



THE INFORMATION SYSTEM OF THE RURAL SUPPORT SERVICE IN LATVIA: A UNIFIED DATA PORTAL FOR EVALUATION

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BETTER DATA = BETTER EVALUATIONS

While it may seem trivial, the fact of the matter is that data is the most critical input needed to conduct robust evaluations. Devoid of quality data it is nearly impossible to utilise more advanced quantitative methodologies and approaches such as a counterfactual and without these more robust approaches it is difficult to draw legitimate, evidence-based, conclusions to support future policy decisions. The problem is that often data in the Member States is housed in many different locations and under the supervision of many different institutions. This can make finding and consolidating the data for the purpose of evaluation a major challenge for evaluators. This factsheet looks at the information system of the Rural Support Service (RSS) the Paying Agency in Latvia and how it has been improved to better support evaluations.

The Rural Support Service won the WSIS Prize in 2017 for their Electronic Application System (EAS) and was recognised as the best IT tool in agriculture in the world. In 2015, the Rural Support Service of Latvia got the second place in the UN competition 'United Nations Public Service Award 2015' in the category 'Promoting Whole-of-Government Approaches in the Information Age'.



A TREASURE TROVE OF DATA FOR EVALUATION

The RSS is responsible for the implementation of a unified national and European Union (EU) support policy in the sector of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and rural development. In the framework of its competence, the RSS administers the EU and state support for rural areas, agriculture, forestry and fisheries:

- Accepts and assesses project applications;
- Makes decisions on allocation or rejecting of financing;
- Keeps records of the granted financing and controls the use of it.

The data stored in the information system of the RSS is also used for evaluation in Latvia. Beginning in 2007, the RSS began drastically improving their system with their Electronic Application System and have continued this work in the current programming period to better improve monitoring and to seek ways for collected data to better serve evaluations. The RSS has improved its system in three ways to better support evaluation:



FURTHER INFORMATION

Latvian Rural Support Service

RSS portal: www.lad.gov.lv

Open data portal:

<https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/dataset?organization=lad&q=lauku+atbalsta+dienests>

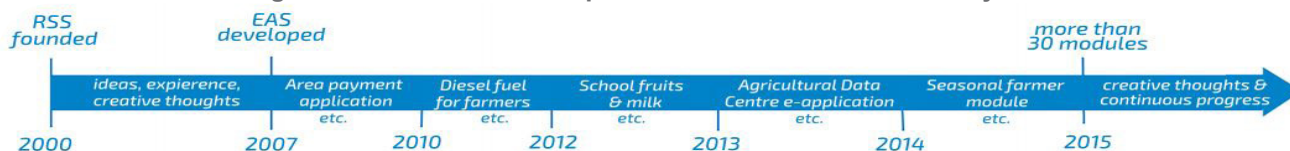


1. Establishing electronic applications and mobile applications for faster data processing.
2. Housing data from multiple institutions in one data warehouse to avoid overlaps and establish synergies.
3. Giving evaluators direct access to this data warehouse to query data as they wish.

Working steps of the RSS information system:

1. Identification of needs/requirements, identification, and analysis of indicators for the needs of the RSS, Ministry of Agriculture, and evaluators.
2. Inclusion of the required information in the application/reporting forms.
3. Farmers and beneficiaries enter the data in the Electronic Application System where logical controls and data existence controls are performed.

