

# **Minutes of the expert group Evaluation Network Meeting with Member States**

Brussels, 25/09/2019

## Minutes

Evaluation Network Meeting with Member States (EVALNET)

21<sup>st</sup> June 2019, Bucharest

- 1. Approval of the agenda**
- 2. Nature of the meeting**

The Head of Evaluation and European Semester Unit (B.2), Ms. Hristcheva, opened the meeting of EVALNET and welcomed the participants. The meeting was organised at the end of the second day of the 8<sup>th</sup> Conference on the Evaluation of EU Cohesion Policy “Investing in our Shared Future”, in Bucharest.

The meeting was organised exclusively for the members of the EVALNET network.

Ms. Hristcheva introduced Mr. Ward – APPLICA Director of Studies- to present the company’s past experiences on evaluation and peer reviewing activities, and she encouraged participants to intervene, to arise questions and comments on that topic.

The meeting aimed to give the possibility to MAs and state actors involved in the evaluation process to express the main issues they are facing in conducting good quality evaluations, the results they have achieved, and to talk about room for further improvements.

Moreover, the unit aimed to understand what type of support the MS need more, and how they would like to be supported.

- 3. Presentation of APPLICA activities**

Mr. Ward provided information on the types of activities APPLICA runs in the framework of the Evaluation Helpdesk activities:

- reviewing the evaluation plans produced by MS and providing support to improve them;
- reviewing evaluations of programmes supported by Cohesion Policy on the 2007-2013 programming period and on the current one, producing summaries and assessments of those;

- conducting peer reviews of evaluations and undertaking specific analysis of selected evaluations, and supporting the MAs in specific evaluation issues;
- organizing summer schools and trainings each year on evaluation topics.

Mr. Ward pointed out that, among others, the main objective of the Evaluation Helpdesk is to strengthen the expertise of the EC and the MAs to improve the quality of evaluation. APPLICA has produced 750 reviews of evaluations so far, and the quality assessment is particularly focused on impact evaluations.

It aims to produce summaries of the evaluation findings, including the several approaches used to conduct the evaluations; to produce metro analysis of evaluation findings, in different thematic areas, or in relation to TOs; and to analyse them. Additionally, peer reviews allow assessing where the EU funds seem to be more effective.

The impact evaluations can be divided in several groups:

- a) evaluations, whose methods seem to be appropriate in relation to the evaluation questions, and therefore generators of reliable results;
- b) evaluations conducting without appropriate methods, which produce not reliable and trustworthy results;
- c) result-oriented evaluations, which monitor what is going on in particular areas, and able to identify the net effect of policy as such. An example could be the ESF evaluations, particularly the Youth Employment Initiative.

APPLICA representative highlighted the difference between result and impact evaluations. Result oriented evaluation primarily depends on the meaning one assigns to what a *result* is. Result could be the number of people supported through EU projects to find a job. The key issue APPLICA delegate underlined was whether the targeted people who look for a job find it as the solely result of the policy implemented or thanks to other external factors.

In addition, Mr. Ward took as example the YEI evaluation to stress the difference between the monitoring results and assessment of impact. A large proportion of the people supported by the action, with a tertiary level of education, have found a job. One can expect those targeted group of people would have found a job also without the EU support. On the other hand, the impact evaluation shows that a smaller proportion of people, with secondary school diploma, supported thanks to the YEI initiative, have managed to find an employment. The impact

evaluation has underlined that the effect of the policy has been more evident on the latter group, rather than on the first group mentioned.

After that clarification, APPLICA delegate stated that most of the evaluations the company reviews are monitoring evaluations, because they do not go further into the effects of the policy.

APPLICA assessments on the reliability of the MS evaluations could be at the disposal of the MAs to help them to consider the strengths and weakness of their completed evaluations. APPLICA can provide assistance to MAs on several areas, including deciding which evaluation methods to be used, how to draft the Term of Reference and to decide the evaluation questions. Support will be provided by high-level evaluation expert with the Helpdesk personnel. APPLICA highlighted that only 25% of the evaluations are considered reliable.

The Head of REGIO.B2 emphasised that the helpdesk support would be a one-to-one relationship: if MAs are interested, it is possible to discuss on the methods the helpdesk uses to define the evaluations reliability.

### **Questions & Answers**

Participants asked where they could find the results concerning the reliability of evaluations conducted.

REGIO.B2 replied they could find a synthesis in the Staff Working Document produced by the EC, based on the EC annual summary of AIRs. They are also available in the online evaluation library. The added value of the Evaluation Helpdesk support relates to the fact that the MS can have also the expert assessment on the quality of the methodologies applied and the degree of reliability of impact evaluations. The key issue REGIO.B2 pointed out was on whether the MS want this feedback and in which form.

The participants assessed that it is not always simple to use the library and have access to the data.

REGIO.B2 stated that they hope to soon put the list of evaluations and abstracts of reviewed evaluations on the ESIFOpenData platform. All evaluations listed on the website can be downloaded from the catalogue. The summaries are in the evaluations library on Inforegio.

