networks-valorising-and-communicating-successful>.

Figure 28: MA/PA survey: Between 2014 and 2020, were you involved in any of the following ENRD activities?

Source: Managing authorities and Paying agencies survey, Q18, n=40 (ADE, 2022)

The effectiveness of the ENRD in terms of capacity building was underlined in both the NSU and the MA/PA surveys. In the MA and PA survey, 86% of respondents deem the ENRD and the NRNs supported capacity building. However, this may not necessarily translate into improved RDP implementation. In the survey, only 74% of respondents state that the ENRD and NRN activities have supported better RDP delivery.

The capacity building workshops and events are demand-driven events, organised by the ENRD-CP around specific needs tied to RDP implementation. These workshops feature strong elements of peer-to-peer exchanges (ibid) between MAs and PAs on RD policies. The 2019 self-assessment report (Rural Networks 2020) highlights a total of 39 capacity building events organised by the ENRD-CP by end of 2019, with 2 846 participants in total. Out of the 39 events, a majority of 22 were focussed on RDP implementation-related topics. These events enable MAs and PAs to exchange on implementation experiences and bottlenecks. The ENRD TWGs also play an important role in terms of enabling peer-learning and exchange on implementation experiences, as highlighted by JC5.1. In Austria, the participation of MA representatives in TWGs focussed on RDP implementation issues enables them to exchange on experiences with other MAs in EU-27 (CSR: AT). The contribution of the (EHD) TWGs was highlighted by the Estonian MA (CSR: AT), as the work undertaken in terms of evaluation support was deemed as contributing to RDP implementation (CSR: EE). A main result of ENRD activities being the facilitation of exchange of experiences and expertise was also highlighted by the Walloon (BE) case study (CSR: BE – Wallonia). However, the interviewed stakeholders in the Walloon network (ibid) cannot observe a direct impact in terms of improving RDP implementation.

This approach of connecting actors involved in RDP implementation together to foster peer-learning was also applied to promote risk management in RDP implementation. While overall limited in terms of number of events and outputs, the ENRD has supported PAs in this process. The ENRD effectively organised a conference in Finland, inviting PAs to facilitate exchange and common learning on risk assessment in RDP implementation. This is especially relevant for LEADER implementation, as measures with a high degree of innovation (such as LEADER or EIP-AGRI) are more difficult to plan in terms of implementation targets and their eventual degree of fulfilment. In this vein, the ENRD-CP also published practical examples in the form of the 2018 publication "A risk-assessment approach for RDP implementation"⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ ENRD (2018), A risk-assessment approach for RDP implementation. https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/enrd_publications/methodological-case_risk-assessment-tool_ie.pdf.

Implementing vertical coordination and empowerment of monitoring committees

The role of the ENRD in supporting the empowerment of monitoring committees and implementing vertical coordination across the NRNs is limited. This is due to these aspects being intrinsically tied to the governance structure of the respective NRNs, an element the ENRD cannot readily influence.

However, the ENRD-CP advocates related good practices. In the perception of the ENRD-CP, some NRNs implement these governance aspects more comprehensively than other NRNs. For example, the Dutch NRN can serve as a good practice, having redesigned their governance structure with a Steering Group and a monitoring committee, both involved at NRN level. This approach works well due to stakeholder trust and usually grants the NRN a higher degree of autonomy.

The governance structure of most NRNs analysed as part of the case studies remained unchanged for the duration of the programming period. Of the seven NRNs analysed as part of the case studies, three NRNs saw changes to their governance structure. These changes included TWGs being taken over by the MA in SK (CSR: SK), the absorption of the NSU by a public body in EE (CSR: EE), and changes steering responsibilities in FR (CSR: FR). However, these changes were not indicated to be due to the ENRD work on the matter.

4.6 SQ6: To what extent have the activities of the ENRD contributed to support the evaluation of the RDPs and how?

4.6.1 Approach

4.6.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

The Evaluation Helpdesk (EHD) conducts ENRD activities to support the evaluation of RDPs. It is one of the two support units of the ENRD and works under the guidance of DG Agriculture and Rural Development (Unit C.4 "Monitoring and Evaluation" during the reporting period discussed here, but now Unit A.3 "Policy Performance"). It has a core team of permanent staff in Brussels, non-permanent core staff, geographic experts in each Member State, and an additional pool of thematic experts.

This question requires i) causal analysis of how the EHD functioned and impacted RDP evaluations in all Member States and regions; and ii) assessing the extent of its influence and effectiveness in ensuring high quality and useful evaluations. It also requires that the role, contribution and effectiveness of the different delivery methods (website, social media, publications, working groups, events, etc.) are examined.

4.6.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC6.1: ENRD EHD guidance documents contributed to more effective RDP evaluation at Member States/region level than would have been achieved without them.

JC6.2: ENRD EHD achieved their set objectives through a variety of delivery methods [of which x and y were judged more effective than z and p....].

JC6.3: ENRD EHD activities have effectively promoted good practice regarding evaluation at RDP level.

4.6.1.3 Methodology

To answer the question, documented EHD activities have been evaluated using guidance documents, publications and feedback on events at EU level, as provided to this study by the EHD. EHD geographic expert activities have been examined at Member States level in case study countries, also their impact among evaluators and MAs at National and Regional levels across the EU-27 and the UK has been assessed via surveys.

Some semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the EHD and covering permanent core team members, also geographic experts in case study countries. The online surveys of MAs and of independent RDP evaluators were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data on EHD activities and their impact and value. Brief documentary review of available evaluation studies in case study countries was also used to identify the extent of adoption of EHD-endorsed practices and methods.

Documents gathered included:

1. ENRD EHD guidance documents on RDP evaluation (over 30 documents 2015-2021) ;
2. ENRD EHD documents: annual work plans (AWP), internal progress reports and survey findings, general publications, specific guidelines (social media metadata was unavailable);
3. 2018 AIR descriptions of evaluation methods and approach, in CS countries;
4. Any other RDP Evaluation reports for 2014-2020 in CS countries.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from EHD documents and the relevant online surveys was made, examining EHD activities and levels of engagement as well as judgements on the value of these things, and suggestions for possible enhancements. Initial analysis of results was shared with EHD core staff to clarify causal links and validate interpretations and emerging conclusions.

4.6.2 Summary answer

SQ6: To what extent have the activities of the ENRD contributed to support the evaluation of the RDPs and how?

The evidence from datasets of the European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development (EHD), from online surveys of evaluators and MAs, as well as case studies, suggests that the activities of the EHD contributed to support the evaluation of RDPs to a good extent. However, under-used potential to mobilise NRN stakeholders in support of policy learning for enhanced delivery of rural development was also identified. The focus of evaluation guidance based on requirements for evaluation for Rural Development as laid down in Commission Implementation Regulation N°808/2014 on the effects of result and on measuring impact reduced their ownership during the first evaluations (2017, 2019).

JC6.1: ENRD EHD guidance contributed to more effective RDP evaluation at MS/region level than would have been achieved without them.

The EHD guidance contributed to supporting more effective RDP evaluations, as shown by strong evidence in evaluator and MA surveys (where over 40% of respondents reported that they had changed their evaluation approach in response to EHD guidance) as well as feedback gathered by the EHD from users of EHD outputs and events. This was achieved by increasing evaluators' skills and knowledge, and by capacity-building, raising understanding and knowledge among MAs in particular, and to a lesser extent, by meeting needs among a wider group of relevant stakeholders, including PAs and NRN members. There is also evidence that EHD activities were modified both during and after the 2014-2021 period in direct response to feedback gathered and received, which should have increased their positive impacts and effectiveness. Some EHD data also indicates increased effectiveness of EHD activities, over time. However, except for the guidance documents, around a third of the respondents to the different online surveys (MA, evaluators, NSU) were dissatisfied with what has been offered and this pattern is also seen to some extent in EHD-gathered feedback. Concerns from open comments (and case studies) relate to complexity and too much focus on meeting the needs of the Commission (e.g. results and impact measurement at an early stage of RDP implementation) as opposed to resolving the practical or operational challenges of MAs and other RDP stakeholders.

A number of survey respondents among MAs and evaluators, and MA and evaluator interviewees in case studies in Italy and Slovakia, comment that EHD guidance and recommended methods were too ambitious or complex to match the evaluation needs and more limited resources of small Member States or regions. Similar comments were also made by MAs in Wallonia and France.

Italian interviewees commented that EHD seemed more directed by DG AGRI needs and priorities than by the needs of evaluators and MAs (as guidance documents were developed in close collaboration with DG AGRI and had to be validated and approved by them before dissemination). Slovakian interviewees felt that larger Member State priorities dominated the EHD agenda, so smaller countries' evaluation needs were less well supported.

EHD guidance focused strongly on evaluations to measure impact meant that it was not useful for enabling earlier evaluations (in 2017 and 2019) to inform improved policy delivery, or to engage stakeholders in such learning.

JC6.2: ENRD EHD achieved their set objectives through a variety of delivery methods, with some more effective than others

The evaluation of EHD data suggests that objectives were met to a good extent and that a wide variety of delivery methods was used. The EHD delivered a number of events, workshops, publications and digital media outputs. Events and workshops were hosted both in person and online (from 2020 onwards) a practice that was valued as it offered more flexibility to participants and thus attracted a wider audience to some EHD events.

Comparing approaches and activities, the most useful for different groups appear to have been the Guidance notes for evaluators; the Good Practice Workshops(GPWs) for Managing Authorities, and also some of the EvaluationWorks! events for them and for GREXE members and other stakeholders, particularly the events that focused on data management and on learning and development. Peer-to-peer learning opportunities were also highly valued: very positive feedback is given on these from interviews in several case studies (Estonia, Wallonia, Slovenia). A few less effective approaches were highlighted in case study interviews and participant feedback from events – these events or publications were felt to be less practical and more theoretical in approach. In addition, it is evident from the case studies that EHD activities were judged much less attractive or useful by NSUs and NRN stakeholders – interviewees suggested there was insufficient EHD focus on process evaluation (analysing operational aspects of RDPs) and on using evaluation lessons to help develop a community of learning among RDP stakeholders, concerning how to improve performance. The EHD activities mostly attracted participation from MAs, evaluators and PAs with much lower engagement from other types of stakeholders. Case study interviews with NRN members in Slovenia suggested some dissatisfaction with how evaluation was promoted and supported by EHD, saying it was complex and over-technical for NRN members. The MA in France noted some EHD insensitivity to MA workload and resources: e.g. the working group on the *ex-post* evaluation was held during a period when MAs were heavily committed to the preparation and submission of new CAP Strategic Plans.

In respect of digital media, a number of respondents to the *Evaluator* Survey and case study interviewees in several countries commented that they felt searching for information on the EHD website was not easy or intuitive.

JC6.3: ENRD EHD activities have effectively promoted good practice regarding evaluation at RDP level.

Evidence of good practice in evaluation resulting from EHD advice and information was found. Positive results from the evaluator survey suggests that guidance, Thematic Working Groups and Good Practice Workshops in particular promoted better evaluation practice, to a good extent. Positive scores for GPWs impacts in feedback gathered by the EHD also supports a causal connection between EHD activities and good practice in evaluations. In certain situations where RDP evaluation was limited by resources and data/information sources, comments were made that the approaches recommended in general EHD publications and activities were unrealistic or too ambitious in focus to be applied in practice. Case studies illustrate a range of views about the usefulness of EHD materials and activities. In some cases (Austria, Wallonia) well-developed national-level support and peer networks are seen as superior or sufficient for most purposes. In others, including both small Member States (Slovenia) and countries with multiple regional RDPs (Italian regions), EHD support was judged vital and valued. In France, EHD support was criticised within a wider context of dissatisfaction with the EU evaluation process as a whole which had led to stakeholder disinterest.

4.6.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

- **JC6.1: ENRD EHD guidance documents contributed to more effective RDP evaluation at Member States/region level than would have been achieved without them**

The evaluation of EHD data combined with evaluator survey findings suggest a positive response to this criterion

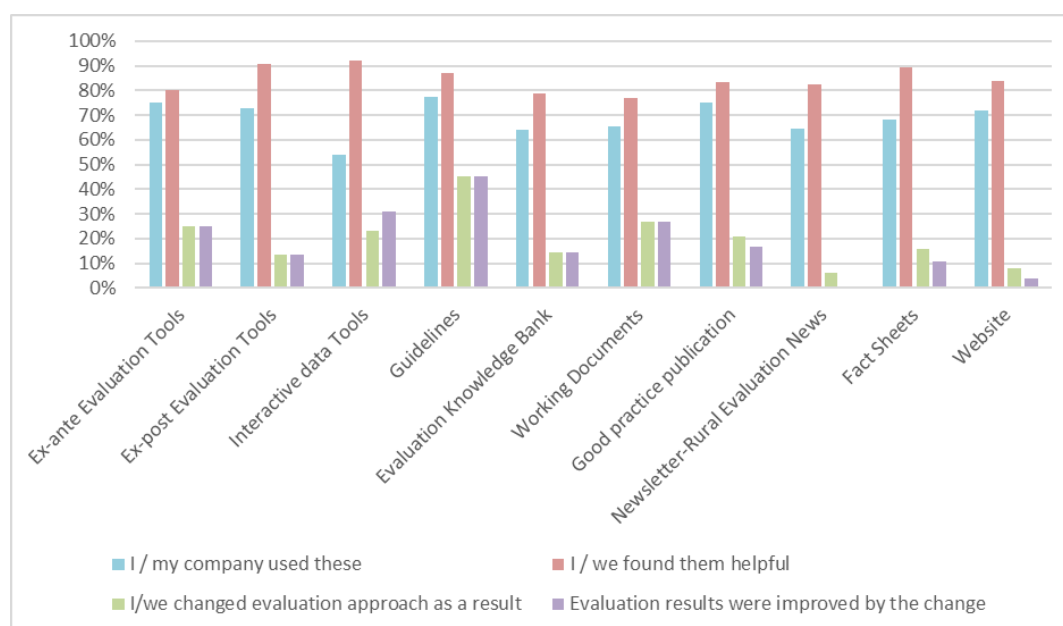
Table 9: Number of evaluation guidance / support documents published

NB: report periods (columns) of unequal length	Pre- Q2 2015	Q3 2015 - Q2 2016	Q3- Q4 2016	Q1- Q4 2017	Q1- Q4 2018	Q1-Q2 2019	Q3 2019 - Q2 2020	Q3 2020 - Q4 2021	Total
Guidelines	1	1	2	2	1	0	0	0	7
Working docs	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	4	8
Ex ante tools	0	0	0	0	0	4	6	1	11
Ex post tools	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	7	11
Reports	0	0	0	4	4	2	5	7	22
Factsheets	0	0	10	2	2	3	4	6	27
Glossaries	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Interactive decision tool	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	7
Evaluation Knowledge Bank	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

Source: EHD external evaluation data (2022)

Table 9 shows that the EHD produced a range of guidance materials: in particular, it was responsible for publishing seven specific Guidance documents which had more formal status than the other materials. EHD interviewees explained that these Guidance documents were co-authored with input from officials in DG AGRI and were intended as supplementary to the Evaluation requirements in the EAFRD – hence there was a strong link to the EU legislative documentation and expected standards of evaluation. An almost exclusive focus on measuring impact made them less appropriate earlier in the programming period (2017, 2019); meaning that there was little use by MAs of the results of the evaluations produced following this guidance, to improve their RDPs.

Figure 29: Evaluators Survey - Evaluators' reported use and opinion of EHD published materials



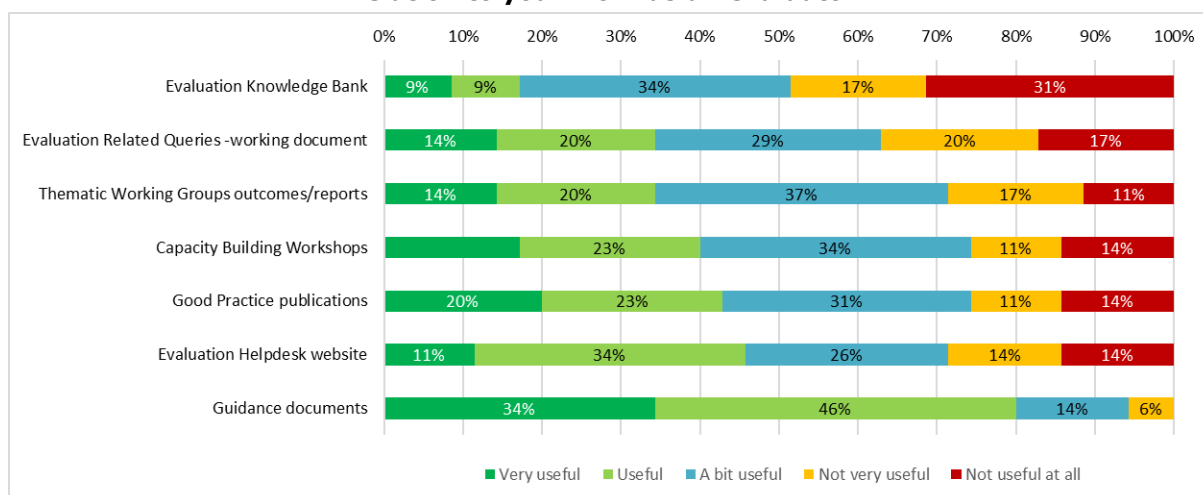
Source: Evaluators Survey, Q12, n=32 (ADE, 2022)

This data suggests that the formal guidelines, other publications and working documents from the EHD were well-used by evaluator respondents from at least 18 Member States. Survey participants also said they found these written publications highly useful. Guidelines were considered particularly useful, with over 40% of participants reporting that they had changed their evaluation approach in response to them, generating better evaluation as a consequence. However, free-text comments expanding on these answers suggested that, for respondents in at least 5 countries (France, Wallonia, Austria, Slovakia, Italy), guidelines were considered too theoretical/ambitious and not well-matched to the (more limited or more pragmatic) learning needs or resources provided for the evaluations by MAs. In particular, several criticisms were voiced concerning what was felt to be too strong an emphasis upon measuring results in impact – particularly for the earlier evaluation exercises in 2017 and 2019, when it was felt that this was not useful and that instead, a stronger focus on learning lessons from process evaluations designed to improve implementation, would have been more appropriate. Two open text comments from the evaluator survey illustrate this concern:

The evaluative questioning, based on the broad objectives, focuses exclusively on the impacts of the programme .., which is not quite appropriate at mid-term. There is a risk of missing out on the real implementation issues for the managing authority and of losing the interest of stakeholders in the evaluation. The methods cannot be generalised to all interventions The limitations of these methods must be acknowledged, especially at intermediate stages. The requirement to extrapolate results to the programme (macro) level remains risky and poses significant problems in terms of the robustness of the results. However, they are systematically requested in the results indicator sheets (survey respondent).

Guidance remains very theoretical; it is not in line with the resources different evaluation teams have to provide the work. a lot of guidance implies kind of research work: and did all this work really enable to improve the future RDPs? Only focused on impact - upstream issues, which are crucial for concrete implementation of RDPs are totally ignored in the whole guidance! (survey respondent).

Figure 30: Evaluators Survey - How useful [or beneficial] overall were the EHD outputs in relation to your work as an evaluator?



Source: Evaluators Survey, Q17, n=35 (ADE, 2022)

The survey also helped to assess adequacy of EHD materials and activities by seeking suggestions for improvement. These findings suggest that EHD might have increased its value to evaluators by putting a higher share of resources into tailored support and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. These are both elements that have a higher profile in the new CAP framework, as reported by EHD interviewees – suggesting that the EHD has learned from the experience of the 2014-2020 period and responded in a positive way.

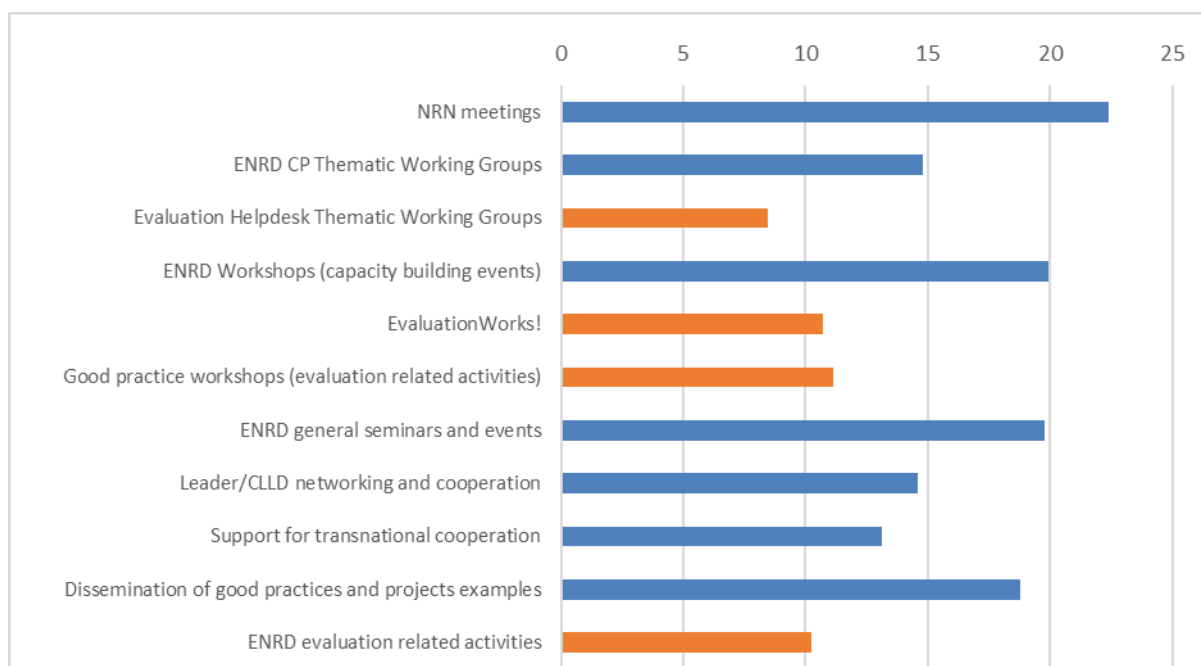
Figure 31: Evaluators Survey - Would other events or facilities have been useful for you? Please tick as many as relevant.



Source: Evaluators Survey, Q14, n=33 (ADE, 2022)

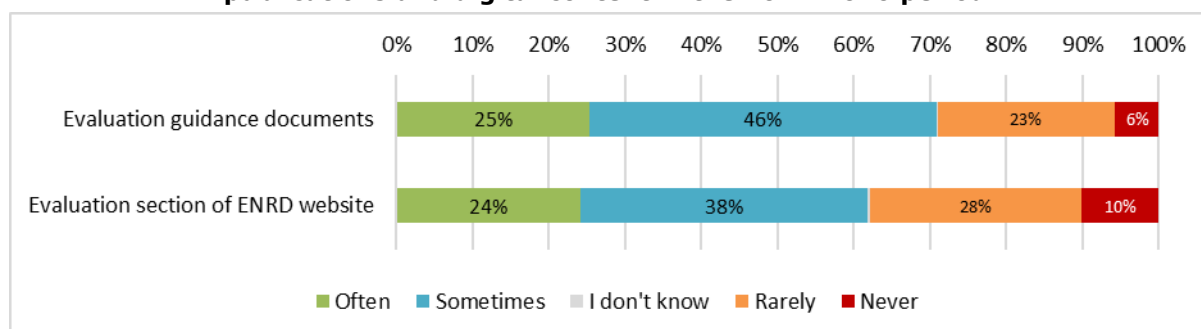
Evidence from NSU and MA surveys indicates some engagement and usefulness of EHD outputs and activities, although more for MA than for NSU, the latter not being a main target of the EHD.

Figure 32: NSU Survey - Between 2014 and 2020, were you involved in any of the following ENRD activities?



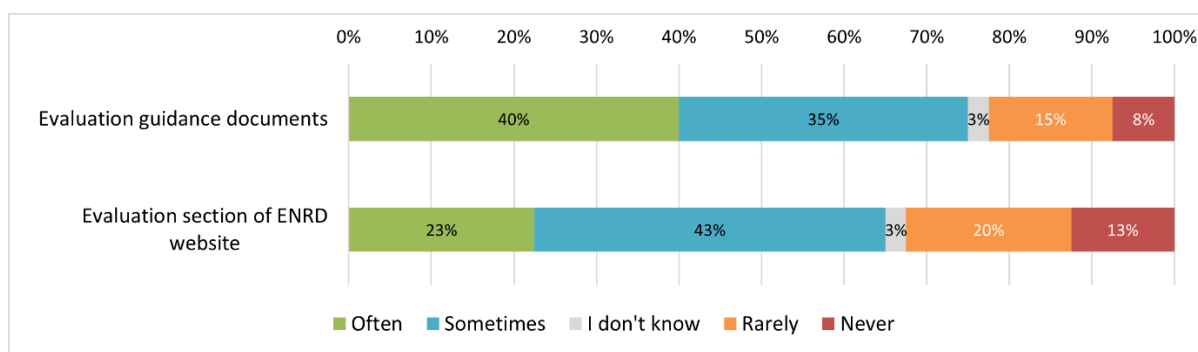
Source: Network Support Unit Survey, Q14, n=23 (ADE, 2022)

Figure 33: NSU Survey - How often did you use and/or disseminate the following ENRD publications and digital content in the 2014-2020 period?



Source: Network Support Unit Survey, Q15, n=24 (ADE, 2022)

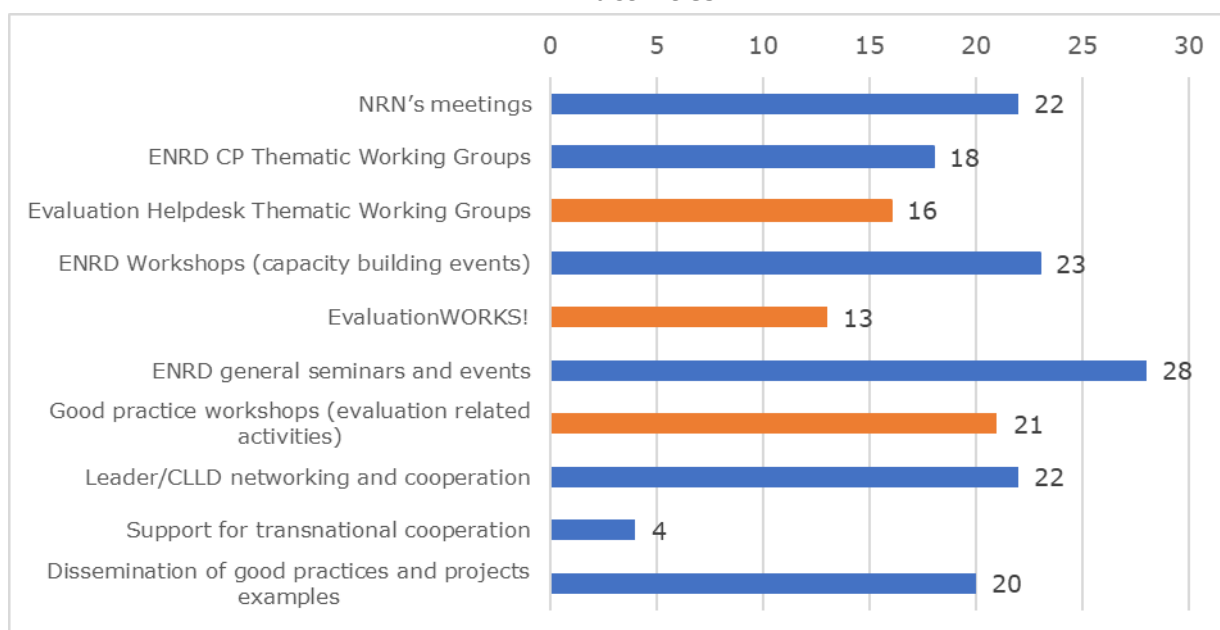
Figure 34: MA/PA Survey - How often did you (MA/PA) use and/or disseminate the following ENRD publications and digital content in 2014-2020 period?



Source: Managing authorities and paying agencies survey, Q19, n=41 (ADE, 2022)

The MA / PA survey included responses from 39 MAs (89%), 3 PAs (7%) and 2 others working for a PA or in technical assistance (4%).

Figure 35: MA/PA Survey - Between 2014 and 2020, were you involved in any of these ENRD activities?



Source: Managing authorities and paying agencies survey, Q18, n=40 (ADE, 2022)

These data show a lower level of NSU engagement with evaluation activities and documents but slightly higher MA engagement, particularly for GPWs and TWGs. Regarding the dissemination of guidance documents, a majority of NSU disseminate it sometimes (46%) or often 25% but a quarter to a third of the NSU respondents rarely or never use/disseminate it.

- **JC6.2 ENRD EHD achieved their set objectives through a variety of delivery methods [of which x and y were judged more effective than z and p....]**
- **JC6.3 ENRD EHD activities have effectively promoted good practice regarding evaluation at RDP level**

These two judgement criteria are evaluated together, as the evidence sources for each are intermingled but require examination and consideration of the same feedback drawn from a variety of different sources – EHD data, online surveys and case studies.

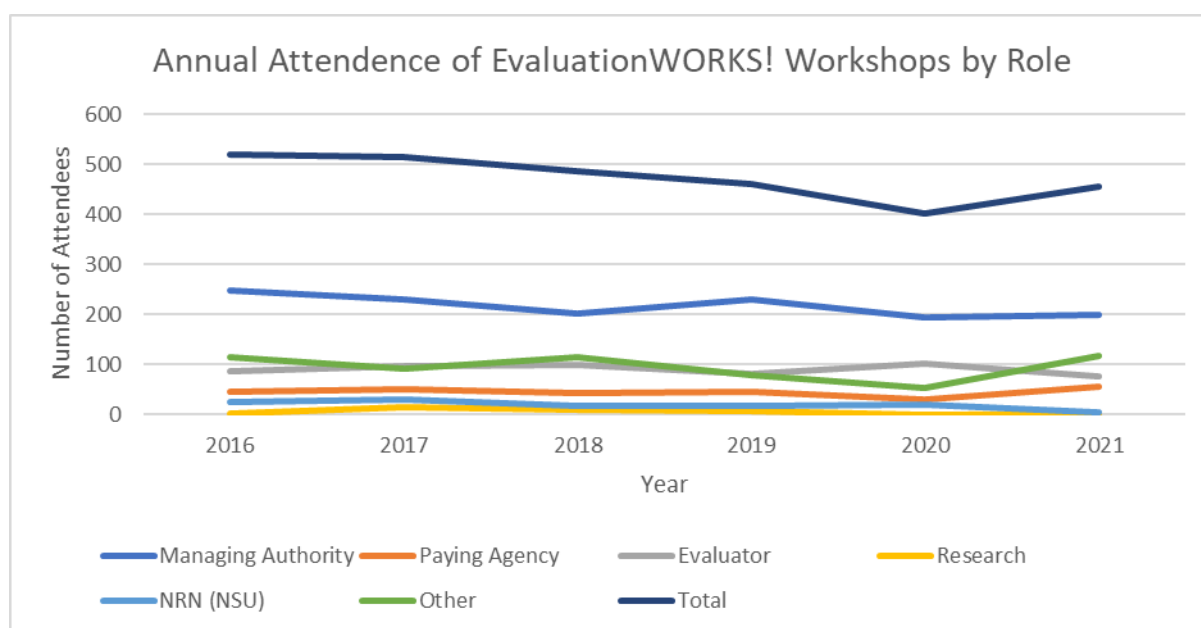
The evaluation of EHD data suggests that objectives were met and that a wide variety of delivery methods were used. Both EHD feedback and online survey data suggest some were more valued than others.

The EHD delivered a number of events, workshops, publications and digital media outputs. Events and workshops were hosted both in person and online, transition online prompted by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020. Data available on attendance and perceived value of events and workshops was far more extensive than use and value data for publications and digital media outputs. Each main output is considered in turn.

EvaluationWORKS! capacity building events (AWP 1.3.2): These capacity building events were held in each Member State (MS), in the local language, and facilitated by the EHD's network of Geographic Experts. A total of 170 were held between 2016 and 2021. All EvaluationWORKS! events in 2020, and all in 2021 except one in Malta, were held remotely due to Covid-19 restrictions. Prior to this, they were held face-to-face.

There was a notable dip in total attendance at EvaluationWORKS! events during 2020, that can likely be attributed to Covid (Figure 36). However, attendance numbers were in gradual, steady decline over the period. Feedback from EHD staff suggests this may be linked to events initially being more generic and relevant to a broad audience, then becoming more specialised over time. In addition, it was stated that some smaller Member States declined to attend these events when they felt the topic was already well-covered by GPWs. Managing Authority staff consistently attended most, as these capacity building sessions were targeted at them, with attendance by evaluators optional.

Figure 36: Recorded attendees at EvaluationWORKS! events, EHD

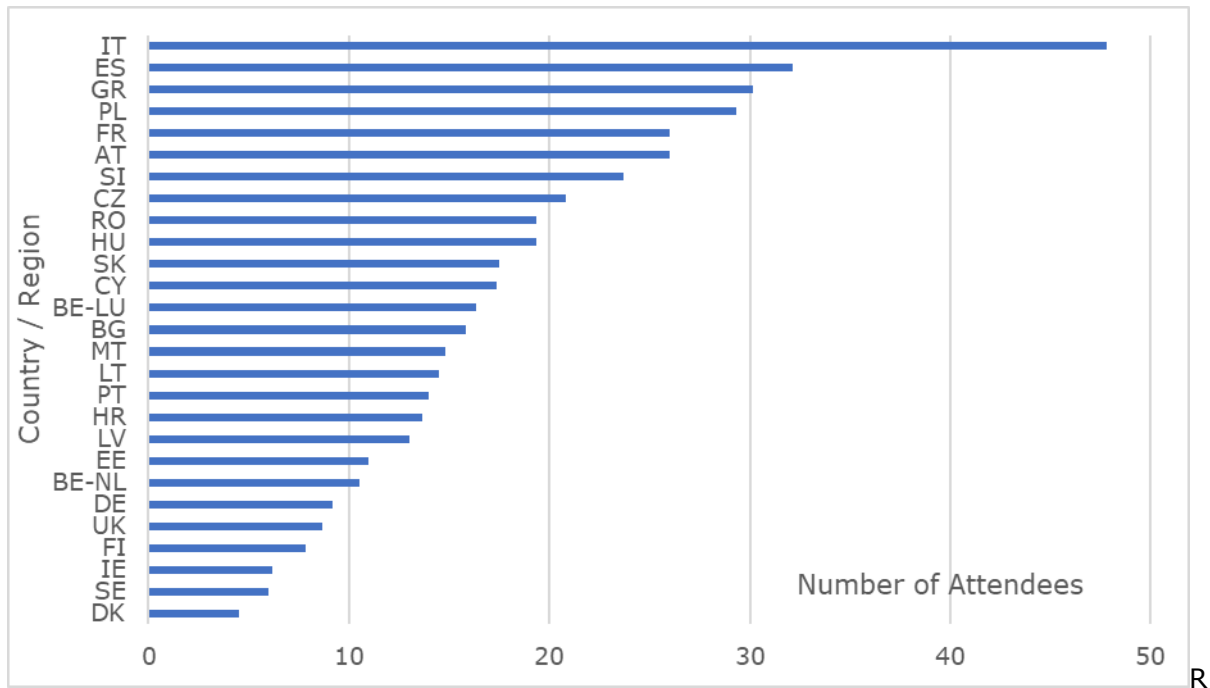


Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, et al., 2022)

When broken down by country, it becomes evident that EvaluationWORKS! events did not have consistent, universal reach (Figure 37). Feedback from EHD staff suggested attendance was impacted by, amongst other things, events not being held in some Member States, the size of, and resources available to, the evaluation units in different Member States and regions, also the varying numbers invited to each event. Attendance at workshops in specific Member States and in different years was reported between 0 (when a Member State opted not to hold that particular session) and 68.

Attendance from Italy and France (both countries with many regional RDPs) was consistently high, whilst from the UK (four RDPs), Denmark and Ireland (one RDP each) it was consistently low. In Germany, attendance numbers were substantial in 2016 and 2017, but in subsequent years EvaluationWORKS! events were not hosted there as the subject matter was sufficiently covered by the German evaluation network (source: EHD staff⁵⁹). Ireland⁶⁰, Finland and the UK also did not host EvaluationWORKS! events in some years.

Figure 37: Average attendance at EvaluationWORKS! events by Member States, 2016-2021⁶¹



Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, et al., 2022)

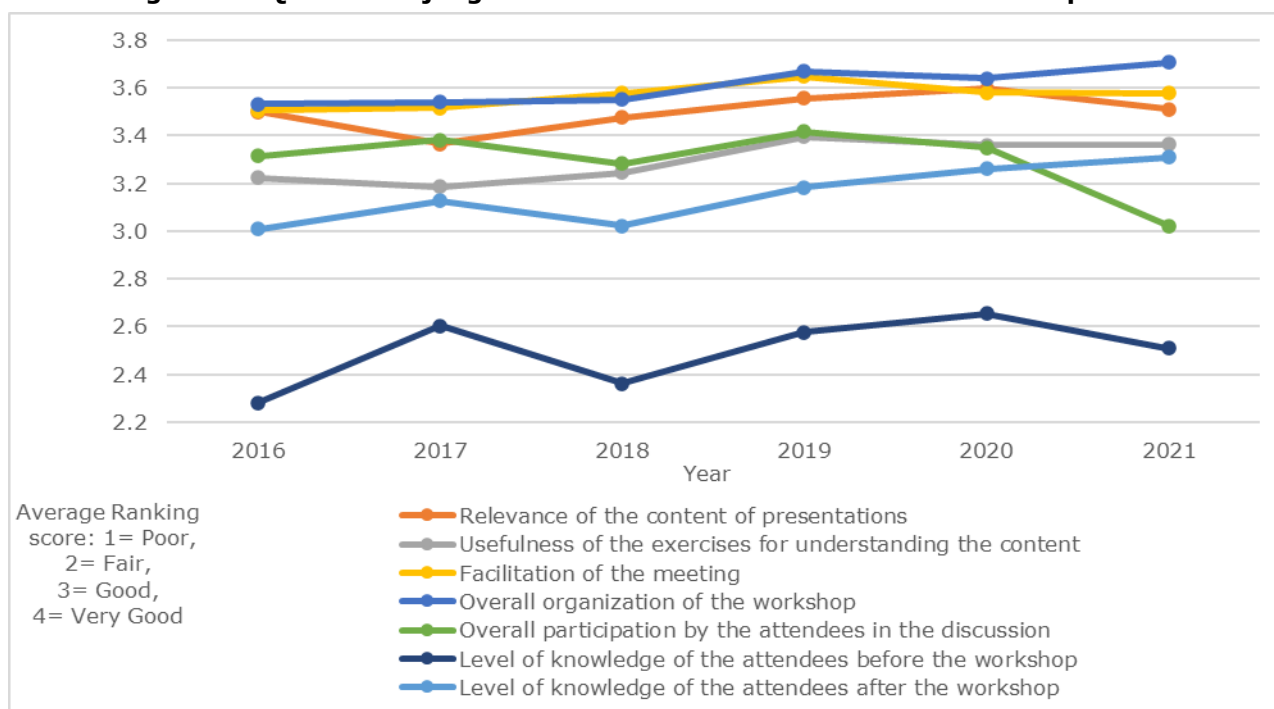
Data shows that feedback was consistently positive regarding the value of the events, with minor variations (see Figure 38). There was a slight fall in overall participation by attendees in discussion which may link to moving online after 2020 or other Covid-related effects; there is no data provided on reasons, making it difficult to draw conclusions.

Looking at the impact of events on participants' knowledge as recorded in feedback, the biggest uplift in attendees self-reported knowledge on the topic of the event was in 2021. This was a broad-based event focused on: 'better data for evaluating the CAP; evaluation plans – experiences and outlook to the future; and how to deal with contextual changes and new regulations for monitoring and evaluation'. The smallest uplift in reported knowledge was for an event in 2017: 'Follow up of the AIR 2017: lessons learnt for the evaluation in 2019'. This was a retrospective/review-based event focused on learning from participants, which may explain that finding. Overall, reported variation was minimal: **most events were rated as increasing participants' knowledge.**

⁵⁹ EHD reported (2022): 'Germany has the specific situation that it has an own evaluation network (MEN-D) that already broadly covers many of the evaluation topics offered by the Evaluation Helpdesk. For some years it was therefore agreed, that no separate meeting would be offered, but that a representative of the Evaluation Helpdesk would participate in a related meeting organised by the German Evaluation Network (which was then counted under "contributions to event hosted by another organisation)".

⁶⁰ EHD reported (2022): 'Ireland mentioned in some years, that the topics of the YCB-events were less relevant as already sufficiently covered in the context of other EHD activities (GPW, TWG) in which the MA participated and which it found more useful'.

⁶¹ Numerical feedback data on EvaluationWORKS! events was limited to the 2016-2019 period. Only visually-collated data for 2020 and 2021 workshops (circles filled to a certain level) was available, so conversion into numerical data is approximate, gauged by eye to the nearest 10%. EHD was asked for numerical data but was unable to supply this, for those 2 years.

Figure 38: Qualitative judgement of EHD events attended and their impacts

Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, et al., 2022)

Good Practice Workshops (AWP 1.2.2): 19 were held from 2016-2021. Of these, six (GPWs 13-18) were held online due to Covid-19 restrictions, while GPWs 1-12 were each held face-to-face in different Member States. A wide range of subjects were covered, so for this analysis, GPWs were themed by four categories (see Table 10).

Table 10: Main topics of GPWs 2016-2022

	Theme	Description	Count
A	Assessing Impact	Challenges of measuring impacts	8
B	Collaborative Evaluation	Collaborative approaches to evaluation (with NRN)	1
C	Data	Data sourcing, manipulation or management	3
D	Learning & development	Pooling experiences and learning lessons	7

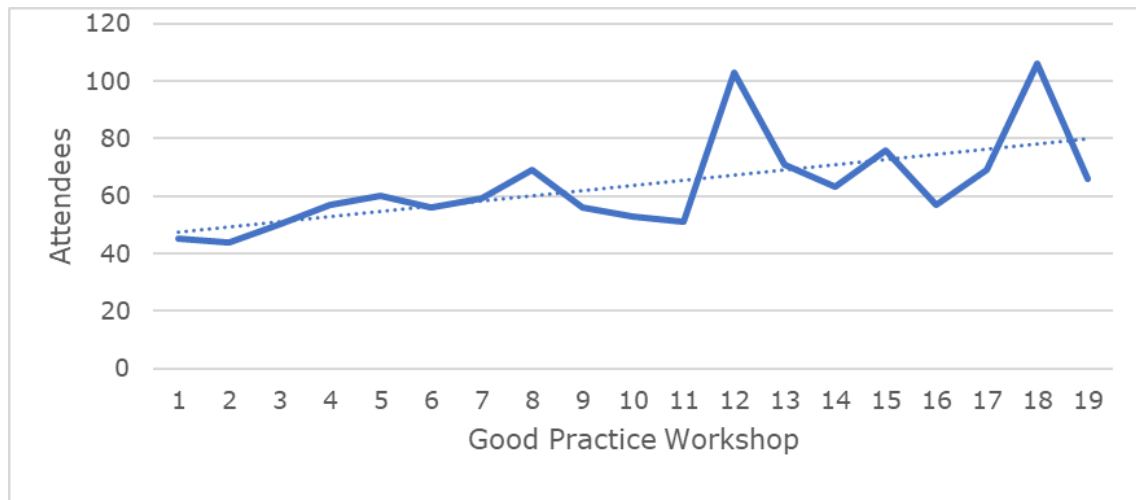
Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Excluding any attendees from the EHD/CP/EC, average attendance for GPWs was 64, varying from 44 (GPW2) to 106 (GPW18). Overall, attendance increased over time (Figure 39), with significant peaks for GPW12 (How to demonstrate RDP achievements and impacts: lessons from the evaluations reported in the AIR 2019) and Good Practice Workshop (GPW) 18 (New tools for monitoring and evaluation: insights from the Evaluation Knowledge Bank). EHD staff reflected that variation in attendance was impacted by the capacity of different hosts to accommodate participants, both in person and online.

GPWs 12 and 18 with most participants were on the theme of learning and development. Average attendance for workshops on this theme, and on data management, were highest, indicating the popularity of these topics amongst participants.

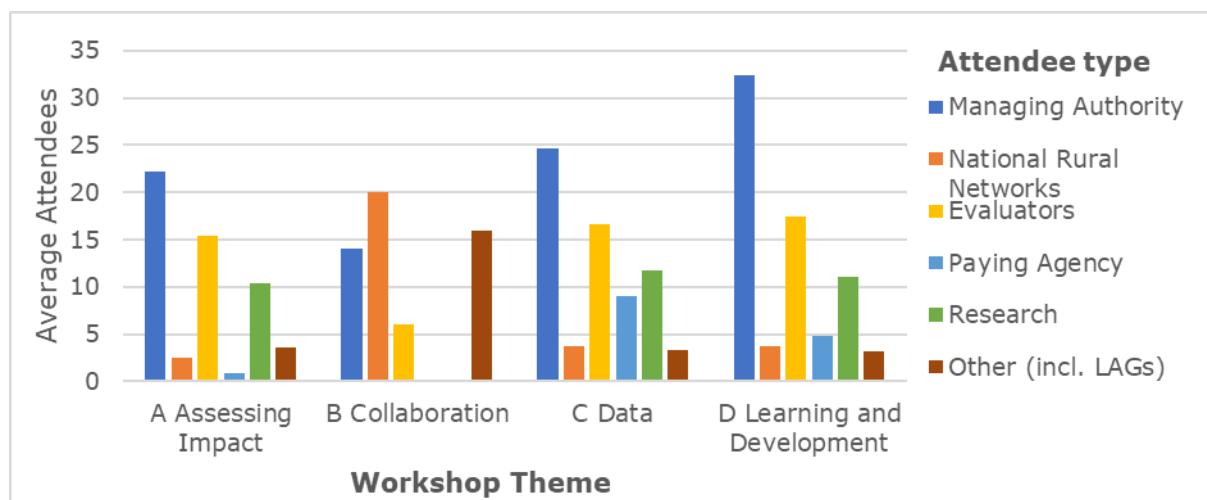
Considering GPWs by theme (Figure 40), attendance varied by attendees' roles. The collaboration GPW was on the topic of NRN support to evaluation of RDPs, likely explaining its high attendance by NRN staff and zero by researchers or paying agencies. Paying agencies rarely attended GPWs on assessing impact, but much more on data management. Managing Authorities had the highest overall attendance, particularly for workshops on learning and development.

Figure 39: Attendance at Good Practice Workshops (excluding Helpdesk/CP/EC)



Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Figure 40: Attendance at Good Practice Workshops 1-19 by Theme and Attendee Role

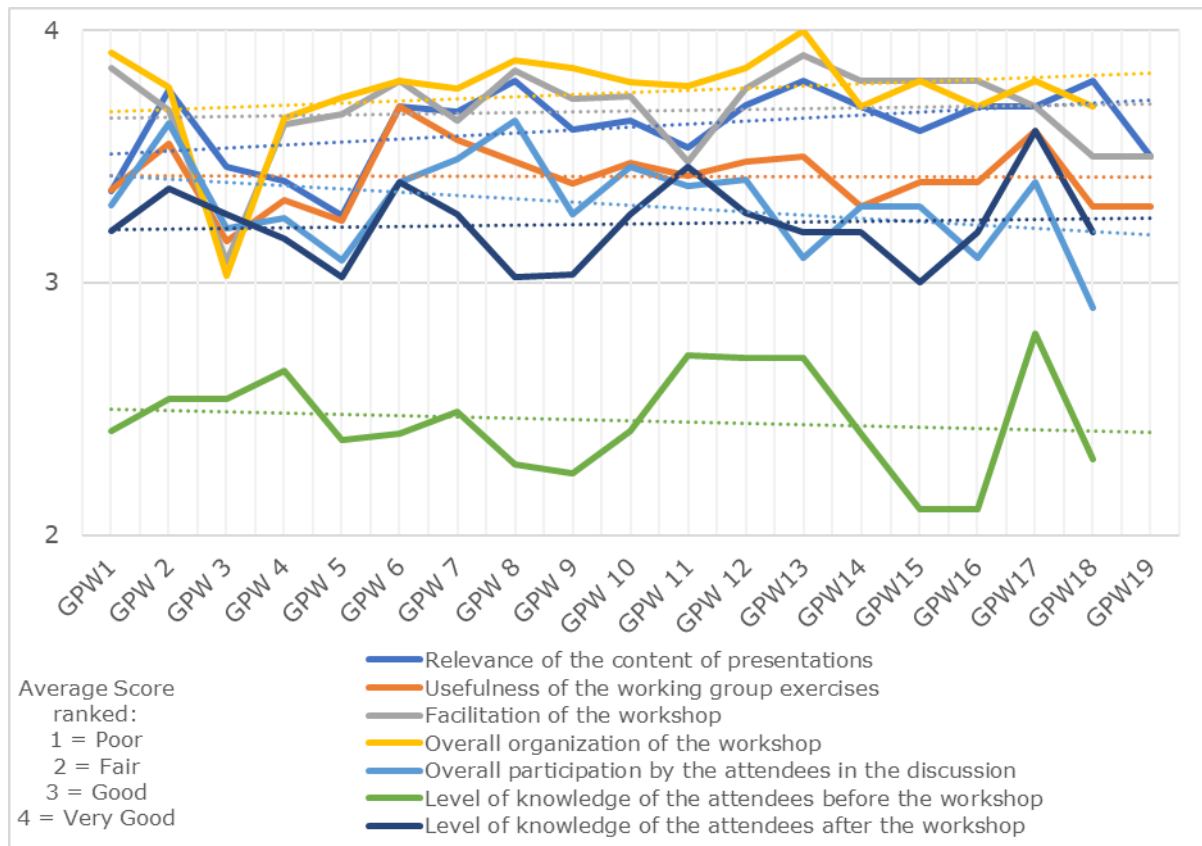


Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Feedback data received on GPWs was not differentiated by attendee role or Member States, to ensure respondent anonymity. As a result, disaggregated assessment of feedback by, e.g., types of Member States or scale of RDPs, was not possible. **Overall, feedback on GPWs was positive** with few variations; the perceived relevance of workshops improved over time (Figure 41).

Despite being best attended, GPW18 (New tools for monitoring and evaluation: insights from the Evaluation Knowledge Bank), in October 2021, recorded the least feedback. There was also a noticeable dip in the average scores of feedback (Figure 41). Reflecting on this, EHD staff suggested it might be 'due to the highly innovative nature of this workshop, focusing on new solutions to monitoring and evaluation, which may have prompted some participants to consider it less immediately useful to them', stressing that whilst the topics of [some] events may be less popular, they remain "still important from a strategic point of view" (EHD response, 2022). GPW3 (Methods for assessing impacts of Rural Development Programmes 2007-13: Practices and solutions for the *ex post* evaluation) also had lower average scores (Figure 41), but was still rated good or very good.

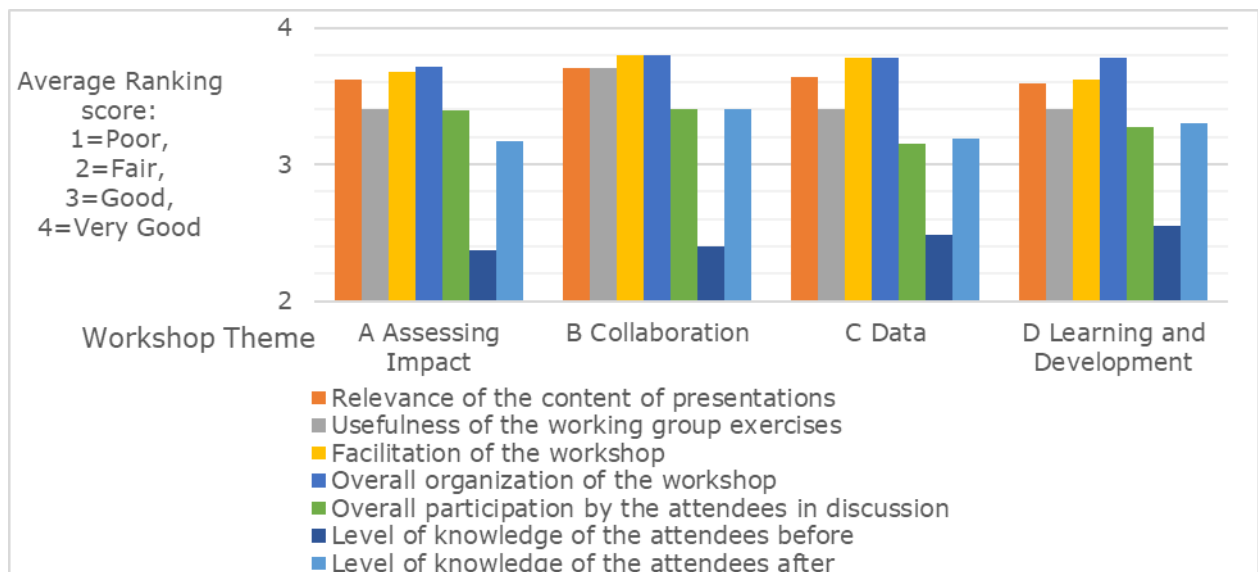
Figure 41: Feedback on GPWs by participants



Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

By activity, and workshop theme (Figure 42), the perceived usefulness of group exercises was rated lower than relevance of presentations and facilitation and organisation. Participation in discussion was also rated lower for all themes. Scores for organisation and facilitation were similar, with slightly lower scores for 'learning and development' and 'assessing impact'.

