European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

European Commission

GUIDELINES

EVALUATION OF NATIONAL RURAL NETWORKS 2014-2020

JULY 2016

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EUROPEAN EVALUATION HELPDESK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

European Network for Rural Development

The Evaluation Helpdesk is responsible for the evaluation function within the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) by providing guidance on the evaluation of RDPs and policies falling under the remit and guidance of DG AGRI's Unit E.4 'Evaluation and studies' of the European Commission (EC). In order to improve the evaluation of EU rural development policy the Evaluation Helpdesk supports all evaluation stakeholders, in particular DG AGRI, national authorities, RDP managing authorities and evaluators, through the development and dissemination of appropriate methodologies and tools; the collection and exchange of good practices; capacity building, and communicating with network members on evaluation related topics.

Additional information about the activities of European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development is available on the Internet through the Europa server (http://enrd.ec.europa.eu).

GUIDELINES

EVALUATION OF NATIONAL RURAL NETWORKS 2014-2020

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CONTENT

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ACRONYM LIST

AIR	Annual Implementation Report
AWU	Annual Work Units
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CCI	Common Context Indicators
CEQ	Common Evaluation Questions
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CMES	Common Monitoring and Evaluation System
CO	Common objective
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
EARDF	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EIP	European Innovation Partnership
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
EQ	Evaluation Question
EP	Evaluation Plan
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESI	European Structural and Investment
EU	European Union
FA	Focus Area
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GIS	Geographic information system
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IL	Intervention Logic
JC	Judgement Criteria
LAG	Local Action Group
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
MA	Managing Authority
MAPP	Method for Impact Assessment of Programmes and Project
MS	Member State
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRN	National Rural Network
NRNP	National Rural Network Programme
NSU	Network Support Unit
O	Output indicators

OP	Operational Programme
PA	Paying Agency
PSEQ	Programme Specific Evaluation Question
PSI	Programme specific impacts
PSO	Programme specific objective
PSR	Programme specific result
R	Result indicators
RACER	Relevant, Accepted, Credible, Easy, Robust
RD	Rural Development
RDP	Rural Development Programme
SFC	Shared Fund Management Common System
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time dependent
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
SG	Steering Group
SNA	Social Network Analysis
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
TA	Technical Assistance
ToR	Terms of Reference
WD	Working Document

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Guidelines for the evaluation of national rural networks

National rural networks (NRNs), group administrations and organisations active in rural development. NRNs were introduced for the first time in the EU rural development policy of 2007-2013 and have been carried over into the 2014-2020 programming period.

NRNs can either operate as a specific intervention within a single Rural Development Programme (RDP), financed from Technical Assistance or be established as a stand-alone programme with an independent budget[1] (national rural network programme – NRNP)[2]. In the programming period 2014-2020 most NRNs are established as part of a RDP, with the exception of Germany, Italy and France who have chosen to establish NRNPs.

NRNs are subject to monitoring and evaluation, similar to the last programming period. The NRN´s achievements, results and impacts should be assessed to improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of NRN operations[3]. The assessment of NRNs should also encompass the NRN's effects on the domains of human and social capital, e.g. broader rural networking and improved governance in rural areas.

The evaluation plan of the RDP[4], a mandatory component in the period 2014-2020, specifies the evaluation activities planned for the NRN. NRNPs have their own evaluation plans.

Why do we need guidelines for the evaluation of NRNs?

Experience with NRN evaluation in the last programming period has shown that many mid-term evaluators still focused on outputs when assessing NRN achievements and therefore stayed at the monitoring level. Some advanced evaluations assessed the contribution of the NRN to RDP objectives (effectiveness) and to a certain extent the added value of NRN activities. However, many challenges were faced in these evaluation experiences, primarily due to limited guidance and the capacity of the stakeholders involved.

The analysis of NRN evaluations showed that support is needed, in particular with regard to the establishment of a coherent intervention logic, the definition of appropriate programme-specific indicators (especially at result and impact level), conceptual issues in assessing rural network´s results/impacts, effects on broader networking, and the added value.

Challenges with respect to the evaluation of NRNs were addressed in the guidelines for the ex post evaluation of RDPs 2007-2013. These guidelines and existing experiences can be utilised for the ex post evaluation of the NRN, due at the end of 2016 (as part of the RDP evaluation or stand-alone). The results of the ex post evaluation of the NRN can serve as a baseline for the evaluation of the NRN in 2017.

The new legal framework and the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES) in 2014-2020 provides more common elements for constructing the NRN intervention logic and the NRN monitoring and evaluation system. **These elements include the common NRN objectives, the**

[1] In case of Member States with regional RDPs
[2] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54.1
[3] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art. 54
[4] Guidelines: Establishing and implementing the evaluation plan of 2014-2020 RDPs, Helpdesk of European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, Brussels, 2014

common groups of actions, the common evaluation question[5] **and three common output indicators**[6].

Member States are expected to further develop the common evaluation elements provided in the CMES with a view to allow for proper evaluations of their NRNs. While the common elements represent the basis for NRN evaluation they need to be completed with programme-specific objectives and groups of actions. Member States also need to develop NRN specific output indicators, set up programme-specific evaluation questions and develop the respective result and impact indicators to measure NRN achievements. This approach is even more important when the National Support Units (NSU) decide to conduct stand-alone evaluations of NRNs.

How and by whom have these guidelines been developed?

The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development has established a thematic working group in order to provide NRN evaluation stakeholders with specific support in conducting the necessary tasks for preparing and conducting the NRN evaluation. The outcome of this thematic working group are the guidelines hereby presented. These guidelines serve to complement the existing evaluation guidelines[7] for the 2014-2020 programming period and are fully aligned with them.

Guidelines for the evaluation of National Rural Networks 2014-2020 have been drafted by a team of evaluation experts from the European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development (Sari Rannanpää, Marili Parissaki, Robert Lukesch, Magda Porta, Jela Tvrdonova and Hannes Wimmer). Representatives of DG Agriculture and Rural Development have ensured the coherence of the guidelines within the EU policy framework. Representatives from the Member States have commented on the outline and on draft versions of the guidelines during the 7th and 8th meetings of the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP and during the Sounding Board[8] meeting. Additionally, written comments have been received and integrated. Members of National Rural Networks as well as of the ENRD Contact Point have been confronted with main elements during several meetings with National Rural Networks and provided important inputs for fine-tuning the contents.

The present guidelines intend to support stakeholders in Member States in developing the NRN intervention logic, assess the effectiveness and efficiency of NRN interventions and NRN´s added value throughout the programming period.

Who is the target group of the guidelines?

The guidelines for NRN evaluation have been drafted for different groups of rural development stakeholders:

- **Representatives of Managing Authorities** will find the information on the purpose and scope of NRN evaluation, including a list of legal references, which have to be fulfilled by Member States/regions. Furthermore, they will find guidance and practical tools, which will help them throughout the process of managing, coordinating and steering the NRN evaluation, as well as disseminating the evaluation results.
- **Evaluators** will find further explanations of the legal texts and rationale behind the requirements, with the aim to create a common understanding of the task. The guidelines also clarify the role and development of evaluation questions and indicators, and propose evaluation approaches and methods for collecting evidence to conduct the assessment of the networks' effects.

[5] Working Document: Common Evaluation Questions for Rural Development Programme of 2014-2020, http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/evaluation-helpdesks-publications
[6] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Article 14
[7] "Guidelines for the Ex ante evaluation of 2014-2020 RDPs" and "Guidelines: Establishing and implementing the evaluation plan of 2014-2020 RDPs"
[8] Sounding Board of the Thematic working group on NRN guidelines was composed of representatives of DG AGRI, of the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating of the CAP 2014-2020 and of the ENRD Contact Point.

- **Actors involved in operating the NRN**, such as the NSU, Paying Agency, implementing bodies, Monitoring Committee, coordination bodies and network members (LAGs, Regional Managing Authorities in the case of NRNPs and beneficiaries) may use the guidelines as a source of information, when contributing to evaluation through data / information collection.
- **Officials within DG Agriculture and Rural Development** dealing with RDPs and NRNPs who may find it helpful to have a reference point summarising the common understanding of the purpose and the tasks of network evaluation.
- **Other stakeholders** that might be interested in the evaluation of EU rural networks.

How are the guidelines for NRN evaluations structured?

The guidelines on the evaluation of NRNs have been structured in three parts and are connected through cross-links provided in the text.

PART I addresses mainly managing authorities and the NSU as the commissioning party for the NRN evaluation, but also other stakeholders interested in planning and preparing the NRN evaluation. It explains the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders who are or might be involved in the NRN evaluation. It also outlines the key steps in NRN evaluation – such as planning, preparing, as well as conducting the NRN evaluation and disseminating, communicating and following-up on the NRN evaluation results.

PART II provides guidance for two options of NRN evaluation: (1) evaluation of the NRN as part of the Technical Assistance within the RDP; (2) "stand-alone" evaluation, which includes the evaluation of a NRN programme (NRNP) or the stand-alone evaluation of the NRN even if it is part of an RDP (as a self-standing evaluation topic). It contains information on structuring, observing, analysing and judging in the evaluation of NRN and particular steps which should be covered during the evaluation process.

PART III (Toolbox) includes and indicative template for Terms of Reference for NRN evaluation during the programming period, as well as examples of the output-result-impact chains.

1.2 Networks and networking in EU rural development policy

The European Union has recognised the importance of networking in rural areas. In 2007, networks and networking among rural development stakeholders was introduced as an instrument to support the implementation of EU rural development policy. Positive experiences with national rural networks and with the European Network for Rural Development in the programming period 2007 – 2013, has led to greater support for networking in 2014 - 2020, through involving more stakeholders and facilitating more activities at Member State and EU level. Moreover, networking has become a fundamental instrument to foster innovation in all EU policies.

Networks and networking have always represented a powerful tool for learning and for improving the wellbeing in rural areas. Networks have helped to generate and multiply new social capital, such as a sense of sharing, changing behaviour, developing common capacities, new knowledge and skills, production and exchange of goods and services, fostering innovation, and enhancing the trust among network members.

Definition of networks

It is vital to define what a network is when using networks as an instrument to support the implementation of rural development policy and when assessing whether a network accomplished its purpose and objectives. In scientific literature, a network is defined as a "web of interactions", which is composed of a set of actors such as organisations, groups or individuals (nodes) and the relationships and connections that exist among these actors (linkages)[9].

A network can be informal or formal[10]:

- **Informal networks** tend to be bottom-up, created by individuals, and based on common interest. They usually grow naturally, with no predefined resources or operational rules (with the exception of any social norms which might apply), and exist due to the added value anticipated by network members in their pursuit of a common goal (e.g. a farmers' group with the goal of improved market access);
- **Formal networks** usually have an explicitly defined purpose, resources and rules for operations. Formal networks can either be top-down structures defined and/or imposed by an authority (e.g. as policy networks[11]), or can be developed in a bottom-up fashion and formalised through registration and formal recognition by a relevant authority (e.g. by ministries, state agencies, etc.).

Rural networks in the EU

Rural networks in the EU are a combination of both – formal and informal networks. They are formally established by authorities and operate within the rural context. In line with EU policy objectives EU rural networks contribute to the development of rural areas.

- The **European network for rural development** (ENRD) has been established by the legal framework[12] for the "networking of national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development at Union level".
- **National rural networks** are further defined as networks which "group the organisations and administrations involved in rural development"[13] within Members States.
- The **European Innovation Partnership (EIP) for agricultural productivity and sustainability** – the "EIP-AGRI Network" is a new network[14] introduced in the programming period 2014-2020 to support networking among "operational groups, advisory services and researchers" to foster innovation in the practical implementation of rural development policy.

Rural networks in the EU also connect many different informal networks, such as voluntary farmers' organisations, LAG's and respective associations, rural NGOs, educational and research institutes, business clusters, etc. These informal networks link beneficiaries to the practical implementation of rural development policy and provide the possibility of an opportunity for information exchange between EU, RDP and local level. Informal networks facilitate the development of existing potentials to achieve NRN and RD objectives.

Formal rural networks may also have some informal characteristics, e.g. concerning governance or interactions between stakeholders.

Structure of networks

The network structure heavily influences the nature of networking between its members. It can be centralized or decentralized[15]. Centralized networks have a central node, which communicates to its

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[9] Roelofs, M. (2004), Criteria for the evaluation of public action taking place within networks, Netherlands Court of Audit, The Hague

[10] What do we know about networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)?, ENRD, Discussion Paper, Version 2 (June 2012)

[11] What do we know about networking as a Rural Development Policy Tool (2007-2013)?, ENRD, Discussion Paper, Version 2 (June 2012)

[12] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 53.1

[13] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54.1

[14] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 53, 55, 56 and 57

[15] Wassermann, Stanley and Faust, Katherine, *Social Network Analysis. Methods and applications,* Cambridge University Press, 1994

members separately. Decentralized networks are characterized by multiple connections between the members.

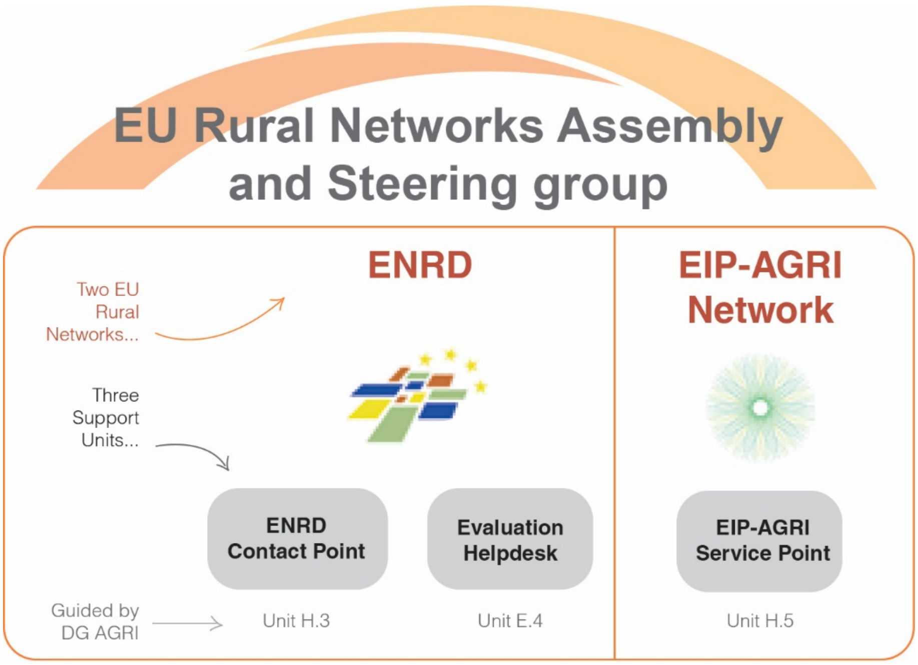
Rural networks in the EU tend to have a centralised structure as they are built around NSUs serving as the central node, which are contracted by the commissioning party, in this case DG AGRI. Still they should encourage more decentralised communication among their members, as well as outside them, reaching other groups of stakeholders.

The **structure of the ENRD** has two support units with distinct functions:

- The **ENRD Contact Point** supports DG AGRI in running the ENRD and provides a focal point for ENRD activities. It supports networking and cooperation among rural development stakeholders at EU and national level, and it ensures the communication with and among them and, at national level, it undertakes thematic analysis and organises various networking events.
- The **ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk** is responsible for supporting DG AGRI, Member States and evaluation stakeholders in meeting the objectives of the common monitoring and evaluation system for rural development.

The **structure of the EIP-AGRI Network** has one support unit – the **EIP-AGRI Service Point**. It acts as a mediator within the network, enhancing communication and cooperation between everyone with an interest in innovating agriculture: farmers, researchers, advisers, businesses, environmental groups, consumer interest groups and other NGOs.

Figure 1. Governance structure of EU rural networks



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

How are NRNs modelled?

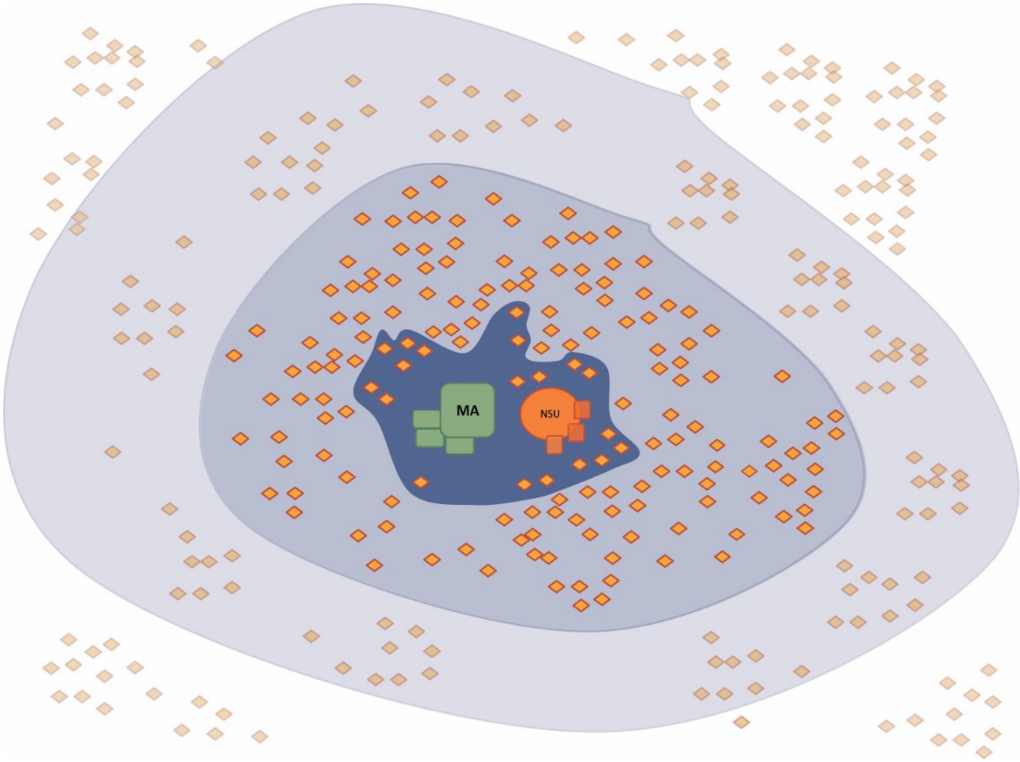
NRNs are composed of three main constitutive sub-systems:

a. **The commissioning party** is the stakeholder which sets up and fosters the NRN. It commissions the NSU (in-house, by delegation or by contracting) to build up and support the network. The commissioning party can be a single **organisation** (frequently the **Managing Authority**) or a **cooperation system** involving several (governmental and civil society) institutions.

b. The **network support unit** (NSU), regardless of being embedded in the MA or contracted out, is an **organisation** with the task to build up and support the NRN. It is typically the central node in the NRN. The NSU communicates with network members, facilitates thematic and analytical exchange and shares relevant information. The NSU also prepares and conducts trainings for LAGs, supports cooperation projects, encourages networking among advisors and innovation support services, enables sharing and dissemination of RDP related monitoring and evaluation findings, and participates/contributes to the ENRD's activities[16].
c. The **NRN** is a **network** whose boundaries are fuzzy by definition, composed of all actors addressed in the course of NRN activities, either directly or at least potentially involved as contributors or users, or both. In principle, the NRN also includes actors under points a. and b.

The following diagram gives an example of a typical NRN architecture:

Figure 2. NRN architecture



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

The actors in the **core field** collaborate with each other on a regular basis. They can be considered as a cooperation system. The commissioning party (MA) is symbolised by large green rectangles. Small green rectangles are other institutions with specific responsibilities concerning the supervision of the NSU. The NSU (b) is represented by an orange circle; in our case we suppose that an external consortium has been entrusted to run the NSU. The consortium partners are symbolized by orange squares with thick orange contours. Further key actors (orange diamonds with red contours) are involved in the core (e.g. in a monitoring committee or as regular knowledge providers). In line with the

[16] Regulaton (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54.3

legal framework the partnership consists[17] of 'competent public authorities', 'economic and social partners' and 'bodies representing the civil society' and represented in the core field.[18]

The **second field,** confined with a dotted line, comprises rural actors being among the key clients or contributors of NSU services, such as LAGs, advisory services, educational institutions, universities, etc.

Further outward in the **third field,** the actors are less involved, limited to distinct themes and to certain occasions such as information workshops.

The **outermost field** indicates actors which are more or less passive, but kept on the screen of the core actors as potential contributors or users of network activities.

All the actors and the field as a whole, that's the entire NRN (c). These actors are mutually interlinked in many ways, although this is not shown in the diagram for clarity reasons.

In spite of the general NRN architecture described above, each NRN may develop its own definition and draw up the map of its architecture, e.g. through using stakeholder analysis methods[19]. In reality, there might be different situations among Member State in the NRN architecture[20]. For example, the NSU might have contracted regional nodes to reach NRN members better. In some NRNs the membership is more restricted, in others it is more open.

Understanding the individual network´s definition and structure is important for the NRN evaluation

1.3 Why and how to evaluate the NRNs?

The purpose of NRN evaluation

NRNs are one of the key components in EU Rural Development Policy. As such, they are subject to evaluation throughout the programming period[21].

The legal acts[22] define specific policy objectives for NRNs in order to contribute to the implementation of the European Union's rural development policy:

a) increase the stakeholders´ involvement in the implementation of rural development,
b) improve the quality of implementation of Rural Development Programmes,
c) inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities, and
d) foster innovation in agriculture, food processing, forestry and rural areas.

Evaluation helps to assess the achievement of the objectives through results, impacts and the added value[23] of the NRN's activities. This contributes to improving the design, quality and implementation of network activities and helps to justify and legitimise the funds spent. Evaluation

[17] Regulation 1303/2013 Art. 5
[18] Presentation by Antonella Zona (DG AGRI): "The shape of NRNs – now and in future" held in the Good Practice Workshop of the Rural Evaluation Helpdesk:" National Rural Networks: How to show their benefits." Rome, 10-11 April 2014. https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/assets/pdf/evaluation/national-rural-networks/GPW_10_NRN_shape.pdf
[19] Stakeholders analysis offer various international donors, such as WHO: http://www.who.int/workforcealliance/knowledge/toolkit/33.pdf, World Bank http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/anticorrupt/PoliticalEconomy/stakeholderanalysis.htm or FAO: http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/y5702e/y5702e00.htm
[20] http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/networks-and-networking/nrn-toolkit/principles-and-practice-of-networking/network-definitions-and-diversity/en/rural-networks-and-networking_en.html
[21] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 68
[22] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54(2)
[23] The added value produced by NRNs is usually related to the development of social capital, contribution to the creation and development of territorial and individual identity, improvement of governance and, encouragement of information and knowledge exchange.

increase transparency and accountability of NRN interventions by demonstrating to stakeholders and taxpayers how the money was spent.

Forms of NRN evaluation

The evaluation of NRNs can take different forms. In those Member States where the NRN is not a separate programme, the NRN is most commonly evaluated as part of the RDP and only optionally assessed through a separate stand-alone evaluation. By contrast, the NRNP must as any programme always be evaluated through a separate stand-alone evaluation.

NRN evaluations can also be part of thematic evaluations on various subjects. For instance, the thematic evaluation on innovation could include the assessment of the contribution of NRN activities to support innovation partnerships, e.g. transfer of innovative approaches, dissemination of innovative projects supported via RDP measures, etc. This can also include the collaboration of NRN with EIP-Agri Network.

Moreover, NRNs may also chose to conduct a self-assessment of the results, impacts and the achievement of network objectives.

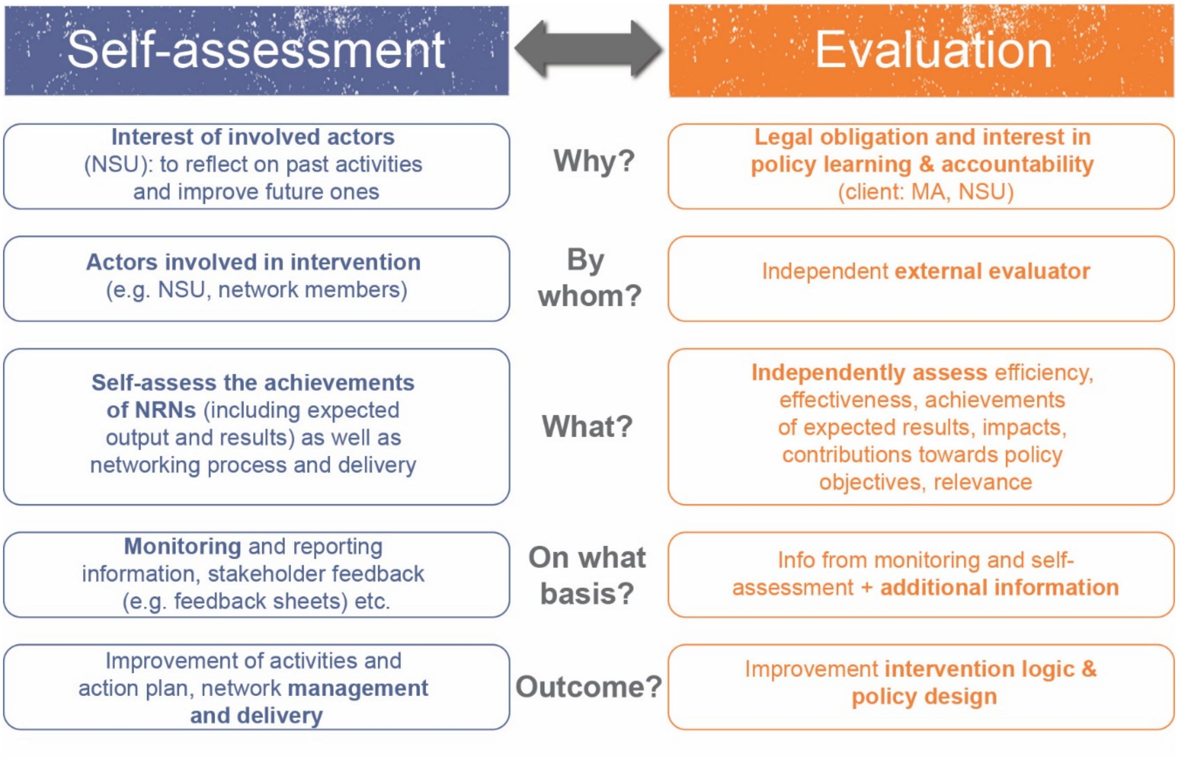
Besides the legal requirements, the chosen form of NRN evaluation will depend on the specific interest of the MA and NSU, and the budget allocated for evaluation.

NRN self-assessment

Self-assessment is a process that is conducted by the NRN itself and consequently generates an inside view of the NRN's activities and performance. This helps involved actors to reflect whether their activities effectively contribute to the achievement of network objectives. External evaluation, by contrast, provides an independent external point of view with similar intention. External evaluation further draws lessons in order to improve the NRN design, interventions and their implementation.

Self-assessment can and should be interlinked with NRN evaluation in order to ensure that the collected evidence can be used as one of the possible information sources when evaluating the NRN's efficiency, effectiveness, results and impacts. Well-established linkages and complementarities between the NRN self-assessment and the NRN evaluation help to reduce the costs of both exercises. This however requires that several actors coordinate and collaborate: the NSU/NRN, the Managing Authority of the programme, and the evaluator (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Comparisons between self-assessment and evaluation of NRN



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

In order to use self-assessment as an effective and self-reflecting learning tool, the actors may want to include the self-assessment of the NRN in their action plan or capacity development plan. A forward-looking planning of self-assessment activities ideally starts at an early stage of NRN implementation.

Self-assessment is often organised as a continuous cycle of activities, periodically involving different actors at different points in time. Typically, qualitative methods to collect evidence are used, such as:

- stakeholder meetings;
- civic groups and citizens' panels;
- focus groups;
- open space;
- feedback sheets from activities;
- needs assessments via surveys, etc.

It is important to choose and adapt a methodology that has been specifically developed and tested for the assessment of networks[24]. Sufficient resources and time needs to be allocated to self-assessment, and its results must feed into the NRN action plan and operations.

Further information on self-assessment tools and methods can be found on the ENRD website[25].

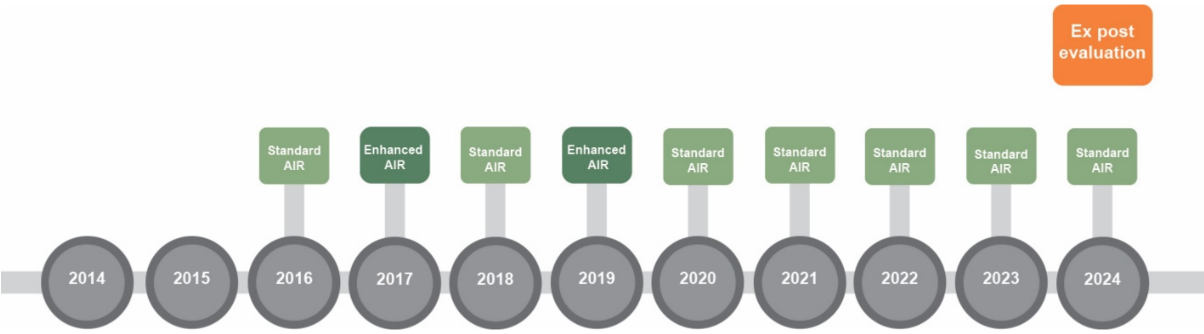
[24] NRN Self-assessment toolkit, ENRD Contact Point. http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/networks-and-networking/nrn-self-assessment-tool-kit/en/index_en.html
[25] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/networking/network-self-assessment

1.4 Requirements of the NRN evaluation in the EU Rural Development Policy

1.4.1 Timeline of legal requirements for evaluation and reporting

The EU legal framework[26] **requires the NRN to be evaluated:** as part of the RDP evaluation for the NRNs included in the programme or as separate evaluations for NRNPs. Information on these evaluations has to be reported throughout the programming period.

Figure 4. NRN evaluation reporting timeline



Source: The European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

Reporting on the NRN(P) evaluation in the Annual Implementation Reports

Each Annual Implementation Report (RDP and NRNP) must contain information on the progress in implementing the evaluation plan[27], including the evaluation activities undertaken, a list and summary of completed evaluations, as well as communication and follow-up activities related to evaluation findings and results. For the NRNs established as part of the RDP, reporting will focus on what has been accomplished in the given year with respect to the NRN evaluation (e.g. the NRN specific evaluation activities, communication on evaluation findings and follow-up), whereas for NRNPs all the listed elements must be reported each year.

Reporting on the NRN(P) evaluation in the AIR 2017 and 2019

The enhanced AIRs to be submitted in 2017 and 2019 must contain the information on the RDP's progress and the quantification of achievements towards programme objectives[28]. In relation to the NRN evaluation, the common evaluation question: „To what extent has the national rural network contributed to achieving the objectives laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54 (2)?" has to be answered already in 2017 for the NRN as part of the RDP and for the NRNP[29], utilising the common output indicators.

Annual implementation reports submitted in 2017 and 2019 should provide **information on the use of all NRN related programme-specific elements** and, if possible, inform on the evaluation results for the **programme-specific NRN related indicators** and answers to the **NRN related programme-specific evaluation questions**.

Reporting on the NRN(P) evaluation in the progress report on the implementation of the Partnership Agreement

The Member States must submit to the Commission a Progress Report on the implementation of the Partnership Agreement by 31 August in 2017 and 2019[30]. These reports inform on NRN-related

[26] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 Art. 68 and Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808!2014, Annex I, Part point 9
[27] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex VII, point 2
[28] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art. 50 and Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex VII, point 7
[29] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex V, point 7
[30] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art. 52

evaluation findings if the NRN assessment included aspects to be reported[31] in the progress report, such as the role of partners, actions taken to reinforce the capacity of the Member State authorities to administer the ESI Funds, as well as the actions taken and progress made with regard to reducing the administrative burden on beneficiaries.

Reporting on the NRN(P) evaluation in the ex post evaluation

Similar to the enhanced Annual Implementation Reports, the ex post evaluation, to be submitted by 31 December 2024[32], has to contain the answer to the CEQ[33] related to NRNs, utilising the common output indicators. In case the programme contains programme-specific NRN related evaluation questions and indicators (e.g. NRN related result and impact indicators), the information on their assessment and answers to programme-specific evaluation questions should be provided.

1.4.2 Focus of the NRN evaluation: what has to be assessed?

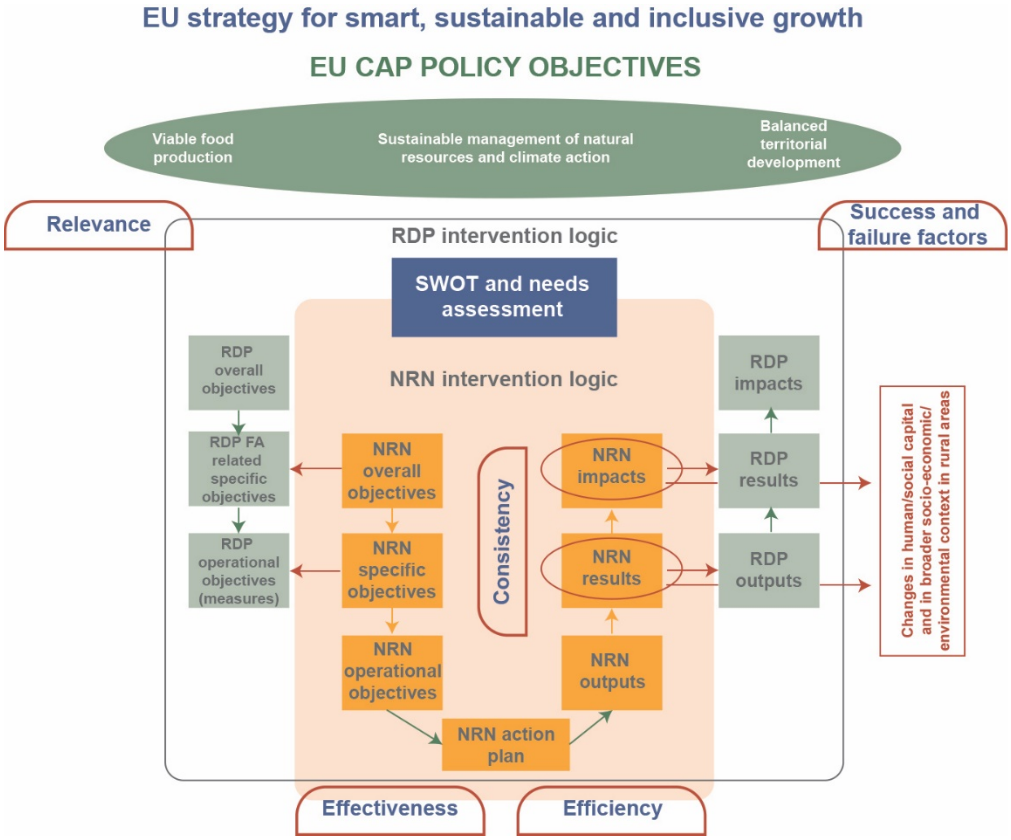
The NRN is set up to accomplish **NRN related objectives** and to contribute **to broader EU rural policy objectives**. They address the priorities of rural development policy and the needs of rural areas (relevance).

To **accomplish/contribute** to the above objectives, the NRN has to produce outputs with the means of inputs via implementing various groups of actions. Outputs should consequently generate NRN **results and impacts** in an **efficient** way and enable the **effective** accomplishment of the NRN's objectives, as well as contribute to EU rural development policy objectives.

The NRN's objectives, activities, outputs, results and impacts are cornerstones of the NRN intervention logic. The internal and external consistency, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the NRN intervention logic is the basic pre-condition of the successful implementation of the NRN over the entire programming period and, at the same time, it represents the focus of the NRN evaluation.

[31] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art 52(2)
[32] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 78
[33] Annex V, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

Figure 5. Focus of NRN evaluation



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

The text below explains the focus of the NRN evaluation in more detail.

Internal consistency and relevance of the NRN intervention logic

NRN objectives

The construction of the NRN(P) intervention logic starts with the NRN's objectives. The legal framework defines four common NRN objectives, which are proposed in the NRN´s hierarchy of objectives as the NRN's overall objectives.

The following **policy objectives** in relation to NRNs are set up **at the EU level**[34]:

- To increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- To improve the quality of implementation of Rural Development Programmes;
- To inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities;
- To foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.

NRN stakeholders can also define programme-specific NRN objectives if the programme SWOT analysis and the needs assessment have identified specific needs which should be addressed by rural networks. The programme-specific NRN objectives can be defined at each level of the NRN´s hierarchy of objectives[35].

There are three levels in the NRN hierarchy of objectives:

- **Overall NRN objectives** (linked with the NRN impacts in the NRN intervention logic):

[34] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54.2
[35] Advice is to formulate programme-specific NRN objectives as suggested by the EC rules for formulating policy objectives, http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/guidelines/tool_13_en.htm

    - Four common NRN objectives, which are rooted in the legal framework and linked to EU policy objectives mentioned above;
    - Overall objectives defined in the Member State as programme-specific.
- **Specific NRN objectives** defined in the Member State as programme-specific (linked with the NRN's results in the NRN intervention logic), which specify further the overall objectives.
- **Operational objectives** defined as programme-specific (linked with NRN's outputs produced with the NRN action plan) and linked to the common and programme-specific groups of actions.

Overall, specific and operational objectives of the NRN should be defined as **relevant** in addressing the specific needs of the programme area, and in full respect of the **vertical consistency**. This means that accomplishment of operational objectives has to contribute to the achievement of specific objectives and accomplishment of specific objectives to the achievement of overall objectives.

NRN effects (results and impacts)

The NRN intervenes either via activities of the NRN action plan or for NRNPs via operations implemented. The legal framework[36] stipulates a common group of actions, which can be completed with more programme-specific actions designed in Members States. Although the linkages between the common groups of NRN actions and common NRN objectives are proposed in the Guidance fiche for the establishment and operation of national rural networks in Annex 1, stakeholders in Member States can establish their own linkages between NRN objectives and activities in the NRN specific intervention logic.

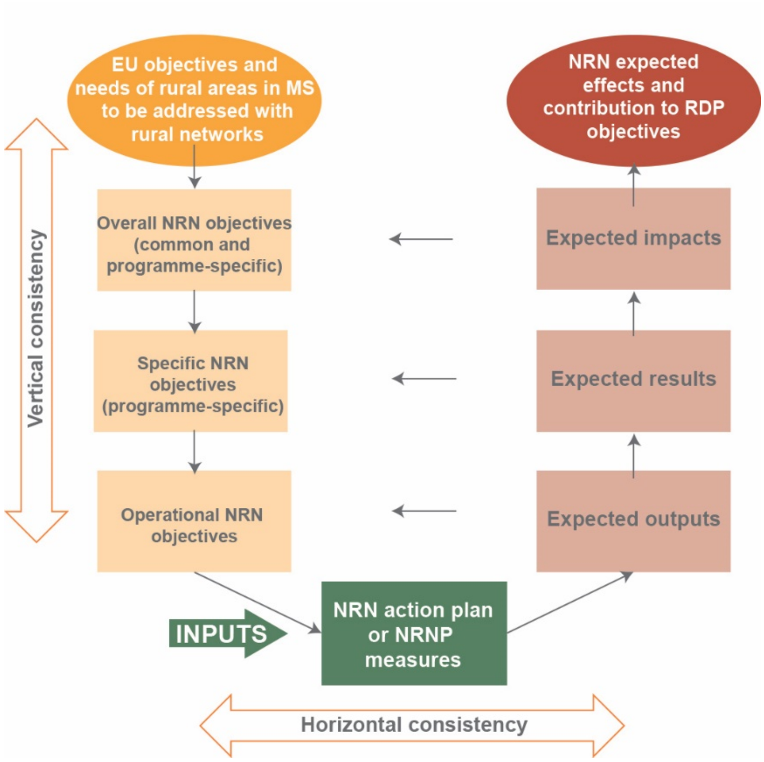
The NRN's activities produce the outputs, which consequently generate the effects in the form of NRN's results and impacts. Each level of the NRN´s hierarchy of objectives should be **horizontally consistent** with its level of expected effects:

- Operational objectives with expected outputs;
- Specific objectives with expected results;
- Overall objectives with expected impacts.

