



# Report of the 14<sup>th</sup> meeting of the European Rural Networks' Steering Group

Webinar, 08 October 2020

## Welcome and introduction

9.15 – 10.00

Welcome and  
Introduction

Mario Milouchev,  
DG AGRI

The key objectives of the 14<sup>th</sup> European Rural Networks' Steering Group (SG) meeting were:

- To provide an update on the state of play of the CAP reform and other relevant EU policy initiatives.
- To discuss the recent and future activities of the European Rural Networks.
- To discuss the preparation of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas including the role of Rural Networks.
- To discuss and propose ideas for the next Rural Networks' Assembly.

The Chair opened the SG webinar meeting and welcomed participants. He outlined the meeting's topics and encouraged active participation in the meeting by SG members.

Looking forward, the Chair indicated that there would be time to consider ideas for the 7th Rural Networks' Assembly meeting scheduled for 4 December, which Commissioner Wojciechowski hopes to be able to open. Given the likelihood of a two-year transitional period between the two programming periods, the Chair indicated that this may not be the last meeting of the Assembly in the current EU Network set-up. He confirmed that the Assembly, together with the other Rural Networks' governance bodies, could continue to operate until the governance structures of the new EU CAP network are in place. On DG AGRI's side, importance is attached to ensuring the continuity of networking support - at both EU and national levels - during the transition period.

Reflection on the governance structure for the future EU CAP Network is still ongoing internally in DG AGRI and, in the context of the CAP transition period, there is still time to put forward proposals. SG members, together with Assembly members, had the opportunity in previous meetings to exchange and express opinions on the current Rural Networks' governance bodies and on what elements of the current system should be kept in the future, or where improvements could be made. Members of the Subgroup on Innovation were also asked to share their views in their March 2020 meeting. A consultation of the members of the CLLD/LEADER Subgroup will be conducted in the near future via a survey in order to gain their views on the governance bodies. Results of this survey will be shared with SG members.

Update on EU  
Commission  
Activities,

Gregorio Dávila from DG AGRI presented the [state of play of the CAP reform co-decision process and key issues at stake](#). His presentation included a timeline with an estimation of the key decision dates and steps, with trilogues anticipated to start in November and, assuming the expected agreement of a

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Gregorio Dávila  
Díaz, DG AGRI

two-year transitional period, MS to submit their draft CAP Strategic Plans by 1 January 2022 for Commission approval during that year, and their implementation to start from 1 January 2023. He also presented new provisions proposed under the German Presidency to provide for a flexible transition for both EU and National level networks. He then responded to questions from participants.

SG members asked if the performance review would be conditional on formal evaluation activities. Gregorio indicated that while it will not be conditional, findings from formal evaluations due in 2027, 2029 and 2031 could be reflected in the performance review processes.

A SG member suggested that farmers, advisors and Managing Authorities are concerned about the proposal to include European Green Deal (EGD) targets in the CAP Strategic Plans. SG members were pointed to a [Commission Working Paper](#) which addresses the links between the EGD and the CAP reform. The Commission's conclusion is that these are compatible, including the targets. Aspirational targets have been set at EU level and recommendations will be addressed to and discussed with each Member State (MS) before they formally submit the draft Strategic Plans, on all the CAP Specific Objectives and paying particular attention to addressing the Green Deal targets. MS should set their own targets according to their own needs and SWOT analysis.

A question was raised on the implications of the Council's proposal to provide for changes in the definition of [Areas of Natural Constraint](#) (ANC), especially regarding ring fencing in Pillar 2. Gregorio indicated that the ring fencing provisions and the delimitation of ANC are not linked.

In response to a question on how the Commission will ensure that the additional European Recovery Instrument funds will be used to serve the European Green Deal objectives, Gregorio indicated that the conditions to be attached to the use of these funds was still under discussion in the context of trilogues on the Transitional Regulation. It was now clear that these funds will be used to reinforce funds in the current RDPs for 2021 and 2022 (rather than the future CAP Strategic Plans) in line with the strategy and measures already in place. The European Commission wants to see their use be focused in particular on green and digital objectives.

SG members asked about the Council proposal to make large infrastructure eligible for rural development support, including for energy and broadband investments and outside LEADER. The Chair highlighted potential advantages of this for MS with smaller allocations of Cohesion policy funds.

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A final question was put forward regarding whether there are any discussions taking place on changes to Article 113 on the role of the networks? DG AGRI confirmed that no new proposals have been made by the German presidency or the co-legislators to change Article 113, but drew attention to the provisions to introduce additional flexibility for the transition between both EU and National level networks, which aimed to avoid gaps in networking support.

