In many ways, this programming period has been defined by its unique nature and unforeseen trials, like the global pandemic and the United Kingdom leaving the EU. Amid these challenges, Member States have been pushed to innovate and experiment leading to many new and improved developments, as well as further challenges, that have ultimately provided valuable lessons learned that can be taken forward into the new programming period.

We take a moment to reflect on the many valuable experiences that we as the evaluation community across Europe have had. For this purpose, the Evaluation Helpdesk has reached out to Managing Authorities, Evaluators, NRNs, and other evaluation stakeholders to share their experiences concerning evaluations, indicators, accomplishments as well as their trials and tribulations.

Experimenting, adaption, problematic, development, conventional, long... These are some of the many word's evaluation stakeholders used to describe the current programming period up until now, when asked by the Evaluation Helpdesk.
Building new capacities and facing down old challenges

From building better relationships and new evaluation units to better evaluating environmental effects and local level development, this programming period has been marked by creating new capacities. Stephanie Vella, an evaluator from Malta, states, ‘I think that the biggest success is the relationships that are being built among major stakeholders involved in the monitoring and implementation of the programme. This has simplified the collaboration process and hopefully will result in better evaluations’. Kostas Apostolopoulos, Managing Authority from Greece, says that for him one of their greatest successes was setting-up a new evaluation unit within the Managing Authority as well as a system for building evaluation capacity among Local Action Groups. Improving the capacity of LAGs has been accomplished through a guidance document for the preparation of evaluation plans, an online collaborative tool where all the work done by the MA and the LAGs is published and having regular meetings with LAGs to present best practices and discuss progress. He states, ‘this is an ongoing process, and we hope that some innovative evaluations of LEADER at the local level will emerge from this work’.

Other stakeholders are particularly pleased with the progress they have made in evaluating particular areas. Paula Talijärv, Managing Authority from Estonia, acknowledged that she is particularly pleased with their on-going monitoring and evaluations related to the environment and the data gathered for evaluations. For Elita Benga, evaluator from Latvia, she told us that an important success has been the evaluation of large farms to agricultural development, taking into account the impact of RDP support and the role of area payments in the economic development of farms. She states, ‘The report has a strong resonance among farmers’ organisations, especially in the Farmers’ Saeima, which represents large farmers’.

Though there have been many successes naturally some challenges have also popped up. Across the board stakeholders suggested that netting out impacts still remains to be one of the biggest challenges. In the case of Greece Kostas states, ‘as always, netting out the impact of the RDP on rural actors and areas, especially regarding economic performance of agricultural holdings and processors of agricultural products is a challenge. For netting out agricultural holdings the challenges arise from the insufficiency of the FADN in Greece, while for netting out processors the difficulty lies in the lack of data to develop a control group’. For others they stated that the biggest challenge was the evaluation of secondary effects. Elita emphasises, ‘In Latvia the evaluation of secondary impacts was a challenge because it wasn’t so visible from interventions and implemented projects, even though we do have access to the database with information about projects’. Even when you have the data it can be challenging, however, even more challenging is when you don’t. In Malta, Stephanie says their biggest difficulty was data fragmentation. She states, ‘in a bid to address this challenge, various meetings have been held with relevant stakeholders and we are now more hopeful on the availability of data for the future’. Despite some of these challenges, evaluations are nevertheless proving to be an important learning process for fostering better policies, communication, and cooperation. Iiri Raa, researcher from Estonia, reveals that there is still room for improvement in evaluations, however, she states, ‘evaluations have really brought additional value, wider communication and livelier cooperation not only with the rural network, but also, advisors and other groups’. She goes on to state, ‘it is important to have continuous and ongoing data collection and data analysis, not only at pre-defined times. This process has really brought additional value for further developments and analyses through participation and cooperation with other stakeholders and projects’.

Evaluation Highlights from the Member States

This programming period has been filled with evaluations from the yearly Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) and their enhanced counterparts to ongoing thematic evaluations. Paula believes that for her a highlight was definitely the AIR in 2019, ‘because despite the difficulties, we had a very good overview of RDP implementation as a result’. For some others their highlights were more thematic. In Latvia, Elita told us, ‘the evaluation of organic farming was one of our most important, because previously, organic farming (OF) was not studied and it was interesting to get acquainted with the requirements, farmers, and their daily problems, and talk with OF certifiers to see the other side of the OF story’. Antri Katsirma, Managing Authority from Greece, states ‘our evaluation of water abstraction in agriculture was very successful because we had good cooperation with the evaluators and a new methodology was developed’. Kostas adds, ‘this new methodology will be very helpful for similar evaluations in the future’. For Malta, the evaluation highlight was more on the social side, as Stephanie states, ‘The thematic evaluation on young farmers, which has recently been conducted, has been an interesting one. The needs of young farmers have been reaffirmed and the support provided to young farmers has contributed towards the regeneration of the sector and will contribute towards enhancing the competitiveness of the sector. It was a pleasant experience talking to young farmers in focus groups, both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and discussing various elements with them’.

