



Rural Evaluation NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EUROPEAN EVALUATION HELPDESK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

THE EVALUATION OF INNOVATION IN RDPs 2014-2020

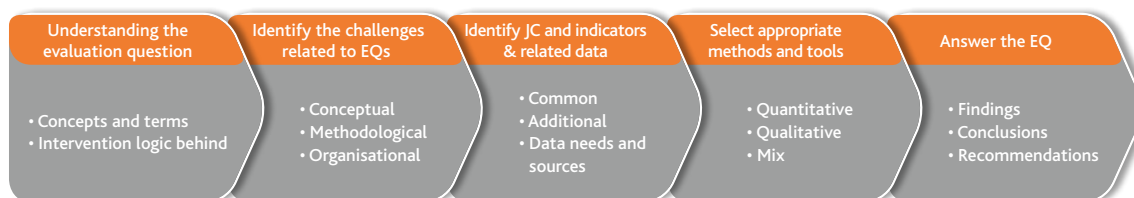
The Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) to be submitted in 2017 and 2019 must include answers to the evaluation questions related to innovation. In this respect, Managing Authorities may follow a general approach to evaluate innovation. To answer these evaluation questions three key aspects must be highlighted in order to conceptualise a general approach useful for Managing Authorities and evaluators for the evaluation of innovation in RDPs 2014-2020.

First, each RDP presents a unique approach towards innovation¹. The specific RDP's approach towards innovation, however, is not the only external force influencing the innovation process in rural areas. In fact, RDP intervention works within an established, dynamic, and open innovation system. Therefore, each specific RDP should identify

its "innovation potential", which is the result of the interaction between the RDP's instruments, resources and governance, and the innovation system surrounding them.

Second, the evaluation of innovation is part of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES) for >

Process for building understanding and answering EQs



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rural development, which provides a common set of elements, such as: common evaluation objectives, questions, judgment criteria, and indicators, as well as reporting requirements and procedures to facilitate the evaluation of innovation as well as to ensure the comparability of evaluation findings.

Apart from the provision of the common evaluation elements, the CMES also provides space for RDP stakeholders to design additional and programme specific evaluation elements in cases where the common ones are not sufficient to conduct the evaluation. The design and use of these programme specific elements (e.g. evaluation questions, judgment criteria and indicators) can facilitate a better assessment and cover further specific evaluation needs of RDP stakeholders (Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, and beneficiaries).

Third, the evaluation stakeholders should agree on the approach to conduct the evaluation of innovation and how they will answer the common evaluation questions and additional programme specific evaluation questions. In the discussion, the stakeholders should agree on the common understanding of all terms used in the evaluation questions, clarify conceptual and methodological challenges linked to the evaluation of innovation, define the judgment criteria and indicators to be used in developing the answers, and propose the evaluation methods and techniques, which can be seen in the figure on page 1. This three-step approach can help to simplify and organise all the activities and tasks that need to be considered when evaluating innovation in RDPs 2014 - 2020. >

Guidelines on the evaluation of innovation in RDPs 2014 - 2020

The Evaluation Helpdesk's 4th Thematic Working Group is currently drafting technical guidelines for supporting Managing Authorities and Evaluators in the evaluation of Innovation in RDPs 2014-2020. The Guidelines will provide further technical assistance on the three-step approach described and how to address evaluation challenges. The Guidelines will be published in the second half of 2017.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

about the common evaluation elements for innovation in the legal framework see [Issue # 6 of the Rural Evaluation NEWS.](#)

1. Article 8, point 1 (c) (v) of the Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013





What should Managing Authorities and evaluators keep in mind when evaluating innovation in RDPs 2014-2020?

The Evaluation Helpdesk posed this question to Ms. Inge Van Oost, from the European Commission – DG AGRI, Unit B.2 (Research and Innovation). Inge is one of the leading experts on the “interactive approach to innovation” in RDPs 2014-2020, which is promoted by the European Innovation Partnership - Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP – AGRI).

'Enlightenment comes when views collide!'

'Interactive innovation aims at speeding up innovation and generating higher impact from innovation projects under the motto “ideas, put into practice, with success”. It views innovation as the result of applying the right innovation policy focusing on interaction and exchanges among actors with complementary types of knowledge. Enlightenment comes when views collide! Innovation support services can help to connect these actors to work together in innovation projects and as such incentivise “stakeholders” to become “actors”' Inge explains. 'This “co-creation” supports the practical implementation of the new solutions a lot because it generates co-ownership for the solutions created together and motivates all parties' Inge continues. In practice, the EIP-AGRI's strategy combines several aspects, foremost among them is linking the regional or national Operational Groups with Horizon 2020 multi-actor projects and thematic networks which allow actors in several Member States