This situation can be illustrated with the following figure:

[36] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54.3

Figure 6. Vertical and horizontal consistency between NRN objectives and effects



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

NRN effects can be described as follows:

- **NRN results** are linked horizontally with the NRN's specific objectives defined as programme-specific and formulated by the NRN stakeholders as part of the NRN intervention logic. Expected results are generated by outputs of the NRN's activities/action plan within the group of the NRN members in the short term and are linked to changes in behaviour, people´s minds, competences, capacities, etc. The NRN's results contribute to the RDP outputs (see Figure 5). For example, if in the NRN action plan a lot of activities are focused on the transfer of innovative practices supporting biodiversity, it could be expected that awareness of innovation among NRN members and beneficiaries will increase.

- **NRN impacts** are the NRN's effects on various stakeholders in the territory concerned by the RDP. Expected impacts are linked to the NRN's overall/general objectives and are generated by the NRN's results in the long run. The NRN's impacts contribute to the RDP's results and can be observed not only in the rural development domain, but also affect the human and social capital domains. For example, via the NRN's innovative actions farmers could reduce ammonia emissions. Additionally, through the NRN's activities the involvement of stakeholders in rural development and the communication in rural areas can be improved (see Figure 7).

NRN impacts in the human and social capital domains (often called 'added value' of networks) represent a very broad spectrum of various types of benefits within various groups of stakeholders which may or may not be the NRN's members and beneficiaries. The impacts related to human and social capital are conceived at various levels:

- At the **individual level**, people involved in or benefiting from networking activities might change their behaviour, or strengthen their capacities for innovative actions. They improve their ability to anticipate and respond to challenges, to acquire a sense of entrepreneurship and serendipity. They also learn to master new technologies, to blend them with the treasures of implicit knowledge instilled by local traditions and of acquired knowledge and skills from their educational and vocational backgrounds. This also raises their potential to cooperate and to expertly deal with relationships and interactions in an environment of increasing diversity.

- At **the enterprise** level, businesses foster individual skills, a culture of cooperation within the firm and between firms, in a complex environment in which cooperation and competition intertwine in a manifold fashion. Enterprises are supposed to embrace new forms of business and to embrace the value of quality work and of products.
- **Civil society organisations** participate on a regular basis, bringing in their concerns and the competencies and skills they foster through their actions, representing interests which are easily disregarded in the global games of wealth and power.
- **Institutions** are reshaped according to their purpose and for the true service of people and communities; providing continuity in a world of growing uncertainty, but ready to adapt and transform when circumstances require it.
- **Social and economic sectors and local communities** can be seen as cooperation systems involving people, enterprises, institutions and civil society organizations. These organizations get fresh impulsions, experience new options to innovate, to diversify and to become forerunners for transformations on a larger scale, to meet future challenges which cannot be dealt with by local action alone.

NRNs results and impacts can also represent self-standing evaluation topics (e.g. networking capacities).

The NRN intervention logic is the basis for the NRN evaluation and is designed to reply to specific needs of the programme area which can be addressed by NRNs.

The NRN intervention logic includes NRN objectives, activities and expected effects and is set up by respecting the vertical and horizontal consistency.

The intervention logic should stay solid during the entire programming period unless the needs of the programme area changed significantly.

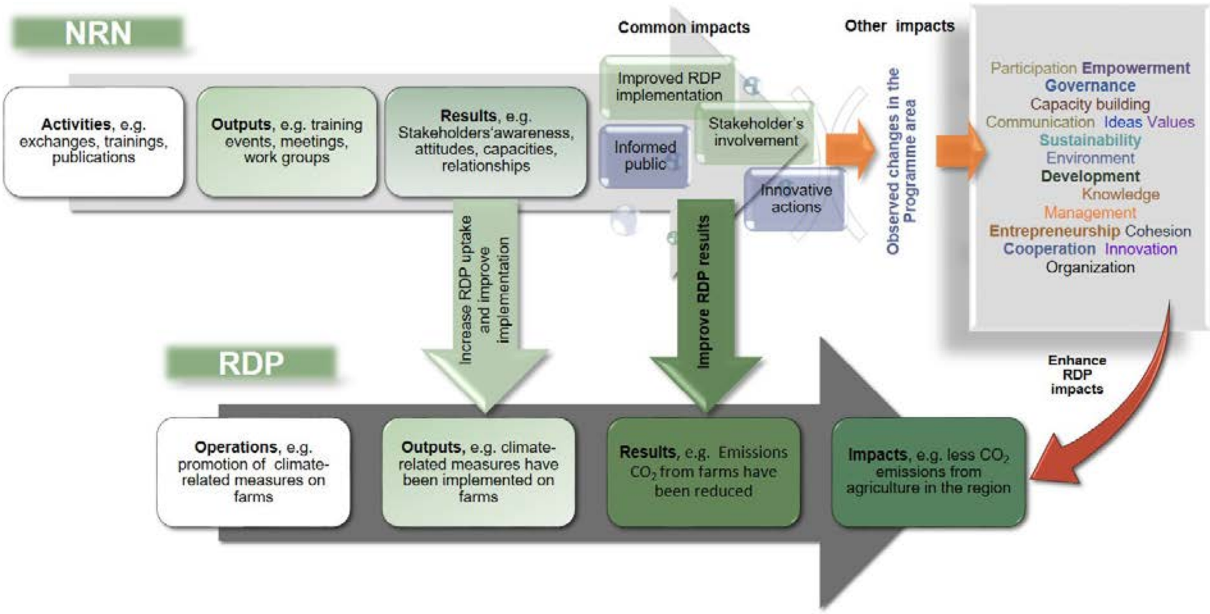
NRN evaluation focuses on the assessment of the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the NRN interventions, the achievements of network objectives, and the assessment of results and impacts.

External consistency of the NRN intervention logic

Being funded by the EAFRD, the NRN's ultimate purpose lies in the support of EU rural development policy objectives. This includes the socio-economic well-being of the rural population as well as the environmental, cultural and aesthetic integrity of rural areas, without forgetting about the contribution of rural areas to the sustainable development of the society as a whole, regardless of boundaries. This can only be achieved if the NRN intervention logic is **externally consistent** with the rural development policy objectives**.**

The external consistency of the NRN intervention logic means that the achievement of the four common NRN objectives also ensures the NRN's contribution to the RDP objectives (single RDP or several RDPs in the case of a NRNP). In the same way that the NRN contributes to RDP objectives, results produced by the NRN should contribute to the RDP outputs and the NRN impacts to the RDP results. In addition to this the NRN usually also impacts the social environment within the group of the NRN's direct and indirect beneficiaries and also non-beneficiaries in the area of social and human capital. Social capital generated by NRNs may also affect the RDP's impacts as it is illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 7. NRN effects and their contribution to RDP outputs, results and impacts

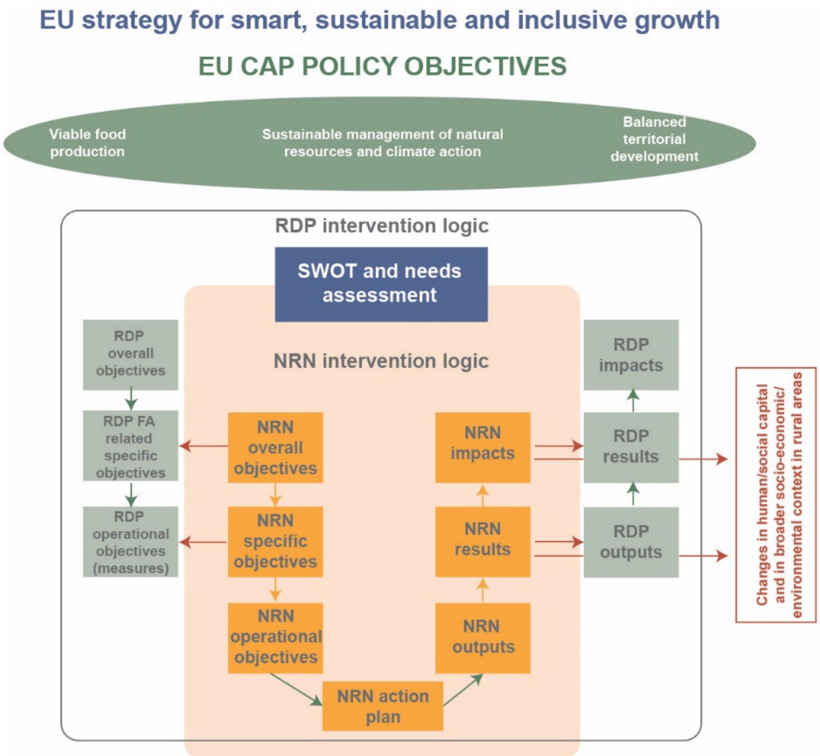


Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

Through the RDP objectives, results and impacts, the NRN is also linked with the EU rural development policy objectives and consequently with the priorities and headline targets of the EU2020 Strategy in another level of external consistency.

The external consistency of the NRN with the RDP(s), rural development and horizontal policy objectives and with the RDP results/impacts is illustrated in the Figure 8.

Figure 8. Contribution of NRN to national, RDP and EU objectives



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

The NRN's contribution to certain policy objectives can also represent self-standing evaluation topics (e.g. contributions made by the NRN to the enhancement of biodiversity, climate change, etc.).

The external consistency ensures that the NRN intervention logic contributes both to the RDP objectives and EU level objectives.

The assessment of the external consistency as well as the assessment of contributions of the NRN to the RDP and EU policy objectives is the focus of NRN evaluation.

Effectiveness and efficiency

The assessment of the NRN's effectiveness looks at the extent to which the NRN objectives are accomplished and the extent to which the NRN contributes to the achievement of policy objectives at RDP and EU level. Efficiency is examined together with the effectiveness and asks whether the allocated public and private funds have been spent in a meaningful manner to achieve policy objectives (NRN, RDP and EU level) and generated the expected outputs, results and impacts.

The assessment of effectiveness looks at the extent to which the NRN interventions are able to achieve policy objectives at the NRN, RDP and EU level.

The assessment of efficiency looks at which costs the generated NRN outputs, results and impacts have been achieved.

Factors of success and failure of NRNs

Apart from examining the NRN's results, impacts and achievements, the evaluation offers the opportunity to provide important lessons to improve the NRN's activities and facilitate better design of future NRNs through the observation of factors which contributed to the success and failure of the network.

Factors of success and failure can be internal or external. They might foster or weaken the effects of the NRN's activities. Internal factors can be issues connected with the administration and delivery of the NRN's activities (e.g. functioning of the NSU). External factors can be networking culture in rural areas, or the lack of it.

The assessment of the factors of success and failure of the NRN's interventions looks at both the internal and external factors which foster or weaken the NRN's interventions. This examination is an important part of the learning function of the NRN evaluation.

1.4.3 Evaluation elements for NRNs

The Common monitoring and evaluation system (CMES) establishes the common evaluation elements which should be used in the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes, including NRNs. The common elements have been designed by the European Commission in collaboration with stakeholders in Member States in order to provide the essential information that can be aggregated at EU level and which is comparable among RDPs. CMES elements shall be complemented with programme-specific elements in addressing the specificities of the programme area, including aspects related to NRNs. The programme-specific elements for NRNs are designed by the programme´s MAs or in collaboration with NRN stakeholders to capture the NRN specific aspects.

The evaluation elements for NRNs include:

- **Intervention logic** illustrating the links between the NRN's objectives and actions of the NRN's action plan and with the NRN's outputs, results and impacts. Context parameters are used to describe and analyse the specific context in which networks operate.

- **Evaluation questions** defining the focus of the evaluation of NRNs in relation to common and programme-specific policy objectives for NRNs in order to demonstrate progress and achievements and to support the assessment of results, impacts, effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of rural development policy interventions[37].
- **Indicators** for NRNs, used as a means to assess the NRN's results and impacts as well as the NRN's efficiency, effectiveness, achievements and the relevance of the network's interventions.

Common evaluation elements

The common evaluation elements are established by the CMES and represent the basis of the NRN monitoring and evaluation framework:

- The four **common NRN objectives** and seven common groups of actions for NRNs that are spelled out in the EU RD regulation[38] form the basis of the NRN intervention logic (See Figure 8);
- The **common evaluation question** (CEQ) for NRNs[39] (see Table 1) included in the CMES and linked to all four common NRN objectives[40], which focuses the evaluation of the NRN's effects towards EU rural development policy;
- Three **common output indicators** for NRNs are defined at the EU level[41] (See Figure 9 and Table 1).

Additional indicators

Since the common output indicators are not sufficient to answer the NRN related common evaluation question, stakeholders in Member States should develop additional indicators - output, result and impact. Additional indicators can be developed with the help of an output-result-impact chain, which can be found in Part III of the guidelines, Chapter 5. Additional information proposed in the working document "Common evaluation questions for Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020[42]" can be also used as inspiration to develop additional indicators.

Programme-specific evaluation elements linked to the NRN

The programme-specific evaluation elements linked to the NRN are formulated by the programme´s MA or by the MA in collaboration with NRN stakeholders in the Member States (NSU, NRN, evaluators). They complement the common evaluation elements at RDP/NRNP level during the finalisation of the NRN intervention logic and design of the NRN-related monitoring and evaluation system. In this respect:

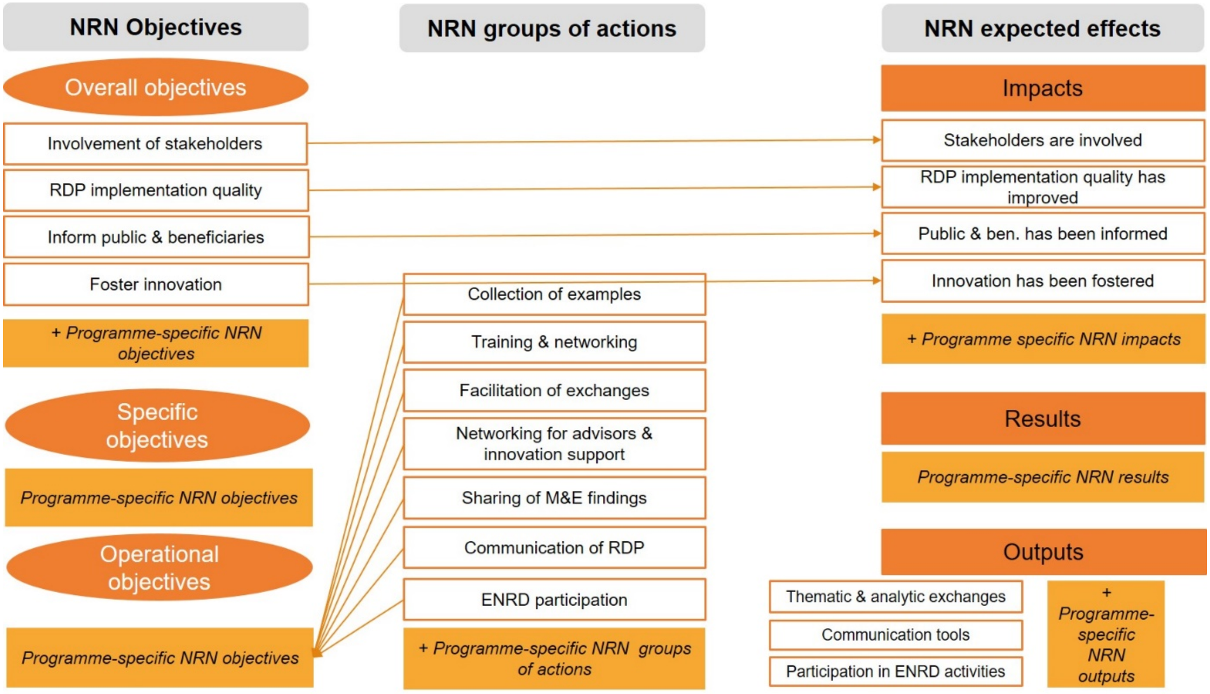
- **Programme-specific objectives** linked to the NRN are formulated if common NRN objectives[43] are not sufficient to set up the NRN intervention logic.
- **Programme-specific evaluation questions** (PSEQs) are developed when the achievement of the common policy objectives cannot be fully assessed with the help of the CEQ or when the NRN intervention logic contains NRN related programme-specific objectives. PSEQ can also be developed if specific evaluation topics linked to the NRN should be developed in more depth (e.g. delivery of the network, etc.). PSEQ are either formulated at the time of the NRN programme/action plan design or later during the NRN evaluation. The PSEQ should be further specified with the criteria to judge on the success of the NRN intervention (judgment criteria). For example, if the PSEQ is "To what extent has the NRN contributed to broader networking in rural areas", it should be specified what is the success in broader networking: e.g. more types of stakeholders involved in the network.

[37] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art 54 (1); Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 Art 68 (a)
[38] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2) and 54(3)
[39] WD: Common evaluation questions for the RDP 2014_2020; Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex V,
[40] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2):
[41] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex IV, Output indicators O.24, O.25, and O.26;
[42] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/evaluation-helpdesks-publications
[43] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2)

- **Programme-specific indicators** for NRNs are linked to specific NRN outputs, results and impacts. The programme-specific indicators are designed to answer programme-specific evaluation questions.

The set-up of the NRN monitoring and evaluation framework starts by linking the common evaluation question and indicators to the NRN intervention logic, composed of common and programme-specific objectives on one side and expected outputs, results and impacts, on the other side, complemented with the NRN related programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators. The following figure summarises the NRN common evaluation elements and shows where the stakeholders in the Members States should develop the NRN programme-specific elements.

Figure 9. Overview of CMES elements for NRN to be completed with programme-specific NRN elements



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

Table 1. Common evaluation framework for NRN

POLICY OBJECTIVE	COMMON EVALUATION QUESTION RELATED TO NRN[44]	JUDGEMENT CRITERIA [45]	COMMON INDICATORS[46]	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION [47]
Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2): • Increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development; • Improve the quality of implementation of Rural Development Programmes; • Inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities; • Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.	To what extent has the NRN contributed to achieving the objectives laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2)?	• Increased number and types of stakeholders involved in RDP implementation due to the activities of the NRNs; • The quality of implementation of the RDP has been improved through the activities of the NRN, e.g. • Improved capacity of RDP beneficiaries, • Improved evaluation awareness, • Lessons from evaluations are taken into account in programme implementation. • Broader public and potential beneficiaries are aware of the rural development policy and funding opportunities through activities of the NRN; • Innovation in agriculture, food production forestry and rural areas have been fostered by the NRN.	• Number of thematic and analytical exchanges set up with the support of NRN; • Number of NRN communication tools; • Number of ENRD activities in which the NRN has participated.	• Number of stakeholders (by type) participating in the implementation of the RDP due to activities of the NRN (including through LAGs). • Number of RDP modifications based on evaluation findings and recommendations from thematic working groups organised by the NRN; • % of RDP implemented projects encouraged by NRN(P) activities; • Number of persons that have been informed about the rural development policy and funding opportunities through the NRN communication tools; • % of innovative projects encouraged by NRN out of the total number of innovative projects supported by the RDP(s).

[44] Common Evaluation Question 21; Annex V, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014
[45] Developed by Member States
[46] Output indicators O.24, O.25, and O.26; Annex IV, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014
[47] Developed by Member States

2 PART I – MANAGING NRN EVALUATION

Who should read PART I?

PART I addresses mainly managing authorities and the NSU as the commissioning party for the NRN evaluation, but also other stakeholders interested in planning and preparing the NRN evaluation. It may also be of particular interest for officials and experts involved in drawing up the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the evaluation, and for people involved in NRN management.

How is PART I organised?

PART I explains the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders who are or might be involved in the NRN evaluation. It also outlines the key steps in NRN evaluation – such as planning, preparing, as well as conducting the NRN evaluation and disseminating, communicating and following-up on the NRN evaluation results.

2.1 Who is involved in NRN evaluation and in what role?

There is a multitude of actors interacting within the different compositions of the NRNs across the Member States. Consequently, there is also great variance in the categories of actors that can in principle be involved in the NRN evaluation, namely actors managing the network, participating in the network, and evaluating the network.

It is important to note that in a network, some actors may have multiple roles – for instance, a representative of a social partner may also be a LAG member. Similarly, the Monitoring Committee is entrusted with the monitoring of the RDP including the NRN. At the same time, it is a NRN member.

Furthermore, the roles of the actors depend also on whether the evaluation in question is one where the NRN is evaluated as part of RDP or whether it is a stand-alone evaluation. As the stand-alone evaluations have a greater focus on the NRN, the actors managing the network and participating in it will have a greater role and responsibility than in the case when the NRN is evaluated as part of the RDP. In addition, the roles of the MA and NSU are different, depending on who commissions the evaluation (MA or NSU). This, in turn, determines who is responsible for the NRN evaluation and who has the budget for the NRN evaluation. Also, it could be the case that the NSU has a small evaluation budget that permits smaller evaluations but an overall evaluation of the NRN is paid from the evaluation budget of the MA.

2.1.1 Actors involved in operating the network

Managing Authority[48]

The RDP and NRNP Managing Authority (MA) bear the responsibility for the preparation, resourcing, management and implementation of the evaluation plan. The RDP evaluation plan includes provisions for the assessment of the NRN. The Managing Authority is also responsible for the quality, punctuality and communication of the NRN evaluation results (as part of the RDP or a self-standing evaluation), as well as for monitoring the network's performance. When the NRN is evaluated as part of the RDP or when the MA commissions a stand-alone evaluation of the NRN or the NRNP, the MA is the commissioning party of the evaluation and thus bears the responsibility for the planning, preparation and quality control of the evaluation.

In some Member States, the ministry responsible for the RDP might have units other than the MA that could take over some tasks in the NRN evaluation. For example, the evaluation unit can manage,

[48] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 66

prepare, commission and quality control the NRN evaluation. The communication unit, if existing, can collaborate with the NRN in disseminating NRN evaluation results.

Network support unit (NSU)[49]

In some Member States the NSU is located within the MA; others have outsourced the NSU's functions with various types of contractors (public institutions[50], private consultancy companies[51], etc.). In countries where the NRN is regionalised, the NSU is important for running the network at regional level. The NSU plays a fundamental role in animating and running the network itself and engaging stakeholders. However, merely setting up the NSU neither establishes the network per se nor automatically ensures networking[52].

The NSU can also decide to prepare and carry out an optional NRN self-assessment in order to improve the implementation of the NRN's activities and performance. The NSU could also commission stand-alone evaluations of the NRN, in which case it bears the responsibility for planning and preparing the evaluation. For the NSU to commission evaluations it has to have sufficient capacity and budget to prepare, manage and quality control its own independent evaluations. In case the MA is the commissioning party of the evaluation, the NSU is a major stakeholder and supports the MA in the planning and preparation of the evaluation. The NSU is an important data provider for all NRN(P) evaluations.

Paying Agency[53]

The Paying Agency (PA) is an important source of data in the NRN evaluation, as it typically holds information regarding programme implementation (payments, beneficiaries, monitoring data, controls), including information related to the NRN. Depending on the Member State, there are one or several Paying Agencies.

Monitoring Committee[54]

The Monitoring Committee is responsible for monitoring the programme's performance[55], as well as the quality and effectiveness of the programme's implementation. The NRNP has its own Monitoring Committee. In cases where the NRN is part of the RDP, the programme Monitoring Committee also covers the monitoring of the NRN.

Moreover, the Monitoring Committee must examine the activities and outputs related to the progress in the implementation of the evaluation plan, including the activities for the NRN evaluation. On the other hand, the members of the Monitoring Committee often participate in the NRN to exchange information on programme implementation[56], including the activities of the NRN, in this respect.

NRN coordinating body[57]

Some NRNs have established a NRN coordinating body, composed of selected NRN members. In such cases the NRN's coordinating body is involved in the planning of the NRN's activities and steers its action plan. The NRN's coordinating body can decide to conduct a NRN self-assessment and to support the NRN evaluation through the provision of information. An important task for the NRN's coordinating

[49] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 66.2
[50] SK – the NSU function is included in the national agency for rural development – institution semi-budgeted by the Ministry of Agriculture
[51] BG – the NSU role is assumed by the private company INTERPRED WTC
[52] Guidance fiche for the establishment and operation of National Rural Networks 2014-2020, developed by the European Commission (DG AGRI) based on Regulation (EU) 1305/2013 and, when relevant, on Regulation (EU) 1303/2013
[53] Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013, Art. 7
[54] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art.73
[55] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 72
[56] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 74
[57] Guidance fiche for the establishment and operation on national rural networks 2014-2020

body is to ensure that the results of the self-assessment and evaluation are taken into account to improve the implementation of the NRN's action plan.

Box 1. Evaluation steering group as tool to manage the evaluation process

The evaluation steering group (SG) is considered a good practice, in order to facilitate and coordinate stakeholders' consultation and manage the evaluation process. The evaluation SG assists the MA in setting the course of the evaluation, as well as checking its progress and quality periodically. The evaluation SG members can contribute with their specialised skills and expertise and help to ensure the availability of data, information and relevant contacts to the evaluator.

The evaluation SG is typically convened and chaired by the MA, who also outlines the procedures for its operation. It should be formed at an early stage as it may take some time to set it up. The composition of the evaluation SG depends on the specificities of the NRN and the tasks assigned to the group. At the minimum, the evaluation SG should include representatives from the MA (representing relevant departments/units) and others involved in operating the NRN, representatives from the PA, and, if applicable, members of the Evaluation Unit. There is no ideal size for an evaluation SG. It should be large enough to have the necessary skills and knowledge, but also small enough to be effective.

The evaluation SG is not mandatory and does not implement the recommendations of the evaluation. This power lies within the MA, the NSU or the NRN governing bodies

2.1.2 Network members

Membership of the NRN varies among Member States, depending on the national rules and practices (e.g. open/restricted membership to the NRN). The members of the NRN are important for the evaluation since they are also the NRN's beneficiaries and can participate in surveys, focus groups and evaluation workshops related to the NRN and its operation. Many of the network members are also RDP beneficiaries. Furthermore, network members can take active roles in operating the NRN's activities, especially in Member States where the NRN's activities are not limited to those organised by the NSU. Members of the network can suggest a self-assessment of the NRN be conducted as well as actively participate in this exercise. Below is a non-exhaustive list of members typically involved in NRNs.

Local action groups (LAGs)

LAGs constitute an important part of the NRN. They are also beneficiaries of the NRN's trainings and networking actions[58] and as such, are important informants for the NRN evaluation. LAGs can bring in valuable local knowledge and contacts for the NRN evaluation. Furthermore, LAGs can conduct self-assessment, which cover networking issues and can contribute to the NRN evaluation.

Managing Authorities of regional RDPs, in the case of NRNPs

The NRNPs in multiregional Member States provide the possibility to network managing authorities of all RDPs in the country. All managing authorities can offer important regional knowledge and contacts that help to assess impacts of the NRN(P) on various regional RDPs. The regional MAs are also important nodes in the network.

Other members of the network

Other network members typically include local authorities, social and economic partners (including organisations representing beneficiaries), bodies representing the civil society, NGOs, educational and research institutions, representatives of other ESI Funds, other networks relevant to rural areas, local alliances, and bottom-up initiatives. In some Member States, it is also possible for the NRN to have

[58] Regulation (EU) 1305/2013 Art. 54(3)(iii)

individuals as members. These members are important as interviewees/focus group participants for the assessment of the NRN's performance and effects.

2.1.3 Actors evaluating the network

The evaluator

The evaluations of the RDP must be carried out by an evaluator who is functionally independent from the authorities responsible for programme implementation[59]. This also includes the NRN evaluation as part of the RDP or as stand-alone NRN(P) evaluation. The evaluator is typically an external national or international[60] expert (e.g. a single company or a research institution, or a consortium consisting of several companies and / or research institutions) and chosen through a tendering procedure for a separate evaluation task (e.g. the evaluation part of the AIR submitted in 2017 or in 2019) or as the ongoing evaluator for the entire programming period. However, the evaluator could also be a public agency or functionally independent department within the same authority as the MA.

2.2 Key steps in the evaluation of the NRN

NRN evaluation is an ongoing process that has to be considered during the whole programming period. It must be planned and prepared for the entire period. The more thoroughly this is done, the easier it will be to commission and conduct the NRN evaluation. The planning and preparation of the evaluation for the entire programming period is relatively similar to the planning and preparation of a single evaluation.

The evaluation plan submitted as part of the RDP/NRNP must contain a list of indicative evaluation topics. Where the NRN is programmed as part of the RDP, the evaluation plan has to contain the NRN as an evaluation topic[61]. Some Member States have supplemented the evaluation plan with an internal, more detailed document, which contains comprehensive planning of the evaluation activities, their timing and resources devoted to them. These documents should give a general overview of the NRN-related (stand-alone NRN(P) evaluation and evaluation of the NRN as part of the RDP) evaluation activities and their timing. The internal planning document might also contain the requirement for the NRN to conduct a self-assessment along with planned resources and feeding into the RDP evaluation activities. In addition, more detailed activities on NRN evaluation, self-assessment, evaluation-related capacity building events and activities linked to dissemination of evaluation findings should also be included in the NRN Action Plan.

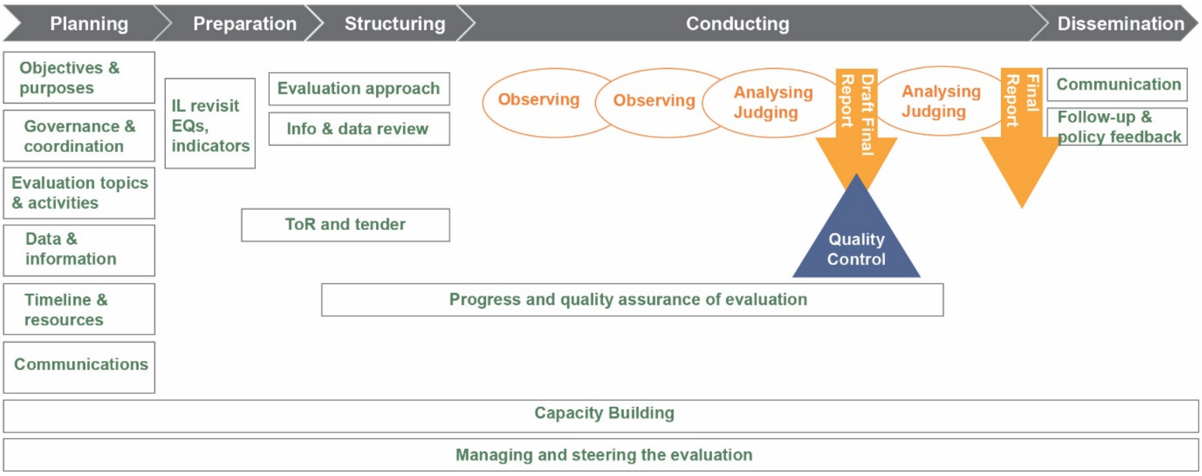
When preparing the NRN(P) evaluation, for the entire programming period, relevant stakeholders (the MA, NSU or other responsible NRN stakeholders) must make sure that the specific NRN intervention logic is established (NRN objectives and expected outputs, results and impacts). Subsequently, programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators (result and impact) should be developed to complement the common evaluation question and output indicators. Furthermore, data sources for indicators need to be thought over, and data collection responsibilities and methods have to be agreed. At this stage, it is also important to concretise the communication, quality assurance and capacity building plans for the entire programming period.

It is best to prepare the NRN evaluation at an early stage of the planning or implementation of the NRN's activities to ensure that data is collected from early on and that the data collection is geared towards the desired information.

[59] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art 54(3)
[60] In case there is lack of evaluaton capacity within the Member State
[61] Annex I to Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

The evaluation plan, the NRN Action Plan and other general planning documents give an overview of the NRN related evaluation activities and topics for the entire programming period. In addition, each evaluation must be planned as distinct projects, as Figure 10 below shows. An evaluation can be divided into separate steps with tasks that follow each other in sequence. The main steps in conducting an evaluation are planning, preparation, structuring, conducting, and dissemination. Each step contains several tasks which will be discussed below together with the responsibilities of the main actors involved.

Figure 10. Steps in NRN evaluation



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

2.2.1 Planning NRN evaluation

Where the NRN is part of the RDP, the NRN's activities are usually planned to be evaluated as part of the RDP evaluations (2017, 2019 and ex post) and in single cases also in the context of a stand-alone evaluation. The NRNPs must be evaluated through a stand-alone evaluation. Whenever the MA is the commissioning party of the NRN evaluation (as part of the RDP or as a stand-alone NRN evaluation), it is responsible for planning and preparing the NRN(P) evaluation process and the timetable. This can be done in conjunction with the NSU and other evaluation stakeholders (e.g. evaluation unit, Paying Agency, etc.)[62]. These evaluations are typically financed from Technical Assistance, and the MA generally leads the process with input from the NSU and other stakeholders. The NSU can also be responsible for the planning and preparation of the stand-alone evaluation if they are the commissioning party.

The steps in planning an evaluation are as follows:

1	Identification of evaluation needs and information needed from the evaluation
2	Deciding on the form of evaluation
3	Planning the evaluation process and timetable
4	Drafting the communication and capacity building plans

[62] The Guidelines "Establishing and implementing the evaluation plan of 2014-2020 RDPs" http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/evaluation-helpdesks-publications

Step 1 – Identification of evaluation needs (what should be evaluated) and information needed from the evaluation

The commissioning party (MA or NSU) can write a concept note to sharpen the evaluation focus and to prepare for the Terms of Reference. A typical content list for the concept note includes the policy background, evaluation topics, timing, scope, purpose and justification, as well as stakeholders´ roles in the evaluation and references to information sources and previous evaluations. The concept note can be written throughout the process, i.e. it can be started at the planning phase and updated later at the preparation phase when issues are clarified.

Step 2 – Deciding on the form of evaluation

The evaluation of the NRN can take different forms, according to the depth in which the NRN is desired to be assessed:

NRN evaluation as part of the RDP evaluation

Those NRNs that are part of RDPs have to be included in the programme evaluation as an own evaluation topic. This implies that NRN-related evaluation activities are already described in the evaluation plan of the RDP and further specified in the ToR for the selection of the external evaluator. NRN-related evaluation activities are reported in section 2 of the standard Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs). Specific NRN evaluations are then reported in the enhanced AIR 2017 and 2019 and are later the subject of the ex post evaluation. In this context, NRN-related common evaluation questions must be answered, and common indicators for the NRN must be used[63].

When the NRN is included in the RDP evaluation, typically only a general, fairly broad, overview of the NRN operations, achievements and results can be given and reported in the respective evaluations. The evaluation of the NRN as part of the RDP typically provides recommendations relevant to the policy-makers, and not so much for the NSU on how to practically improve the NRN processes, activities and targeting. The methodologies used might also not take into account the specificities of the network and its operation. However, this kind of evaluation is useful in looking at how the NRN performs within the RDP system. It can also trigger further, more specific, evaluation questions to be examined through a stand-alone NRN evaluation or a self-assessment.

Stand-alone evaluations of the NRN/NRNP

As the NRNPs are separate programmes, they must be evaluated as any other ESIF programme[64]. However, even Member States with NRNs integrated in the RDP may choose to conduct a stand-alone evaluation of the NRN as it gives deeper insights into the NRN's achievements, results, impacts, added value, efficiency, and effectiveness. It can also give more practical recommendations on how to improve the operation of the NRN. A stand-alone evaluation of the NRN can also answer more specific evaluation questions, or focus on specific issues. It can feed into and inform the evaluation of the NRN conducted as part of RDP evaluation.

The focus of stand-alone NRN(P) evaluations should be:

- relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, outputs, results, impacts, as well as factors of success and failure (i.e. an overall evaluation of the NRN);
- intervention logic;
- Action Plan and activities;
- regional networks;
- network structure.

[63] Annexes IV and V to Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014
[64] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2014, Art. 54

Conducting a stand-alone evaluation of the NRN(P) requires a full evaluation plan and implementation process, including working steps such as the review of the NRN intervention logic (in case the intervention logic already exists) or development of the intervention logic (if not designed before), as well as the development of programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators. Whenever the NRN(P) is the single subject of the evaluation, the latter should cover the NSU, the NRN members and the NRN's activities.

Step 3- Planning the evaluation process and timetable

This includes the timing of various evaluation activities linked to the evaluation phases (preparation, structuring, observing, analysis, judging, dissemination and follow up of the evaluation results), as well as the different actors involved and covers the entire duration of the evaluation.

The following questions can help in this task:

- What do we want to know (what are the evaluation topics, e.g. fulfilment of network objectives, implementation of NRN(P) activities, NRN(P) effectiveness and efficiency, structure of the network, NRN(P) impact on programme implementation, NRN(P) results)?
- Why is it important to evaluate these topics?
- What are the legal requirements concerning the content of the evaluation and selected topics?
- Are there any previous evaluations, assessments or studies with respect to selected topics?
- What are the major knowledge gaps related to the NRN(P) and selected topics?

Step 4 - Drafting the communication and capacity building plans

Communication plan

Communication is a key part of evaluation. As such, it should be designed already at an early stage of the evaluation. One of the main reasons behind conducting an evaluation is to provide accountability to stakeholders and the larger public. Hence, the evaluation results should be communicated to the target audiences. For this purpose, each evaluation should be accompanied by a communication plan, which is designed in the beginning of the evaluation process and whose implementation starts immediately after the evaluation´s finalisation. The commissioning party of the evaluation is responsible for developing and implementing the communication plan of the evaluation findings and conclusions. The actor (unit in the Ministry or MA, NSU, contractor, etc.) handling the general RDP communication is typically well equipped to communicate the evaluation findings to the wider public. The NSU, the network members and the evaluation steering group can assist the MA in communicating the evaluation findings to RDP stakeholders. Communication on the evaluation findings should be included in the NRN(P) communication plan, which is required in the action plan for the networks.

The main questions to be answered in outlining the communication approach are:

- Who are the target audiences? Who is interested in the NRN evaluation?
- What specifically interests them?
- Which channels of communication best reach the different target audiences?
- Which communication styles are required for each of the target audiences?
- When should communication happen?
- Who is responsible for communicating what to the different target audiences?

The communication plan can be summarised in a table format (Table 2). Further information on the development of a communication plan can be found in the NRN Guidebook[65].

Table 2. Evaluation communication plan

Who?	What?	How?	When?	Who does it?
Target audience (e.g. policy makers, stakeholders, general public)	Subject of interest to target audience	Communication channel(s)	Timing and frequency of communication	Responsibility for communicating

Capacity building plan

Capacity building is typically defined as the strengthening and development of human and institutional resources. Evaluation capacity building hence combines the improvement of evaluation knowledge and skills of individuals with the strengthening of the organisational evaluation-related mechanisms, namely established systems and processes.

