

Minutes of the expert group Evaluation Network Meeting with Member States

Brussels, 16/10/2020

Minutes

Evaluation Network Meeting with Member States (EVALNET)

15 October 2020, Webex meeting

1. Approval of the agenda and of the minutes of previous meeting

2. Nature of the meeting

The Head of Evaluation and European Semester Unit (REGIO B.2), Ms Mariana Hristcheva, opened the meeting of EvalNet and welcomed participants. The meeting was organised online via Webex for the second time, due to the ongoing health crisis.

Ms. Hristcheva noted EvalNet members had raised no comments on the minutes of the previous meetings, that would then be considered approved and published on CIRCABC. No comments were raised concerning this point.

Ms. Hristcheva expressed her regret for the impossibility to hold a meeting in person. Nonetheless, she cherished the possibility to welcome a larger number of participants from Member States than in a physical meeting.

The subject matter constituting the agenda was chosen as the follow-up to a survey shared with members over the summer. It was chosen to divide the meeting in two sessions; the first session addressed the following topics:

- ESIF Open Data Platform
- Use of COVID-related indicators by Member States
- AIR progress
- Information about SFC2014 data services
- Any other business, including information about the evaluation conference currently being organised for summer 2021

The second session would address the following topics, also mirroring the requests received from EvalNet members:

- Q&A tool concerning indicators for the programming period 2021-2027
- Additional examples of intervention logic and use of indicators
- Measurement methods for transport result indicators post-2020 (available on CIRCABC as a draft that will be finalised after the agreement of legislators on the common indicators).

Active participation was invited throughout the meeting, both in the chat and by taking the floor.

GR and ES requested to discuss the draft guidelines of closure, notably the section on indicators, under AOB.

3. Latest developments and plans for the Open Data Platform

As requested by EvalNet members, Mr. John Walsh (REGIO B.2) presented some information about the ESIF Open Data Platform and its planned developments.

The Open Data Platform is intended not as a library but as a presentation of planning and implementation data up to the programme level, focusing on finance and achievement; the use of latest technology allows for a high level of detail and the possibility to reuse data. The objective underlying the creation of the platform was to enhance accountability, transparency and the focus on performance, making the data accessible to citizens by describing it in simple language and through visualisations.

The platform focuses especially on the common elements across funds, though a higher level of detail can be found in the available datasets.

Mr Walsh presented the recent developments of the platform:

- The introduction of the Sankey chart: the chart is based on categorisation data and, by selecting a country, it gives a visual representation of investment by thematic objective and composition by intervention fields. It is also possible to look at all Member States or to focus on a specific intervention field.
- Financial data were updated with information from June 2020, making it possible to analyse the implementation progress compared to 2019.
- The possibility to capture images directly for reuse, retweet them or embed charts on other platforms was added.
- 2019 target values were added to the achievements tiles (reporting common indicator targets) to show that targets are dynamic as programmes are changing and being radically affected by the pandemic.
- The range of data stories was expanded and dataset and story on historic EU payment data were updated. Notably, for the first time a database referring to 9000 projects was included in the ODP, linked to the ongoing evaluation of RTD projects in 2007-2013. Mr. Walsh thanked the 17 Member States involved in the evaluation for their cooperation. This exercise contributed to assess the monitoring data that can be collected at the project level, an element that will be factored in the Commission's reflection on the upcoming ex-post evaluations.

The following developments of the Open Data Platform are planned:

- Financial data up to the 30th of September 2020 will be published in December 2020; animated scatterplots will be added for the thematic objectives.
- A new Cohesion Policy aggregation page is being prepared in view of the expansion of the platform for the period 2021-2027.
- New data stories are considered for publication on politically relevant topics, such as the Greenhouse Gas indicator, Job Creation and the Social progress index.
- Indicator data referring to end of 2019 will be published in early 2021, together with categorisation data from the end of 2020.
- A new theme page concerning REACT-EU (to be included in the 2014 – 2020 period) is being discussed with other Commission services. The page would demonstrate the use of ERDF and ESF under REACT-EU and associated indicator targets.
- 2021-2027 programming period (preliminary reflections, TBD):
 - The platform will be expanded to include both the 2021-2027 and the 20214-2020 programming periods, presenting the two periods from the homepage.
 - Financial tables of planned finances and categorisation data and common output and result indicator targets would be published first, followed by implementation values.
 - Specific fund pages are being planned in collaboration with DG HOME, DG AGRI and DG MARE.