to work together. The EIP-AGRI also aims at providing innovation support services through advisory, cooperation, networking and NRN activities; and sharing innovative solutions to specific problems through an EU repository of contacts and practice abstracts. 'The interactive approach, however, is not always fully taken up at the level of RDPs, and the NRNs are only beginning to organise linkages between the local, regional, national and European levels' Inge points out. For example, during the Sounding Board meeting of the Thematic Working Group on the 'Evaluation of Innovation in RPDs 2014-2020', which took place in Brussels on 22 March 2017, participants highlighted how some RDPs support advisory services, knowledge transfer, and cooperation measures which are only delivered in a linear, top-down style (i.e. knowledge is “transferred” from consultants to farmers), thereby missing the two-way combination of knowledge. In other cases, RDP Managing Authorities promote partner search for innovation projects, and organise intermediation and networking for this specific set of measures. Therefore, when evaluating the contributions of RDP measures 1 and 2 towards fostering innovation in rural areas, it is important to distinguish between the provision of traditional linear advisory services providing 'knowledge transfer' and complementing this with the new interactive approach for advisory services supporting 'knowledge exchange' (e.g. supporting innovation through brokering and facilitation). Inge concludes, 'This distinction is important, but relatively new to some Member States and regions. Managing Authorities or Paying Agencies can help evaluators to collect basic information on the type and quality of advisory services, so that evaluators are in a position to make recommendations for improvements where useful'. (Read more about EIP-AGRI on page 4) ■



EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Bradford Rohmer presented an evaluation study of the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) conducted in 2016 by Coffey International Development at the 11th Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP. This study identified the strengths and weaknesses of EIP-AGRI, opportunities and threats, and made recommendations to improve it.

The EIP-AGRI was launched in 2012 to contribute to the European Union's strategy 'Europe 2020' for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The EIP-AGRI brings together innovation actors (e.g. farmers, advisers, researchers, businesses, NGOs) within RDPs in the form of Operational Groups. EIP Operational Groups are project-based and aim at developing solutions to practical problems, making them ready to be put into practice and facilitating the dissemination of project results to a wider audience. An EU-wide EIP network aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, expertise and good practices, to establish a dialogue between the farming and the research community and to connect Operational Groups.

Bradford began by explaining the context of the study, highlighting that since the EIP-AGRI had just begun to be implemented, final Operational Group (OG) project results were not yet available when the research took place. Therefore, the study focused on the approved implementation plans (RDPs) and related national legislation, first calls and the likely effectiveness and efficiency of activities expected to follow. The study team spoke to key actors across the Member States, including government officials, farmers' representatives, researchers and private sector businesses.

Highlights from the study

Overall, the study concluded that the EIP-AGRI is a flexible means that addresses the gap between practice and research in a way that is adapted to widely different circumstances and policy contexts. Farmers, according to the study, are more likely to take part in the innovation process through the EIP-AGRI as compared with other funding streams for innovation in the agricultural sector.

The EIP-AGRI, however, does signify a major change in how agricultural innovation and knowledge management is organised both at EU level and in most Member States. Unsurprisingly, this raises some challenges which need to be addressed to optimise its delivery and future success. The study made a number of recommendations for how to overcome these knowledge flow challenges, including:

- Ways to improve multiplication to maximise effectiveness;
- Simplify procedures and improve support;
- Incentivising multi-region OGs;
- Build an EU-wide agricultural knowledge and innovation system.

Overall, this presentation highlighted that the EIP-AGRI has got off to a good start, with Member States and regions enthusiastic about the EIP-AGRI (26 Member States programming a voluntary measure), helping farmers play a role in innovation and supporting co-creation to solve their practical problems. ■



Learn More?

Read the [full report](#) and see all conclusions and recommendations .
Read more about EIP-AGRI [here!](#)





PROGRESS CHECK!

WHAT EVALUATORS IN LATVIA ARE LEARNING FROM THE 2017 AIR

The Evaluation Helpdesk asked the evaluator Elita Benga, and her team at AREI Latvia about their progress and experiences with the evaluations in the context of the AIR submitted in 2017.

1. Why is it important to assess already in 2017 the achievements of the RDP?

The assessment in 2017 is useful in order to better adapt the programme for the future. Moreover, it allows one to take a moment and mark the differences between the previous ex post evaluation and the requirements in the new period in terms of the structuring of the interventions by aggregate focus areas (FA) instead of isolated measures and by the necessity to evaluate secondary interventions. Another benefit is the opportunity to transition from theory to practice in the assessment of the implementation of RDP 2014-2020 (directly dealing with data, amendments to the programme or regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, etc.). This assessment is akin to a final rehearsal before the assessment of 2019.

2. Which focus areas of the AIR submitted in 2017 could you effectively quantify in terms of results and programme achievements?