Evaluation capacity building related to human resources begins with the identification of the target audiences (e.g. the MA, PA, policy makers, NSU, LAGs and other NRN members) and the assessment of their evaluation skills and level of informational need, as well as knowledge levels (Table 4). In some Member States the NRN is tasked to enhance the LAGs' evaluation capacities. In these cases, the LAGs must be considered in each capacity building plan.

Evaluation capacity building related to organisations, on the other hand, means improving organisational learning and support mechanisms related to evaluation. Organisational learning means that the organisation observes its actions and tries to improve on all fronts. The processes are also documented so that the processes and responsibilities are clear and that knowledge remains in the organisation even if staff changes. Quality assurance (see chapter 2.2.3) and utilisation of evaluation findings (see chapter 2.2.4) are integral parts of organisational learning.

Once it is clear what the main capacity building needs related to evaluation are, it is possible to design the capacity building actions, their timing, and who is responsible for them. The evaluation capacity building plan should be written by the commissioning party (MA or NSU).

The questions leading the evaluation capacity building related to

individuals are:

- Who are the main actors related to NRN evaluation?
- What do they need to know about evaluation?
- What is their current level of knowledge on evaluation?
- What kind of knowledge is still needed? What are the most critical capacity building needs?
- Which capacity building formats correspond best to the identified needs?
- When should the capacity building actions happen?
- Who is responsible for organising the capacity building actions? Who conducts them? Are external trainers needed?

organisations are:

- How can we use evaluation to improve the policy?
- How can we make evaluation an integral part of our annual planning?
- What are the concrete steps for following up evaluation findings?

[65] ENRD, NRN Guidebook at http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf

- What are our main evaluation-related processes? How can we improve them?
- How can we assure good quality evaluation processes? Which tools and tasks are needed?

Table 3. Evaluation capacity building: human resources

Who?	What do they need to know about evaluation?	What is their current level of knowledge on evaluation?	How?	When?	Who does it?
Actors (e.g. MA, PA, NSU, LAGs)	List technical and substantive issues related to evaluation e.g. logical framework, hierarchy of objectives, intervention logic, monitoring, indicators, tendering, evaluation process	Assessment of knowledge on the identified technical and substantive issues related to evaluation (and gaps thereof) based on questionnaires or surveys. Identification of critical capacity building needs	Actions to build necessary capacity (e.g. workshops, seminars, presentations, trainings, info sheets, newsletters, e-training	Timing and frequency of capacity building actions	Responsibility for capacity building actions (organising & implementing)

Responsibilities of different actors in planning of NRN evaluation can be summarised in the Table 4 below.

Table 4. Responsibilities of stakeholders in planning the NRN evaluation

	Actions	Actors			
Phase	**Step**	*MA*	*other MA units*	*NSU*	*Others*
Planning	**Process & time table**	Responsible / participates		Participates / responsible	Possible SG, PA participates
	Evaluation needs	Responsible / participates	If evaluation unit, can participate	Participates / responsible	NRN coordinating body
	Communication plan	Responsible / participates	If communication unit, can participate	Participates / responsible	
	Capacity building plan	Responsible / participates		Participates / responsible	

2.2.2 Preparation of the NRN evaluation

In preparing the NRN evaluation it is particularly important to set up the basis for all types of NRN evaluation: the NRN intervention logic and the evaluation system, composed of the NRN related common and programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators. Moreover, it is vital to define what evidence needs to be collected and how to obtain the information, required from the evaluation by stakeholders. Ideally, the NRN intervention logic and evaluation system should be prepared prior to the NRN implementation for the entire programming period (for all NRN evaluations) or prior any single NRN evaluation conducted at any time during the programming period.

The preparation phase is composed of the following major steps:

1	Construction of the NRN intervention logic
2	Revisiting/formulating NRN related evaluation questions and indicators and checking their consistency with intervention logic
3	Selection of preferred evaluation approach
4	Screening of information and data needs and potential sources
5	Tendering and selecting the external evaluator

Step 1 – Construction of the NRN intervention logic

The intervention logic of a NRN within the RDP or a separate programme (NRNP) is an essential cornerstone both for its operation and its assessment. An intervention logic is a methodological instrument linking the SWOT, the NRN related needs of programme territory, network's objectives, NRN activities/budgets and expected NRN effects observed as the network´s outputs, results and impacts[66]. (See Figure 6 in chapter 1.4.2)

The intervention logic of NRNPs should have been constructed at the programme design phase and its consistency and relevance assessed in the ex ante evaluation. In contrary, the NRN´s intervention logic inside of the RDP is usually not fully developed; the RDP often contains only four common NRN objectives and the common groups of actions. However, the NRN intervention logic is the basis of the NRN evaluation and it should be established/completed before the evaluation starts.

The following questions can help in the construction of the intervention logic:

- What are the needs of the programme area which could be addressed by the NRN?
- What are the programme-specific NRN related objectives linked to identified needs?
- What are the activities which need to be implemented to achieve programme-specific NRN related objectives?
- Which NRN-specific activities have to be implemented, if the common ones are not sufficient to achieve programme-specific NRN related objectives?

The construction of the NRN intervention logic should be done in the **following sequence**:

a.	Conduct the needs assessment and network context analysis.
b.	Review the common network objectives[67] and groups of actions[68] from the point of view of their relevance to address needs identified in context and SWOT analysis.

[66] ENRD, NRN Guidebook at http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf, p. 87
[67] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2015, Article 54(2)
[68] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2015, Article 54(3)

c.	Define and formulate programme-specific NRN objectives.
d.	Define the NRN expected outputs, results and impacts in the support of rural development and with respect to the rural area covered by the programme, as well as human and social capital.
e.	Construct the NRN intervention logic and check its vertical and horizontal consistency.
Expected outcome: vertically and horizontally consistent NRN intervention logic	

Conduct the needs assessment and network context analysis

Before constructing the NRN intervention logic it is necessary to appraise the situation in the programme area and identify the needs which could be addressed with the activities of rural networks. The needs in relation to networking should also be assessed at this stage with the means of the networks parameters. Stakeholders in the Member States may decide themselves which network context parameters will be used to assess the NRN environment, depending on the specific situation in the RDP area. Examples of context parameters are provided below:

- Variety of rural development stakeholders: Mapping of existing rural development stakeholder groups acting at the local, regional and national levels and/or potential members of the NRN, representing: (i) the broader rural community; (ii) Rural Development Programme beneficiaries as defined in the regulation and programmes, including those in relation to local action groups (LAGs); (iii) others, e.g. various NGOs, research and academia linked to rural development, including those working in innovation related fields, etc.
- Linkages between stakeholders: Mapping of existing links and connections among stakeholders, including already established and planned cooperation projects and activities among participants of existing networks (internal links) and between networks (external links).
- Level of decentralisation of rural networks' operational structures: Describing and analysing existing operational and coordination structures in which NRNs are functioning, taking into consideration the national and regional levels and division of responsibilities (decentralisation).
- Level of openness of the current NRN: Describing and analysing the openness of the current NRN to the participation of a broader scope of rural stakeholders (e.g. through formal/informal membership; through the possibility to join the network on an ongoing basis, etc.) and the related rules networks apply in this respect.
- Structure and content of the RDP in which the network will operate: Analysing measures and related financial allocations within the RDP which will be linked to the NRN's activities[69] and might be complementary, synergetic or in conflict. This will help to assess whether the NRN's activities are needed or whether the objective is achieved by the RDP measures.
- Analysis of the NSU (whether the NSU is within the MA, delegated to a ministerial agency/other public institutions or outsourced), highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the existing set up and lessons learnt for the future.

Review of the common network objectives and groups of actions

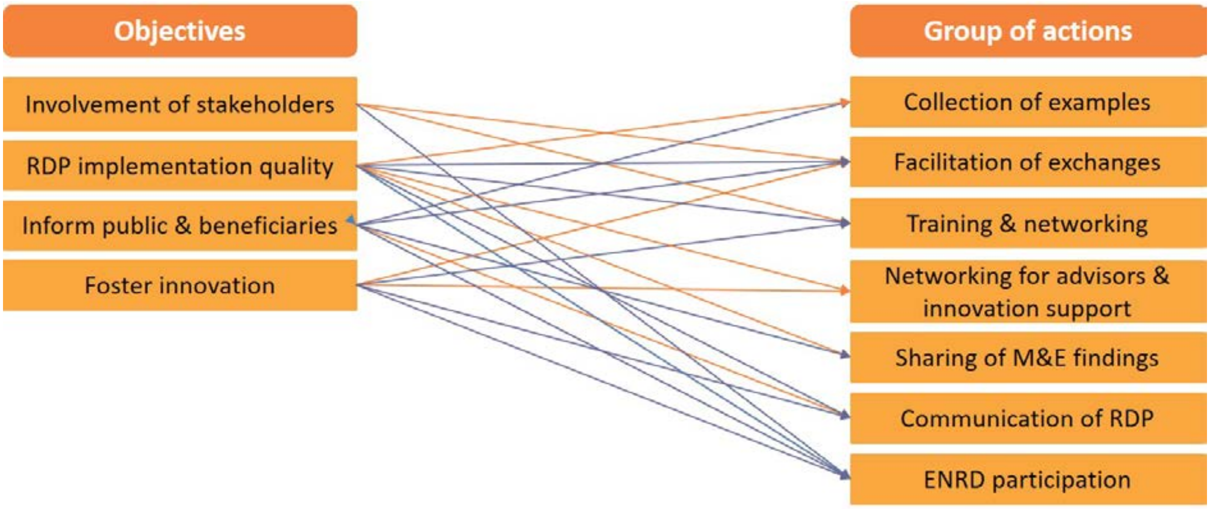
The legal framework lays down the common elements for the construction of NRN intervention logic:

- four common NRN objectives[70] and
- seven common groups of actions[71].

The guidance fiche for the establishment and operation of rural networks proposes the following linkages between the four common NRN objectives and the seven common groups of actions (see Figure 12). However, the stakeholders in Member States can establish their own linkages corresponding to the concrete NRN intervention logic.

[69] Only for NRN context analysis
[70] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54.2
[71] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54.3

Figure 11. Possible linkages between the NRN common objectives and groups of actions



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

The above common NRN objectives, groups of actions and linkages among them are the primary but sufficient cornerstones in constructing the NRN intervention logic. Stakeholders in the Member State have to complete these common elements with programme-specific elements.

The practice shows that many NRNs have prepared their action plan without establishing the NRN intervention logic. If this is the case, it is important to understand which groups of actions – common and programme-specific - are included in the NRN action plan, link them to the four common objectives, formulate the programme-specific NRN objectives and define expected outputs, results and impacts.

Define and formulate programme-specific NRN objectives

Programme-specific NRN objectives can be formulated at the level of overall or specific objectives. There are the following possibilities when formulating programme-specific NRN objectives:

- The situation analysis, SWOT and needs assessment have identified programme-specific needs to be addressed by NRN interventions and they are not covered by the four common objectives, e.g. capacity building to improve the governance in rural areas. The identified needs are turned into overall programme-specific NRN objectives.
- The four common NRN objectives are further concretised via NRN specific objectives. For example, fostering innovation can happen if innovative practices are transferred among stakeholders.
- The NRN output - result – impact chain also leads to the formulation of programme-specific NRN objectives. The NRN expected results defined as programme-specific expected results are the ground for the formulation of the NRN specific objectives and expected impacts for the defining of the NRN overall objectives.
- The NRN group of actions, common and programme-specific, as planned in the NRN action plan, serve as the grounds to formulate the NRN's operational objectives, which are linked to the NRN's outputs.

Programme-specific NRN objectives should be formulated as SMART [72] objectives and the hierarchy of overall specific and operational objectives has to be ensured.

The programme-specific NRN objectives can be formulated in relation to the role of NRNs in the implementation of rural development policy or linked to the broader aspects of rural networks in the

[72] http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/guidelines/tool_13_en.htm and Technical Handbook on the Monitoring and Evaluating Framework of the Common Agriculture Policy 2014-2020, DG AGRI, 2015, glossary

human and social capital domain (e.g. governance, changing behaviour, building skills and knowledge, etc., see also the Figure 7 in chapter 1.4.2).

In case of NRNP, the programme-specific objectives and activities are defined during the programme design. Ideally NRN objectives inside of the RDP should be formulated at the start of the NRN´s operations or later during the preparation for the evaluation. However, they might also be defined additionally in the preparation of the evaluation or when the environment changes, causing new needs.

Define the NRN expected outputs, results and impacts

With the group of NRN activities, common and programme-specific, the NRNs are expected to generate:

- outputs (e.g. number of trainings, analytical exchanges, collected examples, etc.),
- results within the group of NRN members and programme beneficiaries (e.g. better knowledge & skills in implementing the RDP, more innovative projects, changed behaviour in decision making, etc.) and
- impacts in the programme area (e.g. better programme governance, stronger networking, etc.).

When constructing the NRN intervention logic, the expected outputs, results and impacts can be formulated:

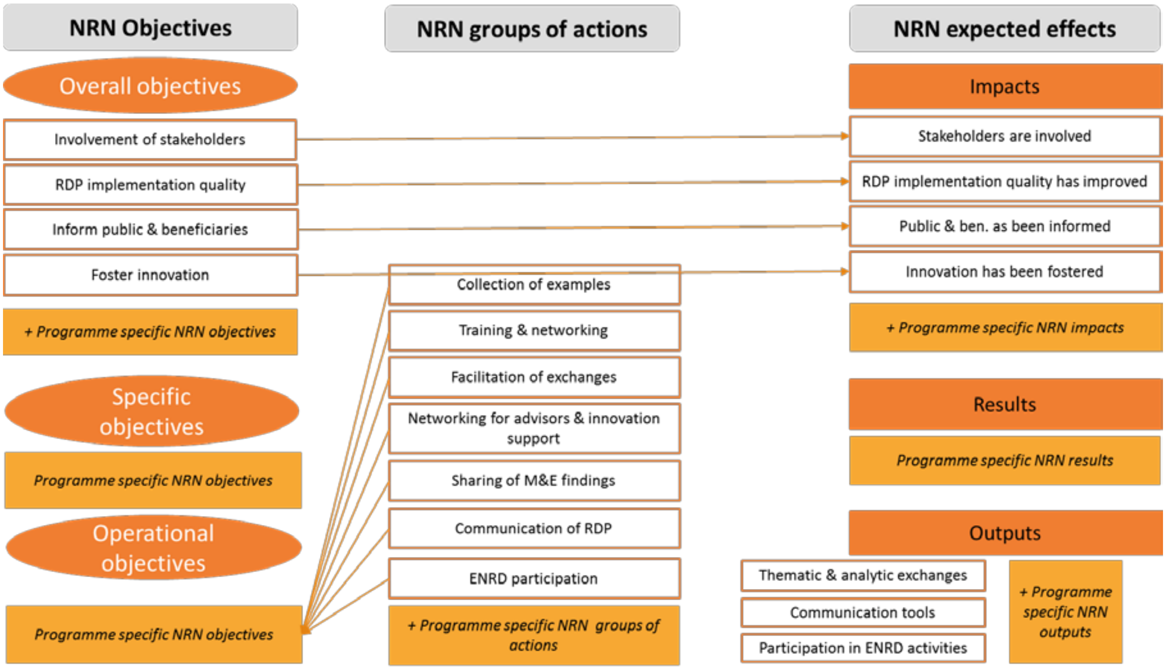
- In horizontal consistency with the common and programme-specific NRN objectives. For example, the expected impacts should lead to the achievement of the NRN's overall objectives. Expected results should be in line with the NRN specific objectives and expected outputs are generated to fulfil the operational objectives.
- In vertical consistency, starting from groups of actions and going up the NRN output – result – impact chain. For example, trainings for advisors (outputs) will help to enhance innovative practices to transverse among farmers (results) and foster the innovation in submitted RDP projects (impacts).

Construct the NRN intervention logic and check its vertical and horizontal consistency

As said above, the common objectives (which also assume the expected impacts), activities and outputs shall be further completed with the programme-specific NRN objectives and activities, expected outputs, results and impacts.

The figure below can help to construct the NRN intervention logic. In this figure, the common objectives are on the left side, common activities in the middle and the expected common outputs and impacts are on the right side. From the figure it is clear that the four common objectives are not enough to express all possible interventions of the NRNs, the common outputs do not cover all the common activities, and the common results and impacts are not defined. Therefore, in the figure, space is always left for programme-specific NRN objectives, activities, outputs, results and impacts. It is up to the stakeholders in the Member State to define missing elements of the NRN intervention logic and link them in **vertical** (between objectives and between outputs, results and impacts) and **horizontal** consistency (between objectives and effects at each level of intervention logic´s hierarchy.

Figure 12. Connecting common and programme-specific NRN objectives, groups of actions and expected outputs, results and impacts



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

Another useful tool which can be used in the building of the intervention logic is a table format (see Table 5) which allows one to create a hierarchy of objectives and expected effects in vertical and horizontal consistency. It helps to sharpen the logic, as well as to find gaps in target-setting. In this example, the NRN's overall and specific objectives are constructed out of the common and programme-specific objectives. The mix depends on the context and needs of the specific area in question.

Table 5. Hierarchy of NRN objectives and expected effects

Overall NRN objectives from Article 54 of Regulation 1305/2015 • Increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development; • Improve the quality of the implementation of Rural Development Programmes; • Inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries about rural development policy and funding opportunities; • Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, and forestry in rural areas. can also include the overall programme -specific NRN objectives, expressing the changes caused by the NRN's activities at the level of the RDP area (e.g. overall networking in rural areas, building social capital)	**Expected impacts** related to overall (common and programme-specific) NRN related objectives,
Specific NRN objectives can include programme-specific NRN objectives expressing changes within the group of NRN beneficiaries (e.g. strengthen networking among beneficiaries) can also include broken down objectives as outlined in Article 54 of Regulation 1305/2015	**Expected results** related to specific (common and programme-specific) NRN related objectives,
Operational objectives linked to activities as planned in the Action Plan	**Expected outputs** Common as stated in Annex IV of Commission Implementing Regulation 808/2014,

	Number of thematic and analytical exchanges set up with the help of NRN (O.24) Number of NRN communication tools (O.25) Number of ENRD activities in which the NRN has participated (O.26) Programme-specific, related to NRN programme-specific activities

After the NRN intervention logic has been constructed it is important to check its internal (vertical and horizontal) consistency.

The **horizontal consistency check** is carried out by analysing whether the expected effects at each level (output, results, impacts) correspond to the objectives set at the respective levels (operational, specific, overall objectives) and whether there are contradictions or mismatches between the objectives and expected effects set at each level. In the case of NRNPs the risk of contradicting objectives will be rather limited. As for NRNs within the RDP, the objectives should be consistent with those of the RDP as a whole. Contradictions may occur here and there, but more frequently the evaluators will find inconsistencies such as duplications or gaps in relation to other measures, specifically for priority 1.

The **vertical consistency check** is carried out by analysing the hierarchy of NRN objectives/expected effects,

- first by asking if the assumptions which govern this logical framework are plausible (e.g. “why or based on what assumption should the training of stakeholders lead to changes in their practices?”);
- secondly by examining if the chosen activities and budgetary endowments for each group of actions are likely to bring forth the expected effects.

Specificities of the construction of NRN and NRNP intervention logic

There are some differences in constructing the intervention logic between the NRNP and the NRN within the RDP.

The NRN planned within the RDP supports just one programme that is linked to the specific territory (usually one Member State or in case of the UK one region) and its needs, including those that can be addressed through the NRN. However, the NRNP is usually designed and implemented in multiregional Member States and therefore supports several regional RDPs. Regional RDPs may contain programme-specific objectives, which might differ from each other. In such a case the NRNP can possibly be expected to generate a broader scope of results and impacts. Thus, the overall and specific objectives of the NRNP should be broader.

How to construct the NRN intervention logic in case there is only a NRN action plan in the RDP?

As mentioned above the NRN intervention logic is very often not established before the start of its implementation. Instead, only a NRN action plan exists. In such a case the action plan and the four common objectives are the starting point in the construction of the NRN intervention logic. The intervention logic can be constructed in the following steps:

- identify **all groups of actions** (common and programme-specific) which are included in the NRN action plan,
- define all possible **expected outputs** of activities under each group of actions and formulate **NRN operational objectives**, linked to expected outputs,

- define **expected results and impacts**, which expected outputs can be produced in an output - result – impact chain (see also examples of output - result – impact chain for common groups of actions in **PART III** of the guidelines),
- formulate programme-specific **NRN specific objectives** linked to the expected results,
- link expected **impacts to the four common objectives** and formulate programme-specific **NRN overall objectives** if identified impacts cannot be linked to any of the four common objectives,
- **check the horizontal and vertical consistency** between NRN activities, expected outputs, results, impacts and objectives (see Figure 6).

Figure 12 above can also be used to illustrate the development of the NRN intervention logic based on the NRN action plan.

Step 2 – Revisiting/ formulating NRN related evaluation questions and indicators and checking their consistency with intervention logic

This step contains the review of existing NRN related common and programme-specific evaluation elements (evaluation questions and indicators) and development of new evaluation elements.

When reviewing or formulating evaluation questions and indicators the following guiding questions should be discussed:

- What are the questions through which the success of the NRN can be evaluated?
- What is the criteria on which judgements are made?
- Which indicators should be used to answer the evaluation questions? Are they sufficient to collect sound evidence?

This step is conducted in the **following sequence**:

a.	Revisiting the existing evaluation questions and developing the NRN programme-specific evaluation questions.
b.	Formulation of judgment criteria which specify the success of the NRN interventions and focus the answering of evaluation questions.
c.	Formulation of NRN related programme-specific result and impact indicators
d.	Checking the consistency of the NRN evaluation elements with the NRN intervention logic
Expected outcome: a consistent NRN related monitoring and evaluation framework	

Common and programme-specific NRN related evaluation questions

Once the evaluation needs and topics have been decided, the commissioning party (MA or NSU), in collaboration with other actors (the NRN evaluation unit at the ministry, and possibly the steering group) should consider the NRN objectives and expected effects and think how the information on NRN achievements and effects can be obtained. This is done by asking appropriate evaluation questions (EQs)[73] which are linked to the NRN common or programme-specific objectives. The EQs define the focus of the evaluation and thus direct the work of the evaluator.

At the EU level, there is only one common EQ to evaluate the NRN and NRNP[74]:

”To what extent has the NRN contributed to achieving the objectives laid down in Article 59 of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 and Article 51(2) of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013?”

The above common evaluation question is linked to all four common NRN related policy objectives and it serves as the common ground to see the benefits of NRNs across the EU, as well as allows for the

[73] See the **PART II**, Chapter 8.1: The role of evaluation questions in the evaluation of NRNs
[74] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 808/2014, Annex V, evaluation question 21

comparison of NRNs' achievements among EU Members States. It can be further broken down into four evaluation questions, each of which will ask to what extent each of the common objectives have been achieved.

Having in mind that the NRN(P) should improve the quality of the implementation of Rural Development Programmes, the NRN(P) evaluation should also ask to what extent have the NRNs contributed to accomplishing the RDP's objectives, for example fostering knowledge transfer, and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas, or linkages between agriculture, food processing, forestry and research and innovation.

In addition to the common evaluation question for NRNs, MAs and NSU/NRNs are encouraged to design programme-specific evaluation questions reflecting the specificities of individual NRN(P) and the expected specific effects of the NRN. The development of programme-specific evaluation questions should be aligned with programme-specific NRN related objectives, included in the NRN intervention logic.

To be consistent with the NRN objectives, programme-specific evaluation questions related to NRN should be formulated consistently with a terminology that reflects the content of the objective. For example:

- At the level of outputs, the programme-specific evaluation questions should reflect the groups of actions and expected outputs from NRN interventions to achieve operational objectives. A programme-specific evaluation question in this respect would be "how many of the immediate outputs (such as thematic exchanges in the example above) have been obtained through NRN activities?"
- At the level of results, the programme-specific evaluation questions should reflect the attainment of NRN specific objectives. They should express the effects of the NRN on the expected change on beneficiaries, for example "to what extent has the change (increased collaboration in the example above) happened due to the NRN's activities?"
- At the level of impacts, the programme-specific evaluation questions should reflect the attainment of overall objectives and changes in the programme area. They should allow for attribution of observed changes to the NRN interventions. For example, "to what extent has the NRN contributed to the observed change of the target variable (fostering innovation in the example above) in the programme area?"

The MA, NSU or evaluation experts should check the consistency of the evaluation questions with the common or programme-specific objectives before the evaluation starts. This can be done by understanding the relation between programme-specific evaluation questions and each level of objectives.

An example showing the consistency between NRN related programme-specific objectives and evaluation questions is presented in the table below. The starting point is the need for innovation in rural areas which would bring forth new products and markets. It is expected that the NRN will address this need and facilitate the promotion of innovation with the objective to generate new products and markets (programme-specific objective) and to foster knowledge transfer and innovation (common objective).

Table 6. Links between objectives and evaluation questions (example)

Level of objectives in the hierarchy	Formulation of the objectives (CO – common objective PSO – programme specific objective)	Evaluation questions (CEQ – Common evaluation questions PSEQ – programme-specific evaluation questions)
Output – operational objectives	Facilitate thematic and analytical exchanges between rural development stakeholders Provide networking activities for advisors and innovation support services Provide training and networking activities for LAGs Collect examples of projects	PSEQ: How many thematic exchanges, databases of innovative projects available to the public and trainings on innovation have been obtained through NRN activities?
Result – specific objectives	(PSO) Strengthen collaboration, exchange and networking among innovation project partners in rural areas through the NRN (PSO) Enhancing the emergence of innovative products and markets, processes and forms of organisation	PSEQ: To what extent did the NRN's activities contribute to increased collaboration, exchanges and networking among innovation project partners? PSEQ: To what extent were innovative products and markets, processes and forms of organisation developed and transferred due to NRN's activities?
Impact – overall objectives	(CO) Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas	CEQ: To what extent has the NRN contributed to (EU policy objective) foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas?

Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for rural development, 2015

The evaluation questions applied in NRN(P) evaluations during the previous programming period, experiences collected via NRN good practice workshops[75] organised by the Evaluation Helpdesk and guidance on the evaluation of NRNPs 2007-2013[76], can be used as an inspiration[77] in developing NRN related programme-specific evaluation questions.

Judgment criteria

Judgment criteria define the success of the intervention and specifies further the EQ. They facilitate the formulation of NRN indicators and answering EQs in a structured manner[78]. Typically, the judgment criteria are formulated together with evaluation questions. Their consistency with indicators is the basic precondition to develop evidence-base answers to evaluation questions. The following figure illustrates the consistency between evaluation questions, judgment criteria and indicators.

[75] http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/good-practices-workshops/national-rural-network-programmes/en/national-rural-network-programmes_en.html and http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/good-practices-workshops/national-rural-networks/en/national-rural-networks_en.html
[76] http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.html
[77] Working Paper on the Evaluation of the National Rural Network Programmes, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, July 2010, page 18
[78] EuropeAid Guide to Evaluations http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/evaluation/methodology/methods/mth_cri_en.htm

Figure 13. Consistency between evaluation questions, judgment criteria and indicators

Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

Common and programme-specific NRN related indicators

There are currently only three common output indicators[79] defined by the groups of actions of NRNs, namely:

- Number of thematic and analytical exchanges set up with the support of the NRN;
- Number of NRN communication tools;
- Number of ENRD activities in which the NRN has participated.

The common indicators are not sufficient to measure all NRN´s expected results and impacts and they are not able to provide sufficient evidence for answering the common and programme-specific EQ. The NRN(P) authorities are therefore encouraged to define additional result and impact indicators to answer the common evaluation question (no 21) and programme-specific NRN related result and impact indicators to answer programme specific evaluation questions. Indicators should be formulated during the programming stage or, alternatively, during the preparation of evaluation by the programme authorities (MA, NSU or both). Expected NRN results and impacts explained in previous parts of this chapter provide a basis for defining the NRN related programme-specific indicators.

The WD: Common evaluation questions for 2014-2020 RDPs provides examples of additional information to be collected for answering the NRN related common evaluation question, namely:

- Number of stakeholders (by type) participating in the implementation of the RDP due to activities of the NRN (including those through LAGs)
- Number of RDP modifications based on evaluation findings and recommendations from thematic working groups organised by the NRN
- % of RDP implemented projects encouraged by NRN activities
- Number of persons that have been informed about the rural development policy and funding opportunities through the NRN communication tools
- % of innovative projects encouraged by NRN out of the total number of innovative projects supported by the RDP(s)

This list can serve as grounds for the formulation of additional indicators. The list is not exhaustive and can be completed with more additional indicators. Moreover, depending on the NRN, a specific intervention logic and programme-specific evaluation questions may require the development of programme-specific indicators to be used when answering them.

A practical approach for developing programme-specific NRN indicators is to use a table listing the objectives and evaluation questions at each level of the hierarchy (output, result, impact). This is depicted in Table 7 using the example on innovation used above.

[79] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex IV, WD Rural Development programming and target setting (2014-2020)

Table 7. Example of linking NRN related objectives, evaluation questions and indicators

Level of objectives in the hierarchy of NRN intervention logic	**NRN objectives** (CO – common objectives PSO – program-specific objectives)	**NRN evaluation questions** (CEQ – common evaluation questions PSEQ – programme-specific evaluation questions)	**NRN indicators** (CO – common outputs PSR – programme-specific results PSI – programme-specific impacts)
Operational objectives (activity and output level)	PSO: Facilitate thematic and analytical exchanges between rural development stakeholders PSO: Provide networking activities for advisors and innovation support services PSO: Provide training and networking activities for LAGs PSO: Collect examples of projects	PSEQ: How many thematic exchanges, databases of innovative projects available to the public and trainings on innovation have been obtained through NRN activities?	(CO) Number of thematic and analytical exchanges set up with the support of the NRN, of which, number of trainings on innovation (CO) Number of communication tools with specific focus on databases of innovative projects, available to the public
Specific objectives (result level)	(PSO) Strengthen collaboration, exchange and networking among innovation project partners in rural areas through the NRN (PSO) Enhancing the emergence of innovative products and markets, processes and forms of organisation	PSEQ: To what extent did the NRN activities contribute to increased collaboration, exchanges and networking among innovation project partners? PSEQ: To what extent were innovative projects developed by NRN beneficiaries?	(PSR) Number of additional networks/ partnerships/ cooperation groups among innovation project partners encouraged by NRN (PSR) Number of innovative products and markets, processes and forms of organisation developed by NRN beneficiaries
Overall objectives (impact level)	(CO) Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas	CEQ: To what extent has the NRN contributed to (EU policy objective) fostering innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas?	(PSI) Percentage of innovative products and markets, processes and new forms of organisation along the value chain and in rural areas developed, transferred and triggered in rural areas due to NRN activities (PSI) Number of patents, prototypes developed / implemented in agriculture and forestry due to the NRN

Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for rural development, 2016

The NRN related programme-specific indicators shall be developed in consistency with NRN related policy objectives and evaluation questions/judgment criteria. RACER criteria should be used in the development of programme-specific NRN indicators[80], namely:

[80] Technical Handbook on the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework of the Common Agricultural Policy 2014-2020, http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-post-2013/monitoring-evaluation/index_en.htm

Relevant	Are indicators closely linked to the objectives to be reached? Are they stated at the right level – are the impact indicators really indicators of impacts and do result indicators refer to results?
Accepted	Are they accepted by stakeholders?
Credible	Are they accepted externally, while being unambiguous and easy to interpret for non-experts?
Easy	Are they easy to monitor?
Robust	Will they continue to be usable and are they such that they cannot be manipulated easily?

Examining the indicator from the point of view of data collection (easy criterion) is linked with the cost- effectiveness of evaluation. Data collection represents the biggest portion of the evaluation budget. Therefore, proportionality shall be taken into account when developing indicators. If the NRN budget is relatively small, it is probably unrealistic to use indicators that require extensive and expensive data collection.

To summarise, all the important elements to evaluate the NRN (objectives, evaluation questions, judgment criteria and indicators) a practical way is to use a table format (see example in Table 8). When condensing the information into a table, it is easy to see the gaps, as well as to ensure a relationship between the objective, EQ and the proposed measurement.

Table 8. Example of NRN evaluation elements

NRN objective (common)	Programme-specific evaluation question	Judgement criteria	Programme-specific NRN related indicator	Data source
Improve the quality of RDP implementation	To what extent did the NRN's actions contribute to the improved quality of RDP implementation?	Quality of RDP implementation has been improved through the NRN's activities, namely through improved capacities of RDP beneficiaries	Number of high quality RDP projects implemented, which were encouraged by NRN activities	PA database Questionnaire/ Survey NSU database

Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for rural development, 2016

Later in conducting the evaluation, in its structuring phase, evaluators may suggest more evaluation questions and indicators or break down existing evaluation questions into further sub-questions in order to obtain more specific information in accordance with the judgment criteria.

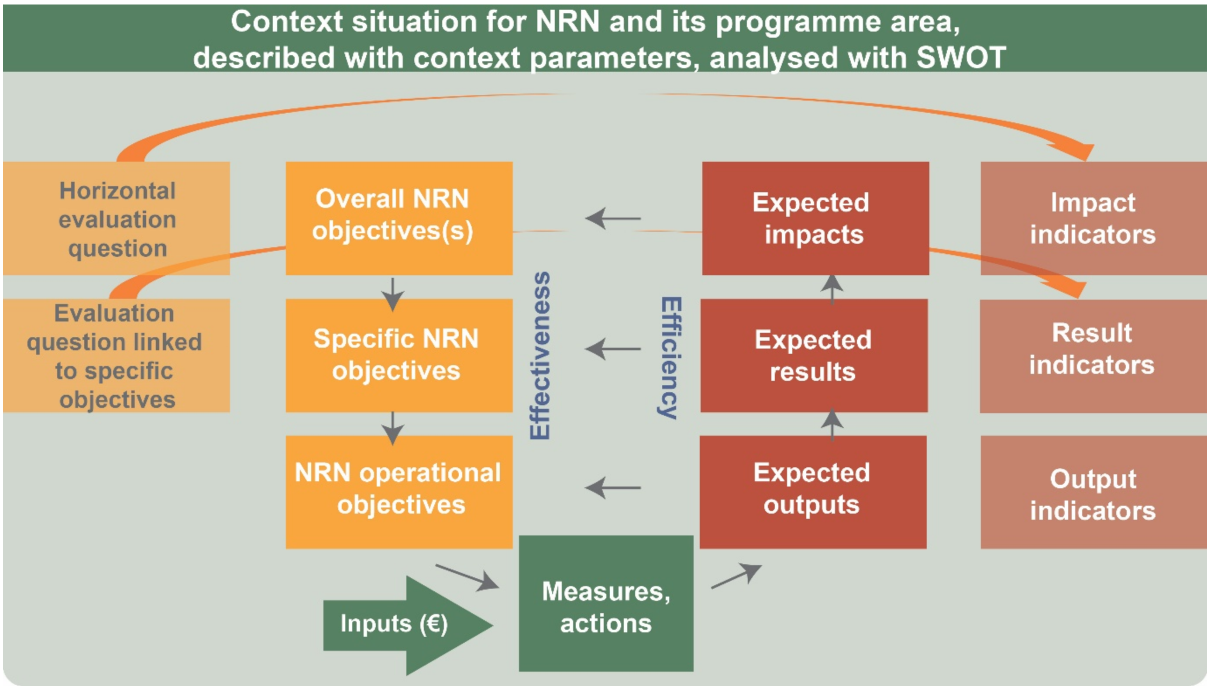
Checking the consistency of the NRN evaluation elements with the NRN intervention logic

After defining all evaluation elements, their consistency with the NRN intervention logic should be checked. This contains the appraisal whether:

- The evaluation questions are sufficient to assess achievements of the objectives
- The expected results and impacts can be measured with the means of proposed result and impact indicators
- Result and impact indicators comply with RACER criteria and can provide sufficient evidence to answer the evaluation questions

The consistency between the NRN intervention logic and evaluation elements can be illustrated with the Figure 14 below.

Figure 14. Consistency between NRN intervention logic and evaluation elements



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

Step 3 - Selection of the preferred evaluation approach

After developing the evaluation questions, the judgment criteria and the indicators, it is important that authorities responsible for NRN evaluation (MA, NSU, etc.) decide how the information to answer EQs should be developed. This covers the selection of the evaluation approach (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed).

The following questions help in the selection of the evaluation approach:

- Which approach best aligns with the goals of the evaluation?
- Which approach gives the most reliable results, considering the available information?

Expected outcome of this step is the decision on the evaluation approach and if possible on methods to be used to answer evaluation questions.

The evaluation approach will be confirmed and if necessary revised by the evaluators after agreement with the responsible authorities (MA, NSU, etc.) during the structuring phase when conducting the evaluation. At the structuring phase, the evaluator will also propose and agree with programme authorities the methods[81] that should be used to analyse collected data and information, develop judgments and consequently answers to EQ. PART II of these guidelines offers a detailed description of how to select a suitable evaluation approach and evaluation methods.

However, the commissioning party does not need to make a decision with respect to the evaluation methodology at this point, as the evaluator will propose methods in its tender. More important is that the commissioning party and other NRN stakeholders are aware of the different evaluation methods and their robustness for providing answers to the evaluation questions in relation to evaluation needs, so that they can quality check the evaluation results.

[81] Working Paper on the Evaluation of the National Rural Network Programmes, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, July 2010, page 21-26

Step 4 - Screening of information and data needs and potential sources

To conduct a sound NRN evaluation it is important to ensure a sufficient amount of data and information to calculate the NRN related indicators. Data needs are also affected by the chosen evaluation approach and methods.

The questions which guide this step are:

- What kind of information and data is needed to answer the evaluation questions?
- Does it already exist, or does it need to be collected?
- Where can this information be obtained?
- How can it be obtained?
- Are there limitations as to whom can use the data and how?
- What kinds of problems are there with the information/data?
- What implications do all of the above have for preparing the Terms of Reference for the NRN evaluation?

This step is conducted in the **following sequence**:

a.	Review the data and information needs in accordance with NRN related indicators (output, result, impact) and in line with the selected evaluation approach and methods.
b.	Identify data and information sources and arrangements to ensure their accessibility.
c.	Identify data gaps and decide how to fill them (including defining provisions for evaluators in future Terms of Reference).
Expected outcome: Accessible existing data sources, identification of data gaps and deciding how to fill them.	

In preparing the NRN evaluation, it is important to review what kind of data and information are needed to fill the indicators and answer the evaluation questions. In practice there is always data and information which already exists and can be collected either via the RDP monitoring or via other systems, for example:

- Monitoring data (operations database) on NRN inputs and outputs;
- NSU internal statistics and performance monitoring (annual reports, feedback from events and trainings, information related to NRN members, etc.);
- Information from previously conducted NRN self-assessment and evaluations.

To review the data and information sources and their accessibility is an important step in ensuring the evidence for the NRN evaluation. Sometimes it is necessary to make special arrangements to access the existing data and information. This should be done by programme authorities or the NSU, especially in cases when it is necessary to consider the legal aspects related to individual data protection issues (e.g. data on individual beneficiaries or information obtained from individual interviewees).

