

*15th meeting of the Expert Committee
on Evaluation of Rural Development
Programmes*

30 April 2013

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1. Introduction and adoption of the agenda

The Expert Committee on Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes (abbreviated to "Evaluation Expert Committee") met for the fifteenth time in the European Commission's premises in Brussels on 30 April 2013.

The meeting was chaired by Leo Maier (Head of Unit AGRI L.4), who welcomed participants and introduced the draft agenda. The draft agenda was adopted, and the topics addressed during the meeting followed the agreed agenda as summarized below.

2. Context indicators: presentation of the database

Zelie Peppiette, DG AGRI, Unit L4, presented an overview of the work carried out on the Common Context Indicators (CCI) since 20 March 2013, and provided a description of the documents circulated in relation to CCIs (analytical table, draft template, etc.). Margot Van Soetendael (Evaluation Helpdesk) gave an interactive demonstration entitled "Using the table of Common Context Indicators", and showed how to automatically extract data from the CCI database into the structured template. The work on the CCIs is considered to be complete and is ready to go forward for inclusion in the implementing acts.

Questions and answers:

The Member States (MS) raised the following questions.

SWOT and territorial analysis has already started with a different set of CIs.

Several MSs (e.g. DE, PL) pointed out that they had already started to carry out territorial analysis, SWOT analysis and needs assessment on the basis of a different set of CIs, and asked whether they are now expected to repeat their work with the final set of CCIs.

The EC explained that although many MSs had already started designing the next programme, the inclusion of the final set of CCIs should not lead to a duplication of work for the following reasons:

- *The final set of CCIs consists of very basic indicators which are commonly applied in a sound territorial analysis. It is therefore expected that the majority of CCI indicators have already been used in any previous analysis. Consequently, the values of CCIs included in the table provided by the EC should not interfere with the conclusions of the territorial analysis already carried out, but should serve to underpin them;*
- *In the event that a similar indicator based on a slightly different definition has been used, the EC expects that the territorial analysis built on this indicator will be very similar to analysis conducted on the basis of the CCI, and therefore inclusion of the CCI should not result in a need to change the conclusions drawn;*
- *Where an additional indicator has been used which adds valuable information to the territorial analysis, the indicator in question should be added as a programme-specific indicator;*
- *In case a CCI on the final list has not been used, MSs are asked to include the indicator in question in their indicator table and if necessary (i.e. if it fills a gap in data and description) to complete their territorial analysis.*

The EC reminded participants that programme development for the 2014-2020 period is an iterative process which should anticipate possibilities for changes and improvements. The inclusion of the final set of CCIs should therefore be considered as one building block in the continuous programme development process.

Updates of CCIs.

Several MSs (e.g. LU, AT, PL) highlighted a lack of clarity concerning the updates of CCIs. Specifically they asked;

- Whether there is a need to update a territorial analysis and SWOT analysis which has been mostly built on data from 2011 and 2012 when data from 2013 becomes available?
- How often does the table of CCIs have to be updated by the MS?
- Will the EC provide updates of the CCI table?

The EC confirmed that the baseline for the new programmes is 2013 but acknowledged that this data is not yet available. In a similar fashion to previous programming periods, the most recent available data should be used when developing a territorial analysis and programme strategy. When 2013 data does become available, an update of the RDPs (including their SWOT analysis, territorial analysis and strategy) is not required, but this data should be used as the baseline for evaluations. MSs are required to use updated CCI data, for their evaluation activities, bearing in mind particularly the requirements of the AIRs in 2017, 2019 and during the ex post evaluation. 2013 values for some CCIs will be needed to calculate some result indicator values. Good practice suggests keeping track of the methods used to calculate indicator values and the date of the updates in the structured template. The EC will provide updated information (on the same basis as that provided now, i.e. dependent on MS submissions to EUROSTAT, and in relation to the frequency of data collection) at certain points, particularly for 2013 data, the 2017 and 2019 AIRs and the ex post evaluation.

Definitions of rural and urban areas, and use of alternative definitions to the standard EU definition.

Italy pointed out that many Italian regions apply alternative definitions to the EU urban and rural definition when developing programme strategies. Portugal also explained that it uses data broken down to a smaller scale than the regional level to underpin their territorial analysis.

The EC replied that data based on alternative definitions to the EU rural and urban definitions (which is that included in the CCI database) should be included as programme-specific indicators, as is also the case when utilising data for specific zones or when applying scales smaller than regional. The definition used to establish rural areas is the one that should be used to underpin the territorial analysis.

Data gaps at the regional level.

Belgium Flanders pointed out that for some indicators the database provided by the EC presents national values instead of regional values (e.g. CCI 9 poverty rate), and asked how to deal with this. Other MSs, e.g. Portugal and Poland, expressed similar concerns about regional and national data.

