



Overview summary Rural Networks' Assembly 26 Jan 2015, Brussels, BE

Enhancing stakeholder involvement, developing and exchanging new knowledge, and improving performance were some of the main topics discussed at the EU's first ever Rural Networks Assembly.

Held in Brussels on 26 January 2015, the first Rural Networks Assembly marked a major milestone in increasing stakeholder involvement in the implementation of EU rural development policy. The Assembly provided a unified platform to share stakeholder priorities and concerns covering all aspects of rural development policy 2014-2020, ranging from programming to evaluation and from CLLD to innovation.

Speaking at the Assembly, European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Phil Hogan, welcomed the role the Assembly could play to help "get Europe going again". He pointed out useful areas where Assembly members could convert policy proposals into rural realities. These included focusing their joint efforts on making farming attractive for younger generations, diversifying rural economies, tackling climate concerns, and building capacities for rural innovation.

Commissioner Hogan also stressed his belief in the importance of simplifying rural development systems in order to increase efficiency and associated RDP performance. Such goals were echoed by a keynote speech from the European Court of Auditors, which reinforced essential due diligence procedures for RDP spending and encouraged more cost-effective use of Financial Instruments to lever additional capital into RDP actions.

Beneficial outcomes

Many other rural development matters were discussed and analysed during the Assembly's mix of plenary and workshop meetings. Subjects ranged from networking within the ENRD and EIP-AGRI's new structures, to integration of RDP cross-cutting priorities. Communication and evaluation were also noted as key points of interest for all Assembly Members.

Participants from public and private sector organisations plus civil society bodies benefitted from the interesting exchanges of ideas and experiences that took place throughout the day in these sessions. Collectively they explored a broad spectrum of economic, environmental and social issues affecting rural Europe, which resulted in a useful collection of items for follow-up work by the European Rural Networks.

Potential priority topics raised by Assembly members included urban-rural relations, demographic challenges, the circular economy, climate action, competitive agriculture, sustainable management of natural resources, balanced territorial development, and local food supply-chains, among others.

Other Assembly achievements included a consensus on the proposal to expand the Assembly's sub-group on innovation to cover more Member State perspectives. This sub-group will also now take special account of innovation opportunities under Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) initiatives.

Such success stories from Europe's first ever Rural Network's Assembly demonstrate its value and potential for making many more positive contributions to help steer the direction of the EU rural networks.

Next steps now involve feeding the Assembly's findings into the operational processes of the Rural Networks' Steering Group. These are expected to inform the on-going work programmes for the ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks. The outcomes of this work will be on the agenda for the second Assembly meeting, due to take place in late 2015.