7+ Years of Networking

The ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk has conducted good practice workshops across the Member States, as well as holding multiple online workshops, in response to the pandemic, during this...
programming period. Stakeholders recalled which ones they found most stimulating. Stephanie states, ‘All of the Helpdesk workshops that I have attended have been extremely interesting as they focus on evaluation challenges and seek to provide solutions including through showcasing of interesting evaluation studies. My favourite one was the good practice workshop online, “Improving data management and information systems for the purpose of CAP evaluation”, as it allowed for the exchange of experiences from existing research projects/studies and data management practices at the EU and Member State levels’. Iiri reminisces, ‘I remember the workshop from Riga, as there were a lot of comments proposed for the commission regarding improving the SFC and the feedback letter, a lot of passion and emotions were in the air’. ‘The good practice workshop in Seville, Spain was very valuable for me as many evaluators/researchers were present and I was able to discuss the issues in detail’ states, Elita. For Anthi and Kostas they enjoyed the workshop ‘National Rural Networks’ support to the evaluation of RDPs’ which took place in Athens, Greece, because they were honoured to co-host and enjoyed being able to share their unique and valuable experiences with other Member States.

Looking to the future

With the transition from the current programming period to the next, so do we transition from the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) to the Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (PMEF). Evaluation stakeholders are preparing for this new change in a variety of ways, but among some of the major questions for the future involve the new delivery model, unifying Pillar I and Pillar II, and new evaluation topics. Elita, suggests that ‘the list of objectives and their complicated linkages with indicators may prove to be challenging’. While Kostas says, ‘The programming of unit amounts and result targets per year will be a major challenge. Another challenge might come from the fact that Member States will have more space in developing their evaluation
plans, since the only legal obligation is an ex post evaluation and the way we will build these evaluation plans to produce useful evaluations might prove quite challenging’. Concerning the addition of Pillar I to evaluations, Stephanie asserts, ‘The biggest challenge will be the learning curve to consider both Pillar 1 and 2 under the same system. Also, while attempts have been undertaken to simplify the PMEF, the fact that the number of indicators (output, result and impact) have increased leads to an element of complexity even in the design of the programme and potentially also in the implementation and eventually evaluation’.

Though there are challenges which lie ahead there are important resources which can be utilised to guide evaluation newcomers to better prepare them for the future. Iiri, affirms, ‘So far I have suggested to people new in the field to go to the Helpdesk’s Back to Basics page and start from there’. For Stephanie data is fundamental, as she states, ‘for someone new to CAP evaluations, I would suggest to immediately start exploring the availability of data to fully understand the data gaps and data sources and effectively work towards a solution at an early stage. I believe that this together with close collaboration with stakeholders is crucial for effective evaluations’. While Paula declares simply, ‘you just have to do it, you will learn by doing and from others experiences’.

Super powered evaluations for the future
As we move into the final year of the extended programming period and move to the next, many open questions will soon be answered, and new opportunities will arise to build stronger evaluation culture and share experiences between the Member States. One of the biggest benefits to the EU is the shared learning between Member States and it is without a doubt that all the shared lessons learned from this programming period will serve as a strong foundation for building towards even more robust evaluations and spreading the evaluation culture to new levels in the next programming period. As a final take away, we asked three of our evaluation experts, what would be their evaluation superpower, which can help us all for the future programming period.

Final reflections and thoughts
It takes time to shift systems and sometimes even longer to shift attitudes, however this programming period has been encouraging to see the progress made. In this period, RDPs were first introduced to the idea of target indicators being linked to the intended results of Focus Areas, with regular monitoring of progress and maybe the system did not reinforce their achievement, however, it has enabled us to progress as a community towards developing the future PMEF. During the implementation period, a shift in the communal mindset has occurred, focussing more on results and achievements, and moving beyond simply looking at expenditures. When it came to planning the future system, this has been taken into consideration and the attitudes have shifted to focus more on results, with targets and a mechanism to incentivise their achievement. None of this could have happened without the experiences of the whole evaluation community.

Kostas
aka Captain CoMo
(Complexity Modeler)
SUPERPOWERS INCLUDE:
Understand the whole complexity of stakeholders (along with their intrinsic intentions and motivations), needs, interventions (including their implementation mechanisms and how these are shaped by the stakeholders, the assumptions and conditionalities underpinning their connections to the identified needs), outcomes and anticipated change (including outputs, results and impacts and the assumptions and conditionalities underpinning their connections to the interventions), and all other parameters that I would be aware of if I was this superhero.

Stephanie
aka Data Girl
SUPERPOWERS INCLUDE:
Power of data integration
Power of data clarity
The ability to take different databases and link them together and make better use of data.

liri
aka Miss Impact
SUPERPOWERS INCLUDE:
Power to calculate all values for indicators and the net values for impacts... of ANY indicator in the WORLD!
As the contract of the Evaluation Helpdesk covering the programming period 2014-2020 comes to an end on 31 December 2021, we would like to say a very big thank you to the whole European rural development community and a very special thanks to everyone involved in the whole evaluation process. From the farmers and beneficiaries on the ground, to evaluators, researchers, and statistical offices battling data sets, to Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies ensuring the systems are implemented correctly, to NRNs and LAGs spreading evaluation results and building evaluation capacity and culture everyone has played a huge part in making the programming period 2014-2020 a major success.

This programming period has already had its fair share of challenges from the UK leaving the EU, fundamentally changing the structure of the EU, to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced us all into quarantine for months at a time. Nevertheless, the rural development community has stayed strong and continued with their important and fundamental work to build stronger networks and better evaluations and despite all these challenges innovations have been achieved and new progress was made in this shared experiment that we are all part of. As this extended programming period winds down and the new one begins, The European Evaluation Helpdesk and all its team members past and present, would like to take this moment to commend all of this hard work and say that we are all grateful for the years of wonderful collaboration and support.

