

Report on working group 2

Trans-national networking

Michael Dower

Our group comprised seven people in the first session, nine in the second, with representatives from Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, England, Iceland, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Sweden.

Responding to the interests of different people in the group, we touched on networking at many different geographic levels – village, district, sub-region, nation, cross-border, trans-national, European. The following key points arose.

1. In countries such as France and Slovakia, where villages have their own mayor, there may be little need for local networks other than the local council, because the mayor can make things happen. This is elective democracy.
2. By contrast, in countries such as Sweden, Germany or England, where the effective local authorities are much larger, there may be more need and more incentive for local networks or village development groups, led by active citizens, to make things happen. This is participative democracy.
3. Local networks take many forms, such as women's groups; youth groups; social action groups to create and run facilities such as village halls, crèches, old people's day centres and the like; commercial networks such as associations of farm guesthouses.
4. At the district level, groups or small municipalities may work together on projects which are larger or wider than one municipality can manage alone – such as a new water supply or a new tourism facility. Such groups – which in some countries are called micro-regions – may become formal partnerships between the public, commercial and voluntary sectors. In this way, they may take on some of the character of a LEADER Local Action Group, without (at that moment) having LEADER recognition or funding.
5. As we enter 2014, the year of transition between the existing Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and the new regime, we must handle both the challenge and the opportunity which this represents. The challenge is to ensure continuity of development effort, and of the skilled teams which run the existing RDPs and LEADER Local Action Groups. The opportunity is for existing or new groups in the EU member states, and for emerging sub-regional groups in the very new member states or the IPARD countries, to prepare for a possible future role as LEADER Local Action Groups.
6. The LEADER programme includes valuable, and funded, opportunities for inter-territorial and trans-national exchange between LEADER groups in different parts of one country or in different countries. This can trigger very fruitful networking. Activity in this field will, however, be very limited from now until a new family of LAGs is in place.
7. Within the European Union, the main formal structures for networking – related to the rural development programme – are the National Rural Network in each member state, and the European

Network for Rural Development based in Brussels which forms the link between all the National Rural Networks .

8. **National rural networks.** There is no standard model for these networks, which member states are obliged to create as part of the process of shaping and implementing their rural development programmes. The main requirement is that the network shall include all the stakeholders in the programme. These might be seen to fall within ten broad groups :

- The Managing Authority and its related agencies
- Regional and local authorities
- Trade unions
- The primary economic sector of farmers, farm cooperatives, forestry interests etc.
- The secondary economic sector of processing and manufacturing
- The tertiary economic sector of services, including commerce and tourism
- The civil sector, including NGOs committed to social and cultural development, environmental NGOs, sectoral groups such as those for women and youths, and religious organisations
- Ethnic and minority groups
- Universities, research institutes, providers of training and professional advice
- LEADER local action groups.

Michael Dower, facilitator of the working group, offered a notional model of how such groups might fall within a National Rural Network, and how they might be presented on the board of that network. This model is attached as an Annex to this report.

9. In most countries, there is already a strong measure of networking within each of the broad sectors named above. This networking is expressed, for example, in associations of local authorities; farmers' unions; chambers of commerce; and formal or informal associations of leader groups. If sectors are recognized as elements in the formal national rural network, this networking within each sector may be strengthened and formalised, particularly if they are invited to select representatives on the board of the National Rural Network.

10. The main functions of each formal National Rural Network will relate to :

- Information related to the Rural Development Programme
- Training and capacity building
- Discussion about the shape, contents and implementation of the Rural Development Programme
- Support for LEADER Local Action Groups
- Networking, both within sectors and between sectors.

Thus hopefully the National Rural Network will become a true multi-directional network, with progressively rich exchanges among all its members. Whether or not this happens will depend greatly on the wish of the members to achieve such networking, and the open-mindedness of the Managing Authority.

11. Fears were expressed in the thematic working group that the National Rural Networks would be used by powerful interest groups to lobby government to their own benefit, and to exert their strength vis-à-vis other groups. Of course there are major issues of the balance of power among

and between different rural sectors, and lobbying will take place behind the scenes or in the open. But the National Rural Network, if it is wisely led by the Managing Authority, should rather be a platform for all members of the network to express their views, to gain and to give information, to influence policies and programmes, on equal terms.

12. The National Rural Network is also a framework within which different sectors can work together, through cross-sectoral interest groups or formal alliances. LEADER LAGs themselves should bring together in partnership the public, private/commercial and civil sectors. Other partnerships may arise, for example between people in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors (farmers, food processors, retailers, tourism enterprises) to form new food chains.

13. Each of the major sectors involved in rural development at national level already has, or may further develop, networks or formal associations at European level. For example the farmers and farming interests are represented at European level by COPA, COGECA, CEJA, Via Campesina and others. Farm and village guesthouses have national associations, which work together at European level through Eurogites. Regional and local authorities come together in CEMR and other groupings; and in the Committee of Regions, which is an EU institution. National LAG associations work together in ELARD. Civil society networks, such as the national rural networks in Sweden, Finland, the new member states, Macedonia and Serbia, come together in PREPARE : some are also members of ERCA and/or of ELARD. Environmental NGOs work together at European, and often at global, level through WWF, Birdlife International and other bodies. Many NGOs from all these sectors work together in ARC 2020, which embraces 150 NGOs (social, environmental, agriculture, public health, food quality etc.) to campaign for a sustainable CAP and rural development policy.

14. From the Bosnian members of the group, we gained an impression of a complex structure of governance in their country, which tends to impede networking and effective activities in rural development. There is an overall state structure, but much policy and action in rural and other development rests separately with the two entities – Republika Srpska, and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Federation. Within Republika Srpska, there are simply two tiers of governance – the Republican government and the municipalities. Within Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are (in some parts of the territory) three tiers – government, cantons, and municipalities – and some confusion about the roles and powers of different levels. In other parts of the territory, there are no cantons, and the government relates directly to the municipalities. In this complex context, networking is (on the one hand) difficult, but (on the other hand) potentially very useful, in order that people can help each other to navigate in difficult waters and to campaign for more workable system.

15. A final significant theme, prompted by the hard realities of life for many people since the break-up of the Yugoslav federation, is the possible role of networking in support of religious or ethnic minorities – for example Albanians in Macedonia, Bosnians in Albania, Roma in many countries. The group's discussion on this pointed towards three main principles :

- that governments and development agencies, including LAGs, must sensitise their policies and programmes to the needs, capacities and resources of such minority groups
- that the minority groups themselves must be energised to express their needs and to develop their capacity to take initiative in their own development

- that there could indeed be high benefit to such groups in networking – for example through inter-territorial and multi-national exchanges – in order to give each other mutual support, to strengthen their capacity, their visibility and their voice in national and European life.