The EC replied that for regional programmes regional data is in many cases available at regional level although not necessarily passed to the EC or Eurostat. When regional data is not available, the national value could be used, otherwise a proxy or a programme-specific indicator could be applied.

Reporting of programme-specific CIs.

Belgium Wallonia and Italy pointed out that currently no provision is foreseen for including programme-specific indicators in the structured template.

The EC replied that soon a technical solution will be proposed for the inclusion of programme-specific CIs in the structured template. The following Rural Development Committee will give the opportunity to discuss the proposed template, and the functioning of System for Fund Management in the European Community (SFC) for the new RDP.

Source of values included in the EC database of CCI.

Ireland asked if there were overlaps between the report “EU agriculture - Statistical and economic information – 2011” and the values provided in the EC CCI table.

The EC replied that the report in question reports on the indicators defined for the current period (see <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/statistics/agricultural/2011/>). For many indicators there is a complete overlap with the CCIs proposed for the new period. For some of these more recent values are available in the CCI database. The new CCIs are only available in the database and not in the aforementioned report.

**3. Context Indicators:
use of Proxies**

Enrique Nieto (Evaluation Helpdesk) presented the working document “Defining proxy indicators for Rural Development Programmes”, developed by the Evaluation Helpdesk in cooperation with Unit L.2 of DG AGRI. The document includes a tentative definition of a proxy indicator, some clarifications on their use, a tool to guide the identification of proxy indicators and an example of a proxy indicator.

Questions and answers:

The Member States (MSs) raised the following questions:

How long may proxies be maintained (ES)?

The EC outlined two possibilities:

- *Long-term use if the proxy replaces a CCI for which there is no requirement for regional data to be available and for which no regional data collection/calculation is foreseen.*
- *Short-term use where data should be provided by the MS but has not yet been provided. In this case, there is an obligation on the MS to supply the required data, and the CCI should be used once this data becomes available. However, in order to complete a comprehensive territorial analysis the EC can accept a proxy until the correct required data is supplied by the MS.*

What are reliable sources for proxies? Who decides if a proxy is valid (ES, IT)?

The EC replied that regional databases are valuable sources for proxies. The validity and quality of a proxy should be checked in the first instance by the ex ante evaluator and secondly by the EC during the approval procedure of the RDP. Geographic desks are supported by the horizontal units of DG AGRI for checking the proxies that MS propose. Building up a list of possible proxies could be considered as a further support for MS.

May proxies be qualitative (IT)?

The EC explained that proxies should always be quantitative. Ideally the proxy should have the same unit of measurement as the CCI. On the occasions that qualitative indicators provide useful information for territorial analysis they may be included in the set of programme-specific indicators.

There is a need for clarification on the HNV indicator; will there be a common indicator in the future (PL)?

The EC explained that HNV is a particular indicator for which the EC will not be able to provide data even at a national level. Instead, there is a common definition, set out in the indicator fiche, corresponding to the broadly accepted view of the scientific community. Since data availability varies widely, MS are asked to use the highest quality and most appropriate data they have to provide a value which matches the common definition. As the HNV indicator was introduced in 2005 for the current period, MS have had ample time to develop appropriate methods and identify data, so provision of a baseline figure should be feasible for all RDPs.. The indicator is needed as it is one of the few that concerns biodiversity.

4. Forthcoming Good Practice Workshop: experiences with preparation of the SWOT analysis, needs assessment and ex ante evaluation – the prerequisite for a sound RDP intervention logic

A presentation of the forthcoming Good Practice Workshop, originally scheduled at the end of the meeting, took place before lunch time.

Hannes Wimmer (Evaluation Helpdesk) introduced the next Good Practice Workshop, entitled “Experiences with preparation of the SWOT analysis, needs assessment and ex ante evaluation – the prerequisite for a sound RDP intervention logic” to take place in Prague on 27th-28th May 2013. The target audience is MAs, SWOT experts and evaluators, and the purpose of the workshop is to exchange experiences on SWOT analysis and needs assessment, develop understanding on common issues raised by ex ante evaluations and to identify lessons learnt for the improvement of SWOT analysis, needs assessment and intervention logic before finalising the RDP.

5. Minimum requirements for the Evaluation Plan

Zélie Peppiette (AGRI L.4) presented a draft proposal on the minimum requirements for the Evaluation Plan (EP), which had been circulated to MS before the meeting.