- The programmes are likely to be published on the platform as they are adopted, once a critical mass has been reached.

No comments were raised on the presentation.

4. Use of COVID common indicators by MS

Mr. John Walsh presented the new [CORONAVIRUS DASHBOARD](#) on the ESIF Open Data Platform; the launch of the dashboard was announced by Commissioner Ferreira on the 12th of October. The dashboard presents the aggregated response of Member States to the health crisis through the introduction of COVID-19 indicators (introduced by the Commission) in several Operational Programmes.

The data presented is not final, as programme amendments are still ongoing; the dashboard also emphasises the relevance of specific indicators that cannot be aggregated. Nonetheless, the information collected allows assessing changes in the original indicator system and the introduction of specific actions related to the pandemic.

DG REGIO is grateful for the wide uptake of the proposed indicators by the Managing Authorities in such a short period of time.

The dashboard can be accessed from the homepage of the ESIF Open Data Platform, in the highlights carousel, or in the stories section, under “monitoring and performance”. It focuses on the thematic response to the crisis (concerning health, business and employment), and on the use of financial flexibility allowed by CRII and CRII+.

The various charts allow examining the allocation to the COVID-19 indicators, as well as change in the allocation dedicated to health and to business support since February 2020. Charts can be visualised at the aggregated level, as well as by Member State and by region.

The dashboard exemplifies the advantages of the introduction of specific COVID-related indicators, as they refer to very specific outputs, thus allowing tracking and examining the actions adopted to respond to the crisis. The platform reports information concerning both financial and output indicators.

Information is also available on COVID response financed by ESF, and the relative financial and output indicators; the transfer between funds; the uptake of 100% financing by operational programs; the change in allocation by category of region; the total number of COVID indicators proposed by the Commission introduced in each Member State.

DG REGIO expressed the hope that Managing Authorities will continue using the indicators, stressing that the dashboard attracted unprecedented levels of attention since its publication.

Ms. Hristcheva also remarked on the high pressure to track the finances reallocated to COVID-19 response, thus inviting members to use the proposed indicators when modifying operational programs.

Q&A:

IE: The programmes hope to use the full allocation and report on CV1 and CV6 before the end of the year, is there value in updating targets?

Answer: If the programmes need to be amended in any event, there is certainly a value in updating the indicators with more robust target values, as this allow a better understanding of the measures being implemented and updated targets would be published rapidly.

5. Update Annual Implementation Reports 2019

Mr. Máté Tas (REGIO B.2) delivered the update. The deadline for the submission of Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) was postponed from May to the end of September 2020. Almost all AIRs were submitted before the new deadline.

AIRs are as the basis of the summary report to be prepared by the Commission pursuant to Article 53(1) CPR, which informs the other European institutions on the implementation of ESI funds. The summary report will be delayed, too, to the end of April 2021; the report will reflect the situation until the end of 2019, before the pandemic and its impact on implementation.

The AIRs received so far are undergoing quality checks by the colleagues in geographic units. The aggregated data will then be subjected to further controls by Unit B.2, before being used for reporting about cohesion policy achievements.

The initial analysis revealed that of the 13000 indicators reported (common and specific), in 36% of cases selected value exceeded target value by more than 10%. This may be due to the common practice of over-commitment, but the AIR needs to clarify this. Cases of decreasing trends for selected values and implemented values, as well as implemented values exceeding the selected values, need correction or explanation in the AIRs.

