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16.2 The national network for rural development

The purpose of the national network for rural development is to bring together parties involved in or affected by the Rural Development Programme, through information activities, exchanges of experience and methods development, with a view to improving its implementation and strengthening its potential for rural development. The network should also serve as a national and transnational forum for wide-ranging exchange of information, experience and methods, and help to broaden dialogue on implementation at and between local, regional, national and international levels.

It is also important as a means of promoting exchanges of experience between those involved in rural development policy, regional development policy and environmental policy. It is therefore essential that public authorities with links to these policy areas be given a role in the network.

16.2.1 Organisations and public authorities forming part of the rural development network

All parties and actors involved in implementation of the Rural Development Programme must be included in the network and its activities. The network must therefore comprise a broad cross-section of organisations and authorities involved in all four axes. These may represent beneficiaries, the rural population and its industries, or be stakeholders with an interest in the development of Sweden's rural areas. The network should also include representatives of Sweden's municipalities, regional autonomous bodies and municipal cooperation bodies. Representatives of immigrant organisations should also be affiliated to the network. Finally, the network should include a broad selection of representatives from institutions of higher education actively involved in research in relevant areas.

16.2.2 Procedures and timetables for building the network

A pilot study on the creation of a national rural development network was conducted in the spring of 2006. A large number of prospective network members have been contacted and invited to give their views on appropriate network functions and activities and to outline the nature and scope of their organisations' future participation.

The target is to build a national network for rural development in the autumn of 2006. As the managing authority for the entire Rural Development Programme, the Swedish Board of Agriculture is also responsible for the activities of the network. However, responsibility for the implementation of network tasks should rest largely with the member organisations.

An initial task will be to draw up a network action plan. The plan must contain a description and analysis of successful, transferable methods and information on the latter, an account of the network's structure, organisation and operation, including its

arrangements for exchanges of knowledge and experience, a plan for the preparation of training programmes for local development groups and future LAGs, and details of support schemes for national and interregional projects and initiatives. An important task in this connection is to identify in greater detail the parties to be included in the network.

Useful lessons and observations from the existing Swedish Leader+ network and relevant authorities should be turned to account when planning the network. Other existing networks could also serve as examples.

The network will have an important part to play at the start of the new programme period inter alia by contributing to the dissemination of information about the Rural Development Programme, and in connection with the introduction of the Leader method in new areas. It should therefore commence operations before the end of 2006.

16.2.3 Activities

Among other tasks, the network will be expected to:

- Gather, analyse and disseminate information about and raise awareness of rural development and the possibilities offered by the Rural Development Programme.
- Gather, analyse and disseminate information about conditions in the countryside in areas affected by all the axes.
- Promote knowledge dissemination through exchanges of R&D-based experience between stakeholders, authorities and expert networks.
- Promote method development and evaluation of methods, projects and other initiatives.
- Organise training courses aimed at actors in the network.
- Act as a contact point for exchanges with the European network and encourage transnational exchanges.
- Support implementation of the Rural Development Programme
- Act as a contact point for LAGs.

A detailed description of the content of the network's activities and initiatives and its relevance to the Rural Development Programme will be included in the action plan.

16.2.4 Budget

Technical support funds will be used to cover the network and implementation of the actions. The indicative budget for the national rural network is estimated being approx 70 million SEK (approx M€ 7,8) under the programming period. Of the total budget approx 15 million SEK (approx M€1,7) will be reserved for the structure needed to run the network (Article 68(2)(a) of Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005) while 55 million SEK (approx M€ 6,1) will be reserved for the action plan (Article 68(2) (b) of Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005).