Screening of existing data can be repeated also at later stages of the NRN action plan implementation by evaluators (see **PART I**, chapter 2.2.2 “Preparation of the NRN evaluation”). In this respect it is important that all available data is accessible for evaluators once the evaluation has started. The NSU/MA have the responsibility to provide all available data to the evaluator during the implementation of the evaluation.

Special attention should be paid to data and information gaps and how to bridge them. The commissioning party (MA, NSU) decides which data and information can be obtained from existing sources, e.g. via provision of special arrangements and which missing data and information should be collected by evaluators. The knowledge of the MA and NSU on data and information availability, quality and gaps influences the evaluation budget and the Terms of Reference. In addition, this process may alert the MA early enough to avoid problems with data that may arise during the implementation of the NRN action plan.

Step 5 - Tendering and selecting of external evaluator

Drafting the Terms of Reference and tendering procedure are key procedures in selecting and contracting the external evaluator. The previous steps in relation to planning and preparing the evaluation, described above, create the basis for what shall be prepared by the NRN´s authorities and what should be left to evaluators and included in the Terms of Reference.

The questions guiding this step are:

- What is the background of the evaluation?
- What is going to be evaluated?
- Why is this evaluation conducted?
- What are the questions that need to be asked?
- What should the evaluator do in practice?
- What kind of documents/reports should the evaluator produce and when?
- How should the evaluation be conducted?
- What kind of data and information exists?
- What data and information should be collected additionally?
- What are the requirements for the evaluator?
- How is the evaluator chosen?
- Are the financial and human resources adequate for carrying out the evaluation we want?
- Is the time frame reasonable? Does each step have enough time allocated to it? Is there time allocated for contingencies and problems?
- What is the best tendering procedure for the NRN evaluation in question?

This step is conducted in the **following sequence**:

a.	Drafting the Terms of Reference for external evaluation.
b.	Allocating resources for external evaluation as the basis of planning and preparing the evaluation.
c.	Preparing and conducting the tendering procedure.
Expected outcome: selection of an external evaluator.	

The commissioning party (MA, NSU) is responsible for drafting the Terms of Reference and ensuring that it reflects the NRN in question. The evaluation steering group may support the commissioning party in defining and drafting them, if the MA provides the steering group with the evaluation mandate.

Box 2. Evaluation mandate

If the MA decides to use an evaluation steering group, it is advisable to draft an evaluation mandate prior to drafting the Terms of Reference. The evaluation mandate is a document that gives a brief and overall description of the evaluation to be carried out. It should specify the scope (what is going to be evaluated?), context and motives (what are the background and motives for doing an evaluation?), responsibilities and timing (how will the work be organised and in what kind of schedule?), and the objectives (what is the expected use of the evaluation?). The evaluation mandate guides the preparation of the Terms of Reference, as well as the work programme of the evaluation steering group.
The evaluation mandate is typically initiated and approved by the MA, and the evaluation steering group assists the MA in the drafting process.

The Terms of Reference should explain the importance of the NRN implementation and consider the size of the NRN evaluation budget. It should also contain a description of the origin, scope and objectives of the evaluation, as well as a clear distribution of the roles and responsibilities. The Terms of Reference should list the evaluation questions to be answered and describe tasks and activities to be accomplished by the external evaluators. In addition, it should outline already available information sources. Good Terms of Reference should also contain criteria for choosing the evaluator, as well as the quality assessment criteria for the final report.

There are no legal requirements on the content of Terms of Reference. Below are the recommended main elements which reflect common good practice standards[82].

- Context (purpose, objectives and justification for the evaluation);
- Scope of the evaluation;
- Objectives of the evaluation;
- Evaluation questions;
- Tasks to be performed;
- Timing and content of the deliverables;
- Organisation of work;
- Sources and documentation;
- Tendering procedures and contractual clauses. This will include selection criteria for the evaluator, such as:
  - required profile of the evaluators, including educational background, existing (multi-annual) evaluation experience and related references and links to existing reports,
  - proposed evaluation approach and methods,
  - requirements on data & information and an indication of the data to be collected by the evaluator,
  - proposed evaluation budget,
  - quality assessment criteria for the final report,
  - Etc.

The Terms of Reference should leave space for the evaluators to suggest the evaluation approach/design and methods, including the required data and information. Drafting the Terms of Reference is a starting point for structuring the evaluation, which the chosen evaluator will then continue.

It is important that the commissioning party (MA or NSU) **reserves and ensures sufficient and adequate financial and human resources** (in terms of capacities and skills of the MAs' staff and evaluators, available data and information, etc.) for conducting the evaluation and allocates sufficient time for the evaluation process and its individual steps. Before launching the tender, it is also important to set out clear rules and procedures for the evaluator and the responsible management bodies to interact.

Finally, the commissioning party (MA or NSU) must choose **the tendering procedure**. This depends on the specific approach taken to engaging the evaluator (a single open call, the establishment of a framework panel, contracting directly). In each case, it is fundamental to respect the relevant tendering procedures. Prior to the call for tender, it is important to ensure that all legal aspects related to tendering

[82] Further information from the Guidelines on the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, July 2009 at pages 11-13 and Guidelines: Establishing and implementing the evaluation plan of 2014-2020 RDPs, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, March 2014 pages 67-72

are respected. If the MA has a long-term evaluation contract with an evaluator, the NRN evaluation must be mentioned in the original tender and contract for this evaluator to conduct the evaluation without an additional tender. Otherwise, the applicable public procurement procedures should be followed.

Figure 15. Responsibilities of stakeholders in the NRN evaluation´s preparation

	Actions	Actors			
Phase	**Step**	*MA*	*other MA units*	*NSU*	*Others*
Preparation	**IL construction**	Responsible / participates	If evaluation unit, can assist	Participates / responsible	
	EQs & indicators	Responsible / participates	If evaluation unit, can assist	Participates / responsible	Possible SG participates
	Evaluation approach	Responsible / participates	If evaluation unit, can assist	Participates / responsible	Possible SG participates
	Info & data source screen	Responsible / participates	If evaluation unit, can assist	Participates / responsible, screens NSU data & info	PA provides data
	Tendering & evaluator selection	Responsible / participates	If evaluation unit, can assist	Participates / responsible	Possible SG supports

2.2.3 Implementing the evaluation

Step 1 - Conducting the evaluation

After the tendering process, the evaluation contract is awarded and the evaluator can start working. Even though the evaluator does most of the work at this stage, the commissioning party (MA or NSU) and the evaluation steering group, if set up, should support the evaluator (e.g. enable access to all existing data and information, inform stakeholders about the selected evaluator, and invite the evaluator to relevant meetings) to ensure a good quality evaluation in all its phases through maintaining open and frequent communication, commenting on the reports, and helping with access to data and interviewees.

The MA, PA, intermediate bodies, LAGs, other network members and beneficiaries play an important role in the observing phase as they allow access to information and data to the evaluator. In this respect, ensuring that application forms from beneficiaries have the correct permission statements in terms of accepting their details to be used for research and analytical purposes is important to make sure data is available for the evaluation. This needs to be planned from the beginning of the programme implementation period[83].

The evaluation is typically conducted in four phases: structuring, observing, analysing and judging.

In the **structuring phase**, the evaluator examines the documents and clarifies the task at hand. By the end of this phase, the evaluator should have a clear understanding of the NRN in question, its intervention logic, members and activities, as well as the EQs, indicators and evaluation tasks. The first task of the evaluator during the structuring phase is to review the intervention logic and assess the

[83] For example, in Portugal the NRN has set a methodological guideline providing a common basis of tools (e.g. questionnaires to evaluate events) to be used by the NRN beneficiaries in their activities. These tools are available online.

consistency of evaluation questions with objectives and indicators, potentially suggesting additional ones based on sound justification. The methods and tools used in the evaluation are also created in this phase and all existing data and information sources are known and accessible to the evaluator. Moreover, the evaluator should be aware which additional data and information he/she must collect in addition. It is recommended to produce an “Inception Report” at this stage setting out in detail the work plan, risk assessment, including when possible fieldwork tools.

The **observing phase** covers the collection of information and data. All relevant information and data is collected from various sources, such as NRN monitoring and evaluator´s tools and techniques (questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus groups, case studies, etc.). Due to the prevalence of qualitative methods in NRN evaluations, this phase will require significant resources.

In the **analysing phase**, all available information is systematically processed and synthesised in line with the selected evaluation approach and method. The aim is to use different kinds of evaluation techniques to triangulate evaluation findings.

In the final stage of the evaluation, the **judging phase**, the evaluator develops answers to the evaluation questions and draws evidence-based conclusions and recommendations[84].

PART II of these guidelines presents in detail the phases and steps involved in conducting the evaluation.

Step 2 - Assuring quality and progress of the evaluation

The more numerous the evaluations are, the more important it is for the commissioning party (MA or NSU) to set up a quality assurance and quality control system. Whereas quality assurance focuses on the process by trying to ensure that things are done the right way, quality control focuses on the products.

The main questions related to quality assurance and evaluation progress are:

- What are the quality standards for managing the evaluation and working with the evaluator?
- Are the agreed deliverables submitted on time?
- Are the deliverables of good quality? What are the quality standards for the evaluation?
- What could be done to improve the deliverables?
- Does the evaluator take feedback into account?

The evaluation steering group, if set up, monitors the evaluation progress. If there is no steering group, this is the task of the commissioning party. Different reports (such as the inception report, the intermediate report(s), the draft final report, and the final report) specified in the Terms of Reference should be submitted by the evaluator at key stages of the evaluation process. These reports should be analysed by the evaluation steering group and the commissioning party, preferably through specifically developed quality control grids/checklists. The most typical quality assurance tools used in evaluation process are checklists, content lists, overall and detailed process maps and different kinds of plans[85]. Quality control, on the other hand, is typically conducted through a quality control grid or checklist.

Meaningful and timely feedback should be given to the evaluator. This way the quality of the evaluation can be tracked and improved. Furthermore, the evaluation progress can be checked frequently against agreed milestones. The evaluator is responsible for submitting the agreed reports and taking feedback into account.

[84] Further information on the four evaluation phases can be found at CMEF Guidance Note B Evaluation Guidelines 2007-2013
[85] WFP evaluation quality assurance system at http://www.wfp.org/evaluation/methods-and-tools/eqas-evaluation-quality-assurance-system

Step 3 - Assessing the quality of the final report

After the evaluator submits the final report by the deadline agreed in the Terms of Reference, it should undergo a thorough quality assessment by the commissioning party (MA or NSU) and, if set up, the evaluation steering group. For this purpose, it is recommended to develop quality standards for the evaluation reports and a quality assessment grid. There are no compulsory quality assessment criteria for NRN evaluation reports.

Good quality criteria relate to the evaluation process (relevance, timeliness and inclusiveness), to normative issues (focus on independence and impartiality of the evaluator), as well as to technical criteria (relevance of the evaluation, scope, appropriate design, reliable data, sound analysis, credible findings, evidence-based answers to evaluation questions, valid conclusions, helpful recommendations, and clarity in reporting[86]).

Figure 16. Responsibilities of stakeholders in implementing the NRN evaluation

	Actions	Actors			
Phase	**Step**	*MA*	*other MA units*	*NSU*	*Others*
Implementing	**Conducting**	Supports evaluator, assures quality		Supports evaluator, provides data	PA provides data LAGs provide data & informants Regional MAs provide data & informants Evaluator conducts evaluation
	Quality control	Responsible / participates		Participates / responsible	Possible steering group participates

2.2.4 Communicating and disseminating evaluation findings

Communicating evaluation findings

Communication occurs throughout the evaluation process, but the main communication effort comes at the end, after the results and recommendations have been finalised. The communication actions should follow the communication plan developed at the beginning of the evaluation process.

Dissemination

The evaluation report should be made public. It should be featured on the website of the MA/NSU. Furthermore, to increase transparency, the evaluation report should be disseminated to the participants of the evaluation process and all the relevant NRN(P) stakeholders. As a good practice, it is recommended to write a citizens' summary of the main findings of the evaluation. The evaluation should also be presented and discussed in workshops and other events (such as with the Monitoring Committee). It is important to agree at an early stage on who does what (MA and NSU) in terms of dissemination.

[86] Annex 6 'Quality Assessment Form', DG Market Guide to Evaluating Legislation at pages 87-97

Following-up evaluation findings

In order for the evaluation (and self-assessment) to be useful for the NRN itself, there has been a procedure for following up and utilising the findings and recommendations.

The utilisation of evaluation findings could be put regularly on the coordinating body agenda or into the work plan of the network/actor that the recommendation is aimed at, together with a timetable for achievement. For the NRN, the Action Plan is an excellent context for it as it is an annual document. The NRN Action Plan could also include provisions on how to use the evaluation and self-assessment results in improving the network activities. The progress in fulfilling the recommendations could be included in the annual reporting. Thus, the evaluation findings can also feed into the future policy design. The Managing Authority and the coordinating body should develop and implement a strategy and process for following up the evaluation recommendations. This follow-up could be done by the evaluation owner in the form of a follow-up matrix, such as presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Evaluation follow up matrix

WHAT?	WHEN?	WHO?	HOW?	WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?
What are the major evaluation findings? What was concluded/ recommended? What is the expected change? How does the MA/NSU see it? What should be done?	Time frame for follow-up, final date of follow-up	Responsibility for follow-up others involved	Format of follow-up	Status of follow-up, date
Finding- conclusion - Recommendation 1: firmly based on evidence and analysis, clearly formulated, pragmatic Expected change: according to the evaluation report MA/NSU response: accepted, partially accepted, rejected – provide reasons Key actions: • … • …	quarterly, annual, biannual, etc.	organisation, unit, person	NRN annual work planning / reporting, AIR, Monitoring Committee, Steering Group, etc.	Status codes: not yet started ongoing finalised
Finding- conclusion - Recommendation 2: Expected change: MA/NSU response: Key actions: • … • …				

Table 10. Responsibilities of stakeholders in the communication and follow up on NRN evaluation findings

	Actions	Actors			
Phase	Step	*MA*	*other MA units*	*NSU*	*Others*
Communication & Dissemination	Communication	Responsible / participates	If communication unit, can participate	Participates / responsible	
	Dissemination	Responsible / participates	If communication unit, can participate	Participates / responsible	LAGs and regional MAs can disseminate information
	Follow-up	Responsible / participates		Participates / responsible	Possible NRN steering group can take actions and monitor progress relating to evaluation recommendations

3 PART II - METHODOLOGICAL HANDBOOK

To whom does PART II address?

First and foremost, this part addresses evaluators and all stakeholders interested in the methodological aspects of NRN evaluation. It may also be of particular interest for officials and experts involved in drawing up the Terms of Reference, and for people involved in NRN management.

The methodological handbook serves as guidance throughout the whole period, i.e. for the enhanced AIR 2017 and 2019 until the ex post evaluation, regardless of if the evaluation covers the whole range of evaluation questions or just a specific part in the context of a thematic evaluation.

PART II provides guidance for two options of NRN evaluation:

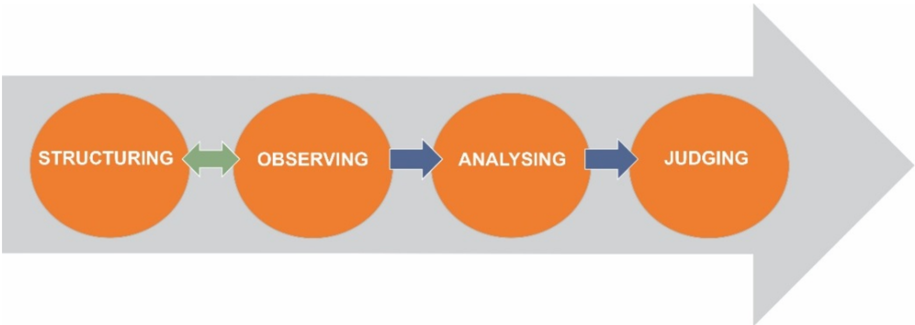
- evaluation of the NRN as part of the Technical Assistance within the RDP;
- “stand-alone” evaluation, which includes the evaluation of a NRN programme (NRNP) or the stand-alone evaluation of the NRN even if it is part of an RDP (as a self-standing evaluation topic).

How is PART II organised?

PART II is organised according to the logical sequence followed in the RDP evaluation, which also applies for the NRN evaluation:

- In the **structuring phase** the evaluators set up the evaluation approach, decides on evaluation methods and checks if all data and information needed to apply the chosen methods and to measure the indicator values, are available, and what information would still have to be collected.
- In the **observing phase** data and information are collected and processed.
- In the **analysing phase** indicators are quantified with quantitative data or expressed with qualitative information, using evaluation methods and tools.
- In the **judging phase** the quantitative and qualitative findings are interpreted, evaluation questions are answered, conclusions and recommendation are formulated.

Figure 17. The four phases of the evaluation process



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

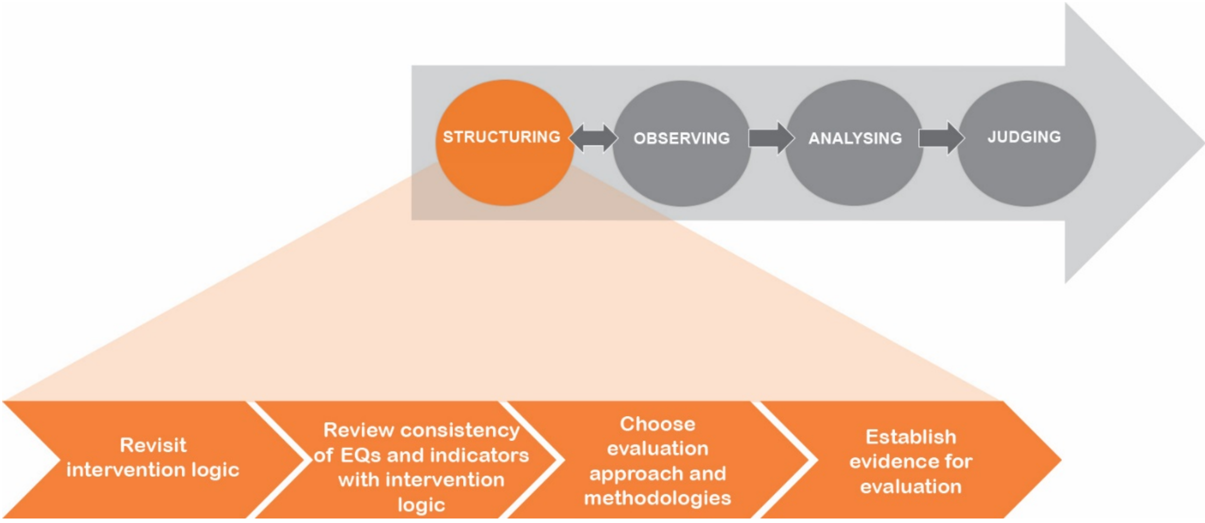
The four phases should not be understood as being strictly chronological. In practice, they will overlap. Furthermore, it is recommended to proceed in loops, e.g. if some data turns out to be inconclusive for the evaluation question (observing) it could be appropriate to utilize an additional information source into the survey (structuring). This means that the whole process should be accompanied by a meta-reflection on how each phase fits into the overall process.

3.1 STRUCTURING: Designing the framework for the NRN evaluation

In preparing the evaluation, stakeholders have developed the NRN intervention logic and evaluation framework (evaluation questions and indicators), discussed the evaluation approach, and the collection of data and information (see chapter 2.2.2). The better the evaluation was prepared; the less work the evaluator will have in the structuring phase. However, if the NRN evaluation was prepared before the NRN implementation starts, or if the evaluation is conducted at a later stage, the steps described in preparing the evaluation would need to be repeated again. The structuring phase is conducted in four major steps (Figure 19):

- Revisit the coherence and relevance of the intervention logic
- Review the consistency of evaluation questions and indicators with the intervention logic
- Choose the appropriate evaluation approach, method(s) and tools
- Establish the evidence for evaluation.

Figure 18. The structuring phase in four steps



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

3.1.1 Revisiting the NRN(P) intervention logic

Is there always an explicit intervention logic?

By default, the intervention logic of NRNPs has been constructed during the programme design phase and its consistency and relevance assessed during the ex ante evaluation (See: **PART I**, chapter 2.2.2).

As for NRNs that are part of the RDPs, the NRN intervention logic is by definition embedded in the intervention logic of the RDP. Sometimes the intervention logic may be rather implicit so that it needs some effort to properly reveal it; sometimes it may however also be missing altogether. In each case there are always two starting points to (re)construct the NRN intervention logic: the four common NRN objectives and the NRN action plan. (See also **PART I**, Chapter 2.2.2).

It is suggested to (re)construct the NRN intervention logic before the implementation of NRN activities or at least in the course of preparing the evaluation. This is in fact a reverse operation: The challenge is to find an answer to the question: “If there had been a theory of change behind what has been actually done, how could it be modelled?” **PART I**, chapter 2.2.2 offers guidance on the construction of the intervention logic by the NSU/MA during the preparation phase of the evaluation.

What is meant by the theory of change?

The **theory of change**[87]:

- rests on the assumption that NRNs and NRNPs are based on the explicit or implicit theory of policy makers concerning how and why NRN activities lead to the intended changes anticipated;
- provides an explicit causal chain (or 'theory of change') linking the NRN's objectives, activities and expected effects, which can then be used to guide the collection of evidence and the analysis of causal contributions by developing hypotheses that can be tested through critical comparisons.

In rural development evaluation, the theory of change is depicted as a model, which we call intervention logic[88].

How should the intervention logic be revisited?

The structuring phase starts with revisiting (validating) the NRN intervention logic. It is necessary to re-check the relevance and coherence of the intervention logic with regard to the NRN objectives and Action Plan.

Even if there is an explicit intervention logic, revisiting it is necessary because the programme context may have evolved. Things could also turn out differently than assumed during the programme design phase. Through the review of the intervention logic the evaluator can establish the framework for all of the further steps in the evaluation.

The first revisiting of the NRN intervention logic goes along with the preparation of the enhanced Annual Implementation Report submitted in 2017, followed by the review for the AIR 2019 and finally for the ex post evaluation in 2024.

Key questions guiding the review of the intervention logic are:

- Have there been changes concerning the context and the needs initially identified?
- Are all overall (policy) objectives taken into consideration?
- Are all specific and operational objectives identified and labelled correctly?
- Are all groups of (common and NRN-specific) actions considered?
- Is every operational objective linked to a suitable output?
- Is every specific objective linked to a suitable result?
- Are the identified impacts in accordance with the overall objectives?

What are the main steps in revisiting the NRN intervention logic?

Recommended steps for revisiting the NRN intervention logic and their expected outcomes are:

1	Assess changes in the context and specific needs of the territory in which the NRN operates;
2	Revisit the relevance of common and programme-specific NRN objectives and groups of actions, and linkages between them against the changes observed in context and needs;
3	Revisit the chain among the NRN expected effects, outputs, results and impacts, and their relevance;
4	Check the horizontal and vertical consistency between the common and programme- specific NRN objectives/ groups of actions, on one hand, and the expected outputs, results and impacts, on the other;

[87] See also: Helpdesk of the European Rural Evaluation Network (2014): Guidelines for the Ex post Evaluation of 2007-2013 RDPs. Brussels. P. 61ff.,http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.html

[88] See the references for further reading at the end of chapter 3.1.

5	Redefine or adjust the intervention logic, if needed.
Expected outcome: confirmed horizontal and vertical consistency and relevance of the NRN intervention logic as a basis for the evaluation	

The above steps are detailed below.

Step 1 - Assess changes in context and needs

NRNs operate within the context of rural areas. This context is characterised through a thorough situational description, SWOT and needs assessment. The situation in networking is depicted with the set of context parameters[89]. Changes in the programme and network context may imply changes in the scope of NRN objectives and interventions and therefore in the intervention logic.

There are certain differences between NRNPs and NRNs inside of RDPs, which need to be taken into account. While for a NRNP the context relates to Members States with several RDPs, a NRN performs within the frame of a specific RDP and its contextual situation (Member States, regions). In the case of NRNPs which start in parallel with the regional RDPs which they are supposed to service, context changes may be even more substantial.

Step 2 - Revisit the relevance of NRN objectives and groups of actions and linkages between them

The pursuit of the four common NRN objectives should contribute to the achievement of the RD priorities, CAP objectives and EU 2020 targets, via common groups of actions. The four common NRN objectives are placed within the NRN(P) intervention logic at the level of overall NRN(P) objectives.

The common NRN objectives and groups of actions are complemented with programme-specific NRN objectives and groups of actions in the preparation of NRN evaluation. (See also **PART I**, chapter 2.2.2).

During the review of the intervention logic the validity of proposed programme-specific NRN objectives and activities will be checked against any changes concerning the context to assess:

- whether the NRN objectives (common and programme-specific) properly mirror the changes expected to happen during or after the programming period at the level of NRN beneficiaries (results, e.g. changes in behaviour), and in the programme area (impacts, e.g. contributions to RDP results, or changes in human and social capital) (See **PART I**, Chapter 2.2.2);
- whether the respective level of hierarchy (overall, specific and operational objectives) and their inter-linkages are clear;
- the extent to which NRN objectives can plausibly be achieved with the groups of actions;
- whether the NRN(P) objectives are sufficiently clear and tangible as to be measured by RACER[90] programme-specific indicators.

Step 3 - Revisit the chain between the NRN expected effects: outputs, results and impacts

Activities of NRNs are expected to produce outputs, results and impacts, which lead to the accomplishment of NRN objectives. While outputs are brought forth by concrete activities organised and implemented by NSUs (events, web page, publications, trainings, good practice exchanges, etc.), NRNs transform these outputs into NRN results and impacts (often called NRN added value). NRN results and impacts are more difficult to capture because they often (not always) have an intangible

[89] Context parameters have been proposed by the ENRD Contact Point and the Helpdesk of the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development in 2014; as they are not part of the legal framework, they can be adjusted by Member States if appropriate. The list of context parameters can be found in **PART I**, Chapter 2.2.2 Preparation of evaluation

[90] RACER: relevant, accepted, credible, easy, robust

nature (changes in human and social capital). Examples of the output-result-impact chains for each of the common groups of actions can be found in **PART III** of the guidelines.

Expected NRN effects are ideally defined during the preparation of NRN evaluation, but can be completed also during the structuring phase, respecting the possible changes in the context situation.

Step 4 - Check the horizontal and vertical consistency between NRN objectives and expected effects

During this step, evaluators should conduct a horizontal and vertical consistency check between objectives and expected outputs, results and impacts (internal consistency of NRN intervention logic, see the Introduction, chapter 1.4.2) of the NRN. In case the NRNP or RDP authorities have not defined the expected NRN results and impacts clearly enough and in a way that can be measured, the evaluators are called to run a consistency check of the intervention logic and add missing elements and fine-tune existing elements in collaboration with the programme authorities and the NSU, in the same fashion as what was described in **PART I**, chapter 2.2.2.

Besides the internal consistency of the NRN intervention logic, the evaluator should check also the external consistency of NRN intervention logic with the RDP and the EU objectives (See Figure 5 and Figure 6 in Introduction, Chapter 1.4.2). In the case of NRNs being part of RDPs, outputs produced with the means of inputs (financial and others) through the implementation of the NRN action plan generate the NRN results, and these contribute to the RDP outputs. NRN impacts should foster better results from the RDP and also affect rural areas as such, e.g. in the human and social capital domains, which can also influence the RDP's impacts (Figure 5 in Chapter 1.4.2). If inconsistencies are found in the above checks, the missing elements should be developed by the evaluator.

NRN unexpected effects

In addition to the expected or intended effects, NRN activities usually also generate unexpected or unintended effects[91]. These unexpected/unintended effects can reach the intended beneficiaries or other groups which originally have not been explicitly named as direct or ultimate beneficiaries, such as other organisations or networks (e.g. rural business owners, cooperation systems and clusters of SMEs, eco-tourism associations or enterprises, municipalities or NGOs engaged in climate actions, etc.).

On the contrary, NRN interventions can also indirectly induce changes (both positive and negative), via multiplication, deadweight, displacement or substitution effects. For example, if we invest a lot into the formal NRN, already existing informal networks could be starved out, since they live on membership fees and cannot compete with RDP supported networks. This could lead to the reduction of net social capital due to the NRN intervention! When revisiting the NRN intervention logic, it is worth recognising that every positive change also comes with a price (shadow costs).

Step 5: Redefine or adjust the intervention logic, if needed.

The review of the NRN intervention logic may lead to changes. These changes might result in a fine-tuning of the NRN related programme-specific objectives, groups of actions and expected effects. It also may result in the revision of the hierarchy of objectives and/or a revision of the expected outcomes (outputs, results, impacts) in accordance with the objectives. Finally, the assessment of unexpected/unintended effects may lead to the identification of additional expected results and impacts.

Guiding questions for the review of the intervention logic

- Is there an explicit theory of change behind the stipulated intervention logic?

[91] Information about intervention logic´ effects can be found in the guidelines „Assessment of RDP results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017", published in April 2016

- Is the intervention logic clearly set out or can it be at least modelled from what is written in the programme or concomitant documents (such as the Terms of Reference for the NSU or the service offer of the winning bidder, etc.)?
- What significant changes can be observed among stakeholders in the programme area or in the wider socio-economic and political context?
- Are the stipulated objectives and expected results and impacts relevant regarding the context (SWOT, needs)?
- Are there contradictions or mismatches between activities, expected outputs, results and impacts (vertically) and the stipulated objectives (horizontally)?

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Consider changing circumstances that may have impacted the meaningfulness of the intervention logic. **Clarify how NRN can contribute to rural development policy objectives.** **Conceive NRN objectives and achievements** also as changes in the human and social capital of rural actors and areas. Consider complementarities and coherence with other similar interventions (outside the realm of rural development policy). Always remain open to surprises (unintended benefits or unwanted effects).	Accept the intervention logic unquestioned. Connect the NRN activities directly to the achievement of RDP objectives. Just look at the effects written on paper. Consider shadow costs of interventions and certainly ignore the occurrence of any surprises which could lead to unwanted effects.

Further reading

Assessment of RDP results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, Chapter 5.1 Evaluation Helpdesk, April 2016

Capturing the success of your RDP: Guidelines for the ex post evaluation of 2007-2013 RDP, PART II, Chapters 1.4 and 1.5, link: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.html

Getting the most from your RDP: Guidelines for the ex ante evaluation of 2014-2020 RDPs, Chapter 5.4, http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.html,

On the NRN intervention logic:

ENRD 2014: NRN Guidebook, 3rd chapter on Setting up and Starting a Network. http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf

On the theory of change and realistic evaluation:

Avril Blamey and Mhairi Mackenzie, 2007: Theory of Change and Realistic Evaluation: Peas in a Pod or Apples and Oranges? Sage. Web resource: http://evi.sagepub.com/content/13/4/439.full.pdf

Ray Payson and Nick Tilley,1997: Realistic Evaluation, Sage, 1997. Web resource (2004): http://www.communitymatters.com.au/RE_chapter.pdf

3.1.2 Review the consistency of the evaluation elements with the NRN intervention logic

In the structuring phase, the consistency of the evaluation questions and indicators developed when preparing the evaluation should be revisited. In case the revisiting of the intervention logic has led to modifications, the existing evaluation elements will also have to be reviewed and completed, to ensure a consistent evaluation framework.

What are the main steps for choosing the evaluation approach?

Recommended steps and expected outcome are:

1	Check if additional indicators are still relevant to answer the common evaluation question. Formulate new ones if this is not the case
2	Check if existing programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators are still relevant. If this is not the case, reformulate them or remove them from the system
3	Formulate new programme-specific evaluation questions if needed, e.g. if new NRN objectives have been added, and develop indicators[92] which will allow the answering of these questions
4	Check again the consistency between the NRN intervention logic, evaluation questions and indicators
Expected outcome: A consistent NRN evaluation framework (Figure 9)	

At this stage the evaluation should validate the relevance of programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators, as well as additional indicators formulated to answer the NRN common evaluation question. Changes might be needed if there are new programme-specific NRN objectives defined or new results and impacts are identified at the time of the evaluation. The formulation of programme-specific NRN related evaluation questions and indicators, as well as the consistency check between the NRN intervention logic and common, additional and programme-specific evaluation elements is already explained in **PART I**, chapter 2.2.2, Preparation of NRN evaluation. In the structuring phase of the evaluation the procedure is identical.

Guiding questions for the consistency check of evaluation elements with the intervention logic

- Are the evaluation questions really asking what we want to know?
- Are there any evaluation questions missing or redundant?
- Do the indicators cover the aspects we want to know?
- Do the indicators sufficiently itemise the evaluation questions and judgment criteria?
- Are the indicators able to provide sufficient evidence for answering the evaluation questions?
- Are the indicators RACER?

[92] More guidance in this respect is provided in the guidelines: Assessment of RDP results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017,

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Build a comprehensive evaluation architecture by adjusting the evaluation elements to the intervention logic, whenever needed. Make sure that evaluation questions actually cover the whole range of what we want to know about the NRN's contribution to rural development. **Be aware** that indicators are to collect evidence to answer the evaluation questions. Use the RACER approach in developing indicators.	Accept the evaluation questions and indicators unquestioned. Formulate evaluation questions without specifying them with judgment criteria and linking them to indicators.

Further reading

Assessment of RDP results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, Chapter 5.1 Evaluation Helpdesk, April 2016

Italian NRNP: Examples for mapping IL, EQs and Indicators in the Case Study presented by the evaluator Francesca Angori during the Helpdesk seminar: *"National rural networks: How to show their benefits."* Rome/IT, 10/11 April 2014. http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/evaluation/national-rural-networks/GPW10_Italy.pdf

3.1.3 Choosing a suitable evaluation approach and method(s) for NRNs

The next task in the structuring phase is to define the evaluation approach and to choose a suitable mix of methods. A robust evaluation design is crucial for testing and finalizing the indicator system, as well as for identifying data sources and means of data collection.

How to distinguish the evaluation approaches from the methods and tools?

In these guidelines we use the terms "approach", "method" and "tool". There are no all-purpose definitions for these terms. We use them in a way that the choice of the former implies the choice of the latter. From the approach down to the tool, the significance of purpose and concept decreases whereas the technical aspect gains relevance:

- The choice of the **approach** defines the playing field in which the evaluation is carried out. It is guided by questions like: "What is the purpose of the evaluation?" - "What are the (political, economic, technical, financial) boundaries or restrictions we have to take into account for the evaluation?"

  → Example: Mixed quantitative and qualitative approach.

- The choice of the **method** or **methodology** defines the avenue, the ways and means, of the evaluation process. It is guided by questions like: "Considering the chosen approach, what method or mix of methods do we have at hand?" – "How can we address the purpose and thematic focus of the evaluation?"

  → Example: Social Network Analysis.

- **Tools** are the basic technical elements of methods, which we use in collecting evaluation evidence.

  → Example: Standard online questionnaire.

Choosing an evaluation approach for NRNs

What is required by the legal framework and what is up to the discretion of the Member States?

The appropriate evaluation approach will in most cases consist of a mix of methods determined by:

- type of evaluation required (2017, 2019 and ex post),
- thematic priorities of the NRN's activities,
- purpose and interest of the managing authorities and other stakeholders.

The **legal framework** requires focusing the NRN evaluation in 2017 on the quantification of programme achievements while using the NRN common output and programme-specific result indicators, and answering the common evaluation question linked to the NRN.

The AIR 2019 additionally requires the assessment of progress towards the objectives of the RDP or NRNP, and its contribution to the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth through, inter alia, assessment of the programme´s net contribution to changes in CAP impact indicator values. In both cases the assessment will rely on information collected via common output and programme- specific result and impact indicators related to the NRN.

The ex post evaluation requires the assessment of NRN(P) results and impacts against the backdrop of NRN objectives, RDP and horizontal CAP objectives.

It is up to the **discretion of Member States** to define:

- specific evaluation topics in respect to the NRN in the evaluation plan;
- NRN related programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators;
- scope and features of the monitoring and evaluation framework of the NRN, possibly connected to self-assessment;
- the evaluation approach in the Terms of Reference, which gets fine-tuned by the evaluator. In some cases, the Member States will go so far as to prescribe methodologies and tools, in other cases this will be left to the choice and competencies of the evaluator;
- specific evaluation activities, such as ongoing evaluation, and accompanying research and studies covering particular themes.

The main choice will be that of the right weighting in a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach in relation to chosen evaluation themes. Some themes (e.g. information and dissemination activities; training activities) will allow for more, some for less quantification (e.g. fostering innovation in rural areas; involvement of stakeholders in RD).

In any event, proportionality should be taken into account. The effort to apply the evaluation methods should match with the scope and scale of NRN tasks and operations.

What are the main steps for choosing the evaluation approach?

The chosen evaluation approach is affecting the selection of methods and requirements for data and information to be collected and analysed for answering the evaluation questions. It also influences the quality of evaluation findings and conclusions and recommendations to improve the NRN related policy objectives and interventions. Recommended working steps and expected outcome are:

1	Identify the scope of the NRN evaluation
2	Understand the challenges in assessing NRN results and impacts
3	Obtain an overview of the possible evaluation approaches for the NRN and their comparative advantages
4	Decide on the NRN evaluation approach
Expected outcome: Decision on evaluation approach	

Steps in choosing the evaluation approach are detailed below.

Step 1 - Identify the scope of the NRN evaluation

The scope of the NRN evaluation should be defined by the evaluation plan or a similar internal evaluation planning document. Within this scope it is important to include the assessment of the achievements of the NRN's common and programme-specific objectives (see also Introduction, chapter 1.4.2), as well as the NRN's results (in the AIR submitted in 2017). This can cover changes in the behaviour of the NRN's members and beneficiaries and impacts (in the AIR submitted in 2019), such as more effective RDP implementation due to the NRN's activities, and changes in human and social capital. For example, networking and cooperation activities and structures, increased participation of the civil society in rural development, increased individual, organisational and societal capacities through the exchange of information and experience, etc.

The preliminary review of existing NRNPs 2014-2020 and their evaluation plans shows that in addition to the common evaluation requirements for 2017, 2019 and the ex post, the evaluation activities of NRNPs may also focus on building the methodological capacity for carrying out evaluations of the programme's effects, e.g. through studies to develop result and impact indicators or to develop methods for the evaluation of the essentially intangible results and impacts of the NRNP.

Step 2 - Understand the challenges in assessing NRN results and impacts

Before selecting the evaluation approach, the evaluator needs to have a full picture of the challenges associated with the specificities of NRNs, including inter alia[93]:

- Networking activities often produce intangible results and impacts that are difficult to measure. The emergence of behavioural changes, social innovation and the enhancement of human and social capital constitutes the most important results and impacts of networking activities which may also go beyond the NRN's members and RDP's beneficiaries. The field of expertise in this realm is quickly expanding, and evaluators are called upon to draw on the most recent studies[94].
- The scope of NRN activities can be very broad, since events and training activities may permeate all aspects of rural development policy (competitiveness, environment, socio-economic development), potentially generating results in all these spheres.
- The assessment of NRN results and impacts should chisel out causal relations between NRN(P) activities and indicator values, notwithstanding the difficulties to observe intangible changes. Put as a question: *"To what extent are observed changes expressed in indicators´ values due to the NRN's activities or what changes would have happened without them?"*

[93] See also the guidelines: Assessment of RDP results: how to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, to be published in 2016, Chapter 7.