For example, FA 2A¹ could be effectively quantified in terms of primary contributions to the measure. As for secondary contributions, the results obtained are only indicative due to the small size of the samples for beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

3. In which way has the evaluation carried out in 2017 been useful for your MA?

As most of the indicators for the evaluation are available in the monitoring tables and are known to the MA, the conclusions arising from the evaluation of the complementary result indicators can be of special interest, as well as other additional indicators by using a comparison of the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Lastly, the results of the quantitative assessment, evaluating causes of problems and options to achieve goals, can be useful and interesting to the MA. Moreover, there are messages about the structure of the programme, which can already be of use (e.g. coherence between the goals of programme and priorities, and measures).

4. What kind of recommendations was your evaluation in 2017 able to generate?

We have recommended that in order to better achieve the goals it may be necessary to correct the rules of measures or financial plan

(e.g. division between different FA and measures). A main challenge in the evaluation of FAs has been to assess if the planned target value is realistically achievable with the use of funding as it is now.

Additionally, it should be strongly recommended to the MA to provide baseline data not on operations but on clients involved in these operations. The variables should be expressed not in terms of volumes but values.

It is important to make a review of the timing of the intervention periods, to understand where if possible inadequacies have arisen during setting up and amending the programme.

5. What has been the biggest challenge for you in terms of the assessment and quantification of RDP results in the context of the AIR 2017? What was the biggest help for you in addressing these challenges?

The biggest challenge was to obtain relevant data for 2016 (because data for 2015 are not valid for the assessment of results). In addressing this challenge, we found two solutions:

- 1) conducted the survey of both participants and non-participants of the programme;
- 2) obtained data of about 250 farms from the agricultural advisory centre who prepares the annual reports for these farms.

Additionally, we have had a challenge both understanding and collecting the data required for the evaluation of secondary impacts.

Overall, however, the biggest help for addressing all of these challenges has been good cooperation with the MA, PA, NRN as well as the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) and FADN.

6. How would you better structure the assessment of the AIR submitted in 2017?

There would be more benefits if it would be possible to have the evaluation separately from the annual report, after the annual report is finished, having fully analysed the information found in the AIR and having received the data for 2016 from all public and PA databases, in order to fully take into account the trends in the approval of projects for the first half of 2017. ■

1. Improving the economic performance of all farms and facilitating farm restructuring and modernisation, notably with a view to increasing market participation and orientation as well as agricultural diversification





FARM LEVEL INDICATORS FOR NEW TOPICS IN POLICY EVALUATION

The FLINT project (Farm Level Indicators for New Topics in policy evaluation) is an FP7-project, which recently presented their findings at the 11th Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP, which met in Brussels on 10 May 2017 and was attended by representatives from the Member States and the European Commission.

Changing policies and information needs

The principal objectives of evaluations are to improve decision-making, resource allocation and accountability¹. As such, policy evaluations can help policy makers in the formulation and reorientation of policies. The evaluation of rural development policies is particularly challenging because of the broad set of objectives (e.g. innovation, sustainability, risk management, viability) and limitations

in the available information on these aspects. Traditional agricultural statistics still have a strong focus on structure, productivity and income and do not satisfy the growing needs for data on the sustainability performance of agriculture.

FLINT

The FLINT project has investigated the feasibility of collecting data on the sustainability performance of farms². The project has defined a list of relevant sustainability themes based on (emerging) policy needs and a literature review on initiatives to measure sustainability. 33 sustainability themes were identified (see figure), which have been translated into a list of data items to be collected at farm level. These data items were collected in connection to the normal data collection for the EU Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN).

List of indicators in the FLINT project

ENVIRONMENTAL	E1: Greening	E2: Ecological focus areas	E3: Semi-natural areas
	E4: Pesticide usage	E5: Nutrient balance	E6: Soil organic matter
	E7: Indirect energy use	E8: Direct energy usage	E9: On-farm renewable energy production
	E10: Nitrate leaching	E11: Soil erosion	E12: Use of legumes
	E13: GHG emission per ha	E14: GHG calculation	E15: Carbon sequestering land uses
	E16: Water usage, storage	E17: Irrigation practices	
ECONOMIC, INNOVATIVE	EI1: Innovation	EI2: Producing under label	EI3: Market outlet
	EI4: Farm duration	EI5: Efficiency field parcel	EI6: Modernization
	EI7: Insurance	EI8: Marketing contracts	EI9: Risk exposure
SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY	S1: Advisory service	S2: Education and training	S3: Ownership management
	S4: Social engagement	S5: Working conditions	S6: Quality of life
	S7: Social diversification		

Source: FLINT 2017



The defined data items were collected in 9 Member States (Ireland, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Finland, Hungary, Greece, Spain and France) on 1,100 farms of different farm types³.

Collection of sustainability data is feasible

Although some problems occurred, mainly due to the pilot project and first-year character of FLINT, experiences of data collectors and farmers were positive in terms of the collection of data on the sustainability performance at farm level. A crucial factor discovered was the relationship between the farmer and the FADN data collectors. Building trust is an important aspect in the willingness of farmers to share their data.

