



GUIDELINES EVALUATION OF NATIONAL RURAL NETWORKS 2014-2020

Draft November 2015

Disclaimer: This draft version contains **Part I** (for Managing Authorities) and serves as background document for the 8th Meeting of the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (12/11/2015) where both Part I and the outline for Part II will be discussed. **Part II** (for evaluators) will be sent in a separate document to the members of the sounding board for its meeting in December 2015.

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Recommended citation:

EUROPEAN COMMISSION – Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development – Unit E.4 (2015): [Draft Version, not yet to be quoted.] Brussels.

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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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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Guidelines for the evaluation of national rural networks

National rural networks (NRNs), which group administrations and organisations active in rural development, were introduced in the EU rural development policy of 2007-2013 for the first time. The NRNs could either operate as specific interventions within a single Rural Development Programme (RDP), financed from Technical Assistance or be established as stand-alone programme with an independent budget¹ (national rural network programme – NRNP)².

The rural development stakeholders had overall very positive experiences with NRNs. Therefore, it was agreed to have NRNs in each Member State also in the programming period 2014-2020. As in the previous programming period, the NRNs are subject to monitoring and evaluation to improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of their operations and assess NRN impacts³. In addition, the assessment of NRNs should also take a look at the added value generated through broader rural networking, creation of social capital and improved governance in rural areas.

The evaluation plan of the RDP⁴ should contain the planned evaluation activities related to NRNs.

Why do we need guidelines for the evaluation of NRNs?

The NRNs were the subject of evaluation (ex ante evaluation, ongoing and mid-term evaluation, ex-post evaluation) already in the 2007-2013 programming period. In the mid-term evaluation, most NRN evaluators have used only output indicators (e.g. number of events organized and number of good practices identified/disseminated) to assess the NRN achievements. Some evaluations have also focused on the contribution of the NRN to the RDP objectives (effectiveness) and to a certain extent, the assessment of added value of the NRN activities. Only in the evaluations of NRNP of Italy and Spain, evaluators have also assessed the results of the network. The NRN self-assessment was conducted by several NRNs' "pioneers", accompanied by many challenges, mainly due to the late establishment of many networks and the limited self-assessment capacity.

Experiences collected in MS during the previous programming period have shown that the evaluation of NRN is faced with methodological challenges due to the specific character of NRN interventions. These challenges are mainly linked to the set-up of a coherent intervention logic, the definition of appropriate programme specific indicators (especially at result and impact level), conceptual challenges in assessing rural network's results/impacts and to capture NRN's effects on broad networking, as well as the generation of NRN's added value.

The legal framework and the common monitoring and evaluation system for rural development (CMES) of 2014-2020 provide guidance on common elements, which should be applied in the construction of the NRN intervention logic and the NRN monitoring and evaluation system. The common elements are the common NRN objectives, the common groups of activities, the common evaluation question⁵ and three common output indicators⁶.

However, these common elements only represent the basis for NRN evaluation. Member States, in collaboration with NRN evaluation stakeholders, are further expected to complete the NRN intervention

¹ In case of Member States with regional RDPs

² Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54

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

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 Act (EU) No 808/2014, Art. 12

logic with programme-specific objectives and groups of activities. Furthermore, they should think of NRN expected results and impacts, set up programme-specific evaluation questions for the NRNs and develop the respective result and impact indicators to measure NRN achievements.

Since NRN evaluation stakeholders need support in conducting the above tasks, the Evaluation Helpdesk established a thematic working group to complement the existing evaluation guidelines⁷ for the 2014-2020 programming period with this self-standing guidelines document on NRN evaluation.

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

Who is the target group for 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 that will help them 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 clarifies the role and development of evaluation questions and indicators, and proposes evaluation methods and approaches for collecting evidence to conduct the assessment of the networks' effects.
- Actors involved in operating the national rural network, such as National Support Units (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 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 to use the guidelines for NRN evaluation?

This guidelines on the evaluation of NRNs have been structured in three parts which are connected through cross-links provided in the text. Although each part elaborates in depth the various aspects of the evaluation of NRNs, there is still necessarily a certain amount of repetitions, particularly in relation to the legal requirements.

PART I:

This covers

Chapter 1 provides.....

Chapter 2 deals with.....

PART II:

This part contains information on structuring, observing, analysing and judging in the evaluation of NRN and particular steps which should be covered during the evaluation process.

⁷ "Guidelines for the Ex ante evaluation of 2014-2020 RDPs" and "Guidelines: Establishing and implementing the evaluation plan of 2014-2020 RDPs"

Chapter 4 deals with....

Chapter 5 explains

Chapter 6 summarises

Chapter 7 provides.....

PART III Toolbox

This part contains practical tools such as common output indicator fiches, examples of evaluation methods for the evaluation of NRNs and a template that outlines topics for data collection through a questionnaire which can be used in the evaluation of NRNs.

How and by whom have these guidelines been developed?

The guidelines for NRN evaluation have been drafted by a team of evaluation experts of the European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development (Sari Rannanpää, Marili Parissaki, Robert Lukesch, Jela Tvrdonova). Representatives of DG Agriculture and Rural Development have ensured the coherence of the guidelines with the EU policy framework. Member States have also participated in the development of the guidelines, when commenting on it as members of the Sounding Board⁸ (meeting in December 2015) or discussing the guidelines during the meetings of the Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating of the CAP 2014-2020.

1.2 Networks and networking in EU rural development policy

Networks and networking have always represented useful and effective tool in order to improve the wellbeing in rural areas. Consisting itself of social capital, networks have helped to generate and multiply other social capital, such as the sense for sharing, developing common capacities, knowledge and skills, producing and exchanging good and services, fostering innovation, enhancing the trust among network's members, thus contributing to the wealth of the network's community.

The European Union has recognised the power of networking in rural areas. In 2007, networks and networking among rural development stakeholders was introduced as an instrument to implement the 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 of networking in 2014 - 2020, involving more stakeholders at MS and EU level, and implementing more activities at national and EU level. Furthermore, networking also became an instrument for fostering innovation in the application of all EU policies.

Definition of network

To use networks as an instrument of rural policy implementation and to see if it accomplishes its purpose and objectives is vital in order to understand what a network is. 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 exists among the actors (linkages)⁹.

Types of networks

A network can be informal or formal¹⁰:

⁸ Sounding Board of the Thematic working group on NRN guidelines was composed of representatives of the DG Agri, Expert Group on Monitoring and Evaluating of the CAP 2014-2020 and EU Rural Networks Steering Group.