We hope that you will keep the evaluation community alive and continue contributing to spreading the evaluation knowledge and culture to further support robust evidence-based policy making for the future!

Your European Evaluation Helpdesk Team
2014-2020

P.s. To all the data gaps, failed counterfactuals, and dropped zoom calls, we will see you on the other side!
Insights from the Evaluation Knowledge Bank:
tools supporting the evaluation of soil erosion

The Evaluation Helpdesk’s interactive tool ‘The Evaluation Knowledge Bank’ provides insights into various outputs developed in initiatives and projects at the EU and Member State levels concerning data infrastructure and data use. Important and unique features of this Evaluation Knowledge Bank include outputs’ categorisations and its ‘quick guide’, which briefly explains outputs’ potential for the use in monitoring and evaluation of the CAP. The Evaluation Knowledge Bank is being updated on an ongoing basis, and currently contains over 60 outputs from more than 30 projects/initiatives.
All outputs can be filtered by an array of categories, which allow them to be linked to the CAP evaluation context and related data needs. For example, some of these categories are CAP Objectives, data collection system used or associated evaluation approaches.

Task forces for continued learning
The Evaluation Knowledge Bank will continue to develop to enhance its content to find new outputs and new uses for the current outputs. As part of this, the Evaluation Helpdesk has organised several task force meetings where outputs were discussed with evaluators, Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, researchers, project holders, DG Agri, the JRC and other evaluation stakeholders. In total 93 people participated in several working meetings organised by specific thematic focus.

Task force meetings supported the transfer of the most relevant solutions included in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank for the CAP evaluation context. As a result of these discussions, practical examples will be further developed on how selected outputs could be used in a practical way for evaluations, with one presented below.

Putting the Evaluation Knowledge Bank to work for the assessment of soil erosion
The Evaluation Knowledge Bank includes outputs that can contribute data and support evaluating the effects of agricultural policy measures on soil erosion. Soil erosion is a fundamental environmental indicator in the current CMEF and in the future PMEF. The achievement of the overall CAP objective of ‘ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources, and climate action’ is addressed by the Common Evaluation Question (CEQ) 28, ‘To what extent has the RDP contributed to the CAP objective of ensuring sustainable management of natural resources and climate action?’.

In the CMEF, the relevant common CAP impact indicator for measuring ‘soil erosion by water’ is I.13 which consists of two sub-indicators: I.13-1 estimating the rate of soil loss by water erosion and I.13-2 estimating the agricultural area affected by a certain rate of soil erosion by water, which can also be expressed as a share of the total agricultural area affected by a specific rate of soil erosion. To assess impacts of policy measures on soil erosion evaluators apply erosion models such as the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE), which estimates long-term average annual soil loss by sheet and rill erosion.

Figure 1: The category of outputs supporting soil erosion evaluation and their potential use with the RUSLE model
The RUSLE is based on the multiplicative effect of five components, 
\[ E = R \times K \times C \times LS \times P \]
Where:
- \( E \) is the annual average soil loss (tons of soil per ha and year),
- \( R \) is the rainfall erosivity factor,
- \( K \) is the soil erodibility factor,
- \( C \) is the cover-management factor (dimensionless),
- \( LS \) is the slope length and slope steepness factor,
- \( P \) is the support practices factor.

Figure 1 shows examples of how the data provided by the different outputs presented in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank can assist in the estimation of the various components used by the RUSLE and especially the components that can be directly influenced by policy.

Assessing the C-Factor
The Cover Management C-Factor depends on the farm practices followed and the crop type. Farm practices include cover and catch crops, the management of residues, and the mechanical disturbance of the field with tillage, ploughing and mowing. Some of the outputs that were designed to monitor the application of greening rules provide information on:

- the presence and extent of catch and cover crops (e.g. TimeStamp - Tool for automated support system to monitor agricultural funding sites);
- the degree of tillage (e.g. SENSAGRI - Yield and biomass maps – Map of tillage changes);
- the presence of mowing events (e.g. SEN4CAP - Grassland mowing detection tool);
- the possible burning of stubbles (e.g. ENVISION - Analytics on vegetation and soil index time-series) and others.

At the same time, many outputs which provide detailed crop type maps may be handy to estimate the C-Factor using coefficients for each crop type recorded in the scientific literature (SEN4CAP, SENSAGRI, ENVISION). Therefore, the evaluator can assume that if all other factors remain the same, the effect of the policy can be evaluated through the effect on the C-factor and the P-factor, which are those that policy measures can influence.

Creating synergies
A frequently cited limitation is that the RUSLE equation estimates soil loss through sheet and rill erosion, but not from other types of erosion, such as gully, channel, bank, or landslides. By excluding these types of erosion, the RUSLE may underestimate the actual soil loss. RUSLE also does not account for deposition, leading to overestimation or sediment routing. This limitation may be partly offset by sampling many sites suspected of a gully or bank erosion. This control may be accomplished by using geotagged photographs that show these types of erosion on the field.
Outputs such as DIONE - Geotagged photos to complement Earth Observation data use geotagged photos specifically for this reason. Other outputs which use geotagged photos (e.g. NIVA - Earth Observation monitoring and traffic lights tool) can also support the estimation of the C-Factor by checking that the RUSLE does not over or under estimate.