Value of sustainability data for policy analysis

The project has illuminated through examples how policy analysis can benefit from additional data on the sustainability performance of farms, by:

1. filling gaps in terms of research methodology (i.e. social performance, economic viability);
2. providing better understanding of the sources of sustainability performance (i.e. impact of land fragmentation, advisory services, age of assets);
3. contributing additional insights into challenges faced by farmers (i.e. trade-offs between environmental and economic performance); and
4. providing more precise recommendations for policy makers (i.e. effect of CAP subsidies on technical efficiency).

A crucial observation is that although the environment and other public values are the objectives of the policy, governments target a change in farm management. Therefore, policy analysis requires an integrated data set at farm level to understand choices made by farmers, including trade-offs between economic and (sometimes contradicting) environmental and social objectives.

Recommendations

The FLINT project has investigated options to upscale the results of the project from 9 to 28 Member States to create a representative panel of farm-level sustainability data⁶. The final recommendation is to collect sustainability data on a sub-sample of 15.000 farms in Europe, financed by additional resources or alternatively by a reduction of the current FADN sample. ■

Innovation and sustainability

One of the cases of the FLINT project is the state of innovation in European Agriculture⁴. Innovation is seen as one of the key drivers for competitive and sustainable agriculture. Innovation is influenced by numerous determinants. Due to a lack of data it has been very difficult to empirically evaluate the impact of innovation on the sustainability performance of farms. FLINT data allows for the analysis of the adoption of innovations, the characteristics that determine innovation (among other policy measures such as subsidies and advisory services) and the impact of innovations on the productivity and sustainability performance of farms. Research has focused on the adoption of innovations and show that farm type and farm size are likely to be the main determinants of process and organisational innovations⁵. Subsidies appear to have a positive effect on the adoption of process innovations. Farmer age and advisory contacts also have an impact. If data collection would be continued the evaluation of the impact of innovation on the sustainability performance would become feasible.

**WANT TO
LEARN MORE?**

Visit the FLINT project [website!](#)

1. Terluin and Roza, 2010
2. Poppe et al., 2016
3. Vrolijk et al., 2016
4. Van der Meulen et al., 2016
5. Van der Meulen et al., 2016
6. Poppe and Vrolijk, 2017

EVALUATIONWORKS! 2017: FOLLOW-UP OF THE AIR 2017

The Evaluation Helpdesk is pleased to announce the new module for the yearly capacity building events: **'Follow-up of the AIR 2017: What are the stakeholder's main lessons learnt from answering the CEQs (methods, data and coordination needs).'**

The 2017 enhanced Annual Implementation Report (AIR), is the first major milestone for the reporting and evaluation of RDPs for the 2014 – 2020 programming period. The 2017 AIRs, which will be submitted by the Member States by 30 June 2017, will provide the first snapshots of the implementation of RDPs. The 2017 AIR will further act as a window into what worked and did not work, concerning the monitoring and evaluation system and what data, methods, and coordination needs will need to be addressed to provide for more robust results in subsequent AIRs.

The Helpdesk's EvaluationWORKS! 2017 capacity building events will provide a forum for the exchange of experiences on the AIR 2017 and be conducted in the autumn of 2017. Participants of the capacity building events will have the opportunity to have structured discussions with evaluation stakeholders in which they

can draw from their individual experiences from the 2017 AIR to exchange on what worked well and what potentially needs to be improved at the RDP level.

These events will be carried out in the local languages across the Member States by the Helpdesk's network of Geographic Experts and will be customised to meet the needs and specificities of each Member State. The Helpdesk's Geographic Experts will further provide the conclusions of the analysis of the AIR 2017 to help participants understand not only their own situation, but also trends across the Member States. ■

The Geographic Experts act as a relay of the Evaluation Helpdesk in the Member States. They are in direct contact with relevant stakeholders in the Member States and facilitate a two-way flow of information between Member State and EU levels.



EVALUATING INNOVATION IN SWEDEN: A CONVERSATION WITH THE MANAGING AUTHORITY LENA LIND

In Sweden, innovation is perceived as an important aspect of rural development. Rural areas have long since had a strong entrepreneurial tradition of innovation, especially in rural businesses, where it is believed to be essential for the future to increase competitiveness, while at the same time mitigating adverse effects on the environment and climate change. Choosing which innovative projects are selected and how they are evaluated is a multistep process, which involves many different government and non-governmental bodies. The Evaluation Helpdesk sat down with Lena Lind, the Managing Authority, from Sweden to discuss this intricate process and what the importance of innovation is in the Rural Development Programme (RDP) and how it will be evaluated.