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)

- Informal networks tend to be bottom-up, created by individuals, and based on a 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. farmers' group with the goal of improved market access);
- Formal networks have usually an explicitly defined purpose, resources and rules of operations. Formal networks can either be top-down structures defined and/or imposed by an authority (e.g. as policy networks¹¹), or can be developed in a bottom-up fashion and formalised by registration and formal recognition by a relevant authority (e.g. by ministries, state agencies, etc.).

In this respect, EU rural networks are the combination of both – formal and informal networks.

On one side, rural networks are formally established by authorities and operate within a rural context in order to contribute to the development of rural areas in line with EU rural policy objectives. The legal framework¹² defines the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) as the “network 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 agriculture and rural development – “EIP-AGRI Network” is a new network¹⁴, introduced in the programming period 2014-2020 to support networking among “operational groups, advisory services and researches” to foster innovation in the practical implementation of rural policy.

On the other side, the EU rural networks often connect many different informal networks, such as voluntary farmers organisations, associations of LAGs, rural NGOs, business clusters etc. These informal networks link the beneficiaries to the practical implementation of rural policy and provide the possibility for continuing information exchange between EU policy, RDP and local level. Informal networks as EU rural networks' members also facilitate the mobilization and further development of existing potential to achieve NRN and RD objectives.

Apart from informal network members, EU rural networks also have informal characteristics, especially concerning governance and interactions in rural areas among its various stakeholders. These informal features of rural networks should also be captured when analysing the context where they perform.

Structure of the network

Networking among members depends on the connections or linkages between the actors in the network. A distinction between networks is commonly done on the basis of their structure, into centralized and decentralized networks¹⁵. The centralized network has usually a central point, which communicates to each member separately. Decentralized networks, on the other hand, are marked by connections between most of the actors.

The EU rural networks are usually built around support units and therefore have a centralised structure, while at the same encouraging also mutual, often decentralised communication among members (e.g. transfer of good practice).

At EU level for the ENRD there are currently two support units, which have different functions:

- The ENRD Contact Point supports the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Commission in running the ENRD and provides a focal point for ENRD activities, including supporting the networking and cooperation among rural development

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

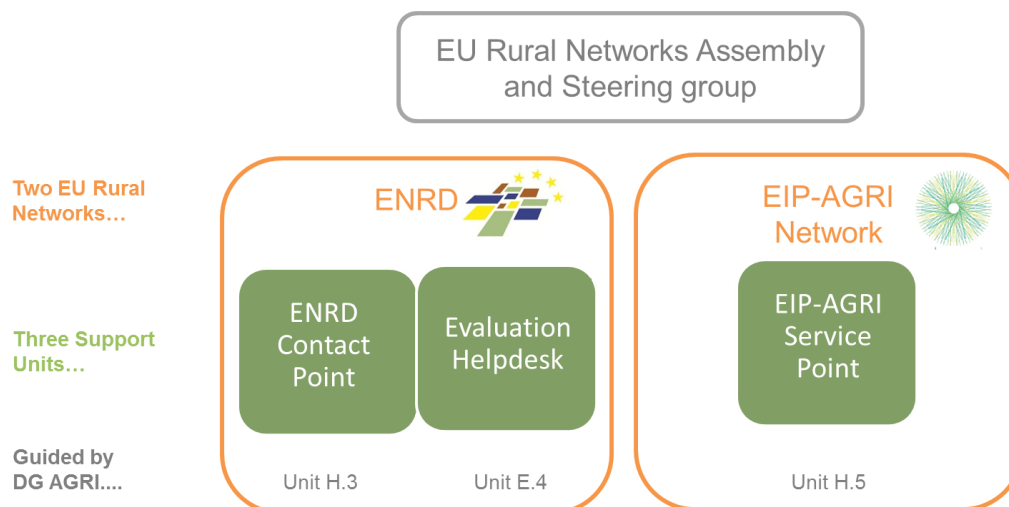
stakeholders at EU/national level, ensuring the communication with and among them and national level, it undertakes thematic analysis and organises various networking events.

- The ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk is responsible for supporting DG AGRI, Member States and other evaluation stakeholders in meeting the objectives of the Common monitoring and evaluation system for rural development, and in facilitating networking between them.

The Service point is the support unit for EIP-AGRI Agriculture & Innovation. The EIP-AGRI Service Point acts as a mediator within the EIP-AGRI network, enhancing communication and cooperation between everyone with a keen interest in innovating agriculture: farmers, researchers, advisers, businesses, environmental groups, consumer interest groups and other NGOs.

The structure of EU level rural networks can be illustrated with the figure below.

Figure 1. Governance structure of EU Rural Networks



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

For NRNs, the central node is a national support unit (NSU), which ensures the involvement of all relevant rural development stakeholders within the Member States. It also communicates with network members, facilitates the thematic and analytical exchange between stakeholders, and shares and disseminates information. Furthermore, the NSU prepares and conducts the training for LAGs, supports cooperation projects, encourages networking among advisors and innovation support services, it enables sharing and disseminating RDP related monitoring and evaluation findings, and participates in or contributes to the ENRD activities¹⁶.

In real life, the EU rural networks show different degrees of centrality/de-centrality, generating various horizontal linkages among members through the activities as laid down in the legal framework. For example, to encourage thematic and analytical exchanges, it is useful to invite experts in a given topic and encourage networking among them. The same is envisioned for advisors and research/academia.

Networks and networking

When looking at EU rural networks, it is important to acknowledge the networking process as being an essential element of the network, going beyond the legal requirements. Networking, understood in a broader sense, encourages "...sharing, exchange or flow of ideas, information, knowledge, practice, experience (and sometimes resources) among actors and around a common interest, or opportunity, to create value"¹⁷. Networking is essential to enhance the effectiveness of the network through activating and utilising the linkages and relationships of the actors. Networking builds, mobilises and enhances

¹⁶ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2014, Art. 54.3

¹⁷ ENRD – What do we know about networking as a rural development policy tool (2007-2013)?, Version 2, June 2012

human and social capital in rural areas through learning processes and exchange of information. Thus, enhancing the networking processes and outcomes is fundamental for unlocking the full potential of rural networks.

Although these guidelines are focusing on the evaluation of national rural networks, many of the principles and procedures described could be applied in the assessment of any EU rural network.

1.3 Why to evaluate the NRNs?

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 period¹⁸.

The legal acts¹⁹ spell out specific policy objectives for the NRNs. The goal of the NRN is to:

- 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 policy and funding opportunities,
- d) foster innovation in agriculture, food processing, forestry and rural areas and thus contribute to the implementation of the European Union's rural policy.

