Minutes of the expert groups

Minutes

Meeting of the Evaluation Network- DG REGIO

19-20 May 2022, hybrid meeting

(Room CSM1-00/07 and online via WebEx)

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

The Head of REGIO Unit B2 welcomed participants, then introduced the agenda of the meeting. The minutes of the last EvalNet meeting in December 2022 were approved. They were uploaded to the CIRCABC platform for consultations, no comments were received.

2. Nature of the meeting

Non-public virtual meeting organised for the members of the REGIO Evaluation Network expert group.

3. List of points discussed

Thursday, 19 May PM

1. Evaluation activities and news from the Member States

REGIO B2 introduced the discussion on evaluation activities, which included several questions for the participants.

1. What consequences the late adoption of the programmes has on your work streams?

Some of the answers were: Insecurity, delay if implementation, frustration, changes in the economic situation.

2. In a previous EvalNet meeting in September 2022, challenges had been identified. Which of those challenges are still present, what other challenges have appeared?

Some of the most popular answers were: Missing or incomplete methodological documents, Milestones set at zero. Other challenges that the MS incurred were setting targets for 2029 and methodological documentation.

FR expressed that the authorities shared their approach to setting targets and suggested sharing of methods on a wider level with other MAs who already have implemented. For this, such EvalNet meetings can be emphasised as opportunity to share examples of good practice.

CZ experienced issues with midterm evaluation because there may not be any evidence available.

REGIO B2: The methodological documents would include the assumptions and weaknesses, for which local authorities may consult experts in refining the methodology. Later the methodology can be adjusted and the assumptions can be further explained.

DE also encountered the same issue in setting targets for 2029 due to uncertainty. Because of that, in their methodology, they explained the known and unknown and risk factors, and in the midterm evaluation the values will be reset if their assumptions prove to be wrong.

<u>3. Have you considered and/or implemented the ex ante evaluations for the 21-27 period?</u>

The majority (84%) of the answers were negative, 16% answered "yes". As the ex ante evaluation was no longer compulsory as one of the simplification measures, though many had found it useful in drafting programmes. The participants were asked to elaborate on the choice to have an ex ante evaluation. LT underlined that it was useful in identifying the prior experience and what requires further investment.

DE performed an ex ante evaluation on the financial instruments, they had a socio economic story, in which they evaluated the results from the 2014-2020 period and they used the prior results as the basis.

CZ did not find the ex ante evaluation particularly needed because they were busy preparing the programmes, rather, it was a hindrance. Although they agreed that some evaluation could be useful in preparing the programme.

LV had many discussion whether to have an ex ante evaluation or not. They decided against one due to timing constraints and legal uncertainty.

<u>4. Are there any particular challenges in setting up the monitoring systems for the 2021-2027 period?</u>

Some of the most dominant answers were: Milestone 0, readiness, late; other answers included: double counting, calculation of certain indicators, costs, indicator breakdown.

AT highlighted that the challenge they deal with is double counting, for which they plan on setting up a system to eliminate double counting of the indicators. Another challenge they deal with is readiness, namely, in setting up a new system for process monitoring. In the AT IJG/ERDF & JTF programme 2021-2027, they put a lot of work in creating good common selection criteria for the same measures for the intermediate bodies. The data of the selection will also be available for evaluation purposes.

Similarly, **IT** also experiences issues with double counting for output indicators for enterprises, for which they expressed that they want to improve capacity and the system.

Other participants also confirm readiness as a common challenge. For instance, **DE** underlined that setting up a functional and thoroughly tested system can be a lengthy process.

<u>5. Are there any particular challenges with implementing final evaluations?</u>

The most common answer to this question was timing, other answers included: procurement procedures, quality, Covid-19 and motivation because the focus is on 2021-2027.

On the issue of how to deal with the timing pressure, one of the solutions, expressed by **DE** was to set a cut-off time. **LV** viewed that timing can be seen as a positive aspects because the programmes have not yet been adopted, so there is still time to include learnings from the ex post evaluations. Moreover, they observed that in priorities where the evaluations were launched sooner are performing better.

