Evaluation of the Specific programme of the National Rural Network (SPNRN) in the framework of the 2019 annual implementation report

Synthesis – 22 October 2019

In partnership with

This evaluation is financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) in the framework of the specific programme of the National Rural Network
The National Rural Network and its organization

The French Rural Network aims to communicate, promote and improve the efficiency of the EAFRD mobilization in France. For this purpose it contributes to reflections, exchanges and debates about rural areas and policies needed for their development. It is also in charge of the relations with the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) with the other member states, in order to take into account the European dimension of rural development issues. It is co-driven by the French Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the General Commissariat for Territorial Equality (CGET) and “Régions de France” (which represents the regional councils in France).

The Specific Programme of the National Rural Network contributes to the 4 priority activities (specific objectives) of a rural network:

- Increasing the stakeholders’ involvement in the implementation of the rural development policy;
- Improving the quality of the regional rural development programmes implementation;
- Informing the general public and the potential beneficiaries about the rural development policy and funding opportunities;
- Promoting innovation in agriculture, food production and forestry sectors, as well as in the rural areas.

The fifth objective is the national and transversal objective aiming at strengthening all forms of cooperation and their structuring.

A. The objectives of the evaluation

THE METHOD

The evaluation has been designed to bring answers to evaluative questions, based on factual elements and on the perception of the rural network members:

- Application of a reference tool for assessment to report on the National Rural Network activities;
- Interviews of network stakeholders (26 stakeholders interviewed);
- Online survey (on the renown and satisfaction of the network activities) addressed to the network members;
- Valorisation of “MCDR” projects (collective mobilization for rural development projects) through 4 case studies;
- Analysis of the programmes data and indicators;
- A working group, moderated through the contribution analysis method.

As a tool of the European rural development policy, the evaluation of the SPNRN has to be based on the common framework for monitoring and assessment.

The regulatory framework requires the member states to carry out an evaluation of the outcomes and objectives achievements of the rural development programmes and of their contributions to the European strategy for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the annual implementation reports submitted to the Commission for approval in June 2019. This leads to several evaluative questions.

It should be noted that only one common evaluative question drawn from the monitoring and evaluation framework of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) is directly linked to the National Rural Network: "To what extent has the National Rural Network contributed to the achievement of the objectives set by the article 54, paragraph 2 of the European regulation nº 1305/2013?"

Thus, the national support unit (NSU) of the Rural Network, supported by the Services and Payment Agency, wanted to carry out an evaluation of the Specific Programme for the National Rural Network including for instance the evaluation of the network activities efficiency, through the analysis of its contribution to the achievement of the regulatory objectives. It is in this framework that Teritéo, Crealead and Eurêka 21 have been appointed.
One of the network objectives is to encourage the mobilization of various stakeholders and organisations (209 members) concerned by rural development. In this framework, the NRN is seen as a coordinating stakeholder for the building of the rural development policies by facilitating exchanges and links between various stakeholders. Several efforts have been made in order to:

✓ Provide conditions for exchanges among various stakeholders, through governance bodies and events (thematic workshops, national seminars...)
✓ Ensure a complementarity with the regional rural networks, through regular meetings of the regional networks (13 meetings) and the reactivity of the NSU.
✓ Organize events on various themes linked to the rural development issues: gender equality, digital technologies...
✓ Develop innovative moderation methods (Beekast).

However, the stakeholders’ mobilization seems to be contrasted. Despite a mobilization revival during the 2018 General Assembly, the participation rate to governance bodies is globally below 50% and most of the stakeholders consider that their involvement is weak. There are various reasons but three main elements arise from the evaluation:

✓ Difficulties to meet heterogeneous expectations;
✓ A “complex” network organisation that may hinder the stakeholders’ mobilisation;
✓ A governance and events sometimes considered as too “institutional”, with a strong expectation regarding the use of innovative and participatory methods.