It is important to monitor and evaluate the achievement of these objectives. First, the evaluation results can be used to improve the design, quality and implementation of the networks' activities in supporting rural policy and overall networking in rural areas. Second, the achievements of NRN's objectives as well as the NRN results, impacts and added value²⁰ are important means to justify and legitimise funds spent by the rural networks at European, national and regional levels, especially in times when resources are tight and very limited. Evaluation of NRN also permits showing the stakeholders and taxpayers how money was spent, what has been achieved and at what cost. This way, the transparency and accountability of NRN's interventions are enhanced.

Forms of NRN evaluation

NRNs can be treated as evaluation subject in several ways. Most commonly, in the Member States where the NRN is not a separate programme, the NRN is evaluated as part of the RDP. The NRN can also be evaluated through a stand-alone evaluation. Member States with a separate NRNP are obliged to do this. The aforementioned evaluations are typically conducted by external evaluators. The NRNs can also conduct a self-assessment of results, impacts and added value of their activities, as well as of the achievements of network objectives.

NRN evaluation as part of RDP evaluation

Those NRNs that are part of RDPs have to be included in the programme evaluation as evaluation topic. This implies that NRN-related evaluation activities are described in the Evaluation plan and included in the evaluation scope, ToR, and analysis. Furthermore, the NRN-related- common evaluation questions must be answered, and the common indicators for NRN must be used²¹.

When the NRN is evaluated as part of the RDP, typically only a general overview of the NRN operations, achievements and results can be gained and reported in evaluation reports. However, this kind of evaluation is very useful in exploring how the NRN performs in relation to and together with the other

¹⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 68

¹⁹ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54(2)

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Annex IV and V, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

RDP mechanisms. It can also stimulate the development of further, more specific, evaluation questions to be examined through a stand-alone NRN evaluation or self-assessment.

Stand-alone NRN or NRNP evaluation

As the NRNPs are separate programmes, they must be evaluated as any other ESIF programme²². It is also beneficial for Member States with NRNs integrated in the RDP to conduct a stand-alone evaluation of the NRN as it gives deeper insights into the NRN achievements, results, impacts, added value, efficiency, and effectiveness. 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 subjects of a stand-alone NRN evaluation can be:

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

Conducting a stand-alone evaluation of the NRN requires a full evaluation planning and implementation process, including the review of the NRN intervention logic, as well as the development of programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators.

NRN self-assessment

Self-assessment is an ongoing process conducted by the NRN itself, about its own actions and performance. Self-assessment of NRNs helps network actors to reflect on the extent to which activities contribute to the network objectives. Whereas external evaluation provides an independent view with a similar intention. There are some similarities but also differences between self-assessment and external evaluation of NRNs. Yet, the self-assessment can and should be interlinked with the evaluation and its findings (e.g. collected evidence, self-assessment results) should feed into evaluation activities and should be used as an information basis when assessing NRN efficiency, effectiveness, results and impacts. Moreover, well-established linkages and complementarities between NRN self-assessment and NRN evaluation can help to decrease costs for both exercises. When linking self-assessment and evaluation of NRNs, an effective communication and collaboration among all parties involved plays a crucial role. This requires the collaboration between the NSU/NRN, the Managing Authority of the programme and the evaluator e.g. on the methodological approaches to be used in both exercises.

Self-assessment and evaluation exercises for NRNs are compared in Table 1.

²² Regulation (EU) No 1303/2014, Art. 54

Table 1. Comparison between self-assessment and evaluation of NRN

Aspect	Self-assessment	Evaluation
Responsibility	Rural network	Managing Authority
Execution	Rural network (possibly with the help of experts and advisors)	Independent evaluator
Mission	To facilitate effective steering and management of the rural network	To support the effective implementation of the interventions which contribute to rural policy objectives, and facilitate the effective steering of the network
Purpose	To assess the added value of the network for its members on rural areas and beneficiaries, looking beyond immediate outputs and assess the action plan	To evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the interventions and resource utilisation and, if relevant, to identify the needs to be addressed in line with rural policy objectives and the added value of the NRN for the programme and rural area
Subject	Action plan and its implementation	Intervention logic of the network and its accomplishments
Usability of the outcomes	Improvement of the action plan and its implementation	Improvement of the intervention logic, which should better target identified needs and rural policy objectives

Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

Self-assessment of NRNs should be an ongoing practice with the aim to improve the implementation of network activities and at the same time boost the added value of the NRN to the RDPs and rural areas. Self-assessment should be an effective self-learning tool for NRNs. It is therefore paramount for a NRN to integrate self-assessment and self-reflection into its action plan, annual work cycle and capacity development. The results from a systematic self-assessment should also be an important input for the NRN evaluation during the programming period, as well as improvement of NRN operations.

The planning of self-assessment should be started at an early stage. It is recommended to choose and adapt a methodology that has been specifically developed and tested for networks rather than relying on methodologies for sector interventions or organisational development²³.

Self-assessment should be organised as a continuous cycle of events, periodically involving different actors at different times, using various (mainly qualitative) methods such as:

- stakeholder meetings;
- civic groups and occasional citizens' panels;
- focus groups (fast cycle: ranging between several weeks and months);
- large-scale open space or future search conferences (medium cycle: between several months and years);
- feedback from organised trainings and events;
- needs assessments via surveys (slow cycle: several years), etc.

The role of high quality facilitation, visualisation and animation is crucial in this continuous cycle. Furthermore, sufficient resources and time must be allocated to self-assessment, and its results must feed into the NRN action plan and operations.

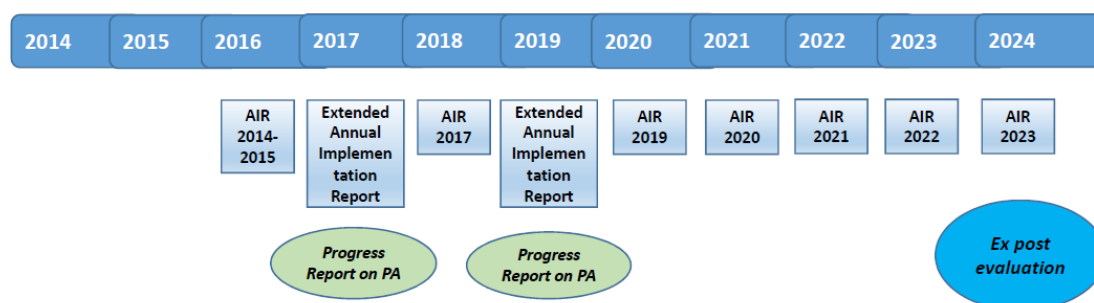
²³ NRN Self-assessment toolkit, ENRD.