Figure 42: Feedback by workshop theme and activity/impact



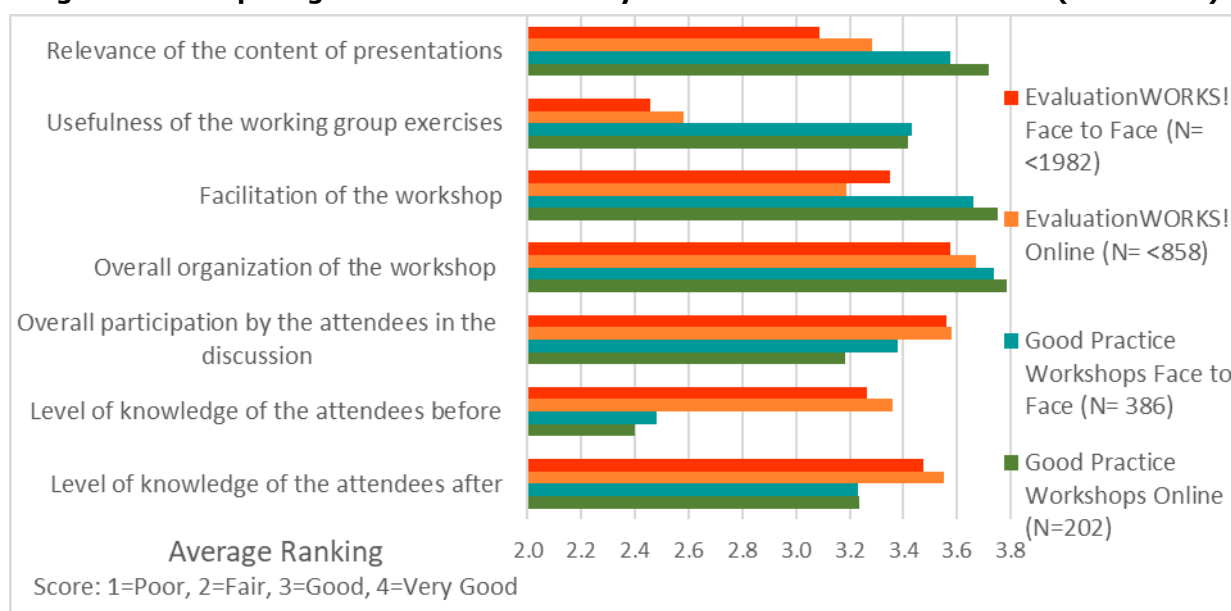
Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Online versus face-to-face events

Comparing online and face-to-face EvaluationWORKS! events, it is important to note that the assessment of online events is based on feedback data from just two years (2020-2021), so the sample is not large and is potentially biased by timing factors. When **comparing feedback from online and face-to-face GPWs, neither scores consistently better**. For face-to-face workshops, participation in discussion and group exercises were scored stronger, whilst online, participants scored events slightly higher for relevance, facilitation and workshop organisation. Levels of self-reported knowledge after the event scored equally for online and face-to-face events, with a bigger average knowledge improvement reported for topics covered in the (later) online workshops.

Overall, feedback from participation in online events was slightly more positive than for face-to-face events, except for participation in discussions. Online events occurred in the final years so feedback may also reflect EHD improvement through learning over the period. In addition, feedback is only from those who chose to attend, and a smaller proportion of potential participants attended the online events than the face-to-face ones.

Figure 43: Comparing feedback on events by whether online or face to face (N= <3428)



Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Overall, the GPWs are rated good or very good on most points by participants, suggesting that they served their purpose of promoting good practice.

Thematic Working Groups (AWP 1.5.1): There were nine thematic working groups (TWGs), each a small group of named experts from the EHD permanent staff and external experts, with Member States representatives. The EHD was responsible for establishing at least one new TWG annually, and ongoing facilitation of all TWGs. TWGs supported development of methodological guidance and addressed specific evaluation challenges.

1. Assessment of RDP results: how to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017.
2. Evaluation of National Rural Networks 2014-2020.
3. Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD.
4. Evaluation of Innovation in RDPs 2014-2020.
5. Reporting on RDP Achievements and Impacts in 2019.
6. Data for the assessment of RDP achievements and impacts.
7. Preparing for the *ex-ante* evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plan.
8. *Ex-post* evaluation of RDPs 2014-2020: Learning from practice.
9. Research Projects to Support Better Data for Evaluating the CAP.

EHD user feedback was not provided for TWGs so was gathered from the online survey of evaluators, and from case study interviews – see hereafter.

Website (AWP 1.6.2): The ENRD/EHD tri-lingual website was launched pre-2016, and re-developed regularly with additions including a filterable e-library (2016-2017) and searchable query database (2017-2018); interactive tools on data for the assessment of RDP achievements and impacts, and the Evaluation Knowledge Bank on data infrastructure and use. User levels and feedback on these, along with website traffic, are not reported. Within free-text comments in the *Evaluator Survey* some respondents said searching for information on the EHD website was not easy or intuitive.

Social Media (AWP 1.6.2): Under the Annual Working Programmes, it was envisaged that new interactive tools and other EHD developments would be publicised through social media. Social media was referred to once in EHD Main Achievements 2019-2020: Member States evaluations uploaded to the website were disseminated through 'appropriate e-alerts, updates on social-media channels and targeted mailings'. There is no meta-data on social media engagement. EHD staff commented that only Twitter was used, and this was to engage with NRNs, provide news alerts, publicise content and provide event coverage.

Newsletter (AWP 1.6.1 / 1.6.3): 20 EHD newsletters were published online and in print between 2016 and 2021. A newsletter satisfaction survey was completed at events during 2017-2019. 71% of respondents were signed up to the newsletter but the frequency with which respondents read the newsletter varied. The vast majority read it online.

The perceived usefulness of different sections of the newsletter showed minor variation, with a majority of respondents considering all subjects except 'Back to Basics' useful in every or most issues. The Back to Basics section was least favoured, however, this may remain important for the accessibility of the newsletter. Feedback on what respondents would like to see in the newsletter and how it could be improved was gathered. Responses were detailed and extensive. Key points included:

- Examples of good/ innovative practices;
- MS experiences of the evaluation process;
- Not enough discussion of problems / challenges;
- Too technical/ focussed on methodological approaches – inaccessible;
- Not enough discussion of climate / environment;
- Too long and infrequent.

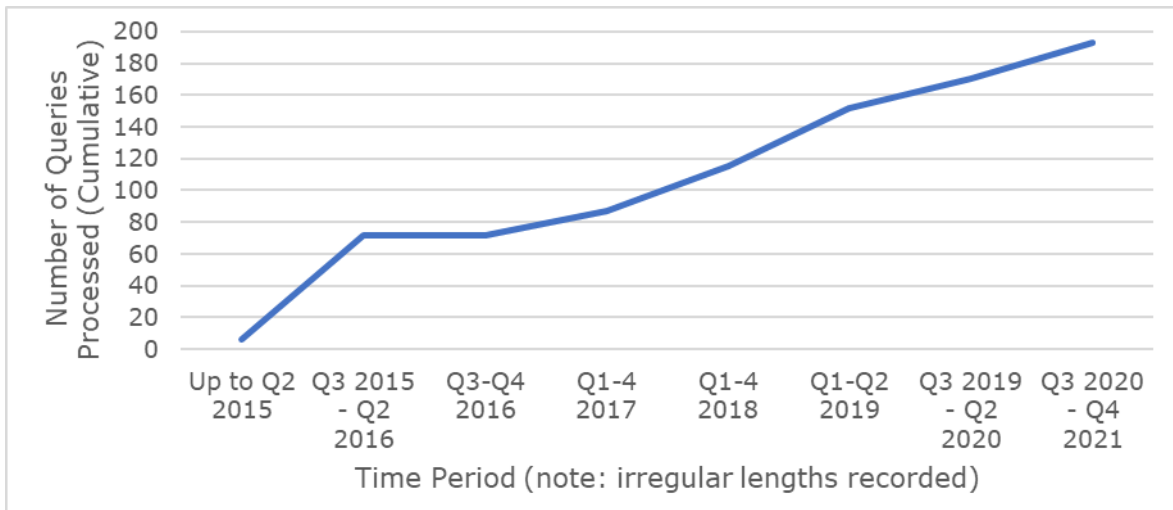
EHD staff reflected that the findings from this survey were discussed internally and with DG AGRI and future newsletters adapted in line with the findings. This included using more interviews, good practice examples, news from Member States, and producing content across a mixed spectrum of technicality, as designed for a range of audiences (EHD response, 2022).

The ENRD self-evaluation report 2020 highlights that during the reporting period, 12 newsletters were sent to up to 3 851 recipients, although no meta-data was collected on how many read it. **Self-reported feedback collected by the EHD suggests that between 1/3 and 2/3 of recipients read the newsletter.** ENRD website downloads of newsletters, guidance documents, factsheets and working documents totals 18 605. It is not known how this divide by different documents, or by how many people.

Answering Queries: 193 queries were processed between 2014 and 2021 (Figure 44). Queries received by EHD were clarified with those posing the question, and answers provided by a team of permanent experts in collaboration with DG AGRI's Unit C4. AWP's for the EHD envisaged this should be within 2 weeks. **Dedicated feedback was not collected on the usefulness or timeliness of responses:** EHD staff commented that the process of answering queries was iterative, with EHD staff inviting question posers to "come back to them in case of further questions". They stated that they aimed for a 2 week turn-around, but in cases where the questions were complex it took longer. Selected queries were covered in the 'evaluation queries' working document, as a reference document for the EHD to refer users to. This was published on the [website](#) in 2019, and has since been updated around

every 8 months. The process by which queries are assessed as appropriate for this document was by expert EHD and DG AGRI discussion.

Figure 44: EHD Queries Processed 2014-2021 (Cumulative)



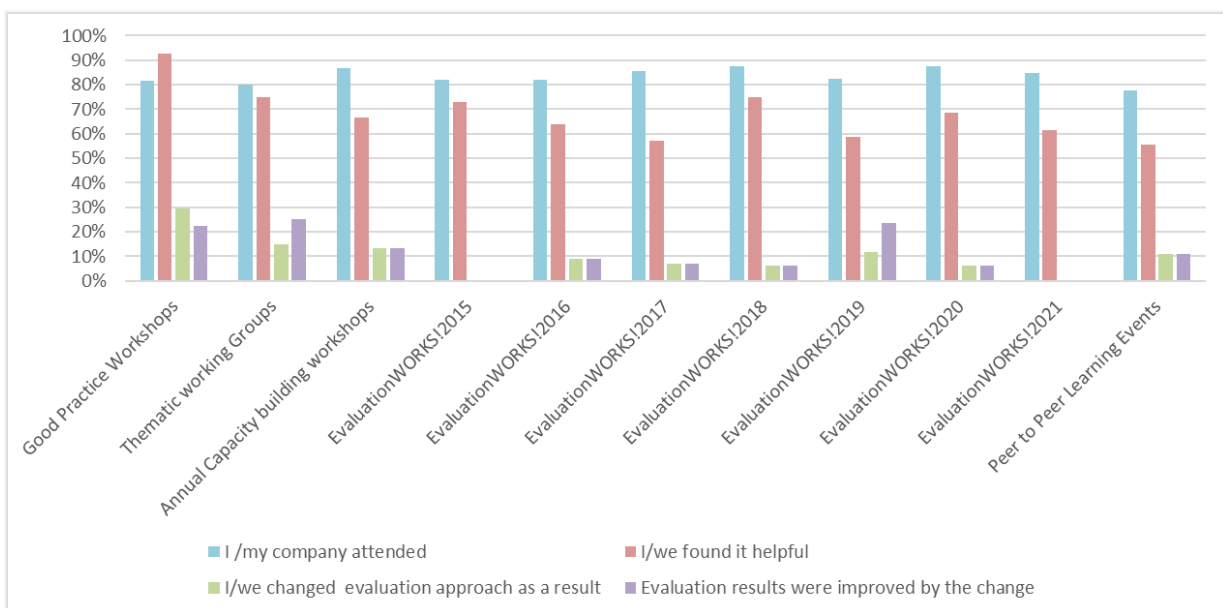
Source: Study team based on EHD external evaluation data (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Feedback from the evaluator survey indicates high levels of use and value of EHD outputs

Only 23% respondents had no contact with EHD, and 91% used their publications or materials. Of the 77% that had contact with the EHD, 85% were contacted by the EHD, while 15% reached out to the EHD. **81% were happy with the EHD support.**

Feedback from the evaluator survey compared GPWs, EvaluationWORKS! events 2015-2019, TWGs and other events. Whilst **EvaluationWORKS! events were widely attended, GPWs were considered significantly more helpful, and TWGs had the biggest perceived impact** improving evaluation results. Of EvaluationWORKS! events, the 2019 event was notable: "From the AIR in 2019 to the *ex-ante* evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plan: What are the key lessons from the AIR in 2019 for the set-up of the monitoring and evaluation system post 2020? What lessons shall be taken into account during the *ex-ante* evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plans 2021-27?". Attendees considered this event prompted more changes in evaluation approach, and the changes had a significantly greater positive impact on the quality of evaluation, than any other event considered.

Figure 45: Evaluators Survey - Did you participate in any of the following EHD events in person or online?



Source: Evaluators Survey, Q13, n=30 (ADE, CCRI 2022)

Evaluator respondents (Figure 45) considered guidelines to have been the most significantly useful output from the EHD for their work, with 94% of respondents finding them useful to some extent. Nevertheless, common themes in the open comments suggest they are insufficiently relevant to some small Member States or regions, because they assume a level of resources for evaluation (funding, data and/or technical skills) to which these respondents did not have access. The additional criticism of too narrow a focus on measuring impact was discussed already under JC1.

Events, workshops and Good Practice Publications were all considered generally useful, with some room for improvement. The most recently launched Evaluation Knowledge Bank was the output least highly rated by respondents, nearly half disagreed that it was useful and 37% did not rate the Evaluation Queries working document as useful.

On usefulness of EHD publications, feedback from the ENRD self-evaluation report 2020 suggests 2/3 respondents said publications supported their evaluation of RDPs. However, those who were members of the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluation (GREXE) judged them more highly than evaluators, in building evaluation capacity (67% and 58% respectively), so over **40% of evaluators did not judge the publications useful in building capacity. Self-evaluation report 2020 and 2017 findings suggest that respondents generally favoured workshops, capacity building events, and good practice examples, among the most useful activities of the EHD.**

Self-assessment report 2020: "According to the respondents, evaluation-related needs to be addressed by the EU Rural Networks include more capacity building for evaluators and stakeholders, more workshops, as well as continued dissemination of Good Practices and examples of evaluation methods. Furthermore, more guidance on qualitative evaluations, added value of networks and stronger focus on economic and social impacts, as well as more focussed guidelines on indicators were also suggested. The respondents also proposed the development of guidelines for dissemination to different target groups". (EU Rural Networks, 2020).

Self-assessment report 2018: "Suggestions for improvement included more exchange between evaluators and more evaluation support to LAGs and NRNs (both in terms of NRN evaluation and helping NRNs to improve dissemination of evaluation findings). A couple of the comments referred to simplification of ENRD evaluation-related communication outputs in order to make them more inclusive to wider audiences. Some respondents stated that they are not well informed about rural development evaluation". (EU Rural Networks, 2018).

The MA and NSU online surveys asked 'How much do you agree with the following statements? ENRD activities, publications and digital contents...' which provides some assessment of this criterion, although it is not specific to evaluation (Figure 27, p.79).

From Case Studies, the following evidence was gathered on evaluation usefulness.

Austria

The NRN does not access the EHD content, as this lies outside of the scope of NRN activities. This is also supported by the NSU survey (Q15). This content is accessed by the MA. The MA takes active note of the EHD outputs. The NRN itself does not have any role in the dissemination of M&E approaches and other information, as per the desk review of the annual NRN reports and an interview with the NSU.

- However, **internal evaluation has an important role in the NRN**. These internal evaluation mechanisms provide important feedback from stakeholders which serves as input for the annual work plans and the implementation of individual activities. The internal evaluations are managed by the consortium member ÖIR GmbH, a regional consultancy with expertise in monitoring and evaluation.
- **The added value of the EHD materials** in the context of the needs and activities tied to **RDP implementation is not high**. The **MA assesses the EHD materials as generally useful, also the proposed methodologies**. However, **guidelines are usually too extensive, long, and theoretical to be useful**. The MA commends the

good ideas contained in the guidelines but ideally, these materials should be shorter and more practical. However, the MA finds the country helpdesk useful for concrete questions (ibid).

Wallonia

Evaluation is not a priority for the RwDR and the NSU is not directly involved in EHD activities. RwDR contributes to evaluation in two ways: 1) support to Leader LAG' self-evaluation, as well as key work to define a set of common indicators for monitoring activities, in this framework; and 2) promotion and dissemination of evaluation results, in close connection with the MA and the evaluators: the NSU is represented on the Evaluation Monitoring Committee. EHD activities are monitored by the MA representative on the GREXE and if necessary, it relays information to those concerned. In 2014-2020, GREXE met every 3 or 4 months and was an important forum for discussion on RDP evaluation.

In the opinion of the MA, the **challenges in evaluating RDPs are numerous**, the framework of 30 Common Evaluation Questions remains complex and demanding. Evaluative questions, based on broad objectives, focus exclusively on RDP impacts and pose practical and methodological challenges, particularly in identifying appropriate and realistic analytical approaches and tools adapted to the specific contexts of each Member State. The MA has participated in some EHD events but has not been involved in the TWGs. Compared to the 2007-2013 period, **the EHD is more responsive to the needs** and constraints encountered at Member State level. The main problems of the MA concern the application of the EU framework to the specific context of Wallonia's RDP. In this EU framework, the added value of evaluation for the Walloon network remains limited.

- **EvaluationWORKS!** capacity building sessions **are a real step forward and should be continued**, according to the MA. Annual sessions are organised jointly with the MA of the Luxembourg RDP. They facilitate open discussion between evaluation stakeholders on specific challenges, what works and what needs to be improved, and raise awareness and stimulate engagement among different government departments about key evaluation issues.
- **RDP evaluation questions are oriented exclusively to impacts**, which is **inappropriate for mid-term**. There is a risk of ignoring real implementation issues for the MA and losing the interest of stakeholders in the evaluation.
- **EHD guidelines are useful when they are operational**. They help synthesise, collate and promote elements that are complex and spread among many documents. They have been useful in structuring evaluations: especially useful for the MA are the templates and guidelines for in-depth monitoring reports. **Guidelines on evaluation of complex approaches such as Leader and innovation have also been a source of inspiration**. Some working documents and guidelines are difficult to use because they are too long (200 pages), not operational enough or too specific to apply in the context of a regional RDP. EHD support on the environmental side has been limited.
- **EHD's activities have enabled progress** in approaches and counterfactual methods at the microeconomic level (farms), despite recurring difficulties (e.g. FADN data on the R2 indicator). However, these methods cannot be generalised to all interventions, especially for a regional RDP. The limitations of these methods must be acknowledged. The requirement to extrapolate results to the programme (macro) level is risky and poses significant problems for the robustness of results, but they are systematically requested in the results indicator sheets. **The recommended approaches are difficult to apply** without the involvement of experienced researchers and significant budget resources. The resources allocated are insufficient for the number of evaluation questions and recommended methodologies.

In overview therefore, the MA has more criticisms of the EU evaluation framework than of the EHD's activities, but these criticisms mean that EHD outputs are not best tailored to what would be most valuable for their specific RDP and their stakeholders, to help improve implementation and performance.

Estonia

Monitoring and evaluation related activities have not been very important within the NRN action plan and therefore NSU has not been actively using EHD, and has only participated in some EHD events. Activities provided by EHD have been important and useful but not so much for the NSU staff as for those tasked with monitoring and evaluation. Stakeholders mentioned during the interviews that **NRN could be a bit more active in introducing evaluation results** as this helps to promote the understanding of the benefits and impact of RDP measures among wider range of stakeholders: in recent years NSU has started some of these activities (e.g. for advisors).

By contrast, **MA judged EHD activities as very useful**. They have used the working documents and guidelines, participated in EvaluationWORKS! and other events, and TWGs.

France

The French NRN has given a strong role to evaluation⁶², through its contribution to the monitoring and evaluation of RDPs as well as its own activities. Initially, the governance structure included an advisory committee dedicated to monitoring and evaluation, but this was soon replaced by a more flexible thematic group (GTSE). This group has been very active throughout the period and guided the evaluation activities of the NRN. EHD did not work directly within the GTSE, but **the EvaluationWorks! annual event was designed to be complementary with the GTSE's work**, and takes place the day after a GTSE meeting (source: Geographical Expert interview).

The NRN worked in partnership with and provided complementary funding to the Observatoire du Développement Rural, an essential actor collecting data and indicators to monitor rural development outcomes at national level in France⁶³. **It contributed to mandatory RDP evaluations and initiated additional studies on rural development topics**, such as a study of the effects of COVID-19 on rural-urban migration. It also informed monitoring and evaluation through the AIRs and used external evaluators to conduct the 2017 and 2019 AIRs.

The Geographic Expert for France noted a need to differentiate what was within the scope of EHD activities (dissemination of good practices) versus what the MAs ask for (mainly training, individualised support and advice). Despite this, **EHD activities were designed to support both NRN and MAs in their evaluation activities and meet their needs**.

- Regions became the MAs of RDPs at the beginning of the 2014-2020 programming period. This new role brought a new obligation to monitor and evaluate programmes. **EHD guidance for evaluation, and its capacity building activities were therefore key to ensure proper evaluation of RDPs by the new regional MAs.**
- **The framework of the contract with DG AGRI was too strict to enable EHD to develop new initiatives based on the knowledge and expertise present in the network.** The number of hours set in the contract also limited their ability to assist MAs and the NRN in their activities.

However, an interview with the Executive Committee revealed that French stakeholders find the EC Evaluation framework very challenging to complete, and this has led to built-up frustration about evaluation requirements. EHD activities are key for compliance with EC guidance, but the evaluations remain largely unused by MAs and are mostly seen as a mandatory exercise rather than helpful for improving RDP implementation (source: Executive Committee interview). Another evaluator noted that evaluations have become seen too much as a judgement that will lead to sanctions rather than a tool for positive learning, and suggested the EHD emphasis upon measuring impact is related to this focus.

⁶² In France, the **Regions became Managing Authorities for RDPs following the 2013 territorial reform**. This is a major change for French rural development policy, which is now organised around elected regional authorities and not just the central State. These new bodies were not experienced at all in the EAFRD nor in evaluation of the RDPs.

⁶³ A sort of data bank and support provided by the French research agency INRAE on monitoring and evaluation indicators (output, result) for each French region, providing a national picture.

Italy

Evaluation is a relevant activity of the NRN. A Monitoring and Evaluation TWG is established in the NRN Programme and specific activities included in NRN action plans. Personnel from relevant research institutes CREA and ISMEA ("Istituto di Servizi per il Mercato Agricolo Alimentare") are involved in the M&E TWG. Its activities divide into two blocks:

- Support to regional MAs, both in monitoring RDPs and evaluation needs. This includes analysis of topics to enhance monitoring and evaluation practices nationally.
- Participation in ENRD and EHD activities, GREXE meetings and the national working group in charge of the monitoring of ESI funds.

Interviewees (FG with evaluators) point out that the M&E TWG enabled to improve the capacities of regional MAs in evaluation: often the focus of MAs is on monitoring rather than on evaluation. The TWG helped disseminate good evaluation practices among the MAs and develop a common understanding about evaluation, how to prepare calls and select evaluators. TWG activity varied a lot across the programme period- busy periods organising meetings and other exchange events alternate with periods with no exchange or materials. Evaluators would appreciate a much more consistent involvement.

EHD activities are valued overall positively. The EHD organises **regular meetings with NRNs** and the insights gained are useful to implement evaluation exercises at national level. Participants in the EHD have not changed much over the years, this helped build the relationship between participants and improve exchange among NRN representatives and EHD personnel. Representatives from the NSUs (Focus group on ENRD activities) pointed out that **the needs' assessment performed by the EHD to select the topics to be addressed in the AWP and to organise the EvaluationWorks! events is less efficient than it was in the previous period.** The feeling is that the **EHD responds much more to input from DG AGRI rather than to needs expressed by NRNs.** The M&E TWG works to help prepare capacity building events and involve all MAs. It would be more useful if the topics discussed were decided by national actors.

MAs are directly involved by the EHD in their activities, mainly in EvaluationWorks! events. **A concern was expressed about the visibility of the EHD website.** The fact that it is hosted in the ENRD website makes it, according to some interviewees (FG on ENRD activities), less visible than it used to be. Participation in GREXE is useful to coordinate work at national level. In 2007-2013 and early in 2014-2020 the EHD would assist DG AGRI in preparing and running GREXE meetings and elaborating follow-up documents; it was heavily involved in shaping the new EU regulations for monitoring and evaluation, 2014-2020. This role has become less important now, EHD was not involved in the preparation of the monitoring and evaluation framework of the new CAP. A certain lack of coordination has been detected in organisation of meetings and transfer of inputs from them to the national level. While this difficulty is related to poor coordination between the NSU and the Italian Ministerial structure, more attention in managing the mailing lists from DG AGRI and from the EHD is suggested, in order to ensure that the right national representatives receive the correct information.

EHD outputs are considered useful at national level, both for the work of the Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) TWG and for the independent evaluators of RDPs. Guidelines for evaluation and those documents that tackle the evaluation of specific themes or aspects of the RDPs (e.g., innovation, LEADER/CLLD) are extensively used at national level by the independent evaluators of the regional RDPs and they are judged to have contributed to build the capacities of all actors involved in evaluation (source: respondents in the FGs of the NSU on ENRD activities, and FG with evaluators of the NRN programme).

The **Evaluation Knowledge Bank** is considered **interesting for researchers but not of particular use for evaluators**, even though some workshops were organised with evaluators to explain the content of the database and to understand if the information collected could be useful or could be improved. **The selection of topics to be discussed in the TWGs is not best designed to meet national needs, nor is the needs' assessment related to the preparation of the AWP** – the EHD gives less attention to the requirements expressed by Member States representatives. As a result, themes discussed in the group are not those most relevant for Member States.

Involvement of evaluators in EHD activities boosted exchanges between them at national level and with evaluators in other countries, fostering improvement of their capacities to perform evaluation and also to innovate in the methods used.

Slovakia

The NSU attends the EvaluationWorks! events but doesn't have an active part in evaluation and it is not a priority area for them. They do not take part in EHD activities at the EU level.

MA interviewees valued highly EvaluationWorks! workshops and find published EHD material, especially guidance documents, very useful. They have been in regular communication with the geographical expert. MA doesn't have a unit specifically focusing on evaluation and there is lack of capacity to focus on this task: all evaluations are conducted by external evaluators. MA representatives have not been involved in TWGs at EU level, but take part in GREXE meetings.

Independent evaluators found EHD materials, notably guidance documents extremely useful. They note *there is a limited pool of people involved in this kind of evaluations and Slovakia [MA] doesn't have the capacity or resources to develop its own methodological guidance* (CS interview). **Evaluators also noted capacity building workshops as very useful**, however they **would like the topics more aligned to actual Member States needs.** *"The topic is planned ahead and reflects the needs of countries more advanced in RDP implementation and not the needs on the ground in SK: topics are sometimes not relevant at all in that certain point of time". (CS interviews, 2022). Member States are on varied paths of RDP implementation and those most advanced are the ones "steering the course of the priority topics".*

Slovenia

Interviews with **MA M&E unit** representatives judged EHD activities **highly valued**, especially the annual **EvaluationWorks!** events. Topics of the workshops are from their point of view relevant – usually they choose from 2- 3 proposed topics. The recently introduced **"peer to peer" learning workshop** organised by EHD has been **very highly valued by MA**, as well **evaluators**. MA is keen to engage in more. More focus on specific issues that the MA is dealing with and having the opportunity to discuss problems as well as solutions with experts and partners from another Member State has been extremely valuable. This workshop not only enables to share experience and know how on a very specific topic between two MAs and evaluators, but also an expert in the particular field who can provide more information and answer specific questions (CS interviews, May 2022).

Supporting capacity building at MA level by organising "exchanges" between different MAs on RDP implementation issues and best practices would be highly valued and should be incorporated into EHD activities (CS interviews, May 2022).

Interviews with independent evaluators supported the positive view of EHD activities, evaluators appreciate the opportunity to engage in the capacity building workshops. (CS interviews May 2022). In contrast, some other **NRN stakeholders**, found the capacity building workshops **"not responding to [our] needs"** and pointed out that the **"language and presentations are too complicated and difficult to follow and the content not applicable and relevant for our organisation"** (CS interviews, May 2022).

EHD guidance is regarded as highly useful, with some interviewees saying it was *"the most useful material provided by ENRD"* (CS interviews MA and evaluators, May 2022).

Summary points from all case studies

For NSUs, evaluation was not a priority focus in AT, SK, BE-Wal and EE NSU (in EE another unit is responsible for evaluation), and in SI monitoring is important but NSU is not involved in evaluations (another small unit within MA is responsible for evaluation). NSUs judge evaluation important in Italy and France.

Most important EHD outputs across all CS: EvaluationWorks! which built capacity especially among MAs, peer to peer learning workshops, and guidance documents.

'...for small countries [such as SI] with limited human and financial resources in respect of evaluation, having access to guidelines and support regarding evaluation is paramount' (CS interviews, SI, 2022).

4.7 SQ7: To what extent have the activities of the NRNs helped to build different stakeholder groups' capacities at the national level, in order to contribute to the implementation of the RDPs and how?

4.7.1 Approach

4.7.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

This SQ examines how the NRN supports stakeholders in understanding, promoting or shaping and responding to RDP goals, measures and initiatives: encouraging appropriate applications, supporting effective use of funding, demonstrating what is effective in rural development or not, and why. In the 2014-2020 period networks had a strengthened mandate to increase stakeholder involvement as a means of improving the design and implementation of RDPs.

This SQ primarily targets the Member States level and focuses on activities delivered through individual NRNs to build and enhance SH capacity and contribution to RDP implementation. LAGs form a first major group of stakeholders for whom capacity-building is specifically provided by NRNs; and most networks also had a key role in respect of capacity-building for innovation; but the role extends more broadly across the full range of rural stakeholders for whom RDPs can be relevant. Key here is to establish the causal connection between specific NRN activities and changes that improve SH engagement and responses, whilst considering the different types of activities and delivery methods used. It is linked to Article 54.2 b of R1305/2013 to "improve the quality of implementation" of RDPs and contributes to Causal Analysis SQ1.

4.7.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC7.1: NRN activities contributed to *building and enhancing capacities* of different stakeholder groups at national/regional level.

JC7.2: The activities carried out by the NRNs have *stimulated innovative approaches* to involve stakeholders in respect of RDP implementation.

4.7.1.3 Methodology

The answer to the SQ is based on triangulation of mainly qualitative data sources and approaches. Building Stakeholders' capacities at the national level is the core focus of this SQ, therefore in-depth interviews with NRN representatives and selected stakeholders - end users in Case Studies as well as ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk and Contact Point geographic experts within the Case studies - were paramount, along with Case studies, NRN Action Plans, reports/database screening and MA and NSU online survey analyses. To gather evidence regarding JC1 capacity development, activities in Case Studies were analysed by different stakeholder categories (as defined in the Glossary and SQ1), including EHD geographic expert activities organising and animating capacity-building meetings, looking for the impacts on RDP implementation.

Documents gathered included:

- CS NRN action plans, NRN self-evaluations and annual reports;
- ENRD CP common network statistics, summaries and self-evaluation summaries;
- SH feedback on specific capacity building activities, from EHD and CP and in CS;
- 2018 AIR in CS;
- ENRD CP best practice examples and guidance focused on capacity development;
- EHD geographic expert reports on animating capacity building meetings in selected CS (on evaluation);
- Other relevant data from CS, including any on SHs in CS NRN databases.

4.7.2 Summary answer

SQ7: To what extent have the activities of the NRNs helped to build different stakeholder groups' capacities at the national level, in order to contribute to the implementation of the RDPs and how?

The combined evidence from all sources suggests that NRN activities helped to build capacity in public administrations and LAGs in particular at the national level, to a good extent. The extent of this impact among a wider range of stakeholders was more limited, but still judged positive.

JC7.1: NRN activities contributed to *building and enhancing capacities of different stakeholder groups at national/regional level*

Mostly positive evidence from surveys and case study interviews indicates that involvement in NRN activities helped to build the capacities of different types of stakeholder. However, both MAs and NRN respondents stated that they perceived higher involvement of public authorities and LAGs in NRN activities, leading to higher perceived capacity-building among these groups, than among other types of stakeholder. Bespoke capacity-building among LAGs via the training is noted as an activity where NRNs generally performed well. This was seen by most interviewees as the principal role of the NRN in several case study countries (Austria, Estonia, Wallonia). In addition, thematic exchanges, field trips and thematic working groups were seen as important for capacity building and collaboration between stakeholders (Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy).

Evidence from case studies is generally very positive on this criterion but the perception of MAs is frequently even more positive than that of other stakeholders. Stakeholder survey findings (416 respondents across the seven case studies) show that certain types of stakeholders such as environmental NGOs and rural business organisations have a generally lower engagement with NRN activities, but these nonetheless assess NRN capacity building impacts as positive. By contrast, some groups that have regular interaction with NRNs (notably farmers, researchers, civil society NGOs) report a much lower level of enhanced RDP implementation knowledge and capacity through NRN activities.

JC7.2: The activities carried out by the NRNs have *stimulated innovative approaches to involve stakeholders in respect of RDP implementation*

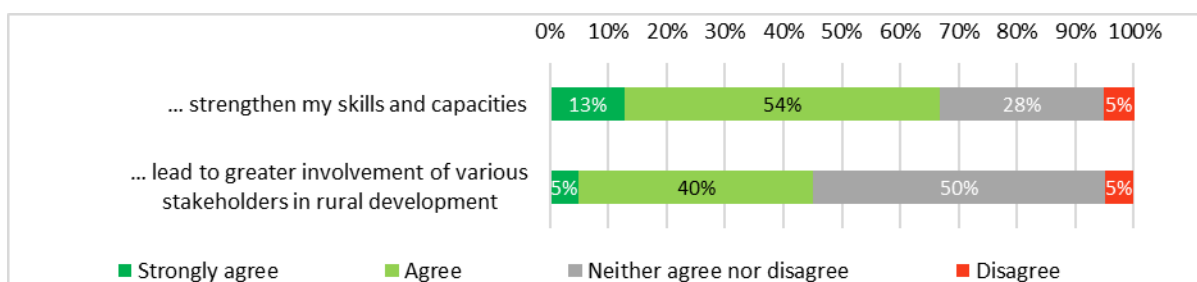
There is less relevant evidence from surveys on this point, but selected case study evidence is positive on the impact of NRN activities in stimulating innovative approaches to mobilise stakeholders in RDP delivery, with examples of innovative outputs, events and institutional approaches. These include dedicated organisations to support LAGs, new web-based information and support facilities, revised operational structures arising from NRN reviews and stakeholder feedback, and dedicated support to promote stronger co-operation between actors.

4.7.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

➤ [JC7.1: NRN activities contributed to building and enhancing capacities of different stakeholder groups at national/regional level](#)

From the MA / PA online survey: some responses give indication of stakeholder engagement and capacity building by ENRD and NRN activities. Respondents were asked: How much do you agree with the following statement? for relevant topics.

Figure 46: MA/PA Survey - "ENRD activities, publications and digital contents..."

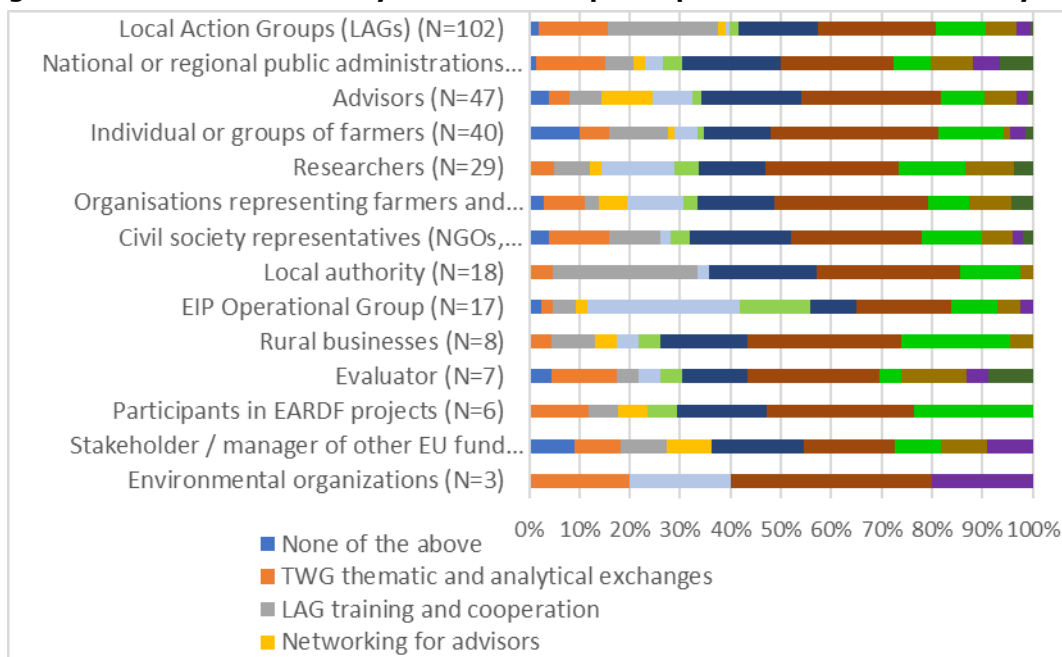


Source: MA / PA Survey, Q20, n= 40 (ADE, 2022)

So, 67% of respondents agree or strongly agree that ENRD strengthens their capacities, but only 45% agree or strongly agree that ENRD activities led to greater involvement of SHs in rural development.

The main source of information about engagement comes from the SH surveys which were made in each of the 7 case studies. Key results are presented here. A large number of SH organisations and individuals responded to our CS SH surveys, organised through the NRN, in each of the case study Member States/regions. Altogether they totalled 416 respondents across the seven cases, and covered most key types of rural SH.

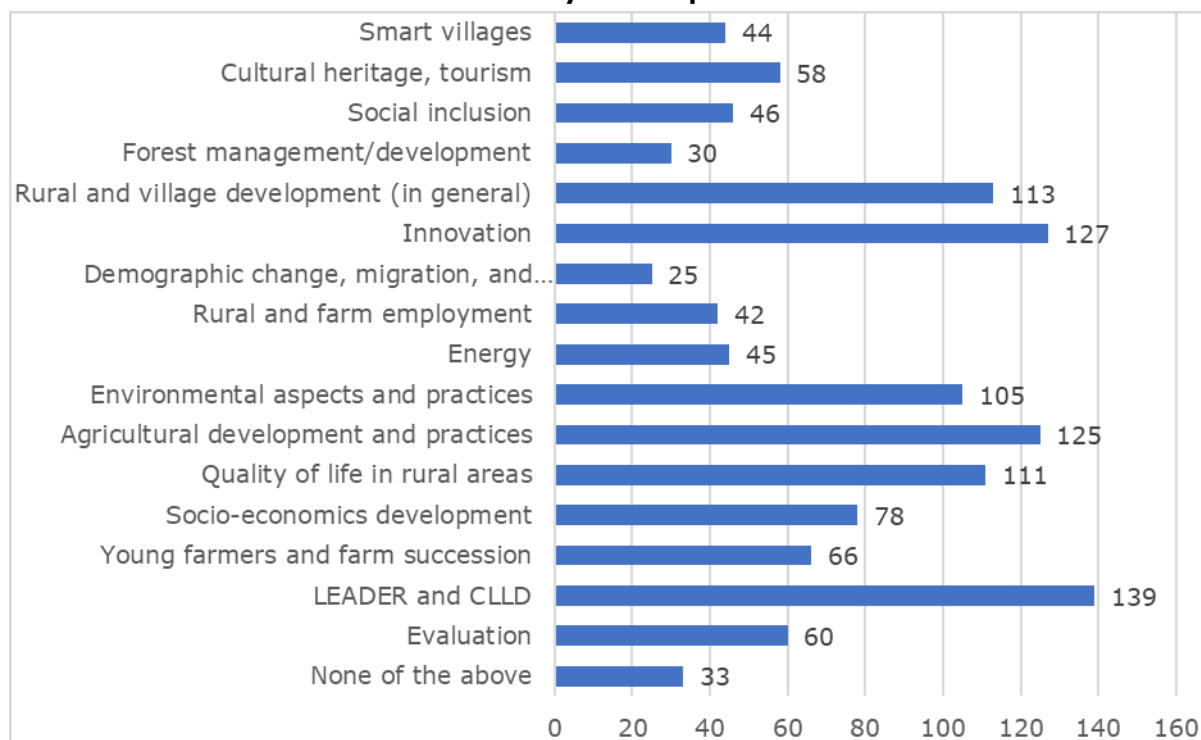
Figure 47: National SH Survey - Stakeholder participation in NRN activities by role



Source: National Stakeholders Surveys (x7 countries) disaggregated by role (ADE, et al., 2022)

This figure shows that in the seven CS countries/regions, a wide variety of types of SH were reported as engaging in many or most of the ENRD activities on offer. However, the actual number of SH organisations of each type varied considerably, with a much higher participation among public administrations and LAGs, in particular, and much lower and/or more selective participation among environmental NGOs, individual rural businesses and other ESI fund managers. Of the various activities, attending seminars, events or workshops was the most common experience of most SH groups considered.

When asked to report how helpful the NRN activities were for them in improving their knowledge of RDPs and rural development policy, responses were generally more positive than negative, for most activities; although for some, a significant minority of respondents said they didn't know whether the activities had contributed to improving their knowledge, which suggests perhaps a low level of engagement with those types of activities. Another possibility is that if engagement is primarily on the basis of specific topics for which varied activities are offered, SHs may not be able clearly to separate the specific value of different means of engaging with NRNs on these topics. Figure 18 shows the range of engagement and reported impact on knowledge by topics, for SH respondents to the surveys in the seven case study countries.

Figure 48: National SH Survey - If relevant, what were the main themes of the networking activities you took part in?

Source: National Stakeholders survey, Q5, n=416 (ADE et al., 2022)

The SH survey findings therefore indicate reasonable levels of engagement and improved knowledge, particularly for events and dissemination actions, but their evidence on SH capacity-building is limited. To understand how NRN interactions might have been related to capacity-building, it is necessary to draw upon interviews and other documentary evidence from the case studies. These may illustrate how far NRN activities contributed to increased development activity of:

- a) Policy and programme designers and implementers (especially LEADER LAGs);
- b) Interest group representative bodies and/or;
- c) Actors on the ground - beneficiaries of the EAFRD funding.

Austria

Awareness and skills building on RDP measures contributed to a higher degree of project participation among RDP projects, especially for environmental actors and groups. The NRN consortium member Umweltdachverband (UWD), an environmental umbrella organisation (36 members) notes a higher degree of participation among environmental member groups. This is accompanied by fewer requests to support project application, a role the UWD has traditionally taken on.

The NRN organises thematic exchanges among RD stakeholder organisations to foster knowledge transfer and stakeholder discussions. The review of annual NRN reports from 2015/16 to 2021 highlights these events aimed at improving the RD knowledge base and discussing contemporary needs and challenges of rural areas. Each year a thematic focus point is chosen and used as an overarching theme to be discussed in the network. Some dedicated workshops or seminars take place in each TWG and are deemed to raise awareness on this topic across the network. The annual theme is addressed retrospectively during the horizontal annual conferences at the end of each year.

According to the **MA survey, the AT NRN strongly contributed to strengthening skills and capacities of LAGs.** This finding was also reiterated in the interview with the MA and with the NRN representative leading the thematic field LEADER, regional development, and basic services.

The NRN provides support to LAGs in addressing specific thematic knowledge needs (e.g. digitalisation, innovation etc.); support to LAGs for questions on the implementation of LEADER; and support to LAGs in technical and administrative matters, e.g. seminars on legal forms etc. LAGs and LEADER actors are important members of the NRN network. Significant activities targeted capacity building and knowledge transfer in LAGs:

- Organisation of annual LEADER event;
- Seminars and workshops on thematically relevant issues (e.g., evaluation, legal organisational status, communication etc.);
- Ad-hoc seminars on selected issues for LEADER implementation;
- Direct support to LAGs on the conceptualisation and implementation of cooperation projects and organisations interested in TNC.

NRN activities were successful in enhancing knowledge in target interest groups and facilitated networking between them. Due to the diverse structure of the NRN consortium itself, this brings together diverse actors and improves common understandings, e.g. between farmers and environmental NGOs.

Informal exchanges in the context of LEADER activities were highlighted as important (SH1, SH2, SH3, 13.07.2022). These enable LEADER actors to exchange implementation experiences and strengthen their networks. It can be difficult to address the knowledge needs of both experienced LAG managers (who need specific information) and incoming or less experienced LAG managers (who need generally more introductory knowledge) (ibid). Events positively help to meet knowledge needs and are of high quality.

Networks have an inflexible approach to deciding which events are organised via annual work plans; the network is **unable to always rapidly address evolving knowledge needs**. Ad-hoc seminars implemented to support LEADER can be organised by individual LAG managers to support the LEADER community in addressing knowledge needs. Interviewed stakeholders, however, point to the low degree of remuneration the LAG managers obtain in exchange for organising the event. Among the interviewed stakeholders (ibid) feedback indicates **low autonomy of the NRN** in organisational matters – the NRN has to validate relatively minor steps with the MA. Requests for cooperation and partners are sent by the NRN via email to all LAGs. The perception of interviewed **stakeholders** (ibid) is of a **low degree of targeting** of cooperation requests: ideally, they should be sent only to LAGs with relevant thematic priorities.

NRN activities have contributed to the formation of social capital, especially in the context of LEADER implementation. They enhanced consensus-building among network members. They also contributed to **strengthening the capacities of the MA/PA** (MA survey). The interview with the MA highlighted that this support is largely addressing knowledge needs among BMLRT⁶⁴ staff, particularly in the fields of gender mainstreaming and digitalisation. The NRN implemented several activities on gender mainstreaming which were assessed as very beneficial by the MA. The annual thematic foci are also valuable, as they enable knowledge transfer along a certain topic.

Interest groups, the so-called multipliers, are at the core of the NRN's activities. The **focus of the NRN activities is on information transfer**. In this regard, particularly the **annual themes** have proven useful in **enhancing the knowledge or RD stakeholder groups**. The **annual themes** were:

- Innovation in 2015/16;
- Regional quality of life in 2017;
- Value added in 2018;
- Climate change in 2019;
- Digitalisation in rural areas in 2020;
- The European Green Deal in 2021.

⁶⁴ Bundesministerium für Landwirtschaft, Regionen und Tourismus [Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions, and Tourism] is the MA of the EAFRD 2014-2020 in Austria.

Annual thematic foci were accompanied with events concentrating on specific knowledge needs within the topic. According to the MA and the NSU, these activities were successful in enhancing knowledge in the target groups of NRN activities.

The case study SH survey found:

- NRN activities strengthened cooperation with other stakeholders and improved awareness of RDP opportunities in at least 50% of surveyed stakeholders.
- Generally, more respondents agree with some degree of positive impact of NRN activities than disagree.
- The NRN also had a degree of positive impact in terms of improving stakeholder innovation potential in 47% of respondents, and among 46% in terms of skills and capacities to implement RDPs.
- The NRN was relatively less impactful in enhancing involvement in the RDP (37% respondents at least agree) and addressing specific needs (41% at least agree).

The general perception is that the **most effective outputs are NRN events (3), dissemination of RD information (2.9), and the best practice database (2.4)**. More specific thematic fields (support to TNC, LAGs, innovation support) are not ranked as highly. **NRN core impact indicators are derived from event feedback**. Monitoring of event feedback 2016-2021 (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum, Land 2022a) revealed the following:

- The **most significant contribution** of the NRN was furthering support between NRN stakeholders and active innovation transfer- ranked highly across all reporting years, i.e., signalling a "very good impact contribution" of the NRN.
- A **"good impact contribution"** was judged across most years for: "contribution to a positive innovation climate", "knowledge on developments in rural areas", "innovation generation", "increases in competences in project implementation", and "multipliers: knowledge on needs and RD funding".
- **Medium to good contributions** were made in the indicator "multipliers: information dissemination on RDP implementation" (assessed in 2021) and "furthering cooperation".

"On-the-ground" actors are not the direct focus of NRN activities. However, in the case of on-the-ground actors involved in EIP-AGRI Operational Groups, their capacities have certainly increased according to the MA.

Wallonia

The **network played an important role in training and capacity building of LAGs (AIR2018 - Q21)**. It includes training actions for LAG development officers but also networking and support (InterLAGs, community of practice, specific working groups -see JC2). This specific **coaching** has been **reinforced** compared to the previous period. It is justified because LAGs are the drivers of change in the territory. **LAGs animation requires specific skills for which there is no specific training in Wallonia.**

Contractually, the network's training activities are only intended for LAGs (Source: NSU and MA interview). The development of skills concerns **20 LAGs in Wallonia**, including 5 new ones and several LAGs that have expanded (new municipalities have been added). They are aimed at LAG teams whose role is to implement the local strategy and projects in their territory. The **needs** in terms of training are therefore **significant**. They were jointly identified together with the LAGs. **Training modules were developed around three areas of expertise**, to which almost 350 participants were registered in the 20 training sessions. The number of participants per session was limited in order to reinforce interactivity. Training is completed by individual or team coaching according to needs and the launch of communities of practice. According to the LAGs, the network is reactive when a request for training is expressed in terms of capacity building (Source: LAG interview).

LAG teams have acquired skills that enable them to operate more effectively. The training was appreciated (average score c.3.5 out of 4; NSU 2019 activity report) and considered effective by participants (Source: LAG interview). 79% of respondents (LAGs) to

the 2019 survey in the AIR2018 consider that training provided by the RwDR enabled them to effectively implement the LEADER approach in their territory (AIR2018).

Networking activities such as InterLAGs, working groups, communities of practice and support for self-assessments also strengthen LAGs' skills. **More broadly, the network's activities** (including thematic exchanges, working groups, publications, and interaction with other stakeholders) **also contribute to capacity building for all stakeholders**, although this is more difficult to measure.

In sum, the Network's activities contributed to building skills: through targeted training and networking actions for LAGs, and through the network's activities aimed at all stakeholders, in particular thematic exchanges and innovation roads. Training and networking activities have enabled LAG teams to acquire and maintain the skills that enable them to operate more effectively in their territory. The demand for training and support remains high, even during the programming period. Furthermore, the work carried out by the TWGs, particularly through the "network booklets" (*carnets*), also contributes to capacity building for the various stakeholders concerned.

Estonia

According to the **MA survey** (Q11), **NRN** activities contributed **to strengthening skills and capacities of LAGs. This finding was also supported by interviews with NSU representatives as well as stakeholders related to LAGs.**

The **main focus of NRN activities in the period 2007-2013 was targeted to LAGs and the support has continued (but in reduced volume)** during this period. NSU supports LAG teams in questions related to technical and administrative matters but also in networking. They help LAGs to look for cooperation partners from other countries to stimulate networking and new projects. 77 events were organised for LAGs in 2014-2020. In order to better implement the LEADER measure the following formats were most common – **one- or two-day information days (2-3 times a year), regional training, webinars and development seminars in summer**. LAG teams have strengthened the skills that enable them to operate more effectively.

Based on MA survey (Q11) **NRN** activities have also helped to **strengthen the skills and capacities of the MA.**

Italy

As stated directly by the **NRN Evaluator** (2019 Evaluation Report), the sheer **number of the subjects engaged conditioned the modus operandi of the NRN**, which, in order to improve rural actors' ability to seize the opportunities offered by the RDPs, **made considerable investments in activities aimed at capitalising on experiences and good practice through support and consolidation of the networks, and networking among stakeholders**. The aim is to promote and disseminate a common basis of information and operational practices, while at the same time improving the transmission of network information among associated beneficiaries.

MAs and LAGs highlighted the effectiveness of the "geographic" and "thematic" meetings organised by the NRN between the MAs, as well as between the MAs and intermediate subjects, such as the LAGs. However, the **added value** of NRN's activities for improving stakeholders' skills and capacities in the field of rural development goes beyond activities aimed at implementing the RDPs. It also includes **the positive impact of network activities reinforcing stakeholder inter-relations and consolidating governance systems for rural development matters at national and regional level** (forests, social agriculture, territorial supply chains, use of pesticides in agriculture, etc.).

The Network's decision **to shine a spotlight on certain cutting-edge issues in laying the groundwork for the post-2020 CAP should be recognised**: including for example the economic and social integration of migrants, attention to multi-fund territorial development, and introduction of new local approach methods with community cooperatives.

France

NRN provides assistance and guidance to members through thematic activities, technical tutorials, bilateral advice and cross-cutting support for collaboration. It contributes to reinforce various skills of its members and to foster capacity building for rural development stakeholders in general. It contributes to **capacity building through technical support designed specifically for LAGs**, but the Teritéo 2019 evaluation finds that this **was not always deemed satisfactory by LAGs members**. High turnover within LAGs contributed to an increased need for technical support for newcomers (source: NSU interviews, Teritéo 2019 evaluation report).

The NRN was very active in promoting EIP-AGRI Operational Groups with the regional stakeholders in particular to RDP MAs and establishing links with H2020 projects with the research community at national level. Interviews conducted by the evaluation team concluded that **the NRN provided real capacity building regarding Operational Group and the EIP-AGRI supporting territorial engineering. The NRN fully filled its role as a facilitator for the implementation of these projects.**

NRN activities have contributed to **building and enhancing capacities** of interest group representative bodies within the scope of NRN interventions, **namely national, regional and local "organisations representing farmers, landowners, forest managers, rural businesses, actors along the food chain, environmentalists, researchers, rural communities, and disadvantaged groups"** (ENRD website). In general, the **thematic activities** organised by the NRN on a broad scope of themes related to rural development contributed **to reinforcing capacities of stakeholders** involved in the type of organisations cited above by enabling dynamic thematic exchanges between actors.

The NRN initiated training sessions for EAFRD procedures in 2014 and continued them throughout the programming period. **An online tutorial** was published in 2018 (source: 2018 AIR), **regularly cited as one of the main contributions of the NRN** in interviews and stakeholders survey.

The **capacities of national, regional and intermediate actors** in charge of implementing rural development policy were targeted for **improvement by thematic sessions of the NRN website. Manuals and technical and methodological notes** aimed at **improving MAs skills** in implementing the measures, as well as those of **LAGs, and territorial and supply chain partnerships**, in the drafting and implementation of intervention plans at the local level (methodological guidance on initial territorial diagnosis, analysis of local needs, self-assessment activities, etc.).

Slovakia

The SK **MA strongly agreed that NRN activities** (including publications and the website) **strengthen the skills and capacities of the managing authorities, paying agencies and LAGs**. They agreed they also strengthened the skills of advisory services, and other stakeholders implementing the RDP.