Lena Lind

The evaluation of innovation in Sweden

The evaluation design developed in Sweden serves to complement the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES). The Board of Agriculture and its Evaluation Secretariat has planned for a qualitative and a quantitative evaluation of innovation. Lena explains, 'The Board of Agriculture and its Evaluation Secretariat has drafted a two-part plan for the evaluation of innovation, one part quantitative and the other part qualitative, and at the same time they did a larger overall plan on how innovation at large could be evaluated in this programming period'. Lena continues,

'the quantitative study will allow us to grasp not only the ongoing perspective of the programme, but also the long-term effects in a more quantitative way. They also conducted a baseline study at an early point in order to be able to grasp the effects of the RDP'. 'The Evaluation Secretariat has an advisory committee connected to it, which consists of researchers from different universities and institutes and serves to keep their work objective and on scientific grounds' informs Lena. Nonetheless, 'we try to have an inclusive approach...The evaluator doing the on-going evaluation is quite free to do what they think they need to do to have a good evaluation, so we expect that they will go out and talk to key stakeholders as well to get their input on how the measure is working' postulates Lena. Lena goes on to underline that, 'One of the big things for us is that we want to evaluate the effect of innovation in rural areas in the agricultural sector. We see innovation as such, as a tool that will bring new ideas and bring progress into the areas we are trying to help'. The primary focus of these evaluations is to assess if the RDP stimulates innovation.

What is Innovation?

In Sweden, it all begins with the Managing Authority (the Board of Agriculture) who is responsible for the selection and evaluation of innovation projects. The Board of Agriculture has an Evaluation Secretariat responsible for evaluation issues related to the RDP. No formal definition of innovation is made in the Swedish RDP and innovation is defined implicitly through the selection criteria for innovation projects (cooperation measures, EIP-AGRI) and other measures where innovation is an indirect objective. With that said, innovation is an important aspect in almost all measures in the Swedish RDP, making innovation an integral part of their

'We see innovation as such, as a tool that will bring new ideas and bring progress into the areas we are trying to help.'

selection criteria to a greater or lesser extent depending on the characteristics of the measure. 'This broad definition is to not limit project proposals' states Lena. Since there is no formal definition, the Managing Authority is supported in this process by an advisory committee made up of experts from the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), who provide their guidance on the assessment and selection of the proposed innovation projects based on their understanding of innovation (a process, product or service that brings value to the user).



Send your
questions to:

info@ruralevaluation.eu





Part I: Quantitative evaluation of innovation

The quantitative evaluation is focused on the effects of innovation in rural areas and will be completed by a private consultant. It will focus on the following evaluation questions:

- Did the RDP (generally) contribute to increase activities in the innovation system among enterprises (e.g. farmers) in rural areas?
- Did the RDP (generally) contribute to the number of innovations in rural areas?
- Did the measures, aimed at innovation, contribute to increase competitiveness among rural enterprises?
- Did the measures, aimed at innovation, contribute to bettering the environment?

The quantitative part has been split into three working steps:

1. The baseline assessment - currently in the final stages of data analysis is expected to be completed by the end of 2017. This baseline is made up of 2000 respondents (rural entrepreneurs), who were asked questions about the introduction of new products/services/processes, cooperation with other businesses, received financial support, etc. Respondents also answered questions on whether they see obstacles for innovations and whether they seek support for that. A similar methodology was used to that of the Community Innovation Survey (CIS), however, with stratified selections from rural areas and the agricultural sector included. This stage of the evaluation is viewed as being very important to optimise future support. In the future, it will also allow for the matching of responses to micro data, thus allowing for the possibility to control for several other characteristics (e.g. human capital and the

impact of regional knowledge spill overs). The EIP-AGRI was not involved at this stage.

2. Innovation activity and collaboration and the role of RDP - monitoring - uses a similar methodology as in step 1, but focuses on those firms, which have been included in RDP innovation support (EIP-AGRI and horizontal priorities). Survey data will be collected from RDP beneficiaries and the control group not receiving support. Additional data will be collected from FADN and national statistics.
3. Innovation activity and collaboration in rural areas – post analysis (2023), this step will use the same data as in steps 1 and 2 and will focus on visualising the scale of innovation activities in rural areas with the potential to make more detailed socio-economic, regional and business analyses.

Part II: Qualitative evaluation of innovation in Sweden

The qualitative analysis will be conducted by Umeå University and will focus on the implementation process of EIP – AGRI, exploring the following questions:

- Is EIP-AGRI designed and implemented so that it can be expected to contribute to relevant innovations?
- Is EIP-AGRI designed and implemented so that it can be expected to contribute to a.) competitiveness and b.) the environment
- Do relationships with other policies (other parts of the RDP, Horizon 2020, and other ESIF) increase the overall performance?

The qualitative evaluation will be on-going from 2016-2022 and the Evaluation Secretariat will serve as the link between researchers and implementing organisations.