1.4 Requirements of NRN evaluation in the EU Rural Development Policy

1.4.1 Legal requirements and the timeline

The EU regulation requires the NRN to be evaluated and the evaluations to be reported throughout the programming period. The reporting timeline is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. NRN evaluation reporting timeline



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

Annual Implementation Reports

Each Annual Implementation Report must contain information on the progress in implementing the evaluation plan²⁴, including evaluation activities undertaken, list and summary of completed evaluations, as well as communication and follow-up activities related to evaluation findings and results. For those NRNs established as part of RDPs, the reporting depends on the evaluation activities in the given year, but for NRNPs all the elements must be reported each year.

Annual Implementation Reports submitted in 2017 and 2019

The AIRs submitted by 30 June in 2017 and 2019 must contain reporting and quantification of programme achievements²⁵. The reports must assess the progress made towards achieving the objectives of the programme²⁶. In relation to NRN established as part of RDP, this means that the CEQ must be answered²⁷, utilising the common output indicators. Furthermore, the information on programme-specific elements: objectives, activities, evaluation questions and indicators (mainly result and impact indicators) should be provided in the reports.

Progress Report on Implementation of the Partnership Agreement

The Progress Reports submitted by 31 August in 2017 and 2019²⁸ can contain elements related to the NRN evaluations, especially with reference to 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.

Ex post evaluation

For the ex post evaluation to be submitted by 31 December 2024²⁹, the CEQ must be answered³⁰, utilising the common output indicators. Furthermore, the information on the assessment of programme

²⁴ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex VII, point 2

²⁵ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex VII, point 7

²⁶ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art. 50

²⁷ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex V, point 7

²⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art. 52

²⁹ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 78

³⁰ Annex V, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

specific indicators (mainly result and impact indicators) and answers to programme specific evaluation questions related to the NRN should be provided in the reports.

1.4.2 Scope of NRN evaluation

Policy objectives linked to national rural networks

The evaluation of NRNs starts with the consideration of policy objectives developed at EU, national and regional level. The following policy objectives in relation to NRNs set up at EU level by the legal acts³¹ are:

- 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.

At national and regional level, the EU policy objectives set up for NRNs should be translated into the RDPs or into a single NRN programme (NRNP), taking in consideration the specificities of the respective countries or regions. In addition, NRN authorities might develop additional programme-specific objectives for the NRN addressing specific needs of the programme territory with respect to networking.

Focus of NRN evaluation

The evaluation of NRNs should focus on:

- Relevance of rural network interventions in relation to needs in the programming area, which can be addressed through NRN,
- Results in terms of network achievements within the group of network beneficiaries,
- Impacts in terms of network contributions to the change observed in the programming area,
- Effectiveness of network activities in relation to the achievement of NRN and RD policy objectives,
- Efficiency in terms of receiving best value for money,
- Factors of success and failure of the NRNs.

The paragraphs below describe in more detail each of the above aspects of the focus of evaluation.

Relevance

In the assessment of the relevance of the NRN interventions, the evaluation looks at the extent to which the NRN activities respond to specific networking needs and concerns in rural areas as identified in the SWOT analysis and needs assessment. While assessing the relevance, the evaluation should take into consideration the composition of the NRN intervention logic: objectives, activities, expected outputs, results and impacts, as well as allocated funds. The assessment of relevance also examines whether the objectives and the design of the NRN interventions are still appropriate at the time of evaluation, given that circumstances may have changed since the programme started or its objectives were revised.

In evaluating the relevance of NRN interventions, it is useful to consider the following questions:

- To what extent have the NRN objectives, activities and funds addressed the specific needs of the programming area in relation to NRNs?
- To what extent are the activities, outputs, results and impacts of the NRN consistent with the NRN objectives?

³¹ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54.2

- To what extent is the budget allocated for NRN consistent with the intended NRN effects?

Results

The evaluation of NRN results should assess the contribution of the NRN in addressing the needs of the group of direct beneficiaries and in achieving NRN objectives. Evaluating network results is very important as a first step for the assessment of NRN impacts.

While evaluating the NRN results it is useful to consider the following questions:

- How and to what extent did the NRN results affect the group of direct beneficiaries?
- To what extent have the achieved results reflected NRN objectives?

Impacts

In the assessment of impacts, the evaluation examines the extent to which the change observed in the programming area in relation to policy objectives can be attributed to NRN interventions. It also looks at the extent to which the NRN activities have contributed to Community priorities for rural development and EU, national and regional objectives compared to other rural development interventions and various influential factors.

While evaluating the NRN impacts it is useful to consider the following questions:

- To what extent can the change in the programme area be attributed to the NRN activities?
- What are the direct and indirect effects of the NRN?
- What are the influential factors?

Effectiveness

The assessment of the NRN effectiveness looks at the extent to which the network attains the NRN policy objectives at EU, national and regional level.

While evaluating the effectiveness of the NRN and its achievements towards the EU, national and regional policy objectives it is useful to consider the following questions:

- To what extent were the NRN (common and programme-specific) objectives³² achieved?
- To what extent has the NRN contributed to the EU rural development priorities for 2014-2020³³?

Efficiency

Efficiency examines whether the public and private funds have been allocated and spent in a meaningful manner. In this respect, the assessment also analyses the relationship between the allocated resources and the achieved NRN outputs, leading to results and impacts, or in another words, whether the money spent has generated the expected value.

While evaluating the efficiency of NRN interventions, it is useful to consider the following questions:

- To what extent were the allocated resources able to produce the expected NRN outputs, which could lead to the expected results and impacts in a cost effective manner?
- What was the cost for delivering an output unit or activity and how is this cost compared to other interventions?
- To what extent was the delivery of NRN activities cost-effective?
- What are the factors influencing cost-efficiency of the implementation of the NRN interventions?

³² NRN objectives laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 54(2);

³³ Rural development priorities laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 5

Factors of success and failure of NRN

Apart from examining the NRN results, impacts and achievements, the evaluation offers the opportunity to provide important lessons to improve NRN activities and design the future NRNs through the observation of factors which contributed to the success and failure of the network. Thus the evaluation plays an important role in the policy cycle and represents a governance tool for the implementation of policy instruments and funds.