The above is an example where various outputs from the same or different projects, using different data sources, can provide synergies to the estimation of the C-Factor by complementing each other or by providing the confidence that the estimates are correct.

Getting the data for calculating the P, K and R factors
Another example is provided by the estimation of the Support Practices or P-factor. For example, the DIONE tool - Maps of crop-types, non-productive EFAs, permanent pastures and of farming activities uses drones to increase the resolution and allow the recognition and mapping of specific features. These features include buffer strips, non-productive EFAs, trees, and other elements supported by policy and affecting the P-Factor.

In addition, other tools can assist in the estimation of the K-factor on soil erodibility, for example DIONE - Soil property map, or the R-factor on rainfall erosivity, for example ENVISION – Analytics on vegetation and soil index time-series (AVIST) and DIONE – An Earth Observations based Environmental Performance Tool. The estimation of these factors cannot be based solely on the data offered by the tools, however, the tools can provide critical information that may be missing for calculating these factors.

In Figure 1, these tools are marked as providing support and not primary inputs to the RUSLE.

Supporting future evaluations
With a view towards the future PMEF and beyond the RUSLE, the data offered by these tools can support the evaluator in estimating impact and result indicators or addressing the relevant evaluation question.

For example, if one assumes that a CAP Strategic Plan concentrates its efforts to combat soil erosion on a measure promoting cover crops, then one can use outputs presented in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank which are based on Earth Observation or drone technology to create a detailed map of cover crops for the CAP Strategic Plan target areas or pre-selected case study areas. This map, combined with an LPIS/IACS map, can provide a reasonable estimate of the PMEF result indicator ‘Improving and protecting soils: Share of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) under-supported commitments beneficial for soil management to improve soil quality and biota (such as reduce tillage, soil cover with crops, crop rotation included with leguminous crops)’.

The cover crop map combined with a map indicating moderate and high erosion risk areas can show how much of the UAA at risk to erosion was targeted by the policy instruments. Additionally, it can show whether the policy was successful not only in targeting the correct areas but also in attracting farmers. Evaluators can use the data provided by these tools individually or in combination to estimate soil erosion using the RUSLE model or other simpler models or provide evidence that will assist them in answering the evaluation question.

Furthermore, the data and information provided by one tool, for example, for soil erosion, may be used to evaluate another impact, in this case GHG emissions. A crop type map helps to evaluate the C-factor in soil erosion and support a Tier 1 evaluation of GHG emissions from agricultural soils.

Thus, synergies can develop across outputs presented in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank and evaluation themes for the same output. These potential synergies are important because if one output can benefit evaluations across multiple themes, then it has the potential to reduce the overall costs of evaluations and potentially time while still leading to robust findings.
Things to consider when using the Evaluation Knowledge Bank

As mentioned previously, the outputs included in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank are not primarily designed for the purpose of evaluation specifically, therefore when considering their use for evaluating the CAP, one must check the transferability of each particular output.

Nevertheless, some outputs presented in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank are easily transferable for use in CAP evaluations, and require little effort and cost from the user. For example, SEN4CAP tools have developed algorithms and processes that allow interested stakeholders to apply them in regions and the Member States. Downloading the package is open to anyone and free of charge. The only effort required is for testing and calibration of the model before it can be functional and the obvious costs of a computing system with ample storage and specifications.

However, other Earth Observation based tools (e.g. NIVA - Earth Observation monitoring and traffic lights tool) are more complex because they combine E.O. algorithms derived by SEN4CAP with Decision Support Systems (DSS) resulting in a ‘traffic lights’ system. These tools need to be tailor-made for each RDP and region or Member State and therefore add a degree of complexity. Other tools are based on E.O. but use Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning methods to determine whether a parcel is mowed, ploughed or tilled and produce binary maps of the presence of the farm activity (e.g. SENSAGRI - Yield and biomass maps). These tools require an even higher degree of skill for calibration and adaptation.

Ultimately, it is up to the user and Member State to decide which outputs are most appropriate for them based on their technical capacity and allocated resources. However, with that said the Evaluation Knowledge Bank provides a vital foundation for understanding how each output can be used for evaluation so that users can attempt to plan and innovate to use these outputs to make their future evaluations more robust.

The Evaluation Helpdesk would like to thank all of the project partners for their support and involvement in the Evaluation Knowledge Bank.

Outputs from the Evaluation Knowledge Bank for the monitoring and assessment of soil erosion

- NIVA - Earth Observation monitoring and traffic lights tool
- ENVISION - Analytics on vegetation and soil index time-series (AVIST)
- ENVISION – Cultivated crop type maps
- TimeStamp - Tool for automated support system to monitor agricultural funding sites
- SEN4CAP - Grassland mowing detection tool
- SEN4CAP - Agricultural practices monitoring product
- SEN4CAP - Crop type map
- SENSAGRI - Yield and biomass maps
- SENSAGRI - Crop type maps
- DIONE - An Earth Observations based Environmental Performance Tool
- DIONE - Geotagged photos to complement Earth Observation data
- DIONE – Soil property map
- DIONE - Maps of crop-types, non-productive EFAs, permanent pastures and of farming activities (i.e. mowing, grazing)

EXPLORE the Evaluation Knowledge Bank NOW!
Capacity building through peer-learning events: a new format for EvaluationWORKS! events in 2021

The ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk provides yearly capacity building events, EvaluationWORKS!, to strengthen evaluation capacity in the Member States. These events provide valuable opportunities for evaluation stakeholders in the Member States to identify and discuss the challenges they have faced and come up with potential solutions in order to improve their evaluation capacity for the future.