[94] See for example the World Bank's publications on measuring social capital, such as Working Paper No. 18, 2004: "Measuring social capital: an integrated questionnaire", http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2004/01/3050371/measuring-social-capital-integrated-questionnaire ; or particular approaches to capture changes induced by social innovation, e.g. the Regional Social Innovation Index (http://avitem.org/IMG/pdf/cuaderno_resindex_eng.pdf) developed for the Spanish Euskadi Region in 2013; or the achievements of the EU research project IAREG on indicators of social capital in the EU: http://www.iareg.org/fileadmin/iareg/media/papers/WP2_02.pdf

- Experience shows that some NRNs may start their activities in a relatively late stage of RDP implementation, in which case the scope for measuring results and impacts will be limited (e.g. due to missing baseline values of indicators or inadequate data collection system).
- In some cases, the NRN is merely considered as an auxiliary device to promote RDP measures, disregarding other NRN objectives (e.g. the generation of new knowledge, the contribution to rural innovation).
- The monitoring of NRN activities generates data related to the frequency of events, exchanges or trainings, and the number of people participating. All this is easy to collect. However, there is limited possibility to collect evidence in relation to expected result and impacts, such as the establishment of a consolidated cooperation framework or the generation of knowledge in LEADER areas that the NRN activities may have spawned.
- Several NRN effects on the RDP implementation would appear in the long-term. Tracing them back to the NRN's activities could turn out as a highly speculative exercise. This does not mean that the evaluator should refrain from drawing hypothetical conclusions, but not without the necessary caveats.

Step 3 - Obtain an overview of possible evaluation approaches for the NRN and their comparative advantages

In rural development evaluation, the theory of change is expressed by the intervention logic (see chapter 3.1). Theory of change is focused not just on generating knowledge about whether a programme is effective, but also to explain what methods can be considered to be effective.

The solution for sound NRN(P) evaluations is to rely on a well-designed mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Table 11 provides an overview of the advantages and drawbacks of qualitative and quantitative approaches in the context of NRN(P) evaluations.

Table 11. Overview of the qualitative and quantitative evaluation approaches

Evaluation approach	Suitability for the evaluation of NRN(P)		Examples of where to use
	Advantages	Drawbacks	
Qualitative approach	Qualitative approaches are used in the evaluation of networks since they allow the assessment of effects that are difficult to quantify and to corroborate or adjust hypotheses on factors of success for specific interventions in specific contexts.	The results are not always precise. The approach heavily relies on methods that offer subjective information (interviews, participant surveys, questionnaires).	The results and impacts of • good practice collection; • the generation or exchange of new knowledge; • the participation in ENRD activities.
Quantitative approach	The quantitative approach allows the assessment of net effects of precisely delimited NRN activities and make comparisons of evaluation results across NRNs/countries easier.	There are difficulties • to quantify changes in the human and social capital; • to delimitate beneficiaries from non-beneficiaries in many areas of NRN interventions, at least in quantitative terms • to obtain data for NRN activities which are meaningful in relation to the stipulated added value of NRN; • to number activities and outputs in a context of matchless and nonrecurring interventions;	• Outputs of NRN activities, e.g. the three common output indicators; • Results of NRN activities where the use of outputs can be clearly attributed to certain beneficiaries or users, e.g. o the degree of information enquired among readers of newsletters; o the degree of satisfaction of

Evaluation approach	Suitability for the evaluation of NRN(P)		Examples of where to use
	Advantages	Drawbacks	
		• to net out any observed effects by pondering the influence of other interventions; • to get reliable quantitative data over a longer period of time (as in the past mostly qualitative information on NRN has been collected).	inquirers in search for support; o the degree of use of the website, distinguished by offers (downloads, blogs…) Measuring involvement of stakeholders

Mixing of both approaches facilitates applying quantitative approaches for quantifiable NRN activities and qualitative ones for non-quantifiable ones; for instance, the quantitative assessment of good practice collection can be combined with the qualitative assessment of how this has contributed to increasing the knowledge base amongst rural stakeholders. This also allows for the cross-checking of findings from quantitative approaches with the use of qualitative ones; for instance, the quantitative results from the assessment of NRN events can be verified with the qualitative results of opinion surveys and stakeholder interviews.

Step 4 - Decide on the NRN evaluation approach

Apart from considering the advantages and drawbacks of different evaluation approaches, the selection of a robust evaluation approach should account for:

- the validity of results offered by the evaluation approach,
- the scale of measurement,
- the possibility to model output, result and impact indicators into a coherent cause-effect structure,
- the ability to analyse the counterfactual where it seems to be feasible,
- the ability to capture unintended effects and
- the antecedents and the actual time horizon of the intervention[95].

Given the complexity of NRN evaluation, a **mixed approach**, combining qualitative with quantitative methods will be the appropriate choice.

Particularly at the higher level of NRN objectives, at the level of NRN results and impacts, the character of NRNs implies a strong emphasis on qualitative evaluation:

- firstly, because the sphere of activities and influence of the NRN goes beyond the RDP beneficiaries and affects the wider range of the rural actors;
- secondly, NRN activities addressed to a specific target group may have an effect also on non-beneficiaries; for instance, the information of a thematic exchange event targeting farmers will also have an effect on awareness raising of other stakeholders in the area. There is no such thing as linear cause-effect chains in social systems. Moreover, NRNs are social systems and any intervention from a NSU inseparably blends with the signal noise from other communications, interactions and any occurrences influencing the behaviour of beneficiaries and stakeholders.

[95] See also guidelines: Assessment of RDP results: how to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, which will be published in 2016

Counterfactual assessment: where and when?

Sound evaluation practices require the counterfactual to attribute observable effects to programme interventions[96]. Counterfactual assessment is possible with both quantitative and qualitative approaches and can be applied without clear-cut control groups in the situation when there are no non-beneficiaries. There are different possibilities to design and apply a counterfactual by using various methods and techniques (counterfactual design based on statistics, on modelling or on qualitative approaches), even when all rural actors are included in NRN's activities (although to varying degrees).

All in all, the more targeted and standardised the type of intervention is, the more appropriate and feasible will be the counterfactual assessment[97]. It should be decided at an early stage of programme evaluation (ideally in the setting up of the evaluation plan), which thematic areas and indicators would be subject to counterfactual assessment, in order to set appropriate baselines and cater for the subsequent data collection[98].

Choosing evaluation methods for NRNs

Choosing a mixed-methods approach means to systematically adopt various perspectives and observation devices. The Helpdesk's Guidance on *"Capturing the Impacts of LEADER and of measures to improve the quality of life in rural areas"*[99] devotes a whole chapter to "matching complexity with triangulation". A closer look at the term reveals that **triangulation** can refer to different aspects:

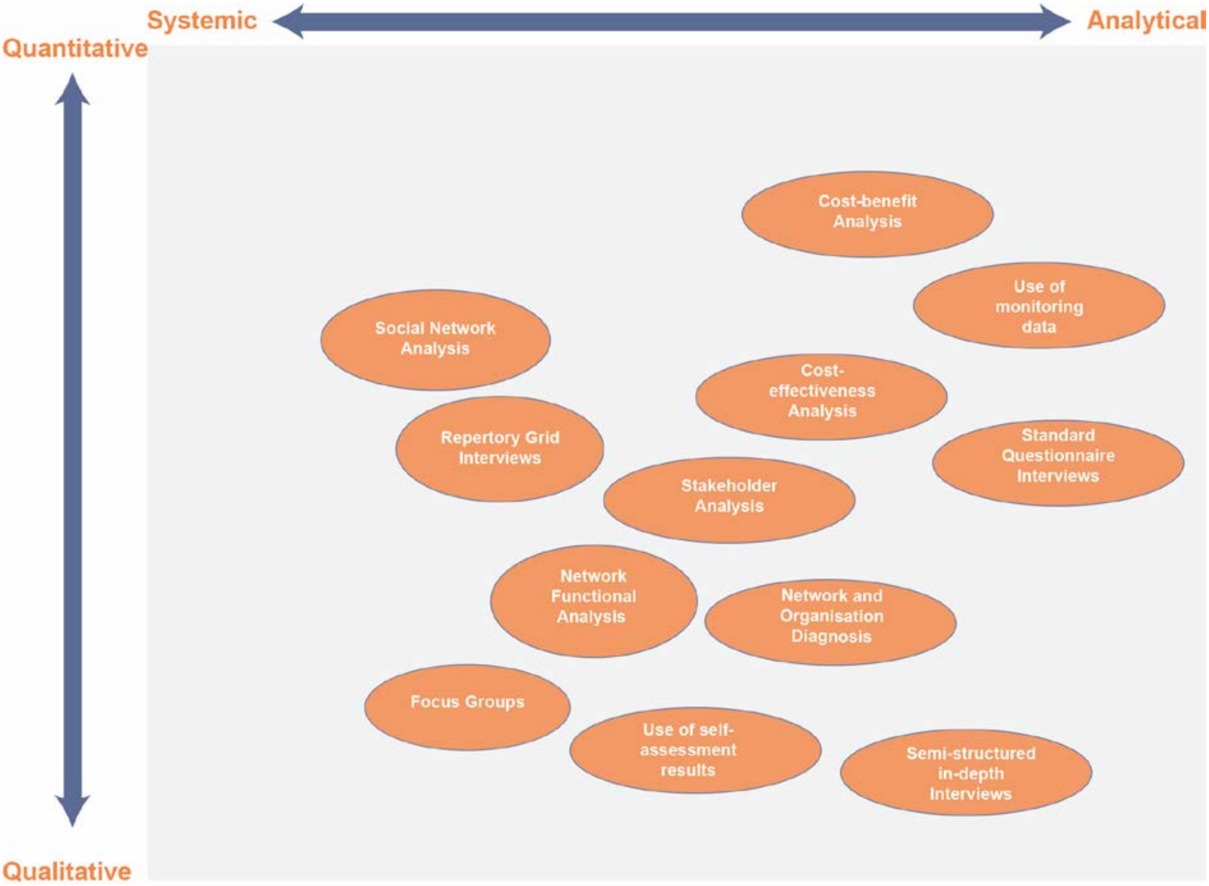
- Evaluator triangulation involves a broad range of competences within the evaluation team;
- Methodological triangulation, which means using more than one method to gather data (such as interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and documentary analysis);
- Data triangulation in respect to space and people.

What are the suitable methods for the evaluation of NRNs?

Figure 19 shows methods which can be recommended for evaluating RDP interventions, without raising any claim on completeness. Robust methodological approaches consist of sets of various methods, in order to obtain a multi-dimensional picture of what is going on in reality.

[96] See also the guidelines: Assessment of RDP results: how to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, which will be published in 2016
[97] Assessment of RDP results: how to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, which will be published in April and Guidelines for ex post evaluation of 2007-2013 RDPs, http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.html
[98] See the Helpdesk Guide (July 2010): Approaches for assessing the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiple intervening factors, p. 26 ff.
[99] Idem, p. 56 ff.

Figure 19. Methods for evaluating NRN(P)s



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

The methods in the yellow field can be roughly subdivided into:

- Surveys
- Dialogue-based methods
- Analytical methods
- Diagnostic methods.

<u>**Surveys**</u> may be based on

- **Standardised questionnaire interviews** addressing network participants and stakeholders, with subsequent statistical analysis; they are usually sent out, filled in and sent back online using one of the available online tools[100], often for free;

  → Example: Online survey involving LAG leaders and managers concerning the kind and intensity of their involvement in NRN activities, as well as with their satisfaction and possible follow-up activities.

- **Semi-structured (in-depth) interviews** held with experts, stakeholders or beneficiaries directly exploring their standpoints concerning the evaluation questions; they usually imply face-to-face, but also telephone or skype interaction;

[100] e.g. SurveyMonkey, https://www.surveymonkey.com/, KvikSurvey, https://kwiksurveys.com/ etc.

→ Example: Individual interviews with selected representatives of the Managing Authority and implementing bodies about their views on the accomplishments of the NRN in respect to the expected outcomes.

- Repertory-grid interviews[101] which allow for quantitative processing of qualitative information gained from a relatively small number of interviewees; "rep grids" serve as tools to investigate personal constructs (world views, values and attitudes) which from a social psychological point of view are recognised as guiding our actions, i.e. our behaviour patterns. → See also **PART III** of this Guidance Paper.

  → Example: Rep-grid interviews of selected network members (e.g. the 'inner core' such as indicated by a preceding Social Network Analysis) about their attitudes toward the quality and evolution of the network (best to be done at least twice – e.g. 2017 and 2019).

Standardised questionnaire interviews, but also semi-structured interviews allow for collecting factual information as well as for gleaning opinions and value statements. These subjective statements can be quantified for statistical processing by using scoring (e.g. % of fulfilment), ranking (ordering according to preference) or Likert scales which offer different positions between two extreme values (e.g. from "very bad" to "very good"). Scoring and scaling allow for a contextualised comparison based on subjective judgments (specifically for impact indicators)[102].

Dialogue-based or participatory methods bet on 'collective intelligence'[103] or 'group intuition'[104] which complement the individual opinions and factual findings collected in surveys.

- Dialogue-based and participatory methods constitute a bridge to **self-assessment practices,** which may include coordination or monitoring meetings to thematic or methodological work groups, underpinned by continually updated monitoring data. The aggregate results of self-assessment sessions and feedback sheets can be used as inputs for conformable dialogue settings facilitated by the external evaluator.

  → Example: Annual strategy retreat with external facilitation, making a point on the achievements and shortcomings of the past year, using monitoring data, accompanying studies, internal surveys also as inputs for reflection; the facilitator may propose unconventional dialogue formats, settings and external contributors, in order to instigate thinking outside the box; the retreats 2017, 2019 and after closure could directly feed into the respective evaluations.

- **Focus groups** are widely used as formats for dialogue-based evaluation methods. Apart from focus group series stretching over a certain time, they can be arranged in a two-tier architecture (cascading focus groups at two levels of decision-making, e.g. at the level of LAG and NRN representatives); they can focus on thematic areas or for exploring cross-cutting questions; in any event they grow in quality if their composition is sufficiently diverse, and if there are not too many participants (5 to 12 persons per group meeting, or larger group events with according breakout settings for this group size); last but not least they should be facilitated by an external moderator (i.e. the evaluators or, if they lack facilitation skills, by someone acting on their behalf). Meetings of the evaluation steering committee, if it exists, can in principle also be organised as a 'second-tier' focus group meeting.

  → Example: Setting up groups of people with a high diversity of perspectives to validate specific segments of the NRN's activities (e.g. communication and publications/workshop and event architectures/fostering innovation); these groups may overlap, i.e. two groups

[101] http://edutechwiki.unige.ch/en/Repertory_grid_technique
[102] According to Steve de Shazer, "You can know what's better without knowing what's good"
[103] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_intelligence
[104] Robert Lukesch, Harald Payer, Jutta Rabenau (2008): Wissen von innen – Fokusgruppen in der Begleitforschung von Regionen Aktiv. In: Michael Böcher, Max Krott, Sebastian Tränkner (2008): Regional Governance und integrierte ländliche Entwicklung. p. 179-205. Springer, Wiesbaden.

would in that case validate the same topic, independently from each other (for the sake of a multi-dimensional picture of what's going on).

Analytical methods are mainly used to capture the effectiveness and efficiency of interventions.

- The outputs of NRNs may be grasped with **cost-benefit analysis** (e.g. concerning the production and dissemination of leaflets, journals etc.; or the organisation of training courses and stakeholder workshops).

  → Example: Cost-benefit analysis of the total cost incurred for training courses, measured against the number of participants and the degree (scale value) of satisfaction.

- As the activities of NRNs are supposed to trigger behavioural changes of the users of the NRN's outputs, purely quantitative methods will not suffice to grasp this level of outcomes; this could possibly be achieved with a cost-effectiveness analysis. While the cost side is still expressed in monetary terms (like in the cost-benefit analysis), the effect side is captured by a range of qualitative indicators which may partly be the programme-specific indicators, but also specific variables just picked for this purpose.

  → Example: Cost-effectiveness analysis of the total cost incurred for training courses and the subsequent take-up and application of the training content, also measured in terms of additional demand for accompanying advice or coaching.

Diagnostic methods include various methods ranging from pure heuristics to those supported by computational software:

- **Functional Analysis of Networks**[105]: This method analyses networks through its Network Support Units (NSUs) according to six typical functions (namely: to filter, amplify, invest and provide, convene, community-building and facilitate), and two 'supra-functions' or roles (the agency role and the support role), the combination of which determines the ways the NSU uses to intervene into the network. In practice, most policy networks have some characteristics of both roles (See also **PART III**).

  → Example: This analysis could be conducted on the basis of a broad online survey combined with a series of in-depth interviews with selected stakeholders, or a focus group, using the preliminary results from the online survey as inputs to the latter.

- **Stakeholder Analysis**[106]: Stakeholder Analysis is the process of detecting the individuals or groups that are likely to affect or be affected by a planned action, and cataloguing them according to their influence on the action and the impact the action will have on them. (See also **PART III**).

  → Example: This could be done as a self-assessment exercise, e.g. providing hints for the 2017 evaluation, and be repeated at a later point in time, e.g. during the 2019 evaluation or right after closure.

- **Social Network Analysis (SNA)**[107]: SNA is based on the idea that networked actors (i.e. nodes) and their actions are interdependent. The ties between the actors are seen as channels for the transfer or flow of resources (information, influence, money, etc.), and the network itself is viewed as providing opportunities for or constraints on the behaviour of the actors. SNA is the mapping and measuring of relatiships and resource flows between actors. With the help of SNA software, it is possible to get a visual representation (in the form of a network graph) and a mathematical analysis of the relationships between actors (See also **PART III**).

[105] Enrique Mendizabal: *Understanding networks: The functions of research policy networks*, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2006

[106] R. Mitchell, B. Agle, and D. Wood, *Towards a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: defining the principle of who and what really counts*, Academy of Management Review, 22(4) (1997)

[107] David Knoke and Song Young (2008), *Social network analysis, 2nd edition*, SAGE Publications; Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), *Social network analysis. Methods and Applications*, Cambridge University Press.

→ Example: Conducting SNAs on specific thematic aspects (e.g. according to the three EU CAP objectives or to the six priorities), looking at the thematic network plots (e.g. for identifying key players) and on overlaps between them (e.g. for identifying key connectors), and discussing them in a focus group.

More diagnostic tools to appraise the innovative and learning capacity of organisations and networks are presented in the GIZ handbook on cooperation management[108]. The exploration of the innovative and learning capacity may focus on certain aspects predefined by the CMES. However, it may be conceptualised as a more comprehensive and interactive process aiming at understanding the systemic patterns underlying the observed changes (See also **PART III**).

What about case studies?

Case studies usually integrate various methods. They offer a broad range of possibilities to mix quantitative with qualitative methods: from comparative cost-effectiveness analyses to heuristic narratives. There are many different ways of designing a case study. 'Issues-specific case studies' refer to the thematic investigation of issues that call for a closer look in order to address particular evaluation concerns. At every stage, a case study involves a good deal of interpretation and judgements by evaluators:

- What makes an issue relevant for a case study?
- How should specific cases be selected?
- What models should be applied in order to put the empirical results into an explanatory frame?
- Which generalised lessons do the findings allow for?

Case studies are appropriate means to complement surveys and to deal with trickier questions: besides the mere observation of change, they allow to dig deeper into why and how things have come out as they did. Case studies can also be used to explore the hypothesis of cause-effects or chain effects. Considering the time needed to carry out good case studies, it is recommended to conduct case studies accompanying RDP/NRNP implementation (e.g. in collaboration with a research institute, university or college) and to use their findings as inputs for evaluations, rather than conducting them as part of the evaluation itself.

Apart from using well-established methods, the evaluator should try out unconventional methods with which the findings could be sharpened or even explored more in-depth. The Terms of Reference should keep the possibility open for applying methods derived from action research, cultural anthropology, educational studies or organisational development, such as:

- Picture analysis (interpretation of videos and photographs by which the rural actors express their own perception of things going on in their area);
- Text analysis (linguistic and cultural interpretation of language patterns used in internal communications and publications);
- Critical incidence technique (applied in focus groups, text analysis, etc.);
- Systemic constellations[109], role plays[110] and other socio-metric methods[111].

[108] Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/GIZ (2015): Cooperation Management for Practitioners. Managing Social Change with Capacity WORKS. Springer, Wiesbaden. The book is available in English, French and German.
[109] Andrè Martinuzzi and Ursula Kopp: Systemic constellations in theory-based evaluations – tools and experiences. http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/conferences/evaluation2009/abstracts/martinuzzi.pdf
[110] See for example: Krysia M. Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997: Role Play-Theory and Practice, Sage.
[111] http://asgpp.org/pdf/psychodrama.conciseintro.pdf

All these, and more unconventional methods, can also be built into the overall monitoring and evaluation architecture, e.g. as self-assessment practices.

What are the main steps in selecting evaluation methods for NRNs?

Following the selection of the evaluation approach and the review of different evaluation methods, the evaluator should select the evaluation methods. Recommended working steps and expected outcome are:

1	Verify the applicability of the method;
2	Review the ability of the method to meet evaluation standards (rigour, credibility, reliability, robustness, validity and transparency);
3	Review the NRN specific criteria for selection of evaluation methods, such as the ability to: a. provide robust answers to the evaluation questions set by the contracting authority (MA/NRN/NSU); b. capture the contribution of NRN to rural development; c. put forth the distinction between NRN achievements and RDP achievements; d. capture the results, impacts and ultimately the added value of NRN; e. measure the efficiency and effectiveness of rural networking.
4	Consider budget, data and time constraints;
5	Select the appropriate bundle of methods[112]. Furthermore, selecting a given method should be based on the ability to explain causality, eliminate possible selection bias, isolate the effect of the programme from other factors, etc.
Expected outcome: selection of evaluation methods	

☞ **PART III** of the guidelines provides a more detailed description of less well-known methods, such as network function analysis, stakeholder analysis, and social network analysis.

Guiding questions for the choice of an appropriate evaluation approach and methods:

- Which evaluation approach and methods align best with the NRN related evaluation needs?
- What approach and methods help capture the added value generated by NRNs that goes beyond the envisioned common and programme-specific objectives?
- What approach and methods are best suited for assessing the intangible effects of NRNs?
- Which approach and methods help involve key stakeholders and strengthen the networking links among them?
- Which approach and methods promise to yield the most reliable evaluation findings, considering the highly intangible character of human and social capital?

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Adopt a mixed qualitative-quantitative approach, with a variety of different methods and integration of different perspectives. Match the evaluation effort and cost with the scope and scale of the NRN's activities.	Overemphasize purely quantitative measuring. Depict simple cause-effect relationships without linking the findings back to the comprehensive 'theory of change' which lies behind the intervention logic.

[112] See also the guidelines: Assessment of RDP Results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, Chapter 7.

Consider monitoring, self-assessment and evaluation as components of a comprehensive learning architecture. Experiment with unconventional methods in addition to the well-established ones.	Ignore any results coming from self-assessment practices or accompanying studies.

Further reading

For all other methods mentioned and more, see the extensive presentation of qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups, surveys, case studies and others) and quantitative methods (e.g. difference in difference, propensity score matching, their combinations) in: The Guidelines for ex post evaluation of RDP 2007 - 2013, Evaluation Helpdesk, Brussels, 2014.

Concerning the assessment of impacts:

Working Paper of the Rural Evaluation Helpdesk (July 2010): Approaches for assessing the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiple intervening factors, p. 26 ff.

Assessment of RDP results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, Evaluation Helpdesk, April 2016

3.1.4 Establish the system for collecting the evidence for evaluation

The existing set of indicators and the choice of the evaluation methods determine which kind of data and information is needed. Some of the data and information will already exist, albeit not necessarily in the appropriate format for the evaluator, and some has to be collected explicitly for the evaluation. The allocated budget might also influence this decision, since cost-efficiency is often a key factor in selecting methods, sometimes to the detriment of their appropriateness for the specific evaluation.

There are four discernible options concerning available data sources for NRNs:

a) The available data on the NRN(P) action plan implementation is usually kept at output level (number of events, number of participants, newsletters produced, beneficiaries' profiles, information on results achieved, etc.) through the monitoring system (operations database).

b) In cases where programme authorities have developed NRN(P)-specific result and impact indicators at the RDP design phase, relevant data can be incorporated in the data infrastructure developed for monitoring purposes by the MA. This would become the basis for the collection, storage and management of all programme data.

c) Data and information for NRN(P)-specific result and impact indicators may also have to be collected by the evaluator or on an ad hoc basis by the NSU (e.g. tracking of feedback on user satisfaction, uptake of good practices by event participants over the programming period, etc.).

d) There are also cases of NRNs which have developed their own monitoring system (separately from that of the MA) to collect information on their operations through their own database.

Whatever the chosen or available option for collecting and storing data, there should be some harmonisation and coordination of all of the above to avoid duplication of data and effort.

More and more NRNs practice self-assessment or make use of other mechanisms providing expedited feedback (e.g. expert panels). Having such mechanisms built into the steering structure of the NRN does not only support the management but also constitutes a valuable interface between monitoring and evaluation. Some elements used for the self-assessment can be taken up and utilised by the evaluation team (e.g. the minutes of periodic focus groups, or certain judgment criteria for programme-specific indicators). External evaluations of LAGs and other survey studies (ranging from thematic surveys to student's theses) will feed into the evaluation of NRN(P) as well[113].

The results of these self-assessments, external evaluations and accompanying research activities should be stored by the NSU as part of its monitoring system. It is advisable that the monitoring system foresees for the collection and management of qualitative data in relation to NRN activities, in addition to quantitative data.

What are the issues to be considered in relation to data/information needs and sources for NRNs?

Information for NRN results and impacts should be captured where NRN effects are expected:

- At the level of individuals (micro level) participating in the network activities, where they acquire knowledge and information in order to conduct their work more effectively;
- At the level of NRN groups of stakeholders and their organisations (meso level), where effects in relation to building capacities to achieve the NRN and RDP objectives can be expected;
- At the level of rural areas (macro level), where effects for example on the improvement of the governance in the rural areas in a broader sense can be expected.

Each type of information requires specific collection methods, for instance:

- Data & information relating to participation and satisfaction, e.g. via assessment sheets, questionnaires, etc. directly or almost directly at network activities;
- Data & information relating to opinions and social relationships, e.g. via interviews, surveys, self-assessment tools, focus groups, etc. in the course of the routine work of stakeholders and involved actors, or via social network analysis and socio-metric methods in the course of particular investigations;
- Data & information relating to governance issues, e.g. either through social network analysis, visualising the change in the network relations, or through indirect evidence, e.g. through an increase in cooperation becoming manifest in a new institution or a memorandum of understanding induced by network activities.

In a schematic way the following data needs and sources can be discerned:

- Quantitative data for input and output indicators (monitoring based on the operations database). Data on result indicators already defined during the programme design phase may also be included in the monitoring system.
- Quantitative data and qualitative information for result indicators collected from NRN beneficiaries (surveys, focus groups, case studies, etc.) by the NSU (self-assessment) or during the evaluation.
- Quantitative data and qualitative information for result and impact indicators collected from both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the NRN(P) in order to conduct counterfactual analysis (surveys using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups or case studies, etc.); for example, for the result indicator *'Number of actors (by type) participating in the implementation of RDPs as a consequence of the NRN activities'* developed for the Spanish NRN).

What are the main steps in establishing the system for collection of data and information?

High quality and timely available data and information are essential for calculating and filling the indicators and applying the selected evaluation methods. Therefore, emphasis should be put on the proper establishment of data and information collection systems. Recommended working steps and expected outcomes are:

[113] The NRN Self-Assessment Toolkit provides a host of useful resources for practicing self-assessment for NSU: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/networks-and-networking/nrn-self-assessment-tool-kit/practical-tools-for-nrn-self-assessment/en/practical-tools-for-nrn-self-assessment_en.html

1	Identify data needs and sources (in accordance with the indicators and the chosen evaluation methods)
2	Review existing data and sources
3	Decide on additional data to be collected
Expected outcome: inventory of existing data and information sources, identified data gaps and provisions to fill them	

The steps in establishing the system for collection of data and information is detailed below.

Step 1 - Identify data needs and sources

In cases were the commissioning party (MA or NSU) has defined the NRN related evaluation questions, indicators and evaluation approach and methodology already in the preparation phase, data needs and sources may have already been identified (see step 4, chapter 2.2.6 in **PART I** of this document). In this case the evaluator should get access to all available data and information from the MA or the NSU.

In cases were the evaluator is supposed to choose the evaluation approach and methodology, the probability that data needs are covered by the available information will be lower.

Table 12 gives an indicative overview of which data are needed for which types of methods.

Table 12. Type of data required for different evaluation methods

Method	Type of data	Collection	Possible boundaries
Surveys (interviews)	Relevant interviewees (stakeholders, beneficiaries, experts, witnesses)	Desk research, information from stakeholders	It is essential to reflect on the boundaries of the system and the number of interviewees; "witnesses" can be valuable as control groups.
Dialogue-based methods (self-assessment methods and focus groups)	Potential participants and contributors	Desk research, information from stakeholders	Diversity of participants and modularity of dialogue settings are paramount.
Analytical methods (cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis)	Quantitative data (volumes and funding) on specific interventions; beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries	Reports and monitoring data (from NRN(P) operation database but also from RDP implementation); project managers and beneficiaries	Qualitative data complement quantitative data on the effectiveness side; RDP monitoring data is needed if the effects of NRN interventions are used to assess the quality of project implementation.
Diagnostic methods (Different network and organization diagnosis methods and Social Network Analysis)	Network participants, NSU team and non-members; For the SNA: relational data	Questionnaire; exploitation of written documents (statutes, rules, minutes…)	For the SNA: The boundary should be well considered. It has to cover most of the network, otherwise it would be unreliable.
Case studies	All kinds of relevant quantitative and qualitative data	Desk research, interviews, participatory observation	Collection of data time-consuming; could be commissioned to a study team prior to evaluation.

Step 2 - Review existing data and sources

The evaluator will review the existing data and information and their sources for the evaluation of NRN activities including:

- NRN action plans: for types of activities and their beneficiaries
- Reports: Periodic progress reports based on monitoring data, information on the implementation of NRN action plans;
- NRN self-assessment documentation;
- Thematic studies and evaluations of programmes that may include NRN activities: for instance, the example above on innovation can be subject to a thematic evaluation and the NRN contribution would be one component of such an evaluation;
- Readers and reports from events (conferences, workshops) organised by the NRN;
- Publications (journals, newsletters, circular e-mails, press releases, web-based communication);
- Minutes of network management meetings, written regulations;
- Use of the website (visits, % new visits, user submissions, user registrations, newsletter opt-ins, support incidents raised, projects added, new consultations, social media activity, content, countries)[114];

[114] See for example the Scottish case study presented during the Helpdesk workshop held in Rome, 11/12 April 2014: "NRN – How to show their benefits." https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/assets/pdf/evaluation/national-rural-networks/GPW10_Scotland.pdf

- Composition of the steering structure and role descriptions of stakeholders involved; and
- Budget sheets and financial monitoring data.

Step 3 - Decide on additional data to be collected

The review of the data and information will enable the evaluator to identify data gaps for the NRN related common and programme-specific indicators and applied methods. Based on the gaps identified, the evaluator will propose additional data to be collected.

The collection of additional data implies additional costs. The cost-effectiveness ratio of additional data collection may be a matter of concern; however, the added value of this data on the quality of the evaluation should also be considered. Ideally, there should not be any trade-off between cost and evaluation quality. If possible, priority should be given to methods and information/data that can generate robust evaluation results. For example:

- Survey data based on personal interviews (either in the context of a standardised survey or as written notes or transcripts) including scorings (quantified qualitative information);
- Focus group records;
- RDP project monitoring data (in case the effect of the NRN interventions on projects shall be assessed);
- Social network diagrams, visualising the processed answers to socio-metric questionnaires (frequency and intensity of interactions, key roles in the network, etc.);
- Heuristic narratives (network or organisation diagnosis, picture and text analysis, stories of critical incidents, etc.);
- Pictures and videos;
- Case studies.

Guiding questions for setting up the data collection system:

- What kind of data and information do we need to make the chosen method work?
- To what extent is the data provided by the NSU and MA reliable and complete?
- If this data is not fully available or sufficiently reliable, what alternatives do we have to collect additional data or to adjust the methodology?
- Is there a cost-effective way to collect the needed data and information?
- Which topics can be explored by counterfactual analysis and where would we have to search for approximate ways to estimate the net effects?

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Adopt a mixed approach, drawing from a variety of different types of (qualitative and quantitative) data and information. Distinguish between the 'focused' data collection (to build up knowledge in respect to specific evaluation questions and indicators), and 'diffuse' screening to	Double up data collection efforts by ignoring the existing database and information. Suck up all data and information, regardless of its presumed relevance to the evaluation questions and indicators.

become aware of important shifts and trends in the context.	

Further reading

Guidelines: Assessment of RDP results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, Chapter 6.2, Evaluation Helpdesk, April 2016

On the integration of self-assessment and evaluation:

ENRD 2014: NRN Guidebook, 4th chapter on NRN Self-assessment and Evaluation. http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf

See also the ENRD website on NRN self-assessment tools:

http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/networks-and-networking/nrn-self-assessment-tool-kit/practical-tools-for-nrn-self-assessment/en/practical-tools-for-nrn-self-assessment_en.html

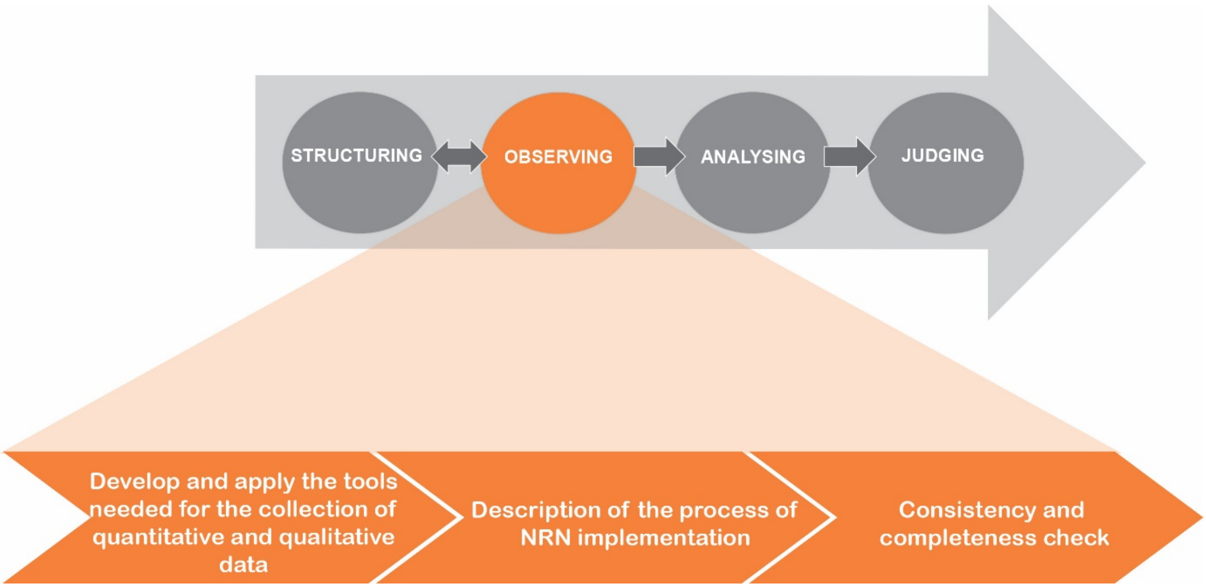
3.2 OBSERVING: Gathering the evidence for the NRN evaluation

In the observing phase the evaluators collect and aggregate all the necessary data and information identified in the previous structuring phase.

During the observing phase the evaluators should go through the following steps (Figure 20):

- Development and application of tools needed for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data
- Description of the process of NRN implementation
- Consistency and completeness check

Figure 20. The observing phase



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

3.2.1 Development and application of the tools needed to collect quantitative and qualitative data

The monitoring system will provide the basic quantitative data with respect to output indicators for NRNs. For further programme-specific NRN-related output, result and impact indicators, a combination of qualitative information and quantitative data will be collected. Due to the nature of NRN activities, the majority of information will consist of qualitative inputs, such as opinions and perceptions of rural actors and qualitative assessments by the evaluator.

Let us take the example of fostering innovation in rural areas (one of the objectives of NRNs). The participation of innovation project partners in NRN activities does not necessarily imply a direct cause-effect relationship between participation in the network and the emergence of new products and markets, processes or forms of organization. Therefore, the opinions of rural actors and experts with a broader knowledge of the sectorial and territorial specificities may shed light on the actual contribution of NRN activities to the observed changes in the programme area.

Notwithstanding the high complexity of phenomena linked to network interventions it will be useful to break it into manageable chunks. In many cases the NRN(P) strategy or action plan foresees thematic divisions, which can in principle be followed in the observing and analysis phases of the evaluation[115]. If the thematic clustering of the NRN(P) action plan is not sufficiently discernible or practicable for the evaluation, the evaluator has to design a proper partition.

The recommended data and information collected for each group of indicators are presented in Table 13.

Table 13. Recommended data and information to be collected for NRN evaluation, according to different methods used

Groups of indicators	Existing and recommended data and information collection tools
Input indicators	Available: Input indicators are linked to the RDP/NRNP financial allocation and payments for NRN activities. Data is collected from existing financial monitoring systems.
Output indicators	Available: Data for three common output indicators from the monitoring system (operations databases). Recommended: • monitoring data broken down, by type, (e.g. by thematic area, such as innovation, communication, environment, forestry, etc.), • communication tools, by type (e.g. publications, newsletters, events, promotional material, etc.), • ENRD activities where the NRN has participated, by type (events, workshops, conferences, etc.), • Data and information collected in the course of other accompanying studies (monographs, case studies, collaboration with universities/schools).
Result indicators	Possibly available for additional result indicators (developed to answer the common evaluation question) and programme-specific NRN result indicators to measure the NRN's results linked to behavioural changes of NRN stakeholders: • quantitative data; e.g. projects and partnerships for local food chains established based on recommendations from the NRN's thematic work. • qualitative information; e.g. the awareness of key policy issues which have been raised. (see also **PART III**, Examples of the NRN result and impact chain) Recommended: • Collection of quantitative data can be included in the monitoring system. • Qualitative information can be collected on an ad hoc basis, via surveys on the satisfaction of experts, participants and non-participants in NRN activities, through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and periodic NRN self-assessments.

[115] For instance, the Austrian NRN Strategy 2014-2020 defines five overall objectives and 17 strategic objectives and 13 types of interventions which are cross-related to a host of operational objectives in five priority areas: (i) Agriculture and forestry and related value chains; (ii) Environment, biodiversity and nature protection; (iii) climate change and climate protection; (iv) innovation; (v) basic services, LEADER and local/regional development. It should be noted that the innovation priority coincides with the network support unit for the EIP OG which is embedded in the same NSU in Austria.

	• Data and information collected throughout the course of other accompanying studies (monographs, case studies, and collaboration with universities/schools).
Impact indicators	Additional and programme-specific NRN impact indicators to measure NRN impacts linked to: • NRN's contribution to RDP results, which will be primarily quantitative in nature, e.g. number of new products based on innovative projects (mainly additional indicators!). • Human and social capital generated by NRNs in rural areas, which will be mainly qualitative in nature (e.g. degree of improvement of RDP management due to NRN activities, or the degree of improvement of cooperation in rural areas due to NRN activities) (principally programme-specific indicators!). (see also **PART III**, Examples of the NRN result and impact chain) Recommended: • The main tools to capture data and information include, surveys, interviews and focus groups. Focus groups in particular are appropriate for collecting data related to net NRN's effects, since they can be composed of both participants and non-participants of NRN's activities. • Data and information collected in the course of other accompanying studies (monographs, case studies, collaboration with universities/schools).