The purpose of the EP in the RDPs is to ensure sufficient and appropriate evaluation activity, in particular:

- *Programme steering + AIR 2017*
- *Interim progress + AIR 2019*
- *Data availability*
- *EU level info (aggregation)*

The proposed eight minimum requirements were presented to the MSs:

1. *Objective and purpose of the EP*
2. *Governance and coordination*
3. *Evaluation topics and activities*
4. *Data and information*
5. *Timeline*
6. *LEADER*
7. *Communication*
8. *Resources*

Questions and answers:

The MSs raised the following comments:

Potential overlaps between RDP and EP.

Several MSs (IT, FR, NL, DE) pointed out that some sections of the EP (e.g. Data and information) are also supposed to be described in other parts of the RDP and may therefore lead to repetition. BE-Wallonia asked for clear reporting requirements in the AIR, in particular for the transition period 2015.

The EC replied that the EP is a chapter of the RDP, and that there should be no duplication between the EP and other chapters of the RDP. The reporting requirements on evaluation in the AIR will comprise a summary of the activities in relation to the EP, the problems encountered and the solutions adopted. The reporting requirements for AIRs (normal and enhanced) will be specified in the implementing acts.

Level of detail of the EP minimum requirements as part of the RDP

Many MS (UK, FR, BE-Wallonia, IT, NL, AT) said that the minimum requirements for the EP are too detailed. Poland commented that other structural funds submit the EP only after programme implementation has started. The Netherlands questioned the added value of the EP as the current approach of annual reporting on evaluation systems and activities (see the section on ongoing evaluation in the APR) works well and ensures evaluation is planned and taking place during the programming period.

The EC explained why the EP should be part of the programme. If an adequate evaluation system is already in place it only needs to be described, but if the evaluation system is not complete, the EP forms the basis for its further development. In the current programming period various problems regarding evaluation planning became obvious at mid-term; in this respect the EP is an important element to support MSs to better organize evaluation right from the start of the programme.

The current proposal for the EP guarantees sufficient flexibility as it only refers to the three major milestones (2017, 2019, ex post evaluation) and deals with evaluation activities in a very general way, e.g. if data gaps are due to be filled up by evaluators, this should be mentioned in the EP, however no description of methodologies is required.

Furthermore the EC explained that the monitoring requirements for the next programming period have now been simplified significantly compared to the first proposals, as target indicators are mostly output indicators. Only five complementary result indicators have been retained and these need to be calculated and assessed by evaluators for the three evaluation milestones. The EP should show that the system is in place for achieving this.

LEADER: why in a separate section?

Many MSs (e.g. DE, IT, PL, FR) disagreed with the idea of having LEADER in a separate section of the EP. BE-Wallonia pointed out that evaluators will have to define an appropriate method to evaluate LEADER, and that details cannot be included in the EP before the programme starts.

The EC replied that LEADER is a particular case because the current monitoring and evaluation system does not sufficiently capture its added value, as also specified by the Court of Auditors. However, the EC will consider including LEADER in Section 3 "Evaluation topics and activities".

Communication strategy as part of the EP (DE, FI).

The EC highlighted the distinction between the communication strategy of evaluation results and the communication strategy of the RDP. Therefore, section 7 of the EP should describe how evaluation results are fed back into the RD policy and how evaluation results are communicated to a well defined target audience.

Provisions for the evaluation of NRNs in the EP?

The EC replied that the mention of the evaluation of National Rural Networks (NRNs) in Section 3 is essential, as in many cases methods and indicators are not yet in place. The EP should therefore describe the necessary planning to determine how to develop NRN evaluation further. As the NRN is an element financed from the technical assistance of the RDP it should be evaluated in each and every case.

Coordination with other funds.

Many MSs (e.g. DE, PL, BE-Wallonia) expressed their concern about Section 2, in particular with regard to coordination with other funds. As this requirement is not an obligation for the Structural Funds, there was concern that partners from these funds may be less willing to coordinate.

It was accepted that coordination requires the willingness of all partners. The EC pointed out that putting coordination with 1st pillar in the minimum requirements was also considered, although there was no requirement for RD evaluations to extend to Pillar I. Nevertheless some MSs do it already and this is considered as good practice.

Quality control of data in the EP.

France asked clarification about the Commission's expectations regarding the quality control of data in the EP, mentioned in section 4.

The EC answered that data quality is addressed in the EP as it is a problematic issue in the current programming period and had led to unreliable monitoring data and evaluation results. Inclusion of quality control provisions in the EP would therefore ensure that the data collected in the new programming period fulfils certain quality standards.

M&E system for RD versus other structural funds.