This year, in addition to standard capacity building events, Member States also had the opportunity to take part in innovative peer-learning workshops, which focused on specific topics agreed between two Member States.

Targeting Member States evaluation needs and mutual learning

Evaluation related challenges and capacity building needs of Member States are very specific. At the same time, Member States have acquired highly valuable experiences and insights on different topics which are worth sharing.

The peer-learning approach aims to match the needs of different Member States. In order to find the most suitable pairings of Member States, the Evaluation Helpdesk explored potential complementarities between Member States through surveys and interviews with key stakeholders.

As is well known, learning from others’ good practices is the most effective way to gain practical and realistic solutions to deal with internal challenges one might be facing. Some of the events followed a pure peer-learning approach, where one Member State provided the other with their experiences and good practices on a topic the other needed support. A perfect match! In other cases, Member States worked on common challenges they both faced concerning the same topic to find potential solutions. Finally, the last type of peer learning involved bringing in an external thematic expert (in this case on FADN) who guided the two Member States in developing applicable ideas for their common challenges and specific concerns.
Example of a peer learning event

The event organised on 14 September 2021 between BE- Flanders and Sweden aimed at improving both Member States’ capacity in planning data management for the evaluation of environmental indicators and impacts. Sweden presented its experiences on data for assessing the impact indicators on Biodiversity (namely I.08 and I.09) and Soil Quality (I.12), while Belgium (Flanders) showed its approach for evaluating the environmental effects of investment support. Six representatives from each Managing Authority and Evaluation Unit participated in the event.

The participants expressed that they found the methods presented and discussed were very relevant and transferable into the other Member State’s context. Discussions provided valuable hints on several topics for both Member States. For example, participants inspired each other on further or different uses of the information already available (e.g. FADN/FSDN, RUSLE) even though some challenges could still be faced regarding the reliability of the quality of data reported by the beneficiaries which could bring additional administrative burden. In this case, participants agreed that support from the Paying Agency in order to guarantee a high quality and efficiency in data collection from beneficiaries would be a solution for confronting such issues.

What was the overall feedback on this new format?

Participants stressed the overall utility and value of discussing practical cases and learning from one another while they suggested that the exchange of material beforehand would be an advantage for an even more fruitful discussion.

Moreover, the peer-learning event has sparked several Member States to set up follow-up meetings to transfer additional practices in their specific contexts and deepen their mutual knowledge on the topics. To this extent, the peer-learning sessions facilitated the direct creation of channels of communication and contacts between evaluation stakeholders from across the Member States.
The 17th Good Practice Workshop: 'A journey through evaluation plans: Learning from past experiences for the future CAP'

The 17th Good Practice Workshop of the Evaluation Helpdesk, 'A journey through Evaluation Plans: learning from past experiences for the future CAP', took place online on 28-29 June 2021. It brought together 83 participants from 25 different EU Member States, including RDP Managing Authorities (MAs), evaluators, European Commission representatives, researchers, National Rural Networks (NRNs) and other evaluation stakeholders. The overall objective of the workshop was to reflect on experiences in relation to the design and implementation of Evaluation Plans.

Six case studies were presented during the two-day workshop, bringing together experiences from selected Member States (Italy, Greece, Estonia, Sweden, Romania and Hungary) in relation to the following elements of evaluation planning:

- governance and coordination,
- evaluation activities and topics,
- data management,
- communication.

This workshop specifically aimed at:
- exchanging experiences concerning the design and implementation of Evaluation Plans in order to identify what worked well and what should be avoided;
- discussing specific elements of the Evaluation Plans in relation to the process, governance, content, management, and communication;
- identifying best practices for the future for further promoting evaluation culture and for better design and implementation of the Evaluation Plans.
Figure 1: Participants of the GPW 17 by role and Member State

- RDP Managing Authority: 40%
- Evaluator: 14%
- Paying Agency: 6%
- European Commission: 6%
- Other (NGO, etc.): 8%
- Support Unit: 12%
- Researcher: 10%
- Network Organization (e.g. NRN): 4%
- Other (Network Organization): 4%
Figure 2: Overall framework for evaluation

- Governance and coordination
  - Evaluation Secretariat
  - Advisory Research Committee
  - Evaluation Steering Committee
  - Large framework contract

- Needs driven planning
  - Annual evaluation plans
  - Different methodologies and study typologies

- Broad evaluation system: flexible + specific needs driven
  - EP and other (operational plan, master plan)
  - Various topics outside usual ones

- Capacity building
  - Various target groups
  - Develop capacity of staff (project)

- Communication and informing the future
  - Various channels and target groups
  - Evaluations gave input to ex ante and SEA
  - Follow up recommendations of evaluations

- Data management
  - Assessment of data needs
  - Analysis of data availability now and for the future
The outcomes of the discussions on evaluation planning presented at the workshop and expert input, together with the group discussions, provided insights in relation to the bottlenecks of evaluation planning and good practices and stressed the benefits of evaluation planning.

Key lessons on evaluation planning

**Clear responsibilities** of actors and better coordination through dedicated structures (e.g. Steering Committee, Evaluation Unit) facilitate evaluation planning and implementation.

