



BUILDING THE EVALUATION CULTURE IN TUSCANY - LOCAL LEVEL LEADER EVALUATION SUPPORT FOR LAGS

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STRENGTHENING LOCAL LEVEL EVALUATIONS

LEADER in the past was only the subject of evaluations at the RDP level, but in the programming period 2014-2020, Local Action Groups (LAGs) are asked to go one step further. According to Article 34.3 g) of the Common Provision Regulation 1303/2013, each LAG shall carry out specific monitoring and evaluation activities linked to their CLLD strategy. In practice, this may include a self-assessment or optionally even an independent external evaluation of their CLLD strategy. To organise this process has been particularly challenging for LAGs, but also for the Managing Authorities and other actors (NRNs) aiming to guide and support LAGs in these exercises.

This factsheet focuses on Tuscany's efforts to strengthen evaluation knowledge and culture among the LAGs and other evaluation stakeholders.



BUILDING EVALUATION KNOWLEDGE THROUGH A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

While evaluation activities can be very helpful and provide deeper insights at the local level it has become clear that to achieve this it requires a specific skill set that is not always available within the staff of LAGs. Nevertheless, Tuscany believed that this could serve as an opportunity:

- to equip LAGs with new and profitable skills that could be used beyond the fulfilment of any obligation;
- to illustrate the role of evaluation both at the local and programme level and the benefits it can bring about to improve performance.

Therefore, the objective of this evaluation support activity was to coordinate, guide and support all seven LAGs in Tuscany with their first attempt at local level LEADER evaluation activities. This support process was based on a participative and inclusive approach. The support period started in October 2019 and concluded in February 2021 with the objective to create a methodology suited to each LAG's needs and capabilities. The building blocks and the methodological framework were the same for each LAG and included the standard evaluation question, judgement criteria, indicators structure, but the contents were different for each LAG according to their needs and specific situation. By doing so this activity provided each LAG with the essential knowledge and capacity to either organise their own self-assessment or know what to look for when contracting an optional external evaluator for an evaluation.



FURTHER INFORMATION

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<https://www.regione.toscana.it/psr-2014-2020/gestione-e-sorveglianza/monitoraggio-e-valutazione1>



Furthermore, this support activity looked to stimulate LAGs to go beyond simply fulfilling the requirement and instead to help them to truly understand the meaning of evaluation, which can also be used as a tool to improve their performance and better implement their strategies for the future. It is important to highlight the importance of this activity for the evaluation of LEADER at the RDP level as it gives more capacity to LAGs and can therefore assist in the collection of more robust data making it more useful and informative.

The main actors that were involved were the Region, MA, facilitating evaluator, LAGs, local authorities and other stakeholders/beneficiaries. The evaluator in this process served as an evaluation expert that 'facilitated' the LAG level self-assessment activities.

This process was divided into two main stages:

1. The facilitating evaluator backed by the Region and the MA carried out various participatory activities involving LAGs, other evaluation stakeholders and local authorities (e.g. mayors and preminent local authorities) to identify what the main topics of evaluation could be and to structure a systematic methodology that would allow LAGs to answer the evaluation questions identified.

2. In the second stage, LAGs practiced the instruments to carry out their own self-assessments (or optionally to contract an external evaluator). At this stage, the role of the facilitating evaluator was still important because LAGs could/can still consult them as an expert to solve any criticalities they may encounter. During this stage LAGs could also reach out to other stakeholders to collect primary data that would help them to better grasp the scenario.

In the first stage, the facilitating evaluator used a mix of primary and secondary data in supporting LAGs to prepare the assessment through the established evaluation framework. Context indicators were used to provide a detailed overview of the circumstances in which LAGs operate and that influence their work.

In the second phase, LAGs collected both primary and secondary data necessary to answer their evaluation questions.