Regarding the European dimension, if activities are driven by the NSU (participation of the NRN in European events, reports and documents translations...), they are not visible enough most of the stakeholders (51%) who have more expectations regarding concrete capitalisation of innovative projects and feedbacks on European events (particularly in the framework of the NRN activities).

According to the evaluation, the network activities regarding stakeholders’ mobilisation and the European dimension have to be strengthened.

KEY FIGURES:

25: it’s the number of thematic and analytic exchanges set up with the support of the National Rural Network (working groups, workshops...)

But 77% of the stakeholders consider their involvement in the network as weak

The National Rural Network participated to 41 European events

51% of survey respondents consider that the activities of the Network have allowed them a greater access to information and to European rural development networks.
Contributions of the NRN to strengthen cooperation and synergies among stakeholders

The National Rural Network enables to create or strengthen links between the stakeholders. In the framework of its working programme, several activities contribute to this objective:

✓ Thematic and analytic meetings (workshops, seminars...) play an important role for the stakeholders networking: 85% of the stakeholders strongly involved in the network think that their participation leads to create new contacts;
✓ The “MCDR” projects and the networking of EIP groups also contribute to involve stakeholders and to stimulate cooperation: with 21 projects within the 2018 call for projects and more than 115 partners involved (including regional rural networks), the “MCDR” projects are seen as a tool for the mobilisation and cooperation of stakeholders.

In the previous evaluation, the involvement of rural development stakeholders was considered weaker than the involvement of agricultural stakeholders, this situation evolved towards a rebalancing, through:

✓ The drafting of an action plan to promote synergies among stakeholders;
✓ The organisation, from 2018, of events open to all and more focused on rural development topics;
✓ The new “MCDR” projects generation through the development of new themes.

In terms of future perspectives, strong expectations have been expressed regarding the strengthening of the NRN activities concerning its moderation and cooperation support. There is also a will to strengthen the use of innovative and participatory methods encouraging the stakeholders networking.

According to the evaluation, the network activities have a “positive” impact on the strengthening of cooperation and synergies among stakeholders.

**KEY FIGURES:**

50,3% of the survey respondents consider that their participation to the network enabled them to make new contacts.

47% of the survey respondents consider that the NRN strongly contributes to strengthen the links between agricultural and rural stakeholders and their involvement in the network.

5: it’s the number of events dedicated to cooperation organised or supported by the NRN.
The NRN promotes the implementation of regional rural development programmes through different activities:

- ✓ Development of tools and methodologies: 7 studies carried out in the framework of rural development programmes, tutorial to set up an EAFRD project;
- ✓ Trainings about State aid and monitoring-evaluation of rural development programmes: 10 sessions for 183 participants;
- ✓ Moderation of thematic workshops likely to promote the implementation of rural development programmes (workshop about gender equality for example).

The NRN also provides data and indicators processing through the Rural Development Observatory. It has also developed communication tools, and particularly a tutorial dedicated to the setting up of EAFRD projects, that was widely appreciated.

If for most stakeholders, the activities of the NRN for the implementation of rural development programmes are satisfactory, this role remains weakly identified. The NRN has difficulties to determine its role in the context of the EAFRD managing regionalisation. Indeed, managing authorities are quite autonomous and organise themselves outside the NRN to work together and mutualise tools enabling the operational implementation of the rural development plans.

Due to this context and the lessons learned from the evaluation, the strategy of the specific programme of the NRN regarding the rural development programmes implementation has to be clarified, for instance thanks to a better coordination between the responsibilities of managing authorities, regional rural networks and the EAFRD coordination authority. More specifically, the role of technical support dedicated to Local Action Groups, particularly in the 2014-2020 programming period concerned by important delays for the LEADER programming, has to be strengthened. Indeed, only two cooperation events have been organised between 2017 and 2018. However, the NRN has supported three times the organisation of regional or interregional events about cooperation (inter overseas territories cooperation meeting...).

According to the evaluation, the activities of the network regarding the setting up of rural development programmes are “positive”. However, its role has to be “reinforced” regarding the support to monitoring-evaluation activities and the valorization of the lessons learned.