**Internal structures** (e.g. Evaluation Unit within the MA) which facilitate a dedicated team for evaluation planning and implementation.

**External independent structures** (e.g. advisory body, Steering group) can make planning individual evaluations and quality control more robust.

**Closer working relationships** between the Managing Authority and the evaluator can facilitate better access to data and better understanding of evaluation needs. In addition, synergies with other units/funds/networks help build capacity and share evaluation experiences.

**Thematic groups**, where they exist, help guide more complex thematic evaluations. The involvement in these groups of research bodies or universities brings in thematic expertise.

**A structured system** is one that facilitates the involvement of farmers and uses thematic evaluators to cover all capacity needs.

A detailed data development plan for collecting data from the farmer or involving national statistical offices in the definition and collection of data for specific indicators (e.g. social) is vital. Key steps in a data development plan include:

1. Assessment of data needs
2. Analysis of data availability
3. Development of definitions and methodologies for data collection
4. Cooperation agreements with data providers (will also make step 3 more efficient)
5. Use of alternative approaches when data sources are insufficient or outdated. For example, the use of specific data collection methods for environmental indicators through the use of innovative technologies (e.g. GIS-based) or additional indicators.
The overarching lesson is to go beyond compulsory evaluations to cover a large variety of themes that address evaluation needs. For this reason, annual plans should complement the multi-annual evaluation planning. The Evaluation Unit can be used for annual planning of evaluation activities and topics to ensure the evaluation process is adapted to changing needs.

An evaluation steering group along with the MA and evaluators can help identify evaluation needs in the beginning, while defining topics for thematic evaluations at a later stage.

Different methodologies and study typologies for specific evaluation topics merit the contracting of different specialists and experts.

Evaluation activities contribute to knowledge building and to fostering evaluation culture, while some Member States have dedicated activities for building evaluation capacity.

Targeted and general communication activities and tools (e.g. ad hoc events, online publications, workshops, podcasts, press releases, articles, info days, NRN events, NRN website, training events) are useful both after each evaluation report/study, as well as on an ongoing basis.

Some Member States have used stakeholder mapping to better target their communication efforts, while others have undertaken efforts to make the content and tools of their communications interesting for each type of stakeholder (e.g. leaflets and stands in agricultural fairs or territorial meetings with targeted information).

Communication should focus not only on the results of specific evaluations but also on evaluation in general with the objective to raise awareness on the importance of evaluation for evidence based policy making.
In Italian RDPs, a dynamic, adaptive, and co-owned Evaluation Plan, as well as the dissemination of evaluation results and knowledge sharing facilitates a better evaluation culture.

In Greece, establishing a separate Evaluation Unit, establishing multiannual and annual evaluation planning and conducting more useful (i.e. focused on learning, taking into account the interests of stakeholders) and formative evaluations improves the evaluation process.

In Estonia, frequent communication on data, continuous collection of high quality data and synthesis through application forms and studies beyond the minimum requirements are positive practices that improve the implementation of the Evaluation Plan.

In Sweden, they found that it was important to have a clear processes and structures in place to involve stakeholders from the beginning of the programming period. Additionally, they found that it was valuable to develop external evaluation contacts and to take into account not only national needs, but also EU requirements.

In Romania, launching specific projects to collect data for specific indicators, collaboration between the evaluator and actors involved in the evaluation process as well as understanding and prioritising evaluation needs, helped to overcome challenges related to access to data and the long procurement processes.

In Hungary there were positive effects from combining monitoring and evaluation, connecting the evaluations conducted during implementation, ex ante and SEA, and continuous data gathering about environmental and social impacts.

Good practice from the different case study countries

Explore the Presentations and Workshop Report
Governance and coordination

In the future... the existence of an intermediate body (e.g. Steering Group) can bring together MAs, evaluators, and PAs. This can be especially beneficial at the regional level for regionalised Member States. The NRNs can play a key role in bringing together all relevant actors for planning and implementing evaluations. Collaboration can be strengthened with formal agreements between evaluation stakeholders, including collaboration with thematic actors (e.g. environmental authorities) given there are clear working procedures in place.

Data management

In the future... better coordination with the PA, environmental and other data providers, including national and regional statistical units (cooperation agreements) can help define the timeline and type of data needed. Working with research institutions is suggested for data collection and quality check. Finally, collecting data in applications from the beginning may ensure the provision of the required data directly from beneficiaries.

Evaluation activities and topics

In the future... formative evaluations at the beginning of the implementation period can evaluate the delivery mechanisms. Results (of the programme and of specific measures) can be assessed during implementation, and at a later stage. Overall, a participatory approach for the identification of evaluation needs is recommended. A review of past evaluations can help to identify knowledge gaps that should be addressed in future evaluations.

Communication

In the future... awareness raising of the benefits of evaluations can be achieved through additional better targeted communication for example through, networking, knowledge exchange through peer learning events, use of new media (including social media), showcasing practical examples and use of LAGs as an information ‘multiplier’. NRNs can have an important role in spreading communications especially regarding evaluations to different typologies of stakeholders.
The 18th Good Practice Workshop: 'New tools for monitoring and evaluation: insights from the Evaluation Knowledge Bank'

The 18th Good Practice Workshop of the Evaluation Helpdesk, 'New tools for monitoring and evaluation: insights from the Evaluation Knowledge Bank', took place online on 20-21 October 2021. It brought together 127 participants from 21 different EU Member States, as well as participants from the UK and Serbia. These participants included RDP Managing Authorities, evaluators, European Commission representatives, researchers, National Rural Networks, and other evaluation stakeholders. The overall objective of the workshop was to build evaluation knowledge based on the innovative outputs of EU level research projects in relation to data management systems and tools.