<u>6. Are there any particular challenges with planning evaluations for 2021-2027?</u>

The answers included: public procurement, evaluation questions, high workload, data, PO2, new MA team.

LV expressed that changes in OPs can be challenging in drafting an evaluation plan. Further emphasised that it is good that Programmes have become shorter, however, thus drafting evaluation questions is more challenging. They consulted the line ministries to elaborate on the results and expected impacts. This programming period, the MA decided to use mostly common indicators, which, however, might not be highly explanatory, for instance as in the case with supported enterprises.

SE elaborated on the challenges with PO2, in particular, how to calculate and measure indicators, how to approach an area in which they are not experts and ask relevant questions in evaluations. **REGIO B2** suggested creating intergovernmental structures for consultations.

<u>7. Are there any other evaluation or monitoring related issues or activities?</u>

To this question the dominant answer was the midterm, additionally the increasing number of indicators to be reported, long-term evaluation plans.

REGIO B2 highlighted that there are fewer programme-specific indicators used and that the number of indicators is an important value because the use of common indicators allows to evaluate the performance on an aggregated level.

CZ raised a question on whether the midterm reviews should be by done for each program. **REGIO B2** explained that the regulation specifies that the review should be done at the level of programme.

LT elaborated on the topic of long-term evaluation plans, in particular that they could be combined with similar national reports.

2. Update on all EC Evaluations 2014-2020

REGIO B2 provided an overview of the different work packages for the 2014-2020 ex post evaluations, the status and contents of the packages. Five packages (WP1, WP5, WP6, WP7, WP8) are already launched, WP1 tender was closed and contract signed, WP2 work is in finalisation and the remaining packages will be launched in the upcoming months.

Q&A:

LV raised a question on the impacts of inflation on financing the evaluations and whether changes in received application have been observed.

REGIO B2 explained that such factors are taken account in the planning process.

Q: How many contractors apply for a competition?

REGIO B2: It is usually consortium, and most of them are known.

Q: Are you satisfied with the bids?

REGIO B2: We are pleased with the quality.

FR expressed that they tend to have the same contractors, and elaborated on organising a training session for the contractors. Perhaps the same in the EU level?

CZ shared a mixed experience with such trainings and that contractors are not interested. The issue depends on the market size.

3. Presentation of the first results of the preliminary study of the ex post evaluation

PROGNOS and **CSIL MILANO** presented the study on the monitoring data on ERDF and Cohesion Fund operations, and on the 2014-2020 monitoring systems. The study was the first attempt to collect, harmonise and aggregate the data produced by ERDF and CF monitoring systems for all thematic objectives on the basis of monitoring data rather than available public lists. The main deliverable was a single database which is a combination or interlinkages of three data sets. The key findings of the study:

1. There are different monitoring systems in place, three types: national, hybrid, decentralized. This has implications: possible discrepancies, as well as benefits in terms of data reliability.

2. Control mechanisms are necessities to monitoring systems, but labour intensive and inefficient processes persist.

3. Time intensive activities for data reporting may result in mistakes or inaccuracies. Manual process is too dominant, and advantages of SFC options are not utilised to its full extent.

4. Despite complexity, monitoring systems fulfil the purpose of providing quality data to monitor ERDF and CF expenditures, hereby high scrutiny can ensure high quality.

5. Categorisation data are slightly less accurate than expenditure data since they are given lower priority by MAs.

6. Gaps in beneficiary data may hamper transparency on the use of funds, especially for collaborative projects and intermediated instruments

7. Different interpretations and double counting can hamper reliability of achievements indicators at operation level. Decentralisation of data was found to cause possible double counting or unreliability.

8. Data reported in the AIRs are by large plausible, they correctly represent what is included in the monitoring systems.

9. There is still room for greater harmonisation to improve relevance of data at the EU level.

10. Influence of different understanding or interpretations on data consistency in AIRs, e.g. in the definition of 'operations'.

In conclusion, there is still a great potential of data to be explored. The data quality, especially financial data, is high, and it is linked to data reliability, though there are some challenges to be addressed ahead.

Q&A:

LV: During the research, did you find anything that would come close to serious deficiency and where do you see significant deficiencies in monitoring data for evaluations?