**KEY FIGURES:**

- **183 participants to the 10 training sessions** organised in 2018 by the network about the State aid regime and the monitoring-evaluation of regional development programmes.
- **36 requests for data extraction from the Rural Development Observatory** (in 2018)
- **60%** consider the activities of the NRN regarding the rural development programmes as « quite satisfactory ».
- But **60%** are not aware of the activities and role of the NRN for the rural development programmes implementation
E. Contribution of the NRN to inform the general public and the potential beneficiaries about rural development policy and funding opportunities

Since the beginning of the programming period, the NRN has considered communication as essential. All the activities foreseen in the programme regarding the communication tools and information about the rural development policy have been implemented: network promotion tools, publication, newsletter...). The communication strategy seems well articulated with the Regional Rural Networks.

Since 2017, efforts have been made by the NRN to strengthen the communication tools quality, mainly through the website redesign and the strengthening of its visibility to the general public:

- Presence on the social networks: Facebook (400 followers), Twitter (750 followers);
- Presence at the agricultural show (salon de l’agriculture): a popular event that arouses media interest;
- Publication in partnership with the newspaper “Alternative économique”.

These activities seem to have a positive impact on the renown of the network. Indeed, the number of visitors going to the network website has increased by 33% between the first and the last term of 2018.

Nevertheless, the network undergoes difficulties to communicate beyond a limited circle of “expert” stakeholders. Indeed, there is a lack of knowledge regarding some activities of the network: 65% of the stakeholders are not aware of the network activities regarding innovation.

For the stakeholders less involved in the network, communication appears as too institutional to target a larger public: the vocabulary is most of the time too technical (PEI, LEADER), the communication is mainly focused on the network dimension and not enough on the project one or on local initiatives...

According to the evaluation, the activities of the network regarding its visibility towards the agricultural and rural stakeholders are positive. However, these activities have to be strengthened to target a broader public.

KEY FIGURES:

+ 160 activities and communication tools implemented since 2016

The number of visitors going to the network website has increased by 33% between the first and the last term of 2018

For 57% the activities of the NRN regarding communication are well articulated with the regional scale.

53% think that the activities to inform the general public about European activities and priorities regarding agricultural and rural development are not satisfactory.
Contribution of the NRN to the innovation in rural areas and the agricultural, food production and forestry sectors

To achieve its objective regarding innovation support, the NRN implemented two main complementary measures: the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) promoting a sustainable agriculture and the initiatives implemented by the French Rural Network called “Collective Mobilization for Rural Development” (Mobilisation Collective pour le Développement Rural or “MCDR” projects).

These two mechanisms are not equally implemented: the “MCDR” projects are selected by a national call for projects and directly cofinanced by the specific programme of the NRN. The EIP cooperation projects are directly selected and promoted at the regional scale, in the framework of the regional rural development programmes implementation.

The innovations tested by the EIP operational groups are focused on agricultural and forest issues whereas “MCDR” projects meet broader development challenges faced by rural territories. These two mechanisms contributed to create new links between the stakeholders and to highlight innovative projects that can be duplicated (including European experiences for the European Innovation Partnership). They also enabled a better awareness of specific topics in the debates.

Furthermore, in the framework of the NRN activities, more than 170 innovative projects have been gathered and promoted. They are available via the data center of the network. These projects mainly concern EIP and “MCDR” projects.

One of the main suggested improvements, could consist in developing exchanges at the regional or interregional scale and decentralize some meetings dedicated to the EIP and “MCDR” projects. Indeed, “MCDR” project stakeholders are not necessarily known by the regional stakeholders. Likewise, according to the survey results and analysis, the EIP could be more integrated in the agricultural, forestry or rural regional bodies.

According to the evaluation, the network activities « strongly » promote innovation.

KEY FIGURES:

More than 170 innovative projects gathered and promoted by the NRN

16 “MCDR” projects have been selected in 2015 and 21 projects in 2018

76% of the stakeholders consider the network activities promoting innovation as satisfactory