This workshop specifically aimed at:
- exchanging and sharing experiences from existing outputs of EU level research projects/studies and data management practices that can be used for evaluations of the CAP;
- discussing specific issues that can facilitate or hamper the incorporation of identified (data collection, management and monitoring) outputs into evaluations at the Member State level;
- identifying needs for further support, principally for Managing Authorities (MAs), Paying Agencies (PAs) and evaluators, as well as, for data providers, in relation to using research project outputs for future CAP evaluations.
Outputs from a total of 10 EU level projects were presented (some including online demonstrations) during the two day workshop, covering the topics of local development, social innovation, digitalisation, interoperability, small farm performance and environmental performance. The presented outputs can serve the needs of CAP evaluation stakeholders by providing new indicators, new data and methodologies that may help answer evaluation questions or get inspiration for new ones, obtain data and information for existing or new indicators as well as offer insights and inspiration in relation to methodological approaches and tools.
Relevance of IMAJINE and MATILDE outputs for evaluations of CAP interventions in the field of local development

The provision of new indicators such as, ‘MAJINE composite indicator for local development’ and the ‘MATILDE indicators’ for capturing the social dimension of third country national’s participation to local life or the economic impacts of migration at the local level, may help connect programme outcomes to drivers of geographic inequalities at the local scale.

These new indicators can also help measure the contribution of CAP interventions to local development and to employment and social inclusion, including for specific target groups that may represent an important share of the rural populations in the future, such as migrants.

The IMAJINE local level database offers a proxy for income, i.e. useful for calculating the rural GDP indicator of the CAP, but goes also beyond that to collect more data at the local level to analyse the spatial distribution of inequality. This is relevant for LAG’s local development strategies, since it is important to have local level data in order to develop local-based policies and then evaluate them using this data.

The MATILDE Toolbox provides a list of tools (quantitative and qualitative mix methods) for the assessment of the impacts of migration, especially in rural remote mountainous regions.

Relevance of SALSA outputs for evaluations of CAP interventions targeting small farms

Small farms and small farm businesses constitute a significant source of sustainable food production within many regional food systems. They also contribute significantly to the diversity of food systems, and hence their resilience and stability. For these reasons, the SALSA ‘Methodology for mapping the distribution of small farms in Europe’ output can help one to understand the intervention logic of CAP interventions related to farm resilience and food sustainability.

SALSA is valuable for its capacity to make small farms visible, which are often not in official statistics. The crop area and crop production estimation of small farms and the crop type maps provide additional, remote sensing and accurate data which complements FADN. Crop types, area extent or yield estimates are examples of data for small farms that may be used for CAP indicators related to farm productivity.

The ‘methodology for quantification of the contribution of small farms to local food systems and food and nutritional security’ output offers a mixed approach combining official statistics, interviews and focus groups and various data/information sources that can help assess the effectiveness of interventions in small farms for contributing to food security.
The SIMRA database of social innovations in marginalised rural areas can help answer questions on how, why and under what circumstances has social innovation increased participation or increased sales or supported competitiveness.

It is also an example of how to identify social innovation and what data to collect or what types of information to seek.

Both the SIMRA and RurAction methodologies for evaluating social innovation in rural areas and their impacts can help answer evaluation questions directly or indirectly related to local development (e.g. ‘how has a social innovation responds to societal challenges?’ or ‘how does it engage civil society?’).

Social innovation can cross different policy areas and the project outputs stress the importance of recognising social innovation, raising awareness, and making it measurable. The methodologies offered by the EU level projects can help evaluators assess how social innovation contributes to macro targets, such as the Green Deal targets, or at a micro level, what are the impacts of individual social innovation projects/interventions.

The methodological approaches created by SIMRA/RurAction projects can serve as a benchmark for evaluations of social innovation and what is delivered. However, a working definition of social innovation is necessary before applying any of these approaches.
The ‘Inventory of digital tools’ output is a collection of around 700 digital tools (software applications, adverse sensors, etc.) that can be used in agriculture, forestry and rural areas. The inventory can raise awareness on technological innovations, what they are, how many, where and if they are supported by policy. It also offers additional information on the use of ICTs in rural areas. To better link these digital tools to evaluation, the project coordinators will classify them according to their relevance for evaluation. For instance, there are tools that can offer data on irrigation, air quality monitoring and tourism.

DESIRA offers a quantitative (econometric) model that measures the impact of broadband access on economic growth. The novelty is doing so at regional level, because previously it was only achievable at the national level. In this way, it opens a new door to impact assessment at NUTS 3 level where many interventions are implemented. It can help assess impacts of interventions that aim to digitalise rural areas or measure the Farm to Fork objective ‘to accelerate the roll-out of fast broadband internet in rural areas to achieve the objective of 100% access by 2025’.

The DEMETER ‘Agricultural Information Model’ (AIM) output expands interoperability of information among, but not restricted to, several data domains, including farm crop data, earth observation data, livestock data and traceability of products, meteorological and open spatial data including weather data, agricultural machinery data, data on farmers’ preferences including farmers’ needs related to cost optimisation and production issues, disease monitoring, yield analysis, animal welfare tracking and much more.