Data quality must be thoroughly checked because the AIR is the only formal source of information for the Commission to report on the implementation of Cohesion Policy, and the data will be published on the ESIF Open Data Platform: consistency needs to be ensured. Besides, the attention of stakeholders on Cohesion Policy performance, such as the European Parliament and the European Court of Auditors, is increasing. A new report from the European Court of Auditors on the performance of ERDF and Cohesion Fund will be presented to the European Parliament in November as part of the budgetary discharge procedure, with negative findings on the funds' performance.

Also very important in terms of data quality is the work, now at its early stages, on the ex-post evaluation for the 2014 – 2020 period. The ex-post evaluation has to be completed by 2024, and thus cannot wait for the programmes' closure; the evaluation will most likely rely on 2019 achievement data. The Commission will soon launch a study that focuses on data collection, with the aim to construct one database collecting data about all projects and information about programme specific indicators. The study will also focus on the setup of national monitoring systems; Managing Authorities will most likely be contacted by a contractor to this aim as of early 2021.

The questions received on the closure guidelines will be discussed at the EGESIF meeting of 20/10/2020 and then addressed with the Evaluation Network in a future meeting if still deemed necessary.

Q&A

MT: Could you explain what is the "selected" value and how this is different from the target value?

Answer: Selected values are the values corresponding to selected operations reported in the Annual Implementation Reports; they refer to operations selected for funding, while implemented values indicate what is delivered. In time, implemented value should reach the selected value. If the selected value for an indicator exceeds significantly the target value, the target value may be questioned as the selected value suggests that it could be too low.

DE: Is overachievement a serious problem? Target values often were estimated in 2013 and 2014; projections over a very long time are often characterised by uncertainty. Managing Authorities might see no reason to adjust values if they overachieve, and only do so if there is the risk of underachievement.

GR: When is the appropriate time to modify indicators target values? 2020 or 2021?

Answer: if programmes are achieving more than expected, Managing Authorities are encouraged to adjust targets to make them more realistic. Nonetheless, targets should be kept stable where possible so to track progress. In general, Managing Authorities are encouraged to adjust targets this year (2020), but to avoid target adjustments in the remainder of the period. It is normal that implemented values differ from targets, but it is important for evaluations to be able to individuate whether there are discrepancies and to understand the reason for these. Overachievement can be justified; the quality controls are concerned with extreme values. Pursuant to the Regulation serious underachievement of target values (implemented value below 65% of the target value, depending on the level of financial implementation) may trigger the proposal of financial correction from the Commission, subjected to multiple conditions. Before initiating a financial correction procedure, the Commission will carefully assess whether the where the failure to achieve targets is due to the impact of socio-economic or environmental factors, significant changes in the economic or environmental conditions in the Member State concerned or because of reasons of force majeure seriously affecting implementation of the priorities concerned. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis may fall under these cases, and it has to be clearly explained in the final implementation report. This can prevent the financial correction procedure. Thus, target setting and modification should not be over-influenced by the risk of financial correction.

PL: If a Managing Authority prepares the AIR while a programme modification is pending, which version of the OP should be considered for the preparation of the annual report?

Answer: The OP version that was valid at the time of submission of the AIR should be taken into account. There might be cases where an OP amendment is adopted by the Commission shortly after the submission of the AIR, and this possibility is taken into account by the Commission in case of inconsistencies in the data.

6. Data synchronisation in SFC2014

MR. Jukka Himmanen, Project manager SFC2014 and SFC2021, delivered the presentation. Web services allow to connect national monitoring systems directly to SFC, thus avoiding manual encoding errors when inserting data and reducing the likelihood of mistakes.

The use of web services reduces the need of manual labour to insert data, but requires IT skills. An IT team is needed not only for the setup of the system, but also for the continuous updates and maintenance that will be required (e.g. triggered by changes in regulations or reporting that have to be mirrored in SFC).

The type of IT skills needed depends on the national system in use; familiarity with web services and the availability of continuous maintenance are always required.

SFC makes available documentation and an API (Application Programming Interface), but as the IT services are very busy building SFC2021 and meeting the IT requirements of the REACT-EU and CRII packages, active support is very limited. Some Member States, though, have already implemented web services and can be contacted to share best practices and experiences.