The UK and the Netherlands provided the following observations regarding managing different M&E systems:

- Evaluation results provide explanations on where and how the EU money is used, no matter the Fund. Currently the structural funds are managed by three different DG's applying three different M&E systems, which significantly complicates the work for the Managing Authorities (UK);
- Besides the different M&E systems of the EC, many MS also have a national evaluation policy in place. Having so many different rules for RD compared to the other structural funds, makes this exercise particularly complex, and in the case of the Netherlands this is reflected on the evaluation market as less and less competitors for RD evaluation are observed (NL).

The EC replied that as already discussed previously, the approach taken in RD is different from the other funds as it builds on ongoing evaluation in the current programming period and reflects the specificities of the policy framework.

Possibility to change the minimum requirements.

Several Member States (e.g. FR, NL, PL) said that the comments raised on the EP during the previous Evaluation Expert Committee meeting had not been fully taken on board.

The EC stated that the minimum requirements (referring to the 8 sections as presented above) are still under discussion. However, the inclusion of the EP within the RDP is proposed in the basic regulation and no change is anticipated. The EC undertook to make a further revision of the proposed minimum requirements taking account of the comments made, and to circulate this to Evaluation Committee members.

6. Update on the TWG Preparing guidance on the Evaluation Plan

Jela Tvrdonova (Evaluation Helpdesk) presented the Thematic Working Group's (TWG) progress in preparing guidance on the Evaluation Plan. The presentation included the state of play of the work carried out so far, the scope and content of the guidance and its proposed structure, and the next steps, including a meeting of the Sounding Board on 28 May in Prague.

Questions and answers:

The Member States raised the following questions:

Parallel work on minimum requirements for EP and guidelines on the EP.

Poland questioned the usefulness of developing guidelines on the basis of minimum requirements that are yet to be finalised.

The EC replied that in order for the guidelines to be ready on time, there is a need to start the work in the TWG in parallel with the discussions on the minimum requirements, and that the contents of the guidelines will be adapted according to future changes.

Scope of the EP and the guidelines.

The Netherlands questioned the scope of both the EP and the guidelines.

The EC replied that no final decision had been taken yet on the guidelines' scope, however the EP itself is an instrument that will transfer experience from the current programming period into the next, and the guidelines will support the MS in developing and implementing the EP.

Relationship between CMEF and the EP guidance.

Germany asked how the guidance on the EP will fit in to the wider picture of RD monitoring and evaluation.

The EC replied that the new monitoring and evaluation system encompasses the whole set of guidance documents being produced such as those for the EP, the ex ante evaluation, future methodological guidance, indicator fiches and tables. As in the current period all these aspects together constitute the monitoring and evaluation system.

Linkage between the EP and Pillar I aspects.

France pointed out that the evaluation system is evolving into a global approach for measuring impacts of the CAP as a whole, while the EP is dealing with Pillar II only, and expressed concern as to how to include Pillar I aspects into the EP.

The EC replied that there is a mandate for evaluating the CAP as a whole. The EC will continue to cover Pillar I evaluations while responsibility for Pillar II evaluations at RDP level will remain with the MS. The EC will also work on assessing the interplay and combined effects of both pillars. The EP is therefore not the formal solution for linking evaluations of the two pillars, although it is good practice to consider these links within particular territorial evaluation exercises.

Description and comparison of evaluation methods in the EP.

The Netherlands pointed out that evaluation methods and comparisons between methods are already well described elsewhere and do not need to be included in the EP.

The EC replied that the guidelines will not deal with evaluation methodologies as such but will provide guidance on what should be included in the EP and will explain the minimum requirements (the "what") and possibly provide guidance on how to prepare and implement the EP (the "how").

7. A.O.B

Two questions sent in writing by MSs were addressed:

SEA: under what conditions might it be necessary to undertake cross border consultations on the programme?

The EC replied that after consultation with DG ENVI cross border consultations are not compulsory for SEA unless the implementation of the programme is likely to have a significant impact on the territory of the other country. If the RDP is not going to have such an impact, cross border consultation is not needed. Cross border consultation is in fact very rare for the structural funds, e.g. ERDF, which deal with substantially bigger projects than RD.

EAE guidelines: requirements for national frameworks and national programmes.

The EC explained that there are two distinct concepts: "national frameworks" – which were already included in the original legal proposal, and "national programmes" which are a new element which may be introduced depending on the final agreement on the text.

- "National frameworks" such as those currently existing in Spain and Germany set up core measures centrally, which are implemented through regional programmes. These national frameworks do not have a budget and do not need an ex ante evaluation.
- The new potential concept of "national programme" would have a budget and would be implemented across a territory where regional programmes are also present. It would therefore need to fulfil all the requirements for an RDP, including territorial analysis, SWOT, needs assessment and ex ante evaluation.

All presentations are available on the CIRCA platform. The next meeting of the Evaluation Expert Committee is tentatively scheduled for 19th June 2013.