It is recommended to conduct counterfactuals for both NRN results and impacts when two conditions are fulfilled: (i) when a determinable group of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, or an applicable algorithm to differentiate between degrees of involvement of beneficiaries exists; (ii) when a recognisable difference in outcomes (behavioural changes) can be clearly attributed to the NRN intervention. It is important to ensure the baselines data and information.

3.2.2 Description of the process of NRN implementation

Evaluators should also recall and analyse the process of implementation of the NRN(P) intervention, with active participation of NRN stakeholders, contributors and beneficiaries. This reflection should take into account the relational aspects of NRN(P)s (communication links and channels, issues concerning differences in the access to information and resources, reach out and retreat, shrinking and growth, critical incidents, etc.), as well as managerial aspects such as budgetary issues and the financial and physical execution of NRN activities. This reflection should be underpinned by adequate information on the subjects discussed, e.g. the written documentation and information raised from interviews held during the initial phase of NRN(P) evaluation with the MA and NSU representatives and other core network members.

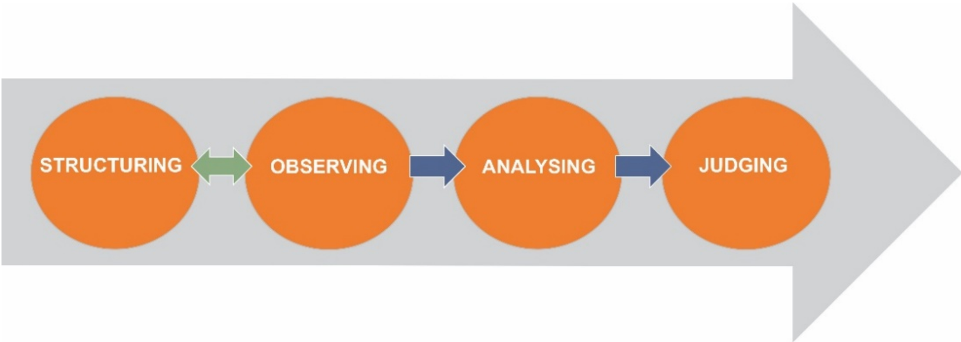
3.2.3 Consistency and completeness check

The collected data and information should be scrupulously checked. Key questions are:

- Is the collected data sufficient to answer the evaluation questions to the extent required for the respective evaluation task (AIR 2017, AIR 2019, ex post evaluation or other, and stand-alone NRN evaluations)?
- Is there sufficient redundancy in the database (for data on output indicators and if developed, any data on other indicators) in order to fill possible gaps with information from other sources (= triangulation)?
- Is there sufficient qualitative data and information available given the highly intangible nature of the expected results and impacts?
- Are the information sources reliable?

If it turns out that it is necessary to collect additional data and information from sources which have not been considered from the outset, there should be enough flexibility to go back to the structuring phase and investigate for additional data. This loop-wise movement is indicated by the green double-headed arrow in Figure 21. However, such loops require additional time and budget reserves to be accounted for in the overall evaluation architecture.

Figure 21. Advancing loopwise



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

In practice, budgetary and time restrictions will limit this flexibility throughout the whole process. The most important thing is to keep this possibility open for the first two phases (where the green double-headed arrow is set in Figure 21). In other words: If new, unforeseen facts surface, there should be room to readjust the evaluation setup accordingly.

Guiding questions for the observing phase:

- What data is there and what data do we have to generate during the evaluation process?
- What is the most important data to be raised, in order to keep the data collection process feasible in terms of time and cost?
- Is there sufficient redundancy in the data, in other words, can the main conclusions be cross-confirmed from different empirical sources?
- Was everything done to avoid observation biases (selection bias, response bias, halo effects…)?
- What could be the reason for two mutually contradictory outcomes? Could it be that only one conclusion is true, or both in some way, or does the real answer lie beyond both of them?

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Determine the fields in which counterfactual analysis is feasible and prepare accordingly (e.g. by identifying control groups or at least an algorithm of differentiation by establishing the baseline).	
Draw from different information sources (qualitative and quantitative, internal and external, emic[116] and etic[117]).	Be complacent with one single source of information for any thematic issue.
Restructure the evaluation process if unexpected questions arise requiring further investigations.	Copy-paste the self-description of the NRN's activities without questioning anything, and do not differentiate between more or less relevant issues.

[116] The 'emic' approach investigates how people think, how they perceive and categorize the world (Wikipedia).
[117] An 'etic' account is a description of a behaviour or belief by a social analyst or scientific observer (Wikipedia).

Check the completeness and the degree to which certain data delivery contradicts results. Look behind these apparent contradictions.	Hide or keep unreliable data a secret, especial if you know it.

Further reading

Concerning the assessment of impacts:

Working Paper of the Rural Evaluation Helpdesk (July 2010): Approaches for assessing the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiple intervening factors, p. 26 ff.

On bias in evaluation (the source is from the US Centres of Disease Control and Prevention and deals with health themes, but it is very useful for social research in general):

Bernard C.K.Choi and Anita W.P.Pak (Jan 2005): A Catalog of Biases in Questionnaires. http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2005/jan/04_0050.htm

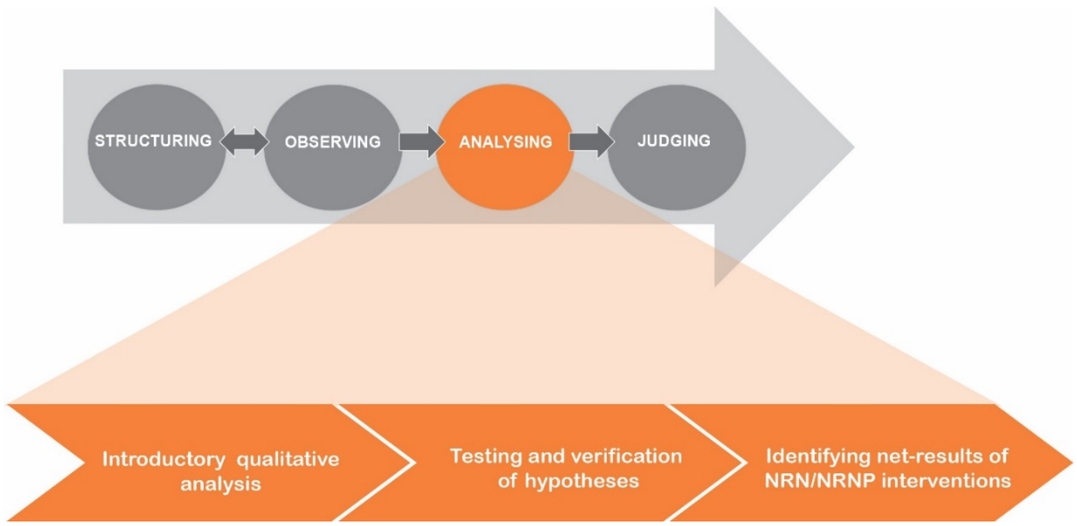
3.3 ANALYSING: Examining the available information

In the analysing phase, all available information is systematically processed and synthesized. Different tools and techniques are applied to measure outputs, results and impacts against objectives and targets. Ideally, in this phase the main task would be to separate the effects of the NRN interventions from the host of other possible influences on the outcomes. This means to analyse the collected qualitative and quantitative evidence, and assess the NRN's achievements towards objectives and effects in the form of net values of result indicators (in 2017 and 2019) and impact indicators (in 2019 and in the ex post evaluation).[118]

In any case the evaluators try to answer the question: "To what extent did the change happen due to the NRN intervention?"

The evaluator's task in the analysis of NRN effects is to establish a logical series of steps that enable the analysis of the data and information collected during the observing phase.

Figure 22. The analysing phase



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

[118] Also see the guidelines: Assessment of RDP results: how to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017, Chapter 8.

3.3.1 Introductory qualitative analysis and formulation of testable hypotheses

A preliminary qualitative analysis should be carried out at the beginning of an evaluation process in order to reflect on various possible expected or unexpected, positive or negative effects of the NRN. The main aim of this introductory qualitative analysis should be the formulation of hypotheses on potential effects, most notably those which, in view of the RD stakeholders and policy makers, are expected to make the biggest “change” in comparison with a situation “without” the NRN interventions.

The provision of stakeholders’, beneficiaries’ and associated experts’ perspectives on the NRN’s performance is valuable, particularly with regard to unintended or indirect effects.

This step will culminate in the formulation of testable hypotheses based on the single common evaluation question for NRNs and its related judgment criteria, and on the NRN-specific evaluation questions and judgment criteria.

3.3.2 Testing and verification of hypotheses

Under this step, the above hypotheses are empirically tested using various methods to obtain different perspectives on the same phenomena. For NRN evaluation, where most of the data and information will be of qualitative nature, it is important to use this information to analyse expected or unexpected, positive or negative aspects of NRN effects. This step is the first attempt to test the theory of change behind the intervention logic, the assumptions which are symbolised by the arrows leading from inputs to outputs, from outputs to results, and from results to impacts.

As explained before, NRN results are linked to the changes in NRN stakeholders´ behaviour, while NRN impacts are expected, on one hand, to contribute to RDP results and, on the other, to generate changes in the human and social capital in rural areas, which also might affect the RDP impacts (See Figure 8 in chapter 1.4.2).

While the NRN’s contribution to the RDP’s results can be appraised in a more straightforward fashion via the NRN’s direct and indirect beneficiaries, the analysis of behavioural changes, and in general changes in human and social capital, is specifically subject to biases (the researcher’s cognitive filters, the social desirability of certain answers, respondents’ hidden agenda, etc.). It is therefore recommended not only to differentiate between actors invited to participate as internal and external observers, but also to attribute specific roles to members of the evaluation team: as participating observers and outside observers (although we know that there is no such thing as a genuinely “neutral” observation point). This can be very helpful in focus group settings, validating the preliminary evaluation outcomes.

Who is an ‘actor’?

Changes in human and social capital can only be investigated by social analysis. A crude distinction between social actors in the realm of RDP networking would identify stakeholders and beneficiaries as actors on whom the investigation should focus. But this distinction is not sufficient for a sound analysis of the results and impacts of social interventions.

The methodology of Critical Systems Heuristics may help us to make a better choice of actors (when it comes to selecting interview partners, focus group participants, etc.) for evaluation purposes.

Critical Systems Heuristics, originally developed by Werner Ulrich and Martin Reynolds, distinguishes between:

- **Clients** (in our terminology ‘beneficiaries’); they are the sources of motivation for any Rural Development Programme; they stand for the purpose of RDPs/NRN(P)s.

- **Decision-makers** (usually addressed as 'stakeholders'); they are the sources of power in the design, implementation and evaluation of any Rural Development Programme; they stand for the provision of resources of RDPs/NRN(P)s.
- **Professionals** (mostly addressed as 'experts', but also as 'stakeholders'); they are the sources and hubs of knowledge; they stand for the expertise (in terms of content and strategizing) necessary to make the RDPs/NRN(P)s work. Many actors which will multiply the knowledge/skills can be found within this category[119], although they also play a role among the others.
- **Witnesses** (anyone not included in the former groups, but part of the wider system, e.g. taxpayers, food consumers, rural dwellers, etc.); they provide legitimacy against the backdrop of the society as a whole and of higher societal principles; they connect the specific results to the long-term perspective, the probability of lasting changes (impact level).

3.3.3 Identifying net results of NRN interventions

Whenever possible, the results and impacts of NRN interventions should be expressed in net terms, which means after taking into account the effects that cannot be attributed to the NRN activities, and by taking into account indirect effects[120] (e.g. multiplier effects of activities which go beyond the group of direct and indirect NRN beneficiaries). The evaluator should specify in detail what elements have been accounted for when calculating programme net effects.

Counterfactuals are the recommended approach for netting out NRN effects, although its use is rather limited for several NRN interventions, often relying on qualitative information and conducted in a simulative way, e.g. using specific focus group settings, such as MAPP method[121]. These focus groups would involve representatives of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and relevant institutional stakeholders whose knowledge may be relevant for an estimation of the net impacts, taking into consideration the NRN indirect effects, intended or unintended ones, and the wider context of rural development. Horizontal CAP objectives should be considered as well, looking at the complementarities with other networking-type interventions (e.g. EIP OPs; ERDF smart specialisation programme).

Guiding questions for the analysing phase:

- How can we assess the contribution of the NRN to the rural development policy objectives?
- How can we attribute observed changes in human and social capital at individual, organisational and societal level to NRN interventions? (e.g. changes in behaviour, knowledge, skills and capacities, networking and communication ability, governance of rural areas, etc.)?
- What are the main differences between the theory of change underlying the intervention logic and how things seem to turn out in reality?
- What are the unintended effects of NRN interventions? Which of them are desirable, and which not? How can we discover them and explain their occurrence?

[119] E.g. multipliers are explicitly addressed by the Austrian Network Strategy.
[120] Guidelines for ex post evaluation of 2007-2013 RDPs http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/evaluation/library/evaluation-helpdesk-publications/en/evaluation-helpdesk-publications_en.html
[121] http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/evaluation/rural-development-reports/2014/investment-support-rdp/fulltext_en.pdf

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Use the intervention logic and the evaluation questions as a backdrop for the hypotheses. Consider the contribution of NRN to the achievement of rural policy objectives. Concentrate on changes in human and social capital, i.e. behavioural changes of boundary partners and subsequent effects. Consider the counterfactual analysis as an important tool to attribute observed changes to the NRN intervention. Even if counterfactual analysis is not possible, try to approximate the approach by posing appropriate questions and by using multiple sources to net out the NRN's results and impacts.	Just rely on your own interpretation of facts. Conclude on findings obtained with one method only. Just go through the evaluation questions mechanically, without exploring the information thoroughly. Just depict a naïve before-after comparison without even discussing other possible intervening factors.

Further reading

EU Rural Evaluation Helpdesk: Working Paper on Approaches for assessing the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiple intervening factors. March 2010. Chapter 3.3.3.3 starting on page 31 specifically deals with 'possibilities to deal with apparent non-availability of control groups'.

There is a brief description of the Critical Systems Heuristics approach on the BetterEvaluation website: http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/critical_system_heuristics

For the basics of the CSH approach see: Reynolds, M (2007). "Evaluation based on critical systems heuristics." In Using Systems Concepts in Evaluation: An Expert Anthology, edited by Bob Williams and Iraj Imam, 101-122. Point Reyes, CA: EdgePress. Available online at: http://oro.open.ac.uk/3464/

3.4 JUDGING: Answering the evaluation questions

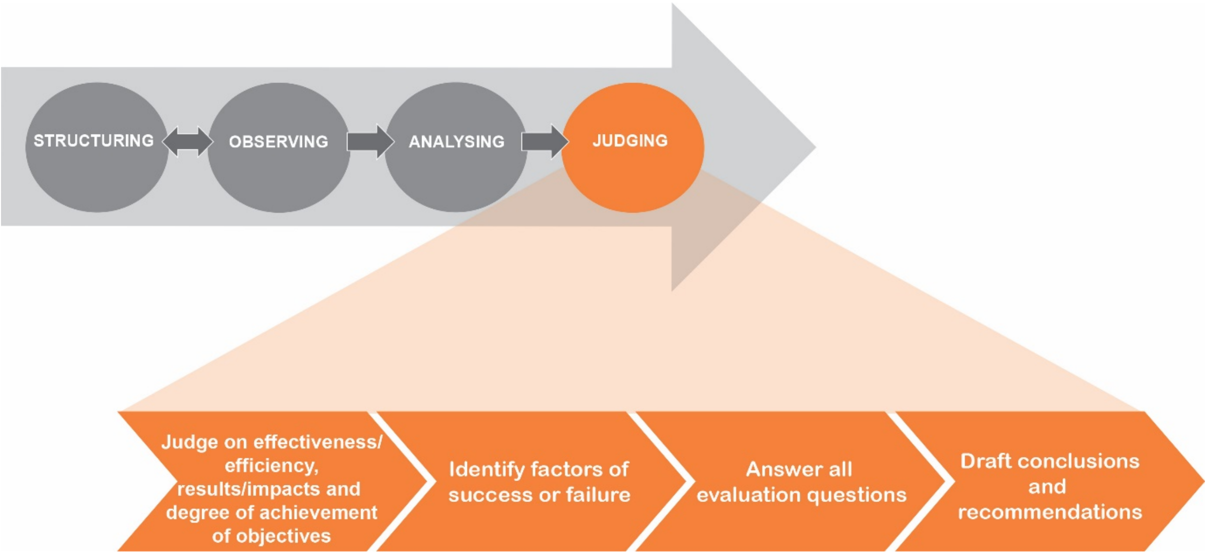
In the judging phase, the evaluator interprets evaluation findings, answers all evaluation questions and draws conclusions from the analysis regarding the judgement criteria defined in the structuring phase. In any event, the answers to the evaluation questions should be accompanied by a critical discussion of the evidence of findings. The answers to evaluation questions, conclusions and recommendations relate inter alia to the NRN(P) achievements and added value, the functioning and processes of NRNs. The answer to each evaluation question must reflect the common indicators, any additional NRN-specific indicators and any additional qualitative information obtained on the implementation of the NRN's activities through the evaluation process. In all types of NRN evaluations, the evaluation needs to consider the NRN action plan or the NRNP evaluation plan and the context within which NRN activities are implemented.

The judgment should include a critical discussion of furthering and hindering factors. If certain activities have not delivered the expected results and impacts, an analysis of the reasons is necessary.

During this phase, evaluators have to accomplish four steps:

- Judge on the effectiveness and efficiency of the NSU and NRN(P) activities and the degree to which the NRN(P) contributed to achieving rural development policy/RDP objectives and their own objectives;
- Identify the factors which contributed to the success or failure in achieving the NRN's objectives;
- Answer all evaluation questions (common and NRN-specific);
- Draft conclusions and recommendations based on the findings, including proposing possible adjustments necessary to improve the design, content and implementation of NRN activities.

Figure 23. The judging phase



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

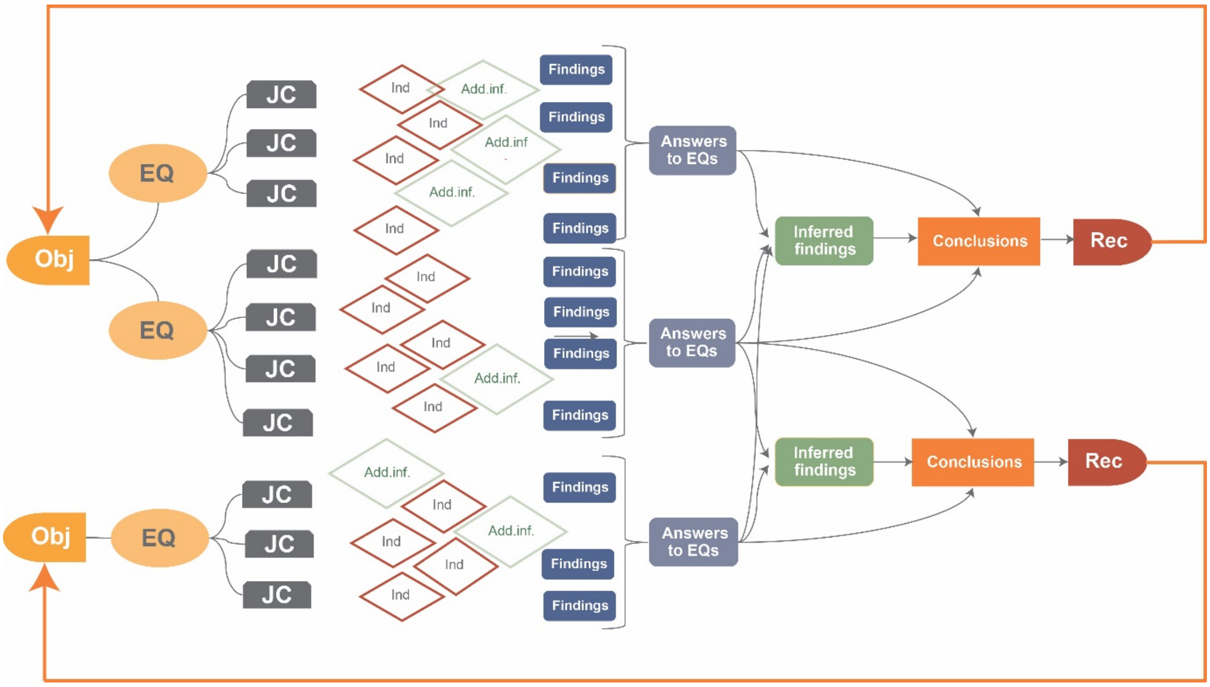
The judging phase delivers answers to:

- the common evaluation question addressing the NRN's activities: "To what extent has the national rural network contributed to achieving the objectives laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art.54 (2)"?[122]
- NRN-related programme-specific evaluation questions formulated by the NSU and/or Managing Authority (with or without collaboration with NRN stakeholders) in the preparatory phase or by the evaluators in agreement with the NSU/MA during the structuring phase.

Figure 23 shows how the findings are clustered to answer the evaluation questions and feed into conclusions and recommendations. The inferred, i.e. aggregated findings relate to the policy objectives for the NRN.

[122] Helpdesk of the European Evaluation Network for RDPs 2007-2013 (2015): Working Document: Common Evaluation Questions for Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020.

Figure 24. Transparent inference ladder from findings to conclusions and recommendations



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, 2016

3.4.1 Judge on effectiveness and efficiency of the NRN, results/impacts and the degree of achievement of objectives

The various findings on the effectiveness of network activities towards NRN related policy objectives (programme, national, EU), NRN results/impacts and on the efficiency of the NRN in terms of achieving the best value for money are interpreted and judged upon.

3.4.2 Identify factors of success and failure

If the previous step has brought forth answers to the question: “What has been achieved? What has not been achieved?”, the main learning value of the next step consists of exploring the question: “How has it been achieved?” or “Why has it not been achieved?” Questions like these address the links (i.e. the arrows) connecting the outputs, results and impacts in the intervention logic. The arrows stand for more or less explicit assumptions on how the NRN’s beneficiaries/target groups would make use of the output, or on the ways the results achieved by beneficiaries/target groups would take effect in the context of the rural society. They have already been put under scrutiny in the analysing phase. Now, in the judgment phase, it is the time to point out to what extent the findings confirm or contradict these assumptions, and to elicit the identified factors of success and failure: Lessons for the future.

3.4.3 Answer all evaluation questions

The evaluation findings provide the basis for answering the common and programme-specific NRN-related evaluation questions.

In the case of NRNs embedded in RDPs, the evaluation findings can also show how the NRN has contributed to the achievement of rural development objectives in terms of focus areas and priority levels. These findings might be used while answering other non NRN related evaluation questions. For example, the CEQ addressing Focus Area 2a: “To what extent have RDP interventions contributed to improving the economic performance, restructuring and modernization of supported farms in particular through increasing their market participation and agricultural diversification?" can be related to the interventions of the NRN geared towards fostering innovation and increasing access to markets.

To make it easier to track the derivation of the answers to the EQs, it is recommended to present the findings using a table with three columns. The upper column exhibits the respective evaluation question, in the central column the means to answer the evaluation question should be explained, and in the bottom column the answer to the evaluation question is placed.

Table 14. Depicting the answers to evaluation questions

Evaluation Question
Means to answer the evaluation question, e.g. information sources, indicators used, outcomes of qualitative research, etc.
Answer to the evaluation question

In the AIRs 2017 and 2019, the MA will use the SFC template to answer each evaluation question, in a similar structure as the table above.

3.4.4 Draft conclusions and recommendations

The findings and answers to the evaluation questions constitute the basis for the conclusions which lead to recommendations to the MA, NSU and other NRN stakeholders to improve the NRN activities and overall performance.

The answers to the evaluation questions are published in the enhanced AIRs 2017 and 2019. In the ex post evaluation reports, and other reports envisaged by programme authorities conclusions and recommendations are also published. A possible format for the succinct presentation of evaluation results is shown below (Table 15).

Table 15. Proposed structure for summarising findings, conclusions and recommendations consistently

Major evaluation finding	Answer to relevant evaluation question	Conclusion	Recommendation for future NRNs

Guiding questions for the judging phase:

- To what extent have we found insightful answers to all of the evaluation questions?
- To what extent has the collected evidence facilitated providing robust answers for policy learning?
- Which questions should be explored more in-depth by further studies and evaluations?
- What are the points of leverage to improve the network performance, effectiveness and efficiency?
- Who should do what to improve the performance of the NSU and the NRN's contributions to rural development including the horizontal objectives of the CAP?
- To what extent can the NRN consolidate benefits generated by enhanced human and social capital in the long-term?

Do's and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Try to identify, from an outsider's (etic) viewpoint, prevailing patterns in the observed social interactions, and exploit the treasure of (emic) narratives provided by interviewees/focus group members.	Answer evaluation questions only on the basis of the evaluator´s assumptions without collecting evidence.
Go through all evaluation questions and also answer unasked questions, if there is something relevant, maybe surprising, to say.	Mix robust with vague findings to answer evaluation questions.
Draw conclusions to evaluation findings respecting intervention´s relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, results, impacts, sustainability and be clear about the degree of validity and robustness of the conclusions.	Produce all-purpose truisms without exploring the depth of the specific features and potential of the NRN.
Formulate recommendations for each relevant actor and be as practical and realistic as possible.	Answer evaluation questions without looking at unexpected effects.
Include various actors in interpreting the findings and discussing the evaluation conclusions and recommendations.	Just produce generic recommendations, by avoiding to address specific stakeholders and circumvent topics which appear to be taboo.

Further reading

Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley, 2004: Realist Evaluation. http://www.communitymatters.com.au/RE_chapter.pdf

4 PART III - TOOLBOX

4.1 Indicative template for Terms of Reference for evaluation during the programming period

Introduction

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the NRN evaluation is developed by the Managing Authority (MA) and provides important information for potential external evaluators during the proposal call. The ToR reflects the activities outlined in the evaluation plan (EP) and helps to structure the NRN evaluation to be carried out by the external evaluators. External evaluators respond to the ToR with an offer. Both elements (ToR and offer) combine to form the basis of the contract for the delivery of the evaluation.

The ToR for the NRN evaluation specifies the evaluation requirements, activities and expected outcomes and clarifies the way in which different parties will work together. It usually consists of a general introduction for the consultant, the specifications of the technical requirements, and various annexes (e.g. references to key documents, evaluation questions, templates for price offer, draft service contract).

The following indicative outline provides some recommendations for the development of the ToR for the NRN evaluation and in particular its technical parts. The ToR is developed in line with the requirements set by the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES). The ToR may refer to a NRN programme or to a stand-alone evaluation of a NRN included in a single RDP. In cases when the NRN is included in the RDP evaluation, there is no separate ToR for the NRN evaluation.

Contracting authorities will need to ensure that the ToR is consistent with public procurement procedures in the Member State. The following elements of the ToR's technical specifications should be considered.

Context, objective and purpose of the evaluation

The starting section should set out the statutory requirements and the framework for the evaluation (e.g. legal references at the EU and national level). A description of the background and purpose of the evaluation should be provided. The evaluation's subject should also be clarified.

Example:

Evaluation as a whole, and network evaluation in particular, is reinforced in the 2014-2020 rural development policy. A greater focus has been placed on the evaluation of networks and networking to understand more about the results and impact of these activities.

The main requirements with regard to RDP evaluation for the 2014-2020 programming period are set out in Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Articles 54 to 57 and Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Articles 76 to 79. The later includes four common NRN overall objectives and a common group of actions the networks should deliver.

The Commission implementing regulation specifies three common output indicators and a common evaluation question (as part of the CMES). The Guidelines on the Evaluation of NRNs provides information on how to develop additional and programme specific NRN related indicators.

The evaluation plan of the RDP identified the NRN as a major evaluation topic during the programming period.

The NRN with its specific role and nature as a policy network should be a driving force in order to improve the effective delivery of the Rural Development Programme (RDP). The NRN should fill gaps in the services offered by other public or private institutions and seek synergies with other networks at *the national and European level. As the NRN is funded through the RDP´s Technical Assistance budget it is an important aspect to get the most out of the employed resources.*

The NRN evaluation shall aim to demonstrate achievements of the NSU (the network secretariat) and its network (a wider group of NRN stakeholders) and assess its results, impacts, effectiveness, efficiency and relevance and contribute to better targeted support for Rural Development.

The evaluation should also contribute to update the Action Plan of the NRN in order to respond to changing needs during the course of RDP implementation.

The target audience of the evaluation is the client and the wider circle of stakeholders who are involved in the NRN.

The evaluation may be informed by the NRN self-assessment which is an important tool to improve the NRN's performance.

The assessment of the NRN's results and the answer to the common evaluation question on the NRN is expected in the enhanced AIRs submitted by 30 June in 2017. The assessment of the NRN's impacts and the answer to the common evaluation question on the NRN will be included in the enhanced AIR submitted in 2019, and the ex post evaluation, submitted by 31 December 2024.

Scope and tasks of the NRN evaluation

In this section the ToR specifies the scope and content of the evaluation in line with the evaluation objectives. Details could include the examination period, the geographical and thematic coverage of the evaluation, the target groups and the tasks to be considered. The scope of the evaluation must be realistic given the time and resources available.

Example

The objective of this comprehensive evaluation study is to:

- *demonstrate achievements of the NSU (the network secretariat) and the NRN (a wider group of NRN members) and the network´s stakeholders,*
- *assess its results, impacts, effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and*
- *contribute to better targeted support for Rural Development.*

The main evaluation tasks are:

- *assess the relevance of rural network interventions in relation to the needs and changing framework conditions*
- *assess the performance, results and impacts of the NRN's activities, NRN´s objectives, achievements and contributions to the RDP's objectives*
- *elaborate recommendations on how to improve the design and implementation of the NRN*
- *propose an effective approach on how to improve monitoring and evaluation of the NRN.*

The external evaluation during the programming period will cover all of the NRN's activities in the 2014-2020 period, starting with the establishment of the NRN until its termination.

The geographical coverage is the entire RDP territory. The major evaluation tasks have to be carried out in relation to the evaluation milestones (2017, 2019 and the ex-post). It is important to link evaluation activities with the policy making and reporting cycle. This helps to ensure that the evaluation findings are delivered and communicated on time to the relevant target audiences (the client, a steering group of NRN stakeholders, and the European Commission).

The enhanced AIR 2017 and 2019 should report in point 2 on NRN evaluation governance and activities conducted in relation to the NRN evaluation (included in RDP or as stand-alone evaluation), including activities in relation to data collection, dissemination, communication and follow up of evaluation findings

Point 7 of the AIR 2017 provides the information on the NRN's contextual changes, the NRN's results (with the means of additional and programme specific result indicators) and an answer to the common evaluation question No 21 and to any programme specific evaluation questions developed in the Member State, which relate to the NRN. Evaluators should use additional result indicators to reply to the common evaluation question. Programme specific NRN evaluation questions should be answered with programme specific NRN indicators, also developed in the Member State (see Chapter 2.2.2 of the guidelines)

Point 7 of the enhanced AIR 2019 should, in addition to information provided in the AIR 2017, also include information on the NRN's impacts, assessed through the use of impact indicators – additional and programme specific (See chapter 2.2.2 of the guidelines). In both reports the recommendations how to optimise the NRN interventions should be present.

The ex post evaluation 2024 should include evaluation findings on the following topics:

- *Impacts of the NRN's activities, mechanisms to deliver the impacts, attribution of changes to the network, and unexpected impacts*
- *Recommendations on how to optimise the NRN's services and activities in the future*

Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions in the ToR specify the focus of the evaluation and contribute to more targeted evaluation activities. The ToR should specify which kind of evaluation questions are expected to be answered:

a) Common evaluation question No 21[123] is linked to the four common overall NRN objectives
b) Programme-specific evaluation questions (PSEQs) are linked to the programme specific NRN objectives as defined in the Member State

Evaluation questions define the key issues to be explored by an evaluation. They are developed and prioritized by the Managing Authority and other stakeholders. Under each evaluation task (described in the previous section) there will be one or two evaluation questions.

Evaluation questions help focus and provide structure to an evaluation, guide the evaluation planning process, facilitate decision making about which evaluation methods to use, and inform discussion about how evaluation results can be used to improve the intervention. Evaluation questions are linked to the NRN objectives or to the specific topic which should be evaluated. The evaluation questions should be further specified with judgment criteria, which are linked to indicators to be used to answer the evaluation questions. Evaluators are invited to propose additional judgment criteria and indicators for existing evaluation questions and develop more programme specific NRN evaluation questions, if it is useful for the quality of the evaluation.

Example of ***programme-specific NRN evaluation questions linked to NRN programme specific objectives.***

The programme specific NRN objective is: "Improve the cooperation among stakeholders in rural areas through to the NRN's activities"

[123] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex V

Programme specific NRN evaluation question: "To what extent has the NRN's activities contributed to the improved communication among stakeholders in rural areas?"

Judgment criteria: Cooperation between stakeholders has improved

Indicator: number of cooperation projects established/implemented due to the activities of NRN

Examples of ***programme-specific evaluation questions linked to specific evaluation topics****:*

Topic: NRN governance and delivery

Programme specific NRN evaluation question:" Is the NRN governance and delivery system effective?"

Judgment criteria: NRN governance and delivery has allowed for the involvement of a broad number of stakeholders in the NRN's activities

Indicator: no of stakeholders, by type involved in the NRN's activities

Methodological approach

The aim of this section is to specify the methodological approach for the evaluation; this can either be achieved by asking those submitting tenders to describe in their offer their proposed approach for the evaluation topics and activities or, alternatively, by asking for specific methodologies to be applied by the contractor. It is generally recommended to give flexibility to the contractor to propose their approach to the assessment of the NRN's achievements, results, and impacts and apply the methods, which they consider sufficiently robust for the NRN assessment. Approach and methods should be described in detail by contractor in the offer. In each case, it is recommended that the MA build sufficient capacities to judge the quality of the approach and methods´ robustness.

Example:

It is important to acknowledge that rural networks are examples of "soft" interventions, the impacts of which are often difficult for evaluation to capture. The following methods may be used in the evaluation of NRNs / NRNPs:

- *Desk analysis of monitoring data;*
- *Theory-based approaches to establish an intervention logic and evaluation framework (e.g. theory of change);*
- *Case studies*[124]*;*
- *On the spot assessments by participants, participating observations at events;*
- *Surveys on a wider group of stakeholders;*
- *In depth interviews and focus groups*[125]*;*
- *Stakeholder analysis*[126]*;*
- *Network function analysis*[127]*;*

[124] Capturing impacts of Leader and of measures to improve Quality of Life in rural areas, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, 2010

[125] Capturing impacts of Leader and of measures to improve Quality of Life in rural areas, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, 2010

[126] FAO Socio-economic and gender analysis (SEAGA) - http://www.fao.org/knowledge/goodpractices/bp-gender-equity-in-rural/bp-seaga/en/

[127] Enrique Mendizabal: Understanding Networks: The Functions of Research Policy Networks, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2006

- *Network and organisation diagnosis*[128]*;*
- *Social network analysis*[129]*.*

Information sources

The ToR should contain an overview of the available data and information sources relevant to the evaluation task. This includes the specification of the information collected via the monitoring system, other available databases and documents, details on who holds the information and how it can be assessed, and reference to any relevant analysis and research work that has already taken place. It is also helpful to highlight what information / data is not available and is expected to be collected by the evaluator. This information is also essential for a realistic assessment of the offer.

Example of available data and information sources

- *Feasibility study and needs assessment to establish the NRN,*
- *NRN Action plan including capacity building plan and communication plan,*
- *Self-assessment data of the NRN,*
- *Project data base of the NRN,*
- *Payment data for NRN's activities,*
- *RPD monitoring data (operations database),*
- *Ex post evaluation of the NRN in the 2007-2013 programming period.*

Time schedule and deliverables

The ToR specifies the duration of the evaluation contract and the timing of the deliverables. One should also state fixed milestones and deadlines to which deliverables are linked. The ToR may further specify the purpose and the target audience of the main deliverables.

The expected deliverables, their length, format and content, should be carefully described (e.g. content of evaluation reports, contribution to standard and enhanced Annual Implementation Reports, executive summaries (in English), other required deliverables for a broader dissemination of evaluation results).

A link between the expected deliverables and (interim) payments is provided in the invoicing arrangements of the ToR.

Example:

Timing	***Deliverable***	***Content of the deliverable***
March 2017	*First report (max. 80 pages) approved by the steering group* *The first report shall include an executive summary of max. 4 pages and specific identifiers on the cover*	*Review of the evaluation framework and availability of data sources including self-assessment* *Review of the NRN governance and delivery system* *Review of the relevance of envisaged NRN services and activities*

[128] Bauer-Wolf, S. et al., (2008), Erfolgreich durch Netzwerkkompetenz (successful through Network competence), Springer-Verlag, Vienna

[129] Capturing impacts of Leader and of measures to improve Quality of Life in rural areas, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, 2010

Timing	*Deliverable*	*Content of the deliverable*
	page and a standard disclaimer. *The first report will be published in full length on the RDP website*	*Coherence with other networks at the national and European level* *NRN performance and outputs (taking into account CMES output indicators)* *Recommendations how to optimise the NRN's services and activities*

Management of the evaluation contract

This section describes how the evaluation contract will be steered and managed. If there is an evaluation steering group, the ToR may list its members and describe their specific roles.

It should also be specified how the evaluators are expected to interact with the contracting authority (e.g. contact persons, frequency of meetings, presentations to specific target groups).

Budget

The budget for the evaluation contract should be clearly specified (costs for data purchase should be listed separately). It is considered good practice if the contracting authority specifies a maximum and minimum budget for tenders. This allows evaluators to develop realistic financial offers.

Qualification of the team

The requirements related to the qualification of the evaluating team are closely linked to the requested methodology and project management needs. Categories of experts are often specified (e.g. years of professional experience, academic degrees). More flexible ToRs limit themselves to only specifying what skills and experience must be available in the evaluation team, rather than specifying requirements for each position. This gives more choice to the contractor to compose a well-functioning team.

Exclusion, selection and award criteria

The ToR details the criteria for the selection of contractors in line with national procurement legislation. Selection criteria can be divided into three groups; exclusion, selection and award criteria:

Exclusion criteria refers to the exclusion of a contractor who is in a bankruptcy situation, has shown grave professional misconduct, or who has not fulfilled obligations towards the tax office, social security, etc. In most cases a simple 'Declaration of honour' is required as evidence. In addition, proof that the contractor does not have a conflict of interest (e.g. was involved in the implementation of the RDP) can be requested.

Selection criteria usually refers to the contractor's legal position, and their economic, financial, technical and professional capacity. If the national legislation allows, the contracting authority may request only copies of relevant documents, whereas the originals are collected only from the successful bidder. This helps to simplify the tendering procedure.

Furthermore, the categories of experts and expertise are described in the ToR, including the level of qualification and professional experience required. For instance, in the case of a counterfactual evaluation design, the ToR will request an experienced expert in this field. The required proof of qualification will be specified, but requesting too detailed formal proof will create an unnecessary administrative burden for contractors.