A slightly different picture is presented by SH survey respondents, who prioritised dissemination of best practice projects as the most impactful activity, with 62% agreeing that it strengthened their knowledge and capacities *a lot-fairly*. Training and field trips, seminars and events as well as networking for LAGs were valued highly as well, with more than half of the respondents rating impact of these a lot and fairly. Impact of networking activities and LEADER transnational/national cooperation was rated very low; however, the measures supporting these activities was launched very late and stakeholders had no opportunity to be involved in these activities, at the same time these activities focused on a quite specific group of stakeholders, and the sample in the survey was not representative.

SH survey revealed that respondents did not find NRN activities particularly useful. Usefulness of NRN activities and publications was not rated high overall.

Overall, the **survey results show a division of opinion between MA, NSU and stakeholders**, with **MA being incredibly positive about the role of the network in respect of enhancing skills and capacity building**, while **stakeholders** are much more

critical and do not see the network activities sufficiently contributing to their skills and capacity development. Several reasons may explain the contrast: stakeholders communicate mostly and are in contact with regional antennas, many however do not recognise RAs as part of the wider national network, as RAs are private companies or non-profits, and for most of these companies the NRN is only a part of their "work portfolio". Many stakeholders are unaware of the activities of the central unit. There is a lack of common institutional awareness. In addition, there was also a delay to RDP implementation, with some measures significantly delayed and people on the ground are frustrated and extremely critical of the process: this might have impacted on the ratings.

NRN, especially RAs, organised a considerable number of events (with over 8 600 participants by end 2021) and provided a large number of consultations to potential RDP beneficiaries. Combined with four TWGs, a number of publications, newsletter and PR activities contributed to enhancing the capacities of actors on the ground, highlighted in the AIR 2018 and 2020. Certain groups were difficult to reach, engage with - notably foresters, youth and to an extent farmers. Farmers and foresters seek information and assistance mostly from their own membership organisations/ chambers and channels (CS interviews 2022). GDPR requirements have not helped either, as organisations were reluctant to pass on personal contact details and information (CS interview 2022).

According to interviews with **MA and NSU** representatives, as well as MA survey (2022) NRN activities **significantly improved stakeholder capacities**, mostly due to numerous seminars, educational and information events, consultations (offered mostly at regional level by RAs, however from the beginning of 2022 ARVI - Agency for Rural Development, which manages the NRN - also started to offer tailored consultation to project applicants, not linked to NRN activities). **Thematic exchanges, field trips and thematic working groups were important "tools" of capacity building and collaboration.** According to AIR 2018 *"NRN has a positive impact on increasing the number of entities involved in the implementation of the RDP through a large number of informative seminars and workshops on announced calls."... "The number of information activities conducted contributed to increase the number of people interested in RDP funding and contributed to the improvement of the quality of the implementation of supported projects by organising practical seminars / workshops focused on activities related to project implementation (e.g. information seminars focused on public procurement, etc.)"*.

Slovenia

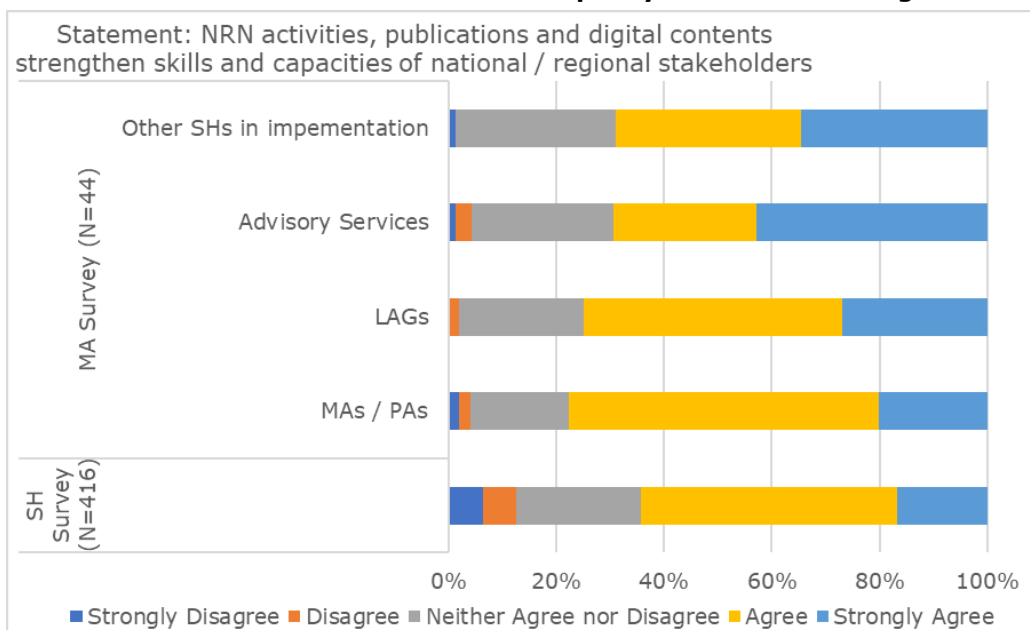
NRN activities enhanced stakeholder involvement in the RDP implementation in comparison to 2007-2013.

Thematic exchanges and trainings were highlighted as direct capacity building activities by many stakeholders (CS interviews), rated highly by MA as well as in the stakeholder survey. Stakeholder perceptions on which NRN activities improved their knowledge on rural development policy were mixed. Reflecting a preference for more of these events, seminars, training and field trips were ranked most favourably, with around 70% of participants stating that they had improved their knowledge 'fairly' or 'a lot'. Support on LEADER transnational / interterritorial cooperation, participation in the governance structures of NRN, and networking for advisors and innovation, rated weakest.

Based on online surveys (of NSU, MA and Stakeholders), CS interviews as well as internal NRN survey and the RDP 2014-2020 evaluation, **NRN activities have contributed to improvement of skills and capacity development, with LAGs and advisory services probably benefiting most. Seminars, open calls and INFO points have proved effective "tools" in providing information, as well as supporting stakeholder capacity building.** The RDP 2014-2020 evaluation considered the NRN and technical assistance to make an important contribution to *"greater stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development, better quality implementation of rural development programmes, informing the general public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities, promoting innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas."* (RDP 2014-2020 evaluation).

Another way to investigate this question is to examine the consistency or otherwise between the opinions concerning SH impacts from NRN engagement as expressed by respondents to the online MA survey, and the SH surveys in the CS countries (Figure 49).

Figure 49: Different CS actors' views on the capacity and skills-building of their NRNs



These findings suggest that stakeholders themselves have a slightly less positive opinion of the impact of NRNs' activities and outputs on their own capacities, than is held by MAs. Nevertheless, among both groups of respondents, the assessment is more positive than negative, overall, with more than 60% judging that NRN activities have had a beneficial impact on SHs' capacities.

Looking again at SH survey findings, it is clear that capacity-building was recognised among different types of SH, a majority of respondents indicating some level of agreement that NRN activities have strengthened their abilities to implement RDPs (Figure 50).

Figure 50: SH Survey - Stakeholder judgements on how far NRN activities strengthened skills and capacity

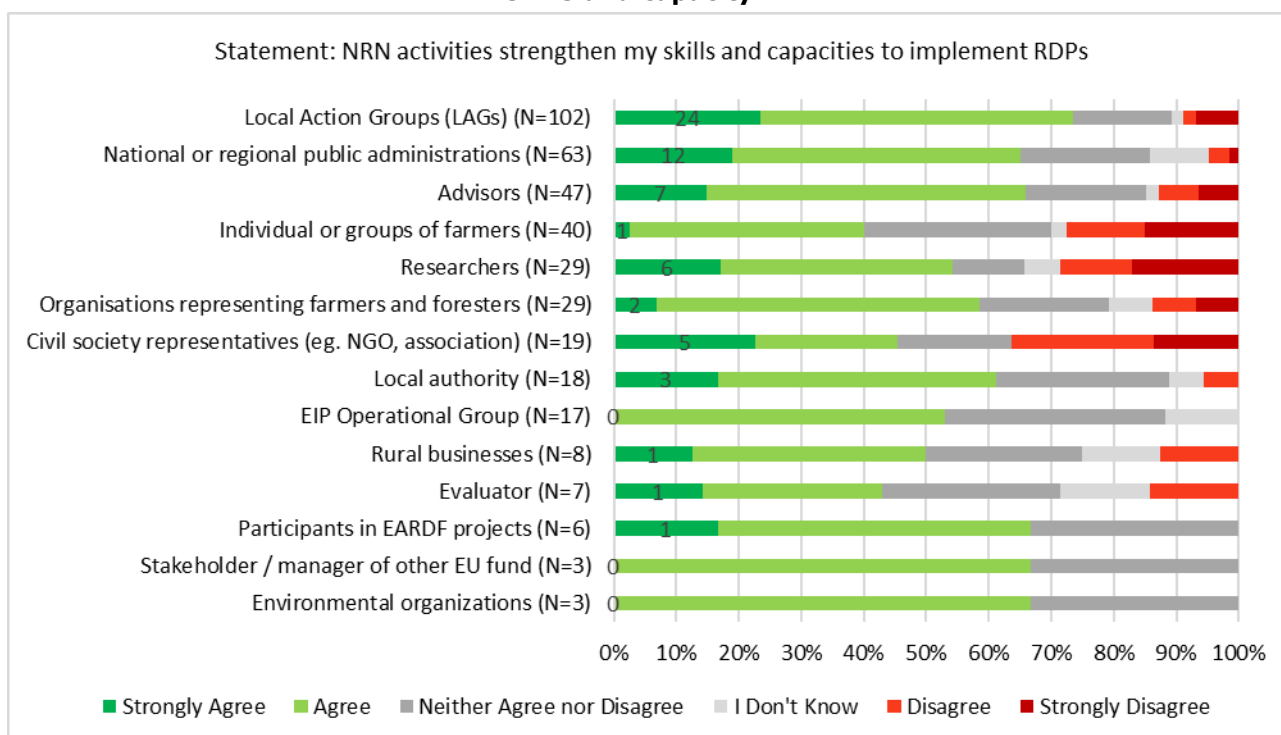
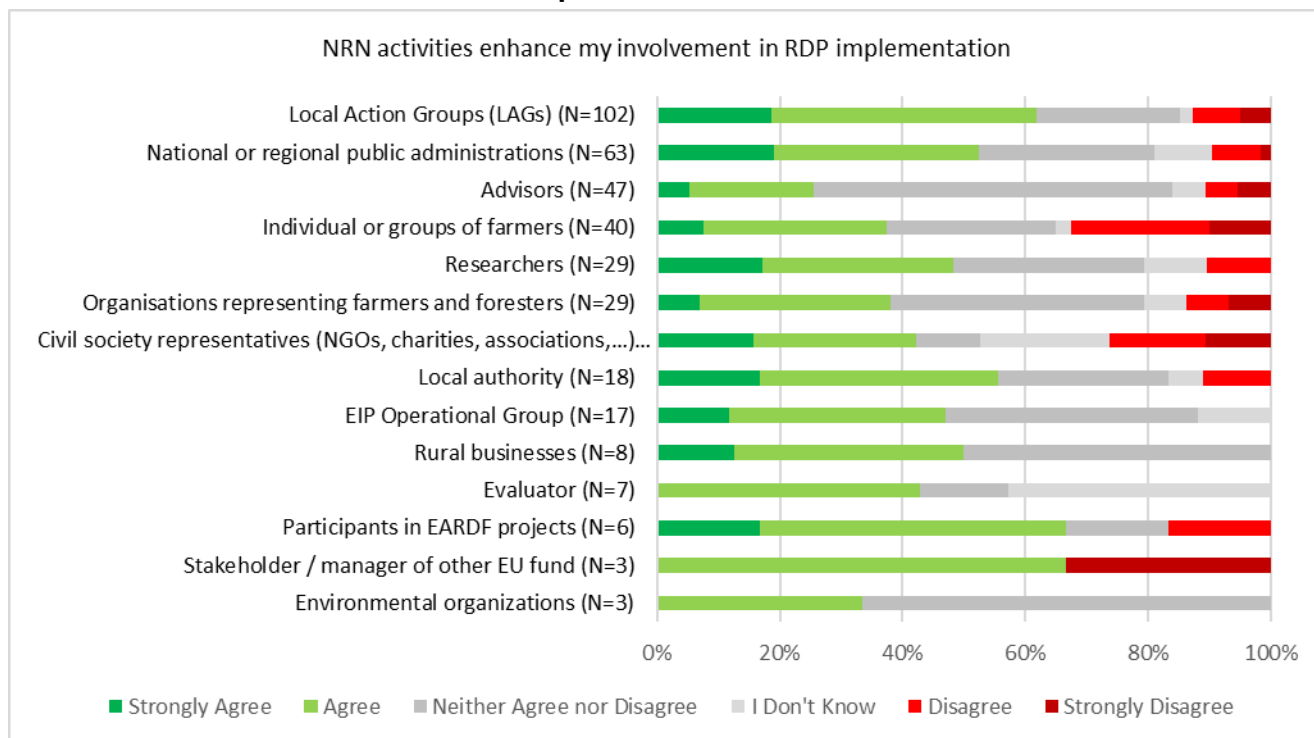
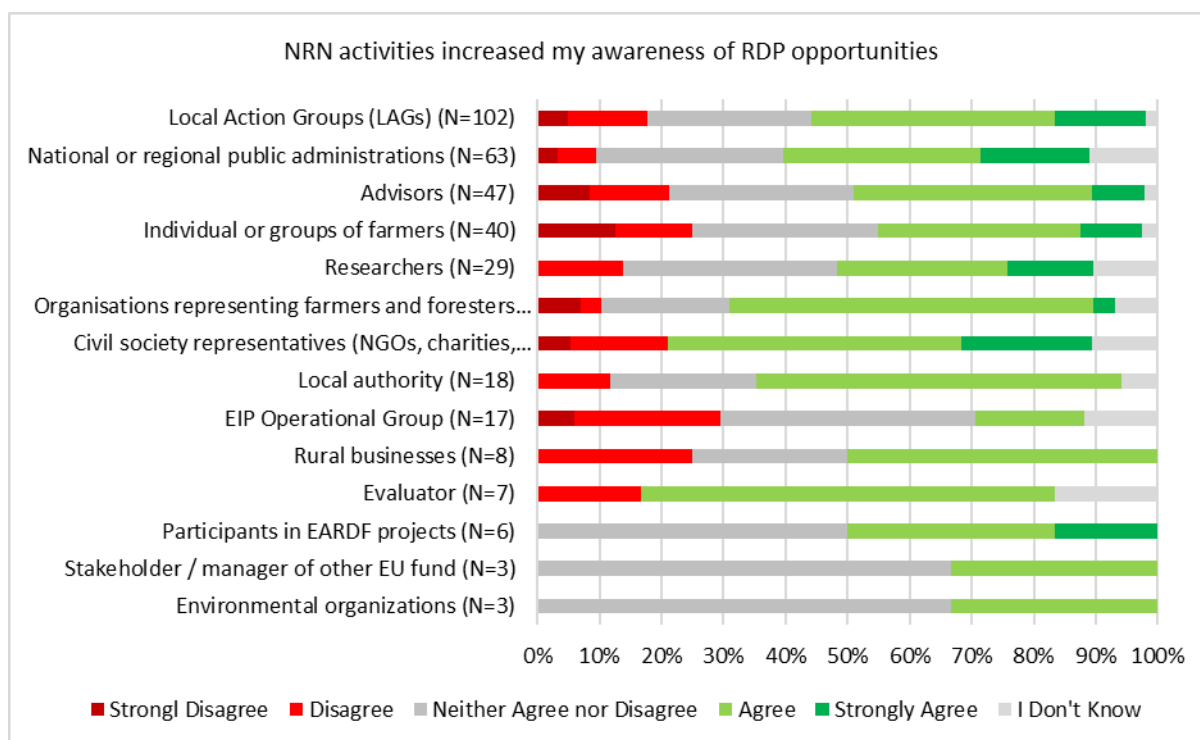


Figure 51: SH Survey - Stakeholder views on NRN impacts on their involvement in RDP implementation



Source: SH Survey (x 7 countries) disaggregated by role (N in figure) (ADE, 2022)

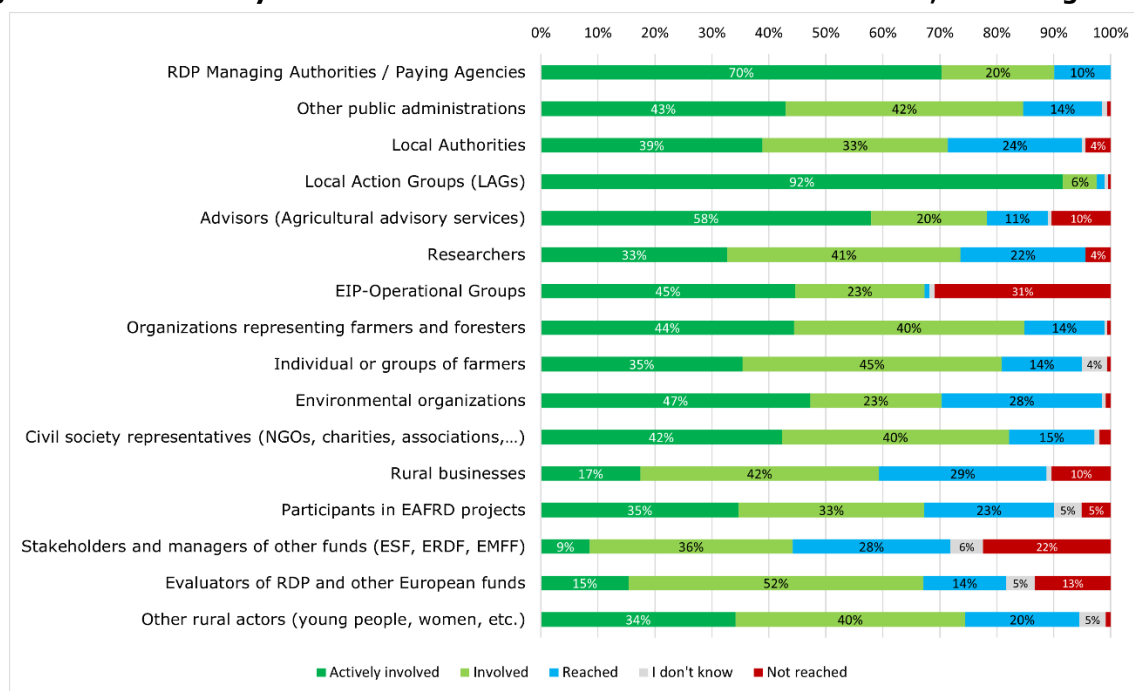
Figure 52: SH Survey - Stakeholders' judgement on NRN activities and impacts on awareness about RDP opportunities



Source: SH Survey (x 7 countries) disaggregated by role (N in figure) (ADE, 2022)

Some questions in the surveys for NSUs and for MAs asked respondents to assess the extent of SH involvement and capacity-building in NRN activities. In the NSU survey, respondents scored: Have you succeeded in reaching or involving the following stakeholders in NRN activities during the period 2014-2020? While responses do not measure capacity-building impact, they suggest more potential for such impact among certain SHs than others (Figure 53).

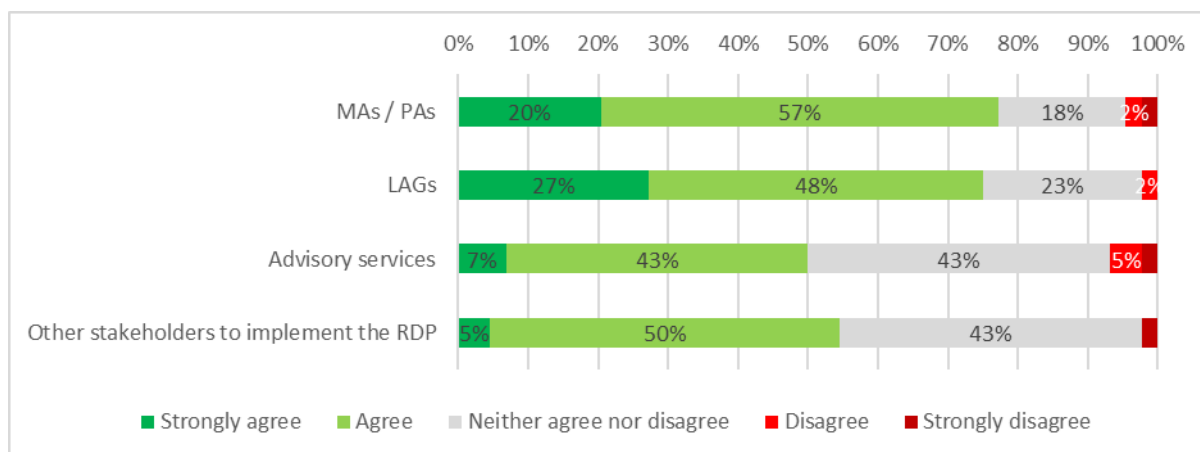
Figure 53: NSU Survey - Perceived involvement of SHs in NRN activities, according to NSUs



Source: Network Support Unit Survey, Q8, n=24 (ADE, 2022)

In the MA survey the question was more direct concerning the perceived impact of NRN activities on capacities of SHs, differentiated by SH type: NRN activities (2014-2020) (including publications and website) strengthen the skills and capacities of rural development stakeholders. How much do you agree with this statement for the following stakeholders?

Figure 54: MA Survey - MA perceived impact of NRN activities on SH capacities, by broad SH types



Source: Managing authorities and paying agencies survey, Q11, n=44 (ADE, 2022)

Similar to the perceived degree of engagement of different SHs, these responses suggest greater capacity-building impact among public authorities and LAGs, than among other SHs. Even so, the suggested impact among these other SHs is assessed as positive by at least half of respondents, while the level of assessed positive impact among public authorities and LAGs is around three-quarters of survey respondents.

Taken together, these responses help to provide further evidence of SH capacity building arising from NRN activities.

➤ **JC7.2: The activities carried out by the NRNs have stimulated innovative approaches to involve stakeholders in respect of RDPs implementation**

Case studies provide some relevant positive evidence for this JC, as follows.

Austria

NRN 'Farminars' and online interactive content (esp. during COVID) boosted engagement especially with farmers, women, and the international audience. This has subsequently been axed by the MA, despite positive feedback.

The NRN sees itself as an innovation enabler for rural development – fostering networking and/or dialogue for innovation. However, direct support of RDP implementation is outside the scope of NRN.

Wallonia

'The NSU was entrusted with the role of innovation broker in the RDP. One objective of the network is to foster innovation in all dimensions of rural development. As measure 16.1 is not programmed in the RDP, no Operational Group is supported or officially recognised by DG AGRI. However, the innovation road, initiated and financed by the RwDR has led to creation of three Operational Groups recognised by EIP-AGRI, two link to H2020 projects'.

Involvement of diverse stakeholders (especially farmers) is reportedly limited by their lack of available time: networking events are time-consuming and require financial resources. Those farmers that do attend are committed and innovative; others are not well represented.

Communities of practice enabled exchange of experience between LAG sectoral development agents on a specific theme (e.g. mobility, agriculture, social cohesion, digital animation, etc.). They were initiated by the Network and now operate independently.

France

The scope of the NRN was revised for this programming period and a distinct programme for technical assistance and risk management (*Programme National de Gestion des Risques et Assistance Technique*, PNGRAT) was created in 2015 in order to assist RDP managers. Technical support is also set up at the regional level by regional actors. NRN continued to play a role in supporting rural policymakers and project managers throughout their activities and designed several activities aiming to improve their technical skills.

An external service provider was contracted in 2021 to create a support unit aiming to improve the quality and frequency of LAGs support activities in cooperation. According to NSU, this was much needed and contributed not only to improve capacities of the LAGs but also their corresponding regional MA and RRN.

Italy

Geographic and thematic meetings organised by the NRN between the MAs, LAGs and 'intermediate subjects' improved networking and knowledge transfer between groups. It also updated knowledge on novel topics such as social farming, green communities and smart villages.

"The innovative methodological solutions deployed by the NRN are appreciated and considered functional, however sometimes the involvement of actors on the field, as well as the dissemination of results, are insufficient."

Slovenia

One of the most **impactful factors was establishment of INFO points**, which significantly broaden the **availability of accessible information and support regarding specific RDP measures**.

*"Most innovative operations are carried out by local action groups within measure M19, and a large proportion of innovative operations are aimed at improving production potential. **A significant number of innovative operations are largely carried out by young farmers.** The Rural Network in particular makes an important contribution to innovation within the RDP through notification of examples of good practice and organisation of professional excursions".*

Field trips and good practice examples were key methods for the NRN to support innovation, esp. around young farmers and LEADER. **Documentary films in English and Slovenian on rural projects, and the Slovenian rural parliament**, constituted innovative approaches to involving diverse stakeholders in NRN activities.

4.8 SQ8: To what extent have the activities of the NRNs fostered innovation at the national level and how?

4.8.1 Approach

4.8.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

Fostering innovation in agriculture, food production and rural areas is one of the tasks assigned to National Rural Networks. Regarding innovation, National Rural Networks (and Regional Rural Networks) are especially supposed to increase stakeholder involvement in EIP-AGRI, facilitate Operational Group partners and networking for advisors and innovation, and collect and disseminate examples of Operational Group projects.

The role of the NRNs in the implementation of the EIP-AGRI and the promotion of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups varies from one Member State to another, but by far the most common model is internal (EIP-AGRI Unit within the NRN), while only a few Member States outsourced their EIP-AGRI. All case study countries use the internal model, which provides much of the evidence for answering this SQ.

This SQ will take into consideration EIP units at national level, but EIP-AGRI and its Support Unit at EU level will not be evaluated, as this was already assessed by ADE's [evaluation of the CAP's impact on knowledge exchange and advisory activities](#), including innovation, in 2019.

4.8.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC8.1: NRN activities resulted in the stimulation of innovative applications and projects for EIP-AGRI and within the RDPs.

JC8.2: NRN activities resulted in process improvements and innovation in respect of RDP governance or implementation.

4.8.1.3 Methodology

Answering this SQ is necessarily qualitative. Sources were triangulated and case study examples illustrate different practices and their impacts, drawing on stakeholders' and NRN/MAs' experiences, retrospective views on effectiveness, and relevant secondary literature. Using case studies increases depth of information on the different implementation models and delivery methods, in addition to MA online survey data. For triangulation purposes the 2016 study on EIP-AGRI, and relevant CS level evaluation reports, AIRs and literature reviews have been essential sources.

Activities targeting innovation were identified from NRN action plans and reports and their impacts evidenced through qualitative analysis of the experiences and opinions of key stakeholder groups including Programme Monitoring Committee members, MAs, and independent experts. Documentary evidence e.g. evaluation of NRN actions within RDP evaluations/AIRs or independently, is mentioned where relevant.

Information sources and tools:

- NRN action plans, annual reports and (self-)evaluations in case studies;
- ENRD CP common network statistics, and self-evaluation summaries;
- Stakeholder feedback;
- RDPs (defining innovation and EIP-AGRI implementation), and 2018 AIRs in case studies;
- Structured interviews with MA, NRNs and relevant stakeholders in case studies;
- Semi-structured interviews with the EIP-AGRI Service Point, ENRD- both EHD and Contact Point;
- Online survey of Mas;
- Literature review in case study countries.

Statistics from the EIP-AGRI support facility were not available to this study.

4.8.2 Summary answer

SQ8: To what extent have the activities of the NRNs fostered innovation at the national level and how?

NRNs fostered innovation at national level via support units acting as EIP-AGRI, to a very good extent. EIP-AGRI was introduced into the CAP by the 2013 reform, strengthening support to innovation through the funding of dedicated EIP-AGRI innovation projects by Rural Development funds. Fostering innovation in agriculture, food production and rural areas was one task assigned to National Rural Networks. However, the role of NRNs in EIP-AGRI implementation and the promotion of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups varies from one Member State to another. Nevertheless, in all case study countries it has proven very important to the success of EIP-AGRI as a tangible initiative with real impact.

In some cases (France and Italy), the NRN with a specific EIP-AGRI unit was at the heart of the implementation of the EIP-AGRI, while in other countries the NRN played a main role in disseminating information and in innovation brokerage. In Wallonia, the network took on the role of innovation broker with a task to foster innovation in all dimensions of rural development, but M16.1 was not implemented. NRNs also stimulated discussion to generate innovation ideas among their stakeholders. The different implementation models for EIP and the links to NRNs were taken into consideration when answering this question, as they affected these impacts.

JC8.1: NRN activities resulted in the stimulation of innovative applications and projects for EIP-AGRI and within the RDPs

The assessment from case study documents and interviews, also MA survey and EU-level interviews, is very positive for most models: the NRNs fostered innovation at national level through a very wide range of initiatives, activities and communication methods, to a good extent. They promoted effective communication of good practice and potential innovation topics, also linked to H2020 projects (this was a strong focus for the French NRN). They encouraged stakeholder engagement and the generation of ideas, and helped to establish Operational Groups and support their work, once launched, via novel communication methods and events. Where NRN achievements on innovation were reported as more modest (notably Slovakia), case study evidence suggests this is not due to any failings by the NRN but to the wider implementation context and governance, with significant delays and barriers to progress.

JC8.2: NRN activities resulted in process improvements and innovation in respect of RDP governance or implementation

In many cases, including Slovenia, Austria and Estonia, France and Italy, NRN leadership on EIP was judged a critical factor ensuring the successful establishment of Operational Groups and the development of a culture of innovation in the RDP stakeholder community. Even in Wallonia, despite the fact that OGs were not supported via the RDP, NRN activities enabled significant progress in the understanding and approach to innovation seen in the agricultural sector, to the benefit of all stakeholders. In Slovakia, the NRN role was also reported by interviewees and stakeholder survey respondents as positive and inspirational, if more limited in achievement, as no OGs had yet been selected (October 2022).

4.8.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

➤ JC8.1: NRN activities resulted in the stimulation of innovative applications and projects within the RDPs

Implementation of EIP-AGRI: The support to EIP-AGRI was introduced in the CAP with the 2013 reform, strengthening the support to innovation through the funding of dedicated CAP EIP-AGRI innovative projects by Rural Development funds. This concerns in particular funding for setting up as well as implementation of Operational Groups' innovation projects, the possibility to fund innovation support services in RDPs (innovation brokering, innovation facilitation etc.) and the activities of EU and Member States' EIP-AGRI networks supporting and connecting Operational Groups through EIP-AGRI network activities (ADE, et al., 2020)⁶⁵.

The EIP-AGRI network (Article 53) at EU level, together with the National Rural Networks (Article 54) and/or EIP-AGRI networks in the Member States inherently have a knowledge exchange and innovation fostering role. The EIP-AGRI network builds bridges between policies, especially between the CAP EIP-AGRI Operational Group innovation projects and Horizon 2020 R&I projects.

Innovation support (through various methods) plays a key role in enabling the networking of Operational Groups, advisory services, researchers, and many more innovation stakeholders, both at EU and national levels.

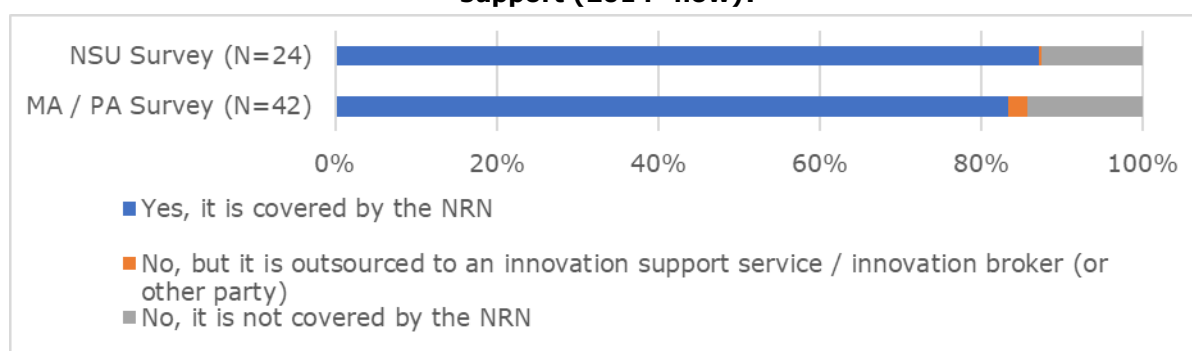
Roles of Innovation Services and Rural Networks in the Dynamics of RDPs

Fostering innovation in agriculture, food production and rural areas is one of the tasks assigned to National Rural Networks. Regarding innovation, National Rural Networks (and Regional Rural Networks) are especially supposed to:

- raise awareness of and involvement in EIP-AGRI of relevant stakeholders;
- facilitate the search for Operational Group partners;
- network for advisors and innovation support services;
- collect and disseminate examples of Operational Group projects.

The role of the national networks in the implementation of the EIP-AGRI and the promotion of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups **varies greatly from one Member State to another**. However, some EU-level evidence is relevant from the online surveys.

Figure 55: MA and NSU Survey - Did your National Rural Network (NRN) cover innovation support (2014- now)?



Source: MA and NSU Surveys (N in figure) (ADE, 2022)

This graph suggests that NRNs have an important role in innovation. Collated responses from the CS countries are relevant, also (Figure 56) and suggest the same.

⁶⁵ ADE, CCRI, OIR, (2020). Evaluation support study on the CAP's impact on knowledge exchange and advisory activities. Final Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2762/045268>.

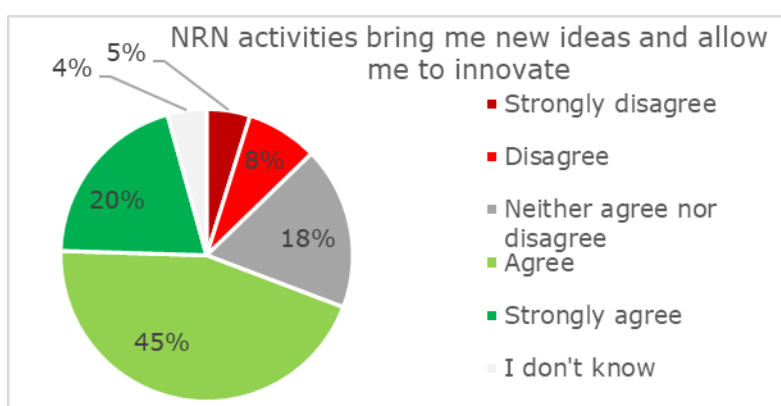
Figure 56: Responses on NRN involvement in innovation support, from MA/PA and NSU surveys

Did your NRN cover innovation support (2014-now)? (Anomalies in green).						
	MA / PA Survey			NSU Survey		
	Yes	No- outsourced	No	Yes	No- outsourced	No
Austria	1			1		
Estonia	1					1
France	1			1		
Italy	13			35	1	
Slovakia	1			2		
Slovenia	1			1		
Wallonia	1			1		

Source: MA and NSU surveys per Member State (ADE, 2022)

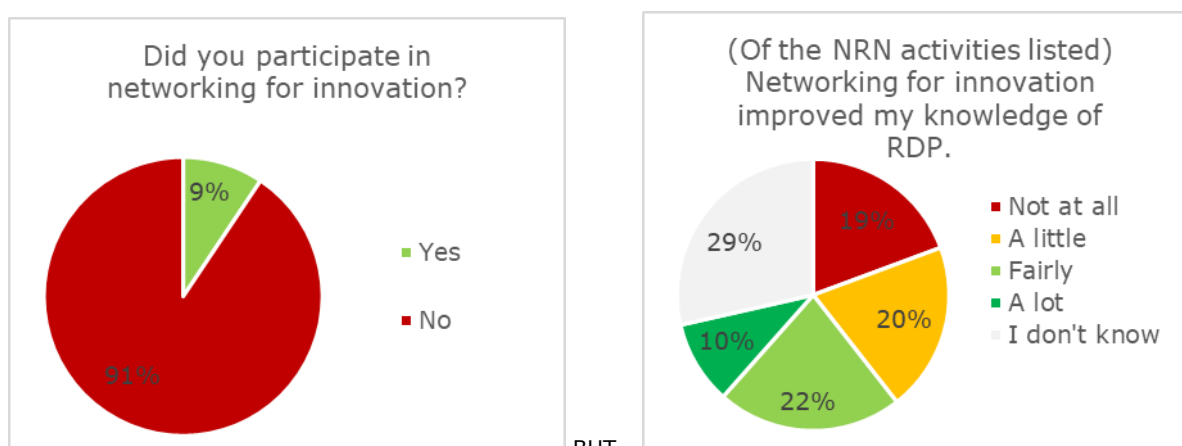
Compiling feedback from the stakeholder surveys in the seven case study countries, further evidence is demonstrated concerning how NRN activities connect to innovation (Figure 57 to Figure 59).

Figure 57: National SH Survey – 65% of stakeholder respondents in case study countries say NRNs help them to innovate



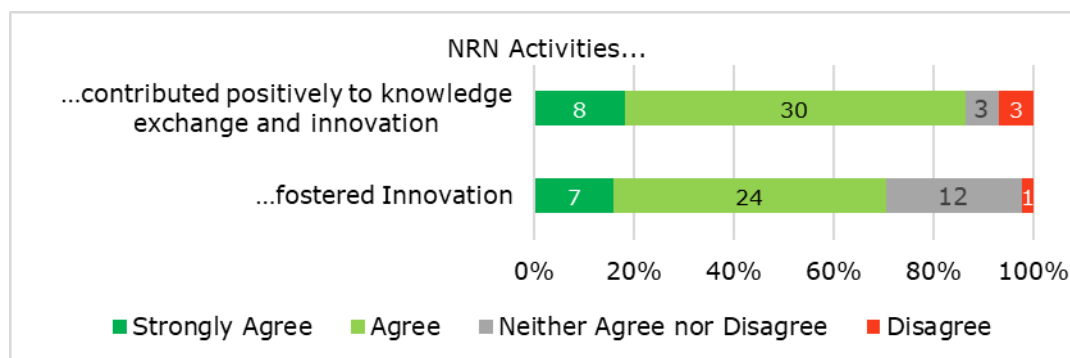
Source: National Stakeholders survey, Q11, n=416 (ADE et al., 2022)

Figure 58: National SH Survey – under 10% of stakeholder respondents in case study countries participated in networking specifically for the purpose of innovation, but 52% of them reported a positive impact of this activity on their knowledge



Source: National Stakeholders survey, Q4 and Q12, n=416 (ADE et al., 2022)

Figure 59: MA/PA Survey – Managing Authorities overwhelmingly support the view that NRNs contributed to KE and innovation, and fostered innovation



Source: MA / PA Survey, n =44 (ADE et al., 2022)

These survey findings support the positive role of NRNs in innovation, helping stakeholders to innovate and raising their awareness of this potential.

Other evidence from the Case Study countries adds significantly to understanding of how this worked, and the considerable extent of its benefits for stakeholders and for EIP- AGRI

Austria

Innovation support services are part of the NRN. The NRN itself is outsourced (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2022d). Innovation support is allotted 15% of the overall budget, the same as the other three thematic areas. As per the NRN website, four experts work in this field, however, the core function of innovation broker is undertaken by one expert.

EIP-AGRI was implemented for the first time in Austria in the 2014-2020 period via measure 16.1. Operational groups are set up with support of the innovation broker: the NRN supports the interested actors in finding potential cooperation partners and in strengthening their networks.

The following activities are directly supporting innovation, as identified in a desk review of annual NRN reports:

- Innovation brokering activities;
- Networking events for the EIP Operational Groups;
- Outreach and set-up support for EIP Operational Groups;
- Thematic events (such as on results of EIP activities, on specific RD topics such as value chains etc.);
- Participation in EIP-AGRI events (workshop, seminars, conferences);
- Transfer of EU content to national level;
- Set-up of 37 operational groups in the 2014-22 period;
- Innovation support and networking.

The innovation activities were implemented along the following characteristics:

- The years 2015/2016 was mostly dedicated to the implementation of the EIP-AGRI in measure 16. 2016 saw the start of the activities of the innovation broker, as a contact for potential EIP-AGRI applicant. The activities and support provided by the innovation broker team grew and developed strongly over the years and was praised and used by both applicants and members of the operational groups (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2016). Additionally, to support applicants and operational groups, the innovation broker and the team also developed several highly useful tools to promote and facilitate access to EIP-AGRI. One of them is the frequently asked questions page on the website (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2017) and was deemed useful. Two competitive events were also organised in 2017: an "Agrar-Hackathon" on forest services and an open innovation forum "von der angewandten Klimaforschung in die landwirtschaftliche Praxis: innovative ÜbersetzerInnen und UmsetzerInnen gesucht! ["from applied climate research to agricultural practice: innovative translators and implementers wanted!"]". The events were deemed quite successful in terms of

participation. However, no real follow-up was observed and the winners from the open innovation forums (2016 and 2017) often did not claim their prize (a professional innovation coaching session). No further competitive events were organised in later years (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2017).

- 2019 marked the beginning of operational groups networking activities organised by the innovation broker.
- In 2021, an international network event for Operational Groups was organised by the Austrian ENRD network, the ministry for agriculture, regions and tourism: "Getting the right people together" with insight on Horizon 2020. Other "Rufseminare" [ad-hoc seminars] were also implemented in the LEADER working group. These thematic seminars happen at the initiative of LEADER regions and are led by them, to support Operational Groups wanting to connect over specific topics linked to their research. In 2021 two ad-hoc online seminars took place, each supported by three Operational Groups. The themes tackled were "circular economy in the field of agriculture"; and "pig farming of the future" which was popular, attracting 17 participants (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2022a).
- 2021 saw further development of the national AKIS for implementation of the new CAP strategic plan. A co-creation workshop with AKIS actors was used as basis for two ministry workshops on the content of the new AKIS (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2022a).

Overall, stakeholder feedback collected via NRN self-evaluations is highly positive and had an important impact on the level of knowledge of applicants and Operational Group members, as the questions asked to the innovation broker team grew more technical (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2016 to Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2022a).

The MA survey highlighted the strong contribution of the NRN to fostering innovation (MA survey). Annual NRN surveys also highlight the role of the NRN in supporting innovation (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2022a): participants attending NRN events consistently score the contribution of the NRN to "innovation generation" and "contributions to positive innovation climate" as "good" between 2016 and 2021. The 2018 NRN evaluation found a very positive stakeholder perception of the innovation broker (Metis GmbH, 2019) and pointed out that innovation brokering is solely restricted to implementation of EIP-AGRI and could benefit from expansion into e.g. LEADER.

The NRN has supported the implementation of 37 EIP-AGRI Operational Groups. The implementation of EIP-AGRI has led to a series of innovative projects. The NRN's function is as an enabler in this context.

The NRN produced two short videos on EIP-AGRI in Austria in 2020 (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2020) and published them on YouTube. The videos are roughly 2.5 minutes long and cover the following topics:

- Project findings on extended nurturing time in organic pig farms,
- Project findings on the use of geo-information systems for efficiency and sustainability improvements in Austria.

NRN deemed the videos as good media formats due to the limited time availability of practitioners. However, preparation proved extensive as this was a new format.

The review of annual NRN reports (2015/16-2021) indicated that participation in EIP-AGRI events has strengthened the international networks of the innovation broker, particularly with the German NRN, as their stage of implementation is similar. The NRN also recognised that other NRNs face similar issues tied to lack of involvement of farmers in Operational Groups. Another key perception is that EIP-AGRI seems underfunded in Austria, compared to other Member States. Domestic activities tend to be targeted to raise awareness of EIP-AGRI implementation; EU activities tend to be targeted at knowledge transfer and common learning on implementation approaches.

There are also other, horizontal, avenues with which the NRN seeks to foster innovation in rural development. A primary mechanism is the project database in which good practices are showcased to stimulate innovative approaches in new project applications. Another

mechanism are the rural development project competitions. These awards aim to increase the awareness around good practice projects submitted into the project database (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2022a). These can be thematically-focussed such as the 2018 competition on "value added in rural areas" (Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land 2019).

The overall contribution to improving innovation is not measurable at national level. The NRN sees itself as an "innovation enabler". Key points include the role of ad-hoc seminars/on-demand seminars as they can fill gaps and needs. Further, the structure of the NRN itself lends itself to fostering process innovation: as the NRN consortium partners are also key stakeholders with large networks, they can bring diverse stakeholder groups together to foster dialogue and networking among diverse stakeholder groups. The MA interview also highlights strengthened cooperation in FFG [a federal research grant provider] projects due to NRN networking and improved EU/At networking as innovative outputs.

Direct support to RDP implementation or governance is outside of the scope of NRN activities. In the context of governance arrangements, the activities of the NRN in gender mainstreaming may be relevant. The gender mainstreaming activities of the NRN were highlighted as useful to the MA. The EIP-AGRI approach to fostering rural innovation was also highlighted as a good example of process innovation.

In sum, the NRN's implementation of EIP-AGRI has been relatively successful so far in Austria. A total of 37 Operational Groups have been established, with the innovation broker assessing created networks as sustainable with innovative approaches and project partner constellations. However, the NRN perceives innovation support services to be relatively underfunded compared to other Member States. The NRN also implements other activities to foster general innovation. These are primarily related to supporting the dissemination of best practices, by a project database and RDP project competitions.

Wallonia

M16.1 is not included in the Walloon RDP and Wallonia did not plan to implement operational groups, but the NSU was designated as innovation broker. Significant resources have been devoted to the innovation roads and innovation desk since 2016.

The NSU has the role of innovation broker in the framework of the RDP. One of the objectives of the network is to foster innovation in all dimensions of rural development. The **innovation road**, initiated and financed by the RwDR has led to the creation of 3 Operational Groups which are recognised by EIP-AGRI and two are linked to H2020.

Innovation road 1.0 resulted, after a process of more than a year with 5 full day field days associating farms visits in the morning to collaborative multiactor workshops (see hereafter) in the publication of a specific booklet (carnet) defining the approach and the concept of innovation in agriculture. It started introducing the concept of AKIS in Wallonia. This very relevant publication supported dissemination of the results of the [Innovation Road](#) (RwDR, 2018). Its implementation is the result of a specific thematic working group on the subject, the Scientific Council, regional, Belgian and European actors (EIP-AGRI) as well as the Permanent Committee. A European seminar closed the Innovation Road 1.0. in May 2018, entitled "Stimulating innovation - How to respond to the challenges of rurality".

In total, the NSU implemented **three innovations roads. Innovation road 1.0 started in 2016 and** was framed around the topic of autonomy of farms (inputs, energy etc.). It was implemented in 6 steps, 5 field days of farm visits in the morning and multi-actor workshops in the afternoon, analysis of the factors stimulating innovation and discussion with other farmers of constraints and opportunities to overcome them. Innovation Road 1.0 was followed by Innovation Road 2.0 in 2020, followed by the Market Garden Innovation Road 3.0 and the innovation desks in 2021.

Innovation Road 2.0 was structured around 4 axes, based on the needs identified in consultation with the Permanent Committee at the end of Road 1.0.

- 1) **Pro-filières** (RwDR, 2020a) (RwDR, 2020d) aims at new ways of organising the food chain in order to improve added value for producers and strengthen their bargaining power within the chains.

- 2) **Re-generations** (RwDR, 2021c) targets new agricultural projects that promote generational renewal.
- 3) **Déclit climat** (RwDR, 2020b)⁶⁶ contributions and impacts of agriculture and forestry on the energy transition of territories and on the fight against climate change. This is relatively specific to the network, not driven by the ENRD. A case study is underway, based on measures taken in the wood and biomethane sectors.
- 4) **Symbio** (RwDR, 2020c) collective/partnership practices to stop the loss of biodiversity. Biodiversity 360° fights against the disappearance of biodiversity. The new Walloon government has financed a 4 000km hedgerow project which aims to promote cooperation between different actors in order to establish these infrastructures.

The innovation roads successfully mobilised participants. In total, over 300 structures and individuals participated in Innovationroad 1.0. Road 2.0 regrouped close to 100 participants (during Covid), and the 3rd had between 100 and 150 participants.

Innovation desks were also launched in 2021 and resulted in nine meetings on different subjects (digital farming, water management, etc.) (RwDR, 2021b) (RwDR, 2021d). These events are mostly aimed at farmers and are designed to foster discussion on innovation. The innovation desks could all be face-to-face.

Finally, the RwDR has initiated "transmission cafés" from 2021 (Le Soir, 2021) (RwDR, 2021e) linked to generational renewal. This idea follows an exchange with CIVAMs in France. It is a meeting of around 20-40 stakeholders, including the farmers transferring their farm, who are not consulted very often. Four transmission Cafés took place in 2022.

The innovation road 1.0 enabled significant progress on the concept and approach to innovation in the agricultural sector for the benefit of all stakeholders. It rests on a holistic approach, involves vision, breakthroughs (bottom-up approach and collective approaches to co-create responses) and learning through experiment. The work resulted in three Operational Groups (OGs), the publication of a specific booklet (RwDR, 2018) (RwDR, 2019) (RwDR, 2021a)⁶⁷ as well as a thematic working group on "independent and neutral farm advice" launched in December 2019. The latter is linked to the current development of AKIS and its integration in the CAP Strategic Plans. For two of the Operational Groups, the link is established with H2020 at EU level.

Lessons learned from the Innovation Roads and RwDR activities will be taken up in the future CAP strategic plan (e.g. definition and modalities of AECM, AECM High Nature Value Meadow, new ecoscheme grazing of interculture by sheep, forage autonomy, investments for hay drying in barns, etc.).

Innovation is also promoted through the network's other activities: Permanent Commission (some sessions dedicated to innovation), thematic working groups, facilitation of LEADER LAGs, facilitation of innovative measures (e.g. measure 16.9 Social Agriculture), good practices dissemination, monitoring and communication activities, etc.

In sum, the RwDR has played a key role in innovation, as an innovation broker for the RDP and a link for EIP-AGRI. The Innovation Road is a flagship initiative and has been a real success both in terms of the involvement of stakeholders, the interest and relevance of the themes and issues addressed, and in terms of capitalisation and dissemination of knowledge.

⁶⁶ RwDR (2020). Note de capitalisation : Soil Capital (SC). https://www.reseau-pwdr.be/sites/default/files/soil_capital_note.pdf.

⁶⁷ RwDR (2018). Carnet du Réseau n°6 - La Route de l'Innovation. <https://www.reseau-pwdr.be/document/carnet-du-r%C3%A9seau-n%C2%B06-la-route-de-linnovation>. Objectif Renforcer l'autonomie protéique et alimentaire des poulets de chair conventionnels et indirectement éliminer le soja OGM traité au glyphosate de l'alimentation des poulets

RwDR (2019). Carnet du Réseau numéro 7, consacré au Séchage et lait de foin. <https://www.reseau-pwdr.be/document/carnet-du-r%C3%A9seau-n%C2%B07-s%C3%A9chage-et-lait-de-foin>. Objectif : Produire un foin de qualité synonyme de lait de qualité (réflexion sur les types et les espèces de fourrage à produire ainsi que sur les options de production d'énergie) ;

RwDR (2021). Carnet du Réseau n°9 - Pâturage des intercultures par les ovins. <https://www.reseau-pwdr.be/document/carnet-du-r%C3%A9seau-n%C2%B09-p%C3%A2turage-des-intercultures-par-les-ovins>.

Objectif : Éliminer le couvert des cultures hivernales pièges à nitrates par les moutons sans impacts négatifs sur le sol et sa structure, sans recours au glyphosate mais en restituant l'azote et d'autres éléments fertilisants.

The Innovation Road provided significant added value. It enabled to make significant progress about the concept and approach to innovation in the agricultural sector for the benefit of all stakeholders. It also enabled the integration of the EIP-AGRI and the Operational Groups in a RDP which had not chosen this. It rests on important facilitation and animation support provided by the NSU and involvement of relevant stakeholders in the specific topics.

Estonia

Innovation is supported by the NRN. In 2014 the Innovation Network was established. A range of different type of activities are implemented:

- In total 44 events (with 1 319 participants) were organised by the end of 2020. Based on interviews, the most valued of them have been innovation camps and regular roundtables.
- Thematic webinars «Networks to Innovate» (4 events) were organised in cooperation between Estonian and Finnish NRNs in the first half of 2022.
- NSU has been looking for partners for Estonian innovation cooperation projects.
- One of the thematic working groups is targeted on innovation.
- NSU has collected and disseminated (by the end of 2020) through different communication channels, 132 innovation-related best practice examples.
- NRN website has a separate innovation network sub-section, and by the end of 2020 more than 500 news/articles have been published on it.
- NSU has (by the end of 2020) translated and distributed 72 issues of the EIP-AGRI newsletter with additions related to Estonian activities/context. Three electronic "Innovation Network Newsletters" have been published as well as "Notice innovative farming 2.0".

NRN has a very valuable role in offering support for innovation network activities – supporting networking, organising training, translating and publishing relevant materials, collecting and disseminating innovation cluster results and best practice examples, and supporting international cooperation.

A survey (2019) was used to collect feedback from the members of innovation network. Examples of the questions asked: Which activities are you expecting from the innovation network; preferred format of activities; the most interesting topics to be covered. Respondents were also asked not only to mention but also to rate the importance of different formats. The most preferred activities were newsletters, information days and study-trips. The most preferred format for getting information was by video-lecture which can be watched any time, later on.

Italy

Support to innovation is provided by the NRN. It is envisaged in the NRN programme, and the action plans describe in detail the activities carried out and the expected outputs.

A specific Thematic Working Group is dedicated to innovation, namely TWG Innovation, EIP and Knowledge transfer. Another TWG "Advice and Training" is linked to innovation as well.

Innovation TWG support covers:

- Methodological support - development of methods and procedures to implement innovation-related measures, with specific focus on the EIP-AGRI Operational Groups;
- Support to exchanges and networking of the AKIS actors;
- Communication and dissemination of information;
- Dissemination of innovation projects and good practices;
- Innovation toolkit.

The toolkit is addressed to MAs and regional agencies involved in the preparation and implementation of the Operational Group sub-measure, and to partnerships that want to apply for funds. The toolkit is both a guidebook and a reference source, since it includes a set of operational documents to be used in the preparation of the call for Operational Groups: partnership agreement template; template of internal regulation; template to prepare an Operational Group project; minimum monitoring information to be provided; template to collect project information and progress.