Answer: Such audit was not performed on the data, rather plausibility checks for consistency, and follow-up with MAs with specific questions. However, conclusions or assessment whether the indicator data is correct or not was not done.

REGIO B2 thanked MAs for the data and cooperation in preparing the study. Summaries and descriptions of databases will be published on the Cohesion Open Data Platform. The data will be used for other work package studies.

<u>Friday, 20 May AM</u>

1. Presentation of the final report on e-cohesion

REGIO B2 Thanked contractors for successfully overcoming difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 crisis in carrying out this evaluation, as well as colleagues from Member States who filled questionnaires and surveys and participated in interviews and workshops.

PPMI presented the recently finalised study on e-Cohesion.

The 2014-2020 CPR required that beneficiaries should be able to exchange data with programme authorities through electronic data exchange systems. The evaluation aimed to assess the implementation and performance of these electronic transmission (e-Cohesion) systems during the 2014-2020 programming period. The study also presented good practices that could support the further development of e-Cohesion systems, as well as identifying challenges and difficulties, including potential solutions.

The e-Cohesion systems are part of a broader system of data collection and transmission. The focus of the evaluation was on the “front office” used by beneficiaries; this interface can be more or less integrated with the data management and monitoring systems used by Managing Authorities and centrally Member States (the “back office”).

The implementing regulation and CPR establish a series of requirements forming a legal framework for e-Cohesion, that provided the framework for the analysis of the data collection tool. The intervention logic of the evaluation was based on the legal requirements and 16 evaluation questions addressing the criteria set out by the Better Regulation Guidelines and the additional criterion of user-friendliness.

The evaluation questions were answered through a mix of data collection and analysis methods. Each step of data collection was followed by a process of data analysis aimed at structuring data to answer the evaluation questions, validation through dialogue with the responsible authorities in the Member States.

Different data collection methods served for different purposes, from collecting factual information to collecting the opinion of the users and lessons learned.

The evaluation faced some challenges and limitations, mainly due to this being the first study on the matter and the limited available information. The subject matter analysed was very specific and technical and it was sometimes challenging to find the right person to address in the Managing Authorities. Distribution of the survey to beneficiaries also presented some challenges due to the lack of direct contact with beneficiaries.

Overall, 108 e-Cohesion systems were identified, in all EU Member States, with a different logic of implementation in each Member State. Out of the 302 programmes covered by the evaluation, only 8 did not use e-Cohesion systems, for four of which e-cohesion was not a requirement during 2014-2020 (ENI CBC programmes). There are a few large systems that cover a very large number of OPs.

The findings were presented according to the evaluation criteria and can be found in the accompanying presentation.

Overall, e-Cohesion systems are widely implemented and the legal requirements are met. The impact of these systems lead to improvements in information exchange between beneficiaries and programme authorities. Some remaining challenges for these systems were identified, such as the parallel exchanges of information still present and the need for greater interoperability.

Q&A

REGIO B2: could e-Cohesion systems help reduce double counting at the central level, especially of firms?

PPMI: the focus of the evaluation was rather on data transfer from beneficiaries to programme authorities, but these systems are connected to different monitoring systems at the central level, where the problem of double-counting would be addressed. However, some Member States are considering how to make better use of e-Cohesion systems to collect more information at the level of beneficiaries; GDPR compliance is a challenge.

REGIO B2: the e-Cohesion file will be taken forward by REGIO F1. A Commission Staff Working Document on this evaluation will follow by the end of the year. The evaluation and results are already being useful for colleagues from Member States and other Commission services as data transfer systems are being developed in the context of other EU funding instruments.

FR: Surprising that only two e-Cohesion systems were found in France, as some regions have left the main e-Cohesion systems.

PPMI: Only two systems were found for e-Cohesion, as reported by the Member State authorities; systems covering only the application side but not implementation were not included in the analysis.

REGIO B2 will be in contact to clarify the situation in FR.