Figure 1: Timeline of developments of the RSS information system



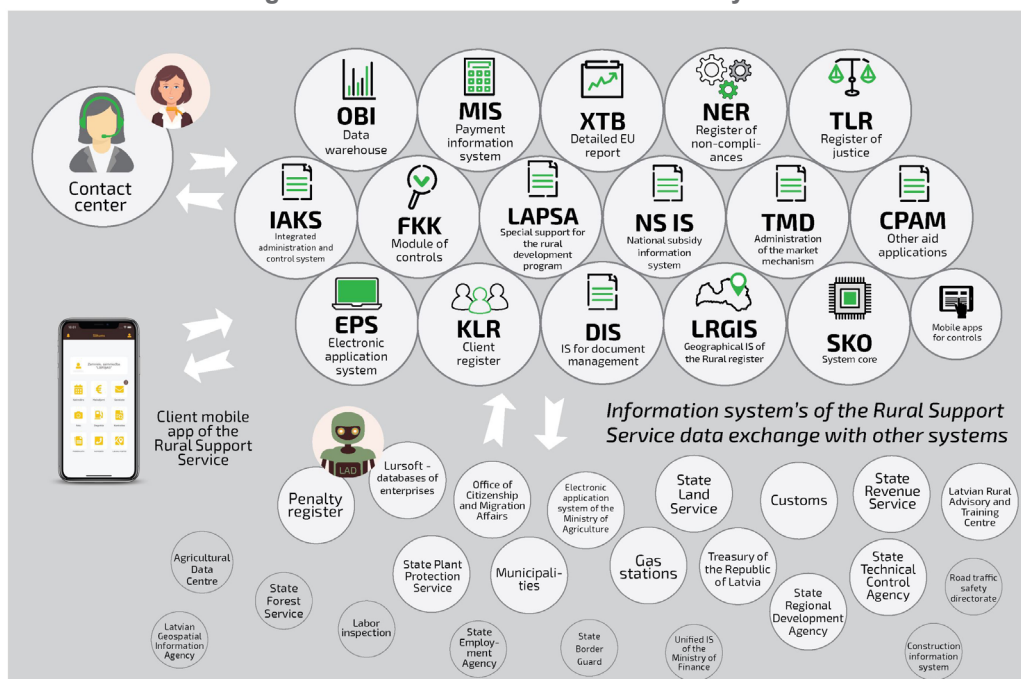
Source: Latvian RSS, 2021

4. The data is managed in a structured way for most of indicators.
5. Creation of data classifiers in the database so data can be easily processed and analysed.
6. Data is transferred to the Oracle Business Intelligence data warehouse (OBI- tool used for reporting and data analysis) where it can be easily queried for the purpose of evaluation, reporting, or research in order to not overload the database with report requests.

Overall, these working steps provide a coherent means for the process of monitoring and evaluation from the identification of data needs to the querying of data for models and assessments.

Ensuring faster and more accurate data collection and processing
 In order to collect data in the most efficient way, while attempting to place the least amount of burden on beneficiaries, the RSS has created and implemented an almost fully electronic system for all aspects of the application, processing, mapping, communication and controls process. The objective was to ensure the successful processing of applications, providing data for policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluations, collecting administrative and on the spot checks, executing payments and reporting needs. To best meet these needs the electronic application system was developed after consultations with farmers' representatives/organisations and evaluators. For example, evaluators can identify farmers who

Figure 2: Structure of RSS Information system



Source: Latvian RSS, 2021

applied for supports and received it in different measures. It's allows evaluators to exclude them from the calculation of direct effects of specific measure and therefore to avoid double counting.

The current information system collects all direct payment schemes and rural development measures data (statistical data, applications, and spatial geographical information system's data) and is stored in one unified data warehouse. Since 2016, 100% of direct payments applications are submitted electronically in the EAS. Additionally, all applications for investment measures are to be submitted electronically using the RSS e-portal. The submission of data online not only improves data quality and availability for the administration, but also, makes data available to evaluators much faster.

Since the whole application system is electronic, the RSS has recently implemented an innovation in the use of a mobile application for beneficiaries allowing even faster communication with the RSS. Clients can now receive individual reminders, the RSS has the ability to do controls based on photos and GPS tagging, beneficiaries can view field maps, track payments, view correspondence and much more. Evaluators on the other side now get the data even faster because the data is entered into the e-environment and logical controls are performed, thus ensuring the quality of the data and its rapid availability. This means that evaluators can almost immediately start working with the data ensuring significantly improved data availability and accuracy.

Exchange with other institutions

To improve data quality and accessibility and therefore facilitating better evaluations the exchange with other institutions is very important. The RSS has worked hard to reduce bureaucracy and establish cooperation with other national institutions in order to ensure data is consolidated in one place from external systems and other databases including the State Forest Service, Nature Protection Board, Register of Enterprises, Animal register, Tractor equipment register, State Revenue Service, etc.

Currently the system has 650 users with over 80,000 external users for the EAS. The system currently has 17 sub-systems with various business system modules and more than 10 services for data exchange with external systems. The data warehouse can be accessed directly by 50 users including the RSS, Ministry of Agriculture, Institute of Agricultural Resources and Economics, evaluators, and others with more than 1000 different processes performed each day. Therefore, evaluators have information about applicants stored in other systems.