- The innovation team provided guidance documents to define simplified cost options for advisors and farmers involved in the Operational Groups.
- Organisation of information activities at regional level. The innovation team was involved in a set of information activities organised at regional level prior to launch of the Operational Groups.

The activities of the Innovation TWG are numerous and try to address all SH groups involved. The regionalised implementation with 21 RDPs, as well as the presence of 21 sometimes different AKIS makes the task of the network particularly challenging.

It is important to highlight that, given this administrative organisation and the distribution of competences between regions and State, the Innovation TWG had limited possibilities to foster innovation by addressing beneficiaries directly. That could be done much more efficiently by the MAs, with assistance, where required, of the Innovation TWG. However, the activities carried out for and with MAs are considered key to improve the implementation of innovation projects. All the tools provided by the network were judged relevant to ease the implementation of Operational Group measures and foster harmonisation of procedures, at the same time building the capacities of MAs to manage this new and complex measure.

France

A dedicated component of the NSU was in charge of EIP-AGRI activities in France from the start of the NRN in 2015 until 2020. The NSU EIP-AGRI component supports innovation mainly at three levels (source: PSRRN):

- at **regional level**, establishing a link with the Regions that are **new MA of RDPs**, by raising awareness of the new concept of **EIP-AGRI and Operational Group**, developing a common understanding of these concepts, later addressing their needs in order to succeed in the implementation;
- at national level, linking the CAP and agricultural research including with H2020, which implied linking stakeholders from two different directorates of the MAA (DGER and DGPEE on the current organisation chart);
- at EU level, making a link with the EIP-AGRI Service Point at EU level and H2020.

The goal to set-up 300 Operational Group has been achieved and exceeded: 310 groups are established throughout the different regions. Awareness of this new type of intervention had to be raised among local stakeholders and MAs guided in order to properly implement this new measure. Training and dissemination of information related to EIP-AGRI was supported by the EIP unit of the NSU, in a particularly challenging context due to the 2013 decentralisation reform that gave Regions a new role as MAs (NSU interview).

NRN had the role to facilitate collaboration between Operational Groups and MAs, build thematic Operational Group networks and encourage participation to European EIP-AGRI activities. A collaborative platform to share results has been put in place to facilitate cooperation and knowledge exchanges between Operational Groups, but in practice the platform was not convenient for Operational Groups to use (sources: AIRs, NSU interview). The EIP-AGRI component of the NRN was a driver for the provision of technical assistance through the network. They initiated training on how to produce a video to share project results easily, as well as tutorials for management of EAFRD projects, now available on the NRN website (source: NSU interview).

The link with H2020 projects was a strong focus for the French NRN. The EIP-AGRI component of the NRN worked to build ties between the 78 H2020 projects supported by one or more [French organisations](#) and the Operational Groups. It set up working groups dedicated to H2020 objectives and worked actively to disseminate results to key rural development stakeholders and policymakers (notably to regional MAs, the MAA, the ministry for education) (sources: NSU interview, French rural network website).

French EIP stakeholders were also very much involved in EIP-AGRI at the EU level. They were able to share the **French definition of agroecology** with other Member States during the 2019 EIP seminar. As a result, the definition adopted by the European Rural Networks included downstream effects and impacts on income (source: NSU interview).

NRN relied on a working group for innovation and cooperation to consolidate links with stakeholders from various structures. The EIP advisory committee serves as a hub for exchange among stakeholders involved in Operational Groups or H2020 projects (source: NSU interview).

The involvement of the French Ministry of Agriculture in the EIP-AGRI concept started at the very beginning in 2012-2013 at EU level, both in participating in EU events.⁶⁸ as well as in the SCAR⁶⁹ working groups. This early involvement in the process enabled the concept and knowledge to be shared with the various French actors at national and regional level from 2013 onwards. This person is on leave since 2021 and has not been replaced.

The NRN fosters innovation in a cross-cutting way. Major support is provided by the EIP-AGRI unit especially for understanding and disseminating the concept of the Operational Groups but also for the networking of actors, the link with H2020 at national and EU level. Support is also provided through LEADER and through the 5th strategic objective of the NRN, strengthening all forms of cooperation (MCDR).

The NRN also support innovation through the **MCDRs**⁷⁰ (collective, interregional project linked to the implementation of RDPs) and **LEADER**.

EIP-AGRI innovation support in France is mainly addressed through 3 main activities of the PSRRN:

- **Promoting collaboration and transversal exchanges** between regional EIP-AGRI stakeholders and managing authorities.
- Creating or consolidating **thematic networks** of EIP operational groups (or thematic focus groups).
- Encouraging stakeholders' **participation to European EIP activities** (EAFRD, Horizon 2020).

Support to the regional level includes:

Substantial awareness raising on the concept of Operational Group and EIP-AGRI, through meetings with stakeholders in all regions (the new MA, the EIP correspondent etc.);

Substantial support to the sharing of tools and information among the 27 RDPs:

- Development of a EAFRD tutorial;
- Creation of a **collaborative platform** to facilitate exchanges between regional actors and EIP coordination;
- Elaboration of a guideline to innovation support, translation of a common Operational Group format; updating of innovation support sheets;
- Consolidation or creation of thematic networks of EIP Operational Groups;
- Summary of selected Operational Groups;
- Translation of the summaries of the work of the focus groups (H2020) and the European workshops of the EIP-AGRI and the essential brochures;
- Collaborative work with the Regional EIP correspondents to update and share the regional Calls for Projects on the platform of EIP initiatives of the NRN (*51 Calls For Projects since the beginning of the programming period until 2019, under 24 RDPs*), to extract regional case studies on the implementation of the EIP-AGRI in regions.

Pool of experts made available for the regional MA who can support them for analysing the applications of Operational Group. Training to Operational Group about making videos with a mobile phone to make results easily available; this training has later been expanded to other stakeholder groups of the RDPs (LAGs, MCDR, other).

⁶⁸ Brussels December 2012: Workshop on the scope of Rural Development Policy for fostering the EIP; Brussels January 2013: Discussion in SCAR (AKIS) of the Annual Work Programme 2013 for the EIP Network; Berlin 2013, Brussels 2014.

⁶⁹ Standing Committee for Agricultural Research (SCAR).

⁷⁰ A central feature of the French NRN is the support to collective projects called MCDR (*Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural*), carried out by national or regional stakeholders to contribute to the implementation of RDPs.

RRNs were asked **in May 2022** about the NRN and the ENRD's contribution to innovation in their territories in the specific RRN survey. A negative perception of NRN support to innovation is explained by the current situation (2022): respondents noted that the NSU member dedicated to innovation had been on leave for two years at the date of this survey and that has not been replaced. As a result, the NRN did not implement many activities in support of innovation throughout the end of the programming period (2021-2022) and the link with the EIP-AGRI Service Point was not effectively maintained.

Support at national level

The EIP-AGRI unit of the NSU fostered the dissemination of the bottom-up approach of innovation, working together with the farmers on collective responses to issues or opportunities. Concretely, it fostered networking at national level by bringing actors together and collaborating on specific topics relevant to the RDPs. 310 Operational Groups have currently been selected in French regions which exceeds the target set in the beginning of the programming period. They cover a wide range of agricultural topics.

Over the 2014-2020 programming period, the EIP-AGRI component of the NRN conducted substantial work to initiate collaboration and cross-fertilisation of activities implemented under the CAP and agricultural research⁷¹:

- Initiate and facilitate numerous meetings between different actors, from the two different directions of the Ministry of agriculture (agriculture and education and research), also associating stakeholders from research and farm advisory services; this "decompartmentalising" started with the elaboration of the specific NRN programme in 2013;
- [EIP seminar on protein autonomy in livestock in Rennes in 2017](#);
- Organised thematic innovation workshops (launch of the first thematic coordination "innovation, forest, climate change" in 2018);
- Three working groups dedicated to Cooperation (measure 16), innovation and ESIF, and social challenges of the H2020 strategy;
- AGRI Innovation Summit organised in France (EU event see hereafter).

Strengthened governance via the Innovation Advisory Committee promoting the results of EIP projects supported by the EAFRD and H2020 to national network coordinators, decompartmentalising and opening up the work of the EIP Advisory Committee to key players (Ministry for the Environment, Education and research and involved stakeholders, etc.).

Provided support to both regional, national and EU level through the website of the French Rural Network, with a dedicated Section on the EIP-AGRI, EIPAGRI in regions, the "*Brèves du PEI (EIP)*" etc.

Link with the EU level

The NRN also encouraged participation to European innovation-related events, and translated reports from European workshops into French. The French NRN's NSU was also involved in the Subgroup on Innovation of the European Rural Networks' Assembly:

- Significant French participation in multi-actor projects and thematic networks of EIP-AGRI and thematic networks and multi-actor projects of Horizon 2020;
- The EIP unit fostered a community of interest, promoting collaborative work through animation of networks (EIP Network, national network coordinators, national EIP animation, etc.);
- The **second AGRI Innovation Summit** (June 2019) (Réseau Rural Français, 2019)⁷², co-organised by the French Ministry of Agriculture (with the French Rural

⁷¹ The French Ministry of Agriculture has 2 major directions, a direction in charge with education and research and a direction in charge with the CAP. Flowchart available on the MAA website: <https://agriculture.gouv.fr/administration-centrale>.

⁷² "The event was dedicated to innovation in the agricultural and forestry sector, in particular to the contribution of the European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural Productivity & Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) for the transition to agroecology. The event brought together over 400 participants, including 150 participants from all over Europe: farmers, researchers, advisors, enterprises, associations, decision-makers ... 120 innovative projects and networks have been presented during workshops or projects market places and 8 field trips of projects located

Network), the Normandy Region, the European Commission and the EIP-AGRI network, was held in Lisieux, France⁷³;

- Visit of a German delegation of the EIP-AGRI in the regions Grand-Est and Bourgogne-France Comté;
- Summary of EU events in which the French Network was involved;
- Translation of EIP-AGRI Focus Groups and EIP-AGRI workshops publications (published on the French Rural Network website, <https://www.reseaurural.fr/le-partenariat-europeen-pour-linnovation-agri/les-projets-et-travaux-europeens-du-pei>).

According to the 2019 evaluation participation of French stakeholders to European EIP network activities has been high throughout the period, with 63 experts in the 28 focus groups and 213 participants among 51 of the 66 EIP H2020 projects. France ranks 4th in terms of involvement in the H2020 projects (after the Netherlands, the UK and Spain).

In sum, the EIP-AGRI component of the NSU has raised awareness of the EIP-AGRI in France at national level and in the regions. The success can be seen in the number and diversity of Operational Group set-up in France. The EIP-AGRI unit brought different national stakeholders together throughout its activities, to get to know to each other, to exchange experience and network on common topics. It also enabled concretely the networking between the CAP (RD) and Horizon 2020. The EIP-AGRI unit was active at EU level, collaborating with the EIP-AGRI Service Point. Relevant information was shared and made available from national to EU level and vice versa. The NRN and its EIP-AGRI unit largely supported the collection and dissemination of examples from Operational Group (website).

Besides this, the NRN also supported innovative projects through the French initiative of MCDRs – large-scale multi-actor RDP projects. The two calls for tenders enabled innovative, grassroots projects to obtain financing and support from the NRN, and their results were largely disseminated throughout the network. The MCDRs also identified several policy recommendations for rural development, but the extent to which these have been taken up is limited. Further, the NRN supported LEADER and its LAGs in developing local projects and fostering innovation at the local scale, considering stakeholders needs directly.

Slovakia

Innovation is supported by the NRN. However, there are no EIP Operational Group selected and supported on the ground and the measure has been significantly delayed, with the first round of expression of interest application submitted in 2019 and assessed in February 2022. The NSU is one of very few actors that has been advocating for EIP-AGRI and promoting best practice projects from other Member States. NSU has set up a specific Thematic Working Group focusing on EIP-AGRI. The working group represents a platform for discussion, suggestions regarding preparation and implementation of submeasure 16.1.

The outcomes of the TWG EIP so far include a draft concept and selection criteria regarding the call for projects under sub-measure 16.1 – Operational Groups; and discussion of main topics in the field of cooperation between farmers, researchers, and advisers. The outcome in form of a report has been submitted to the MA.

NRN took an active approach, with members of the TWG preparing recommendations for the M16.1 call, including criteria for selection. NRN is also regularly publishing material, examples of good practice on their Facebook and website. They have dedicated website sub-section for EIP-AGRI and are translating the monthly EIP newsletter. They have also actively collaborated with the EIP-AGRI Service Point and one EIP workshop was held in Slovakia at the start of the programming period.

RA Nitra, director of the company [not RA staff member], has been an active member of the sub-committee on innovation at EU level and has been a vocal advocate for EIP-AGRI.

in Normandy have been organised" (source: French rural network website <https://www.reseaurural.fr/le-partenariat-europeen-pour-linnovation-agri/Sommet-agri-innovation-2019>).

⁷³ The European Commission has organised an agricultural innovation summit. The first edition took place in 2017 in Lisbon. In 2019, the summit took place in France in the Normandy region.

Slovenia

Innovation is supported within the NRN, but it is internally managed within the MA. The EIP VEM is a "one stop shop" regarding information and support for EIP-AGRI.

An "EIP Idea Exchange" was introduced as part of the EIP sub-website, which is a platform for stakeholders (researchers, advisors, farmers, etc.) to post ideas on challenges in agriculture, forestry and environmental issues and find or provide solutions. It is a two-way exchange with researchers or advisers posting their ideas, and farmers connecting and reacting to the ideas posted. (CS interview, June 2022).

After a slow start, the number of applications has been steadily increasing and at present (June 2022) 44 EIP Operational Group have been supported.

The NRN (NSU) collaborate closely with EIP-AGRI unit, and promoting innovation and innovative approaches is one of its priorities. NRN showcases good practice examples and inspirational EIP projects in its newsletter, it also publishes best practice examples from other Member States, disseminates information on calls and co-organises relevant public presentations and seminars. EIP has a sub-webpage as well as the idea exchange platform.

EIP-AGRI "unit" is also involved in Farm Advisory System (FAS) training (2nd day), providing the latest information on innovative approaches and projects to farm advisors. Each lead partner for EIP projects has an obligation to disseminate outcomes of their project to other farmers and annual FAS training provides a great opportunity to share information and lessons learned (CS interview, June 2022).

According to the RDP 2014-2020 evaluation (2019) *"An important contribution of the network is also in the area of innovation promotion, through the EIP VEM point and workshops and meetings with the field of EIP, thematic and analytical exchanges, field trips/excursions to good practice projects, etc. From the point of view of support for RDP measures, the role of the network is important for all measures, but it is crucial in case of M16, which supports the establishment of EIP groups."*

Innovation is an important element of rural development, which the RDP supports primarily through measures M16 and M19. The recent RDP 2014-2020 evaluation (2019) concluded that *"Most innovative operations are carried out by local action groups within measure M19, and a large proportion of innovative operations are aimed at improving production potential. Significant number of innovative operations are largely carried out by young farmers. The Rural Network in particular makes an important contribution to innovation within the RDP, through notification of examples of good practice and organisation of professional excursions"*.

The network is very active in the field of innovation, and also important in measure M06.1, promoting examples of good practice and publishing innovative solutions for young farmers.

➤ JC8.2: NRN activities resulted in process improvements and innovation in respect of RDP governance or implementation

The case study evidence presented in response to JC1 already provides some good instances of NRN activities resulting in process improvements to RDP governance and/or implementation. In addition, there is some relevant evidence from records held by ENRD CP, as follows.

Table 11: ENRD CP events to increase stakeholder involvement in the implementation of rural development

Type of event/meetings	Number	Increase since last EU RN Self-assessment
ENRD workshops & conferences	39	13
NRN meetings	14	6
Thematic Working Group meetings	37	14
Thematic seminars	5	1

Source: ADE, CCRI based on Self-assessment of the European Rural Networks 2017 and 2020 reports ADE, CCRI

Table 12: Topics of ENRD CP capacity building events, which may have covered innovation in RDP implementation or governance

RDP IMPLEMENTATION	LEADER	NRNs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) (Feb, 2015); • Reasonableness of Costs and Public Procurement, (Mar, 2015); • Results-based AGRI-environment Payments for Biodiversity (RBAPS), (Apr, 2015); • AGRI-environment-climate Measures (AECM), (Dec, 2016); • Unlocking the Potential of the RDPs, (Feb, 2016); • 'Financing opportunities for projects - the Investment Plan for Europe' (Feb, 2016); • Selection criteria (Mar, 2016); • EFSI-EAFRD complementarity and investment platforms (Apr, 2016); • Measure 16 'Cooperation', (Jun, 2016); • Areas Facing Natural or Other Specific Constraints (ANCs), (Oct, 2016); • Generational Renewal through Rural Development (Jan, 2017); • Social Hubs in Europe (Feb, 2017); • Farm resilience (Mar, 2017); • Natura 2000 (Sept, 2017); • 'The Future CAP: towards a Performance-based Delivery Model' (Jan, 2018); • 'Improving Rural Policy Delivery: the Regional Dimension' (Feb, 2018); • 'Addressing Bottlenecks in RDP Implementation and Preparing for the Performance Review' (June, 2018); • 'Key Steps for CAP Strategic Planning' (Oct, 2018); • 'Biodiversity & the CAP: Working Together to Reach Conservation Goals' (Jan, 2019); • Attracting Young Farmers and Entrepreneurs in Rural Areas (Feb, 2019); • NetworX (April, 2019); • Pathways to farm competitiveness through the CAP (Jun, 2019). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEADER/CLLD Conference on Cooperation (Sep, 2015); • Simplified Cost Options in LEADER/CLLD (Jan, 2016); • Umbrella Projects in LEADER/CLLD' (Feb, 2016); • LEADER/CLLD and Networking in support of Social Inclusion (Mar, 2016); • LEADER Cooperation, (Jun, 2016); • Achieving Results the CLLD Way: Putting the Method to Work, (Dec, 2016); • LEADER innovation (Feb, 2017); • LEADER/CLLD implementation through practitioner-led work (Jun, 2017); • LEADER Innovation (Nov, 2017); • LEADER Simplification (Feb, 2018); • 'LEADER: Acting Locally in a Changing World' (Oct, 2018); • 'Simplified Cost Options: experience gained and new opportunities' (June, 2019). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking for innovation under Measure 16 in RDPs (Oct, 2015); • NSUs in Member States with regional RDPs (May, 2016); • Regional and local networking (May, 2017); • NRN Communication (June, 2018); • 'Project Examples and Good Practices: Approaches to Collection and Dissemination' (Nov, 2018).

Source: ADE, CCRI based on Self-assessment of the European Rural Networks 2017 and 2020 reports ADE, CCRI

Considering specific additional evidence on these topics from the case studies

In Austria: "Direct support to RDP implementation or governance is outside of the scope of NRN activities. Relevant support to RDP implementation can be related to the enhancing of specific thematic knowledge. In the context of governance arrangements, the activities of the NRN in gender mainstreaming may be relevant. The gender mainstreaming activities of the NRN were highlighted as useful to the MA. The EIP-AGRI approach to fostering rural innovation was also highlighted as a good example of process innovation".

In Wallonia: "Some of the lessons learned from the Innovation Roads and RwDR activities will be taken up in the future CAP strategic plan".

In France: the EIP-AGRI component of the NSU strengthened governance through the Innovation Advisory Committee, and fostered dissemination and networking between H2020 projects, farmers, other stakeholders and improved bottom-up approaches to innovation.

In Italy: effective governance of communications and use of magazines and web portal is highlighted as positive model of innovation for the RDP.

In Slovenia: "NRN close collaboration with, EIP VEM and Info Points on supporting and highlighting innovative approaches and solutions, has fostered innovation at national level and brought a focus on innovation to the centre stage. "

4.9 SQ9: To what extent have the ENRD (at the EU level) and NRNs (at the national level) been successful in reaching out to various stakeholder groups ?

4.9.1 Approach

4.9.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the study question

The evaluation in question covers **both the EU level** with the ENRD **and the national levels** with the NRNs.

The SQ9 partly relates to question SQ1, but with a different perspective. SQ9 is about effectiveness (i.e. to what extent) while SQ1 is about causal analysis (i.e. how). SQ1 is more restrictive: "increase the involvement of stakeholders" vs "reaching out to various stakeholders". This second concept implies that the SQ9 focuses on the extent to which stakeholder groups are well informed about the different networking activities and consequently the effectiveness of the communication channels used by ENRD and NRNs.

4.9.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC9.1: Strategies and action plans include appropriate actions to reach different stakeholder groups.

JC9.2: ENRD has been successful in reaching out to different stakeholders at EU level.

JC9.3: The NRNs have been successful in reaching various actors at national, regional and local levels.

4.9.1.3 Methodology

The approach is based on triangulation of information and approaches from literature and documentary review at EU level and in case studies, monitoring data (CNS), surveys (MA/PA, NSU and SH), case studies and interviews with ENRD-CP, NSUs, MAs and stakeholders.

4.9.2 Summary answer

SQ9: To what extent have the ENRD (at the EU level) and NRNs (at the national level) been successful in reaching out to various stakeholder groups (i.e. national administrations, NGOs, local/regional authorities, Local Action Groups, farmers, researchers, etc.)?

JC9.1: Strategies and action plans include appropriate actions to reach different stakeholder groups

NRNs present different modalities of stakeholders' involvement. First, stakeholders can be involved in the **NRN governance structures**, but in most cases, this involvement proved to be less effective than in the **operational networking structures** (i.e., TWGs in different countries or Info Point in Slovenia). Regional antennas (RAs), for their decentralised nature, enable more direct and regular communications with stakeholders. In some cases, the joint working of TWGs and RAs, also through reciprocal information flows, leads to improving stakeholders' participation in NRN activities.

The third modality is the direct participation of stakeholders in networking projects (MCDR in France, small projects in Slovenia and thematic projects in Italy). This approach seems very promising in ensuring proactive participation, promoting grassroots solutions and creating new networks/strengthening existing ones.

An increasing rate of NRNs' participation in the Steering Group and mainly ENRD thematic meetings have been reported in the last years in most CS reports, but the evaluation of ENRD thematic groups and seminars by NSU personnel is controversial.

JC9.2: ENRD has been successful in reaching out to different stakeholders at the EU level

Both MA-PAs and NSUs evaluate positively the range of ENRD activities. Nevertheless, according to the MA and NSU surveys, ENRD seems more successful in facilitating the exchange of expertise between different actors or promoting the capabilities of the institutional stakeholders (also by improving RDP quality and implementation) than broadening the involvement of stakeholders.

JC9.3: The NRNs have been successful in reaching various actors at national, regional, and local levels

According to the different sources of information, NRNs have been successful in reaching some specific categories of stakeholders, such as MAs-Pas, LAGs, and national / regional / local administrations / authorities. These categories are also confirmed by looking at the composition of main stakeholders responding to the SH survey.

Farmers are also important stakeholders to reach. In Italy, farmers/cooperatives/farm networks and MA/PA/sector administrations represent together more than one-third of the total in the closest network. In other cases, farmers are mainly represented by their associations/organisations. In Austria, for example, farmers are targeted indirectly via multipliers. However, with the shift to virtual formats during COVID-19, more farmers were able to participate in NRN events.

Non-agricultural stakeholders and bodies representing the civil society (including environmental and non-profit organisations promoting social inclusion, managers of other EU Funds like ERDF-ESF-EMFF, etc.) **are underrepresented in the people actively involved in networking activities:** for example, in Italy, the world of non-agricultural actors represents something less than one-fifth of the total. In Wallonia, it is 11%. In Slovakia, the range of possible stakeholders and related activities is very much driven and informed by RDP measures, as the boundaries are strictly defined by the primary focus on EAFRD.

In conclusion, ENRD and NRNs have been successful in reaching some categories of stakeholders (LAGs, NSU, MA), but opinions collected through surveys and other sources of information cannot confirm this judgement for other categories of stakeholders (non-agricultural stakeholders and bodies representing the civil society). Farmers, advisors, and researchers got more involved thanks to the support to innovation although this involvement should be continued and further developed (see efficiency).

4.9.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

➤ **JC9.1: Strategies and action plans include appropriate actions to reach different stakeholder groups**

The ways NRNs involve different stakeholders in their strategies and action plans are very differentiated across case studies. In this analysis several organisational and governance factors should be taken into consideration. Four modalities can be enucleated from the CS analysis, as represented by Table 13:

- *Direct involvement in NRN governance structures;*
- *Direct participation in operational networking structures;*
- *Participation in managing networking activities;*
- *Beneficiary of a targeting approach in networking.*

Table 13 shows synthetically how these modalities have been declined in the seven case studies.

Table 13: Different modalities of stakeholders' involvement in case studies

Case study country	Direct involvement in governance structures	Setting up specific networking structures	Direct management of specific networking projects	Target groups of networking activities
Austria	4 consortium partners in NRN, representing key stakeholders	5 TWGs (including stakeholders' representatives)	None	All activities addressed to so-called multipliers
Belgium-Walloon	Network Permanent Committee	9 TWGs (including a series of experts and other SH)	None	Different stakeholders to be involved according to the type of networking tool
France	General Assembly, Rural Network Committee and 2 Advisory Committees (LEADER, EIP AGRI)	4 TWGs (Smart villages, Culture and rural development, Monitoring&Evaluation, Innovation). Regional Rural Network Meetings	collective projects called MCDR (Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural), including up to 20 partners from varied institutions or organisations	Different stakeholders to be reached by diversified tools
Estonia	Cooperation Chamber of Rural Network	15 TWGs , but only 6 active in 2020	None	Different stakeholders to be involved according to the type of networking tool
Italy	4 Steering Committees involving different kinds of stakeholders	21 TWGs grouped in four clusters (horizontal, sectoral, environmental and broader rural) involving different stakeholders. 19 Regional Antennas	two specific projects (outsourced to bodies different from NSU) aiming to biodiversity indicators and the monitoring of bees' sector	Four target groups (stakeholders involved in RDP, farmers/foresters, civil society, MAs/PAs/EIP Ogs) to be reached through diversified tools and topics
Slovakia	None	4 TWGs (LEADER/CLLD, EIP, Social farming, Young and small farmers) including thematic stakeholders. 8 Regional antennas	None	Prioritised stakeholders: those of the 4 TWGs (LAGs, EIP OGs, social farms and young and small farmers)
Slovenia	Steering Group of the Rural Network	10 RDP Info Points (run by different stakeholders' organisations)	OPEAN CALL- Small projects: Co-financing selected networking activities of NRN members	Different stakeholders to be involved according to the type of networking tool

Source: ADE et al. (2022), based on case study reports' analysis

Direct involvement in NRN governance structures

First, in several CS, stakeholders are involved in the governance structures, to ensure that many different needs and visions are taken as relevant in the process of design and implementation. Governance structures range from specific committees to steer/advise the NSU in their operational activities, to General Assemblies (France) or the same consortium partners taking part in the NRN (Austria). Rural development stakeholders have the formal opportunity to express their needs and demands to the NRN during governance meetings.

In several CS, NRN governance structures have partly failed the function of involving stakeholders. In the Italian CS, the four steering committees played a relevant role in the first periods of the NRN's implementation, but in the last two years, they have lost relevance. In the France CS, the stakeholders' participation in the General Assembly was meant to enable rural development actors to contribute to the network's governance directly. The French governance structure actually copied from what exists at the EU level did not work as foreseen: the General Assembly actually duplicated somehow with the Rural Network Committee. Other "official" structures did not work (the colleges) but more operational structures played an important role (TWG innovation, GTSE, NRN-RRN meetings). In Wallonia, the Permanent Committee worked quite well over the period.

More direct participation in the NRN's operational structures in different cases shows more successful results.

Direct participation in operational networking structures

Stakeholders participate directly in more operational networking structures aimed to coordinate and/or implement specific topics. This happens in all countries with TWGs and/or Regional Antennas (RAs) or other decentralised structures (e.g. Info Points in Slovenia). These structures can play different roles:

- Include key stakeholders and support the NRN in terms of stakeholder outreach. This is particularly true for TWGs in Austria, Slovakia and France and for Info Points in Slovenia, where the provision of information is based on the direct involvement of specific stakeholder organisations.

- Provide feedback and enable the identification of relevant topics for the annual work programme as well as potential participants and contacts. This is valid for both TWGs and RAs in Italy, Austria, and Slovakia CSs. In particular, the RAs imply a decentralised nature of the network and consequently more flexibility in addressing needs and more direct and regular communication with their stakeholders. Another positive effect is better cooperation and knowledge of the local rural actors and beneficiaries. In some CS (Slovakia), RAs are defined as the "eyes and ears" on the ground, being involved with stakeholders on daily basis. They can act as a point of first contact, but also as multipliers in their respective regions. In this respect, Italian RAs also make a periodic inventory of regional needs to understand the most urgent priorities for the regional MA.
- Regarding both the Italian and Slovakian cases, there are information flows between TWGs and RAs, since the RAs personnel is involved in TWGs at the national and regional level, having contacts with stakeholders and participating in regional tables/meetings aiming to the measures design.
- Even when stakeholders are not directly involved in TWGs, TWGs can establish closer contacts and feedback with stakeholders, based on common interests and specific topics. These networks, based on frequent contacts and relations, are often equally powerful in stimulating participation and collaboration by the various stakeholders (Italian CS).

In all these cases, difficulties in reaching out a broad range of stakeholders can originate from a series of factors:

- some of the RAs do not have a "balanced" approach towards stakeholders on the ground and are prioritising some groups and activities, neglecting others (Slovakia CS);
- the level of stakeholder involvement varies, from one RA to another, depending on the "variety" of stakeholders in the region and on RA professional focus (Slovakia CS);
- RA's heterogeneous capabilities of involvement are also visible in the Italian CS: the range of activities covered by each RA is variable, strongly depending on the skills and expertise available in the RAs and the types of MA's needs. Given the size of many RAs, is not realistic to have a full range of competencies in each RAs, whereas seems more efficient to count on interchanges/collaborations between TWGs and Ras.

Although Regional Rural Network (RRN) in France have not been included in the CS analysis, reported comments by stakeholders confirm the heterogeneous capability of conveying stakeholders' needs to the NRN: some Regions have a dynamic and well-implemented RRN, and others have not been as active.

Participation in managing networking activities

Third, in some CS stakeholders are allowed to participate actively in **specific networking projects**, like the collective projects in France NRN (Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural, MCDR), small projects in Slovenia or thematic projects in Italy.

In the French case, up to 20 partners contribute to the implementation of networking projects in a different series of fields from different institutions and organisations. MCDR projects are selected under specific calls and aim, among other things, to reinforce cooperation at the national level and within regions and create new thematic networks or reinforce existing ones. They play a key role in bringing together regional actors that work on similar topics to collaborate at the interregional or national scale.

In the Slovenian case, the NRN annually publish a call and co-finance projects proposed by at least 3 NRN members and activities that contribute to its objectives. Target groups are preferred (young, elderly, and rural women, farms in organic farming or agri-environmental measures, EIP operational groups, producer groups and organisations, cooperatives, local action groups, and organisations in the field of promoting equality and combating discrimination). Such an approach has multiplying effects on stakeholders' involvement since organisations representing different stakeholder groups are actively bidding for support (Slovenia CS).

The Italian case is more limited in terms of the number of projects activated, but more focused on environmental stakeholders (organisations and research institutions operating in the field of biodiversity).

Overall, this approach to networking seems very promising in decentralising the management of networking activities and creating new networks in an interregional context, ensuring the active participation and interests of local/regional stakeholders to cooperate and propose grassroots solutions. In most cases, these projects seem to show comparatively high effectiveness, limited costs and high potential to spread participation on the ground. In the French case, they also stimulate rural stakeholders to carry out collaborative projects with complementary funds from the EAFRD.

The beneficiary of a targeting approach in networking

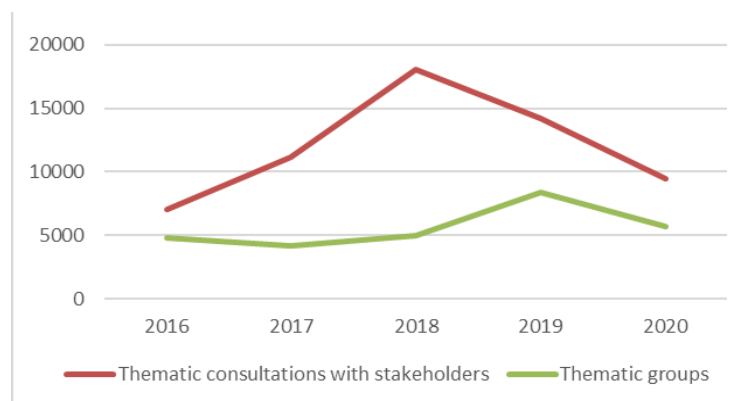
Finally, actions to reach different stakeholder groups respond to some **specific targeting approaches in networking** chosen by NRNs.

In Austria, for example, the approach is selecting specific stakeholder representatives as multipliers. In Italy, instead, the approach is selecting target groups and ensuring that priorities and actions are addressed to selected so-called target groups. Nevertheless, some of these target groups seem quite generic (i.e., civil society). In Slovakia, networking activities are addressed to four prioritised target groups: LAGs, EIP Operational Groups, social farms and young and small farmers. In the other CSs, the range of potential stakeholders is quite large and the capability to reach each group will be explored more in-depth hereunder in JC9.3.

These different modalities to involve actively a broad range of stakeholders have not always met the original objectives.

According to information collected by CNS, the participation of various actors in NRNs events grew constantly until 2019 and then, due to the pandemic, slowed down in 2020 (see second interim report). Among the various initiatives, it is interesting to explore the evolution of thematic consultations. They are organised exchanges between various stakeholders to facilitate the exchange of views, ideas, and experiences on a specific theme. Participation in thematic consultations between 2016 and 2020 reached a peak in 2018 but, unlike the other events, thematic groups remained almost stable. This seems to show that thematic groups represent some of the most effective tools to reach steadily different kinds of stakeholders over time.

Figure 60: Participation in thematic consultations and thematic groups in NRNs between 2016-2020



Source: ADE (2022) based on 2016-2020 CNS database

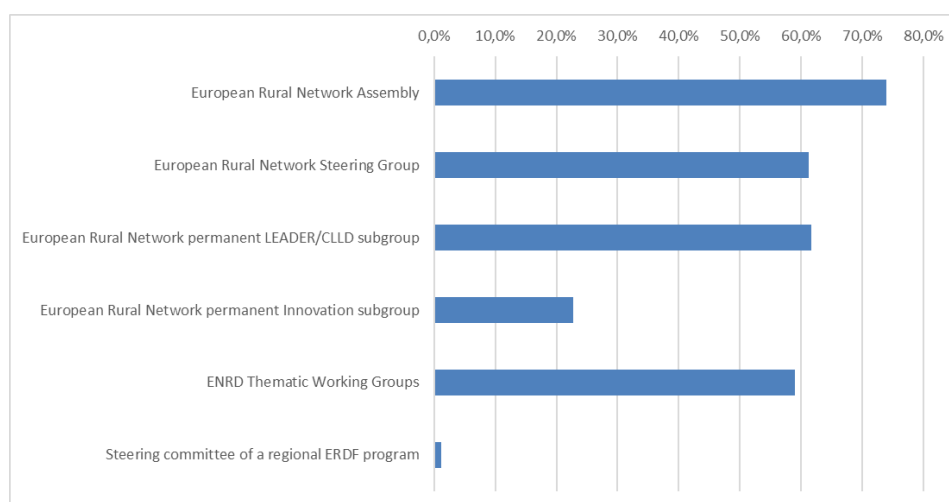
The covid pandemic has negatively impacted the rate of stakeholders' participation in all countries. But it seems interesting to note that this event also caused some positive changes in the participation of some specific stakeholders.

In Austrian and Italian CSs, for example, it was reported the increased participation of farmers and women during COVID-19 was due to increased accessibility of digital events compared to physical events for these groups. Digital events tend to be shorter and are, thus, more easily accessible for persons with significant time constraints.

The NRN's involvement in ENRD groups

The participation of NRN's stakeholders in the ENRD formal groups was asked in the NSU survey, through question 5 ("Were you a member of any of the following governance bodies or working groups during the 2014-2020 period?"). Respondents were rebalanced to avoid the overrepresentation of the Italian NSU. NSUs' answers (Figure 61) confirm that there is within each NRN some member involved in the ENRD Assembly and the broader SG. About 60% of respondents also participate in the LEADER/CLLD subgroup and the various ENRD TWGs.

Figure 61: NSU survey Q5- Were you a member of any of the following governance bodies or working groups during the 2014-2020 period?



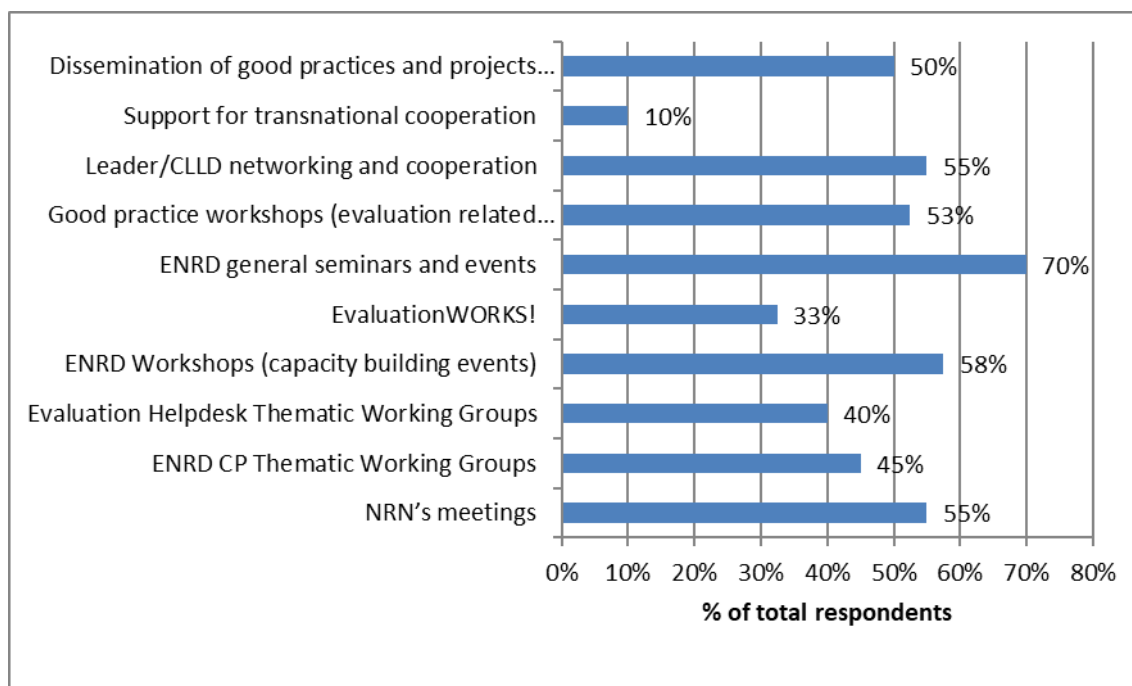
Source: NSU Survey, Q5, n= 23 (ADE, 2022)

An increasing rate of NRNs' participation in the Steering Group and mainly ENRD thematic meetings have been reported in the last years in most CS reports. Nevertheless, in some countries, the participation of NSU members in ENRD activities is strongly regulated by MA and for some activities, the NRN itself does not have any role (i.e., the dissemination of M&E approaches in Austria and Belgium-Walloon CS).

The evaluation of ENRD thematic groups and seminars by NSU personnel is controversial. In some CS reports, the NSU personnel raised some criticism since the results do not always reflect the demands and proposals of the stakeholders (French CS). Furthermore, information tools (i.e., ENRD magazine) or thematic seminars result in being quite generic in the content and operational guidelines (as reported by interviews with stakeholders in Slovenia and Italy CS).

In this regard, to improve networking between the European and the national level, the initiative of aggregating NRNs in country clusters has been greatly appreciated in interviews with NSUs. Common interests among similar countries have stimulated informal contacts: for example, in France the NSU personnel said that the cluster's members meet through online calls once or twice per month, demonstrating a high level of involvement in these informal meetings.

More or less the same question has been raised in the MAs-PAs survey (see **Figure 62**). the rate of participation among the respondents is lower than NSU members but however seems not negligible for some ENRD activities (general seminars and events, capacity-building events, LEADER/CLLD networking and cooperation). It is to be noted that the rate of participation in ENRD initiatives on the evaluation issues is too low, given the strong Managing Authorities' need to get updated information and training on this topic.

Figure 62: MA-PA survey Q18- Between 2014 and 2020, were you involved in any of the following ENRD activities?

Source: MA-PA Survey, Q18, n= 23 (ADE, 2022)

According to NSU personnel and MA-PA, there are often language barriers since these actors find important limitations in the involvement of stakeholders in ENRD activities. This difficulty has been pointed out in several CS interviews (France, Austria, Italy, Belgium-Walloon CS).

➤ **JC9.2: ENRD has been successful in reaching out to different stakeholders at the EU level**

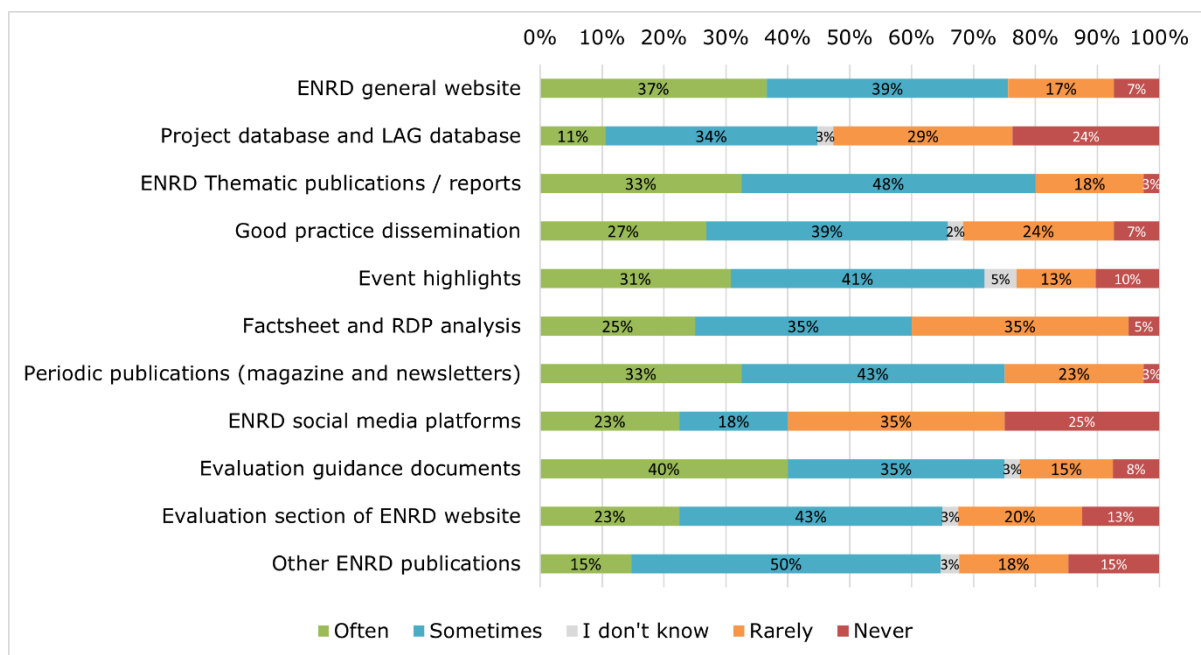
Besides the participation of MAs-PAs and NSUs in the ENRD governance structures and TWGs, it seems relevant to consider to what extent they have been using the ENRD outputs and how the ENRD activities have led to greater involvement of various stakeholders in the EU countries.

MAs-PAs responding to the survey evaluate ENRD activities as most successful in facilitating the exchange of expertise between different actors, but surely much less effective in addressing their specific needs and, more in general, involving the different rural development stakeholders (**Figure 27**).

A very similar opinion turned out to be the result of the NSU survey under the same question (**Figure 26**). ENRD activities are more effective in facilitating the exchange of expertise and promoting capabilities of the institutional stakeholders (also by improving RDP quality and implementation) than broadening the involvement of all stakeholders (**Figure 26**). In France, for example, it was reported that some ENRD publications were used by the NSU to build thematic activities. This was true for the Smart Villages topic, for which France and Italy have set up a series of important initiatives (seminars, guidelines, reports).

An indicator of how much national stakeholders are involved concretely in the ENRD activities comes from their contribution to the use and dissemination of ENRD publications and digital content. For most ENRD activities, MAs-PAs rarely or occasionally use and disseminate ENRD outputs (**Figure 63**). More frequent use is evident for evaluation guidance and documents: it seems interesting to point out that, whereas they are scarcely involved actively in monitoring and evaluation initiatives (see previous **Figure 62**), are however strongly interested in achieving information and knowledge by documents ENRD issues on the topic.

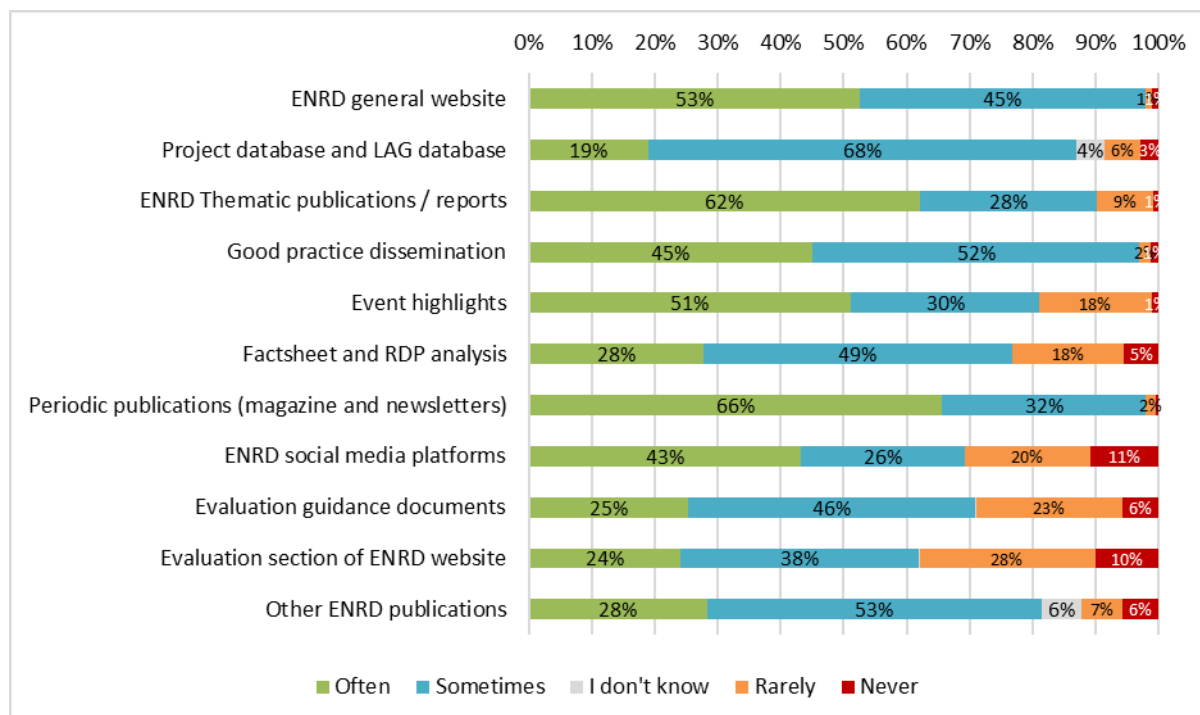
Figure 63: MA-PA survey Q19- How often did you (MA/PA) use and/or disseminate the following ENRD publications and digital content in the 2014-2020 period?



Source: MA-PA Survey, Q19, n= 41 (ADE, 2022)

There is a very large contribution from NSUs to the use and dissemination of ENRD periodic publications (magazine and newsletter), their thematic publications and reports as well as the ENRD website, in accordance with their role of informing the broader public. The project and LAG database is less used and disseminated as well as the evaluation guidance and section. (**Figure 64**). NSU use and disseminate less the ENRD evaluation activities than MAS-PAs.

Figure 64: NSU survey Q15- How often did you use and/or disseminate the following ENRD publications and digital content in the 2014-2020 period?

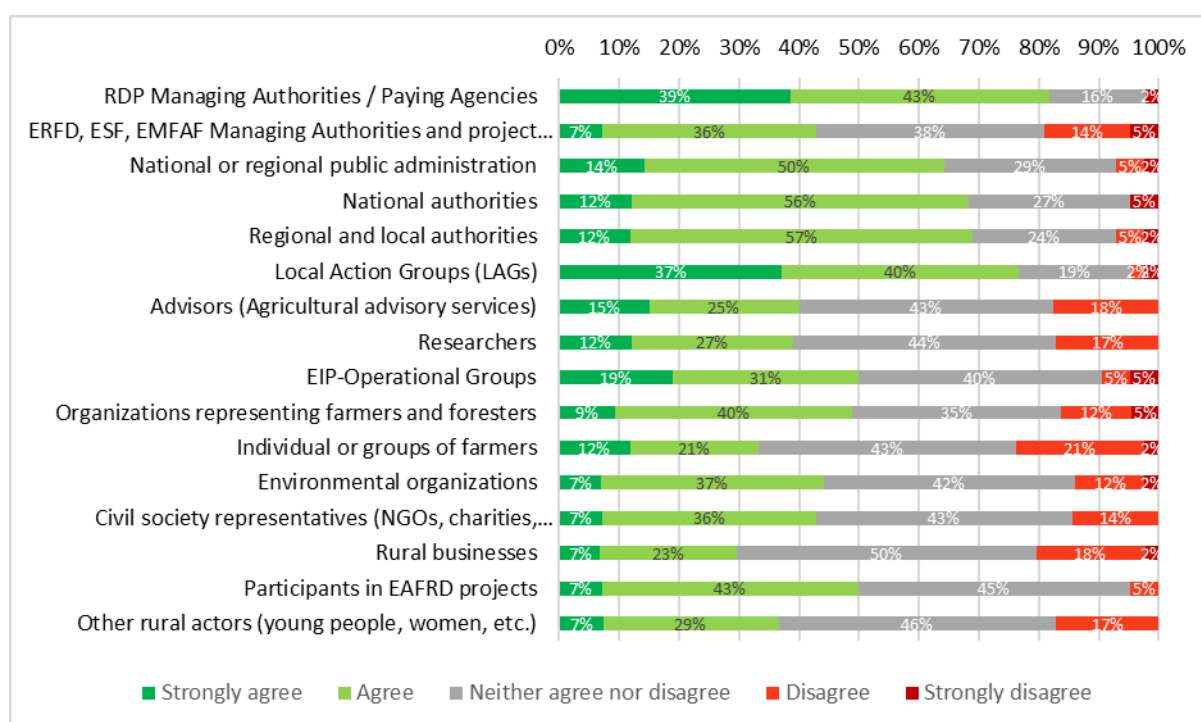


Source: NSU Survey, Q15, n= 24 (ADE, 2022)

➤ **JC9.3: The NRNs have been successful in reaching various actors at national, regional and local levels**

NRN's action plans are very diverse from country to country, including different networking tools. By answering to the question of which stakeholders have been reached by NRN activities, MAs-PAs have perceived themselves, LAGs and national/regional/local institutions as the main targets of networking activities. They agree and strongly agree (Figure 65) on the effective reaching out of these categories, whilst raising doubts about the NRN's capability to reach stakeholders like individual groups of farmers, rural businesses and other ESI Funds administrations. A negative perception seems to be also in the case of environmental organisations, civil society representatives. Worthy to notice that, after excluding from the sample (44 respondents) seventeen Italian respondents (to avoid overrepresentation of this country), the distribution of most reached/less reached stakeholders does not change so much.

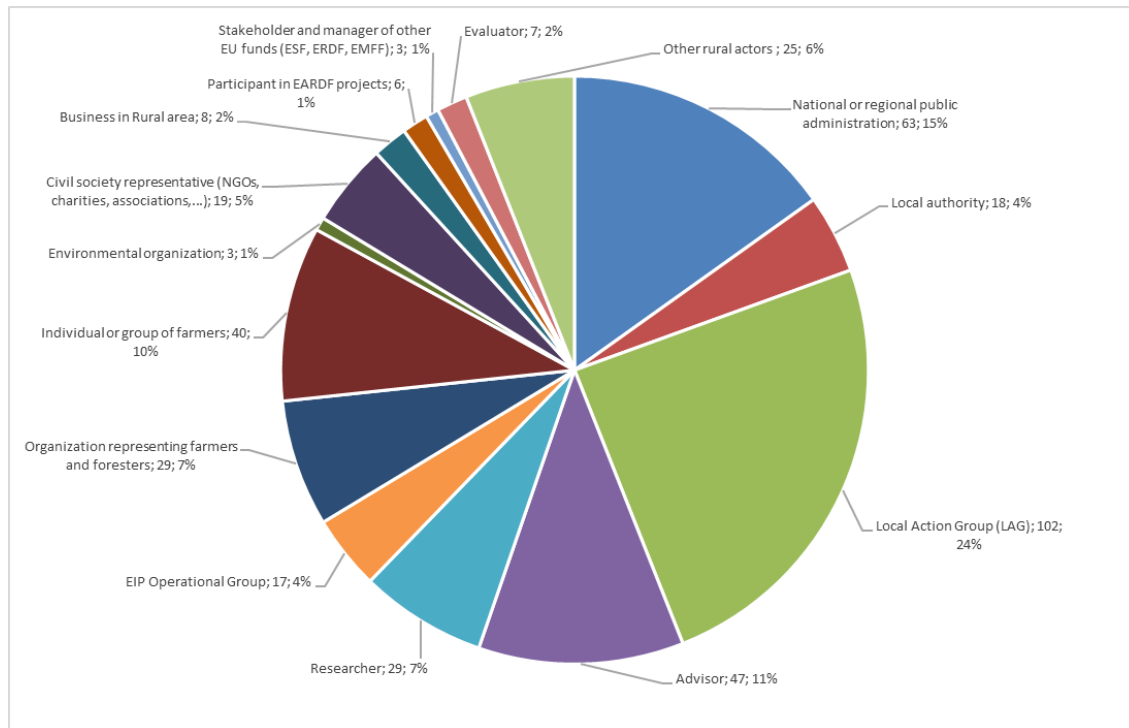
Figure 65: MA-PA Survey Q10 - NRN activities reached the following stakeholders during 2014-2020 programming period



Source: MA-PA Survey, Q10, n= 44 (ADE, 2022)

According to the NSU representatives' opinion (24 cases), EIP-Operational Groups and stakeholders and managers of other Funds (ESF, ERDF and EMFF) are the hardest-to-reach categories (**Figure 53**). This opinion is probably due to the novelty of the EIP groups and the need for a gradual knowledge of this policy measure, on one side, and the separation of the programmes between EAFRD and ESI Funds in the 2014-20 programming period. NSU's representatives seem more positive about the NRN's capability to reach an individual group of farmers, environmental organisations, civil society representatives, and rural businesses. In fact, in the survey NSUs answer that these categories are not only reached, but also involved and actively involved in the national network (**Figure 53**). Highly positive is the opinion on the active involvement of MAs-PAs, LAGs and advisors.