The most important areas to focus on when developing web services are the submission of financial data and implementation reports. Several “objects” are available in the SFC support portal, in the “web services” section. The objects for the submission of financial data and reporting are operative; ES is using both of them. All services are available, but the ones marked with a red label have not been tested extensively yet.

Access to the “web services” section is not public and is granted on request, by writing to ec-sfc2014-info@ec.europa.eu. A certification process will follow, through which technical

security token are exchanged to form a secure connection. The MA will need to test functionality in the Acceptance environment of SFC2014 and, if everything works appropriately, will then be ready to connect to the Production environment and go live.

ES authorities have been using this system since 2019, as well as some operational programs in other countries.

The availability of next generation web services for the programming period 2021-2027 might be delayed as the negotiations associated to REACT-EU and the CPR are still ongoing. SFC2021 will refer to a different data model and underlying technology (REST).

Q&A

BG: When will SFC2014 be updated in relation to REACT-EU?

Answer: The web services should be published on SFC2014 shortly after the regulation is approved, provided there are no drastic changes to the draft proposal.

SE: Would it be better to wait until 2021 for the implementation of web services?

IE: What would be the best period for a MA to procure external IT support for the development of web services for both periods in question (2014-2020 and 2021-2027)?

Answer: In SFC2021 no data can be inserted concerning the current programming period; data concerning REACT-EU will be processed in SFC2014. The two systems will thus run in parallel for a period of time (until the submission of the 2014-2020 final reports). There is no definite answer, and it is up to the Managing Authorities to decide when to introduce web services.

It is difficult to recommend exact dates, but based the current information, the regulation should be adopted around February 2021; shortly after, the first version of SFC2021 should be published. Modules will be available as they are required (e.g. reporting will only be available when needed, and not at the beginning of the period). In the next programming period, SFC2021 will be used for all the shared management funds, thus it should be possible for Managing Authorities to optimise resources. There is no reason to delay staff recruitment to develop web services for the current period.

7. Any Other Business

Ms. Hristcheva expressed her gratitude to Ms. Carla Leal (PT) and to the Portuguese Authorities for their support to the organisation of an evaluation conference in Portugal, planned for the 17th and 18th of June 2021. Ms. Hristcheva expressed the hope to be able to meet in person in that occasion. Nonetheless, the organisation is prepared to be flexible and to decide whether to hold a virtual meeting closer to the time of the conference. Commissioner Ferreira will be present and representatives of the Portuguese government, other European and regional institutions, members of the academia and other stakeholders are expected to take part. The Commission intends to discuss on that occasion the lessons learnt from evaluations conducted by Member States and by the Commission, and the approach to the ex-post of the current programming period.

Mr. Carlo Amati (Unit for Evaluation and European Semester, DG REGIO), remarked that in parallel with the conference a poster exhibition will take place, showcasing evaluations carried out by the Member States. A call for expression of interest to submit posters (maximum 2 per Member State in the first call, for a total of 50 posters) will be circulated. In case of a virtual conference, the exhibition will take place in a digital format.

MS. Leal expressed her enthusiasm to be able to host a conference in Porto during the Portuguese presidency of the EU, and her hope to have physical conference.

8. Q&A tool for clarifications on intervention logic and indicators post 2020

The point was presented by Mr. Philip Engels (REGIO B.2).

Following up on the Member States' interest in clarifying certain aspects of regarding the intervention logic and indicators which will be used in the next programming period, REGIO B.2 created a database of questions and answers. It acts as a repository of questions and answers which the Member States can readily access to look for answers to any questions they might still have following the training sessions and indicator fiches.

Mr. Engels explained that the questions submitted by the Member States to the Geographic Units in REGIO are forwarded to REGIO B.2 who then anonymise, categorise and upload them in the table, which is available on CIRCABC for the Member States to consult. The updates will be done on a monthly basis. Mr. Engels also presented the database, accompanied by an example, also showing the various filters that can be used.

Q&A

SE: when will the database be available to the Member States to consult?

