*Policy brief No. 1:*

Addressing evaluation challenges tracing impacts of EU Rural Development Programmes

EU funded project ENVIEVAL introduces newly developed logic models, which help evaluation experts of the rural development measures to select evaluation method depending on the data availability and quality.

Context

The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development is one of the two pillars of EU Common Agricultural Policy, spending a significant share of the EU budget (more than 96 billion Euros spent during the period 2007-2013) to stimulate social, economic and environmental development in Europe's countryside. All measures implemented within the Rural Development Programmes are, amongst others, targeted to the delivery of environmental public goods, such as ensuring biological diversity, agricultural landscapes, improving water and soil quality and other public goods such as animal welfare. Regular evaluation of impacts achieved by implementation of the measures, especially environmental ones, provides an opportunity to improve RDP by making it more responsive to societal needs. Therefore, robust evaluation of RDP measures is of key importance to ensure the effectiveness of these policy tools to achieve goals set by the policy makers.

However, in practice, experts in EU countries, evaluating impacts of the implemented RDP measures at national and regional levels are facing multiple and diverse methodological challenges. For example, multiple objectives of policies, weak causal linkages between policy measures implemented at farm level and intended environmental impacts at regional and national levels, as well as a lack of environmental monitoring data, in particular on non-participating farms, hinders the use of existing indicators for an in-depth evaluation of direct and indirect policy effects. Instead, evaluators often have to limit evaluations to naïve counterfactual analysis of RDP measures and programmes, e.g. without explicitly considering deadweight and substitution effects and disentangling the policy impacts from impacts of other exogenous factors. Some of the environmental impact indicators of the CMES, such as nitrate in fresh water and the farmland bird index face such a challenge. It is difficult to distinguish how much of the observed changes and trends at national and regional levels are caused by the impact of the RDP measures, especially when considering the impact of specific agri-environmental measures or making evaluations at the farm-level scale. Results of a stakeholder consultation carried out with evaluators and representatives from managing authorities in the ENVIEVAL FP7 project indicate the need for advice on the process to design RDP evaluations selecting the suitable indicators and methods. Nested logic models provide this guidance.

Snapshot of the logic model: workflow and description of the counterfactual design
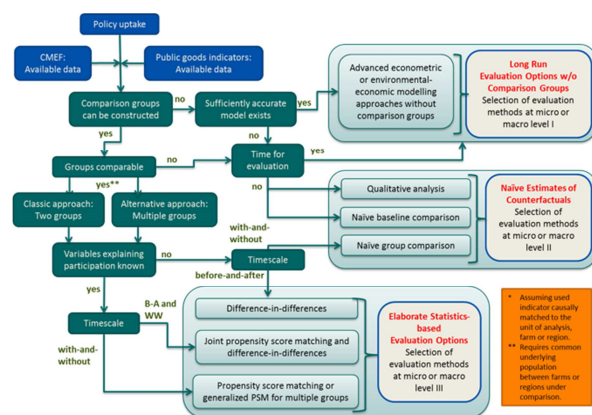
Developing guidance through logic models

The international project "Development and application of new methodological frameworks for the evaluation of environmental impacts of rural development programmes in the EU" (short name: ENVIEVAL, project website: www.envieval.eu), funded by the Seventh EU Framework Programme is working to address such evaluation challenges. Work packages WP3 to WP5 of the project introduced evaluation logic models, which help to design a consistent evaluation processes, eventually setting a robust foundation for the evaluation processes of RDP measures and programmes.

Evaluation logic models introduce important aspects that will help to improve the quality of the evaluation and ensure a cost-effective process. In particular, logic models help to design an effective counterfactual analysis, which assesses the programme's direct and indirect effects at different scales and levels.

Furthermore, the logic models provide a basis for defining evidence of causality regarding RDP impacts on environmental public goods. The application of the logic models guide evaluators to select a suitable evaluation method depending on the data availability and quality. This widens the horizon to alternative methods and/or indicators, which may better fit the evaluation, instead of limiting the choice to the already practiced methods, which in certain circumstances might not be the best for the available data.

The evaluation logic model proposed provides a comprehensive step-by-step overview for a robust evaluation process. Examples of applications of the logic model are provided on the dissemination platform at the project website (www.envieval.eu). Further help from the project team is provided to the users of the logic model in a form of a workflow description, which can also be downloaded. Users are encouraged to contact project partner organisations and join national stakeholder workshops to learn more about the logic models, ask questions and provide user feedback.

Developed logic models are also useful for competent authorities to use the logic models in order to design consistent terms of reference for specifying evaluation tasks. It will be useful in the tendering process to select evaluation proposals and later use logic models as a convenient tool to follow the evaluation process itself.

Lessons learnt

The rural development monitoring and evaluation system for the 2014 to 2020 programming period introduces the need for an evaluation plan, incorporated in the RDP of Member States. To ensure a more consistent evaluation processes, newly developed logic models could be integrated in the evaluation plans. In addition, logic models would be useful in the development of the enhanced annual implementation reports, which are to be submitted to EC at 2017 and 2019, and the ex-post evaluation in 2024.

For countries which have not yet or just started the ex-post evaluation of 2007-2013 RDP impacts, the introduced logic models can already serve as a tool for planning the evaluation and guidance of the evaluation workflow.

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What is ENVIEVAL?
ENVIEVAL is developing and testing improved tools for the evaluation of environmental impacts of rural development measures and programmes in EU Member States. The project covers a representative set of EU member states, including Germany, Scotland, Greece, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Hungary and regional case studies in the selected countries.
The main innovative aspects of the new methodological frameworks are that they enable the integration of micro- and macro-level evaluations (and their results) and provide guidance on the selection and application of cost-effective evaluation methods to estimate net effects of rural development programmes on the different main public goods from farming and forestry. In addition to the environmental public goods of climate change mitigation, biodiversity, landscapes, water quality and soil quality, the project will pay particular attention to animal welfare and include animal welfare case studies.

See the project website (www.envieval.eu) for additional information and documentation.