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The Perspectives of the National Rural Development Networks in a European Context

Abstract

The establishment of rural development networks represents an opportunity for the rural players, increasing the collaboration opportunities at local, national and European level. The power of rural development networks is based on the fact that they put together the people from the rural areas, providing them with representativeness and acting as a partner for the national governments.

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Introduction

Both the changes produced in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the objectives assumed by Romania in the process of accession to the European Union impose the implementation of certain measures and activities meant to substantiate and promote the national priorities in agriculture and rural development.

As stipulated by the legislation into effect¹, by the end of the year 2008, each EU Member State will have to establish a national rural development network. The establishment of these networks will represent an opportunity for the rural players, by increasing the access to information with regard to agriculture, forestry and environment, to the funding modalities, as well as by increasing the collaboration opportunities at local, national and European level. The main objective had in view by the establishment of these structures is to put together all the governmental and non-governmental institutions involved in rural development. The national networks will have in view the consolidation of horizontal and vertical partnerships between the local

¹ European Council regulation no. 1698/2005 on the support to rural development provided by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

and the national authorities, between the public, private and civic sectors.

1. Experiences regarding the national rural development networks

In time, the rural development actions in the EU had in view, among other things, the collaboration between the rural people in order to sustain their common interests, targeting the protection of the rural areas and of their heritage. The characteristic of these actions was the structuring/connection to networks at local, regional, national and international level. In this context, the local population initiates and supports the development of activities, of local economy implicitly. The networks activating in the rural development field have an impact upon the following:

- consolidation of social capital;
- local democracy – stable mechanisms and structures established for the population's direct involvement in the decision-making process;
- rural development policy – through support and partnership

In order to influence the EU rural development policy, these structures initiate support campaigns at different levels in the territory. The strength of the rural development networks is based on the fact that these put together the rural people, representing them in their relation with the national governments.

In general, the reasons that lay behind the establishment of these networks were the need to protect the rural communities and their heritage from the continuous development of urbanization. Thus, the main factors that determined the emergence of these networks are the following:

- decline in agriculture development and the changes produced in the rural economy implicitly;
- local democracy weakening and centralization development;
- cultural and economic urbanization;
- migration and age structure disequilibria;
- globalization of markets and the influence of the European internal market.

In Netherlands, the *Network* network consists of 28 LEADER+ regions and four bodies manage it. Different ministries and provinces fund its activities. Each body has its local action group. These work according to own priorities.

The services provided by this network have in view to enhance local development, encouraging the exchange of experience and co-operation at several levels:

- local level: institutions – initiator
- regional level: associations - executor
- national level: management bodies – mediator

- European level: formulation of rural development policy.

The Polish Rural Development Forum was established in the year 2002 as an informal network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) activating at national and local level. When this was established, 72 organizations signed a co-operation declaration and joined this forum. These NGOs are working in close relation with the public institutions. Among the actions of the Forum the following are worth mentioning: promoting LEADER initiatives; preparation of trainers and initiators of local partnerships; influencing the rural development policies, etc.

The Rural Development Network from Slovenia is an institution of NGO type that was established in the year 2002. Its activities are implemented through 14 regional offices. The main services that are provided target the following: providing information to the network members as well as to the general public; preparing the population with regard to the new development opportunities; implementation of certain specific projects, etc.

2. The European Rural Development Network

The European Council (EC) Regulation no. 1698/2005 on the support to rural development provided by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) stipulates, in Article 68, that "...each Member State will have to establish a national network that will put together the organizations and institutions involved in rural development"; this will be connected to the European Rural Development Network (ERDN) and will closely collaborate with other organizations in the field of rural development at Community level (Art. 67).

Thus, the general objective of ERDN is to ensure the interface with the national networks and administrative institutions, while its specific objectives have in view the following:

- Collection, analysis and dissemination of information on the rural development measures;
- Collection, dissemination and consolidation of the good rural development practices at rural community level;
- Providing information on the rural area development in the European Union and other countries;
- Organization of meetings and workshops on rural development in EU;
- Establishment and operation of the networks of experts in order to facilitate the expertise exchange and support the implementation and evaluation of the rural development policies;
- Support to the national networks and cross-border cooperation initiatives.

As stipulated in the *Community Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development – transposition of priorities into programs*, the resources that have been allocated for reaching the priority objectives in the rural development area depend on the specific situation, on the opportunities and constraints of each program. A hierarchy of these priorities must be established according to the objectives set at Lisbon and Gothenburg and transposed in the national strategy plan and in the national rural development programs by each Member State. At the level of EU Member States, a set of means is available for supporting the design and implementation of rural development policies. The technical assistance can be used for creating certain national networks and a European rural development network as a basis for the exchange of good practice and expertise between the involved players with regard to the design, management and implementation of rural policies.