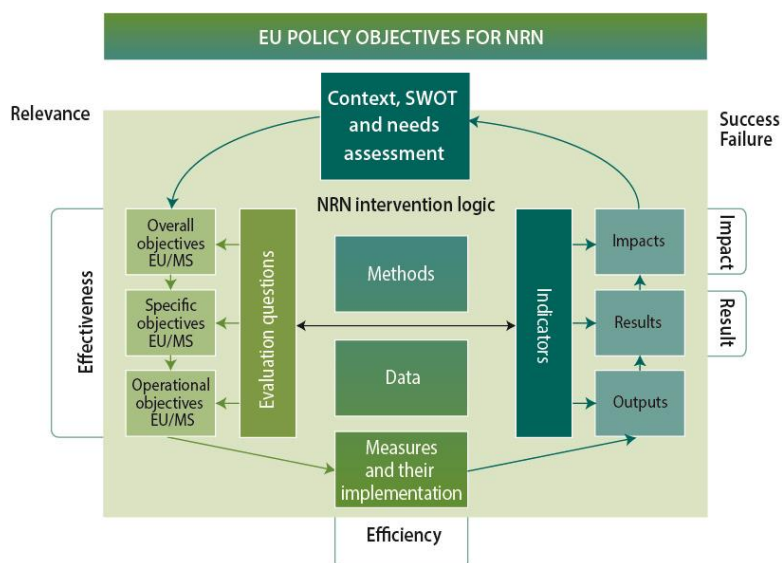
Success and failure factors can be internal or external. They might foster or weaken the effects of NRN activities. Internal factors can be issues connected with the administration and delivery of NRN activities (e.g. functioning of NSU); external factors can be networking culture in rural areas, or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

While evaluating the success and failure factors of the NRN it is useful to consider the following questions:

- What were the major internal/external factors fostering the NRN activities, positively/negatively influencing the achievement of NRN objectives?
- To what extent did internal/external factors linked to NRN foster/weaken the achievements of rural development and wider EU policy objectives?
- To what extent did the internal/external factors affect NRN results/impacts?

The assessment of NRN relevance, results, impacts, effectiveness, efficiency, success and failure factors is built up around common and programme-specific elements of the monitoring and evaluation framework for NRNs. It is composed of the NRN intervention logic, evaluation questions which define the focus of evaluation and indicators as means to measure the NRN effects. The approach for the assessment of NRN activities determines the robustness of the evaluation results and depends on the selection of evaluation methods and the availability of quantitative and qualitative data and information. This situation can be illustrated with Figure 3.

Figure 3. NRN assessment framework



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

1.4.3 CMES elements for evaluation

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 are designed by the European Commission in order to provide minimum and essential information that can be aggregated at EU level and which is comparable among RDPs and in this sense also applicable for NRNs. Programme-specific elements complement the common elements by addressing the specificities of RDPs. Programmes can also contain specific elements in relation to NRNs. The programme-specific elements for NRNs are designed by the NRN MAs in order to capture the aspects of the NRN that are not covered by the common elements.

The common and programme-specific elements for NRNs are:

- Intervention logic illustrating the links between NRN objectives and actions of the NRN action plan and with output, result and impact indicators. Context parameters are used to describe and analyse the specific context in which networks operate.
- Evaluation questions define the focus of 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 interventions³⁴.
- Indicators for NRNs are used as means to assess efficiency, effectiveness, achievements and relevance of the network interventions.

Common elements

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

- The NRN intervention logic, composed of a hierarchy of objectives and action plan/measures (both common and network-specific). The four policy objectives and seven common groups of

³⁴ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art 54 (1); Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 Art 68 (a)

activities for NRNs that are spelled out in the EU regulation³⁵ form the basis of the NRN intervention logic.

- Common evaluation question (CEQ) for NRN³⁶ (see Table 2) included in the CMES linked to policy objectives³⁷. The aim of the CEQ is to focus the evaluation of NRN effects towards policy;
- Three common output indicators for NRNs defined at the EU level³⁸ (see Table 2);

Programme specific elements linked to NRN

The programme specific elements supplement the common elements at RDP/NRNP level. They should be used in the finalisation of NRN intervention logic and design of NRN-related monitoring and evaluation system. In this respect:

- The MA may wish to add further programme specific policy objectives (and thus complement the intervention logic) for NRN at the programme level,
- Programme-specific evaluation questions (PSEQs) for NRNs are formulated by rural development stakeholders at the time of programme/action plan design or also later during the evaluation to capture NRN effects and contributions towards RDP objectives or specific field of interest (e.g. delivery of network etc.). They 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 programme-specific objectives of the NRN.
- In the case of self-standing evaluations of the NRN, the programme-specific evaluation questions are the backbone of the evaluations and hence they must be carefully constructed. As there is only one CEQ for the NRN, it is also useful to define programme-specific evaluation questions for all evaluations covering the NRN. The development of PSEQ should be accompanied by formulation of related judgement criteria.
- 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 or also answer the CEQ, if the common output indicators are not sufficient or suitable.

The NRN monitoring and evaluation framework starts by linking the common elements to construct the NRN intervention logic, which is later complemented with the programme-specific elements of the NRN.

³⁵ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2) and 54(3)

³⁶ WD: Common Evaluation Question 21; Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex V,

³⁷ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2):

³⁸ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014, Annex IV, Output indicators O.24, O.25, and O.26;

Table 2. Common Evaluation Question and Common Output Indicators for NRNs

POLICY OBJECTIVE	EVALUATION QUESTION RELATED OTHER ASPECTS OF RDP ³⁹	JUDGEMENT CRITERIA ⁴⁰	COMMON RD INDICATORS ⁴¹	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ⁴²
<p>Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>To what extent has the NRN contributed to achieving the objectives laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art 54(2)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).

³⁹Common Evaluation Question 21; Annex V, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

⁴⁰Developed by Member States

⁴¹Output indicators O.24, O.25, and O.26; Annex IV, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

⁴²Developed by Member States

2 PART I – MANAGING NRN EVALUATION

2.1 Who is involved and who does what?

There is a multitude of actors interacting within the different kinds of compositions of the NRNs. There is also great variance in the networks, as well as the position of the network support unit (NSU), among the Member States. Hence, instead of giving a strict list naming all the actors who should be involved in the evaluation of the NRN, the text below describes three categories of actors according to their role in the network, namely actors:

- managing the network,
- participating in the network,
- 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 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.

Actors involved in operating the network

*Managing Authority*⁴³

The Managing Authority (MA) bears the responsibility for the preparation, resourcing, management and implementation of the evaluation plan, which includes the provisions for the assessment of the NRN. The Managing Authority is also responsible for the quality, punctuality and communication of NRN evaluation results (as part of RDP or self-standing evaluation) as well as for monitoring the network performance.

The Managing Authority must not be considered as a single entity when referring to the evaluation of the NRN as the situation in MS might differ from each other, e.g. different units might be in charge of different aspects in relation to NRN evaluation. For instance, the evaluation unit, if the ministry responsible for the RDP has one, might manage the evaluation, while Managing Authority is in charge of the NRN implementation. The communication unit, if existing, is important for the dissemination of the evaluation results, a core activity for the NRNs in 2014-2020.

*Network support unit (NSU)*⁴⁴

Some Member States with NRNs have a network support unit within the MA; others have outsourced the NSU functions with various types of contractors (public institutions⁴⁵, private consultancy companies⁴⁶ etc.). The NSU plays a fundamental role in running the network itself. The NSU can also decide to prepare and carry out the NRN self-assessment as a tool to improve the implementation of NRN activities and performance.