Award criteria refers to the quality of the technical and financial offer. Besides price, they generally relate to the proposed evaluation approach, understanding of the task, methodology, the roles of team members and the overall organisation / management of the work. A clear idea within the contracting authority as to what makes a good offer will enable a clear assessment and – most importantly – the best offer will be chosen.

Clarity and transparency of the weighting of award criteria is important, in particular between the assessment of the technical offer (content) and the financial offer (price). It is important to consider carefully if the lowest price offer is also the best from a technical point of view. A lower weighting for the financial offer usually allows the highest quality technical offer to be chosen. Often the ratio between content and price is between 60:40 and 80:20. Recent experiences suggest a weighting between 20 and 25% for price is appropriate. In general, an overview table listing the criteria and corresponding proof (including where they can be found in the offer) is helpful during the assessment process.

Submission rules

Information concerning the submission of offers include:

- The exact deadline for submission (specific date and time, as proved by the post stamp or the day of delivery);
- The institution and address to which the offer has to be sent.

The ToR also specifies if offers have to be submitted in one or two envelopes (with separate financial sections or anonymous technical sections), the number of copies required, the date offers will be opened (if public), and a contact address for questions concerning the ToR.

4.2 Examples of output-result-impact chains for common groups of NRN actions

In the simplest form, the intervention logic can start to be developed as a chain or ladder whose links or rungs are activities, outputs, results and impacts. Each chain link or ladder rung is occupied by one achievement. However, one achievement on one rung can lead to more than one achievement on the next rung. In the end, the results and impacts emerge through multiple causation.

The following figures illustrate how a stakeholder in a Member State could develop the logical chain of the NRN outputs, results and impacts starting from each of the common group of actions[130] and link them to the outputs directly produced with NSU activities, and later with results and impacts generated by the NRN.

These chains can be used as the starting point for the development of specific NRN intervention logic, which must still be linked to the NRN common and programme specific objectives.

[130] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54.2

Figure 25. Example of output-result-impact chain for collection of examples of projects, covering all RDP priorities

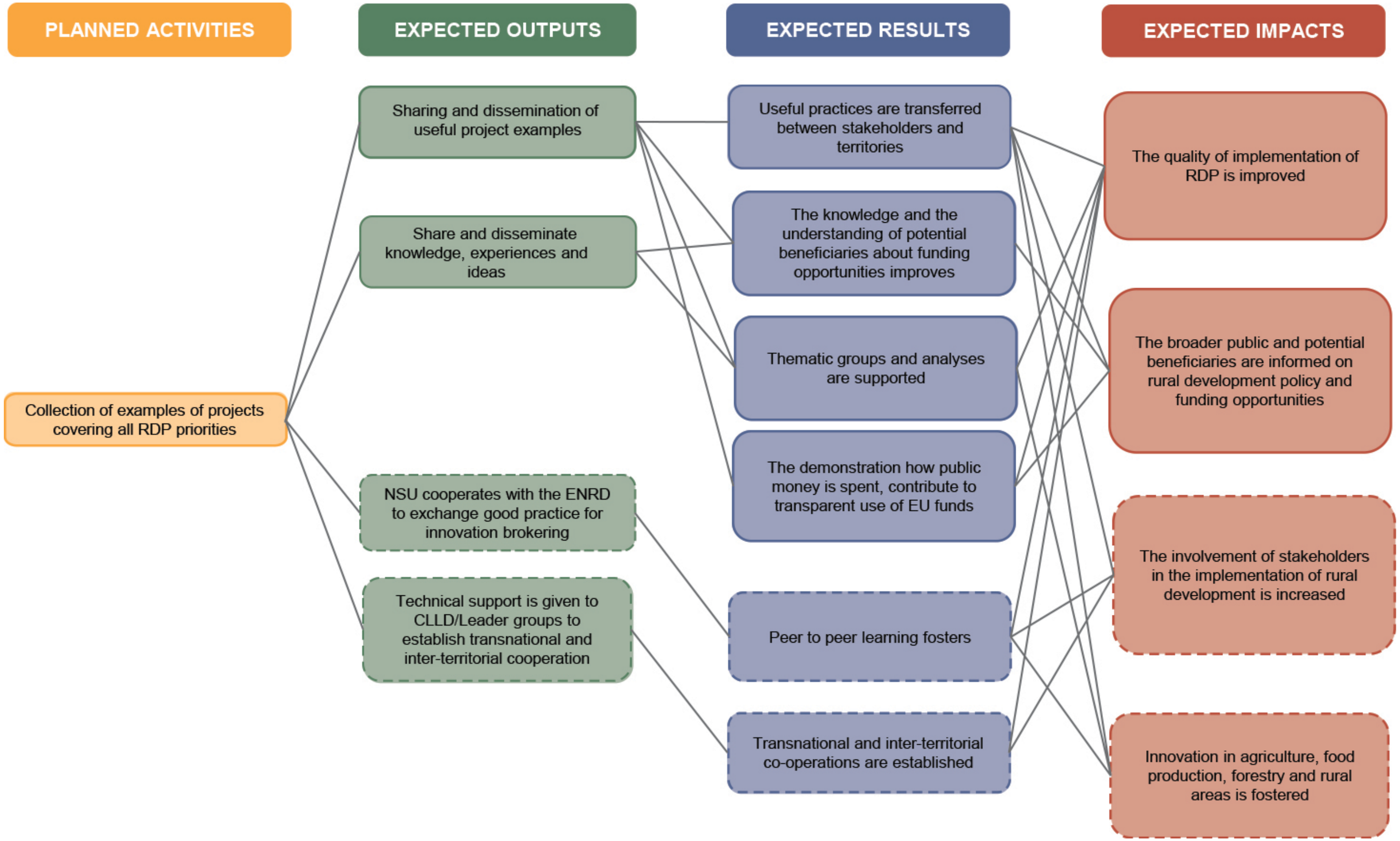


Figure 26. Example of output-result-impact chain for facilitation of thematic and analytical exchanges between RD stakeholders, sharing and dissemination of findings.

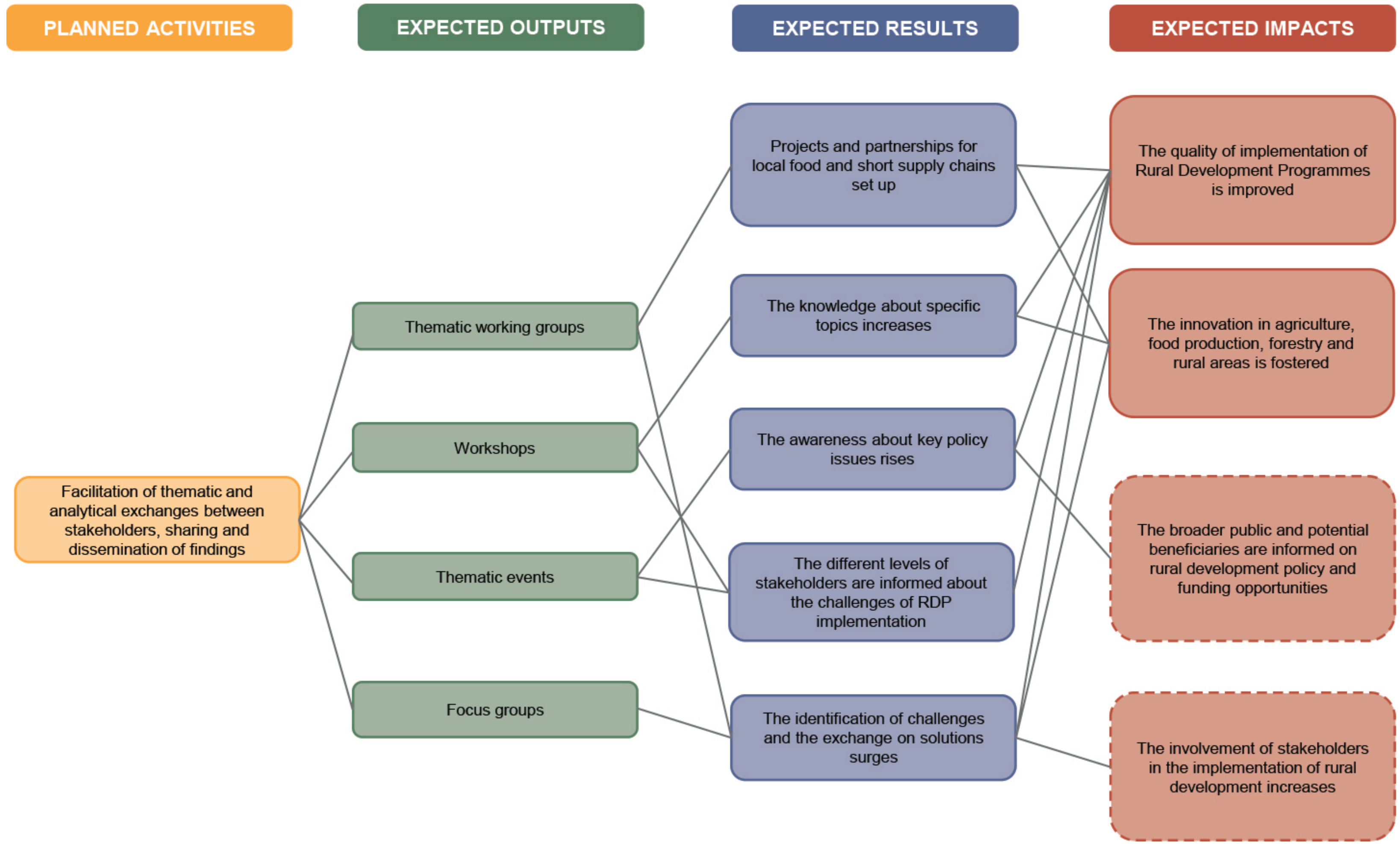


Figure 27. Example of output-result-impact chain for provision of training and networking of LAGs and in particular of Technical Assistance for inter-territorial and transnational cooperation, facilitation of cooperation among LAGs and search for partners

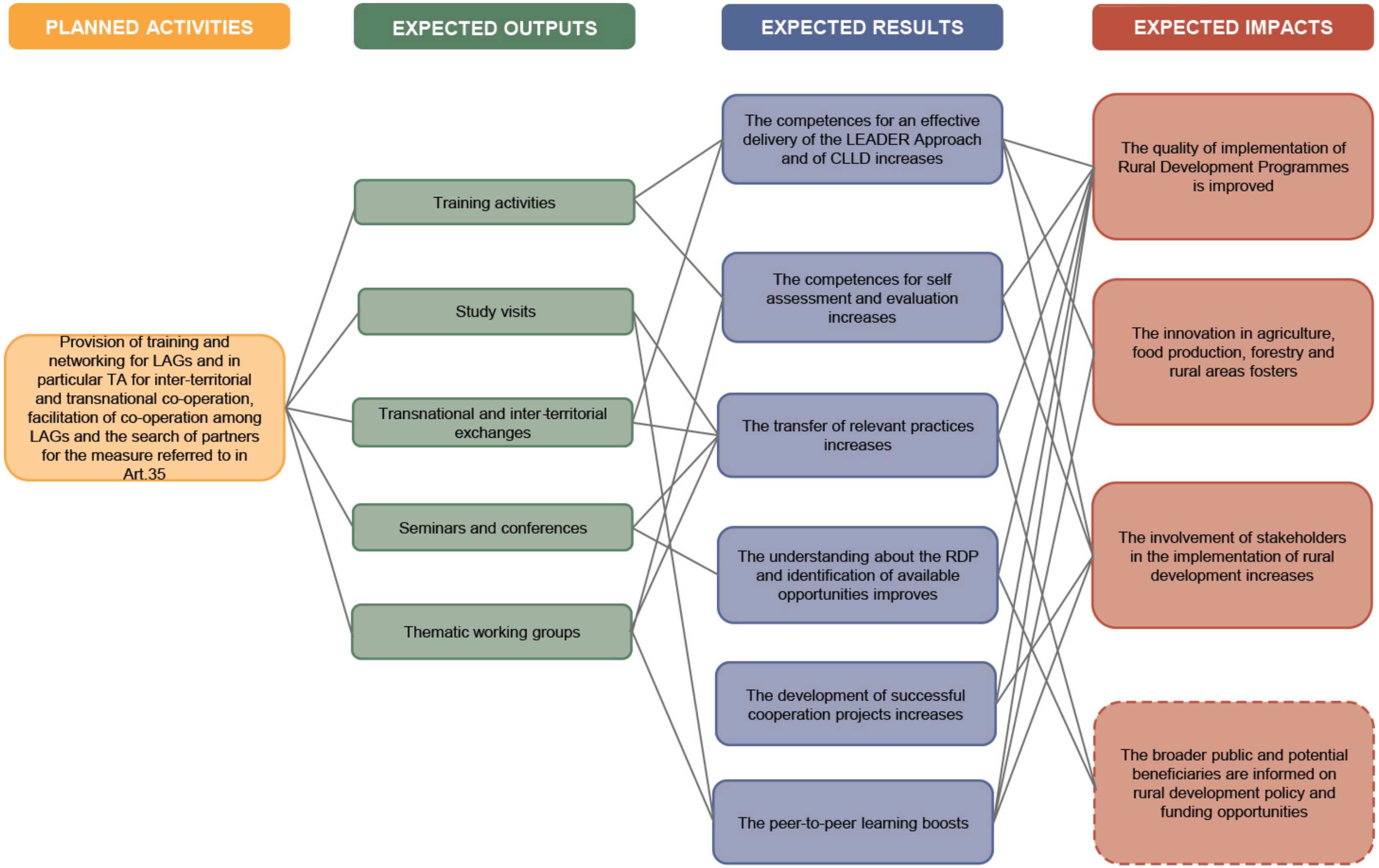


Figure 28. Example of output-result-impact chain for provision of networking for advisors and innovation support services

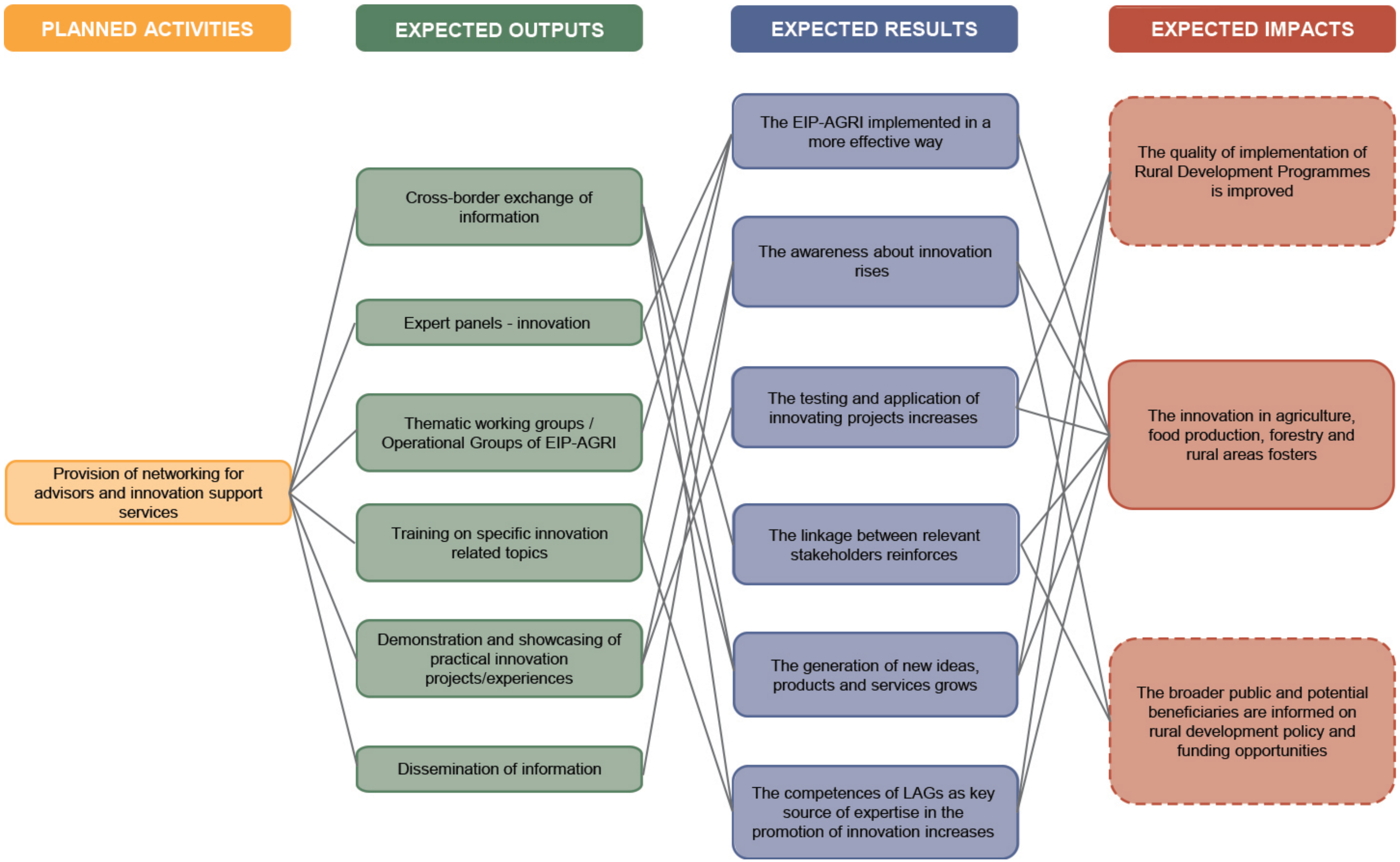


Figure 29. Example of output-result-impact chain for sharing ad dissemination of monitoring and evaluation findings

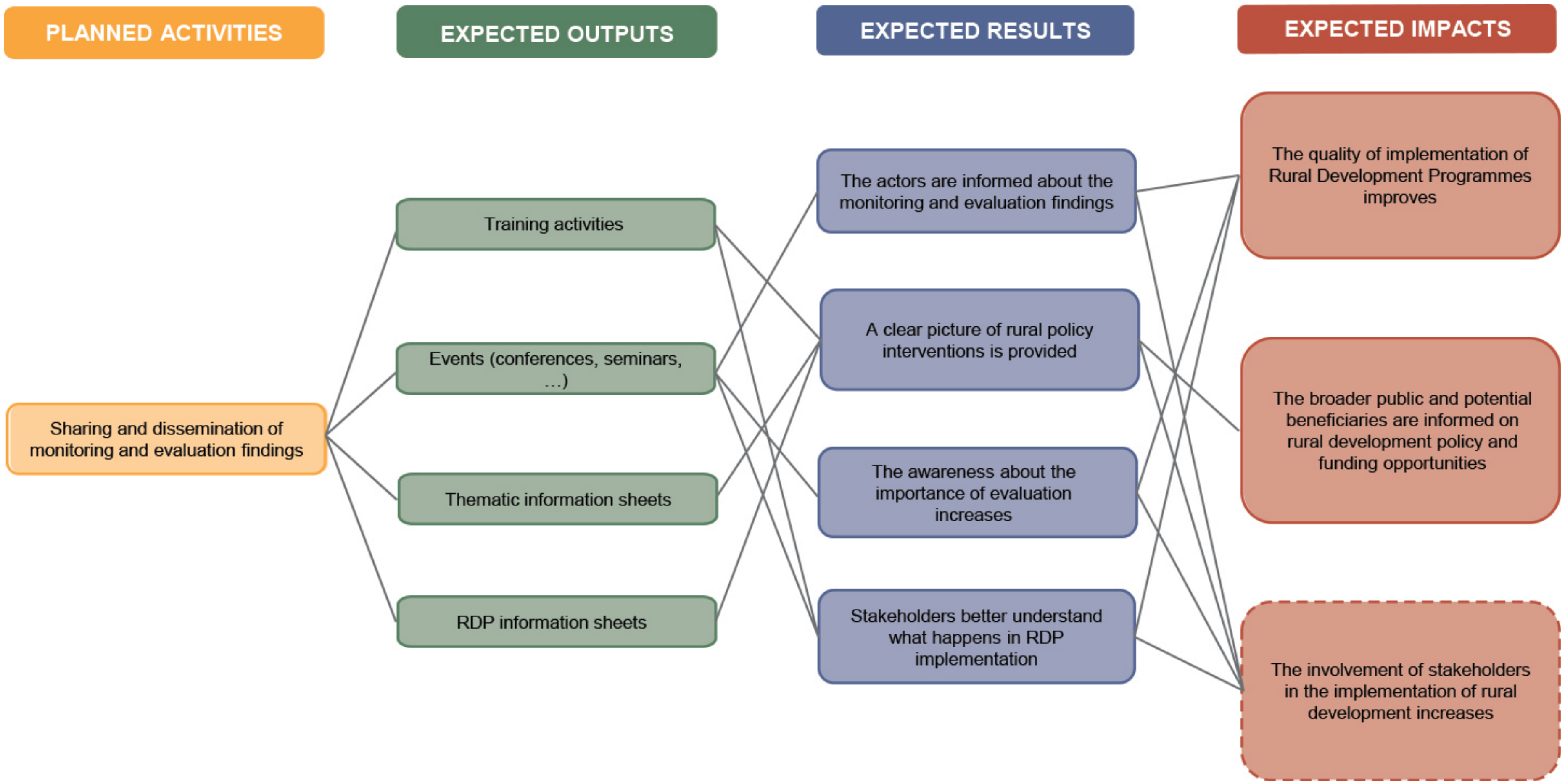


Figure 30. Example of output-result-impact chain for communication plan including publicity and information concerning the Rural Development Programme in agreement with the Managing Authorities and information and communication activities aimed at a broader public.

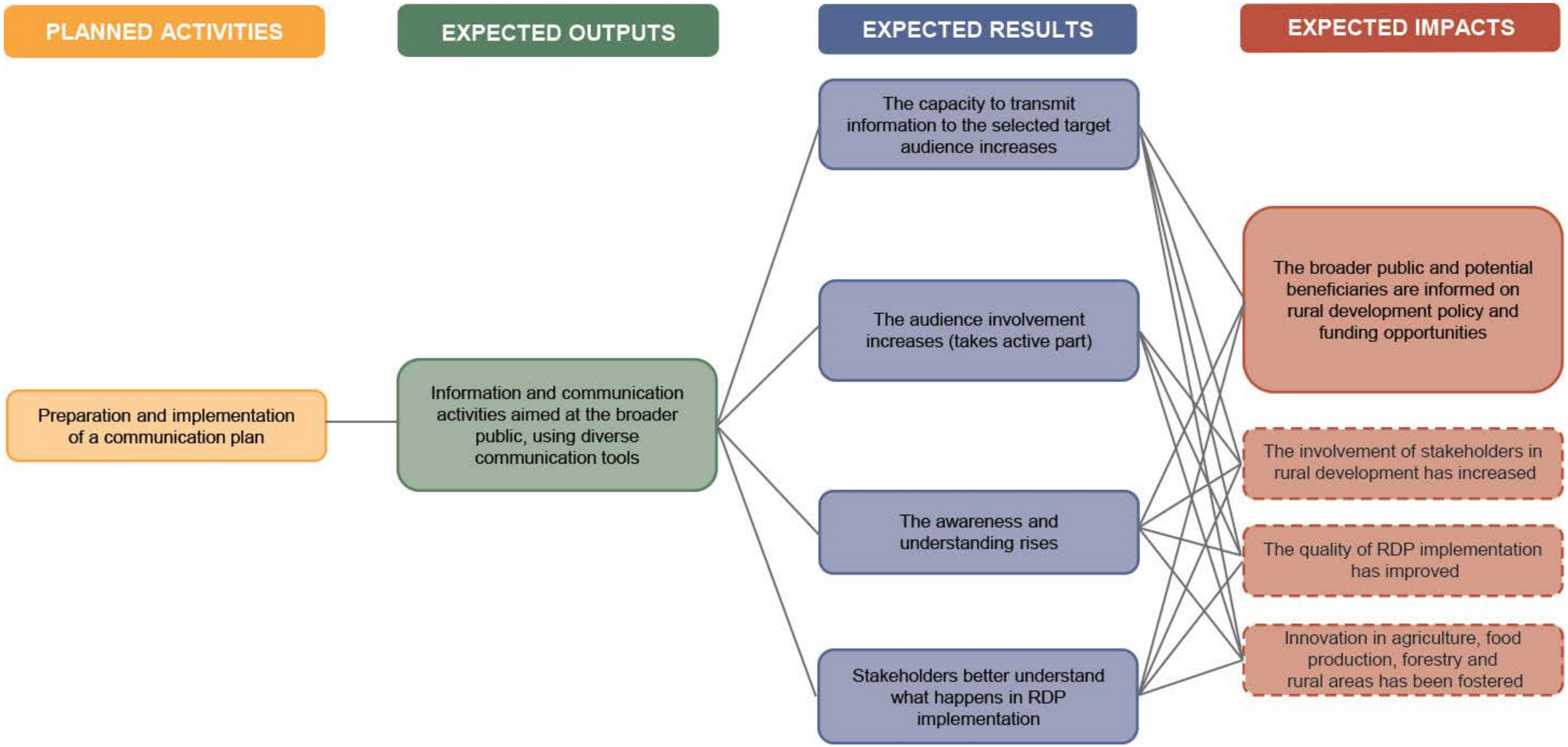
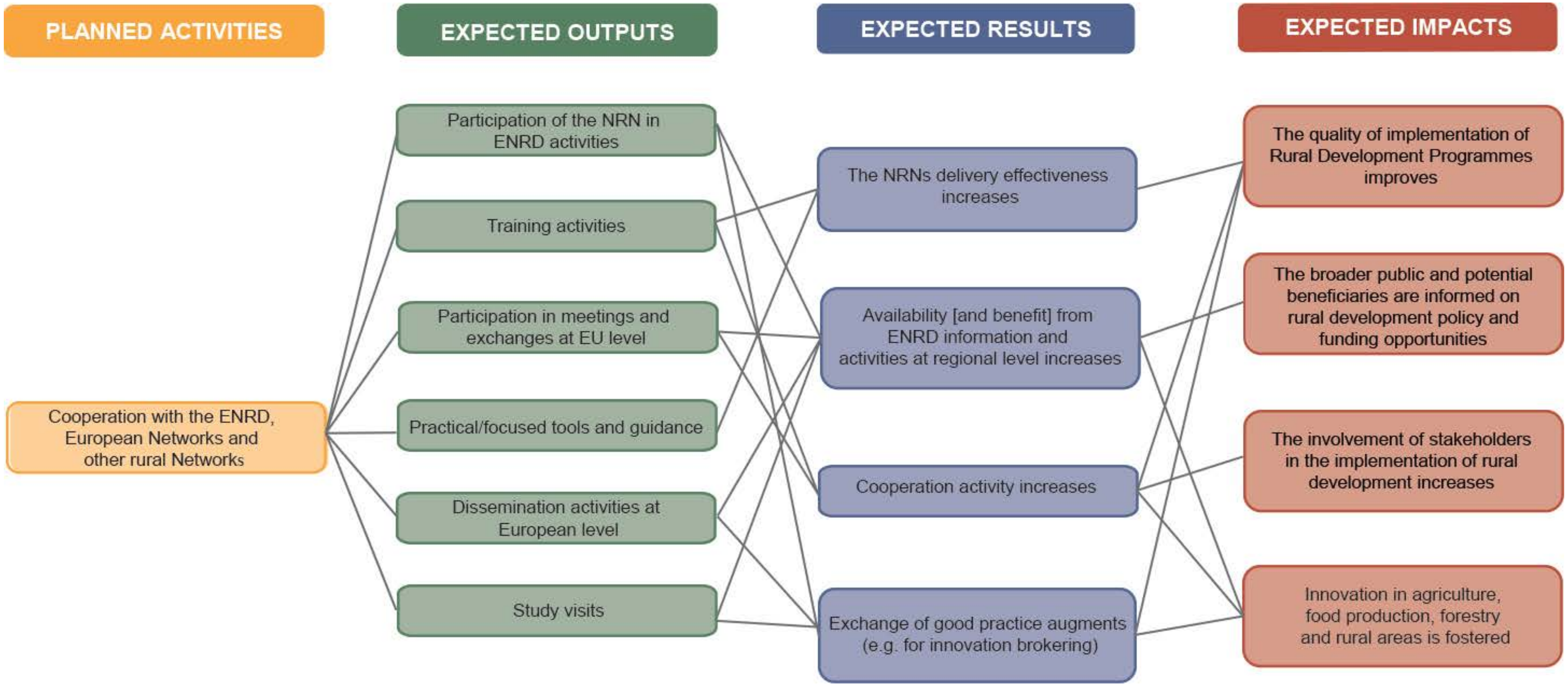


Figure 31. Example of output-result-impact chain for participation in and contribution to the European network for rural development



4.3 Examples of methods for assessing National Rural Networks

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS	
WHAT	Social Network Analysis (SNA) is the process of investigating social structures through the use of network and graph theories. It is based on the idea that networked actors (i.e. *nodes*) and their actions are interdependent. The links between these actors are seen as channels for the transfer or flow of resources (information, influence, money, etc.) and the network itself can be viewed as providing opportunities or constraints on the behaviour of the actors.
WHY / WHEN	SNA can map and measure relationships and resource flows between actors, providing insights on bonding capital in a stakeholder network, on structural characteristics such as centrality or peripherality of specific actors, or on emerging sub-networks which are only loosely linked to other parts of the network, as well as on specific roles of actors within the network (e.g. boundary spanners between distinct sub-groups or between the network and external partners). The SNA helps to assess the density, quality and robustness of communication structures between partners in both formal and informal networks. The partners to be included in the SNA can either be defined by the involved actors or by the evaluators, in accordance to the purpose of the investigation. It is important to note that whereas SNA is an excellent method for visualising and calculating the structure of the networks and the roles of the actors, it only offers a snapshot of the network in a particular point in time. In the context of the evaluation of NRNs or NRNPs, SNA can be used either as a self-assessment exercise or by the evaluator, for: • measuring involvement of stakeholders; • answering CEQ and PSEQs; • monitoring activities; • assessing effectiveness of outputs; • planning of further activities.

HOW

Working steps

When designing SNA research, it is fundamental to first identify the boundary of the network (e.g. the network members). This can be done on the basis of mailing lists, meeting/event participation lists, or through a snowballing method (e.g. identify one actor in the network, ask the actor to name 5-10 other actors, then contact those and repeat).

Afterwards, data sources should be screened. The surveys and interviews must be designed in such a way that they generate relational data, that is, they should focus on the interactions between the actors. In this sense, one could design a questionnaire (which includes a response scale) to be submitted to all members of the network.

The gathered data can be consolidated and stored in an adjacency matrix (a square matrix used to represent a finite graph, whose elements indicate whether pairs of vertices are adjacent or not in the graph), and elaborated through the use of ad hoc software (see below).

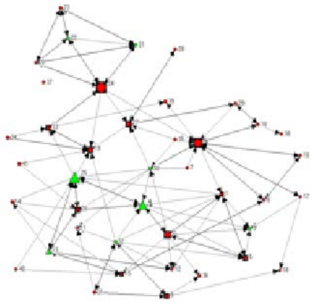
Social network analysis can be conducted at three levels of analysis, namely at the network level, sub-group level and actor level:

a) the network level analysis focuses on the structure and characteristics of the network itself (main concepts related to the network level are the density and centralisation of the network, as well as the connectedness between the actors in the network);
b) the sub-group level of analysis looks at cohesive sub-groups of actors within the network (characteristics of different kinds of groups/clusters of relations between the groups):
c) the actor level analysis is interested in the location of the actor in the network. The analysis of centrality can give insight into the various roles of actors within the network – who are the leaders, hubs, bridges and isolates, as well as the position of the actors within the network (core or periphery). The main concepts at this level of analysis are centrality (degree centrality, betweenness centrality, closeness centrality) and the membership in cliques.

The degree centrality looks at the simple number of direct ties that the actor has with other actors. The other two centrality concepts are related to the shortest path between actors. Namely, closeness centrality measures the distance between an actor and all other actors in the network. Betweenness centrality, on the other hand, measures the number of times an actor acts as a bridge along the shortest path between other actors.

Information sources

Data for SNA can be gathered, for instance, through text analysis (e.g. meeting minutes), surveys and interviews. It is important to note that SNA requires relational data, meaning, contacts, ties and connections, group attachments and meetings, which relate one agent to another and cannot be reduced to the properties of the individual agents themselves.

OUTCOME	With the help of SNA software (UCINET for Windows, Pajek, NetDraw, SNA packages for R and several others), it is possible to get a visual representation (in the form of a network graph) and a mathematical analysis of the network and the relationships between the actors. In the example adjoining, the different types of organisations are illustrated by different symbols (red circles represent administrations and green triangles civil society organisations). The size of each node characterises the relative importance of an actor in terms of the number of its connections. The width of lines depicts how intensive the interactions are between actors, the arrows indicate the direction of the information flows. 
PROs	• SNA is the only method in the social sciences that allows for the investigation of relationships between actors and social processes. • With high-quality network data, many meaningful calculations can be made. Based on these results the network and the underlying dynamics can be demonstrated accurately and clearly. • SNA permits analysis at both the macro as well as the micro level. That means either a single actor and his personal network, or a total network can be investigated. • Thanks to the focus on the connections between actors, SNA impartially uncovers critical hidden links and weaknesses. Therefore, it enables the development of measures to improve the organizational cooperation and effectiveness.
CONs	• SNA is a very laborious and complex method, which is not easy to apply. The data collection for SNA can also be hampered by the fact that SNA demands high-quality and complete data. • Networks often are not explicitly definable because there are no clear boundaries regarding communication flow and cooperation. Including these cooperation partners into the investigation is not feasible in practice. • In the context of coalition operations, the collection of data could be difficult to realise, because those subjects questioned, in such an environment might not be willing to provide information on their interactions with partners on whom their personal safety is dependent. • Network data alone is often not sufficient. For a comprehensive investigation of an organisation, information about the individual characteristics of the actors, context variables and task attributes are necessary. Therefore, it would be ideal to consider SNA as an addition to the otherwise trait-focused methods of social sciences.
REFERENCES	David Knoke and Song Young (2008), *Social network analysis, 2nd edition*, SAGE Publications Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), *Social network analysis. Methods and Applications*, Cambridge University Press Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), *Social network analysis. Methods and Applications*, Cambridge University Press Peter J. Carrington, James Scott, and Stanley Wasserman (2005), *Models and Methods in social network analysis*, Cambridge University Press John Scott (2013), *Social network analysis: A Handbook. 3rd edition*, SAGE Publications Robert Hanneman (2005), *Introduction to social network analysis* , Riverside, CA: University of California, Riverside

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">NETWORK FUNCTIONAL APPROACH</th></tr>
<tr><td>WHAT</td><td>
Network functional approach - or analysis - (NFA) is a decision making approach in which a network is examined according to its component functions to understand how it can maintain and sustain relevance for its members. These functions are further divided into sub-functions, which are later analysed according to certain parameters. The findings are finally discussed in order to make a decision.
The NFA describes networks by considering six non-exclusive functions:

Filter: decide what information is worth paying attention to for network members.
Amplify: clarifying ideas that are less known or less understood by network members.
Invest and provide: offer a means to give the members the resources to carry out their main activities.
Convene: bring together different people or groups.
Community building: promote and sustain values and standards of the individuals or organisations within them.
Facilitate: help members carry out their activities in a more effective way.

</td></tr>
<tr><td>WHY / WHEN</td><td>
Throughout the lifecycle of a network, it is especially valuable and useful to analyse the functions performed by a network, how well it performs them, and how it should adapt to external changes and internal dynamics. In relation to the roles that networks might play, the method distinguishes between two supra-functions, which reflect fundamental differences between networks:
a) The agency role: a network that is charged by its members to become the main agent of the change they aim to achieve;
b) The support role: a network that by itself (as an independent entity or secretariat) is supporting its members toward the change.
A description of a network using the functional approach would consider first its role (e.g. whether it is a support or agency network or what proportion of each it follows), then the various functions the network carries out. This information also helps to understand how the network can use information and evidence to influence policy.
In the context of the evaluation of a National Rural Network or a National Rural Network Programme, the NFA can be used as an on-going tool, both by the MA and the evaluator, in order to achieve the following:

quantifying result indicators;
answering to CEQs and PSEQs;
assessing and restructuring the Network Support Unit and the Network;
assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of activities;
programming future activities

</td></tr>
</table>

HOW

Working steps

The NFA process is simple and very flexible: it can be carried out as part of a workshop session, or as part of a broader consultative process. The amount of time needed depends on the size and scale of the network, and how important it is to reflect on its strategy and functions.

The steps to undertake for the NFA are as follows:

- analyse the relevance of the network's vision and mission and their ongoing relevance;
- map existing / planned activities against the six functions to reflect on and categorise what the network does, and then map ongoing or planned activities to these functions;
- identify the current / planned balance of work across the six functions: allocate 100 marks to the overall effort of the network, and then identify the current (or planned, in the case of a new network) balance of effort of the network by dividing those marks across the different functions in accordance with what the network does;
- for each function, identify how the network's roles are balanced between 'Agency' (e.g. as an active Secretariat, or an empowered Board) or 'Support' (supporting members to perform certain activities);
- rate efficiency and effectiveness, where 'efficiency' is the time and cost put into activities undertaken as part of a function compared to the outputs, while 'effectiveness' refers to the extent to which objectives were achieved in relation to a function;
- reflect on the vision and mission, and think about how these might need to change;
- agree on an ideal functional focus and role, using the discussions and findings in steps 4 and 5 as a starting point, both in terms of what should be done, and how it should be done.

It is vital that once the ideal functional focus has been agreed upon, the network then uses this to revisit and revise its vision and mission. It is also important to reflect on the role of the network in terms of providing support to members or as an agent in its own right.

Information sources

Different types of information sources are useful in order to obtain the data required to conduct a NFA: open discussions, semi-structured interviews and opinion polls.

OUTCOME

The outcome of the analysis based on the working steps described above should result in a matrix showing every related score deriving from the information collected. This facilitates stakeholders to be able to easily understand the position of the network in relation to each focus, and its role, In order to make a strategic shift.

NETWORK	Current functional focus	Current balance of role	Efficient	Effective	Ideal functional focus	Ideal balance of role
Community building	50	80:20	2	2	10	20:80
Filtering	15	80:20	3	3	15	80:20
Amplifying	15	0:100	2	1	0	
Learning & Facilitating	20	100:0	4	5	50	50:50
Investing & Providing	0	-			15	100:0
Convening	0	-			10	50:50

Lastly, the NFA can be used:

- as a management tool to set strategic priorities for an emerging network, or to re-think the strategic priorities of an existing network;
- as a collaborative learning tool, bringing together different networks to discuss common problems and solutions;
- as a mechanism to analyse existing work plans and monitoring network activities;
- as a model that can be part of an overall approach to evaluating the effectiveness of a network;
- as a framework for comparative case-study research across a range of networks.

PROs

- Networks can be fostered by identifying areas where specific network functions might be required or improved to benefit members;
- It introduces new perspectives and builds wider support;
- Analyses of networks suggest that it is useful to look at them from a lifecycle perspective;
- It provides an entry point for thinking about capacity development and network formation.

CONs

- The functional approach is only a first step towards improving the understanding of networks;
- Further research should look at the networks that remain in the space between the formal networks addressed and the informal personal networks that 'make things happen'.

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Mendizabal, E. (2006b) Building effective research policy networks: Linking function and form. Working Paper No. 276. London, ODI.