Answer: the database is already available on CIRCABC.

LV: what is the status of indicator fiches?

Answer: the latest version is that of October 2019. It is a stable version and there will be a final revision once the negotiations are over. They are also on CIRCABC in the folder corresponding to the meeting of 11/10/2019.

9. 2021-2027 Programming: Specific objectives / common indicators for clean energy and cycling

This point was presented by Ms. Violeta Piculescu (REGIO B.2).

To support the Member States in preparing the draft programmes for the 2021-2027 programming period, REGIO B.2 presented further information on how to prepare the parts dealing with indicators. Ms. Piculescu presented two examples of actions falling under policy objectives 2 (clean energy) and 3 (cycling infrastructure).

She presented the relevant sections in programme templates covering indicators. She also presented the type of info that the methodology documents would have to include in order to understand the intervention logic, the choice of indicators, as well as other aspects of each intervention. It is key that this is built on a prior needs analysis.

For the choice of indicators, the programme drafters would have to answer to two key questions, to be able to choose the most appropriate indicators: what success looks like and how to measure it? (for result indicators), and what does the action deliver? (for output indicators).

Ms. Piculescu explained the process of thought and the aspects requiring special attention in setting reliable baseline and target values. She advised the participants to draw up an overview table showing the output and result indicators chosen for each action, including the baseline and target values, the corresponding intervention fields and the financial resources allocated to

them. She also included in the examples the possibility of using programmes specific output and result indicators, in case common indicators are not available.

Q&A

There were several questions regarding the use of GHG common result indicator and the methodology that should be used (RO, EL). Answer: REGIO referred to the upcoming seminar dedicated to the methodologies for GHG emissions measurement that would take place on 12-13 November 2020

RO: How much evidence should the assumptions be based on? It is sufficient to use the expert opinions if data sets are missing?

Answer: the assumption could be those from the current programming period, feasibility studies, evaluations and expectations, updated with market conditions. If the intervention is new and has never been implemented before in your Member State, it is useful to refer to literature and experience in other Member States. It is important for these to be documented in the methodology document, together with the any associated risks. Assumptions must be as accurate and reliable as possible. There will be no penalties linked to milestones and targets.

FR: what would be the consequences of not meeting the targets?

Answer: the performance framework will not be of the same type with the one under the current programming period, in the sense that there will no penalties associated to it. It will instead serve the process of objective setting, monitoring and drawing of conclusions, including through evaluation.

EL: Do all output indicators need to have milestone and target values? Do all result indicators need to have target values?

Answer: Yes.

ES: is it necessary for the methodology document to include the previous analysis?

Answer: The methodology document should present the data or evidence used in the choice of indicators and baseline, milestone and target setting linked to actions proposed.

SE: can it be assumed that the indicators that are not in the fiches will not be added at a later time after the trilogues are finished?

Answer: if the trilogues result in changes, REGIO will revise the fiches accordingly. The list of indicators will be in the Regulation. For programme specific indicators the Member States should documents the metadata / definitions.

SE: When one action address more than one intervention type, it is assumed that the budget for that will be divided accordingly in the programme, but also in the monitoring system and the output.

The monitoring data is collected by specific objective. If an operation / project delivers outputs (or results) linked to several specific objectives it is a matter for the programmes how to decide which SO will be financed and where the outputs (results) will be reported.

LV: what to do if more than one action or specific objective aiming at the same result?

Answer: the same indicator can be used for several interventions and also across specific objectives. In the indicators annex of the draft regulation, the indicators which have an asterisk

they can be used in any specific objective. If they do not have an asterisk they can only be used in the specific objective to which they belong.

EL: Please, clarify if all interventions should be quantified or not with the relevant indicators included in the programme, especially if indicators like emissions of CO₂ are used.

Answer: currently, the reduction of GHG is measured when linked to specific investment priorities (energy efficiency, renewable energy). Other types of actions are not included, i.e. urban transport or rail projects. The topic will be discussed in more detail in the dedicated seminar of 12-13 November.