As regards its organizational structure, ERDN will consist of two components: a co-ordination committee (Leader sub-committee and thematic working groups) and a committee of experts that will have as specific tasks the monitoring and evaluation of the rural development programs.

The funding, both at national and European level, will come from the chapter “Technical Assistance” at the initiative of the European Commission and of each Member State respectively and will represent maximum 0.25% of EAFRD in the case of ERDN and maximum 4% of EAFRD in the case of NRDN.

According to Art. 66 (3), the amounts dedicated to NRDN support will have to be used for:

- Establishment of network operation structures;
- Elaboration of a plan of action (which should contain at least the identification and analysis of the good practices in the field);
- Network management;
- Organization of the experience and know-how exchange;
- Elaboration of training programs for the local action groups in the technical assistance process with regard to the inter-territorial and cross-border cooperation.

3. The National Rural Development Network

In chapter six of the National Strategy Plan for Rural Development (NSPRD) 2007-2013, the establishment of a National Rural Development Network is mentioned, which will have the role to “analyze and disseminate information on the EU measures, to collect and establish procedures, to provide information on the development of rural regions, to organize meetings and experience exchanges of the stakeholders in the rural development field and to provide information referring to the European Rural Network needs”.

In this stage, NSPRD includes only some information with regard to: objectives and expected results, partners, funding sources and implementation modality. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Rural Development (MAFRD) also designed a plan of action that proposes the institutional framework for the establishment of NRDN.

The existence in Romania of certain non-governmental organizations activating in community development, some of them with experience in running development programs or projects that can get fast involved in the development of rural communities, may represent the starting point for the establishment of the rural development network that will evolve in time and that can be modified and completed from different directions with regard to the range of subjects, participants and actions undertaken.

The national rural development network will put together the institutions and organizations involved in rural development and will play a very important role in the improvement of communication and information dissemination on the NSPRD and the EU funds available for the rural players.

According to MAFRD², the general objective of the NRDN is to put together and support the organizations activating in the rural development field, while its specific objectives target the following:

- Identification and presentation of positive/negative experiences;
- Organization of the experience and know-how exchanges;
- Assistance to the establishment of Leader groups;
- Providing technical assistance for the inter-territorial and cross-border cooperation;
- Participation to the network established at EU level.

This network will encourage the initiatives under a bottom-up approach and will co-ordinate the efforts of the interested parts in protecting their own interests on the basis of the exchange of information, knowledge and technology in the field of agriculture and rural development. The national network concept is based on the large-scale understanding of rural development and the involvement of a significant number of stakeholders in this process.

NRDN in Romania will be the partner of the government and of MAFRD in the identification of rural development priorities; of the changes that are needed in the current policy in order to improve the effect of its implementation; the improvement of the dialogue with the civil society, increasing the participation to the decision-making process and to the planning, programming and monitoring of the rural development programs.

NRDN will contribute to the establishment of active partnerships between the public and private sectors, in this way uniting the representatives of local/central public authorities involved in rural development, of local collectivities, NGOs (professional associations,

² www.maap.ro

foundations), etc. That is why the rural development network should be established and managed in an open, dynamic way, accessible to those interested and involved in rural development activities. The network has the role to facilitate the exchange of experience, to support the implementation and evaluation of the rural development program and to ensure a smooth information flow between the local, national and European levels. According to MAFRD, the mission of the network covers two components:

- *The strategic component* (plan of action) – for establishing the main directions of action of the network (collection and dissemination of information on the rural development programs and policies at local level; best use of the players' competences; rural development);
- *Technical component* (instruments) – for the implementation of the strategic elements (establishment of database, of a guidebook, of a web site, organization of workshops for a better communication and for transparency purposes; consultancy services directly to beneficiaries).

The network activity will be co-coordinated by a National Rural Development Committee, and if necessary, resource centers will be established at regional level in order to support the actions of this committee through permanent contact with the local beneficiaries. In order to initiate the establishment activity, MAFRD will propose an action plan that should contain at least the following stages:

- Identification of players involved in rural development
- Designing the terms of reference
- Designing the procedure for the selection of the network administrator
- Identification and establishment of the competency of the National Committee for the rural development network coordination
- Selecting the organization that will administer the network

References

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