### Update on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas

10.00 – 11.00  
Update on the  
Long-Term Vision  
for Rural Areas  
Maria Gafo, DG  
AGRI

Maria Gafo's presentation provided an [update on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas \(LTVRA\)](#). In her presentation, Maria outlined some significant challenges for rural areas, including depopulation and the provision of rural broadband. The gap between rural and urban broadband provision is shrinking and can still be further addressed. Maria also highlighted the necessity of the provision of rural services, such as healthcare and local schooling, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed attitudes to rural working, and teleworking in particular. This is why the Commission has taken a commitment to develop a Rural Vision, but one that is developed using rural voices, and this is why the comprehensive consultation has been launched.

The Chair encouraged members and their organisations to respond actively to the consultation before the deadline of 30 November. He pointed out that the percentages of rural areas as presented in the slides varies depending on the typology used for urban/rural. Information is anticipated from Eurostat that could help address such consistency.

When asked about individual citizens accessing and responding to the on-line public consultation, the Chair highlighted that individual accounts are needed for each response to avoid multiple responses from single individuals. Position papers can also be added to consultation replies or sent directly to DG AGRI.

Participants asked DG AGRI when the LTVRA Workshop Package will be available. Maria indicated that a refined version would be presented at the [18th NRN Meeting](#) on 22 October, with the final version expected by end October. SG members were encouraged to disseminate the use of these tools as widely as possible.

The Chair confirmed that the Conference on the Future of Europe is still expected to take place during 2021. He also indicated in response to questions that it is not confirmed yet if there will be an action plan accompanying the LTVRA and that the implementation of the EU digital

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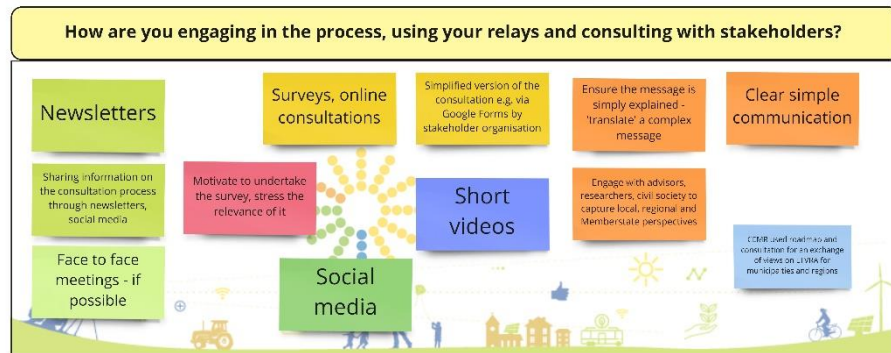
strategy will continue to be supported under the ongoing work of the Broadband Competence Office.

Maria indicated that the results of the Special [Eurobarometer](#) would be published in October with a possible follow up next year.

There was an exchange on encouraging LAGs to use the Workshop Package and to submit inputs to the Vision exercise, including an example presented from Sweden of the NRN providing a platform for LAGs involvement.

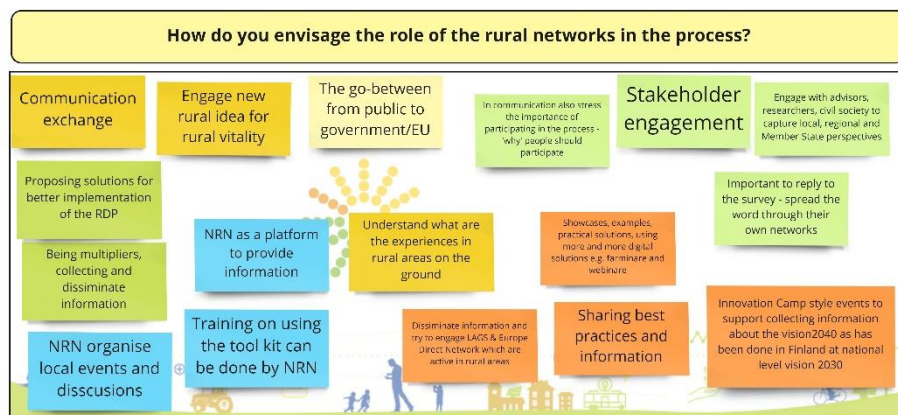
Some clarification was given on wider LTVRA-related events conducted at national level, including innovation camps in Finland on Rural Vision 2030. The Flemish NSU reported that the survey had been disseminated to stakeholder organisations which can act as relays for the consultation.