Perkin, E. and Court, J. (2005) Networks and policy processes in international development: a literature review. ODI Working Paper No. 252. London, ODI.

Stone, D. and Maxwell, S. (eds) (2005) Global knowledge networks and international development: bridging research and policy in a globalising world. London, Routledge.

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STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

WHAT

Stakeholder analysis (SA) is the process of detecting the individuals or groups that are likely to affect or be affected by a planned action, and cataloguing them according to their influence on the action and the impact the action will have on them.

WHY / WHEN

SA is frequently used during the preparation phase of a project/programme to assess the attitudes of the stakeholders regarding potential changes. SA can be done once or on a regular basis to track changes in stakeholder attitudes over time.

The types of stakeholders are:

- Primary stakeholders: are those ultimately affected, either positively or negatively by an organisation's actions.
- Secondary stakeholders: are the ‘intermediaries’ (persons or organisations who are indirectly affected by an organisation's actions).
- Key stakeholders: are those who have significant influence upon or importance within an organisation (can also belong to the first two groups).

SA has the goal of developing cooperation between the stakeholders and the project team (e.g., in the case of NRNs/NRNPs, and the Network Support Unit). Ultimately, SA assures the successful outcome of the project. The analysis can take place at one or more levels – local, regional, national and international – which influences how one collects data and who is considered a stakeholder.

Stakeholder Analysis allows one to:

1. extract the interests of stakeholders in relation to the project’s objectives;
2. identify actual and potential conflicts of interest;
3. identify viability other than in purely financial terms (e.g. includes social factors);
4. help provide an overall picture;
5. help identify relationships between different stakeholders – which helps to identify possible coalitions.

More specifically, in the context of the evaluation of a National Rural Network or of a National Rural Network Programme the SA could be used, for example, as an on-going tool for:

- quantifying result indicators;
- answering CEQs and PSEQs;
- monitoring outcomes and the performance of activities;
- planning further activities (fine tuning of the Action Plan);
- monitoring sub networks.

HOW

Working steps

- The first step in building any SA is to plan the process (define the purpose and how the results will be used, as well as setting up a timeline);
- develop a categorised list of stakeholders. Once the list is complete it is possible to somehow assign priorities, and to convert the 'highest priority' stakeholders into a table or a picture. The potential list of stakeholders will always exceed both the time available for analysis and the capability of the mapping tool to sensibly display the results: the challenge is, hence, to focus on the 'right stakeholders' (the ones who are currently important) and to use the tool to depict this analytical sub-set of the community;
- Adapt the most appropriate tool (e.g. definition of stakeholder characteristics, stakeholder table, reference chart, etc.);
- After the tool for gathering information has been tested, one can start collecting primary data from stakeholders and successively use that data for filling in the stakeholder table defined for determining each stakeholders position on the basis of a power index;
- The data is analysed in order to gauge the results to be later utilised.

Information sources

To collect data from primary sources, face to face interviews (using check lists), semi structured and structured interviews (often self-administered), questionnaires can be used. Secondary sources to be used can include published and unpublished documents, reports, policy statements, internal regulations of organisations, etc. Interviews can further provide opportunities to access additional secondary sources (e.g. internal documents not obtained in the initial literature review). When analysing complex issues, especially for policy analysis, qualitative approaches are essential so as to preclude focusing on a limited number of aspects of the issue. It is important not to neglect those, which may emerge during the process of data collection and analysis.

OUTCOME

The most common presentation of this method is the use of a matrix to represent two dimensions of interest (with often a third dimension shown by the colour or size of the symbol representing the individual stakeholders).

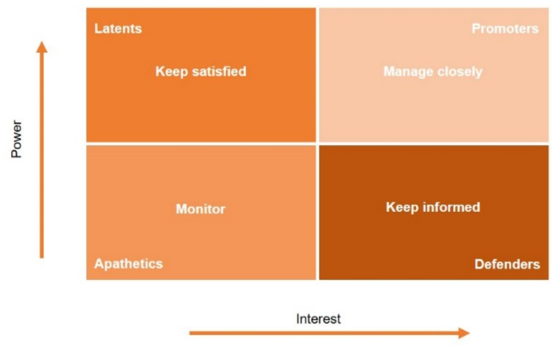
Some of the commonly used 'dimensions' include:

- Power (high, medium, low)
- Support (positive, neutral, negative)
- Influence (high or low)
- Need (strong, medium, weak)

Stakeholder analysis helps to identify the following:

1. Stakeholders' interests
2. Mechanisms to influence other stakeholders
3. Potential risks
4. Key people to be informed about the project during the execution phase
5. Negative stakeholders as well as their adverse effects on the project

Stakeholder analysis considers not only the characteristics of stakeholders with regard to the issue of interest, whether it be around a policy, project or organisational objective. It can also be used to illustrate existing organisational relationships and predict – or help develop – stakeholder alliances.



PROs	• Get to know stakeholders better in terms of relative importance, power and interests; • Better managed relationships and risks identified; • Develop better strategies and decisions; • Greater acceptance of the organisations actions by stakeholders.
CONs	• Best when done on continuous basis; • Assessment of analysis may be subjective; • Often, all stakeholder's interests cannot be met at the same time (e.g. focus on the most important stakeholder, balance and reconcile all interests according to importance or urgency).
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4.4 Practices on assessing National Rural Networks

European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

FINNISH CASE STUDY- NRN SELF ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO DEMONSTRATE ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS OBJECTIVES IN FINLAND

FACTSHEET OF THE EUROPEAN EVALUATION HELPDESK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT - JULY 2016

A NOVEL APPROACH TO BUILD CAPACITY IN RURAL AREAS

Finland covers an area of 390 903 km^2 of which 95% is rural. Of the total land area, 86% is covered by forests and 7.6% by agricultural land. The total population is 5.4 million – of which 30% live in rural areas. About 42% (nearly 118 000) of all enterprises operating in Finland are located in rural areas; In 2010 about 93% of enterprises were defined as «micro sized», (ie employing not more than 9 persons). These defining features of Finland make the connecting of rural areas all the more crucial. The Finnish National Rural Network (NRNs) play an important and innovative defining role in connecting rural areas.

The concept of a NRN in Finland was considered a novel approach in the programming period 2007-2013. For this reason, the Managing Authority of Finland concluded to have a distinct strategy for the NRN.

During the programming period 2007-2013, the main objectives of the Finnish NRN were:

- Increasing knowledge of the potential of, and results from, the RDP amongst programme actors, potential beneficiaries and the general public;
- Enhancing the flow of communication between authorities and interest groups implementing the programme, and;
- Facilitating know-how via the exchange of relevant experiences.

The network was entrusted with the tasks of promoting cooperation and networking, communication, training, collection and distribution of good practice and the facilitation of international cooperation. These activities were also included in the NRN Action Plan.

The NRN had a budget of € 11,8 million. 24% of the budget was spent on communication, 14% on training, 8% on collecting and spreading good practises, and 5% on international cooperation.

The following actors were involved in the implementation of the NRN:

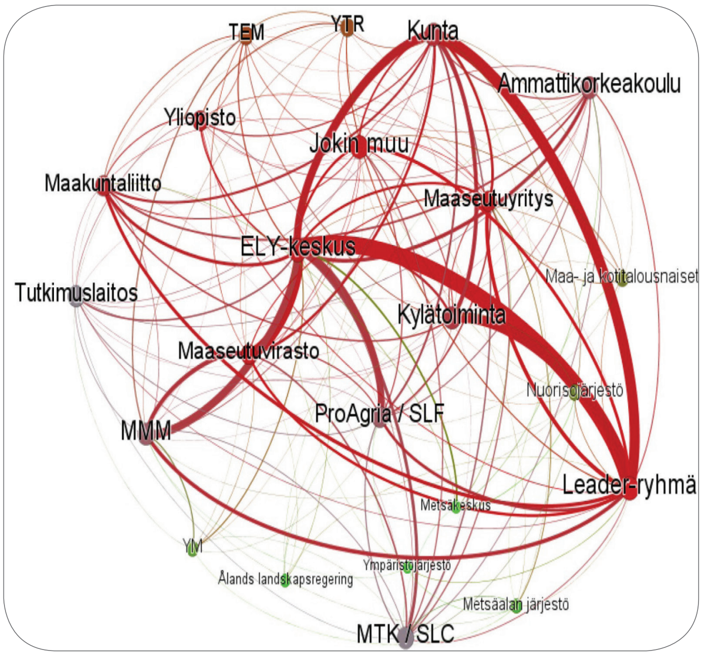
- The Rural Network Unit (RNU) is the network coordinator and plays the role of a traditional National Support Unit (NSU). The RNU was part of the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2007-2013 and Agency for Rural Affairs from January 2014 onwards. The unit had seven permanent staff and occasional summer trainees;
- The NRN Steering Committee consisted of 21 members representing various rural development stakeholders, and;
- Five working groups set up by the NRN Steering Committee (Inter-regional cooperative group, working groups on innovation, LEADER, entrepreneurship and communication). The groups' objectives were to analyse programme results and make proposals connected with the NRN action plan.

Action Plans were based on the strategy and they were drafted to be flexible enough to adapt to emerging needs. Indicators were formulated corresponding to the activities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Information provided by the Finnish Rural Network Unit:

- Programming Period: 2007-2013
- Contact: Director Teemu Hauhia, Rural Network Unit, PL 405, 60101 Seinäjoki, Finland
- https://www.maaseutu.fi/fi/maaseutuverkosto/dokumentit/koosteet-maaseutuverkostotoiminnan-palautekyselyista/Sivut/default.aspx



AN EVALUATION FOR PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

Strategy review as basis for assessment activities

Action Plans were drafted in a flexible manner to allow them to be adaptable to emerging needs and based on the unique strategy, which the MA had developed for the NRN. During the strategy process, the vision and the objectives of the Finnish NRN were formulated and indicators corresponding to the activities were defined (e.g. number of good practices introduced, generation of new cooperative relationships). The Intervention logic of the NRN was not formalised.

NRN self-assessment

During the programming period 2007-2013, the Finnish NSU introduced and tested NRN self-assessment. There was no overarching self-assessment plan, rather self-standing self-assessments conducted over the programming period. The post-event feedback surveys were part of regular activities, whereas the interest group surveys were conducted every second year.

Post-event feedback surveys: The Finnish RNU arranged approximately 40-60 network events for 4000 participants annually. Participants regularly had to give electronic feedback on the extent to which their expectations for the event had been met as well as if they considered the technical content relevant. Participants could also give general feedback on the activities of the RNU.

Interest group surveys: Every second year the RNU arranged an interest group survey. In 2010, the survey was sent to 830 people, and in 2012 to 1,500, and in 2014 to 1,100. Feedback was gathered about both the activities of the rural network and those of the RNU.

External studies

Media surveys: The RNU additionally contracted several media surveys throughout the programming period and carried out a couple of surveys on public awareness on the NRN and its activities.

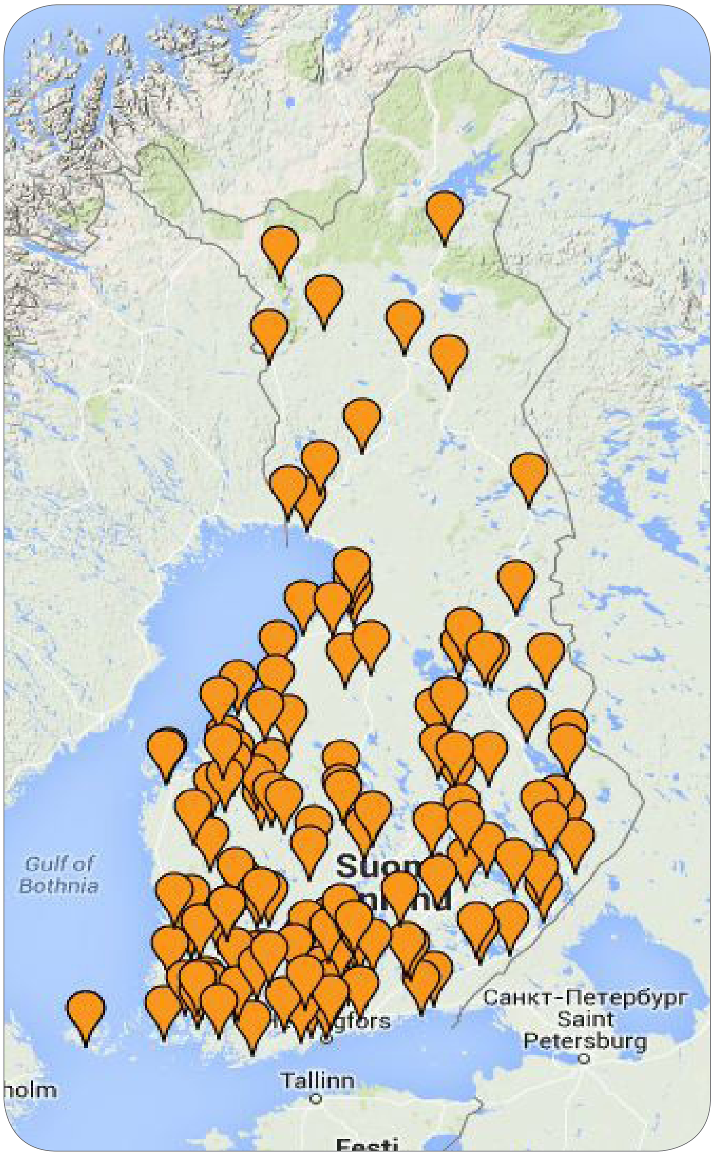
Social network analysis, conducted by an external consultant, was used to assess the composition and dynamics of the rural network, as well as the cooperative relationships within the network. The analysis, which was based on a survey, focused especially on "active nodes", which operate as catalysts and opinion leaders in the network. After three subsequent network analyses, a clear picture of the changes in network structure and activities was obtained. The network structure was analysed in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

Follow-up and use of assessment activities

The self-assessment results from the post-event feedback surveys were reviewed by the RNU, discussed in the NRN steering group, as well as summarised in the Annual Reports and the Final Report. The self-assessments and the external studies (media survey, SNA) were also used in the drafting of the NRN Action Plans.

The annual report combined monitoring and self-assessment information. Monitoring data from the PA and the RNU events log was used to describe targeting of funds per axis, activity type, location, and stakeholders. During the annual reporting process, the activities were assessed against the general strategic objectives of the network. The RNU prepared the annual report, but perspectives of those participating in the network were also obtained.

RN TRAININGS AND EVENTS 2008-2014



Ex post evaluation

The ex post evaluation of the Finnish RDP covered the NRN at a very general level. The NSU provided the evaluator with the self-assessment materials and the external studies (media surveys, interest group surveys and SNA), as well as the Activity Plans and annual and final reports. In addition to these pre-existing materials and the monitoring data provided by the PA, the ex post evaluator conducted interviews with selected members of the NSU and NRN steering group to arrive at conclusions and recommendations.

The programming period 2007-2013 was about establishing the network, the current period is about deepening and widening its operations.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social network analysis is a useful method for illustrating the structure of the network and the connections between the NRN participants. It helps to identify further areas of work (e.g. peripheral actors) and key players. A repeated social network analysis can show how the network has developed.

Comprehensive and systematic planning of monitoring, self-assessment and evaluation activities for the programming period is essential. As the NRN's work is continually evolving, it was necessary to plan a more complex follow-up and assessment for a more complex system. The monitoring, self-assessment and evaluation should reflect this change.

The Finnish NRN will be implementing the following lessons from the previous programming period:

- A plan for ongoing self-assessment, e.g. illustrated through an annual self-assessment clock, necessary in order to select the correct self-assessment activities and time them accordingly. This facilitates the efficiency of drafting the Activity Plan and allows it to be fed into the annual reporting process. Better planning of self-assessment can also help focus the information gathering and reduce the amount of data that goes underutilised.
- Detailed monitoring data can give useful information on the NRN's actions (e.g. type and number of participants in training actions). This information can show swiftly whether actions are on the right track. However, further analysis is needed to find out why things do or do not work.
- The event database of the Finnish NRN combines the event planning, implementation, payment and feedback modules. An integrated database like this permits the running of comprehensive data reports, which can be used in monitoring activities.
- A self-standing evaluation is needed to see a.) if targeting of NRN funds is right, b.) whether the funds have been spent in an efficient and effective manner, and c.) how the work could be developed further.

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EUROPEAN EVALUATION HELPDESK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

ITALIAN CASE STUDY- EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL RURAL NETWORK PROGRAMMES 2007-2013

FACTSHEET OF THE EUROPEAN EVALUATION HELPDESK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT - JULY 2016

OVERCOMING COMPLEXITIES IN ITALY'S NATIONAL RURAL NETWORK PROGRAMME (NRNP)

Italy has 21 Rural Development Programs (RDPs), all involving different stakeholder needs and levels of implementation, providing a challenge for the National Rural Network Programme (NRNP) 2007-2013 to effectively serve the needs of all.

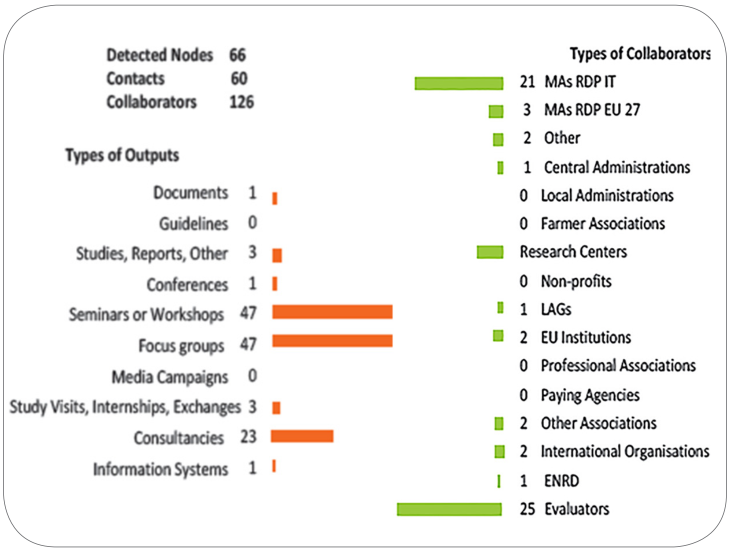
The programme, Food and Forestry, managed by the Ministry of Agriculture, was co-funded from regional RDP resources, and had 2 major goals: to improve the network and networking throughout the Italian rural system and to support and enhance the implementation of RDPs by strengthening governance and management capacity. In Italy, the NRNP acts as a technical assistance programme, which attempts to harmonise the rules and practices of the numerous RDPs, while still capturing each RDPs unique specificities and needs.

These complexities challenged both the evaluator and Managing Authority (MA) during the ongoing and ex post evaluations of the Italian 2007-2013 NRNP. The NRNP evaluation's aim was to gauge the efficiency of the RDPs at the regional level and Italian rural policy as a whole.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lattanzio Advisory Public Sector SpA was/is the ongoing evaluator for:

- The Italian National Rural Network Programme 2007-2013
- Period of activity described: 2010-2015
- Further information: angori@lattanziogroup.eu



AN EVALUATION FOR PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

The goal of the Italian NRNP evaluation was to make the evaluation findings useful and directly applicable, to improve the implementation of the NRNP. In this context, the choice of the most appropriate evaluation technique was carried out in line with the feedback emerging from needs assessments with stakeholders. The integrated work carried out by the evaluator and the Managing Authority (for example through the establishment of a dedicated Task Force for indicators) was aimed at clarifying and making the evaluation more reliable and valuable.

During a preliminary review, evaluators found that the initial ex ante indicators defined during the NRNP design were insufficient. Many result indicators identified in the ex ante appeared conceptually too similar to output indicators, causing only a partial estimation of the related specific objectives. Regarding the impact indicators, it must be recognised that the work of the MA and the evaluator was to rationalize the existing ex ante set of indicators.

The primary deficiencies detected during the analysis of the ex ante set of indicators were:

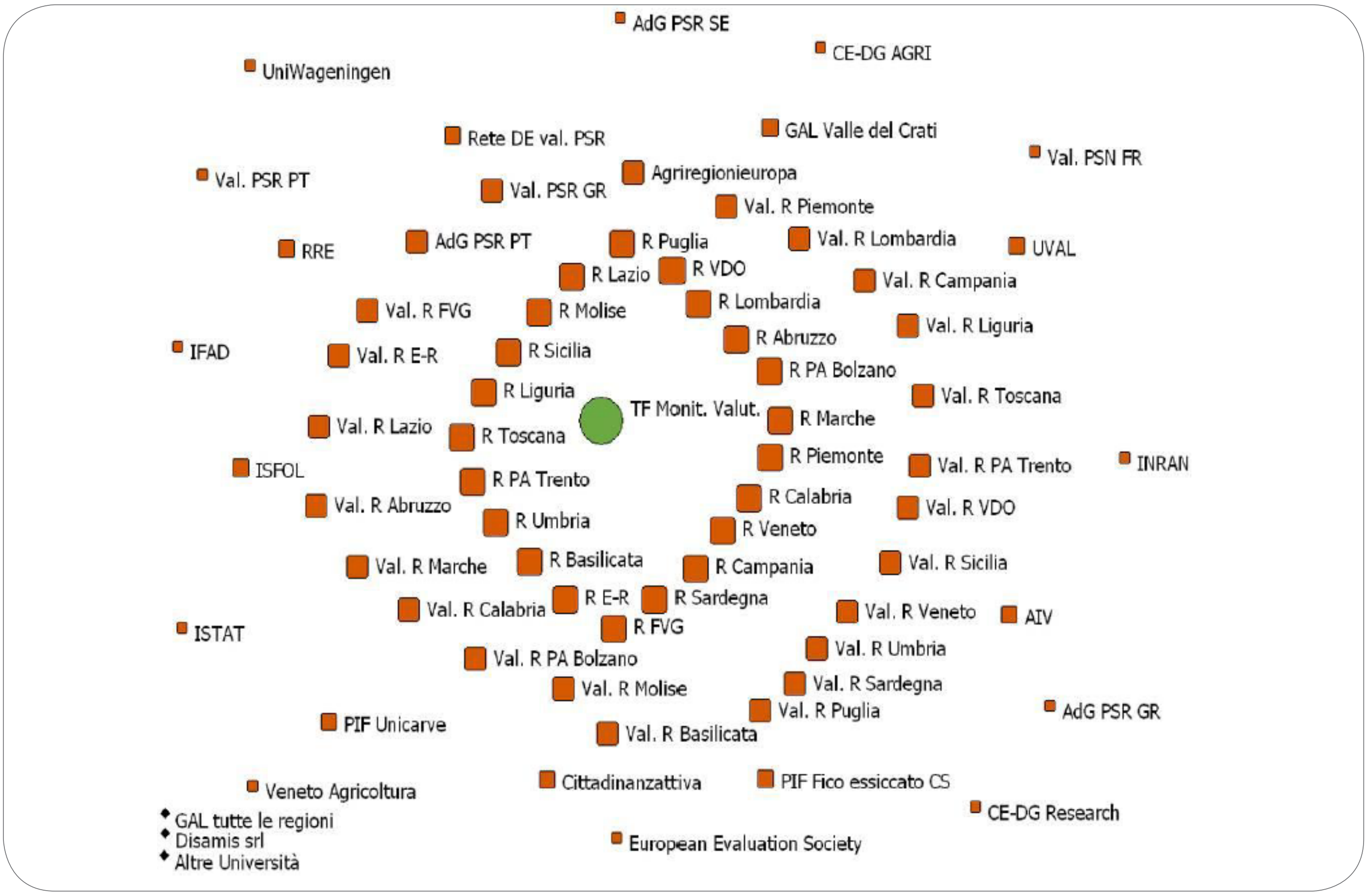
1) Specificity of the indicators in degree with respect to their related objectives;

2) Accountability and assessment of target values;

3) High number of ex ante indicators.

A specific working group was assembled consisting of the evaluator, MA and stakeholders to properly account for details and more accurately gauge the network's dimension

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS



and the capacity of the programme. Through this successful collaboration, a new set of indicators for the NRNP was devised, facilitating a tangible link with the programme intervention logic through increased focus on output and result indicators.

The above-mentioned list of indicators was devised to ensure a balanced combination of qualitative and quantitative elements, which can assess both the tangible and non-tangible effects.

The new set of indicators, primarily those for impacts and results, was based on the cause-effect principle of adopting a bottom up approach (outputs, results and impacts). The whole set of indicators was tested by the evaluator through the use of the S.M.A.R.T. methodology to ensure indicators were logically connected with the programme's intervention logic. The new set of indicators was, therefore, structured taking into consideration the Logical Framework Approach, namely the causal relation between objective levels (Global, Specific, Operational) and indicators (Impact, Result and Output). Such an approach enables the detection of the "grey area" existing between results and outputs

As a consequence of the new battery of indicators selected the evaluator applied qualitative techniques, such as needs assessments, customer satisfaction surveys and social network analysis and directly involved stakeholders in the analysis and collection of data. Stakeholders, for example, were involved on a yearly basis in the NRNP "customer satisfaction analysis", which was conducted via qualitative web-based interviews to collect data regarding the result's achievements (% of actors supported by the NRNP, % of output used by the stakeholders, and satisfaction of communication activities, etc.). Social network analysis played an integral part and allowed for the streamlining of the monitoring systems, enabling increased stakeholder involvement, and ultimately bringing about better design for the performance of future programming periods by showing which products were most successful.

The evaluation attempted to figure out to what extent, and how the actions of the NRNP had affected the RDPs (e.g. contribution to the RDPs improvement in terms of common standardization, good practices disseminated and adopted, higher level of management, and monitoring and evaluation of the RDPs, etc.).

MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION:

The evaluation of the Italian NRNP 2007-2013 faced challenges concerning, indicators, which methods to use and data sources. These challenges were overcome through the utilization of the following approaches:

Data sources: Due to a lack of a systematic NRNP information monitoring system in Italy, the evaluator was required to make additional efforts to collect more information by involving stakeholders and the use of qualitative methods such as customer satisfaction analyses.

Indicators: The challenge concerning indicators was rectified, by establishing a working group involving both stakeholders and the MA to revise the indicators to better connect them to the intervention logic.

Methods: Although qualitative methods were used primarily, a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to overcome the challenging goal of assessing both the NRNP's objectives and results. This was achieved through the use of triangulation of various methods including case studies, an experimental approach, and social network analysis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE EVALUATIONS:

When assessing a network it is important to:

- Develop a suitable set of indicators to gauge the network. In the case of the Italian NRNP, a set of output, result and impact indicators were developed to connect the whole intervention logic and valid for each NRNP level. When evaluating network programmes, as in this case, it is important to clearly define how to measure and assess the net effect(s).
- Use innovative tools such as social network analysis, as carried out in Italy, to capture the capacity in which the NRNP facilitates the creation of sustainable networks (e.g. young farmers nertworks, school networks, etc.). For this purpose, it is also essential to involve key actors early in the assessment.
- Try to apply the correct mix of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, essential for answering the evaluation questions. In the case of Italy, an experimental approach and case studies were used, as well as needs assessments, customer satisfaction surveys, and social network analysis to achieve more accurate results. A single approach or method is not usually sufficient to capture the complexity of network programmes.

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4.5 Glossary

Common indicator

An indicator is a quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development actor. In the context of the rural development policy, the set of common indicators, binding for all Member States, serves to measure achievements and changes at both RDP and European level.

Common Monitoring and Evaluation System

A system for collecting information at regular intervals to facilitate the reporting, analysis and evaluation of programme performance with evaluation methods. The system covers all monitoring and evaluation activities, including the governance of the system itself. The monitoring and evaluation system is coordinated by the Managing Authority and is the basis for communicating evaluation findings internally and externally. In the Rural Development Regulations, the term specifically describes a common system, developed by the Commission and Member States, which aims to demonstrate progress and achievements, assess the impact, effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of rural development policy interventions. It contains a limited number of common indicators relating to the context, outputs, results, and impacts of the programmes.

Consistency

The harmony, compatibility, correspondence or uniformity among the parts of a complex thing. In European legal texts and working documents it is often used equivalently to coherence. There are two kind of consistencies: vertical and horizontal. Vertical consistency refers to the correspondence between different objectives of the same intervention. Horizontal consistency refers to correspondence between the expected outcomes at each level (output, results, impacts) and the objectives set up at the respective levels (operational, specific, overall objectives).

Context indicator

It provides information on relevant aspects of the external environment that are likely to have an influence on the design and performance of the policy, e.g. GDP per capita, rate of unemployment, water quality.

Counterfactual situation

A situation which would have occurred in the absence of a public intervention, also referred to as "policy-off" situation. By comparing the counterfactual and real situations, it is possible to determine the net effects of the public intervention. Various tools can be used for the construction of the counterfactual situation: shift-share analysis, comparison groups, simulation using econometric models, etc. At the baseline, the real situation and the counterfactual situation are identical. If the intervention is effective, they diverge.

Effectiveness

This is the extent to which objectives pursued by an intervention are achieved. An effectiveness indicator is calculated by relating an output, result or impact indicator to a quantified objective.

Efficiency

Best relationship between resources employed and results achieved in pursuing a given objective through an intervention. Efficiency addresses the question whether the more effects could have been obtained with the same budget or whether the same effects could have been obtained at a lower cost. An indicator of efficiency is calculated by dividing the budgetary inputs mobilised by the quantity of effects obtained.

Evaluation plan

It sets out the evaluation activities including the institutional arrangements (evaluation governance) and management provisions (evaluation management) for a whole programme implementation period. For the programming period 2014-2020, Managing Authorities of programmes under the five funds covered by the Common Strategic Framework shall draw up an Evaluation Plan. For rural development the Evaluation Plan will be included in each RDP and must conform to the minimum requirements established in the implementing act.

Evaluation question

A question that needs to be answered by evaluators. These are usually posed by those commissioning an evaluation. Evaluation questions normally feature in the terms of reference of evaluation projects. In the case of the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes, evaluation questions form part of the common guidelines. Evaluation questions have three dimensions: descriptive (what happened?), causal (to what extent is what has happened really an effect of the intervention?) and normative (is the effect satisfactory?).

Evaluation topic

Specific subject that a particular evaluation is focused on. For example, rural development priorities and focus areas, or cross-cutting issues.

Ex-ante evaluation

Evaluation which is performed before programme implementation. Its purpose is to gather information and to carry out analyses which helps to ensure that an intervention is as relevant and coherent as possible. Its conclusions are meant to be integrated at the time decisions are made. Ex ante evaluation mainly concerns an analysis of context, though it will also provide an opportunity for specifying the intervention mechanisms in terms of what already exists. It provides the relevant authorities with a prior assessment of whether development issues have been diagnosed correctly, whether the strategy and objectives proposed are relevant, whether there is incoherence between them or in relation to Community policies and guidelines, whether the expected impacts are realistic, etc. Moreover, it provides the necessary basis for monitoring and future evaluations by ensuring that there are explicit and, where possible, quantified objectives. In fulfilling these functions, ex ante evaluation supports the preparation of proposals for new or renewed community actions. Its purpose is to ensure that the policy objectives will be delivered successfully, that the measures used are cost-effective, and that the ground is prepared for reliable mid-term and ex post evaluations.

Ex post evaluation

Evaluation which recapitulates and judges an intervention when it is over. It aims at accounting for the use of resources, the achievement of intended and unintended effects. It strives to understand the factors of success or failure of programmes. It also tries to draw conclusions which can be generalised to other interventions. For impacts to have the time to materialise, ex post evaluations need to be performed sometime after implementation.

Focus area

The sub-field of policy at which the intervention is targeted. The six Union priorities for rural development are broken into 18 operational focus areas in order to better structure the attribution of measures and planned interventions.

Hierarchy of objectives

This is a tool that helps to analyse and communicate programme objectives and shows how interventions contribute to global, intermediate and operational objectives. It organises these objectives into different levels (objectives, sub-objectives) in the form of a hierarchy or tree, thus showing the logical links between the objectives and their sub-objectives. It presents in a synthetic manner the various intervention logics derived from the regulation, that link individual actions and measures to the overall goals of the intervention. The rural development regulation contains also horizontal objectives that cut across all programme measures.

Impacts

Effects of an intervention lasting in medium or long term. Some impacts appear indirectly, (e.g. turnover generated for the suppliers of assisted firms). Others can be observed at the macroeconomic or macro-social level (e.g. improvement of the image of the assisted area); these are overall impacts. Impacts may be positive or negative, expected or unexpected.

Intervention logic

It represents a methodological instrument which establishes the logical link between programme objectives and the envisaged operational actions. It shows the conceptual link from an intervention's input to its output and, subsequently, to its results and impacts. Thus an intervention logic allows an assessment of a measure's contribution to achieving its objectives.

Judgement criterion

Also known as evaluation criterion, this specifies an aspect of the evaluated intervention that will allow its merits or success to be assessed. Judgement criteria are closely connected to evaluation questions; the criterion is used to answer an evaluation question. One or more judgement criteria are derived from each question.

National rural networks

Networks established by Member States to group organisations and administrations involved in rural development in order to:

a. increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
b. improve the quality of Rural Development Programmes;
c. inform the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy;
d. foster innovation in agriculture.

NRN Action Plan

A plan of NRN covering at least activities regarding:

a. the collection of examples of projects covering all priorities of the rural development programmes;
b. the facilitation of thematic and analytical exchanges between rural development stakeholders, sharing and dissemination of findings;
c. the provision of training and networking for local action groups and in particular technical assistance for inter-territorial and transnational co-operation;
d. the provision of networking for advisors and innovation support services;
e. the sharing and dissemination of monitoring and evaluation findings;
f. publicity and information concerning the rural development;
g. the participation in and contribution to the European network for rural development.

NRNPs

In Member States with regional programmes, a NRNP refers to specific programme for the establishment and the operation of their national rural network.

Objective

Clear, explicit and initial statement on the effects to be achieved by a public intervention. A quantitative objective is stated in the form of indicators and a qualitative objective in the form of descriptors, e.g.: 30% of all outputs must be accomplished by the end of the third year; the public intervention must first benefit the long-term unemployed. Specific objectives concern the results and impacts of an intervention on direct beneficiaries. A global objective corresponds to the aim of the intervention. The aim of an intervention is to produce an impact expressed in global terms, e.g. reducing regional disparities in development levels. Objectives may also be intermediate. Objectives which specify outputs to be produced are called operational objectives. If the objectives of a public intervention have not been clearly defined beforehand, the evaluation can try to clarify them afterwards. In that case, it is preferable to refer to implicit objectives. Objectives may incorporate targets.

Output

Action which is financed and accomplished (or concretised) with the money allocated to an intervention. A project promoter undertakes to produce an output in immediate exchange for the support granted. Outputs may take the form of facilities or works (e.g. building of a road, farm investment; tourist accommodation). They may also take the form of immaterial services (e.g. training, consultancy, information).

Programme

Organised set of financial, organisational and human interventions mobilised to achieve an objective or set of objectives in a given period. A programme is delimited in terms of a timescale and budget. Programme objectives are defined beforehand; an effort is then made systematically to strive for coherence among these objectives.

Programme-specific evaluation questions

Programme-specific evaluation questions are formulated for the purpose of the evaluation of a specific programme, in view of providing a deeper insight into the overall implementation of that programme or to reflect specific objectives of that programme. Contrary to them, "common" evaluation questions apply to all the programmes.

Programme-specific indicators

An indicator is a quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development actor. The set of common indicators, binding for all Member States, serves to measure achievements and changes at programme and European level. Since common indicators may not fully reflect all effects of programme activities, the Managing Authorities in the Member States are asked to complement the common indicator set by defining additional indicators to capture the full range of intended effects of a given programme, in particular for national priorities and site-specific measures. These additional indicators are called programme-specific indicators.

Relevance

The extent to which an intervention's objectives are pertinent to needs, problems and issues. Questions of relevance are particularly important in ex ante evaluation because the focus is on the strategy chosen or its justification. Within the framework of mid-term evaluation, it is advisable to check whether the socio-economic context has evolved as expected and whether this evolution calls into question the relevance of a particular initial objective.

Reliability

Quality of the collection of evaluation data when the protocol used makes it possible to produce similar information during repeated observations in identical conditions. Reliability depends on compliance with the rules of sampling and tools used for the collection and recording of quantitative and qualitative information.

Result

Advantage (or disadvantage) which direct beneficiaries obtain at the end of their participation in a public intervention or as soon as a public facility has been completed. Results can be observed when an operator completes an action and accounts for the way in which allocated funds were spent and managed. At this point s/he may show, for example, that accessibility has been improved due to the construction of a road, or that the firms which have received advice claim to be satisfied. The operators may regularly monitor results. They have to adapt the implementation of the intervention according to the results obtained.

Rigour

In the context of this study a "rigorous" method is understood as a method introduced, applied and further developed in referred scientific journals. A more rigorous method is more widely applied and accepted in the scientific community or community of evaluators and it will be described in methodological textbooks. Methods that can be used to quantify causal effects are considered to be more robust than other methods.

Robustness

The term robustness is defined in different ways in the evaluation literature. In econometrics robustness is used in various contexts (e.g. biased and unbiased estimators, model and variable selection) and has therefore context-specific meanings. In the context of this study, robustness is considered to be high if results are stable and resilient to small but deliberate changes (e.g. an additional year of observations, an additional explanatory variable, another stakeholder, another evaluator). In some methods, the robustness can be checked by sensitivity analyses.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is an ongoing reflective process that is designed and conducted by those who implement an intervention or are part of it (e.g. programme managers, beneficiaries, network members). It generates an inside view on the activities and focuses on the overall performance. Involved actors analyse the way in which they do things and ask themselves how they contribute to the achievement of the agreed objectives and goals. The participatory nature of self-assessment induces learning effects among all those who are part of it.

Terms of Reference

The ToR specifies the conditions under which the tasks related to the evaluation/SEA will be conducted, sets up roles and responsibilities, and informs potential evaluators/SEA experts what is expected in respect to content, process and timing. If they are clearly outlined in the ToR, the applicants´ responses to the proposed terms may provide a key indication as to their suitability for the task.

Theory of change

"Theory of change" which is frequently applied in theory-based evaluations can be described as a way describing the set of assumptions explaining both the mini-steps leading to the long-term goal and the connections between policy or programme activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way. Theory-based approach is an approach in which attention is paid to theories of policy makers, programme managers or other stakeholders, i.e., collections of assumptions, and hypotheses - empirically testable - that are logically linked together. It premises that programmes are based on explicit or implicit theory about how and why a programme will work. The main characteristic of theory-based evaluation is that it provides an explicit causal chain (or 'theory of change') linking the intervention with specific effects; and then it uses this causal chain to guide the collection of evidence and the analysis of causal contribution by developing hypotheses that can be tested through critical comparisons.

Transparency

Transparency of an evaluation methodology requires that users know exactly its main elements, structure, parameters, rules and functional responses. A user can therefore monitor that they are followed. A valid estimate of the counterfactual should be based on clear and transparent assignment rules.

Validity

It can refer to internal, external, and convergent validity. "Internal Validity": Results of non-empirical methods are valid if they are logically sound. Results of empirical methods are valid if they are logically sound and factually sound. Logical soundness can be verified and high transparency makes this easier. Factual soundness is verified if the result is identical to the true parameter which mostly cannot be observed (see counterfactual). "External validity" is a quality measure of empirical research. In our context "external validity" means whether the results obtained from a case study will be more or less the same if a similar programme is in place in another context as well. "Convergent validity" is given if different methods employed to answer the same research question yield similar results.

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