Additionally, since the RSS regularly compares data with other databases it makes it easy for evaluators to make sure there are no discrepancies between data sources when it comes to values reported by beneficiaries. This consolidation of data from across databases is a major advantage for evaluation as it provides a one-stop-shop for everything evaluators may need to do their assessments in a coherent and standardised fashion. Evaluators do not need to waste time

trying to find where each type of data is housed, or which institution monitors it. For example, if evaluators need information from the State Revenue Service for those applying for the support, it is possible to get such information directly using the RSS IS. While not all of the systems in Figure 2 are used for evaluation there is the potential for more of this data to be considered in future evaluations, for example, data from municipalities or data from the State Employment Agency. On the other hand, data from the Agricultural Data Centre, State Plant Protection Service and the State Regional Development Agency and some other institutions are currently being used for evaluations, but are not included in the RSS and therefore their consolidation within the RSS IS would be useful.

Direct access for the purpose of evaluation

In a world of data privacy and access challenges, the RSS has been innovative in allowing evaluators direct access to RSS data analytics software without compromising privacy requirements. Evaluators have access to the specific data areas needed in a data warehouse, significantly reducing administrative burden, and making the overall process much faster for evaluators. RSS information security requirements (including privacy requirements) are specified in an agreement with evaluators. All evaluators (employees) have signed the RSS IS security rules to ensure that the conditions will be followed. Evaluators use available data only for objectives of the agreement. Furthermore, evaluators can directly contact the RSS for specific data requests if additional data is needed. Cooperation between these groups has become well developed for the purpose of evaluation. Evaluators can also utilise Latvia's Open Data portal: www.data.gov.lv.

All rural development programme measures and focus areas can be assessed based on the information collected in the information system of the RSS. The level of detail varies from measure to measure, but basic information is provided, and assessments can often be made

on this basis alone. The information system of the RSS includes mainly the result and output indicators data and their values at beneficiary level which are defined in accordance with Annex IV of the European Commission Regulation No 808/2014¹.

The data on beneficiaries stored in the database is a primary source of information necessary for evaluation purposes to identify beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries for counterfactuals. Data can be sorted directly by evaluators for focus areas, by primary project objectives and secondary impact areas when support is given in more than one focus area. The RSS information system also contains data on other available support for farmers and foresters, which helps evaluators to assess different support for each beneficiary facilitating evaluators to better avoid double counting. Through direct access to the data in data warehouse from such a wide array of institutions and sources, evaluators have the best possible chance of using advanced quantitative methods and therefore conducting the most robust evaluations possible.

Future Developments

With the implementation of the CAP reform, the RSS will continue to implement new innovations in their data system by incorporating more information from distance sources such as Sentinel images, geo-tagged photos and databases of other holders of information. The RSS will continue to implement the principle: if one state institution has data on a beneficiary, then other institutions shall not ask it again from the beneficiary. Client application forms and report input forms will be improved and developed by supplementing them with new data and indicators to ensure the preparation of the Annual Performance Report (APR) on the implementation of the CAP Strategic Plan, as well as provide data that can support the evaluation of CAP Strategic Plans. All of these future improvements will give evaluators even more data to conduct future evaluations.

¹ More precisely defined in the Rural Development Programme of Latvia for the period 2014-2020, Section No 11 'Indicator plan'.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING BETTER INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN THE MEMBER STATES

- Understand the requirements of the Ministry of Agriculture, European Commission, evaluators, and other stakeholders when developing the information system in order to make sure that the system can provide information needs in a coherent and accessible way.
- Cooperate and exchange with other national authorities' information systems in order to have the most accurate and detailed data possible. This can also help with essential controls and verifications of data.
- When performing IT developments, systems should be easily adaptable to facilitate changes in the national and EU legislation concerning indicators. Additionally, indicator classifiers should be created/developed so that data can be easily sorted and processed.
- It would be advisable to establish various standardised summary reports, which would automatically summarise different information in tables (e.g. beneficiaries by specialisation, area cultivated, type of business, affected target (FA), volume of production).
- From an evaluator's point of view, it is important that all the information collected from the client is entered into the system with all the logical controls for error elimination.

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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 fact sheet do not necessarily express the official views of the European Commission.

EVALUATION WORKS!



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Rural Development