Continuous learning from evaluation

'What is vital is that the evaluations are on-going and that we make an effort to really understand the innovative behaviours among our farmers and other rural enterprises' states Lena. 'Our expectations are that we will be able to make small adjustments to the measures, so that they will be better programmed and that we will get the effects we are looking for' emphasises Lena. In addition to supporting incremental changes to programme implementation during the programming period, these evaluations will also serve as an important information source for the next programming period. 'Foremost it is important, because now we are starting to think about the next programming period, it is quite a short time between 2019 and 2020 and it is important that some results can come as quick as possible, so that we have something when we start negotiations with the European Commission about the next programming period's regulations' states Lena.

Takeaways from the Swedish experience

'You can never start too early!' Lena exclaims. 'You must have a clear baseline to measure innovation from, we are very pleased that the

Evaluation Secretariat has completed this baseline so that we have something to build on and so we can see progress. Even with a clear baseline, it can be very difficult to isolate the effects of a specific rural development programme or a certain measure. What we have learned is that instead of doing that, you must look at the actual progress taking place on the ground... The biggest benefits should be for the stakeholders, we want the results out there in the rural areas, we want their agricultural competitiveness to increase' advocates Lena. She continues, 'Increased communication between the innovation support and the advisory committee is recommended, especially related to what should be included in the project plan related to market entrance'. Lastly, Lena recommends, 'Adding one more selection criteria to enhance the importance of the "innovativeness" of the product/process/service supported by the RDP measure, can help to foster greater innovation overall'. ■



THE ROLE OF THE NRNs IN THE EVALUATION OF INNOVATION

National Rural Networks (NRNs) are unique bodies, which serve as dynamic hubs for the transfer of information, knowledge and practices between different rural development stakeholders at different levels of governance. Innovation is often described as a new idea that proves successful in practice. Innovation may be technological, but also non-technological, organisational or social. Such a new idea turns into an innovation only if it is widely adopted and proves its usefulness in practice. The NRN's position in rural development policy makes them ideal purveyors for the promotion, networking, and development of innovation in the Member States. Simona Cristiano is a researcher at CREA in Italy. The Evaluation Helpdesk spoke with Simona about how NRNs can help facilitate innovation and its evaluation, and what the Italian NRN is doing specifically to encourage innovation in Italy.

A new focus of evaluations

Evaluating innovation is a new matter for evaluators in the current programming period, especially in terms of assessing cooperation and interactive innovation. 'In the past programming period, they [evaluators] used to assess innovation as one of the specificities of the LEADER approach, and this was already a challenge....however, evaluating measure 121¹ was simple in comparison...but evaluating the cooperation in terms of interactive innovation, especially the interactions between the different actors, and the types of innovations in terms of problems and opportunities addressed in farms, is a different issue. Interactive innovation needs to be evaluated as a process and for the effects on farms and on the sectors, and evaluators need time and methods to capture these new interactions.' comments Simona. 'There is a greater understanding on the concept of interactive innovation among MAs then among evaluators, at this time. In Italy for example, the evaluation process has not yet started, so evaluators have not talked with the MAs yet on the specific matter of innovation, it was announced by the European Commission in 2012, and it was primarily the MAs and the administrators who were involved in this new wave of innovation. The concept is therefore already more mature in the RDP management than evaluation' highlights Simona.



Simona Cristiano

Knowledge dissemination and cooperation building

Bringing stakeholders together to exchange on this new topic is pivotal, especially for evaluators and is essential for achieving robust evaluations. 'For this reason there should be support and capacity building on methodologies, but in addition to methodologies there needs to be an exchange, and meetings to make them [evaluators] understand the concept of innovation' accentuates Simona. 'In Italy for example, in the last programming period, the only methods for evaluating innovation were used in the evaluation of Axis 4, improving

the quality of life and LEADER. It takes time for them to invest and search for methods to evaluate innovation, so an exchange of knowledge is important' states Simona. 'As the NRN we are supporting the MAs in regional animation of Operational Groups, capacity building and trainings...We help to teach about the concept of interactive innovation in the territories. Even if the sensibility of farmers and rural actors about innovation is much more than before, it is difficult to build a common understanding on the differences between more traditional ideas of innovation and innovation through cooperation measures, as well as on the value of doing it in an interactive way together with universities, advisory services and so on' comments Simona.



NRN tool for establishing the monitoring and evaluation system for Operational Groups:

This tool identifies a minimum set of information and useful activities connected to the monitoring and evaluation of Operational Groups, regarding projects, the establishment and composition of the partnership, and the dissemination of results. Read more [here \(Italian\)](#).



Eagerly Simona continues, 'we intend to conduct pilot workshops on living labs in different territories, together with the selected Operational Groups. The intention is to develop a model of interaction to make them understand how to interact during the programming period...On the NRN website, we upload slides which explain how to set up and develop the project idea and how to call for the relevant partners'.

Lastly, the Italian NRN is working on the synthesis of the RDPs 2007-2013 ex post evaluations. Simona states, 'In this exercise, we want to deepen our knowledge of measure 124², to understand how projects were developed and classify them to gain further insights. A database has already been established on the internet of all the projects realised in Italy

under measure 124'. 'What we want to do is to work together with other rural stakeholders to disseminate the results of these measures to others in order to compare knowledge among the different regions' notes Simona.