As a structure, the NSU is typically running the network and it facilitates the networking process and the engagement of stakeholders. Setting up the NSU neither does establish the network per se nor automatically ensures networking⁴⁷.

⁴³ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 66

⁴⁴ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 66.2

⁴⁵ SK – the NSU is function is included in the national agency for rural development – institution semi-budgeted by the Ministry of Agriculture

⁴⁶ BG – the NSU role plays the private company INTERPRED WTC

⁴⁷ Guidance Fiche For Establishment and Operation of National Rural Networks, developed by the European Commission (DG AGRI) based on the text of Regulation (EU) 1305/2013 [EAFRD] and, when relevant, on Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 [CPR]

In countries where the NRN is regionalised, the NSU is important for running the network at regional level. In other countries the NSU is either delegated to an agency or outsourced. These are important nodes in the network and as such, they could be subject to examination.

Paying Agency⁴⁸

The Paying Agency (PA) is important source of data in 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 Committee⁴⁹

The Monitoring Committee (MC) is responsible for monitoring the RDP performance⁵⁰ as well as the quality and effectiveness of the programme implementation. In particular, the MC must examine the activities and outputs related to the progress in the implementation of the evaluation plan of the RDP also including the activities for NRN evaluation. Vice versa, the MC also participates in the NRN to exchange information on programme implementation⁵¹.

NRN coordinating body⁵²

The NRN coordinating body can be one entity within the governance structure of the NRNs. It is involved with the planning of the NRN activities and steers its action plan. The NRN coordinating body can decide to conduct NRN self-assessment and to support evaluation (information, interviewee), as well as to ensure that the results of self-assessment and evaluation are taken into account to improve the implementation of the NRN action plan.

⁴⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013, Art. 7

⁴⁹ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 73

⁵⁰ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 72

⁵¹ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, Art. 74

⁵² Guidance fiche for establishment and operation on national rural networks 20014-2020

Box 1. Evaluation steering group

The establishment of an evaluation steering group (SG) is considered a good practice to facilitate and coordinate stakeholders' consultation and manage the evaluation process. The Evaluation SG assists the MA in setting the focus of the evaluation, as well as checking its progress and quality periodically. Evaluation SG members can contribute with their specialist 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. As a 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 establishment of an Evaluation SG is not mandatory.

Network members

Membership to 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 direct NRN beneficiaries and can participate in surveys, focus groups and evaluation workshops related to the NRN and its operation. A lot of the network members are also RDP beneficiaries. Network members can suggest the conduction of the NRN self-assessment as well as they can 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. LAGs can bring in valuable local knowledge and contacts to the NRN evaluation. Also, LAGs conduct self-evaluations and their contacts with each other could make a part of the network structure study.

Regional RDP Managing Authorities, in the case of NRNPs

The major difference between the NRNPs and the NRNs is that the NRNPs also networks among the different regional MAs, each managing its own RDPs. They can offer important regional knowledge and contacts that help assessing the impacts of the NRNP into the 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 individuals as members. These members are important as interviewees/focus group participants in the assessment of the NRN performance and effects.

The evaluator

The evaluations of RDP must be carried out by an evaluator who is functionally independent from the authorities responsible for programme implementation⁵³. The evaluator is typically an external national

⁵³Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Art 54(3)

or international⁵⁴ 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. However, the evaluator could also be the public agency or different departments within the same authority as the MA.

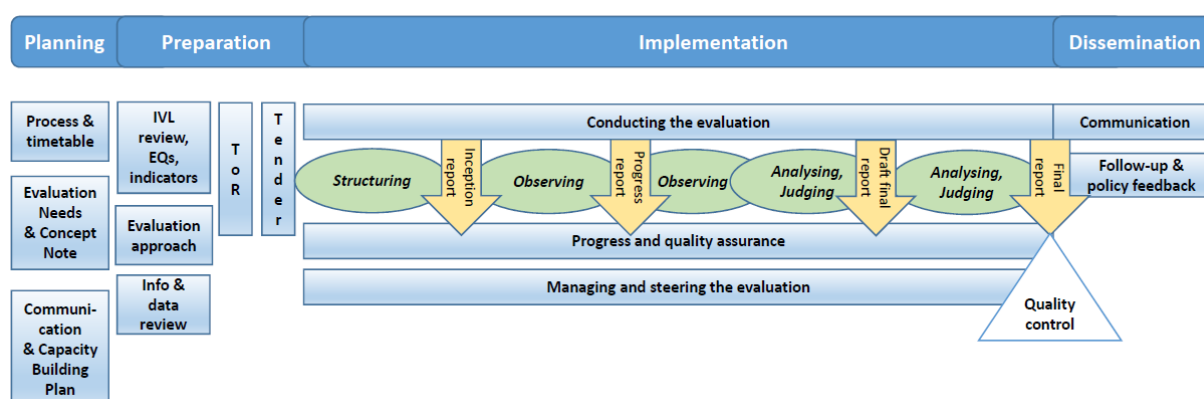
2.2 Key steps in evaluation of NRN

NRN evaluation is an ongoing process that has to be considered during the whole programming period. The Evaluation Plan, which was submitted as part of the RDP/NRNP, must contain a list of indicative evaluation topics, including the NRN⁵⁵. Some MS have supplemented the Evaluation Plan with an internal, more detailed document, which contains comprehensive planning of evaluation activities and their timing. These documents should give a general overview of NRN-related (stand-alone NRN/NRNP evaluation and evaluation of NRN as part of RDP) evaluation activities and their timing. In addition, more detailed NRN evaluation and self-assessment planning and activities, including evaluation-related capacity building events and activities linked to dissemination of evaluation findings, should be included in the NRN Action Plan.

When planning the NRN evaluation for the entire programming period, the specific NRN intervention logic has to be constructed on the basis NRN objectives stated in legal acts, the RDP objectives, and the NRN Action Plan. Subsequently, general programme-specific evaluation questions and indicators must be developed to complement the common elements. Furthermore, data sources for indicators need to be thought over, and data collection responsibilities and methods have to be agreed. This must be done at an early stage of the implementation of NRN activities to ensure that data is collected from early on and that the data collection is geared towards the desired information.

While the Evaluation Plan, NRN Action Plan and other general planning documents give the overview of the NRN related evaluation activities and topics for the entire programming period, each evaluation is a separate project by itself. As such, it can be divided into separate steps with tasks that follow each other in sequence. The main steps of conducting an evaluation are planning, preparation, implementation, and dissemination (Figure 3). Each step contains several tasks, which will be discussed below together with the responsibilities of the main actors involved.