The stakeholders' survey provides some interesting comparisons with previous opinions. First, the composition of respondents to the survey tells already something about the participative attitude of different stakeholders (Figure 64). Of the 416 participants, about one-fourth are LAGs, followed by national/regional/local authorities (19%), individual farmers and organisations of farmers (17%), advisors, researchers and EIP groups (22% totally). Very scarce and insignificant is the participation of environmental organisations, managers of other funds, evaluators, and rural businesses.

Figure 66: Stakeholders' survey – Composition by categories of stakeholders participating to the survey

Source: Stakeholders' survey, n= 416 (ADE, 2022)

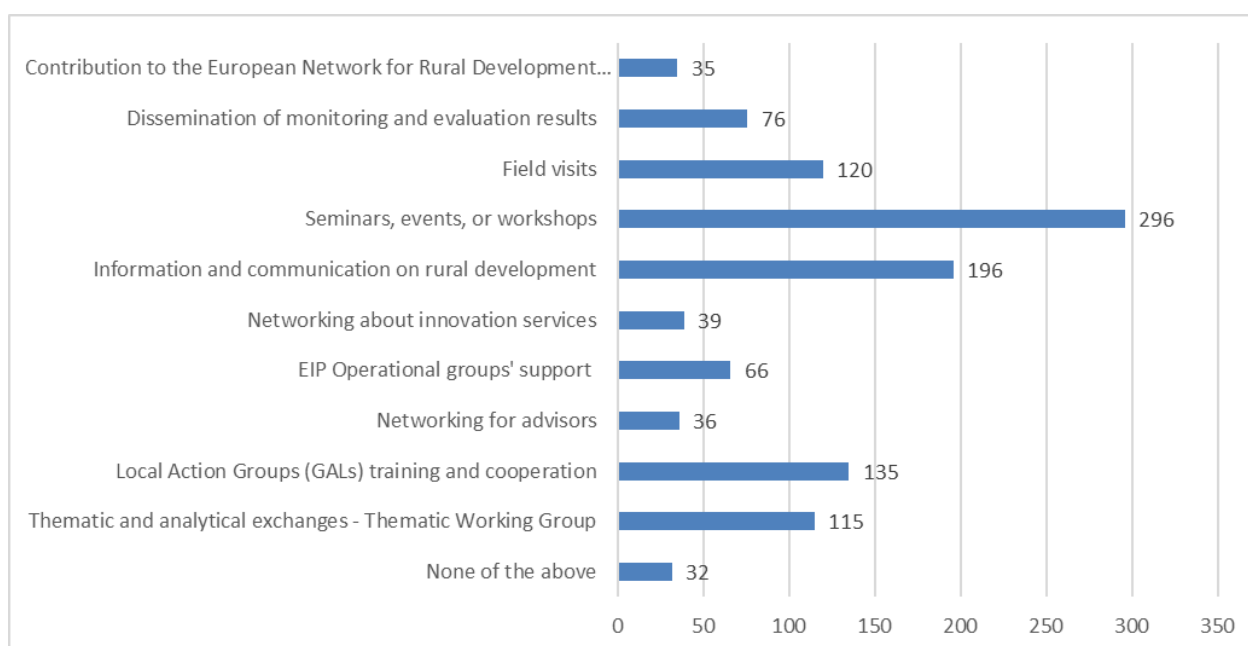
Other relevant information can be drawn from the stakeholder mapping exercise as reported in case study analysis, which provides further elements of reflection on the effectiveness of stakeholders' inclusion and partially confirms surveys' evidence. Leaving apart the singularities of specific countries, the most common features of stakeholders' participation are as follows:

- Administrative bodies (authorities involved in RD implementation, as well as local and regional bodies) and LEADER actors are the most active participants in the network (see Austria, Wallonia and Slovenia CS).
- Farmers are also important stakeholders. In Italy, farmers/cooperatives/farm networks and MA/PA/sector administrations represent together more than one-third of the total in the closest network. In other cases, farmers are mainly represented by their associations/organisations. In Austria, for example, farmers are targeted indirectly via multipliers. However, with the shift to virtual formats during COVID-19, more farmers were able to participate in NRN events. In Wallonia, individual farmers and groups are the most engaged thanks to the innovation activities (see Figure 10 SQ1).
- Researchers and advisors in the agricultural sector are mostly mobilised in the Operational groups and other innovation events, which regroup a large number of participants, including farmers and foresters.
- Non-agricultural stakeholders and bodies representing the civil society, which include environmental and non-profit organisations promoting social inclusion, are underrepresented in the people actively involved in networking activities: for example, in Italy, the world of non-agricultural actors represents something less than one-fifth of the total. In Wallonia, it is 11%. In Slovakia, the range of possible stakeholders and related activities is very much driven and informed by RDP measures, as the boundaries are strictly defined by the primary focus on EAFRD. However in France the diversity of themes covered by the collective projects and cross-cutting animation included the Ministry of Culture and a Partnership with the Urbanism, Construction and Agriculture Plan (PUCA).

- Environmental associations and organisations are not always capable to participate in network events: in Austria, interviews reported that environmental NGOs and environmental technical advisors generally lack personnel and financial resources to participate in events. Nevertheless, this low presence of environmental stakeholders does not automatically mean the undervaluation of environmental topics, as the high relevance of environmental topics in TWGs and collective projects in French NRN is stimulated by other factors.

Stakeholders participated in NRN's activities in differentiated ways, according to the interests and the capacity of the different tools to respond to their needs. According to the evidence of the SH survey, the most popular networking tools are first attending seminars, events, or workshops, and second, getting information and communication on rural development issues (**Figure 67**). Then, at the same level of preference, come other activities like field visits, training on LEADER and cooperation and thematic exchanges.

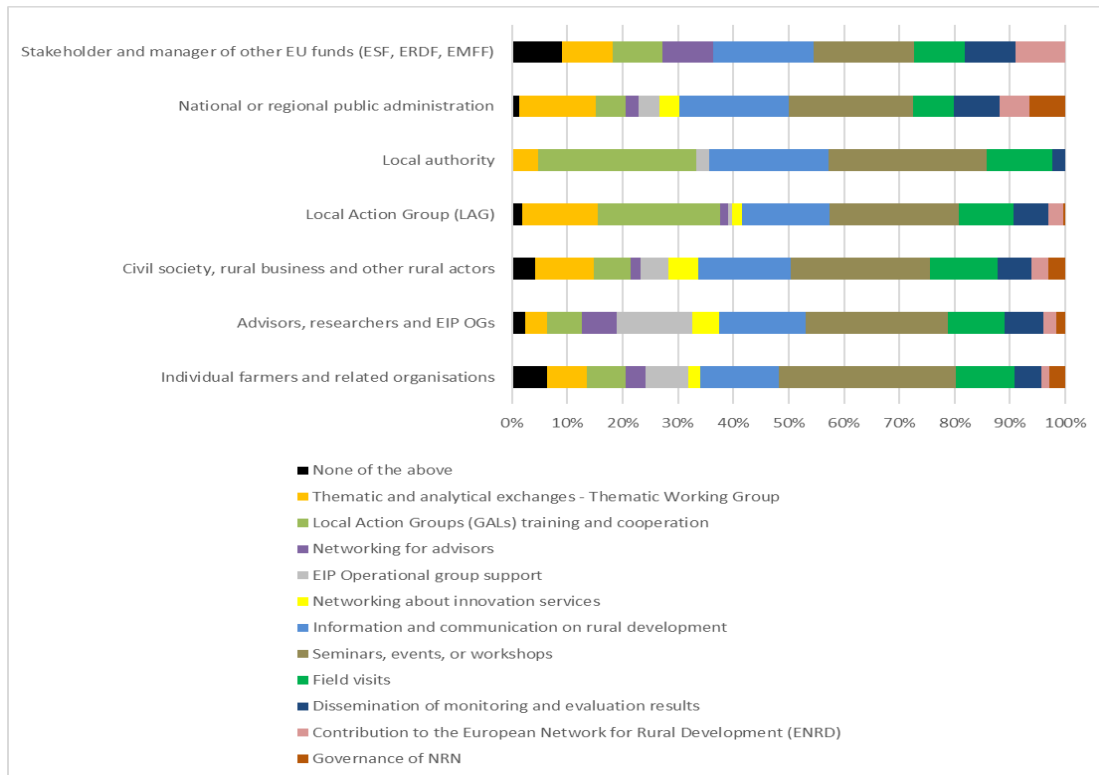
Figure 67: Stakeholders' survey Q4– Did you participate in any of the following NRN activities?



Source: Stakeholders' survey, Q4, n= 416 (multiple responses are possible for each respondent) (ADE, 2022)

The representation of how the different categories of stakeholders distribute their participation to the diverse networking activities is in Figure 68 (after grouping them in more aggregated categories compared to the stakeholder survey questionnaire). Training for LEADER was obviously relevant for LAGs, but also for local authorities, which take usually a relevant role in the LAG's partnerships. Seminars, events and workshops, on one side, and information and communication on rural development are relevant activities to attend more or less for all stakeholders, with no significant differences. They are confirmed to be basic tools for all types of actors and opportunities to enrich knowledge and awareness. Finally, the dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results seems to gain little participation, even in those stakeholders (national or regional public administration and LAGs) which should be potentially preferred target groups of these activities.

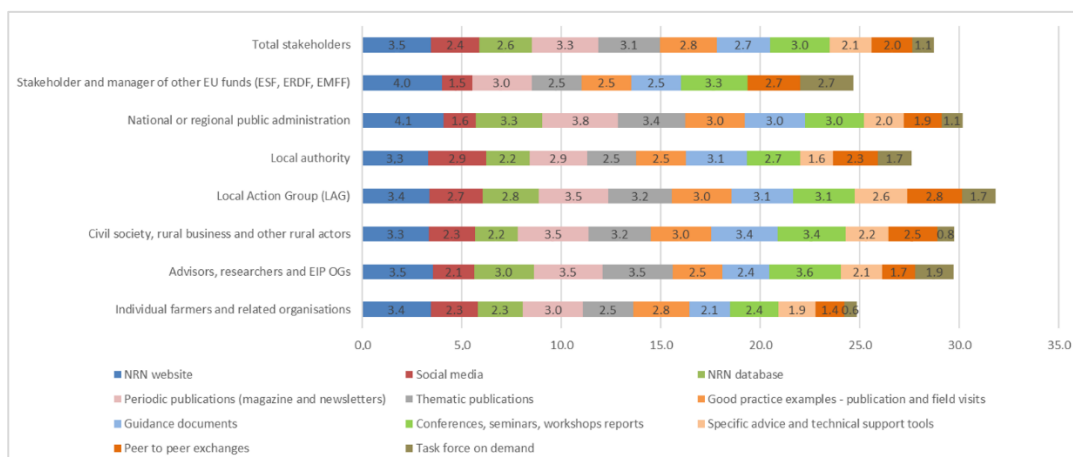
Figure 68: Stakeholders' survey Q4– Did you participate in any of the following NRN activities?



Source: Stakeholders' survey, Q7, n= 416 (multiple responses are possible for each respondent) (ADE, 2022)

Another relevant issue concern whether the different stakeholders have key information relevant for them and to what extent they use the various information/communication tools made available by NRNs. **Figure 69** highlights how the stakeholders' categories (grouped as in the previous figure) rate the different outputs, from 0 (never used) to 5 (frequently used). More in general, all stakeholders use more frequently the NRN website, all types of publications (both periodic and thematic) and, as mentioned before, conferences, seminars and workshop reports. LAGs appear as the category that appreciates most of NRN's outputs, including the peer-to-peer exchanges, which get on average a low rating from other stakeholders. National and regional administrations also rated quite well most of NRN's output, except for specific advice, peer-to-peer exchange and task force on demand. These outputs need to be reconsidered for further improvement in the NRNs' action plans. Social media have very little consideration within the networking activities by the great majority of stakeholders. Worthy noticing that the rate of appreciation of the different outputs by individual farmers and their organisations seems lower than the other stakeholders (except for the website and periodic publications).

Figure 69: Stakeholders' survey - Which of the following National Rural Network "outputs" do you consult/use/read?



Source: Stakeholders' survey, Q4, n= 416 (multiple responses are possible for each respondent) (ADE, 2022)

C

Theme 3: Efficiency

4.10SQ10: To what extent have the different approaches selected by Member States for the structure and organisation of NRNs impacted their efficiency (e.g. outsourced national Network Support Units vs integrated into the Managing Authority; inclusion of regional-level components within NRNs)?

4.10.1 Approach

4.10.1.1 Rationale and coverage

Previous evaluation studies under this Framework Contract (ÖIR et al., 2020; CCRI et al., forthcoming) showed that efficiency analysis based on the costs of services' provision per unit of output is misleading and unable to catch appropriate differences for comparison purposes. As shown by ENRD Working Document, analysing the NRN structures (January 2020), the national/regional dimension and activity outsourcing can play a relevant role in explaining the differences among NRN governance structures.

Efficiency in this analysis is **the network structures' capacity to implement timely** (compared to the stakeholders' needs and RDP implementation) **the networking activities** regarding RDP implementation and to **recruit and employ adequate human resources** (qualitatively and quantitatively) in the different network activities. These capabilities can also be explained by how NRNs are organised and the governance structure (national/regional and type of NSU outsourcing) they have selected.

The effects on the efficiency can also be interpreted as results of governance structures, such as: 1) the division of decision powers between the MA and the network technical structure; 2) the role of various stakeholders in influencing the strategy and action plan management, through the participation of steering committees/task groups/thematic groups, etc.

This study question **is focused on the NRNs** and their different levels of efficiency in implementing their activities.

The NRN activities are addressed to the different actors in rural areas. The main stakeholders of the NRN initiatives to be covered by the data collection belong to three main categories already defined in the Glossary of terms (see Stakeholder main groups). Collecting information on efficiency should cover representatives of this range of possible stakeholders.

4.10.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC10.1: The different governance structures can implement adequately all networking activities designed in their action plans

This JC focuses on the capacity of NRNs to implement the planned budget expenditures among the different activities according to their action plans. This analysis seeks to explore where the main implementation difficulties are and if there are some common patterns across NRNs in delays/implementing difficulties. Comparisons between Member States are considered if relevant.

Furthermore, this analysis envisages an examination of the methods of gathering the stakeholders' demands. It is as well based on the analysis of the judgement that the beneficiaries of NRN activities make at the national and regional levels in the surveys, the documentary review and case studies. In particular, the study analyses how NRNs consider stakeholders' opinions and participation in designing their activities.

JC10.2: The different governance structures have different efficiency depending on the level of autonomy

This JC focuses on the NRNs' capacity to implement timely the networks' activities and implies analysing to what extent the different governance structures of NRNs can drive their initiatives on time toward the directions indicated by stakeholders.

The analysis describes the most efficient instruments to deliver the activities and how the different degrees of NRN autonomy from the managing authority can influence the efficiency of their activities.

Efficiency, in this case, must be judged by beneficiaries of the NRNs' activities, namely MA and regional administrations, LAGs and local community associations, farmers' organisations and other sectors' organisations.

JC10.3: NRNs' human resources are qualitatively and quantitatively adequate in implementing the different activities

This JC focuses on the human resources employed in the NRNs structures to provide the different types of activities (see the different types above). The analysis must consider the distribution of full-time equivalent units by network activities and, at the case study level, the FTE by type of output.

This analysis implies examining how many full-time equivalent units are employed, how they are distributed among the different types of activity and to what extent they are adequate for the planned activities, according to the evaluation of main stakeholders.

4.10.1.3 Methodology

Data was collected through the following means; First, the views of stakeholders on NRN activities by type were collected through three surveys i.e., MA/PA, NSU and SH surveys. Second, more specific insights from stakeholders were collected through the case studies' interviews.

Then, the team will triangulate available information among the survey data, the interviews conducted in case studies and secondary data including qualitative and quantitative information drawn from the seven CS reports of NRNs.

Given the high variability among the NRN governance structures, their programmes and action plans, and the existing monitoring data systems, most comparable information will be provided by the three surveys and interviews from the seven selected case studies.

4.10.2 Summary answer

SQ10: To what extent have the different approaches selected by Member States for the structure and organisations of NRNs had an impact on their efficiency (e.g. outsourced national Network Support Units vs. integrated in the Managing Authority; inclusion of regional-level components within NRNs)?

The different structures and organisations of NRNs had significant impacts on their efficiency. The nature of this impact depends on the governance structure, the degree of autonomy and the administrative burden related to NRN management.

Very few Member States have outsourced national Network Support Units (AT, BE-Wal, IE); most are integrated within the Managing Authority in a kind of hybrid model. The Ministry dedicates internal resources to the NSU, which can in addition outsource smaller or larger parts of the activities (tendering and contracting, organisation of events, etc.).

Networks' activities must be in line with the objectives of rural development policy. This policy coherence is ensured by the MA, and it explains why few NSU are completely externalised. In BE-Wal, there is a close and smooth relationship between the NSU and the MA. In AT, the MA does not give any autonomy to the NSU. In cases where the NSU is integrated within the MA, sometimes burdensome and time consuming administrative work (tendering and contracting, organisation of events, etc.) is outsourced to other bodies, which improves efficiency.

JC10.1: The different governance structures can adequately implement all networking activities designed in their action plans

As measured by the financial assessment, efficiency does not reveal significant problems in most NRNs. The pandemic halted activities and affected all face-to-face events for nearly two years in all NRNs. However, online seminars and info events have provided an effective alternative. Surveys make it possible to analyse which NRN's activities present significant efficiency problems, and the factors influencing efficiency. From the different surveys, the analysis found that MA-PAs, NSU and regional/local stakeholders perceive efficiency problems differently. MA-PAs and NSU agreed on

improving networking efficiency for innovation and advisors. Increasing efficiency is requested by stakeholders for activities like field visits, good practice exchanges and information on the different range of policies (including cohesion and national policies). Compared to the views of the MA-PAs and NSUs, stakeholders in the seven case studies highlighted a greater need for change, especially in implementing more frequent initiatives and better targeting to regional/local specificities.

Two groups of stakeholders strongly believe that NRN should improve its efficiency. The first group includes non-agricultural actors like business operators, managers of other EU funds, local authorities, and civil society representatives. The second group of stakeholders includes farmers (individuals or groups) and agricultural advisers, which according to the survey believe that NRN should strengthen efficiency through more frequent initiatives (advisors) and a substantial improvement of linkages with territorial specificities (farmers).

JC10.2: The efficiency of the different governance structures varies depending on the level of autonomy

The governance structure can influence the efficiency levels of networking in several ways: 1) The choice of internalising vs externalising the networking activities; 2) The degree of NSU autonomy; 3) The administrative burden related to the internal procedures between MA, PA and NSU.

The choice of internalising the NSU is deemed as positive in case studies (France, Italy), but externalising some networking activities can generate some interesting positive effects: reduction of management costs for the MA; greater flexibility and responsiveness in organising activities, events or responding to requests; a broad panel of skills, etc. In France, however, the strong role of institutions in the network has brought some stakeholders to perceive the NRN as a centre providing resources, rather than as a place to exchange experiences. A good solution might be a combination of internalising some crucial activities (i.e. the thematic working groups) and externalising some others (i.e. the contractual management in the French NRN).

The lack of autonomy within MA-NSU relations is felt as a constraint in Austria, where there is strict control of all networking activities by the MA, which narrows innovative networking. In the other case studies, the NSU indicated that they have sufficient autonomy to design and implement their activities.

Finally, the administrative burden has been addressed in the NSU survey as the most widespread issue hampering efficiency in the governance structure. This was one of the main reasons for externalising either specific activities (like the administrative procedures of calls for tenders) or the whole NRN (i.e., in the Belgium-Wallonia case).

JC10.3: NRNs' human resources are qualitatively and quantitatively adequate in implementing the different activities

The human resources employed in the NRNs structures notably vary depending on the governance structures and budget size. Based on the CS description, two groups of countries can be distinguished: one with overall sufficient human resources (France, Italy, and Belgium-Wallonia) and another with insufficient personnel at the NSU central unit (Austria, Slovenia, and Estonia). In this context, Slovakia occupies an intermediate position because the personnel seem sufficient in the NSU central unit but insufficient in the Regional Antennas units.

Budget constraints represent the most important limitations to increasing personnel, as it is confirmed by the opinion about the adequacy of running costs.

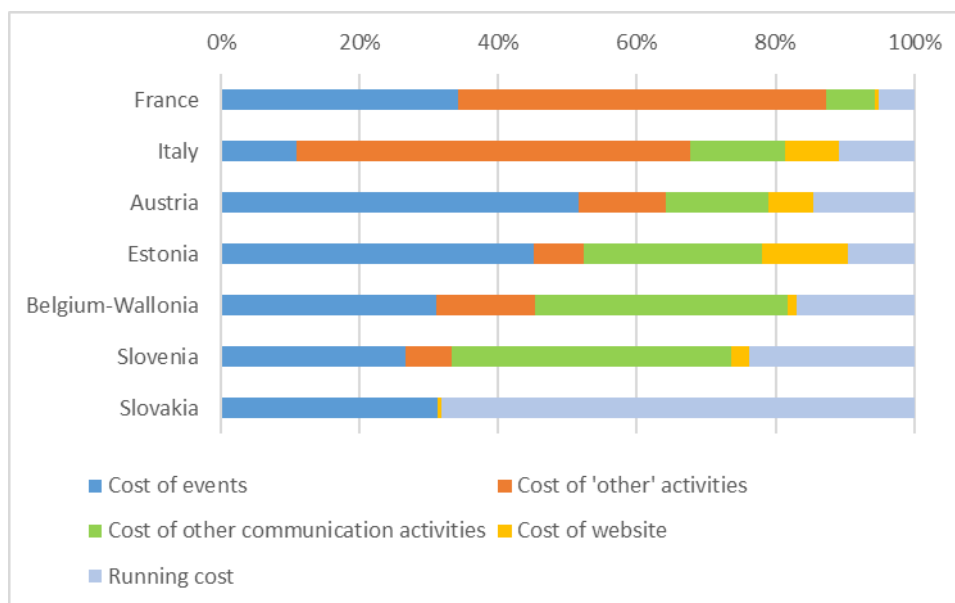
In the national networks with the highest budgets (France and Italy), the case studies show that efficiency can be reached through a broad panel of experts in different fields, on the one hand, and staff of long-standing experience in rural networking in the national contexts. In other national networks with more limited budgets, efficiency can be reached through a multidisciplinary composition of the network staff and adequate administrative skills.

4.10.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

- **JC10.1: The different governance structures can adequately implement all networking activities designed in their action plans**

The characteristics of the different national networks, the main typologies of activity and the implementation dynamics are presented in SQ1.

The composition of networking activities envisaged in NRN's action plans are difficult to compare due to the great budget differences among countries. In fact, there is a broad range of planned resources that range from about 80 million € of the Italian NRN to about 0.8 million of the Slovenian case.

Figure 70: Total public expenditure budget and internal composition in the seven case studies

Source: Data from the seven Case study reports (ADE, et al., 2022)

According to this information, the role of events seems particularly important in Austria and Estonia, whereas other communication activities become more significant in Wallonia and Slovenia (Figure 70). In France and Italy, the other activities that represent 53-58% of the total budget include very heterogeneous things which are uneasy to compare. For example, the Italian case includes analyses, studies and thematic reports, collecting and dissemination of good practices, training, data base creation and evaluations.

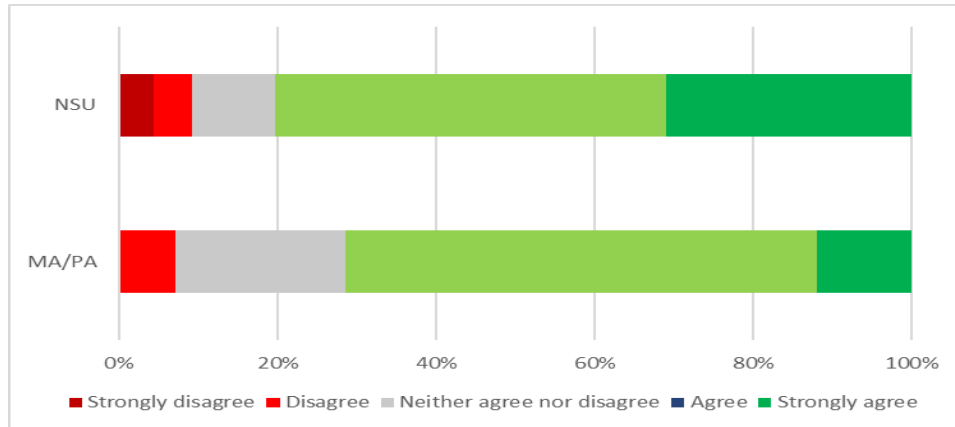
As measured by the financial implementation, efficiency does not reveal significant problems in most NRNs. COVID-19 was one of the main difficulties encountered by NRNs. The COVID pandemic has undoubtedly slowed the implementation rate, especially regarding those activities implying direct contact with stakeholders (study visits, seminars, and public events, etc.).

On the other hand, COVID contributed to accelerating the adoption of webinars and online meetings as ordinary means of communication between NRN and the different stakeholders. For example, in France, COVID-19 slowed down NRN activities and delayed the implementation of projects on the ground. However, the NSU installed online tools quickly, and the shift to online events was successful as it allowed more stakeholders to participate in events. In addition, the informal networking aspect of events has been impacted. However, online thematic meetings still allowed network members to conduct analytical exchanges and create new connections with other rural development stakeholders (sources: NSU and Executive Committee interviews).

Another factor affecting the implementation rate of NRN activities was the schedule of the RDP implementation. In Slovakia, this factor has been particularly significant. The delays in launching some RDP measures, e.g. M19 (LEADER), M16.1 (OG), and M1 (knowledge exchange) has affected the type of NRN activities planned, especially in the first 2-3 years of their operation.

The capacity of NRNs to respond to stakeholder requests deals with the methods of gathering the stakeholders' demands. In NSU and MA/PA surveys, interviewees were asked about the consultations with stakeholders. The prevailing perception is that **stakeholders have been consulted before the networking design**. That is, 72% of MAs and 80% of NSU interviewees confirm that this consultation has been implemented (Figure 71).

Figure 71: MA/PA NSU Survey - Has the NRN designed networking activities after consultation with stakeholders?

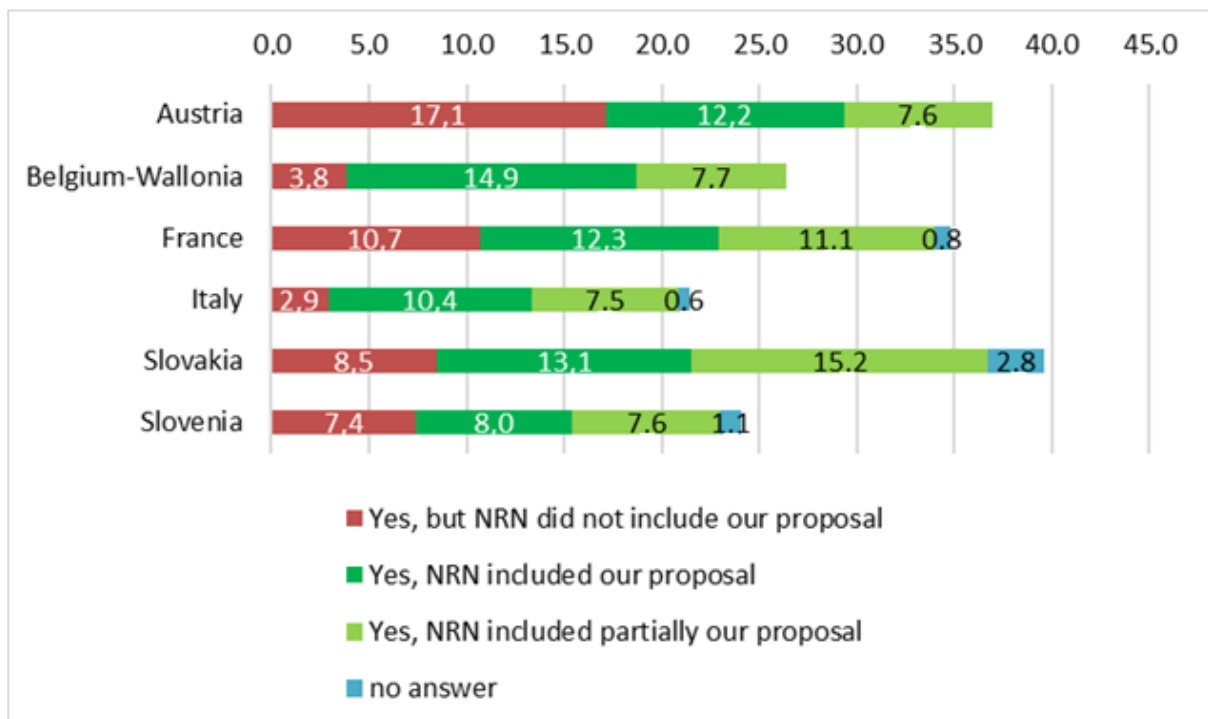


Source : MA/PA survey (n=43) Q15 and NSU survey (n=24) Q11 (ADE, 2022)

It is likewise important to consider the judgement that the beneficiaries of NRN activities make at the national and regional levels in the surveys and case studies. The stakeholders survey included a question on whether stakeholders had proposed particular activities as initiatives to the NRN and if the NRN incorporated those into their plans.

Figure 72 shows the percentage of proposals on the total respondents and the type of NRN answer (negative, totally positive, partially positive). In some countries (Austria, Slovakia, and France), the stakeholders have been quite pro-active since between 35 and 40% of total respondents made specific proposals to the NRN. This information shows the importance of the direct relations between NRNs and stakeholders on the ground. But the capacity of responding positively to the stakeholder's proposal varies across countries. More than one-fifth of respondents in Belgium-Wallonia, France and Slovakia incorporated proposals in the NRN activities, whereas in other countries, NRNs included in their plans between 15 and 20% of the proposals.

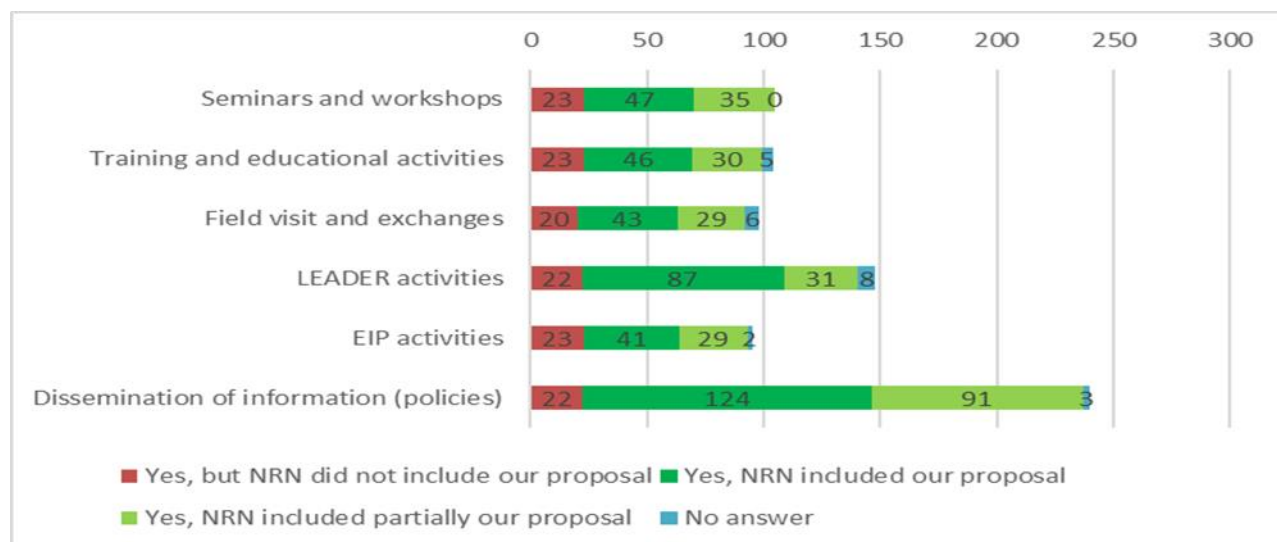
Figure 72: SH Survey - Did you propose specific initiatives to the NRN unit? Proposals of stakeholders (in % of the total responses in each country)



Source: Stakeholder survey, Q9, n=416 (ADE, 2022)

Stakeholders have been active in making proposals for different activities, especially for LEADER activities and disseminating information regarding the different policies (rural development, Cohesion and national/regional). See Figure 73.

Figure 73: SH Survey - Did you propose specific initiatives to the NRN unit in some of the following activities? Stakeholders' answers (no. of responses in each activity)



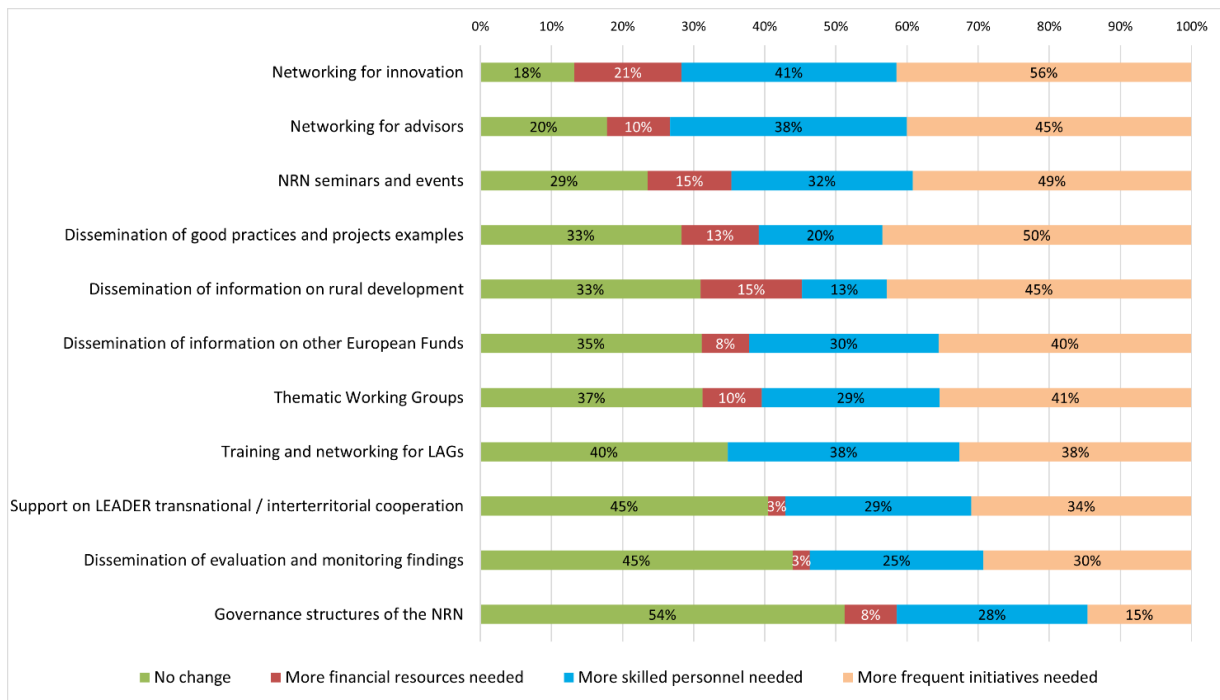
Source: Stakeholder survey, Q9, n=416 (ADE, 2022)

NRNs have been as far as possible inclusive in the study areas. They try to follow stakeholders' requests especially in the field of dissemination of information, which remains one of the primary needs of local stakeholders. In addition, NRNs included the proposals on LEADER and dissemination of information either totally or partially, but mainly without any restrictions. In some countries, proposals concerning some initiatives could hardly be considered due to severe budget limitations. In Austria for example, the only activity in which a relatively large share of suggestions is not incorporated includes resource-intensive tasks such as field visits and exchanges. The NRN only has capacities for 25-30 events per year.

Surveys make it possible to analyse which NRN's activities present significant efficiency problems and factors influencing critical efficiency. MA-PAs and NSU have partly different opinions on efficiency and factors explaining it.

Figure 74 shows the answers MA-PAs gave to the question, "What should be changed in the current NRN activities to increase their efficiency?". According to MA-PAs, networking for EIP and seminars/events would require more effort in improving efficiency. For example, over 75% of respondents say that there is a need for significant changes in more frequent initiatives and more skilled personnel. The dissemination of information would also need more efficiency for different types of information (good practices, rural development measures, and other EU Funds), as 70% of the respondents emphasised. Minor needs for change emerged on topics like monitoring/evaluation and governance.

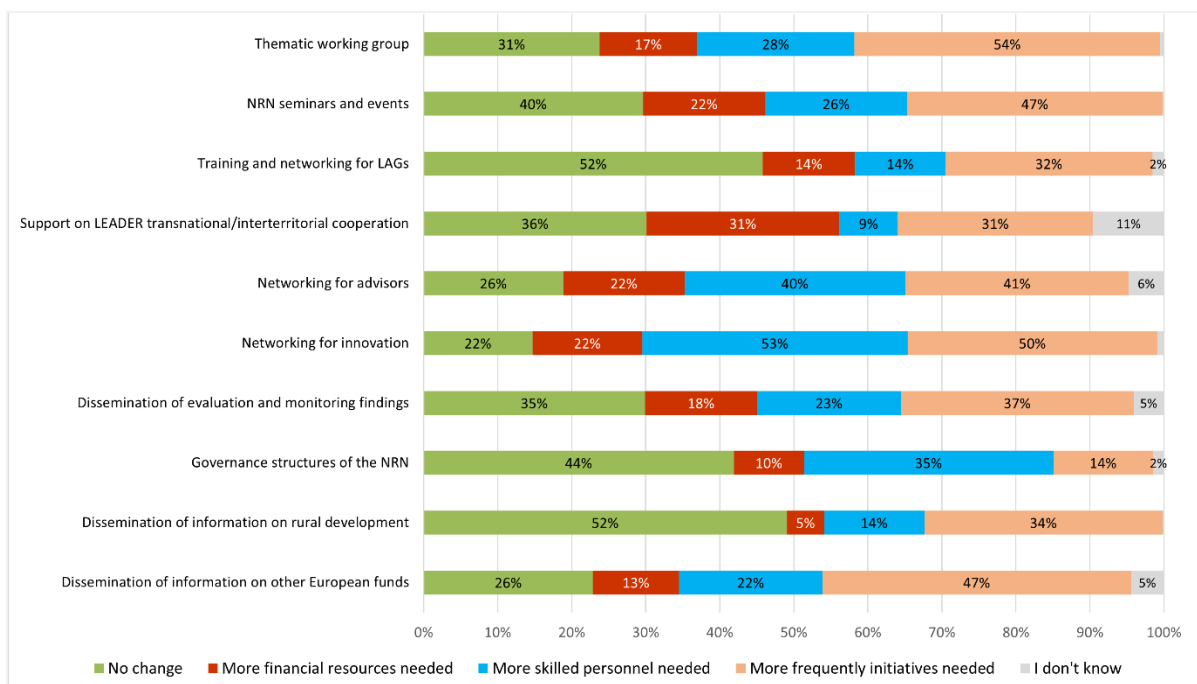
Figure 74: MA/PA Survey - What should be changed in the current NRN activities to increase their efficiency? MA-PAs distribution of responses (in percentage) by type of NRN's activity



Source: MA-PA Survey, Q16, N=43 (ADE, 2022)

NSU responses partly agree with MA-PAs (Figure 75). Networking for innovation and advisors would need more improvements, but with slightly more emphasis on the skills needed. The novelty of the EIP approach in European countries is perceived by all actors (MA-PA and NSU) as requiring new expertise in national networks and more qualified human resources to support implementation. NSU personnel also emphasise that information on other European Funds and thematic working groups would need more frequent initiatives. Compared to MA-PA's opinions, NSU does not believe that information on rural development would need more effort and changes to re-organise their activities. Instead, transnational/interterritorial cooperation would require more dedicated financial resources.

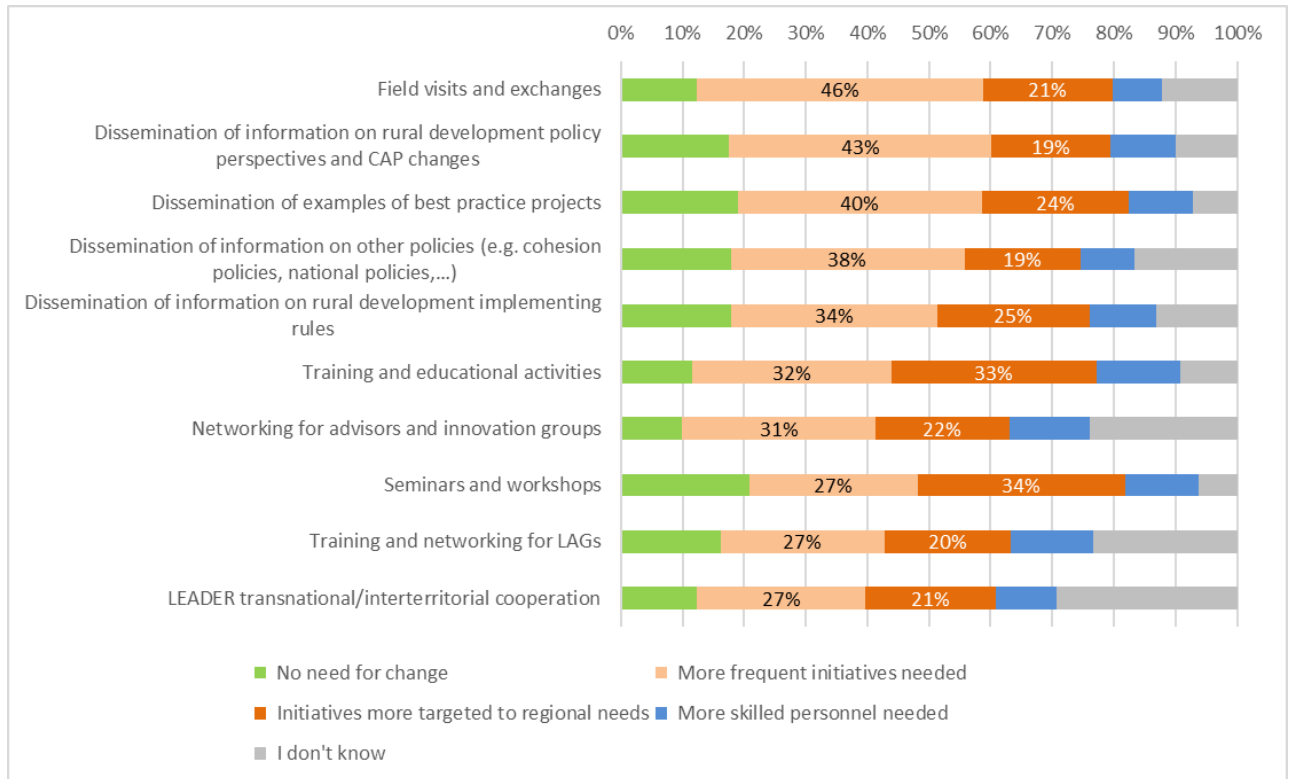
Figure 75: NSU Survey - What should be changed in the current NRN activities to increase their efficiency? NSU distribution of responses (in percentage) by type of NRN's activity



Source: NSU Survey, Q12, N=24 (ADE, 2022)

The efficiency question has also been raised to the whole range of national/regional/local stakeholders (Figure 76).

Figure 76: SH Survey - What should be changed in the current NRN activities to increase their efficiency? Stakeholder distribution of responses (in percentage) by type of NRN's activity



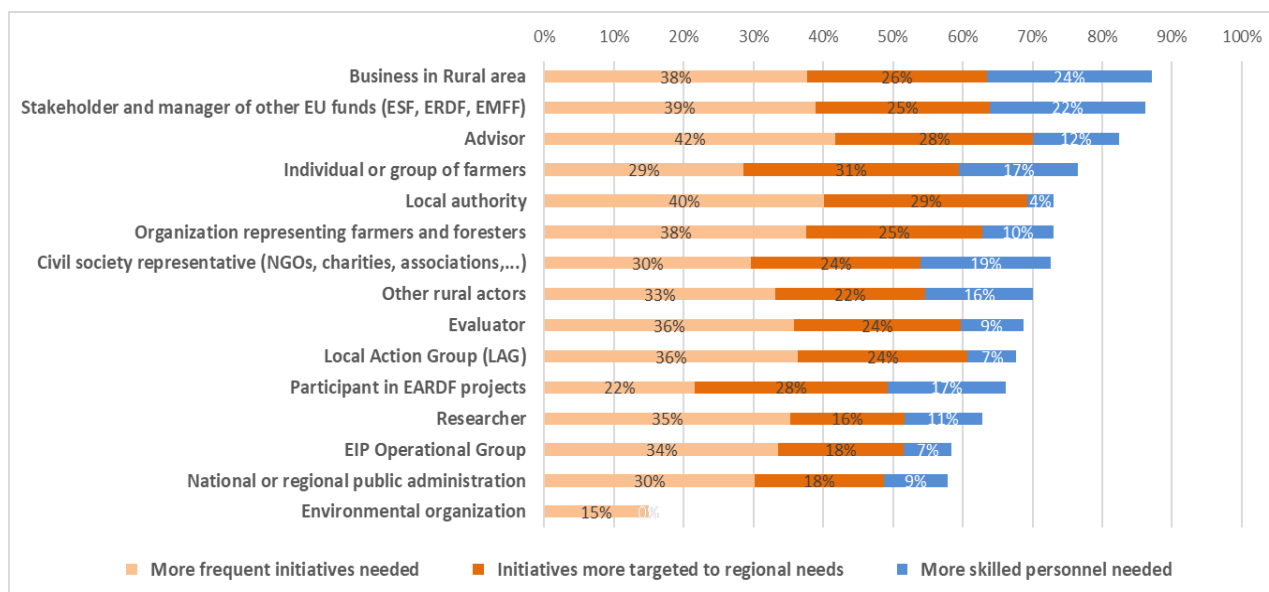
Source: Stakeholder survey, Q8, N=416 (ADE, 2022)

Compared to MA-PAs and NSU surveys, stakeholders highlight a higher need for change, especially in implementing more frequent initiatives. Furthermore, they believe that initiatives more targeted to regional/local specificities are necessary. This demand emerges for each NRN activity by a percentage varying between 20 and 34% of total respondents. Increasing efficiency is requested, particularly for activities like field visits, good practice exchanges and information on different policies (including Cohesion and national policies). In addition, more attention to regional/local specificities is requested for training/education activities and seminars/workshops. Finally, stakeholders probably feel these activities should be less generic and more focused on territorial features.

The stakeholder's perception of efficiency varies among the different stakeholders (Figure 77). Two groups of stakeholders strongly believe that NRNs should improve their efficiency. The first group includes non-agricultural actors like business operators, managers of other EU Funds, local authorities, and civil society representatives. Over 70% of this group answered that NRN efficiency should be improved through frequent initiatives and better targeting of regional/local needs. However, the need for more skilled personnel is less significant, except for business operators and managers of other Funds. In these cases, professional expertise in the NRN activities addressing broader rural issues is probably less adequate than in other activities.

The second category of stakeholders includes farmers (individuals or groups) and agricultural advisers, which according to the survey believe that NRN should strengthen efficiency through more frequent initiatives (advisors) and a substantial improvement of linkages with territorial specificities (farmers).

Figure 77: SH Survey - What should be changed in the current NRN activities to increase NSU efficiency? Distribution of responses (in percentage) by type of stakeholder



Source: Stakeholder survey, Q8, N=416 (ADE, 2022)

➤ **JC10.2: The different governance structures have different efficiency depending on the level of autonomy**

The governance structure can influence the efficiency levels in several ways: a) the choice of internalising vs externalising the networking activities; b) the degree of NSU autonomy; c) the administrative burden related to the internal procedures between MA, PA and NSU.

The choice of internalising the NSU is deemed positive in the case of France, where the MA maintains closer monitoring of the network activities and orientations. In addition, implementing smaller-scale contracts for each activity allowed for more flexibility in the choice of partners, with the national Paying Agency playing a key supporting role in each call for tenders. This subcontracting to a specific unit of the PA resulted highly efficient.

In Italy, the choice has been similar, but with a strong involvement of public bodies supporting the networking activities and only a few activities being sub-contracting by external subjects. The MA plays a role of coordination/orientation, but some sub-contracted activities with external bodies proceed less efficiently than others.

In Slovakia, a hybrid system has been set up, combining a central public unit with regional antennas managed by private entities, which proved effective and efficient.

In Belgium-Wallonia, the outsourcing of the network activities to a single actor and the continuity with the previous period are factors of stability and predictability of expenditure for the Managing Authority, as well as securing the human resources allocated to the network. The opinion of MA and stakeholders converges on the positive aspects of outsourcing: a) reduction of management costs for the MA; b) greater flexibility and responsiveness in organising activities, events or responding to requests; d) a broad panel of skills representing an average of 3 full-time equivalents; e) securing and guaranteeing a volume of human resources dedicated to the animation of the network. Furthermore, it seems that MA and stakeholders agree that outsourcing allows the NSU to be more flexible and independent of the administration. It happens in Belgium-Wallonia, but not in Austria, as discussed later.

Some NRNs delivered their activities through public procedures by selecting external specialists to implement specific activities. For example, in France, most of the activities conducted by the NRN are implemented through calls for tenders, which a specific unit of the Paying Agency (dealing only with the NRN) handles as technical assistance. This implementation mode has proven to be efficient, as illustrated by the many thematic events, specific LEADER and EIP-AGRI activities, and dynamic communication strategy. In addition, it allowed the NSU to rely on external specialists to provide quality services for each mission. Each tender call's small scope and timeframe made it possible to terminate unsatisfactory

partnerships quickly or renew successful ones when needed. Overall, this is viewed by NSU members as an improvement compared to the period 2007-2013. Nevertheless, this implementation mode led to delays, sometimes up to two years, between when the NSU set up a given activity and when it was put in place. Furthermore, some interviewees perceive the French NSU as a centre to provide resources to external actors, rather than opportunities to exchange experiences.

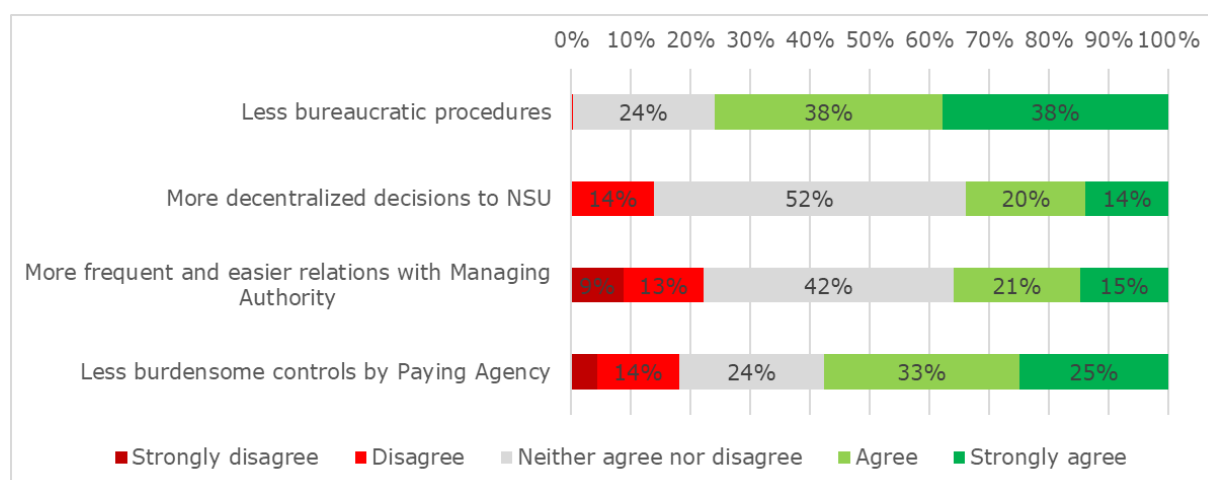
The NSU's lack of autonomy within MA-NSU relations is a strong constraint in Austria. In the other case studies, NSUs indicated sufficient autonomy to design and implement their activities. The need for more autonomy and the negative influence on NRN's activities are echoed in the case study interviews and NSU survey and well expressed by one NRN interviewed: *"The high influence of the ministry - which does not dispose over knowledge in innovation and networking - on the designing of our annual working programme narrows innovative networking. Network units should be more independent from the administration in their activities and cooperation with stakeholders relevant to rural development"* (Austrian case study report).

In Slovakia, it is impossible to include activities outside the remit of pillar II, which is quite limiting as advice and support cannot be provided in respect of, e.g., direct payments and other ESI funds. However, there are also barriers to engaging with wider stakeholders. For instance, students and youth who cannot participate in seminars or field trips as these are focused only on RDP or potential beneficiaries.

In France, some problems emerged from an internal reorganisation of the MA in 2019 which made network animation more difficult (less dedicated time). NSU members are no longer supported enough in their attempts to participate in networking events and organise activities, specifically those designed to foster exchanges among network members.

The NSU survey addresses the administrative burden as the most widespread issue hampering efficiency in the governance structure. NSU respondents were asked what should be changed in governance and procedure to increase NSU efficiency (Figure 78). Over three-quarters of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the importance of bureaucratic procedures. Burdensome procedures are partly due to controls by the Paying Agency (58% of respondents agree or strongly agree with that). However, decentralised decisions and the related NSU degree of autonomy is an issue (34% of respondents agree or strongly agree on that), but it is limited to a few countries (Austria and Slovakia).