Online tools to support the monitoring and evaluation of innovation


The Italian NRN has been active in supporting the monitoring and evaluation of the EIP-AGRI Operational Groups. 'We built a tool for the MAs, which contains a document encompassing information for the monitoring and evaluation of Operational Groups. The tool is non-binding and proposes guidelines for the MAs to help them set up their information systems related to the activities and results of the Operational Group. We hope this tool can enable evaluators to gather relevant information for the evaluation of innovation in the Italian RDPs 2014-2020' asserts Simona.

The Italian NRN has also been tasked with collecting all the data on Operational Groups in an internet portal, which would facilitate the aggregation of data at the national level. 'This monitoring data is really important because the evaluators come after, and need this data for the evaluations...Having good monitoring data from the beginning is very important for MAs and evaluators' stresses Simona. Currently, the NRN is working on using FADN data for the monitoring and evaluation of the effects at the farm level. 'The idea is to cover all the farm beneficiaries of RDP measure 16³ and who are part of Operational Groups. This has been supported by the MAs of different regional RDPs and we hope to extend the implementation of this information system across all the Italian RDPs' states Simona.

Spreading knowledge for better evaluations

Strengthening understanding of innovation and its evaluation is critical to be able to realise better evaluation results. This can be achieved through a variety of means including capacity building workshops, networking events, aggregating data, and building valuable databases to support future evaluations. In this regard, there is no better actor positioned at the national and local levels than the NRN to provide the essential knowledge and links between all rural development stakeholders to foster innovation and its evaluation. ■

1. Measure 121 – Modernisation of agricultural holdings
2. Measure 124 – Cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies in the agricultural and food sector
3. Measure 16 – Co-operation



BACK TO BASICS : THE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR INNOVATION

There are two EU funding instruments specifically supporting innovation in agriculture and forestry. One is the rural development policy, which is one of the two CAP Pillars and the other is Horizon 2020¹, the EU framework programme for research and innovation, which implements the flagship initiative the 'Innovation Union'².

The following figure depicts the overarching policy framework for innovation. As seen in the figure under the new programme design principles in 2014-2020 there is a great amount of flexibility in the use and combination of measures to better address specific territorial and innovation needs and fully exploit their synergetic effects. The measures are no longer rigidly attributed to specific 'axes', but can be programmed in relation to the priorities and focus areas in a flexible manner, based on their expected contribution to those priorities and focus areas³.

All RDP measures and their specific combinations under the focus areas therefore have the potential to foster innovation through the needs they aim to address, the objectives, the budget allocation, the targeting and selection criteria and the implementation mechanisms.

Networking in the context of rural development policy also plays an important role for fostering innovation as depicted in the figure:

- The EIP network, which is a new network facility in the 2014-2020 period, aims to better integrate rural development policy and research policy by bringing science and practice together. As seen in the figure the EIP network enables

the networking of all stakeholders related to innovation including operational groups, advisory services, researchers, farmers, and other stakeholders in the knowledge exchange process⁴.

- National Rural Networks (NRNs) aim inter alia to foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas. NRNs provide, among other things, opportunities for the exchange of information and good practices on innovation among innovation stakeholders (RDP beneficiaries, farmers, foresters and LAGs) as well as being a valuable link between these stakeholders and Operational Groups. ■