In this way, this output offers a vast amount of data to support impact and result indicators that are difficult to estimate. It can also support the calculation of new result and impact indicators, especially in relation to resilience of agriculture or to environmental sustainability and climate action.
Relevance of DIONE, MonVia and DiverImpacts outputs for CAP evaluations of environmental performance

The DIONE maps of crop-types and of non-productive EFAs offer data on crop type maps and maps of permanent pastures, maps of non-productive EFAs (fallow land, hedges, trees, buffer strips, ponds, ditches, and other landscape features). Due to their resolution, the maps can provide a detailed spatial allocation of crops more finely and precisely than CORINE for all farmers in an area, including beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of various measures.

These crop type maps, together with the soil property maps offer very high resolution data, along with field sensors to produce low cost, accurate and timely data.

The DIONE Artificial Intelligence (AI) based 'Environmental Performance Tool' output provides data in the form of maps that integrate multiple monitoring sources. It also includes an ‘environmental scoreboard’, which is the consolidation of nine environmental indicators through AI methods that can be used to evaluate the environmental effects of the CAP at a regional scale.

The MonVia ‘trend monitoring on biodiversity in agricultural landscapes’ output offers data on the diversity of habitats and on functional groups (e.g. pollinators) and other organism groups relevant for agroecological systems. It can help assess the impacts of CAP interventions on pollination.

The MonVia ‘Question-based monitoring approaches at scale of agricultural landscape units’ output can be used to assess the effectiveness of agri-environmental measures on biodiversity. More specifically, the citizen-science based monitoring is a very innovative solution relying on a network of volunteers that can help sustain data collection for monitoring and evaluation in the long-term.

The DiverImpacts database of field experiments offers evaluators information on the possible impacts of diversification and where possible, quantifies the criteria of expected impacts which can be used for estimating various indicators. However, monitoring data on birds or any other kind of indicator, needs to be complemented with an analysis of farm practices to make it more relevant for evaluators.
Back to BASICS: How to assess the reduction of administrative burden

One part of the ex ante evaluation activities is to assess how the CAP strategic plan contributes to the simplification and reduction of administrative burden. Hence, ex ante evaluators will take an external, critical look at the specifications made by the programming body and give recommendations how to simplify and reduce the complexities of the eligibility rules, controls and penalty systems for beneficiaries.

Firstly, the ex ante evaluator would explore to what extent the provisions in the CAP Strategic Plan indicate a simplification through technology and data with the aim to fully exploit the use of technologies for administrative purposes (see Figure 1).

Secondly, the ex ante evaluator may also assess to what extent the simplicity of the design of the interventions in the CAP Strategic Plan have been respected, i.e.:

- Are operations well described in a way to allow one to assess their delivery against the objectives?
- Have simplifications and audit recommendations on previously existing interventions been considered in the design?
- Is the number of interventions in total adequate and not triggering unnecessary complexities for implementation and monitoring?
- Are eligibility conditions adequate, well justified, non-contradictory and easy to implement in view of achieving the objectives of the interventions?
- Are the interventions consistent and non-contradicting between each other?

Ex ante evaluators will take an external, critical look at the specifications made by the programming body and give recommendations how to simplify and reduce the complexities

- Are the support instruments clear and understandable for beneficiaries and is the relevant information easily accessible for potential applications?
- Are evaluations and conclusions from past experiences used when designing similar types of interventions?
- Are simplified cost options sufficiently used to bring simplification and the decrease of administrative burden?

Moreover, the ex ante evaluators may also explore to what extent the CAP Strategic Plans provide information on how farm advisory services, research and rural networks work together to support a simpler implementation of the CAP.
To what extent do the provisions in the CAP Strategic Plan indicate a simplification through technology and data?

- Is the Geospatial Aid Application (GSAA) sufficiently used to support beneficiaries in avoiding errors in declarations and to reduce the time needed by paying agencies for the necessary checks?

- Are Sentinel and other remote inspection and monitoring tools used or envisaged to possibly reduce the need for physical on-the-spot-checks of farmers (e.g. with geotagged photos)?

- Is integrated farm technology encouraged through transmitting monitoring and control data collected by the Paying Agencies back to farmers to enable its use in the context of farm management solutions to create benefits for farmers (e.g. for precision farming)?

- Is the establishment of an alert system envisaged to notify farmers of deadlines and risks of non-compliances (e.g. on mowing deadlines)?

Read more on the ex ante evaluation tools here.
European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

The Evaluation Helpdesk works under the supervision of Unit C.4 (Monitoring and Evaluation) of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development.

The contents of this newsletter do not necessarily express the official views of the European Commission.

European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

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UPCOMING AND PAST EVENTS CALENDAR

Please note, due to the current COVID-19 situation many events are being cancelled or postponed. Therefore, this list is only indicative, and we encourage you to check on the respective websites of the events you are interested in attending to see the current status of the event.

- Online - 20-21 October 2021 - 18th Good Practice Workshop. Read more >>>
- Online - 25 May 2021 - 17th Rural Networks Steering Group. Read more >>>
- Online - TBD 2021 - 26th Expert Group for Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP. Read more >>>
- Online - December 2021 - 8th Rural Networks Assembly. Read more >>>

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