Figure 4. Process of NRN evaluation



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development

⁵⁴ In case there is lack of evaluation capacity within the MS

⁵⁵ Annex I, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 808/2014

2.2.1 Planning the NRN evaluation

The NRN must be evaluated as a part of the RDP, and there may be stand-alone evaluations focusing on NRN. In the case of NRN evaluation as part of the RDP, the MA is responsible for planning the NRN evaluation process and the timetable, in conjunction with the NSU and other evaluation stakeholders (e.g. evaluation unit, paying agency etc.)⁵⁶. The responsibility for planning a stand-alone evaluation of the NRN can vary within MS, but as the evaluations are typically financed from Technical Assistance, MA generally leads the process with significant input from the NSU.

The minimum requirements for NRN evaluation should be outlined in the evaluation plan, which is part of the programme document. Detailed planning of NRN evaluation activities could be described in internal documents, e.g. evaluation work plan, or even a separate document of NRN evaluation. The internal document might also contain the requirements for the NRN self-assessment to be conducted by the network itself and its interconnections with the evaluation activities (e.g. utilisation of methods, data collection, etc.). The sooner this step is done, the smoother the implementation of the evaluation will be. The planning of NRN evaluation contains the following tasks:

Step 1 - Planning the process and timetable for the evaluation

NRN evaluation can be time consuming, especially when there is no sufficient amount of monitoring information and evaluation only relies on qualitative methods. Hence, planning the evaluation should start well in advance of the requested report. Together with timetabling, it is vital to make a process plan considering the different actors involved and covers the entire duration of the evaluation.

The process and timetable planning are guided by these questions:

- Will the NRN evaluation be part of the RDP evaluation or stand-alone exercise?
- Who in the MA does take care of the practicalities (tendering, contract-related issues, possible evaluation steering group)?
- Who should be involved, when and how? Should an evaluation steering group be convened?
- What will be tasks and responsibilities of NSU/NRN?
- When should the NRN evaluation be finalised?
- What kind of deliverables are required from the evaluator and at what point in time?
- How long does it take to conduct the steps and tasks related to the NRN evaluation?
- How long is the whole process of NRN evaluation?
- How should the NRN evaluation (and its steps) be managed?

Step 2 - Identifying evaluation needs and drafting a concept note

When starting to plan the NRN evaluation the first thing to do is to consider what shall be evaluated and what kind of information should be produced by the evaluation. A concept note can be written 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 in an iterative manner, i.e. it can be started at the planning phase and updated later at the preparation phase when issues are clarified.

The following questions can help in this task:

⁵⁶ The Guidelines "Establishing and implementing the evaluation plan of 2014-2020 RDPs"
<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/en/evaluation-helpdesks-publications>

- What do we want to know (what are the evaluation topics)? (e.g. fulfilment of network objectives, implementation of NRN activities, NRN effectiveness and efficiency, structure of the network, impact on programme implementation, NRN results and added value)
- 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 and selected topics?

Step 3 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 evaluation.

One of the main reasons behind conducting an evaluation is the accountability to stakeholders and the larger public. Hence, the evaluation results should be communicated to the target audiences. For this purpose, each evaluation should accompany the communication plan, which is designed in the beginning of the evaluation process and whose implementation starts immediately after the evaluation's finalisation. The owner of the evaluation (typically the MA or the NSU/NRN), 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 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 does specifically interest 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. Further information on the development of a communication plan can be found at NRN Guidebook⁵⁷.

Table 3. 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

⁵⁷ ENRD, NRN Guidebook at http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf

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. MA, PA, policy makers NSU, LAGs and other NRN members) and the assessment of their evaluation skills and information need levels, as well as knowledge levels. 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 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?

Table 4. 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)

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.

The main questions to be answered when planning evaluation capacity building related to 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?
- 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?

2.2.2 Preparation of NRN evaluation

Step 1 – Review the intervention logic

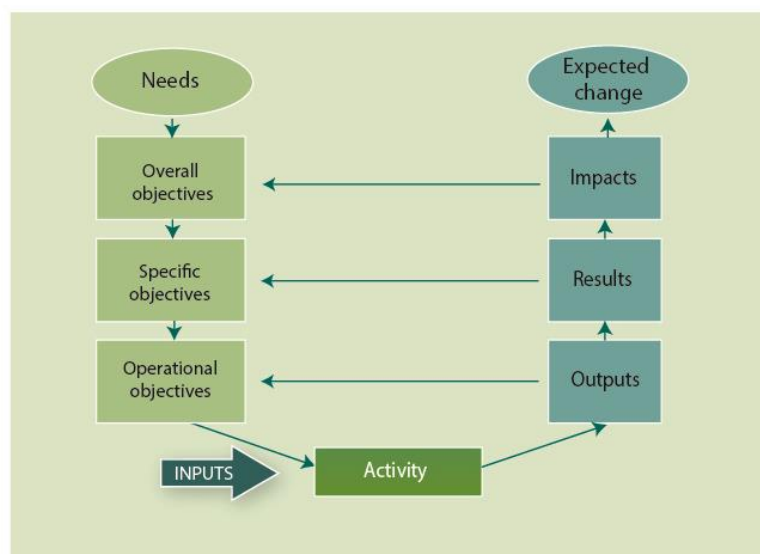
Practical preparation for evaluation starts with the reviewing of the NRN intervention logic.

The NRN intervention logic operating either within the RDP or as a separate programme (NRNP), is an essential cornerstone both for its operation and its assessment. An intervention logic is a methodological instrument linking the programme objectives and operational actions logically. In terms of NRN, it describes “what programme territory needs the networks what to address, what they aim to achieve, with what through what kind of activities/budgets, what are the expected effects: outputs, results and impacts of these activities and how far these effects contribute to the achievement of the initial objectives”⁵⁸.

The above definition of the intervention logic can be illustrated with Figure 5.

⁵⁸ ENRD, NRN Guidebook at http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/app_templates/enrd_assets/pdf/guidebook/nrn_handbook_webversion.pdf, p. 87

Figure 5. Intervention logic



Source: CMEF 2007- 2013

The main questions guiding the review of the intervention logic are:

- Are all overall (policy) objectives listed?
- Are all specific and operational objectives identified at and labelled correctly?
- Does every operational objective have a suitable corresponding output?
- Does every specific objective have a suitable corresponding result?
- Are the identified impacts in accord with the overall objectives?