RO: how to transfer energy consumption in GHG emission? Relationship between primary and final energy consumption: how to make the transformation.

Answer: the REGIO example is based on energy certificates. The GHG methodologies at sector level will be discussed during the upcoming seminar.

EL, LV: what about the JTF indicators, will the Commission provide fiches for them? Does the JTF regulation have a list of indicators?

Answer: Yes, the JTF regulation has a list of indicators, but they will be mostly identical to the ERDF/ESF indicators. There are two JTF-specific SMEs indicators for which fiches will be developed, using the same concepts as for the other indicators.

EL: the total budget of the priority has to be quantified?

Answer: the assumptions for target setting should take into account the total investment, including the national financing. The unit costs from the current period can be taken into account.

HU: should evaluations be taken into account?

Answer: yes, they would be a very good source of information.

EE: Is it acceptable to use statistical result indicators (Eurostat, Eurbarometer, national statistics etc.) as programme specific indicators or all the result indicators should be measured from project level and reflect the direct results of the interventions funded by the EU?

Answer: for 2021-2027 there will be a change of approach, as the results will be measured at the level of intervention, not at the level of the society. E.g. when SMEs are supported, the idea is to capture the results for those SMEs, not for all the SMEs in the region.

SE: measuring CO₂ emission is very useful, but also difficult.

Answer: The topic should be discussed in more detail at the upcoming seminar.

10. Measurement methods for transport result indicators post 2020

Presented by Mr. Fergal Trace, Mr. Maurits Van Der Hoofd and Mr. Paul Riley (JASPERS-EIB).

The Jaspers/EIB experts presented a series of methodological aspects related to a selection of result indicators in the area of transport: RCR55 - Annual users of newly built, reconstructed, upgraded or modernised roads, RCR56 - Time savings due to improved road infrastructure, RCR58 - Annual users of newly built, upgraded, reconstructed or modernised railways in passenger, RCR59 - Freight transport on rail, RCR60 - Freight Transport on Inland Waterways,

RCR64 - Annual Users of Dedicated Cycling Infrastructure, and RCR101 - Time savings due to improved rail infrastructures.

REGIO explained that the methodologies presented are different techniques that can be used in different situations and that REGIO does not prescribe which methodology or which indicators should be used. Also, the methodology document prepared by Jaspers/EIB is complete but not final, as the legislative negotiations might result in changes. Once these are over, the document will be considered as final, but the national authorities will be able to use it already now, as it will be published on the Evaluation Network website.

Q&A

PL: what can you advise about the eligibility of the costs related to the taking of measurements of the results one year after the completion of the projects?

Answer: technical assistance could cover the costs of projects monitoring and also the MAs would have to make it clear to the selected projects that they would have to cooperate with the monitoring of the projects. However, so far there are no explicit provisions covering that specific aspect. A good approach would be to install the monitoring technology before the intervention, to cover the baseline, which would also make it an eligible cost.

RO: how should these transport indicators be used in phased projects?

Answer: To answer this question, more information about the phased projects is needed, as well as the upcoming EGESIF discussion on the closure guidelines. The phased projects should be in place before tackling monitoring issues.

11. Any Other Business

On behalf of the European Evaluation Society it was announced that it continued to organise activities online, despite the need to postpone its conference initially planned for September 2020.

12. Conclusions

The Head of Evaluation and European Semester Unit, Ms Hristcheva, closed the meeting, thanked the participants and expressed gratitude for their contribution to the topics discussed. REGIO reminded about the upcoming Evaluation Conference which is scheduled to take place on 17-18 June 2021, in Porto, Portugal. It will be possible to submit posters for an exhibition, just like during the past conference organised in Bucharest.

13. Next meeting

The participants were asked to express their preference concerning the organisation of the December 10th-11th EvalNet Webex meeting (either two sessions in one day, morning and afternoon, or two morning sessions organised over two days).

14. List of participants

The meeting was attended by 65 governmental experts representing 26 Member States; one Interact representative and three EIB speakers. On the EC side - 32 representatives from DG REGIO and one from DG EMPL.