Figure 78: NSU Survey - What should be changed in the current NRN governance structure and procedures to increase NSU efficiency? Distribution of NSU responses (in percentage) by type of NRN's activity



Source: NSU Survey, Q13, N=23 (ADE, 2022)

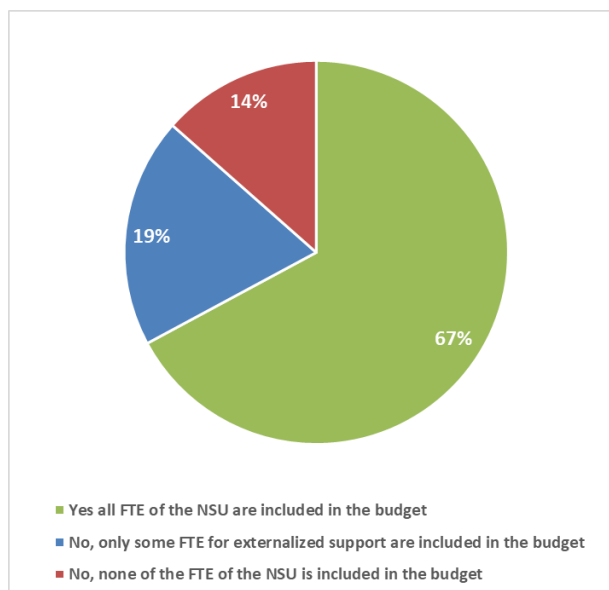
In Slovakia, Regional Antennas and NSU interviewees noted that the system is overly bureaucratic and demanding. Their financial controls go beyond and above the requested level and there has been delays to payments, especially during the pandemic as in person controls are obligatory. This is in line with the outcomes of the NSU surveys where

respondents agreed that in order to increase NSU efficiency less burdensome controls are required and less bureaucratic procedures should be in place.

➤ **JC10.3: NRNs' human resources are qualitatively and quantitatively adequate in implementing the different activities**

The human resources employed in the NRNs structures notably vary depending on the governance structures and budget size. Thus, comparisons of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) based on FTE inclusion in the total budget can be somewhat misleading. According to the NSU survey, only two-third of respondents confirmed that all FTE of the NSU is included in the budget (Figure 79).

Figure 79: NSU Survey - Does the NRN budget include the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) of the NSU?



Source: NSU survey, Q10, n= 22 (ADE, 2022)

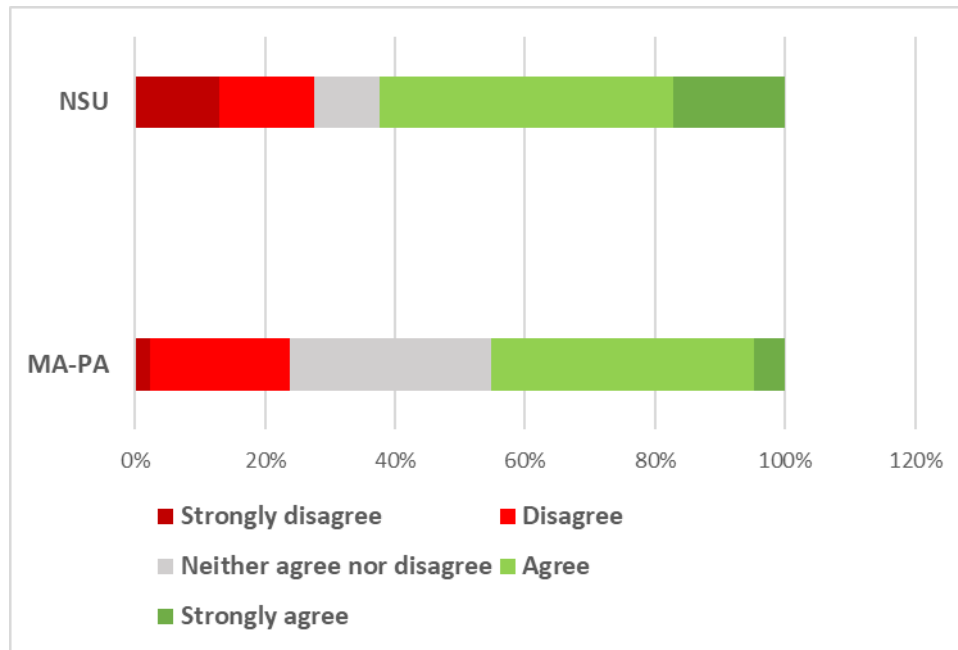
Comparisons of NRN's human resources in terms of FTE are challenging due to the different compositions of internalised/externalised activities. Human resources are employed at different tiers: a) MA and PA; b) NSU central unit; c) regional antennas or other decentralised structures; d) outsourced structures.

The personnel employed in MA and PA is harder to quantify. Regional antennas/decentralised structures might have a significant role. However, their human resources are difficult to know (in France, Regional Rural Networks and their budgets are not included in the budget communicated for France and this information is not collected at national level) or are implemented by volunteers' work (Slovenia). Regional antennas occupy between 13 (Italian NRN) and 16 FTE (Slovakian NRN). Personnel in NSU central units might vary depending on the role of the other operational structures between different annual ranges: from 8-10 FTE (France, Slovakia), to 6-7 FTE (Austria and Estonia), to 3-3.5 FTE in the smallest NRN (Belgium-Wallonia and Slovenia). Italian central NSU can reach 40-50 FTE, working for the 21 thematic working groups and coordinating all activities planned for each TWG. Finally, data on externalised activities have been impossible to gather, as outlined in case study reports.

In France, the NSU works closely with the Paying Agency for the concrete implementation of NRN activities. In addition, a dedicated team of seven PA staff members worked alongside NSU members to implement communication activities (two FTE), the specific activities related to LEADER (one FTE) and EIP-AGRI (one FTE) and to organise and monitor the public calls for tenders (two FTE). These additional human resources contribute significantly to the implementation of NRN activities.

A specific question on the adequacy of the NSU human resources has been raised in the two surveys of MA-PA and NSU. First, NSU personnel is more favourable than MA-PAs (Figure 80). On the contrary, MA-PA probably believes in a need to improve the NSU personnel, as confirmed by interviews with stakeholders in the different case study reports.

Figure 80: MA/PA and NSU Surveys - Are the human resources of the network support unit sufficient to implement NRN activities?



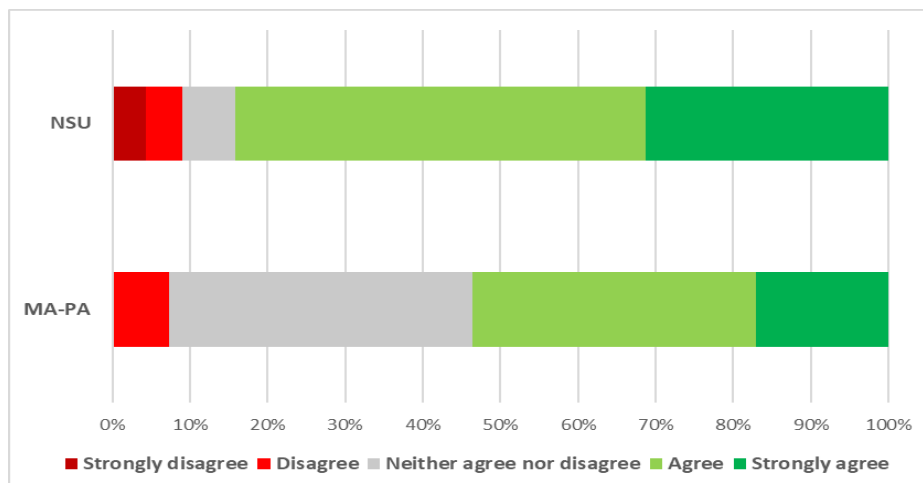
Source: MA-PA (Q15) and NSU (Q11) surveys (ADE, 2022)

Based on the CS description, two groups of countries can be distinguished: one with sufficient human resources (France, Italy, and Belgium-Wallonia) and another with insufficient personnel at the NSU central unit (Austria, Slovenia and Estonia). In this context, Slovakia occupies an intermediate position because the personnel seem sufficient in the NSU central unit but insufficient in RA units.

Budget constraints represent the most important limitations to increasing personnel, as it is confirmed by the opinion about the adequacy of running costs. For example, in Figure 81, the two categories of interviewees are represented. According to the survey data, MA-PAs express an opinion of the inadequacy of running costs, compared with the NSU's opinion. The case study reports confirm this difference.

In Austria, there are insufficient resources in the NSU structure to implement NRN and ENRD activities, especially in the environment and climate themes. Nevertheless, human resources in MA are deemed insufficient for coordination, negotiation of the annual programme, financial matters, and content coordination.

Figure 81: MA/PA and NSU Survey – Are running costs of the network support unit are adequate?



Source: MA-PA survey (Q15) and NSU survey (Q11) (ADE, 2022)

In the national networks with the highest budgets (France and Italy), the cases show that efficiency can be reached through a broad panel of experts in different fields, on the one hand, and a staff of long-standing experience in rural networking in the national context. Still, in both cases, the importance of dedicated administrative staff is also clearly perceived (i.e., to organise and monitor the public calls for tenders).

In other cases, NSU reaches good internal efficiency due to the high quality of employed human resources. For example, in the Belgium-Wallonia case, outsourcing allows the mobilisation of a multidisciplinary team according to needs at the appropriate time and for very specialised subjects (i.e., training and networking for LAGs, dissemination of evaluation findings and networking for advisors and innovation).

4.11 SQ11: To what extent have a) the NRNs and b) the ENRD been efficient in setting up and implementing their different activities with the EAFRD support provided under Article 51 (Technical assistance) in view of achieving the objective of territorial development?

4.11.1 Approach

4.11.1.1 Rationale and coverage

This study question focuses on setting up and implementing the different activities addressing territorial development. This would require, on the one hand, the analysis of the procedures and time to set up the support structure and on the other hand, which mechanisms allowed the ENRD and NRN action plans to be directed towards objectives of territorial development, particularly the strategy design and the monitoring/evaluation systems.

Territorial development: developing rural economies and communities, including local development strategies (European Commission, 2013). (see the Glossary of terms)

The question covers both ENRD support units.

4.11.1.2 Judgement criteria

JC11.1: The ENRD/NRNs structure has been set up in reasonable time to start the activities of the 2014-20 programming period

This JC focuses on the procedures adopted to set up the support structures, particularly the selection methods and criteria, and related time to formalise the contracts between the MA and the support structure.

Efficiency will be evaluated in terms of adequacy of the whole process and single elements of the process (e.g. selection criteria, time necessary to approval/set up the network, etc.).

JC11.2: ENRD strategies and action plans have been implemented through efficient procedures

This judgement Criterion considers ENRD's efficiency in implementing activities addressed to territorial development objectives. The analysis will consider the two main ENRD support structures: the ENRD Contact Point and the Evaluation Helpdesk.

The analysis will describe the most efficient instruments to deliver the initiatives.

Efficiency in this case must be judged by the NRNs structures, RDP Managing Authorities and other relevant stakeholders at the EU level (ELARD, EUROMONTANA, National Rural Parliaments, etc.)

JC11.3: ENRD and NRNs' strategies and action plans have been adapted over time based on efficient monitoring and self-assessment

ENRD and NRNs' action plans have been modulated and amended annually according to new needs emerging over time. This JC aims to evaluate how the presence of a monitoring system has improved/hindered the ENRD (both CP and EHD) and NRNs' capacity to respond timely to the stakeholders' needs and rearrange the action plan accordingly.

Monitoring reports and the human resources employed in the monitoring activities can represent relevant instruments affecting this capacity. The interviews aim to understand to what extent the monitoring system has worked effectively and has been used for re-programming the initiatives.

4.11.1.3 Methodology

The methodology is based on triangulation among the general survey data, the interviews conducted with ENRD personnel and with case studies' interviewees and secondary data already available from the ENRD and NRN documents (i.e., self-assessment reports).

4.11.2 Summary answer

SQ11: To what extent have a) the NRNs and b) the ENRD been efficient in setting up and implementing their different activities with the EAFRD support provided under Article 51 (Technical Assistance) in view of achieving the objective of territorial development?

The ENRD and NRNs have been efficient in that they have started their activities in a timely manner and have introduced some new approaches to facilitate linkages between ENRD and NRN activities. However, more effort should be put into improving monitoring and evaluation procedures and self-assessment, especially in NRNs' activities.

JC11.1: The ENRD/NRNs structure has been set up in reasonable time to start the activities of the 2014-20 programming period

The start of NRN activities was not characterised by significant problems, demonstrated by MA/PA and NSU survey responses. In most NRNs at least the central unit of the NSU became operational in 2015 (some delays were due to the establishment of the Regional Antennas, i.e. in Slovakia).

The ENRD Contact Point started supporting activities of the network in September 2014, and was operational before the different NRNs started, and most RDPs were adopted (2015). The EHD instead started in early 2016.

JC11.2: ENRD strategies and action plans have been implemented through efficient procedures.

At the EU level, interviews with ENRD and NRN representatives evidenced that networking instruments had different efficiency, and different effects on the capacity of NRNs to respond promptly and coherently to stakeholders' needs.

There is a group of factors that contributed to developing more efficient linkages between ENRD and NRN activities, and the capacity to respond to stakeholders' needs:

- Progress was made in digital and remote technologies and methodologies for animating virtual meetings.
- Informal regional NRN groups ("clusters") were recently established (2021) to foster exchanges between NRNs from the same region and with a common interest.
- Peer-to-peer learning has resulted in efficient networking and learning for several reasons, especially in the field of evaluation (it involves successful experiences already existent, participative approach, valorisation of good practices of similar contexts, more informal relations between actors involved on the ground, etc.).

On the other hand, NRNs considered some of the ENRD networking instruments less efficient (i.e. communications via social networks and evaluation guidelines).

JC11.3: ENRD and NRNs' strategies and action plans have been adapted over time, based on efficient monitoring and self-assessment.

ENRD and NRN's action plans are modulated and amended periodically according to emerging needs. Monitoring and evaluation activities do not have the same priority and the same content across the different NRNs. Some NRNs carried out thematic evaluations of the networking effects and of the more general impact on rural development policies. From both sides, NRNs have drawn lessons from and reflections on their networking activity.

Self-assessment is also a practice which some NRNs often implement to steer the adaptation of annual action plans. The evaluation reports, according to MAs, are sufficiently diffused and discussed, but some MAs think that there must be more effort in this direction. Monitoring and evaluation activities have been used to revise NRN action plans, but this perception is more prevalent in MAs than amongst NSU personnel.

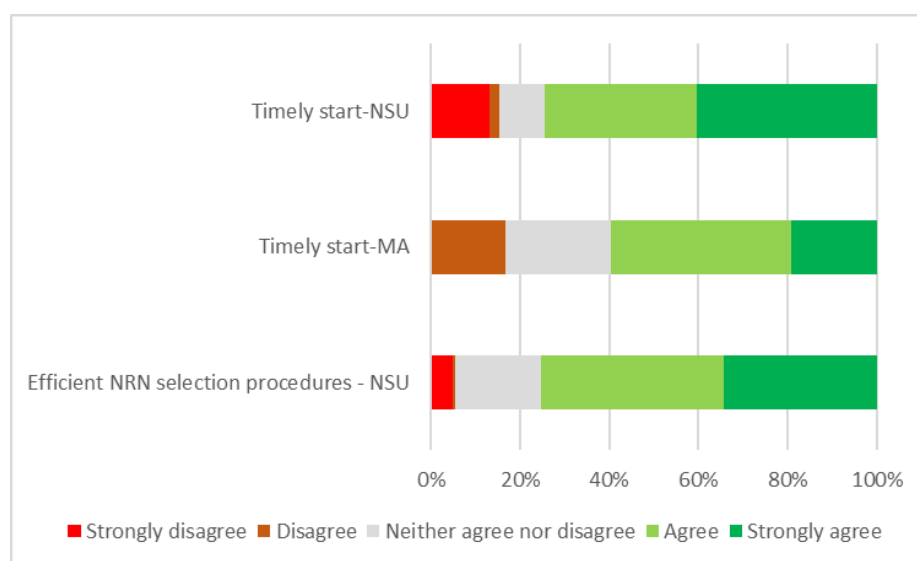
ENRD self-assessment has been regularly implemented both for CP and EHD. This has steered ENRD Steering Group recommendations towards more capacity-building actions in evaluation practices.

4.11.3 Detailed analysis based on the judgement criteria

➤ JC11.1: The ENRD/NRNs structure has been set up in reasonable time to start the activities of the 2014-20 programming period

The start of NRN activities have not been characterised by significant problems, as witnessed by the MA/PA and NSU answers. Some NSU interviewees strongly emphasised disagreement on the time to start the activities (Figure 85). Still, summing up respondents who agree and strongly agree, most interviewees were satisfied with the timing and procedures to formalise contracts between the MA and the support structure. The same positive opinion has been expressed by NSUs on the efficiency of the selection procedures (Figure 82).

Figure 82: Have NRN activities started timely at the beginning of the 2014-20 programming period, and has Managing Authority set up efficient procedures to select the network support unit?



Source: Ma-Pa and NSU surveys (ADE, 2022)

Table 14 summarises the main information about the departure period and the selection process followed in seven case studies. Most NRNs became operational in 2015, at least the central unit of the NSU (some delays were due to the establishment of the Regional Antennas, i.e. in Slovakia). In Italy, the approval of the National Rural Network Programme and the 2015-2016 action plan resulted in the start of the NRN in the spring of 2016. A smooth transition period was possible when the governance structure and the NSU remained roughly identical (Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, and Italy). Continuity not only ensured a faster transition process but also provided the necessary networking expertise.

Table 14: NRN's starting activity and related selection procedure

Country	Timely departure and selection procedure
Austria	The NRN was set up in November 2015 after the conclusion of the tendering procedure, which selected the current consortium.
Belgium-Wallonia	The NSU was set up in June 2015 within a reasonable timeframe. It started its activities in September 2015 in parallel with the start of the RDP. The MA established efficient procedures to select the network support unit through an open call for tender. These are not contested.
Estonia	Estonian RDP 2014-2020 was approved on 13 February 2015. Activities started in 2015 . The same unit as during the previous period continued to execute the tasks of NSU.
France	The PSRRN (<i>Programme Spécifique Réseau Rural National</i>) was approved by the EC on 13/02/2015; a launch event was already organised by the end of 2014 and operations started in 2015 within a reasonable timeframe.

Country	Timely departure and selection procedure
Italy	The NRN programme was approved by the EC on 26 May 2015 . The MA approved the first bi-annual plan for 2015-2016, thereby allowing NRN to start activities on 7 April 2016. At that date, even Regional Antennas (19) started networking activity.
Slovakia	The NSU (NRN Central Unit) started its operation in 2015 (summer) , and there has been a continuity in respect of NSU as the same organisation has been appointed to act as NSU and manage NRN activities as in the previous 2007-13 period. Nevertheless, Regional Antennas (7) from the 2007-13 programming period ceased their activities in 2014, and the new antennas have not started operating until the spring of 2016 .
Slovenia	Smooth transition between the 2007-13 and 2014-20 programming period as the network governance structure and implementation framework have remained largely the same. The network launched its operation on 16 March 2015 . Eleven organisations have been appointed as INFO POINTS.

Source: Synthesis based on case study reports (ADE, CREA, ÖIR, CCRI, 2022)

A specific point negatively impacting the efficiency of the Austrian NRN is related to the annual working plans, particularly their start and end month. Across the EU, the start and end months of the annual work plans differ and are not necessarily the same as the ones of the Austrian NRN. As was reported by the CS report, this makes cooperation with other NRNs more difficult.

The ENRD Contact Point started supporting activities of the network in September 2014 and was operational before the different NRNs started and most RDPs were adopted (2015). The EHD instead started in early 2016.

➤ **JC11.2: ENRD strategies and action plans have been implemented through efficient procedures**

The main information used to develop this point comes from the ENRD annual implementation reports, interviews with representatives of ENRD, ENRD self-assessment reports (2017 and 2019) and finally case study reports.

At the EU level, interviews with ENRD and NRNs' representatives evidenced that networking was differently efficient and has different effects on the capacity of NRN to respond timely and coherently to stakeholders' needs.

In the last two years, networking activity has been conditioned by the COVID-19 Pandemic. All **events were held in a virtual format**, and remote meetings of different kinds have been the norm. Covid-19 has fostered the use of **webinars** in ENRD activities, and this has become more a frequent tool of communication/exchange among the different NRNs. For example, in France, NSU members report being asked for advice for implementing webinars, as France was one of the first Member State to implement them after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully. ENRD reported that important progress was made in digital and remote technologies and methodologies for animating virtual meetings. These encouraged more participation by institutional actors and other stakeholders in ENRD events, as reported by the ENRD-CP annual reports. There could be room for retaining virtual conferencing in the future, even when in-person networking is possible.

Improving networking efficiency between ENRD and NRNs and among the same NRNs was also a very important need raised by NRNs. **The creation of clusters of countries** might meet this need. The ENRD CP recently (2021) created informal regional NRN groups to foster exchanges between NRNs from the same region and with a common interest. Previously the ENRD CP had supported the collaboration and dialogue between countries in specific thematic groups or events (like NetworX in 2019), inspiring joint projects and exchange of experience on themes of common interest (i.e., migrants). This also implies organising general meetings with NRNs according to 4 clusters (central Europe, Atlantic cluster, Northern Baltic and Mediterranean cluster). Some countries are part of two clusters: Germany and Denmark in the NB and Atlantic cluster; RO, HR in the central and Mediterranean cluster; France in the Atlantic and Mediterranean cluster. In France, NSU members reported that this cluster improved the capacity of the involved NRNs. The cluster's members meet through online calls

once or twice per month, demonstrating a high level of involvement in these informal meetings.

Peer-to-peer learning has resulted as efficient networking and learning method for several reasons, especially in the field of evaluation (it involves successful experiences already existent, participative approach, valorisation of good practices of similar contexts, more informal relations between actors involved on the ground, etc.). This happened mainly in networking of evaluation practices. For example, in Slovenia, the recently introduced "peer to peer" learning workshop organised by EHD has been highly valued since evaluators and MA are keen to engage in more of these. The peer-to-peer workshop does not only allow the sharing of experiences and know-how on a very specific topic between two MAs and evaluators, but also benefits from the presence of an expert in the particular field who can provide further information and answer specific questions.

On the other hand, some inefficiencies have been signalled by NRNs as regards the networking activities. Table 15 highlights some significant problems which have been reported by CS reports. Some CSs raise the issue of more efficient **communication channels in different fields** (evaluation and thematic working groups outputs) due to different factors: the complexity of material communicated, translation needs, and lack of adequate personnel in the NRNs. Inefficiency in the communication channels also relies in the working organisation at the ENRD level: for example, the Italian RRR complains about the lack of a reference person for bilateral contacts between ENRD and NRN.

These inefficiencies are frequently raised as regards the evaluation guidelines, deemed too voluminous and theoretical (Austria, Belgium-Wallonia, France, Slovakia, and Slovenia).

Another critical issue has been raised on the validity of ENRD's use of social media as a communication channel (Austria and France). For example, in France, the ENRD general website, project and LAG database's good practical examples and periodic publications were the most used or shared products. On the other hand, the NSU rarely used the ENRD social media platforms and evaluation section of the ENRD website.

In several countries (Austria, Italy and Slovenia) the lack of NRN dedicated staff in some peculiar fields (environmental issue, evaluation, etc.) or personnel devoted to ensuring stable connections with ENRD activities has seriously jeopardised pro-active interactions with ENRD and other NRNs.

Table 15: Main inefficiencies met in ENRD instruments by NRN representatives

Country	Inefficiencies/failures
Austria	The ENRD general website and ENRD social media platforms are rarely used. The MA assesses the EHD materials as generally useful. However, the guidelines are usually too extensive, long, and theoretical to be useful. Ideally, these materials should be shorter and more practical. The main constraint to active participation in ENRD activities seems to be the lack of resources dedicated to the NRN: this limits participation in relevant activities, as well as the active distribution of ENRD outputs.
Belgium-Wallonia	Some working documents or methodological guidelines on evaluation remain difficult to communicate because they are too voluminous (200 pages), not operational enough or too specific to be transposed in the context of a regional RDP.
Estonia	No specific problem with ENRD website or social media was raised.
France	NSU rarely used the ENRD social media platforms and evaluation section of the ENRD website.
Italy	Lack of coordination of the communication flows between the national and EU levels. Delay in replacing the NRN contact person for relations with the ENRD (for several months in 2019), which affected the regularity and consistency of the communication flows previously initiated.

Country	Inefficiencies/failures
Slovakia	<p>Problems in the way of communicating the ENRD Thematic Working Group outputs at the national level. The outcomes are not translated; mostly only links to the original documents are shared/published, with some information occasionally translated and published in newsletters or magazines.</p> <p>The EHD outputs are occasionally shared with NRN stakeholders via NRN communication channels. Evaluation-related publications and content are the least used and shared by the NSU (Evaluation is not the focus of their activities).</p>
Slovenia	<p>The main obstacle to joint activities with ENRD is especially finance and lack of personnel. Insufficient knowledge transfer and findings from the ENRD working groups and EIP-AGRI focus groups to Slovenia.</p> <p>The smaller Member States have limited resources and human capacities regarding evaluation. According to stakeholders, the ENRD topics have not been always relevant or not been communicated appropriately, and the level of coherence should be strengthened.</p>

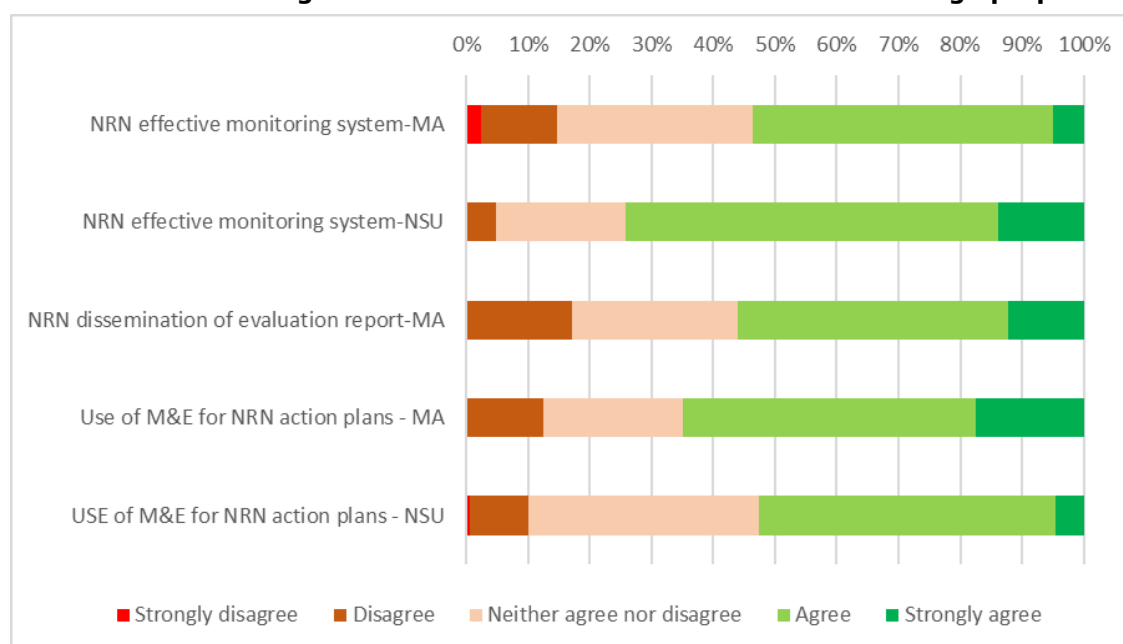
Source: Case study reports (ADE, et al., 2022)

➤ **JC11.3: ENRD and NRNs' strategies and action plans have been adapted over time based on efficient monitoring and self-assessment**

ENRD and NRN's action plans are modulated and amended periodically according to emerging needs. ENRD has also conducted two self-assessment activities (2017 and 2019), focusing on CP and EHD networking. These self-assessments have submitted the principal results to the EU Rural Networks Steering Group and the Assembly for discussion. Based on this discussion, both provided specific recommendations reported in the two self-assessment reports. Interviews with CP representatives confirmed that these reports were considered in designing current activities, but it is uneasy about assessing to what extent this result was achieved effectively.

Regarding NRNs, opinions on the existence of an **effective monitoring system** are diverse. More than 70% of NSU who were interviewed have a positive opinion on the monitoring systems that were set up, whereas MAs were more critical on this point (see Table 16). Gathering and processing information related to monitoring usually falls under the NSU's responsibility, and the quality of the monitoring reports on the NRN activities (presented by MA to the Monitoring Committee) strongly depends on collecting reliable data.

Table 16: Monitoring and evaluation activities and their use for design purposes



Source: MA-PA and NSU surveys (ADE, 2022)

The **evaluation reports**, according to MAs, are sufficiently diffused and discussed, but some MAs think that there must be more effort in this direction.

Monitoring and evaluation activities have been used to revise NRN action plans, but this perception is higher in MAs than in NSU personnel.

The activities on monitoring and evaluation do not have the same priority and the same content in the different NRNs. Some NRNs carried out thematic evaluations of the networking effects and of the more general impact of rural development policies. From both sides, NRNs have drawn lessons and thoughts for their networking activity.

For example, in France, the network worked in partnership with the ODR (*Observatoire du Développement Rural, a resource centre created in 2009 by INRAE and jointly managed by the MA/PA and INRAE*) to support the monitoring and evaluation of the RDPs. Furthermore, the GTSE (*Groupe de Travail Suivi Evaluation*) was created as a working group for monitoring and evaluation. It contributed to the monitoring of the programme through the annual implementation reports. It relied on external contractors to conduct two in-depth evaluations of the National Rural Network in 2017 and 2019, which were then considered by the NSU when drafting the subsequent action plans.

In Italy, NRN set up a specific Steering Committee (SC) for evaluation. This SC responds to the need for driving the evaluator's activity through the evaluation plan. The SC defines the evaluation strategy, provides for the specific content of MA's evaluation demand, and monitors the evaluation work. It comprises of the MA, an independent evaluator, and representatives of NSU. In addition, the NRN also includes a thematic working group on EAFRD monitoring and evaluation which works on methodologies and collaborates with the European EHD. The independent evaluator has conducted periodic thematic evaluations in the period 2018-2021, focusing each time on the four strategic priorities of the programme.

Self-assessment is also a practice which some NRNs often implement to steer the adaptation of annual action plans.

For example, the Wallonia NRN carries out a self-assessment at least every three years. A questionnaire is sent to all network members and results are discussed in the Permanent Committee. The aim is to assess the need to refine the work programme for the next phase of the contract. Needs and areas for improvement are generally assessed with stakeholders in the Permanent Committee.

In Austria, the NRN has a comprehensive self-evaluation and monitoring system in place that provides (stakeholder) feedback on its activities. This feedback provides input to the annual working plans. This system of feedback is implemented, for example, through an annual stakeholder survey on all elements/activities of the NRN. According to NRN interviewees, internal self-assessment improved the targeting of the NRN activities and led to the constructive refinement of the activities.

Self-assessment has sometimes worked inefficiently. For example, in Estonia, the regularity in collecting information differs. Thus, more coordination and a more systematic approach to assess the stakeholder's needs and make self-assessment could be used. In Slovakia, CS interviews revealed no systematic approach to feedback, assessment, or evaluation. Participants' feedback from activities is collected randomly, and mostly informally.

D

Theme 4: Relevance

4.12SQ12: To what extent have the ENRD and NRN activities been responding to the needs considering both general and specific territorial challenges for rural development?

4.12.1 Approach

4.12.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

The question requires an interpretation of territorial challenges and needs for RD, across the EU, and a consideration of how far ENRD and NRN activities have identified and targeted these, in the topic areas and through the geographical focus of their activities. Needs have been defined in previous Framework evaluation studies – socio-economic needs including social inclusion and poverty reduction, environmental needs for biodiversity, water and climate, needs for generational renewal and knowledge and innovation, and for local development, etc. They have also been defined by NRNs themselves in their action plans. The SQ covers current needs and the focus is on the 2014-2020 period. In order to assess how far NRN and ENRD activities have been relevant for the needs of rural territories in implementing RDPs, it is important to consider how the NRN and ENRD activities were determined and resourced and what balance of themes and action was covered, to compare this to other sources of information which give independent or complementary information on rural development needs and their relative territorial occurrence or severity, assessed at both EU level (general territorial needs) and RDP level (specific territorial needs). This allows a triangulation of measures of relevance.

4.12.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC12.1: The ENRD resources, legal and governance provisions made at EU level, and the NRNs' design and governance provisions enable them to target relevant needs and priorities in their activities, covering economic, social and environmental needs in line with Rural development and CAP objectives and priorities and responding to territorial specificities.

JC12.2: Secondary data and literature support the validity of the choice of ENRD and NRN priority activities and themes, as a good response to current needs (defined in section 4.2 of the RDPs) and future needs for effective RDP implementation.

JC12.3: Needs analysis by ENRD and NRNs is updated periodically and taken into account as part of the selection and monitoring process for RDP measures and packages, to allow adaptation to the current needs and/or new or emerging issues or opportunities.

4.12.1.3 Methodology

The answer to the SQ is based on triangulation of mainly qualitative data sources and approaches. Key resources used include:

- Literature and documentary review, including needs assessments in 2014-2020 CAP evaluations and research on current rural needs, also studies examining how NRNs or ENRD have helped to raise awareness of needs and RDP potentials.
- Online surveys and interviews of SHs in CS countries and regions.
- ENRD assessments at Member States and EU level, also documentation tracking the process of needs assessment and review.
- Surveys of MAs and NSUs, to seek evidence and opinion on the relevance of NRN and ENRD activities to governance needs for effective RDP implementation.

4.12.2 Summary answer

SQ12: To what extent have the ENRD and NRN activities been responding to the needs considering both general and specific territorial challenges for rural development

ENRD and NRN activities responded to needs to a good extent, considering both general and more specific challenges. Some minor weaknesses were noted.

JC12.1: ENRD resources, legal and governance provisions at EU level, and the NRNs' design and governance provisions enable them to target relevant needs

There is evidence from documentary review, interviews and online surveys that makes a clear link between the activities and priorities of NRNs and their respective RDPs, and between these RDP priorities and the strategic priorities of EAFRD, as agreed in advance and set out in the Regulation. NRN actions as designed and implemented appear well-matched to strategic needs for rural development across the EU territory. Of particular note have been the activities of NRNs in engaging stakeholders and supporting LEADER LAGs. Also, the roles of ENRD Contact Point and the Evaluation Helpdesk in capacity-building among Managing Authorities to enable better RDP implementation and evaluation, and the NRNs' activities to promote and enhance effective delivery of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and innovation initiatives, including relevant capacity-building among NRN members.

JC12.2: Secondary data and literature support the validity of the choice of ENRD and NRN priority activities and themes

Coherence between these needs and the evidence of rural needs as explored in other CAP evaluations 2014-2020 is good, particularly in respect of RDP goals and impacts. Similar points can be made concerning the coherence of ENRD priorities and actions with the strategic priorities of EAFRD, 2014-2020.

JC12.3: Needs analysis by ENRD and NRNs is updated periodically and taken into account as part of the selection and monitoring process for RDP measures

There is good evidence from documents and case studies to show how ENRD and NRNs undertook efforts on a regular basis to analyse, review and integrate assessment of needs into their activities, in support of RDP delivery processes.

Evidence of minor weaknesses in meeting needs comes from some case studies and online survey comments, where tension between EU level and national or regional levels is noted in whether networks should have given more attention to local needs. These relate to:

- issues in implementation processes and stakeholder mobilisation, where significant local needs were identified by NSUs and other stakeholders for greater clarification and simplification in RDP administration and delivery, but ENRD and also MAs did not give these issues sufficient priority, in the view of local actors (Wallonia, Austria);
- concerns that the agendas of ENRD and NRN activities were too much pre-determined in a top-down way, meaning that local challenges were not well-noted and responded to, despite NSU recognition of these needs (Italy, Slovakia);
- unmet potential to mobilise stakeholders in support of policy learning for enhanced delivery of rural development, through stronger interlinkages between evaluation activities of the EHD and MAs, and communication about evaluation across the NRN between stakeholders at national and regional levels, as examined in the SQ6 answer. There was good evidence of such policy learning occurring for MAs, especially where they attended GREXE and linked this into their approach to NRN liaison; but it was not often evident for NSUs or other NRN stakeholders. Surveys of NSUs and NRN stakeholders in Austria, Slovakia, Wallonia, Slovenia and Estonia identified this, whereas in IT and F, both surveys and interviews found very positive interaction between RDP evaluations and NRN stakeholders' learning.

4.12.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

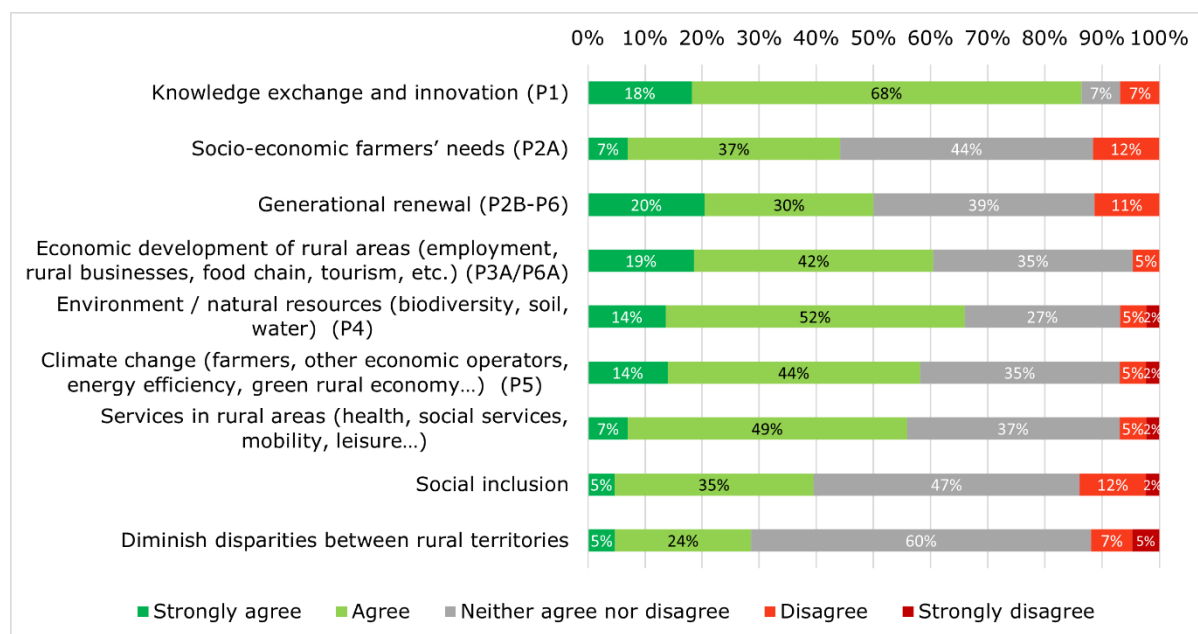
- [JC12.1 ENRD resources, legal and governance provisions made at EU level, and NRNs' design and governance provisions enable them to target relevant needs and priorities, covering economic, social and environmental needs in line with Rural development and CAP objectives and priorities, and responding to territorial specificities](#)

Relevance of NRN activities in meeting needs

The review of documentary and legislative provisions for NRNs and ENRD (set out in this study, revised first deliverable) has facilitated the elaboration of an intervention logic in which these networks and their activities are well-focused on meeting strategic needs, as reflected in EAFRD regulations and the CAP architecture. This should enable the goals and priorities of the networks to be matched to RDP needs as set out in their Programming documents, which are themselves produced in consultation with rural actors across the territory.

Evidence to support this criterion is provided in the MA survey. Respondents were asked: How much do you agree with "NRN activities contributed positively to..." (Figure 83)?

Figure 83: MA/PA Survey - Respondents' assessment of NRN contribution to meeting needs as set out in EAFRD priorities, 2014-2020



Source: MA / PA Survey, Q13,(N=44) (ADE, 2022)

This indicates that NRNs are assessed as most relevant for knowledge and innovation⁷⁴, with all other priorities scoring only around 50% or less agreement by respondents. Among these lower scored contributions, environment, rural services, climate change and economic development score relatively better than cohesion, social inclusion or the specific issues of generational renewal and farmers socio-economic needs. This 'ranking' of priorities is generally appropriate for NRNs when compared against other mechanisms and measures of the RDPs, although social inclusion and generational renewal were certainly topics on which some NRNs invested time and effort in their communications and events (e.g. in Italy, Slovenia and France).

In case studies, some other minor points of potential weakness are noted. For example, in Austria it is commented that there is a perception among stakeholders that the Evaluation Helpdesk was not strong on providing guidance for environmental evaluation, which is a relevant and core part of RDP evaluations.

⁷⁴ It should be noted in this context that because KE and innovation is a cross-cutting priority with no measures directly attached to this priority, any support to KE and innovation would also need to have supported economic, social and/or environmental goals and measures at the same time.

The evidence from all online surveys suggests a good correspondence between RDP priorities and the activities of NRNs, in most cases, which supports a judgement of the relevance of NRNs (the data are presented in other earlier SQ answers). In considering the themes covered by ENRD capacity-building events (see SQ 8), there is again a good correspondence with main CAP themes and priorities, as well as with key process challenges in RDP implementation which are also essential to ensure relevance.

From the case studies there is evidence from interviews with stakeholders and evaluators that NRNs and their activities are judged relevant overall, but in some Member States and regions criticisms were voiced that ENRD (both CP and EHD) was less relevant to them because ENRD priorities were strongly focused on meeting the needs of the Commission, which were not always the same as their own needs and which therefore led to under-representation of their needs, in activities taking place at the EU level. The evidence on this point is already presented in the answers to SQs 6 and 7, including a particular lack of connection between EHD-supported evaluation activities and NRNs which signify a weakness in meeting stakeholder needs and opportunities for policy learning, in all case studies except IT and F.

In respect of innovation and knowledge exchange in particular, NRNs appear to have been highly relevant in their activities and impact, providing a crucial service to animate and realise the aspirations of the EIP-AGRI. The evidence to support this judgement is clear from the answer to SQ 8.

Case studies provide some more detailed evidence for this criterion.

Austria

Table 17: Austria - Needs in the RDP area

LIST OF TERRITORIAL NEEDS	MA	NRN, agriculture and forestry	NRN, innovation	NRN, LEADER	NRN, environment and climate
Knowledge exchange and innovation (p1)	Very important	Very important	Very important	Very important	Important
Socio-economic farmers' needs (p2a)	Very important	Important	Important	Very important	Important
Generational renewal (p2b-p6)	Very important	Very important	Important	Very important	Important
Economic development of rural areas (employment, rural businesses, food chain, tourism, etc.) (p3a/p6a)	Very important	Important	Important	Very important	Important
Environment / natural resources (biodiversity, soil, water) (p4)	Very important	Very important	Important	Very important	Very important
Climate change (farmers, other economic operators, energy efficiency, green rural economy...) (p5)	Very important	Very important	Important	Very important	Very important
Services in rural areas (health, social services, mobility, leisure...)	Very important	Very important	Important	Very important	Important
Social inclusion	Very important	Important	Important	Very important	Important
Disparities between rural territories	Very important	Very important	Important	Very important	Important

Source: Interviews, surveys (ADE et al., 2022)

Interviews with representatives of the NRNs emphasised the validity and importance of all needs in the table above. In summary:

- Interview with NRN representative agriculture, forestry and value added: **generational renewal, economic development of rural areas, basic services as important in the context of networking.** Rural digitalisation and ICT infrastructure was also highlighted as a pressing networking need (especially in the context of the shift of networking activities to virtual environments during COVID-19).
- Interview with **NRN innovation broker: knowledge transfer and innovation assessed as very important, as it is a horizontal issue** which supports all other aspects/needs.

- The interview with the representative of the team environment and climate highlighted especially **climate change and the environment** as very important needs: perception and uptake of environmental measures varies between regions in Austria.
- Interview with NRN representative LEADER, **basic services and regional development** highlighted all aspects as very important, especially in the context of LEADER: NRN activities, in that field, address all these needs.

The NRN has obtained a significant increase in budget, as compared to the 2007-2013 period, enabling the NRN to more comprehensively target rural development networking needs. The introduction of EIP-AGRI enabled the NRN to implement dedicated actions to foster and transfer innovation in rural areas, particularly from theory into more practical research arrangements. Structured and regular self-evaluation allows the NRN to quickly respond to evolving stakeholder needs and adapt as necessary. This was particularly relevant in during COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021.

Wallonia

Activities initiated by RwDR broadly cover the different dimensions of rural development. CNS indicators show that most network activities do not necessarily target a particular priority or measure, but are based on a cross-cutting approach involving several themes. It shows the growing importance of activities carried out in the field of knowledge transfer and innovation, which target territorial issues based on the needs of stakeholders. The main themes of the activities in which the survey respondents participated are **innovation, agricultural development and practices, and the environment. They are in line with the territorial issues identified.**

Estonia

MA rated the following needs as **very important** for the implementation the RDP:

- Knowledge exchange and innovation (P1);
- Generational renewal (P2B-P6);
- Economic development of rural areas (P3A/P6A);
- Social inclusion;
- Socio-economic farmers' needs, (P2A);
- Environment (P4);
- Climate change (P5) and
- Services in rural areas were also **important.**

MA also confirmed that NRN activities have been designed around these needs.

France

The needs of rural territories are heterogeneous across regions, with each RDP catered to regional challenges. Still, this study identified several common themes and demands shared by stakeholders from different regions.

Themes represented in the MCDRs and EIP-AGRI projects give an overview of some of the main concerns of rural territories. **Agroecology is the most common** theme over the two calls. The **second** most important theme is **access to information and training.**

Table 18 classifies the MCDR of the 2018 call according to the main theme(s) they contribute to, based on a booklet published by the NRN after the 2018 call for proposals.

Table 18: France: Main MCDR themes and corresponding projects

Theme	Topic	MCDR (2018 call for tenders)
Agriculture	Agroecology	• 8 projects
	Fair agricultural remunerations	• 2 projects
	Youth and generational renewal	• 2 projects

Theme	Topic	MCDR (2018 call for tenders)
Rural Development (non-agricultural topics)	Service to the population	• 4 projects
	Digitalisation	• 2 projects
	Social Economy	• 2 projects
	Food governance	• 2 projects
	Information and training	• 7 projects
	Local development strategy	• 2 projects
	Urban rural link	• 3 projects
Other	Forest and woodworking	• 1 project
	Ecology and adaptation to climate change	• 2 projects
	Gender equality	• 4 projects

Source: (Réseau rural français, 2018)

The projects implemented through the MCDR, LEADER and EIP-AGRI components of the NRN are tailored to specific needs and challenges faced by rural stakeholders throughout France. Most are not directly identified at the national level because of the heterogeneity of the regions, but stakeholders express their needs and receive assistance for collaborative projects designed to address them.

Slovakia

According to the **Managing Authority (MA Survey Q6)**, the most important territorial needs in Slovakia at the level of rural development are clearly linked to **knowledge exchange and information, generational renewal, environment, economic development of rural areas and social inclusion**, all rated as very important. Socio-economic needs of farmers, rural services as well as disparities between rural areas were not rated at all, with MA noting "don't know" next to these needs. Survey respondents identified 3 most significant special needs in respect of networking for rural development: cover of the [largest possible] rural population; balancing regional disparities; and benefits for LEADER actors.

In the stakeholder survey (SH Q3) where respondents were given free space to comment on their needs, the most dominant 3 needs were: Advice (on project application, measures as well as project management); information; and support and training. From the responses it was evident that stakeholders need professional advice and more information and support in RDP project application and project management, simplified procedures and procurement. More frequent communication, training and seminars were also suggested many times.

Slovenia

MA respondents identified and rated seven needs as important, as follows: Social Inclusion; Services in rural areas; Climate change; Environment/natural resources; Generation renewal; Knowledge exchange and advice. Disparities between rural territories and socio-economic needs of farmers were rated slightly lower. These needs are mirrored in the Slovenian RDP 2014-2020.

According to the SH survey SHs' identified their top three needs for rural development networking. Nearly half respondents prioritised improving **access to and dissemination of information**, closely followed by **improving co-operation / networking**. Advice and support, particularly for making applications and tendering, good practice examples / visits, raising awareness / promotion of their work, and more training opportunities were also high priorities.

- **JC12.2. Secondary data and literature support the validity of the choice of ENRD and NRN priority activities and themes, as a good response to current needs (defined in section 4.2 of the RDPs) and future needs for effective RDP implementation**

The CAP evaluation studies so far published set out a range of evidence concerning current and future rural needs, embracing the 3 strategic priorities of the CAP architecture for the 2014-2020 period. Across economic, social and environmental priorities, the overarching

relevance of investment in knowledge exchange and innovation is clear, and the evidence from this study in respect of ENRD and NRN effectiveness is that this is the most relevant role played by the networks, to support EAFRD and RDP implementation.

The studies also present evidence and confirm the relevance of the socio-economic and environmental needs as set out in the CAP architecture, emphasising the importance of current economic needs, social inclusion and demographic challenges, the climate emergency and pressing need to tackle biodiversity decline, as well as to pursue the sustainable use of precious rural resources including water and soil. Examining the documentary evidence of ENRD and NRN activities, it is clear that these reflect those needs and priorities as well as the practical needs around effective RDP implementation to target those needs.

In some cases, study evidence highlights a few themes or topics where ENRD and/or NRN activities have been judged insufficient, in Stakeholders' opinions. For example, interviewees in Austria identified that EHD outputs and guidance were less strong on environmental topics; Wallonia MA cited insufficient attention to policy learning for efficient implementation within ENRD activities; Italian MA and NSUs called for more ability to direct activities towards locally-identified needs and challenges and Slovakian MA and NSU said ENRD priorities did not sufficiently reflect the implementation challenges of particular Member States.

- **JC12.3 Needs analysis by ENRD and NRNs is updated periodically and taken into account as part of the selection and monitoring process for RDP measures and packages, to allow adaptation to the current needs and/or new or emerging issues or opportunities**

Through the self-evaluation processes and the development and review of work in Annual Work Programmes, the ENRD and NRNs show clear evidence of seeking to assess and respond to the needs of their stakeholder communities. At the EU level, it is clear that alongside the relevance of the contact point and Evaluation Helpdesk to national and regional actors, these bodies must also consider the needs of the European policy institutions and DG AGRI in particular, for RDPs and their implementation.

Some comments discussed under other SQ answers in this study highlight the potential for some tensions to arise between the needs as perceived at EU level and those identified at Member State or regional level. From the regional or national perspective, some stakeholder and NSU comments are made that ENRD is insufficiently focused on problems in implementation processes and wider SH capacities, because it gives a lot of attention to meeting specific higher-level demands for examples of good practice and innovation. At the same time, the relevance of ENRD outputs and activities for promoting an aspirational culture and context for RDP implementation is also commended by interviewees in case study administrations and among key stakeholder bodies.

Overall, the evidence on this Judgement Criterion is positive, but with a few minor concerns identified in case study interviews. Additional evidence and specific points from selected case studies are presented here.

Austria

The NRN work programme is agreed annually based on needs identified among stakeholders and in the MA. Stakeholder needs and satisfaction with NRN are assessed via structured feedback collection after every event, and annual SH surveys. The monitoring system enables the NRN to implement its programme flexibly due to annual reporting and regular forward-looking negotiations.

The overall frame of measures and activities was set out contractually in the beginning of the period. These can be changed every two years, depending on the outcomes of monitoring. Individual measures (e.g. thematic seminars and conferences, including annual LEADER conferences) and specifics of implementation can be adapted annually.

NRN uses a system for monitoring output and result indicators for its 17 strategic objectives. Output indicators are monitored continuously; result indicators are monitored annually (Annual report 2021).

Estonia

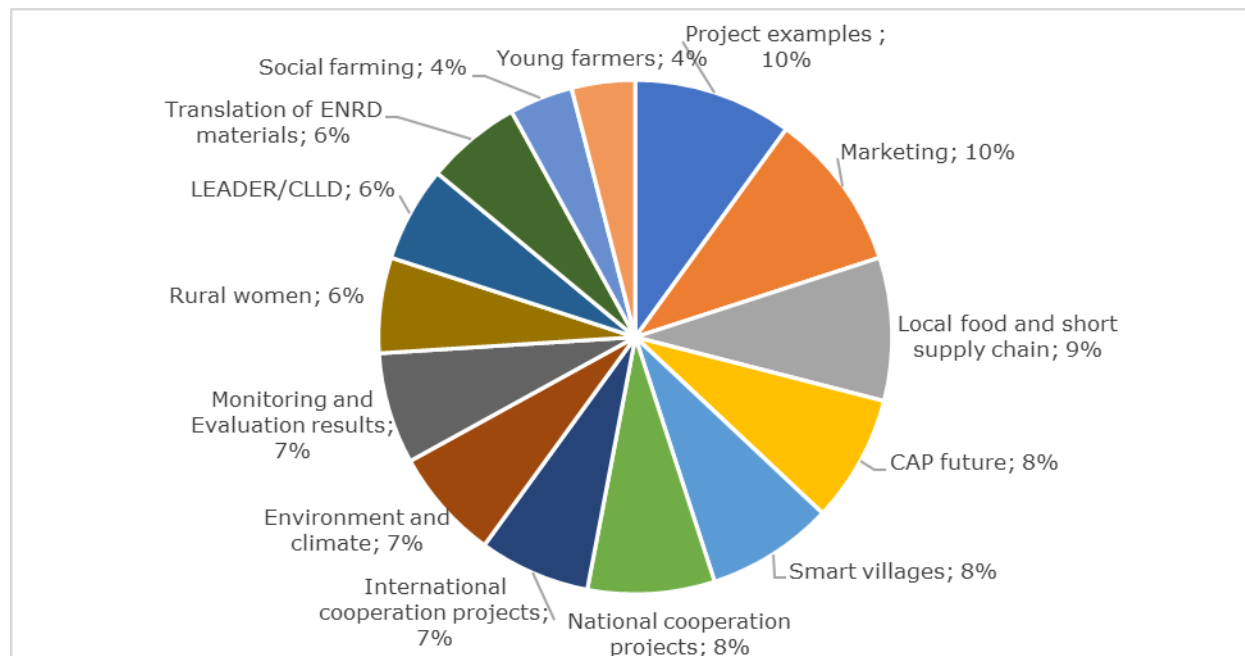
Stakeholder groups are regularly consulted by the NSU to review their current needs and demands in regard to NRN activities. Information from LAGs and Estonian LEADER Union is mostly collected during events or using questionnaires and e-mail. Information from the members of innovation network was collected during events/trainings but also through a special survey in 2019. Information from advisors is collected during the seminars and other events. To avoid duplication, seminar themes for advisors are discussed with the representative of the Rural Development Fund, designated as official advisory service provider of RDP, as they also run training and seminars for advisors.