**SEE FIGURE ON
THE NEXT PAGE!**

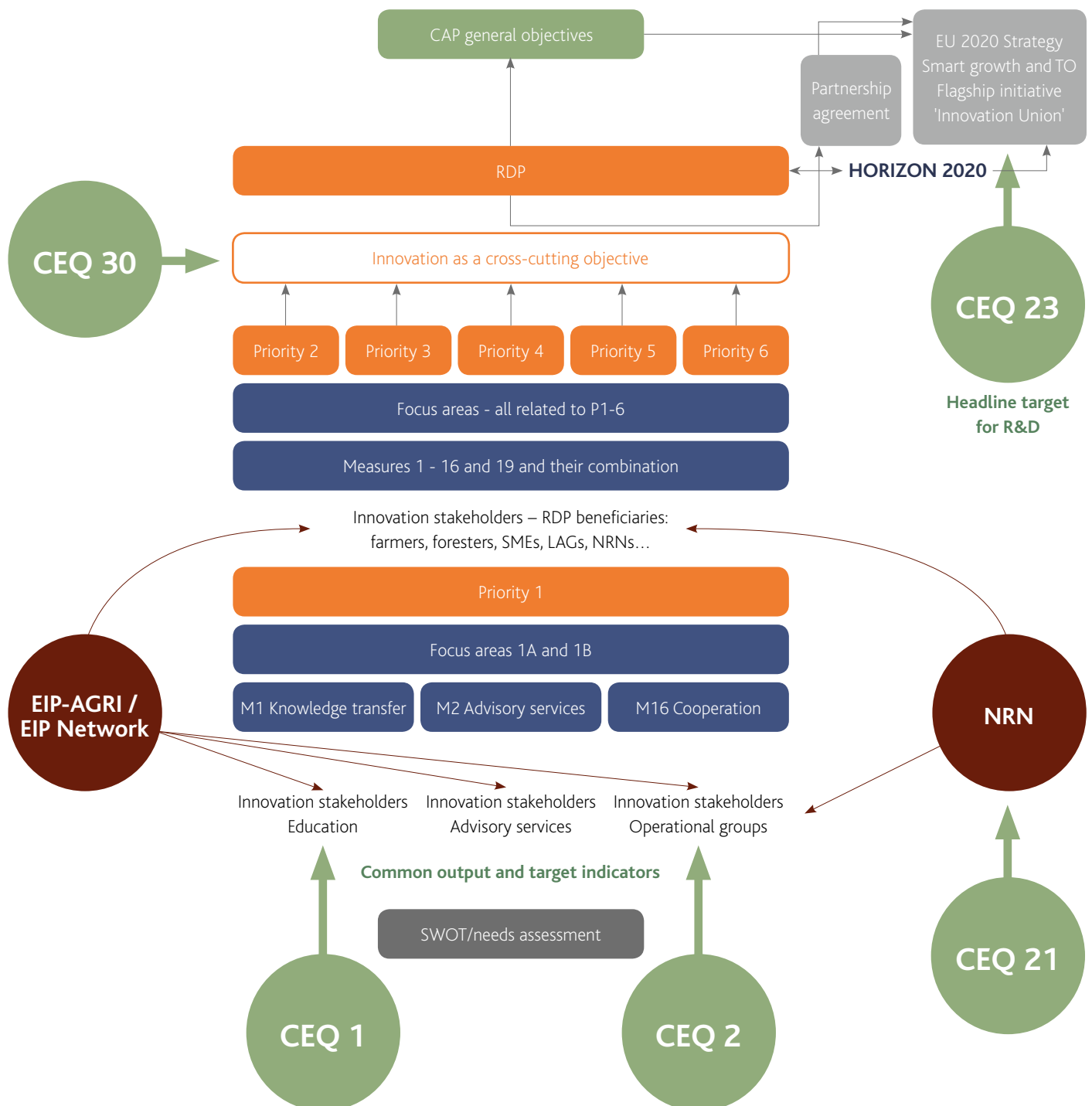
1. Horizon2020 is the biggest EU research and innovation programme aiming to couple research and innovation in all sectors, including agriculture and forestry, as a mean to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and jobs. Many other EU policies that address innovation and skills development can also contribute to agricultural research and innovation (Cohesion Policy, COSME, ERASMUS, LIFE+).

2. It aims to address major societal challenges such as climate change and resource efficiency and strengthen links in the innovation chain (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/flagship-initiatives/index_en.htm)

3. DG AGRI Guidelines for strategic programming for the period 2014-2020, Working paper, 2013 (http://www.reseaurural.fr/files/guidelines_for_strategic_programme_feader_2014_2020.pdf)

4. Article 54 (d) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013





CALENDAR - WHAT'S ON?

PAST EVENTS

- NL – 6 April 2017 - Measuring what matters in a 'post truth' society: [Read more >>>](#)
- IT – 20 April 2017 - XX Congress of the Italian Evaluation Society: [Read more >>>](#)

- ES – 27 April 2017 - 2nd Meeting of the Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group



- UK – 10-11 May 2017 - 2017 Annual Evaluation Conference: "The Use and Usability of Evaluation: Demonstrating and improving the usefulness of evaluation": [Read more >>>](#)

- BE – 10 May 2017 - 11th Meeting of the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the Common Agricultural Policy: [Read more >>>](#)



- 17 May 2017 – 7th Rural Network's Steering Group Meeting: [Read more >>>](#)



- LT – 18-19 May 2017 – 7th Biannual International Evaluation Conference "Evaluation of Innovation and Innovations in Evaluation": [Read more >>>](#)
- ES – 1-2 June 2017 - Capacity Building in Impact Evaluation: Counterfactual and Theory Based: [Read more >>>](#)
- BE – 8 June 2017 - 8th Subgroup on Innovation: [Read more >>>](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

- FI – 27-29 June 2017 - 8th NRNs' Meeting: [Read more >>>](#)
- LV – 19-20 September 2017- Good Practice Workshop on Annual Implementation Reports: [Read more >>>](#)
- TBC - Good Practice Workshop on National Rural Networks: [Read more >>>](#)
- BE – October 2017 - 9th Innovation Sub Group: [Read more >>>](#)
- BE – October 2017 - Rural Network's Steering Group Meeting
- BE – December 2017 - 4th Rural Network's Assembly

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.

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