Some MS shared the positive experiences on peer reviewing; thus, it was proposed to organise similar workshops and meetings, and to divide them in various parts: one organised for MAs and the national coordinating authorities; another workshop opened to suppliers and companies that conduct the evaluations. Finally, the MS suggested sharing good and bad practices with the others.

REGIO.B2 emphasised that the decision to share is up to each MS, it cannot be compulsory; on the other hand, the unit could plan meetings to anonymously share practices and peer reviews.

APPLICA stressed that they have shifted the approach, and they are currently analysing evaluations, by reflecting on the whole process that has conducted national experts to produce the final product, including the term of reference, the evaluation questions, the inception and progress reports. They have realised that some inherent problems in producing good evaluations could be detected not only in the final phase, but also at the beginning of the process. Taking into consideration the overall process, from methods and the used and collected data, they could support the national authorities to improve the quality of the final evaluations. Although the original intention of the peer review exercise was to review only the results, APPLICA found out that a large part of the problems were at the preliminary stage. This is the reason that led APPLICA and the REGIO.B2 to involve the MAs and the main state actors involved in the evaluation process, in order to disentangle and analyse together the main issues, which could arise during the whole process.

APPLICA briefly explained the experience in peer review evaluation, in the previous programming period and in the current one. It focused the attention on the work undertaken on assessing and analysing completed evaluations, ongoing ones and on the evaluations planned to be run by the MS. In the last 2 years, APPLICA peer reviewed programmes supported by ERDF in Estonia, Tuscany, Check Republic and Hungary; three high-level evaluation experts has supported the company, in order to provide guidance on the best methods to use and on the necessary data to carry out the evaluation.

Mr. Ward highlighted that the advice and lessons they provide can affect the ongoing evaluations, as well as the future planned evaluations.

A MS noted that, given that the quality assurance sometimes lacks, it has decided to undertake the peer review during the process to launch the evaluations. That was a method to deeply understand which and how use the relevant evaluation questions. The MS underlined it is interested in the results of peer reviews, and it proposed to organise a workshop in order to present and reflect on the most problematic issues in conducting good quality evaluation, and to anonymously share the best practices.

Another MS stated it has had positive experiences with peer reviews. In the past, it adhered too strictly to the national procurement regulation, and this attitude has led to achieve not so positive results when it comes to quality of evaluation. Thanks to peer review meetings and workshops, it has learnt to select more experienced evaluators and to focus more on the quality of evaluation, rather than on quantity.

Some MS underlined that MAs sometimes are not aware of the newest methodologies available to carry out good quality evaluations; they face problems related to the translation of specific terminology, it can happen that experts working in the evaluation sector are sometimes not aware of problems and issues the programmers have. Those problems could lead to serious misunderstanding and delays. Some MS asked whether it could be possible to receive support on cross border cooperation. Finally, a MS proposed to introduce more visualising tools in order to clearly explain the concepts, to make people and politicians more aware and able to understand what experts are doing.

APPLICA recalled it can organise meetings and conferences at the national and local level, to meet the need of MAs. In this respect, Mr. Ward assed the importance of capacity building.

In addition, APPLICA suggested the MAs to set clear evaluation purposes and priorities, and to undertake evaluations that will deliver the results they aim to get. Moreover, it was suggested to let the expert evaluators provide suggestions and policy recommendations. Finally, when the case arises, it was recommended to select external evaluators who have in-depth experience and understanding of the programme or projects they are going to evaluate.

APPLICA, as provider of peer reviews, would like to receive more feedback about “what happens after the peer review process?”, “what has actually changed?”

APPLICA and the REGIO.B2 replied that the evaluation library on Inforegio is the forum where they can find guidelines, tools, data and more visual information to be used at the

national and local level, to explain what the Cohesion policy is and what type of projects the ESI Funds are supporting.

Some MS urged APPLICA and REGIO.B2 to allow more participants to take part in summer schools on evaluations. They stated all the MAs should have the opportunity to participate to get a more comprehensive overview of the work undertaken in the other EU MS.

As to the possibility to increase the number of available places to participate in summer schools on evaluation, APPLICA highlighted that the workshops' success depends on the limited number of participants (maximum 40 participants). The alternative is to organise training seminars in the MS requiring it.

In addition, REGIO.B2 underlined EVALNET is the regular contact point between the MS and the EC as to the evaluation work, they should transmit all the questions risen from the MS to us and vice versa. Finally, it stressed the importance to build up personal capacity and to make the effort to maintain and strengthen it.

#### **4. Conclusions**

REGIO.B2 announced the plan to launch a call for expression of interest and it would like to have feedback from MS on the type of support MS want to have, in order to adopt a more strategic approach for the next 3 years. In this respect, it has prepared a survey for the MAs.

The Head of Evaluation and European Semester Unit, Ms. Hristcheva, closed the meeting, thanked the participants and expressed gratitude for the process which has led to the creation of the new set of ERDF/CF indicators for the future MFF.

#### **5. List of participants**

The meeting was attended by 28 governmental experts representing 17 Member States.