The Cooperation Chamber of the Rural Network is also very important in collecting information on stakeholder needs as its membership includes a very wide range of stakeholders – it gives direct input to the NRN AWP. Informal communication of the NSU staff with different stakeholder groups either during the networking events or through bilateral discussion is also important.

A special survey to find out stakeholders needs, preferred information channels and collect feedback on executed activities was launched in early 2020. This gave valuable feedback for NSU in planning the further activities. Examples of the questions asked: How have you benefited from the activities of NRN; Which information channels have you used; Which way of exchanging information do you prefer; Which ones of the NRN newsletters you are familiar with; Which newsletter do you read the most and how necessary it is for you; Have you seen any NRN traveling exhibitions on rural life; What information would you expect from rural network. 80% of respondents said they had received information about RDP measures through NRN information channels and activities.

Topics of information expected from NRN is presented in Figure 84. Stakeholders seek information about a wide range of topics.

Figure 84 : Estonia stakeholder topics of interest for the NRN



Source: National stakeholders' survey (ADE et al., 2022)

France

The **NRN governance and mode of operation gives stakeholders opportunities to express specific demands with regard to networks' activities**, these demands are taken into account designing thematic activities and providing technical assistance (source: NSU interviews).

RRN were asked in a specific RRN survey whether the NRN and the ENRD answered the networking needs for RDP implementation on their territory. The vast majority of

respondents agreed with the statement for the French NRN, only one disagreed. Regarding the ENRD, the majority of respondents neither agreed or disagreed, two respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed and only one respondent agreed, suggesting that the NRN was successful in addressing regional networking needs, but regional stakeholders remained mostly unconnected to ENRD activities.

E

Theme 5: Coherence

4.13SQ13: To what extent were the ENRD activities coherent with and complementary to the activities of: (a) the EIP-AGRI network, (b) the NRNs, (c) wider EU information and communication policy on the CAP and rural development?

4.13.1 Approach

4.13.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

According to the better regulation guidelines⁷⁵, the evaluation of **coherence involves looking at how well or not different actions work together** (synergies, potential contradictory objectives, activities or approaches which are causing inefficiencies).

SQ 13 focuses on the evaluation of the coherence between the ENRD activities at EU level (art.52 of Regulation (EU)1305/2013) and activities implemented by the EIP-AGRI at EU-level (art.53), by the NRNs (art.54) at national level or under the information and communication policy of the CAP (art.6 and 45 of (EU)1306/2013). The study question relates to the coherence at the level of activities.

The question therefore focuses on the coherence in the planning and implementation of activities of respective networks (common strategic framework; shared action plans; level of integration and coordination between the networks in planning and implementing their respective activities; demarcation lines; complementarities or synergies between the activities; any contradictions or duplications that would reduce their effectiveness or efficiency).

As the question is about the coherence with NRNs, with the EIP- AGRI, and information and communication policy, and thus concerns the activities of the ENRD-Contact Point. The activities of the EHD are specifically related to evaluation only. The NRNs are not in charge of evaluation.

4.13.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC13.1: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the activities of the EIP-AGRI network at EU level.

JC13.2: The ENRD-CP activities at EU level are coherent with and complementary to the activities of the NRNs at national level.

JC13.3: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the wider EU information and communication policy on the CAP and rural development.

4.13.1.3 Methodology

The approach used is based on triangulation of information from literature and documentary reviews at EU level, case studies, the governance survey, and interviews conducted with ENRD-CP, EIP-AGRI, NSU and MA.

⁷⁵ Better Regulations Toolbox #47 'Evaluation Criteria and Questions' of the EC Tool.

4.13.2 Summary answer

SQ13: To what extent were the ENRD activities coherent with and complementary to the activities of: (a) the EIP-AGRI network, (b) the NRNs, (c) wider EU information and communication policy on the cap and rural development?

JC13.1: The activities of the ENRD-CP are coherent with and complementary to the activities of the EIP-AGRI network at EU level

The ENRD-CP, ENRD-EHD and the EIP-AGRI network are complementary in their scope of intervention aiming to increase awareness and enhance participation of their respective audiences (*rural development stakeholders; farmers and the research community*) and to improving the policy. **Efforts were also made in 2015 to ensure coherence and complementarity** between their respective activities by **creating a common governance structure** within the **European Rural Networks** (Assembly, Steering Group, sub-groups), and by proposing a **single strategic framework** encompassing the objectives and activities of both networks.

Despite this common framework, the networks have developed their activities with very occasional interlinkages and stakeholders deemed synergies between the two networks to be limited. **The degree of synergies and cooperation** between the two networks in the implementation of their activities **has remained limited** at operational level during the 2014-2022 period. The two self-assessments (2017 and 2019) carried out by the EU Rural Networks showed that less than half of the stakeholders (43% and 47%) considered there was good complementarity between the ENRD-CP and the EIP-AGRI. The Governance survey (2022) points to the same direction. Only 39% of the surveyed Rural Networks members considered the cooperation between the two networks as complementary and synergetic.

Within DG AGRI, three different units were responsible of each network which in turn were implemented by different contractors. Although there was good cooperation between these three units at EC level, it has not encouraged close collaboration among networks at operational level. There was no real cooperation and complementarities at operational level in establishing annual work programmes and in implementing activities. This issue would in principle have been considered in the new single EU CAP network, where close coordination between the activities of the support units (implementation, innovation, evaluation) would have become a priority.

JC13.2: The ENRD-CP activities at EU level are coherent with and complementary to the activities of the NRNs at national level

The ENRD-CP at the EU level and NRNs at the national level were both **designed to be complementary**, one operating at the EU level, the others at national/regional levels. They share three out of four specific objectives. The case studies and interviews provide evidence that **the activities implemented by the ENRD-CP have been coherent and complementary with the activities of the NRNs. The coordination and synergies** between the two levels **are important and** have been **successful**. There are many opportunities for exchange between the two levels, with no significant inconsistencies or contradictions being reported by stakeholders.

SQ 4 illustrated through different examples how the activities of ENRD-CP have strengthened the role of NRNs at national level and supported their activities. The **activities of ENRD-CP** effectively **feed into the activities of the NRNs and vice versa**. Some topics were first developed by the ENRD-CP (i.e., Smart villages, LTVRA, etc.) and then fed into the activities of the NRN. The NRNs provide feedback on the needs and experiences from the field to the EU level. If similar topics are usually covered by both levels, the activities will be complementary without overlap as the objective, contextualisation and audience are different.

JC13.3: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the wider EU information and communication policy on the CAP and rural development

The **CAP information and communication policy** refers mainly to articles 6 and 45 of regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 (European Commission, 2013). A clear link can be established between this communication policy and the specific objective of the ENRD-CP (and NRNs) to play a role in informing the broader public on the benefits of rural development policy and to increase stakeholder awareness on RDP opportunities. The ENRD-CP is not part of the Commission's corporate communication, but it contributes to it in various ways.

Question 12 of the recent evaluation on information policy on the CAP published in 2021 (European Commission, PPMI, 2021) provides a clear assessment. It shows that the ENRD's information activities have a more restricted objective than the CAP's overall information policy since they are solely focused on the second pillar and those with an interest in EU Rural Development. It also underlines that the ENRD-CP communication activities and objectives are in line with and complement CAP information policy with strong cooperation with DG AGRI.

4.13.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

- **JC13.1: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the activities of the EIP-AGRI network at EU level**

The EIP-AGRI network (European Commission, 2012b) (art.53 of (EU)1305/2013) was launched by the EC in 2012 to meet the challenges of the agricultural sector and rural development in general. It aims at finding innovative practical solutions to combine competitiveness and sustainability in agriculture, forestry, and rural development.

The EIP-AGRI was mandated to act on several levers: better coordination of public innovation measures and mechanisms; strengthening the bridges between research and practical farming ⁷⁶; and encouraging the exchange of practices at EU level. The EIP-AGRI is also **bridging between the research policy Horizon 2020 and the Common Agricultural Policy**, through its funding architecture.

The EIP-AGRI therefore brings together innovation actors and creates synergies between existing policies. Its overarching goal is to foster competitiveness and sustainability in agriculture, forestry, and rural development. At EU level, the EIP-AGRI network is run by the European Commission and has been supported since 2013 by the EIP-AGRI Service Point (and EIP-AGRI Support Facility since 2021). The EIP-AGRI Service Point supported the NRNs, which have an explicit role in fostering innovation in the agriculture, food production, forestry, and rural areas within the RDs. While NRNs are in close relationship with the ENRD-CP, for innovation their focal point is the EIP-AGRI.

Significant **efforts** were **made at the beginning of the 2014-2020 programming period to ensure coherence between** the activities of **the ENRD and the EIP- AGRI**. These are summarised in the strategic framework for EU Rural Networks (European Commission, ENRD, EIP-AGRI, 2015). The purpose was to provide a common framework for the operation of both networks, to ensure coordination between the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network, and to guide the network support units in the preparation of their activities.

To strengthen the coherence of the approach, both networks (that is, ENRD and EIP-AGRI) have developed a common strategic framework and governance bodies (ENRD, 2015a) (EIP-AGRI, ENRD, 2016). Indeed, the EIP-AGRI Service Point is part of the European rural networking structures as ENRD-CP and ENRD-EHD. Both networks have common governance structures consisting of an Assembly that provides the strategic framework (operational objectives, types of activities, etc.), and a Steering Group that coordinate and supervises the activities of both networks through work plans and permanent sub-groups covering thematic work (see SQ3). The permanent subgroup on innovation aims to contribute to the development of networking activities related to EIP-AGRI. Since 2015, the objectives and activities of both networks are included in a single strategic framework that ensures coordination between the ENRD-CP and EIP-AGRI network and guide them when developing their respective activities.

When the networks were established, there were three different units within DG AGRI. But since 2016, the preparation of the Assembly is done together. The three units are consulted and involved in the preparation of meetings (Assembly or Steering Group) and a draft agenda is proposed to each unit which covers both networks.

The documentary analysis provides a few **examples of complementarity or cooperation**. Some of the themes developed by the ENRD-CP and EIP- AGRI SP are common. The ENRD-CP identifies in its activity reports two common priorities with the EIP-AGRI strategic framework on which there has been cooperation between the networks to avoid overlap: "Smart and competitive rural areas (Priority 4)" and "Supporting the transition to a green economy in rural areas" (Priority 5)". In 2018, the EIP- AGRI SP received support from the ENRD-CP to organise a seminar on Digital innovation. The work of the ENRD-CP thematic group on Smart and Competitive rural areas was showcased during the seminar. The 19th NRN meeting was held in 2021 and focused on supporting transnational cooperation between LAGs and EIP- AGRI Operational Groups.

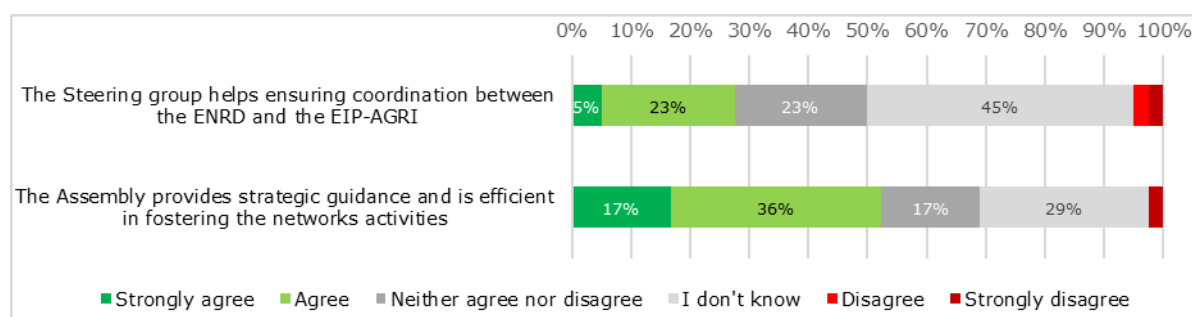
⁷⁶ The OECD Innovation Strategy (OECD, 2010) highlights both the economic and social roles of innovation, stating that the "objective of policy should not be innovation as such, but the application of innovation to make life better for individuals and society at large".

Despite this common framework, the links in the activities of the networks are scarce at operational level. The degree of synergies and cooperation between the two networks in the implementation of their activities has remained low, both in terms of content and participation.

Stakeholders identified the need for more synergy between the two networks to avoid an overlap. The two self-evaluations carried out by the European Rural Networks in 2017 and 2019 asked stakeholders about the coherence of ENRD-CP and EIP-AGRI. In both cases, less than half of the respondents (N=42) (43% in 2017 and 47% in 2019) considered that there was good complementarity between ENRD-CP and EIP-AGRI. Some recommendations were made to avoid overlaps between the two networks. These included a need for more combined workshops, publications, and activities. Some suggested combining the two networks into one.

The results of the governance survey carried out in 2022 as part of this study clearly points in the same direction (see SQ3). Only 39% of the members of the rural networks surveyed (N=42) consider that the cooperation between the two networks is complementary and synergistic. Meanwhile, 28% of the respondents consider that the Steering Group ensures coordination between the ENRD-CP and the EIP-AGRI. (see Figure 85).

Figure 85: European rural networks Governance survey - Role of the European Rural Networks (ENRD-CP and EIP-AGRI) and their governance in the 2014-2020 period



Source: European rural networks Governance survey, Q3 - Do you agree on the following statements regarding the role of the European Rural Networks (ENRD-CP and EIP-AGRI) and their governance in the 2014-2020 period? n = 42 (ADE, 2022)

The lack of synergies and complementarities in the 2014-2020 period is also perceived by some interviewed representatives of the ENRD-CP, the EIP-AGRI Service Point and EC DG AGRI. The EIP-AGRI Service Point highlighted the lack of collaboration between ENRD-CP and EIP-AGRI events.

Some activities are also considered as overlapping due to low coordination. For instance, the ENRD's TWGs on Bioeconomy and Supply Chains covered the same topic and involved the same experts as a previous EIP-AGRI event, even if dealt from slightly different perspectives and audience.

Within DG AGRI, three different support units were responsible of each network implemented by different contractors. Even if there is a good cooperation between the three support units, this has not encouraged close collaboration between the networks at operational level. There was no real cooperation and complementarities at operational level in establishing annual work programmes and in implementing activities.

This issue has been considered in the future CAP with the setting-up of a single CAP network. The EC will also have more vision over the synergies as it is now managed by the same DG-AGRI Unit (D1), except for the evaluation work (A3). Close coordination between the four new entities of the CAP Network has become one of the priorities for the new period, as recalled at the last Assembly.

The ENRD-CP representative also notes that the degree of separation between the two networks is decreasing, with the networks slowly carrying out similar activities in terms of scope. Content synergies have improved since the beginning of the programming period. The ENRD-CP takes up the results of the EIP-AGRI and uses them as inputs for its activities.

➤ **JC13.2: The ENRD-CP activities at EU level is coherent with and complementary to the activities of the NRNs at national level**

The ENRD-CP at the EU level and NRNs at national level were both designed to be complementary, to interact and work together. As shown in the intervention logic (see section 2.3), they have 3 out of 4 specific objectives in common⁷⁷ **but operate at different geographical levels**. The ENRD-CP operates at EU level, involving mainly NSUs, MAs and relevant EU organisations. The NRNs are focused on needs of national, regional, or local stakeholders. The activities of one should feed the activities of the other and vice versa. In this sense, their activities at these two levels are very complementary. This question is not relevant for ENRD-EHD since NRNs are not in charge of evaluation, except dissemination.

The question is thus to assess **whether complementarities and synergies have been strong in practice** in the design and the implementation of actions plans.

The case studies and interviews state that **ENRD-CP activities were** largely viewed as **coherent with and complementary to the activities of the NRNs**. Inconsistencies or contradictions were not reported by stakeholders.

In general, the **level of coordination and synergies between the two levels is high and has been successful** during the programming period. There are many meetings and opportunities for exchange between ENRD-CP and NRNs. The flow of information between ENRD-CP and NRNs is considered appropriate. The NRNs have participated and have been involved in these exchanges to a large extent. These include NRN meetings (three per year), informal NRN meetings within geographic clusters (since 2020), Thematic Working groups (15 TWG over the 2014-2021 period), events, workshops, etc. (see SQ4). It was also pointed out that transparency about reference persons per theme both at national and EU level and direct connections with the ENRD-CP personnel helps build complementarities and benefit from synergies.

The ENRD-CP presents an annual work programme each year which considers the needs expressed by the NRNs. Nevertheless, the ENRD-CP activities at EU and NRN level are planned separately. NRNs' activities are focused on national needs and addressed to the national stakeholders while, the ENRD-CP annual work programmes allow NRNs to implement complementary activities at national level. Even when the same topics are developed at EU and national levels, the approach used may be different, because the context and the audience are different. This allows for learning from the discussions and publications at EU level without creating overlaps. Italy and Slovakia are examples where NRN activities focus on specific national or regional needs and are neither complementary nor contradictory to ENRD-CP activities.

SQ 4 provides examples of how the ENRD's activities have strengthened the role of NRNs at national level. ENRD-CP activities have supported and improved the quality of NRNs' activities. They gave NRNs access to relevant sources of information. They have brought certain themes related to the European vision and stimulated new ideas.

The exchanges between the ENRD-CP and the NRNs has been a two-way relationship. Complementarity works well when ENRD-CP provides NRNs with activities that can be shared to catalyse networking at national level, and when NRNs bring in lessons from their country/region to share with other ENRD-CP members.

Some themes such as the smart villages and the long-term vision for rural areas were first developed by the ENRD-CP and then relayed and adapted to the national context by the activities of the NRN (i.e. CS France) and vice versa. Estonian and Slovenian stakeholders also referred to how ENRD-CP outputs regarding smart villages and the long-term vision for rural areas were shared nationally.

On the other hand, the national networks bring forward the needs and realities on the field, certain themes initially developed at regional and national level or examples of good

⁷⁷ Namely "Increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development", "Improve the quality of implementation of RDPs", and "play a role in informing the broader public of the benefits of rural development policy".

practice to enrich the discussion and improve the activities carried out at EU level. For example, the Walloon rural development network launched a prospective exercise in 2013-2014 on the evolution of Walloon rural territories by 2040 (RwDR, 2014). This exercise was a precursor to the LTVRA and a source of inspiration for the ENRD-CP. In France, the work conducted by regional and national stakeholders on gender equality has been shared with other European actors and became the topic of a European seminar "[Advancing gender equality in rural areas in the EU](#)" in late 2022.

This meeting of ground-level realities with European vision highlights the coherence and complementarity of the activities developed by the two levels. If similar topics are covered by both levels, the activities are complementary without overlapping since the objective, the context and the audience are different.

- **JC13.3: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the wider EU information and communication policy on the CAP and rural development**

The **CAP information and communication policy** mainly refers to regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 (European Commission, 2013). Article 6 sets out that the provision of information policy on the CAP is one of the ways through which CAP funds can be invested/used. Article 45 outlines the general objectives of the CAP information policy which are:

- 1) To help explain, implement, and develop the CAP.
- 2) To raise public awareness of its content and reinstate consumer confidence following crises through information campaigns.
- 3) To inform farmers and other parties active in rural areas.
- 4) To promote the EU model of agriculture, as well as helping citizens understand it.

A clear link can therefore be established with the specific objective of the ENRD-CP (and NRNs) to play a role in informing the broader public on the benefits of rural development policy and to increase stakeholder awareness on RDP opportunities.

A CAP external communication strategy is set every five years. Specific objectives in the 2016-2020 strategy (European Commission, 2016) are :

- for the general public: to raise public awareness about the relevance of EU support to agriculture and rural development via the CAP,
- for stakeholders (including beneficiaries of the CAP and multipliers): to engage with stakeholders in order to further communicate the CAP to their constituencies and to the wider public.

Measures and activities include media networking, social media, website, events, etc. These are undertaken both directly by the EC or by third parties co-financed with grants (European Commission - DG AGRI, 2021). These are outlined in annual action plans and annual reports.

The ENRD-CP is not part of the EC corporate communication, but it contributes in various ways. For example, ENRD-CP projects are used in EC campaigns and other DGs websites to show how EU money is spent.

The recent evaluation on information policy on the CAP published in 2021 (European Commission - DG AGRI, 2021) provides important elements to answer this question. Question 12 considers the coherence between this information policy and other information actions such as those of the ENRD. This study shows that although they use similar communication tools, the ENRD's information activities have a more restricted objective than the CAP's overall information policy. The ENRD's are solely focused on the second pillar and their content is more tailored to those with an interest in EU Rural Development (policy-level stakeholders such as MAs, PAs, LAGs, NRNs, socio-professional sectors such as civil society groups, research organisations and advisory service providers as well as individuals with a personal interest).

This evaluation also underlines that communication activities of the ENRD-CP are in line with and complement CAP information policy, with strong cooperation between DG AGRI

Units being responsible for communication and ENRD. The ENRD-CP also provides material, projects, and representative contacts in the context of EC campaigns.

It also provides evidence of regular and established cooperation between ENRD-CP and the DG AGRI unit dealing with communication (former unit B1) and unit dealing with ENRD-CP (former unit E2), including sharing respective annual work plans. In addition, synergies were identified. The interview with ENRD-CP and DG AGRI confirms this strong relation. All ENRD-CP communication pass through DG AGRI ensuring the coherence.

There is no evidence of contradiction or duplication between ENRD-CP and wider CAP information and communication activities.

4.14 SQ14: To what extent were the ENRD activities coherent with and complementary to the activities of other relevant EU and national/regional networks and structures involved in rural development policy and local development?

4.14.1 Approach

4.14.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the Study Question

The principles set-out in SQ 13 about "internal" coherence apply. The study question focuses on the coherence between the activities planned and implemented by the ENRD (art.52 of (EU)1305/2013) at EU level and those carried out by other relevant EU and national/regional networks and structures involved in rural development policy and local development. SQ14 focuses on external coherence (the activities of the ENRD in relation to other networks); the scope of the question is limited to the activities of the ENRD-CP (see SQ 13).

4.14.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC14.1: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the activities of other relevant networks other relevant networks involved in rural development policy and local development at EU level.

JC14.2: The ENRD-CP activities at EU level are perceived by stakeholders as globally coherent with and complementary to the activities of other external networks or structures at EU or national level.

4.14.1.3 Methodology

The approach is mainly qualitative. It is based on triangulation of approaches and information from literature and documentary review at EU level, case studies and interviews with ENRD-CP, NSU and MA. This information was supplemented with a short survey addressed to a selection of twenty relevant networks⁷⁸ at EU level. The objective was to collect their perception on the coherence and complementarity of ENRD-CP activities with their activities or the activities of other networks at EU or national level. The result of this survey is indicative as the number of respondents is limited (n=11), although the response rate (55%) is good. Most respondents (9) are involved in the governance bodies of the European Rural Networks (7) or have participated in ENRD-CP TWGs (five members of the Assembly + two members of other bodies).

⁷⁸ Among these 20 Networks or structures, the following are members of the **2014-2020 governance structures**: European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA), Confederation of European Forest Owners (CEPF), [European farmers](#) (COPA), [European agri-cooperatives](#) (COGECA), European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), European LEADER Association for Rural Development ([ELARD](#)), European Association of Mountain Areas ([EUROMONTANA](#)), Partnership for Rural Europe ([PREPARE](#)), European Rural Community Alliance ([ERCA](#)), Ruralité-Environnement-Développement ([RED](#)). **Those outside**: [Smart Village Network](#) and [Smart Villages Intergroup](#), Rural, Mountainous and remote areas ([RUMRA](#)), [European Rural Parliament](#) South Sparsely Populated Areas ([SSPA](#)) Network, North Sparsely Populated Areas ([NSPA](#)) Network, Small and Medium-Sized City ([SMC](#)), Broadband Competence Office Network, Territorial Agenda, ARC, European Start-up Village Forum, Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), Rural Youth Europe.

4.14.2 Summary answer

SQ14: To what extent were the ENRD activities coherent with and complementary to the activities of other relevant EU and national/regional networks and structures involved in rural development policy and local development?

This question covers the external **coherence** and complementarity of **ENRD-CP activities with those of other relevant networks** involved in rural development policy and local development at EU, national, or regional levels.

Many structures and networks are active in rural development. Some of them, most relevant from the perspective of balanced territorial development in 2014⁷⁹ are represented at EU level in the governance structures of the EU Rural Networks. There is no institutional network like the ENRD for other ESI funds, except the Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) for EMFF. Other relevant networks at EU level (listed above) are part of the EU Rural Network governance structures (i.e. ELARD, ERCA, Euromontana, PREPARE, etc.), or not (i.e. European Parliament, RUMRA, SSPA/NSPA, Smart Village Network, Small and Medium-Sized City, etc.).

JC14.1: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with, and complementary to, the activities of other relevant networks involved in rural development policy and local development at EU level.

The **governance structures** of the European Rural Networks (especially the Assembly) are the **main platforms for coordination with other networks**. Several⁸⁰ networks relevant to rural development at EU level are represented. The governance meetings allow for mutual exchange of information on activities of networks, especially those set out in the ENRD-CP annual work plans, and discussion and feedback on the needs of the different stakeholders.

The ENRD-CP participates in meetings organised by those other networks to provide information and keep itself informed. ENRD-CP also states "regularly collaborating with many other networks at EU level". However, these co-operations are not sufficiently documented in reports nor in interviews. ENRD-CP explain that it favours collaborations with external structures on specific thematic issues rather than with specific organisations.

There is limited explicit evidence to draw conclusions on the level of cooperation between the ENRD-CP and other EU networks, beyond those included in the governance bodies. Twenty relevant EU networks were asked indicatively about their level of collaboration with the ENRD-CP as part of the coherence survey (n=11). It shows that respondents have regularly participated in ENRD-CP meetings or events. Reported cases of active participation of the ENRD-CP in their activities, joint organisation of activities, or coordination in the planning of the respective activities are rare. Most respondents were involved in the governance bodies or in TWGs of the ENRD-CP⁸¹. The collaboration and involvement of other EU networks is also a matter of structures and resources.

The survey, the documentary review and the interviews nevertheless provide **some illustrations of collaborations, complementarities, or synergies in relation to local territorial development**. Some networks have intervened in ENRD-CP activities and vice versa. The ENRD-CP activities and NRNs supported local actors on the ground, implementing multi-funded CLLD strategies through their LEADER/CLLD focused activities and related thematic working groups. Indeed, the development of rural areas is not only supported by the EAFRD, but also by the other ESI funds. All LAGs supported by the EAFRD, including those with multi-funded strategies combining EAFRD with one or more other funds (EMFF, ERDF, ESF) are covered and have access to ENRD-CP and NRN activities. However, the level of support on other ESI funding varies across Member States, depending on the relationship between the respective MAs involved. The ENRD-CP also developed a LAGs database, including multi-funded LAGs, that enables LAGs to contact, network and cooperate with each other.

The ENRD-CP worked notably on multi-funded topics, such as on the Long Term Vision of Rural Areas, rural businesses, social inclusion, smart villages and recently rural revitalisation (see SQ4). Three of the networks involved in the Assembly (ERCA, PREPARE and ELARD) are joint co-ordinators of the European Rural Parliament, a platform which aims is to strengthen the voice of the rural areas of Europe, influence policy at national and European level and support exchange

⁷⁹ The members of the Assembly were defined at the start of the programming period in 2014 and they are fixed.

⁸⁰ See list hereafter under JC14.1.

⁸¹ 90% of the networks involved in the governance structure replied to the survey compared to only 20% of the surveyed networks outside the governance structures.

of good practice and co-operation among rural communities throughout Europe. Collaboration between NRNs and Rural Parliaments at the national level varies across the Member States where Rural Parliaments exist and are active.

The networks that responded to the coherence survey also mention convergence on several rural development themes. In general, the ENRD-CP activities have informed and strengthened the capacities of certain networks, and also contributed to their own discussions.

The documentary review and interviews **did not identify any evidence of incoherence or significant duplication**, either in terms of regulations or activities. Thematic overlaps are frequent, but not problematic, as they consider the same topic from different perspectives or audiences. The main observations made in the framework of the coherence survey and the interviews are about strengthening links with the networks and stakeholders related to other ESI funds and the national LEADER and ELARD networks and strengthening territorial representation and expertise in the activities of ENRD. Some also stressed the need to maintain the focus on rural and local development in the evolution of the CAP network, and to strengthen connections with other networks.

JC14.2: The ENRD-CP activities at EU level are perceived by stakeholders as globally coherent with and complementary to the activities of other external networks or structures at EU or national level.

The case studies show that national or regional stakeholders have difficulties in evaluating the coherence of ENRD-CP activities with other relevant networks. ENRD-CP activities are primarily addressed to MAs, NSUs and LAGs. Other national or regional networks and structures interact with NRNs and therefore do not necessarily have a comprehensive view of ENRD-CP activities. The perception of the other relevant EU networks in the coherence survey (n=11) is mixed and unclear. In both cases, stakeholders did not identify any significant inconsistencies. Representatives of other ESI funds were not involved in NRN activities (case studies, surveys).

Activities percolate from the European to the national level. ENRD organised TWGs on smart villages, which are one of the NRN's flagship themes supporting multi-funded strategies with rural stakeholders.

4.14.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

Given the heterogeneity and multiplicity of structures and networks involved in rural policy and local development, it is difficult to get an overview of all relevant networks and their activities at EU, national and regional level. There is no institutional network like ENRD for other ESI funds, except FARNET for EMFF.

- **JC14.1: The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with and complementary to the activities of other relevant networks other relevant networks involved in rural development policy and local development at EU level**

There is few evidence of coordination or association between ENRD-CP and other relevant networks to plan and implement their respective activities beyond governance structures.

The **governance structures** of the European Rural Networks **are the main places for coordination with other relevant networks at EU level**. The Assembly has been designed to inform about the activities of the ENRD-CP and to facilitate exchanges with the main relevant structures and networks to rural development at EU level which are represented⁸². This allowed them to raise their voices. The ENRD-CP's programme of

⁸² [European agri-cooperatives](#) (COGECA), [Euromontana](#), [SMEunited](#), [European farmers](#) (COPA), [Ruralité-Environnement-Développement](#) (RED), [European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism](#) (EFNCP), [PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe](#) (PREPARE), [European Agroforestry Federation](#) (EURAF), [European LEADER Association for Rural Development](#) (ELARD), [European Rural Community Alliance](#) (ERCA), [Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe](#) (CCRE), Association of European Regions for Products of Origin (AREPO), European Organisation of Agricultural and Rural Contractors (CEETTAR), BirdLife Europe, European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA), European Liaison Committee for Agricultural and AgriFood Trade (CELCAA), - Confederation of European Forest Owners (CEPF), European Crop Protection Association (ECPA), - European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP), European Landowners Organisation (ELO), , European Agroforestry Federation (EURAF), European Federation of Rural Tourism (EUROGITES), Fur Europe, - International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (FOAM EU GROUP), - Pesticide Action Network Europe (PAN Europe), European Association of Craft Trade and Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEunited), World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

activities is guided by the needs and demands of the groups involved in the ENRD's governance structures and activities. Some organisations represented in the Rural Networks governance bodies also present their forthcoming activities or report back from them. For instance, the European Rural Parliament representative reported the Assembly members about their meetings and declarations (i.e. see hereunder [Candas Declaration](#) and [Kielce Declaration](#)).

The ENRD-CP also participates in external meetings or events of other networks/structures to provide information, keep itself up to date, and consider possible synergies. The ENRD annual reports mentions between 37 and 84 missions per year to attend external (non-ENRD-CP) events. The main themes mentioned were resource efficiency, smart villages, social inclusion, smart businesses, RDP implementation, CLLD and TNC.

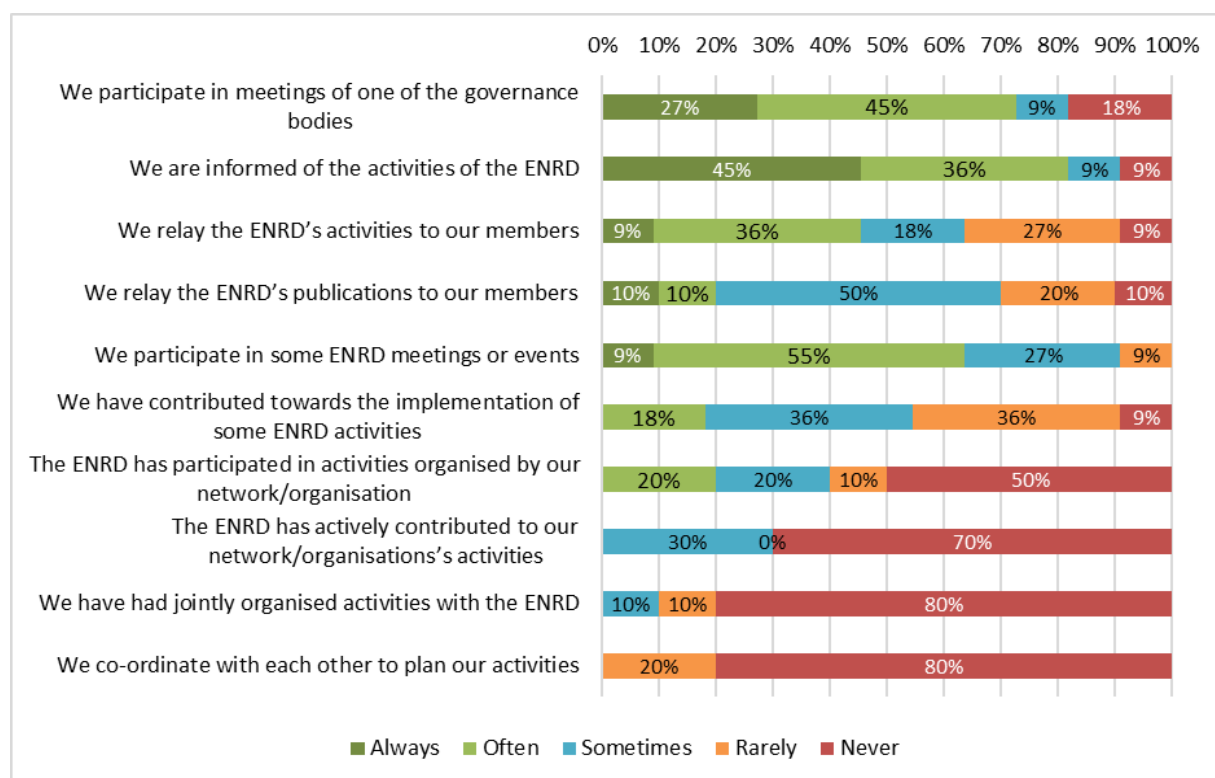
The ENRD-CP also states it "has regularly collaborated with many other Networks at the EU level, building synergies with other Networks activities, [...] organising events in partnership, joining forces to achieve the objective of the ENRD, and learning from each others". However, it did not want to illustrate this with a list of concrete examples to avoid giving a partial or biased picture of working more with some organisations. This information is as well not included in the annual activity reports.

Indeed, ENRD-CP aims to cooperate with all stakeholders who are willing without distinction, as long as it falls in line with its annual work programme or missions. ENRD-CP also underlines that the aim is to collaborate on topics rather than with structures.

The structure and capacity of the different other relevant networks at EU level may also vary. Some networks have more resources than others to collaborate or be actively involved in ENRD activities.

A selection of other relevant networks at EU level (see footnote under section 4.14.1) was asked about their level of collaboration with the ENRD-CP in the September 2022 coherence survey (Figure 86, n=11).

Figure 86: Q2 - What is your level of collaboration with the ENRD-Contact Point (ENRD-CP) or the ENRD-Evaluation Helpdesk (ENRD-EHD) since 2014?



Source: ADE, Coherence survey (n=11)

Most of the 11 respondents are directly involved in governance bodies (7 or 63%) and/or participate in TWGs (9 or 82%). They often participate in ENRD-CP meetings and events. Fewer respondents regularly relayed ENRD-CP activities and publications to their members. Some networks state that they sometimes or often contribute to the implementation of ENRD activities. Four networks (out of 11 respondents) say that the ENRD-CP has sometimes (2) or often (2) participated in their activities, sometimes with an active contribution. The case of joint organisation of activities (1 sometimes out of 11) or coordination in the planning of their respective activities (none) beyond the Assembly is rare. This tends to confirm the documentary review.

For the period 2014 to 2020, there is limited evidence of coordination or association between ENRD-CP and other European networks beyond those represented at the Assembly to plan and implement their respective activities.

There is some evidence of synergies and/or complementarities between ENRD-CP and the activities of other networks.

At the case study level, the stakeholders interviewed generally have only a partial view to assess the coherence of ENRD-CP activities with those of other European networks. The ENRD-CP activities are not in principle directly addressed to national or regional networks. The NRNs are the first point of contact for them.

The coherence survey, the documentary review and the interviews nevertheless provide some illustrations of collaborations, complementarities or synergies at EU level. Some networks or structures have participated as contributors to ENRD activities. Conversely, the ENRD-CP has participated in some activities organised by other networks (i.e. COPA-COGECA, CEMR, etc.). The involvement of ENRD-CP in CLLD related activities and events is the main link with other ESI funds. Some examples were provided of activities or seminars co-organised by DG AGRI, REGIO, EMPL and MARE and participation/involvement of other DGs in the ENRD events and activities, such as the LEADER/CLLD sub-group, the thematic groups of experts dealing with LEADER, CLLD conferences or LINC events. The ENRD-CP has contributed to supporting LEADER/CLLD cooperation projects and LAG networks in the implementation of the 7 LEADER principles. ENRD-CP has exchanged or collaborated with some networks on specific events or themes.

In coherence survey, networks at EU level also mention convergences and complementarities with their activities on several rural development themes: CLLD, LVTRA, Smart Villages, sustainable agriculture, bioeconomy, carbon exploitation, forestry, women farmers, innovative role of agriculture, value chains, etc.

According to the coherence surveys, the ENRD-CP activities have informed, strengthened capacity and the knowledge base of some other EU networks through their activities. ENRD-CP provides a regular update on EU policies relevant to rural development. It has identified best practices on how measures can contribute to the implementation of EU policies and as well shared knowledge on the opportunities and challenges of implementing rural development measures. It facilitates links with the authorities that are directly responsible for implementing rural development policy measures.

There is no evidence of contradiction or significant duplication between ENRD-CP and those networks activities.

The ENRD-CP has not identified any inconsistencies or overlaps between the ENRD-CP regulations and those of other relevant networks at EU level. The documentary review, the interviews and the coherence survey also did not identify any evidence of incoherence or significant duplication.

Thematic overlaps are frequent. However, they are not problematic as they consider the same topic from different perspectives, and often reflect the EU policy priorities. The activities of the different networks are often aimed at different audiences or in response to specific needs at national level.

The main observations made in the framework of coherence survey and interviews are about strengthening links with the networks of the other ESI funds, the national LEADER and ELARD networks, as well as strengthening territorial representation and expertise in the activities of ENRD. Some also stressed the need to maintain the focus on rural and local development in the evolution of the CAP network and to strengthen connections with other networks and stakeholders related to other ESI funds.

Some observations were nevertheless made. Collaboration with the organisations and networks linked to other ESI funds could be strengthened. Especially since the EAFRD is no more be part of the ESI funds. Similarly, at the level of Leader, ENRD-CP could consult and provide more support to the LAGs, the national Leader and ELARD networks to avoid parallel work. The ENRD-CP TWGs do not have sufficient territorial representation or expertise according to one respondent.

According to the article 52 (3)(h)(ii), one of the task of the ENRD specifically for the LAGs should be to "cooperate with the networking and technical support bodies for local development set up by the ERDF, the ESF and the EMFF as regards their local development activities and transnational co-operation." As mentioned above there is no similar network to the ENRD-CP for the other ESI funds to avoid duplications. Thus, the ENRD-CP also supported rural actors through the NRNs in multi-funded strategies, as far as the EAFRD was included among the funds.

Rural actors on the ground have been supported by the ENRD-CP and the NRNs during the 2014-2020 period, particularly in the framework of the multi-fund strategies. Indeed, the development of rural areas is not only supported by the EAFRD, but also by the other ESI funds (ERDF, ESF, EMFF). The CLLDs and smart villages are based on territorial strategies linked to multiple funding (with the Cohesion funds).

Through its activities, the ENRD-CP has worked on multi-funded themes, notably in the framework of LEADER/CLLD capacity building and TWGs such as Smart Villages, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, Rural Revitalisation, Rural Businesses, Social inclusion, etc. (see SQ4).

Regarding LEADER/CLLD level, the ENRD-CP and NRNs covers all LAGs supported by the EAFRD, also in case of multi-funded CLLD. [LDnet](#)⁸³ records 2 825 LAGs (84%) financed by EAFRD (out of 3 337 LAGs), of which 2 206 LEADER mono-funds exclusively financed by EAFRD and 619 combining EAFRD with one or more other funds (EMFF, ERDF, ESF). 12 Member States decided not to make use of the option to use any ESI Funds other than the ones that could already be used in 2007-13 (Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta and Spain).

The ENRD also implement a LAG database that enables LAGs to contact, network and cooperate with each other. It lists 3 134 LAGs, of which 2 782 (88%) are mainly financed by the EAFRD, 300 by the EMFF, 45 by the ESF and 7 by the ERDF.

All LAGs implementing LEADER/CLLD have access to ENRD-CP and NRN activities. However, the level of activities and amount of information dissemination on other ESI funding varies across Member States and depends on the relationship between the MAs involved. Some MAs requested to focus primarily on RDP funded activities/seminars (e.g. SK).

Thematic working groups have been organised by the ENRD to promote Smart Villages. According to the EU Action Plan for Smart Villages (EC, 2017), Smart Villages is a new concept. The focus is put on technology, digital and innovation to enhance standard of living, services for inhabitants and business and better use of resources. The development of Smart Villages is done through multiple funds and EU policy areas. The Smart Village Network is an open, independent, bottom-up network of villages, village groups and village associations across Europe that aim to exchange their views and experiences about smart solutions in response to rural challenges. It is an open platform to discuss and debate various issues related to 'smart villages' and the future of the rural development policy.

⁸³ [LDnet](#) is an informal network set up in 2011 to bring together knowledge and people in local development across rural, coastal and urban areas in Europe and beyond. LDnet provides a forum for sharing information and knowledge among experts, researchers and all those active in local development.

The European Rural Parliament is a partnership initiative initiated by three pan-European networks (ERCA, PREPARE and ELARD) which are all also involved in the Assembly. It is based on long-term campaign (2-year process) which started in 2013. The Asturian network of Rural Development and the Polish NRN were the host organisations for the 4th (2019) and 5th (2022) sessions of the European Rural Parliaments respectively. At the European level, the Rural Parliament has gradually gained importance as a place for open dialogue on the initiative of grassroots rural organisations. For instance, last ERP gathering was hosted by the Polish National Rural Network in cooperation with the local LAGs and Polish Rural Forum. Around 400 people from 39 countries participated to share experiences, challenges, and opportunities that rural areas are facing in Europe. As a result, the [ERP Declaration](#) was signed, and outlines the need for action in rural Europe around resilience to crises as well as security and solidarity⁸⁴.

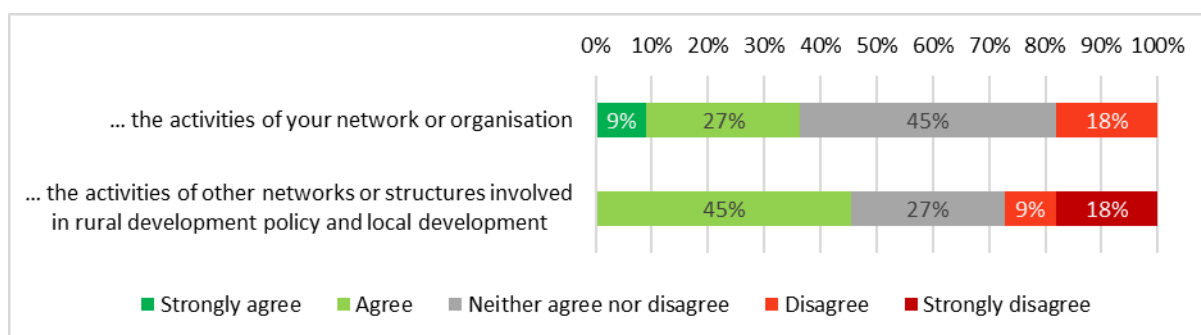
However, the collaboration between NRN and Rural Parliaments at national level vary across the Member States where Rural Parliament are active. In Slovakia for instance, the Slovakian Rural Parliament is regarded by the NRN as a strategic partner, even though there is little collaboration or co-organisation of events. In Slovenia there is a close collaboration, with NRN being one of the co-organisers of the bi-annual Slovenian Rural Parliament gatherings. In France, the French Rural Parliament has been set up next to the French NRN almost without link and contact. The Rural Parliament is the place of discussion and exchange about rural needs and solutions.

➤ **JC14.2: The ENRD-CP activities at EU level are perceived by stakeholders as globally coherent with and complementary to the activities of other external networks or structures at EU or national level**

The case studies shows that national or regional stakeholders have difficulties in evaluating the coherence of ENRD-CP activities with other relevant networks at EU, national or regional level (see above).

The coherence survey (Figure 87, n=11) at EU level shows mixed/unclear results on the perception of other relevant EU networks on the coherence of ENRD-CP activities with the activities of other European, national, or regional networks. 5 out of 11 respondents agree that the activities of the ENRD-CP are complementary and coherent with the activities of other relevant networks while 3 disagree with this statement. In both cases, stakeholders did not identify any significant inconsistencies.

Figure 87: Coherence Survey - The activities of the ENRD-CP are complementary and coherent with...



Source: (ADE, 2022) Coherence survey (n=11)

⁸⁴ <http://elard.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Declaration-signed-5th-gathering-ERP.pdf>

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Theme 5: EU Added Value

4.15 SQ15: To what extent have the activities of the ENRD and the NRNs created European added value?**4.15.1 Approach****4.15.1.1 Rationale and coverage of the SQ**

The European Union provides a clear definition of EU added value: *"There is EU added value when a European intervention produces results beyond what would have been achieved by Member States acting alone" ... (...) The sources and nature of this additional value vary from interventions to intervention. (...) European added value may be the results of different factors: coordination gains, legal certainty, greater effectiveness, complementarities etc. In both cases, measurement is a challenge (...)"* (European Commission, 2021).

This question assesses to what extent the ENRD (both the contact point and the Evaluation Helpdesk) and NRNs have achieved new results, above or different from those that would have been achieved by national or regional policies alone. The challenge is to establish what national or regional policies would have done without the RD Policy.

According to the EU Rural Review N°27 (2019) (ENRD, 2019a), the EU added value of networking for rural development policy is mainly centred on:

- capacity building;
- improved stakeholder involvement and;
- better Rural Development Programme (RDP) delivery.

This coverage has been broadened to the concept of social capital linked to networking at EU and national levels.

4.15.1.2 Judgement Criteria

JC15.1: The ENRD and the NRNs supported **capacity building** additionally to Member State action alone.

JC15.2: Stakeholder involvement was supported by the ENRD and NRNs beyond Member State action alone.

JC15.3: The ENRD and the NRNs supported **better RDP delivery**.

JC15.4: The networking activities common to the ENRD and the NRNs further social capital .

4.15.1.3 Methodology

The answer is based on a qualitative analysis and triangulation of the following data sources and approaches:

- Literature review and documentary review;
- EU level surveys – the provision of EU Added Value (VA) was included in each of the 4 EU wide surveys (MA, NSU, Governance structures and Evaluators);
- Case study surveys (in the seven CS);
- Case study reports – based on literature and documentary review, interviews with various stakeholders, to gather examples and evidence, CS judgements.

4.15.2 Summary answer

SQ15: To what extent have the activities of the ENRD and the NRNs created European added value?

The legislative framework that establishes the networks at EU level and at Member State level is the starting point for the EU value added (see SQ1). EU value added of networking activities (ENRD and NRNs) is centred around capacity building, stakeholder involvement and better RDP delivery additional to Member State action alone. These three aspects are closely interlinked. Social capital development from these additional networking activities is another aspect.

Networking activities supported additional **capacity building**, which is directly addressed to LAGs (via NRNs and the ENRD), but also to Managing Authorities and NSU (ENRD). Capacities of LAGs were strengthened through the acquisition of skills to operate in rural territories applying the LEADER approach efficiently, and to support the implementation of LEADER activities and projects within the LAGs. The capacities of Managing Authorities and NSU have notably been strengthened by the ENRD on RDP implementation and specific measures and topics including on the CAP post 2022 (since 2018). MA were also supported in the evaluation of the RDPs. Increasing stakeholder capacity for meaningful involvement is one of successful priorities of the ENRD.

Knowledge and capacity of MA and NSU was also supported by the ENRD more indirectly through stakeholder involvement in networking activities, such as NRN meetings and workshops, Thematic Working Groups (TWG), seminars, and events. The NRNs, as enablers of rural development, and supported by the ENRD, shed light on previously unexplored topics of rural development, and offer institutional validity to, and avenues for discussion of, otherwise marginalised issues.

In regionalised Member States with several RDPs (FR, IT), the NRNs supported capacity building of the RDP MA in evaluation and in promoting the concept of EIP-AGRI and operational groups (OG) (Measure 16.1).

The concept of **stakeholder involvement** was clarified by the ENRD through a TWG in 2015, providing common understanding and allowing also NRNs to implement it. Events organised by the networks led to greater stakeholder involvement which, in turn, also led to capacity building (see SQ1 and SQ7).

Innovation support by NRNs must be underlined regarding stakeholder involvement, as it considerably enlarged the types of participants engaged to better include farmers, advisors, and researchers (see SQ1, SQ2, SQ8).

Better RDP delivery is intrinsically linked to capacity building for meaningful stakeholder involvement. Capacity building of LAGs is an essential element in the implementation of LEADER in each RDP. The LEADER evaluation implemented in 2020-2021 found that LEADER was relevant and effective for local rural development, targeting and achieving economic development, strengthening social fabric and capacity, and enhancing local governance, with good coherence alongside other policies. The implementation of the EIP-AGRI and its bottom-up, collective and multi-actor approach to innovation in RDPs supported by innovation brokering and the development of operational groups also led to better RDP delivery for those who applied these principles. Networking activities of the ENRD also supported elaboration of the future CAP (CAP Strategic Plans) with the Member States. Networks and LEADER LAGs are called upon to address emerging challenges (climate, energy, competitiveness, generational renewal etc.) and to find responses to crises with stakeholders on the ground through a positive and constructive approach to problem-solving.

Social capital is notably defined as "networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings, that facilitate cooperation within or among groups". Interviews and case studies confirm that these additional networking activities result in common understanding (of stakeholder perspective, but also of rural development and specific EU topics). Involved stakeholders speak a common language that facilitates cooperation, knowledge transfers and resource-sharing.

Finally, networking provides EU added value in **communicating information**. The ENRD plays an important role in clarifying concepts and communicating information of EU relevance, such as over the Green Deal, the new CAP, the Long Term Vision of Rural Areas and makes EU information more accessible. The NRNs, meanwhile, play a role in transmitting information from EU level to other relevant stakeholders at national level, hence bridging information gaps between the EU and on-the-ground actors.

4.15.3 Detailed analysis based on the Judgement Criteria

The concepts of capacity building, stakeholder involvement and better RDP delivery are intrinsically linked. As is shown hereafter, building specific capacities leads to better RDP delivery while stakeholder involvement helps to build capacities. Indeed, the concept of stakeholder involvement as defined by the ENRD includes supporting capacities for meaningful involvement. Henceforth, both concepts contribute to better RDP delivery. In addition to these intertwined aspects, the concept of social capital is addressed under a fourth judgement criteria.

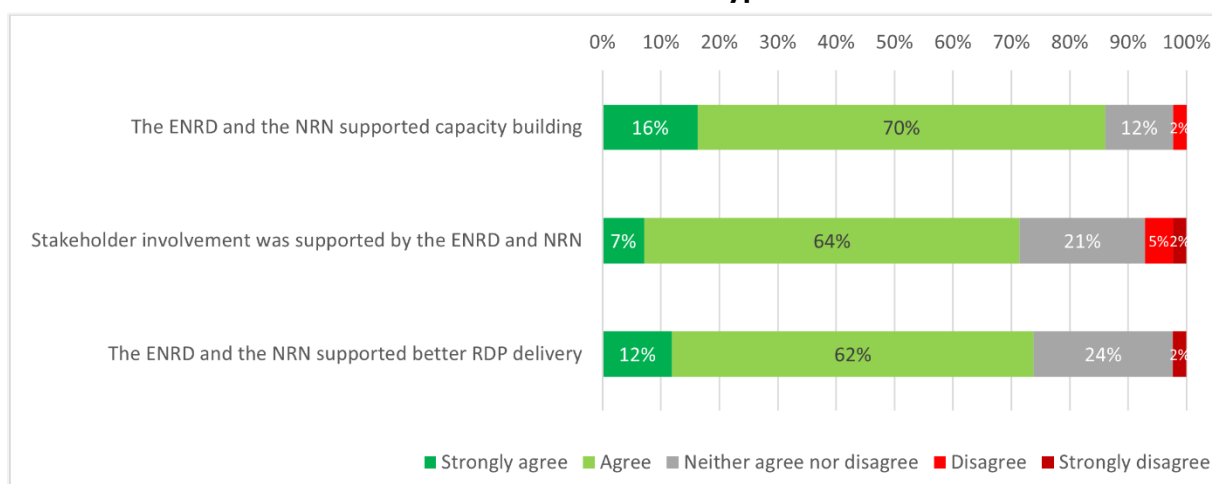
➤ **JC15.1: The ENRD and the NRNs supported capacity building additionally to Member State action alone**

Capacity building can be analysed through two different lenses: direct and indirect capacity building. **Direct capacity building** covers both the EU and the national level. It involves reinforcing capacities through clearly identified activities, such as training, support to cooperation, workshops etc. Especially LAGs, MA and NSU were targeted by direct capacity building.