2. Future developments on the Open Data Platform

REGIO B2: a rebranding of the Open Data Platform is underway, to adapt the platform to the new programming period. The platform will be renamed to “Cohesion Open Data”. For ease of use, some elements will be kept stable from the past and across funds. In general, text is kept to a minimum to give prominence to the data. One of the objectives of the update is to make it obvious to the reader that data from different programming periods is available, while keeping the overall experience as consistent as possible. In the new period more funds from several EU funding instruments will be included in the platform; icons and images will be introduced to mark each fund. All of these changes will be implemented once a critical mass of programmes will be adopted. The aim is to publish the changes by October, in the context of the European week of regions and cities. At the beginning the platform will only feature data on planned values, and implementation values will be added later on.

The user guide was also updated, with more interactive features and visual guidelines demonstrating how to create an account and explore the views. A separate data story was also created to demonstrate how platform users can create visualizations and charts on the platform. This can be a powerful tool to communicate to stakeholders and decision makers. Instructions on how to use Odata were also included in the platform, through which data can be automatically downloaded from the platform and updated to Excel.

The Open Data Platform also features a blog showcasing developments and recent stories, such as the data story on regional impact of the COVID-19 and on the 9th Cohesion report.

Q&A

LV: in Latvia the platform is being used quite extensively for various comparisons. From the Member States perspective, it would be interesting to combine cohesion policy and RRF. Will the data be combined in the future, especially as concerns common indicators, which are very similar?

REGIO B2: the reporting obligations under the various funds are different. Shared management funds are subject to the Common Provisions Regulation, hence all funds that have the same reporting obligations could be included on the platform while ensuring consistency among the published data. RRF has to comply with different regulatory requirements so it would be difficult to aggregate the data.

FI: will JTF be included in Cohesion Open Data?

REGIO B2: yes, once a critical mass of programmes is adopted.

REGIO B2 gave a preview of the use of programme-specific indicators in 2021-2027 programmes. At the time of the presentation, for IGJ programmes that have been sent by Member States or returned by the Commission, the use of common indicators is prevalent in all Specific Objectives. In the previous programming period, the balance of common and programme-specific indicators was around 60/40. The situation seems vastly improved (though with differences across Specific Objectives). This kind of analysis will be publicly available in October. At the time of the presentation, around half of the programmes have been submitted in draft form.

3. AOB

- **Evaluation Conferences**

REGIO B2 invited colleagues to share about upcoming evaluation conferences.

CZ: A conference is currently being organised for November, and a “save the date” will be circulated soon. The conference will be held in person, travel restrictions allowing.

HU: an evaluation conference will be organised either in autumn or next spring; a “save the date” will be circulated as soon as the date will be decided.

REGIO B2: a calendar of evaluation conferences is available on CIRCAB. EvalNet members are invited to check the calendar to avoid to organise overlapping events. To add a conference to the calendar, send the details and a description of the topics to: REGIO-EVALUATION@ec.europa.eu.

- **Summer School – EVHD Applica**

REGIO B2: A summer school is being organised by the Evaluation HelpDesk on the 23rd and 24th of June in Prague; the deadline for registration (currently May 23rd) will be extended. EvalNet members are invited to reach out to REGIO B2 or to the Evaluation HelpDesk to participate.

- **Expression of interest for Methodological support**

REGIO B2: All EvalNet members are invited to fill in the survey indicating their needs for support by the Evaluation HelpDesk.

FR: What needs can be addressed?

REGIO B2: at this stage, many Managing Authorities are consulting the HelpDesk on their draft evaluation plans, notably on timing and strategy. The HelpDesk is meant to support the development of evaluation capacity and to give methodological support.

CZ: The methodological support was useful in designing a complex evaluation. There is also the possibility to peer review concluded evaluations, but CZ found the support more useful in preparation of the tender or in reviewing inception reports, so that the evaluation can start with the right approach.

4. Conclusion

REGIO B2 thanked everyone for joining in person and online and remarked on the value of interaction during in-person meetings. Upcoming meetings will be organised either fully in person or online.

4. Next steps

Another Evaluation Network meeting will be organised in late Q3 – early Q4 2022.

List of participants

The meeting was attended by 55 participants: 37 governmental experts, 3 external speakers from the REGIO contractors SCIL, Prognos and PPMI and 15 representatives from DG REGIO.