The interactive component of the SG discussion on the LTVRA asked members to respond to two questions, considering the role of the rural networks. The two figures that follow present a summary of member responses



The grouping of responses to the question on the role of rural networks in the LTVRA process suggested that SG members saw the NRNs as having an important role to play in disseminating the information, as well as other stakeholder networks. Communication around this should look to encourage stakeholder responses and engagement by indicating that these will be taken into account.

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The relays proposed for the information focussed very strongly on clear, simple messages, and particularly through digital means where possible. This reiterated the point raised at the meeting of the [ENRD Thematic Group \(TG\) on the LTVRA](#) which underlined the need for clear and simple messages in consultation. More traditional means such as newsletters and social media were also recommended to reach as wide an audience as possible, but using the networks as a relay and a platform to reach and motivate stakeholders to engage in the process.

### Recent and Planned Network Activities

**11.30 – 12.30**  
Recent and planned network activities – John Grieve, ENRD CP

An update was given by the EU rural network support units, starting with a presentation of [ENRD Contact Point](#) activities.

Recent activities included the first meetings of the new ENRD TGs on the [LTVRA](#) and the [EGD](#) and the first webinar on [Preparing the CAP Strategic Plans: Designing Intervention Strategy](#). The next main scheduled meeting of the LTVRA TG would be a two-day event in December continuing the JRC-led foresight process which would be a key input for the development of the Vision.

Other ENRD CP activities will include a second webinar on [Preparing the CAP Strategic Plans: Designing Interventions](#), the [18<sup>th</sup> NRN Meeting](#) and a workshop for NRNs on [Valorising and Communicating Successful Projects](#), a LEADER Lab on [developing local strategic approaches to address green issues](#), and the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the TG on the [European Green Deal](#). The [Rural Inspiration Awards](#) for 2021 will also be launched.

Joint networking activities, particularly with EU level stakeholder organisations are planned to help develop greater stakeholder engagement in the ENRD's activities.

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<p>Recent and planned network activities Véronique Rebholtz, EIP-AGRI Service Point</p> <p>Recent and planned network activities Hannes Wimmer, ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk</p>	<p>As an information point it was noted that details on the membership of the ENRD TGs cannot be widely shared due to privacy laws.</p> <p>Veronique Rebholtz updated SG members on the recent and planned activities of the <a href="#">EIP-AGRI Service Point</a>. This included a <a href="#">video</a> from the Innovation Subgroup. Veronique indicated that there would be a number of forthcoming events including focus group meetings, a workshop '<a href="#">Shaping the EU mission – Caring for soil is caring for life</a>' and that the <a href="#">Innovation Subgroup</a> would meet on 3 December 2020. In Spring 2021 there will be a workshop 'Towards carbon neutral agriculture' and a seminar on 'Healthy soils for Europe: sustainable management through knowledge and practice'.</p> <p>In reply to a question on the transition, the Chair confirmed that rural networking will continue, including for innovation and support for the NRNs. DG AGRI also highlighted that MS may organise the animation of their national networks in different ways, including outsourcing or running the network in-house in the Managing Authority, which can have implications for the transitional arrangements at MS level.</p> <p>Hannes Wimmer then presented the SG the activities of the <a href="#">ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk</a>. The <a href="#">outcomes</a> of the ongoing Thematic Working Group on Ex post evaluation have been published on the website, together with <a href="#">Newsletters</a>, <a href="#">Working documents</a>, <a href="#">factsheets</a> and <a href="#">Member States completed evaluations</a>. Capacity building events in the Member States take place in Q4/2020 as well as the <a href="#">Good Practice Workshop 'Assessment of resource efficiency and climate'</a>. The outlook to the Annual Work Programme 2021 shows more guidance to improve data for future evaluations and to update existing guidelines.</p>
<p>Outlook</p>	
<p>12.30– 13.00 Outlook Mario Milouchev DG AGRI</p>	<p>The Rural Networks' Assembly will use an online format for its next meeting on 4 December 2020. Suggestions of topics for the Assembly agenda were invited and included: organisation of the rural networks post-2020 and during the transition; the role of stakeholders in the preparation of CAP Strategic Plans; and experiences and responses to COVID-19 in rural areas.</p> <p>The Chair noted that the topic of transition including for networks could be considered within the Assembly's December agenda. This could also include updates on the European Green Deal and the LTVRA.</p>

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	<p>The Chair closed the meeting by thanking SG members for supporting rural networking activities and he again encouraged SG members to promote their stakeholders' participation in the LTVRA consultation.</p>
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