The capacities of **LAGs** were strengthened through the acquisition of skills to operate in rural territories applying the LEADER approach efficiently and to be well-trained to support the implementation of LEADER activities and projects within the LAGs (see SQ 7). In several CS, this type of capacity building of staff, able to support "territorial engineering" in rural areas, would unlikely exist without the networks, as depicted in the case studies of Austria, France, Estonia and Wallonia.

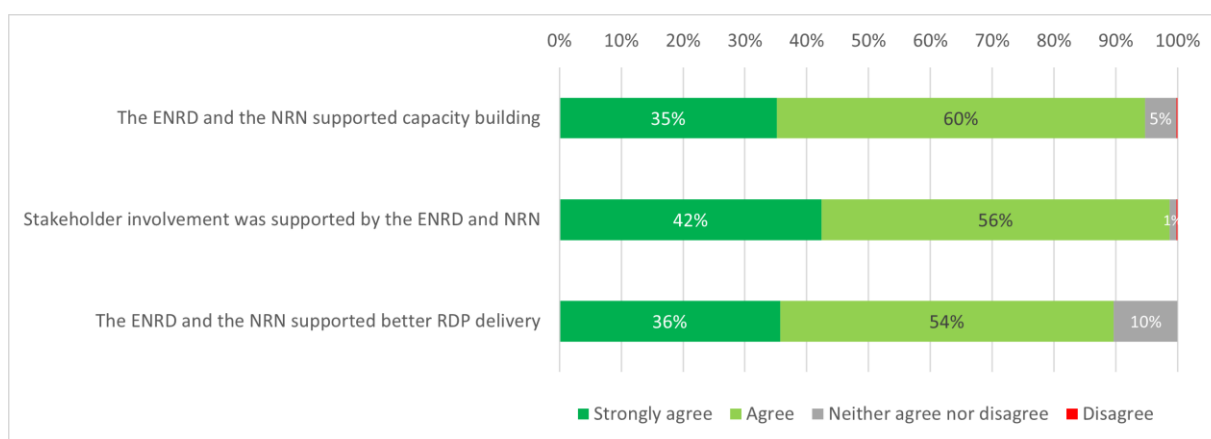
The capacities of **MAs and NSUs** have been strengthened, as described in SQ7 and SQ6. This covered overall RDP implementation in general, specific measures and topics (measure 16, ESIF-EAFRD complementarities, investing in Rural viability and vitality, NRN self-assessment, social inclusion, facilitation techniques for stakeholder engagement, valorising and communicating successful projects) and evaluation of the RDPs. Since 2018, a specific focus has been given to the CAP post 2022 (since 2018). The surveyed MA/PA and NSU (see Figure 88 and Figure 89) show a rather strong agreement that the networks created added value in terms of supporting capacity building, with over 80% of MAs/PAs (strongly) agreeing and 90% of NSUs.

Figure 88: MA and PA survey: Have the activities of the ENRD and the NRNs created EU added value? Please rate these three types of added value:



Source: MA/PA survey. Q23, N= 43 (ADE, 2022)

Figure 89: NSU survey: Have the activities of the ENRD and the NRNs created EU added value? Please rate these three types of added value:



Source: NSU Survey, Q19, n= 24 (ADE, 2022)

According to the EURN's Self-Assessment report (2019) (ENRD, 2019c), the ENRD CP indeed organised 39 workshops and a conference for different target audiences, representing the participation of over 2800 people in ENRD workshops on themes primarily related to RDP implementation, LEADER and exchange between NRNs. This notably included events on Simplified Cost Options (2015), Selection Criteria (2016), Improving RDP Delivery 2018 (ENRD, 2019c), or the organisation of trainings to help project promoters prepare and submit their project (ENRD-Contact Point, 2018). In addition, several events were targeted towards the preparation and implementation of the new CAP Strategic Plans. The majority (73 %) of the responding organisations confirmed that their knowledge and capacities on implementation of rural development policy has improved as a result of the ENRD activities. The rate was similar to the last self-assessment survey in 2017 (72%). The views of the largest groups of respondents varied somewhat, from 66% of the MA to 79% of the NRN respondents. The online materials, seminars, workshops, and publications were considered very useful, as well as the shared good practices (source: ENRD, 2019).

Furthermore, specific activities on evaluation were carried out mainly by the EHD but also at national level in regionalised Member States. Indeed, in France and Italy, the capacity of Managing Authorities in evaluation was supported, as is shown in the feedback of the large-scale event EvaluationWorks! in SQ6. This can be considered as an added value as it is unlikely that the application of the evaluation framework would have been carried out by Member State alone and without the support of the EHD, as provided by DG AGRI. Similarly, in these Member States, the NRNs provided specific capacity building to regional MA to clarify the concept of Operational Groups and to promote and disseminate the EIP-AGRI approach.

Indirect capacity building relates to strengthening capacities through indirect means i.e. through stakeholder involvement in **networking** activities, such as NRN meetings, TWG, seminars, workshops and events. As stated in the EU rural review n°12, the added value of networking concerning capacity building is *producing solutions and results that would otherwise not have occurred through single hierarchal organisations* (ENRD, 2019a)⁸⁵. EU Rural Review n°14 goes a step further by stating: "*Networks funded by the EAFRD are producing solutions and results that go far beyond the usual institutional mandate of DG AGRI and the relevant national authorities in the EU-27 Member States*" (ENRD, 2012). Respondents from EURN Self-assessment (2019) indeed valued the use of participative methods in ENRD activities as they promote learning from others; without the ENRD, there would likely be much less networking between RD actors, and especially at an international scale. In regionalised Member States such as France, the NRN fostered structured exchanges and coordination, including on thematic work at national and international level (French CSR).

⁸⁵ Agranoff, R. , 2003 cited in the EU Rural Review 2012 N°12 and EU Rural Review n°27.

The role of the networks in organising knowledge-exchange on certain topics has also been deemed relevant and a real added value. All case studies demonstrate the essential role of the ENRD (including in EU Rural Governance meetings) in obtaining information on topics of EU relevance such as recently the European Green Deal and the LTVRA. The NRNs as enablers of rural development supported by the ENRD shed light on previously unexplored topics of rural development (i.e. "Tiers lieux", social (and solidarity) economy), and give an institutional validity or argumentation lines to otherwise marginalised issues (AT, FR, SK, BE-Wal) (agro-forestry, social farming, agro-ecology, gender, social inclusion, etc.). According to the Austrian CSR, ENRD activities and outputs provide information on which topics are currently relevant in other Member States. The overall ENRD framework and the exchange possible through it could/would likely not be replicated by individual or groups of Member States (Austrian CSR, NRN interviews). These conclusions are shared by other actors in other CSR, such as France or Wallonia.

➤ **JC15.2: Stakeholder involvement was supported by the ENRD and NRNs beyond Member State action alone**

In the strategic framework of EU Rural Networks, this objective is broken down into two operational objectives: (1) **Understanding RD stakeholders and their diverse needs** and potential for involvement in RDP implementation and (2) **increasing stakeholder capacity for meaningful involvement** by targeting exchanges, involving relevant stakeholders at the most appropriate level and improving their skills and capacity for effective involvement in the implementation of RDPs.

The **ENRD** further clarified the concept of stakeholder involvement in 2015. This clarification was key to allow NRNs to apply it. As emphasised above, events, seminars, conferences organised by the networks led to greater stakeholder involvement which, in turn, also led to capacity building. Notably, increased involvement of various groups of stakeholders in the design and implementation of EU Rural Development policy is pursued through the activities of the networks (see SQ1).

At national level, it is key to highlight the activities in support to innovation⁸⁶ that considerably enlarged the types of participants to farmers, advisors and researchers. Besides, these have also encompassed the consideration of needs, the bottom-up approach, the willingness to listen to inputs developed through LEADER, as well as incorporates the multi-stakeholder approach and co-construction of knowledge.

Finally, the role played by the networks in **communicating information** has been highlighted in several case studies and is seen as a real added value supporting stakeholder involvement. Additional to the ENRD's role in clarifying concepts, communicating information over topics of EU relevance i.e., European Green Deal and Long-term vision for rural areas etc. and by making EU information more accessible (there are over 100 EC websites with information relevant to Rural Development) (CSR Austria), it is important to note the role played by the NRNs in transmitting information from EU-level to other relevant stakeholders at national-level, bridging the information gap between EU-level and on-the-ground actors (CSR Slovakia, France, Austria). This finding has been notably highlighted in CSR France which mentions the role played by the newsletter, the sharing of best-practices and the NRN's website.

➤ **JC15.3: The ENRD and the NRNs supported better RDP delivery**

"Networking supports better RDP delivery and implementation though capacity building and improving stakeholder involvement" (ENRD, 2019a). This criterion is thus intrinsically linked to the two previous ones. It is an attempt to identify, as comprehensively as possible, improvements in the implementation of RDPs identified by stakeholders (mainly the MA) through the seven case studies, the surveys and literature review.

In a broader sense, capacity building of LAGs (see JC 15.1, SQ7) is an essential element in the implementation of LEADER in each RDP. The LEADER evaluation implemented in 2020-2021 found that LEADER was relevant and effective for local rural development,

⁸⁶ This was specifically highlighted in the comments of question 13 in MA/PA survey, in the comments of question 9 in the governance survey, CSR Italy, CSR Wallonia.

targeting and achieving economic development, strengthening social fabric and capacity and enhancing local governance, with good coherence alongside other policies.

This is also true for supporting, first the concept of the EIP-AGRI in RDPs and its bottom-up, collective and multi-actor approach to innovation in RDPs supported by innovation brokering and the development of operational groups. This implementation of the EIP-AGRI also led to better RDP delivery for those who applied these principles (ADE, et al., 2020)(and see case studies, SQ1, SQ8).

As mentioned in JC15.1, LAGs, including coordinators and project managers, have been empowered to support the implementation of projects and activities in rural territories. This capacity of reinforced "territorial engineering" (Lardon, 2016)⁸⁷, also concerns OG and their staff through stakeholder involvement.

The surveys support the finding that networks contribute to better capacity building and constitute an added value. NSUs (90%) and Mas/PAs (74%) agree or strongly agree that the ENRD and the NRNs support better RDP delivery. The ENRD and NRNs are indeed expected to support better RDP delivery, as highlighted in the Regulation. According to the Thematic Group of 'Improving RDP Implementation' (ENRD, 2015e), improving the quality of RDP implementation includes five mechanisms: addressing beneficiaries' real needs, strengthening coordination of all stakeholders involved, ensuring higher capacity and quality of RDP management and administration, avoiding unnecessary complications in devising implementing rules, and staying focused on the agreed results and being able to measure them.

Some of these mechanisms, namely addressing real needs, strengthening coordination of stakeholders, ensuring higher capacity and quality of RDP management were illustrated in JC15.1 and JC15.2 and show positive effects and added value of the network. This point is also highlighted in EU Rural Review n°27 which states: "*Networking also provides a channel for the European institutions to **learn from the ground-up of implementation** or other issues that they should address to improve policy delivery. In this way, rural networking has developed and expanded to become a key tool to get things done, and to add real value to the success of RDPs.*" (ENRD, 2019a).

Furthermore, as is highlighted in SQ5, the ENRD's activities are effectively fostering and improving the implementation of the RDPs given the diversity of types of activities, formats and modes of deliveries which address RDP actors, such as MAs/PAs, directly in charge of the RDP implementation, as well as a wider range of stakeholders. Workshops on better RDP delivery were organised and, since 2019, several events focusing on the new CAP Strategic Plans were also delivered to prepare the networks' members. Case studies (France, Wallonia) also highlight the contribution of the networks in disseminating information through different formats (events, workshops, newsletters etc.) with an emphasis on the added value of the shared best practices and inspiration of stakeholders, contributing to RDP delivery (CSR France, Italy, Slovakia). A notable example is the Rural Inspiration Awards which aims to raise awareness on best practices in various Member States, as depicted in the Walloon, Austrian and French Case Studies.

Networking activities of the ENRD supported elaboration of the future CAP (CAP Strategic Plans) with the Member States. Networks and LEADER, with LAGs comprehensively supported by the ENRD and the NRNs, but also operational groups of the EIP-AGRI are key to address emerging challenges, such as issues related to climate, the preservation of the environment while considering the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, generational renewal, the future of rural areas etc. They are also key to find responses to crises together with stakeholders on the ground, for instance in link to migration in 2015, social inclusion, climate, the global pandemic of 2020, or the 2022 energy crisis. Networking supports a positive and constructive approach to problem-solving. This value added unfolds under the condition that networking is in line with the LEADER and EIP-AGRI principles i.e., bottom-up and multi-stakeholder approach, networking, and the co-creation of knowledge and solutions.

⁸⁷ Sylvie Lardon (Lardon 2007) defines territorial engineering as "the set of concepts, methods, tools and funding mechanisms made available to the actors in the territories to facilitate the design, the implementation and the evaluation of their project".

Finally, a comment from the MA survey Q24 highlights the fact that, although networks can have an added value in better RDP delivery, it is the **actions and reforms of Member States that can ultimately provoke substantial changes in the administration's performance.**

➤ **JC15.4: The networking activities common to the ENRD and the NRNs foster social capital**

The OECD (OECD, 2001) and the (The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2017) define social capital as "**networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups**".

The evaluation on LEADER further explains social capital as "the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. Together with human capital (the skills and knowledge of individuals), these capitals form the set of social assets that are potentially available for harnessing in the process of sustainable and balanced territorial development, following the bottom-up and community-led LEADER approach".

The concept of social capital is well-introduced in the literature. **The main activities and outputs of the networks i.e. networking, increased stakeholder involvement, capacity building and better RDP delivery contribute to social capital through the promotion of interactions among rural actors and stakeholders to facilitate knowledge transfers and resource-sharing, all in the pursuit of rural development.** This is a very important function that is described in academic terms as, "...the mobilisation of intangible intellectual assets through learning, innovation and the building of human and social capital" (ENRD, 2012).

One of the key effects of the networks is indeed their ability to connect people, in turn creating opportunities for greater communication, discussion, inspiration, potentially leading to more effective development actions and innovation. When people become connected, this creates a **better understanding of one another**, along with potential cooperation. It supports the development of creative ways to address problems and needs. Networks therefore help improve levels of social capital within and outside a given group of stakeholders (ENRD, 2019a)⁸⁸.

All case studies confirm that networking results in common understanding of stakeholder perspective but also common understanding on EU topics. Involved stakeholder speak a common language that facilitates cooperation. All this supports social capital through networking. This is true at national level but also at EU level. The ENRD enabled exchanges with other Member States (AT, FR, BE-Wal).

⁸⁸ Rural review n°27, 2019, page 5.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Theme 1 – Causal Analysis

5.1.1 *The contributing mechanisms by which the ENRD and NRNs' networking activities increased stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of EU Rural Development policy*

Networking activities increased stakeholders' involvement through the following mechanisms:

- a precise legislative framework with explicit objectives set for the networks to involve stakeholders (both ENRD and NRNs);
- the financial resources made available for networking at EU and national levels. At national level, this also covered resources dedicated to the Network Support Unit, for networking activities and the human resources made available by the Managing Authorities;
- focusing on addressing stakeholders' needs;
- networking activities promoting stakeholders' participation in RDP implementation, notably through capacity building; this strengthened their common understanding of key topics and challenges⁸⁹ which in turn improved cooperation, and facilitated knowledge transfer and resource sharing to help improve RDP performance.

As a result, networking activities of the ENRD and NRNs led to increased stakeholder involvement in the implementation of the 2014-2020 Rural Development policy, when compared to the previous period. The **total budget allocated to networking activities** remained relatively **stable** compared to the previous programming period (2007-2013), **but networking activities were diversified and strengthened.**

More and different activities took place in the 2014-2020 programming period than in 2007-2013 period. The networks' activities were **more focused on issues related to RDP implementation** (compared to 2007-2013) and, after 2018, on supporting the future CAP and preparing the new CAP Strategic Plans 2023-2027. **New stakeholders were involved** in networks through innovation brokering provided by NSU mainly: notably farmers or farmer groups⁹⁰, advisors and researchers engaged in EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OG) and linked activities. But Operational Groups are among the hardest-to-reach categories.

At EU level, the ENRD fostered particularly the involvement of Managing Authorities, NSUs and LAGs in the implementation of Rural Development Policy.

At national level, LAGs were among those stakeholders with the greatest involvement in most NRNs. Organisations representing farmers, farm advisors, individual farmers (especially those involved in EIP-AGRI OGs) and researchers were also newly involved in many NRNs which actively supported innovation, although not easy to reach.

Stakeholder involvement differed across Member States according to the type of network. The NRNs in regionalised Member States⁹¹ which cover multiple regional RDPs (16-27) such as in the French and Italian case studies and those in larger Member States, focused primarily on Managing Authorities⁹², regional support units (Regional Rural Networks (RRN) or antennas), "multipliers" / "heads of networks" (Austria, Slovakia), and the national representatives of regional stakeholders and regional/local administrations. By contrast, the NRNs in smaller Member States (Estonia, Belgium-Wallonia, Slovenia) have a closer link with representatives of actors on the ground.

⁸⁹ The first TWGs organised in 2015 by the ENRD for MA and NSU were about the concept of SH involvement (including capacity building for meaningful involvement linked to the needs of SH) and quality of RDP implementation.

⁹⁰ The increased involvement of farmers must be underlined, but they are a minority among farmers, already engaged in knowledge exchange often pioneers and open to change in practices.

⁹¹ BE, DE, ES, FR, IT, UK plus PT and Finland with more than one RDP.

⁹² At the level of the MA, NRN's NSU are in contact with different departments, those in charge of the RDPs as a whole, but also services supporting the OGs (M16.1), LAGs (M19) and evaluation.

Non-agricultural stakeholders and bodies representing civil society at national level, and similar organisations at EU level were well-informed of these networking activities but not necessarily strongly involved. EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and managers of other ESI funds are the hardest-to-reach categories.

5.1.2 The mechanisms by which the NRNs and ENRD contribute to improved RDP implementation and territorial development

The networking activities of the ENRD and NRNs contributed to improved RDP implementation (see effectiveness hereafter) and territorial development by supporting capacity building and thematic exchanges among actors involved in RDP implementation. At NRN level, peer-learning and thematic events were the activities contributing most to improved RDP administration and management capacities. They were targeted at addressing specific implementation questions or information needs among the MAs, PAs, and LAGs. At ENRD-level, exchanges to share implementation experiences were particularly valuable for these RDP actors and contributed to better RDP implementation. This occurred in the ENRD TWGs and in dedicated capacity building events.

NRN activities contributed to improved RDP implementation by (1) providing greater awareness of RDP measures among stakeholders and by (2) improving their ability to access RDP funding. Case studies identified two major processes to improve stakeholder participation in RDPs. The first was both targeted and general outreach, and promotion of RDP opportunities, to increase general stakeholder awareness of the funding on offer. The second was holding thematic and general networking events to improve stakeholder capacity to engage on relevant issues.

This is strongly tied with NRNs support activities to LEADER, where case studies show fostered networking and technical exchange among the relevant stakeholder groups engaged in LAGs. (3) The dissemination of innovative practices was another important way through which NRNs improved RDP implementation. Specifically, the implementation of EIP-AGRI enabled NRNs to act as innovation brokers, disseminate information and support best practices among OGs. (4) The dissemination of good practices in RDP projects was another an important mechanism through which stakeholder awareness about RDP opportunities increased, and innovative approaches to implementation were promoted.

Gathering information on **stakeholder needs** was at the core of the networks' contributions to improved RDP implementation. By considering the needs of their respective stakeholders, the ENRD and NRNs were able to provide tailored activities to target those specific needs. This is particularly important at ENRD level, due to the relatively major differences between individual RDPs and Member States in terms of needs and implementation characteristics.

Both the ENRD and NRNs were able to assess stakeholder needs relatively effectively and respond appropriately. At ENRD level, this was achieved through targeted consultations between the ENRD-CP and the Managing Authorities, resulting in demand-driven activities. Case studies show that NRNs employed a wide range of assessment tools, ranging from structured event-based feedback processes and (semi-regular surveys, to the collection of feedback via governance bodies and self-assessments. In most networks, needs were collected on a continual basis.

5.1.3 The European Rural Networks' governance structure and its contributions to fostering networking for rural development

The ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network are governed together by the European Rural Networks' governance structure formed by its yearly Assembly, the Steering Group and permanent Sub-Groups on 'Innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability' and 'LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)'. The Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE) acts as platform for exchange between the Commission and Member States and is supported by the European Evaluation Helpdesk.

The governance bodies of the European Rural Networks contribute to promoting networking for rural development. The Assembly provides strategic direction, guidance, and advice to the two EU Rural Networks. This role was assessed very favourably by the

stakeholders surveyed. The annual Assembly meetings provide a forum for information exchange on issues related to rural development and the CAP. DG AGRI informs stakeholders of recent policy developments related to rural development, and this is highly valued by MAs and representatives of EU level organisations. The activities of the forthcoming annual work plans of the ENRD Contact Point (ENRD-CP)⁹³, the European Evaluation Helpdesk (EHD)⁹⁴ and the European Innovative Partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability (EIP-AGRI)⁹⁵ are presented. More interactive discussions are also organised, such as on governance or rural development issues. The Assembly is also a venue which fosters informal networking on rural development topics.

The agenda of the Assembly is produced within/via a participatory process involving the EU Rural Networks' support units, DG AGRI and the Steering Group. Assembly members were selected at the beginning of the 2014-2020 period by an expression-of-interest procedure and were nominated for the entire duration of the period. Issues regarding the Assembly membership concern inactive Assembly members, under-representation of women and young people. There was no formal mechanism available which could be used to ensure more active membership.

The Steering Group was assessed as effective and beneficial in ensuring coordination of rural networks' thematic work by surveyed stakeholders. The Steering Group meets two to three times per year and takes an active role in overseeing the Rural Networks. It operates as a more focused and detailed discussion and decision-making forum than the Assembly. However, the Steering Group's role in coordinating the ENRD and EIP-AGRI was not valued as highly by stakeholders. As also shown by the governance survey and the Rural Networks' self-assessment, stakeholders identify limited synergies between the two networks (ENRD and EIP-AGRI).

The permanent subgroups on Innovation and LEADER and the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE) were assessed favourably, and as quite effective, by respondents to the governance survey. These groups provide focused discussion forums, enabling stakeholders to dive deeper into topics than otherwise possible at the Assembly. There is no equivalent group for the ENRD activities about RDP implementation, but related discussions took place in the Steering Group. However, surveyed stakeholders assessed the Strategic Framework of the EU Rural Networks as appropriate and overall working well.

The governance bodies made significant contributions to fostering networking for rural development through the facilitation of cooperation between stakeholder groups, fostering networking between partners across Member States, reinforcing capacity building and peer-learning, disseminating good practices, as well as exchanging RDP implementation experiences.

5.2 Theme 2 – Effectiveness

The different types of NRNs should be considered when concluding on effectiveness: Member States with regionalised RDPs with NRNs covering numerous RDPs (FR, IT) sometimes in specific Rural Network programmes, compared to NRNs included within a single RDP. In the latter case, the size of the RDP notably determines the relative proximity of the NRN to the actors on the ground (via multipliers or antennas (AT, SK)) or in more direct contact (BE-Wal, EE, S). Furthermore, Member States may establish NSUs within the Managing Authority (MA) and/or outsource partially or completely the NSUs' activities

⁹³ The Contact Point (CP) supports the operation of the ENRD. It coordinates thematic and analytic work, facilitates networking and exchange, and communicates the work and voices of the network.

⁹⁴ The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development provides specialist support to improve methods, tools, knowledge and understanding for evaluating RDPs and works under the guidance of DG Agriculture and Rural Development (current Unit A3 "Monitoring and Evaluation").

⁹⁵ The EIP-AGRI was included in the 2nd Pillar of the CAP as a further network in 2014. The EIP-AGRI is at the crossroads of the CAP and the EU's research policy "Horizon 2020", acting as an interface between agriculture and science at regional, national and EU level working on specific issues arising directly from the field. Operational groups (OG) formed by stakeholders involving notably farmers, advisors, researchers and other actors aim to finding innovative practical solutions to current challenges on the field.

to a ministerial agency or other public institutions, or to an external service provider.

5.2.1 Effectiveness of ENRD involving NRNs in networking at EU level to improve their role in fostering rural development and contributing to Balanced Territorial Development

Overall, the ENRD-CP succeeded in involving NRN actors (especially NSU, MA and LAGs) in many networking activities at EU level, in particular NRN meetings, thematic working groups, workshops and events. The average level of participation of NRNs in ENRD activities was good, but very heterogeneous across Member States. NRNs ranged from very active, to participating only occasionally, to simply not reporting on their participation⁹⁶. The language barrier was mentioned as limiting participation and involvement of stakeholders at EU level, as well as limiting opportunities for using and sharing best practices. Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic fostered the use of new communication tools in ENRD activities. This enhanced participation in ENRD activities with limitation on direct exchange and contacts between stakeholders.

Feedback from participants on ENRD-CP activities was positive overall, reporting a supportive relationship between the ENRD-CP (EU networking) and NRNs, fostering rural development. ENRD-CP and NRN activities mirrored each other, and mutual inspiration was noted. The ENRD-CP strengthened the role of NRNs within Member States. It supported the quality of NRN interventions as enablers of rural development. Notably, the case studies show that NRNs made progress on numerous topics that were addressed by the ENRD-CP, such as the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, generational renewal, Smart Villages but also on other issues, such as social inclusion and greening of the rural economy. This ENRD thematic work percolated from the EU to the national level.

The link between the Evaluation Helpdesk and the NRNs is not as strong. The NSUs are primarily in charge of the dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results. NSUs in regionalised RDPs also support their regional Managing Authorities in implementing evaluations (France, Italy). NRNs participate in the yearly EvaluationWORKS! workshops (MAs and the public administrations involved in RDP implementation, NSU, evaluators, etc.).

5.2.2 ENRD activities supporting the implementation of RDPs

The concept of improving RDP implementation was elaborated by the ENRD-CP⁹⁷ in a Thematic Working Group involving rural development stakeholders⁹⁸. It includes the following goals: address beneficiaries' real needs, strengthen coordination of all the stakeholders involved (including vertical coordination), ensure enhanced capacity and quality of RDP management and administration, and introduce smart delivery tools to simplify implementation.

The ENRD's activities are effectively fostering and improving implementation of the RDPs. A great diversity of activities, formats and modes of delivery address RDP actors, such as MAs and PAs, directly in charge of the RDP implementation, as well as a wider range of stakeholders. The ENRD functions as a hub for rural development stakeholders, fulfilling a unique role in providing a neutral, non-political and diverse platform for discussion on rural development issues.

The ENRD supported the uptake of smart delivery tools and development of sound communication strategies, primarily via NRN peer-learning events. Capacity building and knowledge transfer were supported among RDP stakeholders. The capacity building events were organised as demand-driven activities centred around peer-learning and effectively addressed needs from MAs and NSUs. ENRD seminars and events were very popular and positive impact was generally reported by RDP stakeholders, along with the successful dissemination of good practices (also via TWG) and publications (NSU). Nevertheless,

⁹⁶ According to CMEF output indicator O26: "number of ENRD activities in which NRNs have participated".

⁹⁷ It was elaborated in several thematic working groups in 2015 run by the ENRD CP ENRD.2015 Improving RDP implementation; EU Rural Review n°20.

⁹⁸ These included representatives from national Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, Network Support Units, EU and national-level organisations, advisors and EC desk-officers.

language barriers remain an issue when it comes to broader dissemination of ENRD good practices, as national actors cannot be expected to use English language materials.

On the other hand, ENRD made few contributions to improving management systems in RDP delivery. These were limited to holding a dedicated conference for Paying Agencies, and related publications. ENRD contributions to improving vertical coordination and empowerment of monitoring committees among NRNs was restricted to the collection and discussion of good practices. This is not due to a lack of investment by the ENRD in this area. Activities were numerous, especially at the beginning of the period, but the adoption of these practices was a matter for the Member States to decide. In the NRNs analysed within the case studies, there was little evidence of changes made to governance structures arising from ENRD activities or recommendations.

5.2.3 ENRD (EHD) supporting to the evaluation of RDPs

The activities of the EHD contributed to supporting the evaluation of RDPs, to a good extent.

The activities of the European Evaluation Helpdesk significantly contributed to supporting the evaluation of RDPs, based on positive combined evidence (from EHD datasets, online surveys of evaluators and MAs, and case studies). This was achieved especially by increasing evaluators' skills and knowledge, capacity-building, and improving understanding and knowledge among MAs. Overall, the methodologies (especially counterfactuals) and the quality of evaluations improved because of the guidance provided by the European Evaluation Helpdesk. This guidance was developed by the EHD based on requirements for evaluation for Rural Development, as laid down in Commission Implementation Regulation N°808/2014⁹⁹.

At the level of the Member States, the resources dedicated to evaluation have been concentrated on meeting the requirements of this framework and the numerous EHD guidelines. In particular, the complementary results indicators aimed at measuring counterfactual effects, as well as the answers to the 30 common evaluation questions focused on the effects of results (evaluation in 2017) and then on impacts (evaluation in 2019). This framework and the elaborated guidance left little room for Member States to include their own questions relating to the implementation and to take ownership of the evaluation.

Thus the current comprehensive guidance approach raises the question of how far an as detailed 'one-size-fits-all' model should be applied in widely varying national and regional contexts, and at different times. The guidance provided was sometimes too ambitious for Member States with limited resources and was not always aligned with their specific needs.

An almost exclusive focus on measuring effects and impact made the guidance less appropriate for use early on in the programming period (evaluations in 2017 and 2019). The guidance and its application also illustrate a tension between serving the Commission's reporting needs (to the Council and the European Parliament), on the impacts of the CAP's second pillar budget and the needs of Member States: to evaluate how well their rural development policies are working and why. This leads to limited ownership of the evaluation outcomes by the wider group of relevant stakeholders and contributes to low stakeholder involvement in evaluation for policy learning, including at the level of Managing Authorities.

Stakeholder views on engagement practices including online vs face to face EHD activities was a specific focus point of the evaluation. Both online and face to face approaches were deemed to be valuable, as different people found different methods more effective.

⁹⁹ RDP evaluations were guided by the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES) for Pillar 2 which includes common evaluation questions (Annex V); a set of common impact, context, result, output indicators; the evaluation plan including specific requirements of the 2017 and 2019 annual implementation reports; and main technical support documents foreseen (Annex IV).

5.2.4 NRNs effectiveness in building stakeholder groups' capacity to contribute to RDP implementation

Contributing to enhanced RDP implementation was a priority for all NRNs. While approaches varied, in general the NRNs were able to strengthen the capacities of stakeholder groups through a wide array of activities. Evidence suggests that NRN activities helped to build capacity of Managing Authorities and LAGs in particular, whilst the degree of impact among a wider range of stakeholders was more limited but still positive, especially for those with lower prior RDP engagement (e.g. environmental associations, non-farm rural groups). Case study evidence also supports a positive assessment of NRNs' role in delivering innovative methods of stakeholder engagement in RDP implementation. A significant increase in the use of new, innovative online tools in stakeholder engagement and training was evident across all case study NRNs.

Close collaboration between NSUs, MAs and key stakeholder groups was pertinent to planning and delivering effective capacity building activities. Peer-to-peer learning helped identify transferable strategies and processes to tackle specific challenges.

Combined evidence from all sources suggests that regular communication with and feedback from stakeholders was key to activities targeting the different developmental needs of NRN stakeholders. NRNs needed an inclusive but strategic approach to capacity-building which recognised and respected the different roles and stages of understanding/engagement of their stakeholders.

5.2.5 NRNs fostering innovation in agriculture and in rural areas

The evidence from case studies and online surveys shows that NRNs fostered innovation at national level through a very wide range of initiatives, activities and communication methods and in many cases they played a key role as innovation brokers (supporting bottom up, collaborative co-production of knowledge, multi-actor partnerships, etc.). They assisted in establishing EIP-AGRI OGs and supported their work, via novel communication methods and events. They promoted effective communication of good practices and potential innovation topics and encouraged stakeholder engagement and the generation of ideas. Where NRN achievements on innovation were more modest (notably Slovakia), evidence shows this was not due to any failings of the NRN but instead due to the implementation context and governance, with significant delays and barriers to progress.

The evidence from case studies suggests that in almost all cases (Wallonia, Slovenia, Austria, Estonia, France, and Italy), NRN leadership on EIP was a critical factor ensuring the successful establishment of OGs and the development of a culture of innovation within the RDP stakeholder community.

5.2.6 Effectiveness of the ENRD and NRNs in reaching out to various stakeholder groups (i.e. national administrations, NGOs, local/regional authorities, Local Action Groups, farmers, researchers etc.)

Reaching out to different stakeholder groups means that these actors are well informed about the different networking activities through effective communication channels. Outreach is a first step that should lead to involvement and engagement of stakeholders in networking activities. ENRD and NRNs use different methods in reaching out to stakeholders.

Stakeholders can be involved in:

- (1) The NRN governance structures. The governance structures are very effective in reaching out to stakeholders, provided that stakeholders participate in the meetings. Indeed, absenteeism of some members/organisations was noted both at EU level (Assembly) and in the case studies.
- (2) Through capacity building activities such as workshops organised at EU level for the MA, NSU and LAGs to foster the capacity of stakeholders to be involved in a meaningful way.

- (3) Through operational networking structures such as Thematic Working Groups (TWG). In most cases, these operational structures (TWGs or Info Points in Slovenia, etc.) have proven to be the most effective in involving stakeholders. Also, Regional antennas (RAs), due to their decentralised nature, allow for more direct and regular communications with stakeholders.
- (4) Direct participation of stakeholders in networking projects (Mobilisations Collectives pour le Développement Rural (MCDR)) in France, thematic projects in Italy, small open call projects in Slovenia) all seem very promising¹⁰⁰ for ensuring proactive participation, promoting grassroots solutions, and creating new networks or strengthening existing ones in larger Member States, especially those that are decentralised.

Beyond this direct stakeholder involvement, regional and local organisations, project promoters and even the broader public are reached by the NRNs information and communication channels.

The ENRD is effective in reaching out to NSU, to many MA, and representatives of LAGs. These are also the most involved actors, taking part in governance meetings, capacity building workshops, thematic working groups etc. EU level organisations, members of the EU Rural Networks Governance structures, are well informed of ENRD activities as far as they participate (see governance above). In addition, ENRD's capacity to reach different stakeholders is mainly assessed through the NRNs, namely the MA-PA and the NSUs (especially as they are in contact with national and regional stakeholders). According to the MA-PAs and NSUs, ENRD appears more effective in reaching institutional stakeholders. The role of these institutional actors is to further disseminate information to their national stakeholders.

NRNs have been successful in reaching specific categories of stakeholders, such as LAGs, regional MAs-PAs, and national/regional/local administrations/authorities. Non-agricultural stakeholders and bodies representing civil society (including environmental and non-profit organisations promoting social inclusion, managers of other EU Funds like ERDF-ESF-EMFF, etc.) are underrepresented in the categories of people actively involved in networking activities. According to NSU representatives, EIP Operational Groups and managers of other ESI funds (ESF, ERDF and EMFF) are the hardest-to-reach categories.

5.3 Theme 3 - Efficiency

As a preliminary remark, the efficiency of MS's different networking approaches could not be compared with the figures. This is due to a lack of comparable data on budgets, high variability in the design of NRNs and the set-up of the NSUs (national Network Support Units internalised in the administration of the Managing Authority is mostly not counted in the budget) with respect to heterogeneously collected output indicators of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (and Common Network Statistics).

5.3.1 The different approaches selected by Member States (e.g. outsourced national Network Support Units vs integrated into the Managing Authority; inclusion of regional-level components within NRNs) for the structure and organisation of NRNs and their impact on efficiency

The structure and organisation of NRNs influence efficiency in three ways: (i) the choice of internalising versus externalising networking activities; (ii) the degree of autonomy of the NSU; (iii) the administrative burden related to the implementation of activities and related internal procedures between MA, PA and NSU.

Network Support Units have been created by Member States to facilitate and promote NRNs' day-to-day operations. The NSU were set up in quite diverse manners. An NSU might or might not be established within the Managing Authority, and might partially or completely outsource networking activities to a ministerial agency or to another public institution or to an external service provider.

¹⁰⁰ These networking projects were briefly assessed in the case studies but there was no specific evaluation yet.

Most national Network Support Units (NSU) are established within the Managing Authority in a kind of hybrid model, outsourcing or delegating some or all activities to a ministerial agency or institution and/or to external service providers. Outsourcing may concern smaller or larger parts of network activities and administrative work. Very few Member States have completely outsourced national Network Support Units (AT, BE-Wal, IE).

Activities of these institutional networks must be aligned with the objectives of Rural Development Policy. In any case, policy coherence must be ensured by the MA, which explains the fact that few NSU are completely outsourced.

Among the NSU established within the Managing Authority, a difference in efficiency concerns the potential outsourcing of administrative work (tendering and contracting, organisation of events, etc.). This is especially burdensome and time consuming. Outsourcing administrative work, as for instance in France, where this was delegated to a specific unit of the Paying Agency, is efficient. Externalising some networking activities also generates positive effects, including reduction of management costs for the MA and increased diversity of available skillsets. It can also generate greater flexibility and responsiveness in organising activities, events or responding to thematic requests.

According to NSU representatives, the administrative burden is the most significant issue hampering efficiency within the organisational structure of NRNs. This is a major reason for externalising either specific activities (like the administrative procedures of calls for tenders) or the whole NRN (i.e., in the Belgium-Wallonia case).

A hybrid system, internalising the policy coherence to the MA (and possibly including some essential activities (i.e., thematic working groups¹⁰¹ in Italy) and outsourcing some activities (i.e., almost all contractual management in the French NRN) appears to be efficient (IT, FR). Outsourcing lowers some of the administrative burden.

Completely externalised NSUs are less frequent but can also be very efficient as long as they rest on a trusting relationship between the MA and the NSU. Policy coherence is ensured by the MA.

5.3.2 To what extent have a) the NRNs and b) the ENRD been efficient in setting up and implementing their different activities

The ENRD and most NRN activities started in a timely manner.

Several factors contributed to developing more efficient linkages between ENRD and NRN activities, and the capacity to respond to stakeholders' needs. These were the growing use of digital and remote technologies and methodologies for animating virtual meetings; regional NRN groups ("clusters") fostering exchanges between NRNs from the same geographical region (such as Nordic-Baltic, Mediterranean, etc.) and with a common interest; and peer-to-peer learning, especially in the field of evaluation, through sharing existing experiences, participative approaches, sharing examples of good practices across similar contexts, or more informal relations between actors involved on the ground.

On the other hand, NRNs considered some of the ENRD networking instruments less efficient, such as communications via social networks and evaluation guidelines.

Within ENRD and NRN activities, there are good practices, especially regarding internal self-assessment and evaluation (evaluation of the 2019 enhanced Annual implementation reports). These improved the targeting of the NRN activities and led to the constructive refinement of the activities. Nevertheless, monitoring and evaluation activities do not have the same priority and content in the different NRNs.

5.4 Theme 4 – Relevance of networking activities

NRN activities appear well-matched to strategic needs for rural development across the EU territory. Three aspects were noted in particular; firstly, the activities of NRNs in

¹⁰¹ The concept of thematic working groups differs according to Member States. This conclusion concerns the Italy type of thematic working group and not necessarily other types of thematic working groups.

engaging stakeholders and supporting LEADER LAGs; secondly, the roles of the ENRD and the European Evaluation Helpdesk in capacity-building among Managing Authorities to enable better RDP implementation and evaluation; finally, the NRNs' activities in promoting and enhancing effective delivery of EIP-AGRI OGs and innovation initiatives, including relevant capacity-building among NRN members.

Coherence between these activities and the evidence of rural needs as explored in other CAP evaluations 2014-2020 is good, particularly with respect to RDP goals and impacts. Similar points can be made concerning the coherence of ENRD priorities and actions with the strategic priorities of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), 2014-2020. There is also sound evidence illustrating that the ENRD and many NRNs regularly analysed, reviewed, and integrated the assessment of rural needs into their activities, thus supporting RDP delivery processes.

Thus, overall, NRN and ENRD activities are largely successful in meeting rural needs. However, several areas were identified which were not targeted by the networks, including seeking greater clarity and simplicity in operational processes and responding to specific local challenges concerning environmental and economic decline. This was due to either MA restrictions on the role and activities of the networks, or in some cases prevailing pre-determined top-down agendas of ENRD and NRN activities dominating NRN business, meaning that local challenges were not recognised and responded to.

In addition, there is unmet potential for NRNs to mobilise stakeholders in support of policy learning for enhanced delivery of rural development, drawing on the findings of RDP evaluations. In many cases it seems this opportunity was either not recognised or not seen as valuable by MAs and NSUs. There is potential for stronger interlinkage between evaluation activities in the EHD and the MAs, and for ongoing liaison and communication across the NRN membership stakeholders at national and regional levels.

5.5 Theme 5 – Coherence

On coherence, the study questions focused on two key aspects. Firstly, the coherence of the ENRD-CP activities with the activities of the EIP-AGRI Network, the NRNs, wider EU information and communication policy on the CAP and rural development (SQ13). Secondly, the coherence with other relevant EU and national/regional networks and structures involved in rural development policy and local development (SQ14).

The ENRD (CP, EHD) and the EIP-AGRI network are complementary in their scope, aiming to increase awareness and enhance participation of their respective audiences and to improve the policy. Initial efforts were made in the governance structure of the EU Rural Networks to ensure coherence and complementarity of activities within them. Nevertheless, the synergies and co-operation between the two networks remained limited at operational level during the 2014-2022 period. Both networks implemented activities with sporadic interlinkages and stakeholders deemed synergies between the two networks to be limited. This issue would in principle have been considered in the new single CAP network, where close coordination between the activities of the support units (implementation, innovation, evaluation) would have become a priority.

The ENRD-CP and NRNs were designed to be complementary, one operating at the EU level, the others at national/regional level, but sharing three common regulatory objectives. The available evidence indicates sound and successful coordination and synergies between the two levels. The activities of ENRD-CP effectively feed into the activities of the NRNs and vice versa.

The ENRD-CP activities are coherent with, and complementary to, wider EU information and communication policy on the CAP and rural development. The ENRD-CP provides material, projects, and contacts in the context of wider EC campaigns.

It is difficult to conclusively determine the level of coherence and complementarity of ENRD-CP activities with the other relevant networks (SQ14), given the heterogeneity and multiplicity of structures involved in both rural development policy and local development at EU, national, or regional levels. The governance structures of the European Rural Networks are the main platforms for coordination with other relevant networks at EU level.

Cooperation with other networks beyond those involved in the governance bodies is not sufficiently documented.

Few examples of collaborations were identified but there was no evidence of incoherence or duplication of activities. In cases same and/or similar topics were addressed, these concerned different stakeholders and points of view. Feedback from online surveys suggests that ENRD should focus on:

- strengthening links with the networks and organisations linked to other ESI funds;
- building connections with the national LEADER and ELARD networks as well as;
- strengthening territorial representation and expertise in the activities of ENRD-CP and maintaining the focus on rural and local development in the evolution of the CAP network.

There is no similar network to the ENRD for the other ESI funds, except FARNET related to the EMFF. The ENRD-CP activities and NRNs supported local actors on the ground, implementing multi-funded CLLD strategies through their LEADER/CLLD focused activities and related thematic working groups. The ENRD-CP worked notably on smart villages, Long Term Vision of Rural Areas, social inclusion, and recently rural revitalisation. This thematic work largely percolates from the EU to the national level. Smart villages is one of the NRN's flagship themes supporting rural stakeholders, even if the support vary across the Member states.

5.6 Theme 6 - EU added value

Networking activities were bolstered by the existence of a regulatory framework that required the creation of networks. The European added value in terms of networking activities (ENRD and NRNs) revolved around capacity building and meaningful stakeholder involvement. Both contribute to an improved implementation of RDPs and generate social capital. The latter is recognised as shared norms, values, trust and understanding, facilitating cooperation within or among groups.

The formal networks (the ENRD and NRNs) and LEADER (LAGs), supported by the ENRD and the NRNs, but also the Operational Groups of the EIP-AGRI at national level, are key for addressing emerging challenges, and introduce new concepts and policy aspects to the Member States.

These include climate change, preserving the environment while producing competitive food, generational renewal, and other challenges for rural areas, as elaborated in the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. They were also essential in responding to crisis situations on the ground (migrants starting in 2015, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21; energy in 2022). The NRNs, LAGs, but also the EIP-AGRI operational groups are systematically called upon to address challenges/crises and find answers with stakeholders on the ground through a positive and constructive approach to problem-solving. This 'added value' unfolds under the condition that networking is in line with NRNs/ENRDs principles, stemming from the LEADER approach, and included in the EIP-AGRI principles (bottom up, networking, based on the collaboration with multiple SH, and on the co-creation of knowledge and solutions).

Finally, networking reflects the EU's added value in communicating information. The ENRD plays an important role in clarifying concepts and communicating information of relevance for the EU, such as over the Green Deal, the new CAP or the Long-Term Vision of Rural Areas, and makes EU information more accessible. The NRNs, meanwhile, play a role in transmitting information from the EU level to other relevant stakeholders at national level, hence bridging information gaps between the EU and on-the-ground actors.

5.7 Conclusions on monitoring

Indicators from the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System on the performance of

NRNs¹⁰² encompassed too many different aspects under one single indicator, resulting in heterogenous interpretation and reporting by individual MS. The additional 'indicators' set up by ENRD CP (CNS) could have had supplementary value for evaluations, but these also lacked clear guidance and common definitions to start with, resulting in varied interpretation by MS and incomparable data. The low involvement of the EHD in the design of these Common Network Statistics was a weakness.

¹⁰² Three CMEF output indicators (O24, O25, O26) support the monitoring of NRNs activities. All indicators are defined in the technical handbook on monitoring and evaluation¹⁰² and in the supporting working document.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction to the recommendations

These recommendations are based on the study on the contribution of the ENRD and NRNs to the implementation of the EU Rural Development policy for the 2014-2022 period. The context of the 2023-2027 CAP has changed significantly with the integration of the two pillars of the CAP and the development of single CAP Strategic Plan for each Member State. On 6 October 2022, the EU CAP Network replacing the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network was established; NRNs will be replaced by national CAP Networks to be operational at the latest within one year from the approval of the CAP Strategic Plan. These recommendations apply to this new context.

Recommendations

R1: Maintain institutional networks that apply the principles of networking, at EU and national levels, and adapt them to the broadened scope of the CAP Strategic Plans

Maintain institutional networks through a legal framework at EU and national levels, applying the conditions and principles of networking (bottom-up, responsive to needs, inclusive, cooperation and collaboration with multiple stakeholders, co-creation of knowledge etc.). These are essential for generating improved mutual understanding of the challenges and policies impacting the rural population and farmers and to work collaboratively on solutions.

The scope of the new CAP networks is broader than that of the rural networks. Ensure all components of the CAP are well covered by the Network Support Units, including rural development, innovation, LEADER etc. Dedicate time and resources to facilitate networking activities that are required within the Network Support Units.

Ensure that national networks establish links with rural actors in the regions and territories (through regional networks, antennas, 'multipliers' or other organisations).

R2: Adapt the EU CAP Network governance structure

Include a specific forum for each component of the EU CAP network, namely implementation, innovation and evaluation, plus LEADER. The CAP Strategic Plans broaden the scope of the CAP networks with respect to rural networks, as they include the first pillar of the CAP.

Reconsider the fixed nature of Assembly membership in light of the non-participation of some members. Ensure continuity for members to maintain their roles.

Additional operational recommendations regarding governance include:

- Improve involvement of members by preparing agendas of governance meetings ahead of time and sharing them with participants (at least partially);
- Ensure that the basic concepts of networking are conveyed to new staff at EU and national levels (bottom-up approach, stakeholder involvement, etc.);
- Allow the use of several languages, at least for spoken contributions;
- Support informal networking at physical events, such as shared lunch breaks.

R3: Promote stakeholder engagement in governance bodies at national and EU level to improve needs-based work

Stakeholders engagement in the governance bodies, with a strong role in steering the networks' activities, can improve the overall usefulness of the networks' outputs, especially at national level. This is particularly important for larger networks with multiple regional networks or antennas, where the core 'body' of the network may be relatively distant from rural development stakeholders at the local or regional level.

R4: Provide a continuous assessment of stakeholders' needs, supported by various tools

Use a wide range of tools at EU and national levels throughout the programming period to identify stakeholders' needs. This includes collecting feedback through governance bodies, self-assessments, structured event-based feedback processes, surveys, and more informally and continuously the needs collected by Support Units in meetings and other activities.

R5: Promote diverse stakeholder involvement in response to needs

The aim is to respond to the needs of all rural actors, linked to the implementation of the CAP Strategic Plans (1st and 2nd pillar) in rural areas. At national level, the involvement of farmers, advisors and researchers increased successfully over the 2014-2022 period particularly due to innovation brokering and support to operational groups. But it is still limited to a small minority of farmers (individuals or groups) and agricultural advisors and needs to be further promoted.

In addition, it is recommended that responses to the needs of non-agricultural actors operating in rural areas linked to CAP interventions be maintained. Apart from LEADER, these actors were already less concerned and involved at both EU and national levels. Better targeting to regional or local needs supported by more frequent initiatives could improve their involvement.

R6: Promote exchange of experiences about the implementation of CAP Strategic Plans

Promote the dissemination of thematic work from the EU level to the national level and vice versa, as it was successfully implemented on several topics in 2014-2022.

Pursue exchanges about implementation experiences, providing accurate and detailed information about the CAP Strategic Plans interventions, including on implementation arrangements.

R7: Maintain the dissemination of good practices

Dissemination of good practices was one of the most widely valued contributions of the ENRD to improved RDP implementation. Maintain this essential activity, which will become even more essential with the increased pluralism of the new CAP Strategic Plans. Ensure that very accurate and detailed information on good practices is provided related to specific CAP Strategic Plans interventions.

R8: Support stakeholders' engagement in evaluation as policy learning

The quality of evaluations and methodologies (especially counterfactuals) improved thanks to the guidance provided by the European Evaluation Helpdesk. But this guidance provided to Member States within the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System is not appropriate under certain budgets and for small regions/MS. The implementation process is not addressed at all by the CMES. This limits Managing Authorities ownership and interest in learning from evaluations. Stakeholders' engagement in evaluation as policy learning should be promoted.

R9: Strengthen the role of national Networks (CAP networks) regarding monitoring and evaluation

To ensure that lessons learned from evaluations are better taken into account as policy learning, the links between (1) the evaluation activities of the Evaluation Help Desk and the Managing Authorities should be strengthened, as well as (2) the liaison and communication on this issue between members of the NRNs and stakeholder's at national and regional levels.

The NRNs should have an enhanced role in evaluation activities. This does not mean that they should engage with methodologies, but MAs should involve NRN stakeholders (*possibly facilitated by the NSU*) in both:

- providing input of information and views into CAP SP evaluation activities,
- giving feedback of early and interim evaluation findings from evaluators to CAP Network members, to enable validating findings and discussing recommendations between evaluators, MAs and CAP Network stakeholders.

R10: Support the new performance-oriented evaluation framework with more attention to the implementation process

The challenges of evaluation will increase under the new CAP, which now groups the two pillars and most of the CAP support into single CAP Strategic Plans per Member State. The new CAP is intended to be more performance-oriented.

It is recommended that the Evaluation Helpdesk directs more attention to evaluating the implementation process. It is further recommended to address Managing Authorities' constraints in the application of best practice of guidance documents.

R11: Ensure policy coherence and efficiency in terms of the structure and operational set-up of Network Support Units

An efficient option for their structure and operational set-up is to establish a Network Support Unit within its Managing Authority to ensure policy coherence, but to outsource part of its activities. Within this structure it is recommended to:

- Ensure that there are adequate resources to actively foster networking at EU and national levels, in close contact with stakeholders in rural territories (agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas);
- Ensure that there are sufficient and qualified human resources available to facilitate networking and administrative/management activities;
- Ensure financial support for the operational structure, based on the close involvement of regional/local stakeholders, which can take different forms (regional antennas, regional networks or other decentralised networking activities), especially in the larger and regionalised Member States;
- Foster the autonomy of NSUs in relation to MAs, in order to stimulate more innovative networking approaches and avoid excessive bureaucratic control;
- Ensure an efficient monitoring system and self-assessment practices both at national and EU level.

An externalised NSU with a good degree of autonomy and a trusting relationship with its MA is a less frequently seen option, but can be very efficient. This configuration should be an option for the Member States whose needs it best suits.

R12: Strengthen coherence between implementation, innovation and evaluation of the EU CAP Network

It is recommended that co-operation and synergies be strengthened between the activities developed by the components of the new EU CAP network (CAP implementation, innovation, and evaluation). Supported with communication, both at strategic and operational levels. Strengthen co-operation between the specific stakeholders involved in implementation and innovation in the National CAP Networks. Foster close links and collaboration between the CAP implementation and its evaluation, required by the Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (PMEF) and performance measuring.

Experience has shown that a common framework is a necessary but not always sufficient condition to ensure full operational coherence between implementation, innovation and evaluation.

R13: Develop and strengthen links with other networks involved in rural and local development

Develop and strengthen links and synergies with relevant structures and networks, especially those related to cohesion policy in rural areas, like the CLLD and the future EU Rural Pact.

Maintain a focus on rural and local development in the evolution of the CAP networks at EU and national levels.

Strengthen territorial representation and expertise in the activities of CAP Network EU and at national level.

R14: Define simple and unambiguous monitoring indicators

The three current monitoring indicators are relevant, but they are subject to differences in interpretation and are reported in a heterogeneous way. The breakdown of indicators into components should be avoided. If a sub-component is relevant, consider using it as an indicator.

Regulation (EU) No 2021/2115 on CAP Strategic Plans no longer includes indicators for networks. It is recommended to include some indicators in the Common Network Statistics (CNS) to monitor the activities of the CAP networks at European and national level.

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