It was important for the facilitating evaluator that during this support activity the LAGs come up with their own evaluation questions and themes in order to make this process as tailor-made as possible. To nudge LAGs into this process, the facilitating evaluator carried out many activities, some included all Tuscan LAGs while others were conducted as one on one sessions. The latter focused on encouraging LAGs to highlight the main issues they faced while implementing their Local Development Strategies (LDS), including both exogenous and endogenous factors. LAGs often wanted to understand and analyse how their strategy contributed to different objectives, such as attractiveness of tourism and increasing farm competitiveness.

Example of an output from a workshop for a LAG's self assessment



These participatory sessions included:

4 Workshops during which both participants and organisers worked together to come up with both tangible and intangible outputs. The facilitating evaluator used different methods including, brainstorming, group concept mapping, priority scales, outcome mapping and theory of change. The meetings included all LAGs and were meant to open a dialogue regarding the greatest needs.

4 Focus groups were carried out to delve into the topics and themes that came up during the workshops. This technique was used to go one step beyond the definition of the themes and to better put them into sub-themes that would be easier to tackle and evaluate. Focus groups were also important because they dealt with key issues linked with methodologies and understanding the complexities of the evaluation processes.

28 Coaching sessions, these activities were conducted both individually and collectively. The sessions were focused on developing and structuring the methodological framework for each element LAGs identified in the previous activities. This activity was intended to make each LAG comfortable with the themes they would take forward for their self-assessments and the methods best suited to answer their evaluation questions. Additionally, it served as a place for LAGs to discuss their needs and capabilities. In this sense, the guidance process conducted by the facilitating evaluator was aimed at equipping LAGs with the expertise and skills necessary to conduct their required evaluation related activities, self-assessments and/or optionally contracting an external evaluator.

Due to the nature of local level assessments, either as a self-assessment or external evaluation, there is not a unique set of indicators to be used, which is why in this case the methodological framework was

built for and with each LAG in order to answer the evaluation questions identified by them. The information needed was later defined at the LAG level once the evaluation questions were defined.

The project is now fully in the hands of LAGs who are carrying out their own self-assessments or managing the optional external evaluations. With that said, the support provided by the facilitating evaluator is not finished, as anytime a LAG encounters difficulties, they can contact the facilitating evaluator for clarifications and support regarding both methodologies and content.

Together with the MA, LAGs asked the facilitating evaluator to be more active and supportive during the second phase as well, even though this could potentially undermine some of the 'independence' of their self-assessments. In this case, however, it was deemed essential to have the facilitating evaluator more involved in order to further support the LAGs, instead of leaving them on their own. All of the stakeholders involved, following the LAGs' input, decided to keep working together to avoid shallow and unproductive self-assessments/optional external evaluations. Moreover, this allowed the evaluation activities at the local level to produce useful information that could be used by the RDP evaluator for a better understanding of the territory during evaluations at the regional level.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

MAIN CHALLENGES:

It is very important that each LAG achieves the same level of confidence with their evaluation activities/self-assessments (a sort of minimum standard), otherwise not all of them will manage to get the most out of this activity.

Most LAGs have been around for a long time and their staff is accustomed with the standard activities they must perform. However, conducting self-assessments/evaluation activities requires training and growth because it needs a specific skill set that not everyone has.

LAGs are overloaded with work and other responsibilities and the required self-assessment/evaluation activities are often labelled as just the next administrative and legal burden.

SOLUTIONS FOR THE FUTURE:

One on one coaching sessions allowed LAGs to ask and discuss specific aspects that helped them to customise their frameworks and better understand their self-assessment/evaluation activities. Even though such activities can be time consuming and resource intensive, the results certainly pay off.

LAGs have been more receptive to this exercise because it not only helped them to comply with self-assessment/evaluation activities, but also, because it included them in the whole process and showed them the value of the new skills and how they can be useful for future implementations.

Showing LAGs the added benefits of these activities helped to change their mindset and approach towards them as they learned that it can be very handy also for when they monitor their performance and have to decide whether to reallocate resources or not, both in terms of strategy and administration. For this to happen it is vital that the MA allocate sufficient resources and time to teach LAGs these new skills and to build evaluation culture.



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EVALUATION WORKS!



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