Step 2 - Reviewing, formulating evaluation questions and indicators

Once the evaluation needs and topics have been decided, the Managing Authority in collaboration with other NRN actors (e.g. NSU) should consider the NRN objectives and expected effects of the network and think how the information on NRN achievements and effects can be obtained. This is done by asking appropriate evaluation questions (EQs)⁵⁹ which are linked to the NRN objectives. The EQs define the focus of the evaluation and thus direct the work of the evaluator. The evaluation questions applied in other NRNs and NRNPs, in the previous programming period, as well as the Evaluation Helpdesk guidance on the evaluation of NRNPs 2007-2013, can be used as an inspiration⁶⁰.

It is good practice to further specify EQ with judgement criteria to facilitate the formulation of NRN indicators and answer the EQs in a structured manner, making the judgement explicit, and improve the objectivity of evaluations⁶¹. The judgement criteria specify the aspects against which the merits of the intervention are judged. The answers to NRN related evaluation questions are based on evidence collected through NRN indicators (results and impact), which should be reviewed (if they exist already) or formulated (if they do not exist). The consistency check between NRN evaluation questions and judgment criteria with indicators should be made at this stage.

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

⁵⁹ See the Part II, Chapter 8.1: The role of evaluation questions in the evaluation of NRNs

⁶⁰ Working Paper on the Evaluation of the National Rural Network Programmes, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, July 2010, page 18

⁶¹ EuropeAid Guide to Evaluations http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/evaluation/methodology/methods/mth_cri_en.htm

- What are the questions that need to be answered?
- What are the criteria on which the judgements are made?
- Which indicators should be used to answer evaluation questions? Are they sufficient to collect sound evidence?

The owner of the evaluation (MA or NRN), in close collaboration with the NSU and MA/NRN, will develop and review the evaluation questions and indicators.

A practical way to go through the objectives, evaluation questions and indicators is to use a table format. 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 5 below gives an example of such a table.

Table 5. Operationalising NRN evaluation

Objective	EQ	Judgement criteria	Indicator	Data source	Comments (e.g. data collection frequency, problems)
Improve the quality of RDP implementation	<p>To what extent did the NRN promote the development of knowledge and skills in the MA and the LAGs?</p> <p>To what extent did the NRN actions influence the quality of implementation in terms of better governance?</p>	<p>Spread of good practices</p> <p>Cooperation and support between LAGs</p> <p>Improved skills and knowledge in MA/LAGs</p> <p>Improved customer satisfaction</p>	<p>Handling times (application, payment)</p> <p>Level of cooperation between LAGs</p> <p>Number of trainings/meetings with implementation focus</p> <p>Improved skills and knowledge in MA/LAGs</p> <p>Satisfied customers</p>	<p>PA database</p> <p>Questionnaire/ Survey</p> <p>NSU</p> <p>Feedback from trainings/meetings</p> <p>Survey, standardised customer feedback</p>	<p>Baselines needed.</p> <p>Complex causation: identify other factors</p> <p>Use of SNA possible</p> <p>Annual</p> <p>Baseline needed</p> <p>Complex causation: identify other factors</p>

Step 3 - Selection of the 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 EQ should be developed. This covers the selection of the evaluation approach (quantitative, qualitative, mixed) and if possible, the methods⁶² that should be used to collect and analyse evidence, develop judgments and consequently answers to EQ.

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?

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

Subsequently, it is important to identify what kind of data and information and their sources are needed to fill NRN indicators and complete the evaluation. Special attention should be paid to the identification of data gaps and how to bridge them. Authorities responsible for NRN evaluation should be clear, what data and information can be still obtained by the NRN, paying agency or Managing Authority and what

⁶² Working Paper on the Evaluation of the National Rural Network Programmes, European Evaluation Network for Rural Development, July 2010, page 21-26

information evaluators should collect. The knowledge of the MA and NRN on data and information availability and quality has the consequence on the evaluation budget and the terms of reference. In addition it may alert the MA early enough to avoid problems with data that may arise during the implementation of NRN action plan. However, the MA does not need to make decision with respect to evaluation methodology at this point, as the evaluator could also propose methods in its tender. More important is that the MA 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.

Although the Managing Authority, in collaboration with other NRN actors, screens the information and data needs and sources in early stages of the NRN action plan implementation, this screening can be repeated at a later stage by evaluator.

For NRNs, the availability of quantitative data is limited and the evaluation has to rely more on qualitative information. The following data and information sources could be used in the NRN evaluations:

- Monitoring data, including data related to programme inputs, outputs, and results;
- Network support unit internal statistics and performance monitoring;
- Information from: NRN self-assessment and evaluations; face-to-face and focus group interviews; and surveys and questionnaires.

Following the screening of information and data needs, it is vital to identify where and how the data can be obtained. A lot of the data related to NRN is gathered by the NSU (database of operations, annual reports, feedback from events and trainings, information related to NRN members etc.) or by the PA (funding of NRN actions, collection of information for common indicators).

It is necessary to consider the legal aspects related to data protection, especially when handling data related to beneficiaries or individual interviewees.

The questions guiding the preparation of the evaluation 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?

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 of 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 ToR, 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.

Step 5 - Drafting the terms of reference for the NRN evaluation

The terms of reference (ToR) is the key document when the evaluation is conducted by an external evaluator. The previous steps in relation to planning and preparing the evaluation, described above,

create the basis on which shall be prepared by evaluation authorities and what should be left to evaluators and included in the ToR.

The owner of the evaluation (typically the MA, NSU or the NRN) is responsible for drafting the ToR and ensuring that it reflects the NRN in question. It also considers proportionality and the weight of the NRN within the RDP. The evaluation steering group supports the MA in defining and drafting the ToR.

The ToR should contain a description of the origin, scope and objectives of the evaluation, as well as a clear distribution of the roles and responsibilities. The ToR should list and describe the evaluation results and tasks to be delivered by the external evaluator during the evaluation, and eventually, indicate activities that must be conducted. In addition, the already available information, as well as the evaluation questions that the evaluation should answer, should be specified in the ToR. Good ToR should also contain criteria for choosing the evaluator, as well as quality assessment criteria for the final report.

There are no legal requirements for the ToR content. Below are the recommended main elements which reflect common good practice standards⁶³.

- 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 (including selection criteria, required profile of the evaluators, sometimes also quality assessment criteria for the final report) and contractual clauses.

The ToR should leave space for the evaluators to suggest the evaluation approach/design and methods. In a way, drafting ToR is a starting point for structuring the evaluation, which the chosen evaluator will then continue.

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 material should the evaluator produce and when?
- How should the evaluation be conducted?
- What kind of information exists?
- What are the requirements for the evaluator?
- How is the evaluator chosen?

⁶³ 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

Step 6 - Tendering

About tendering, it is important that the MA reserves and ensures sufficient and adequate financial and human resources (also in terms of capacities and skills of 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 MA 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 are respected.

The Managing Authority is responsible for reserving the funds for the evaluation and choosing and managing the tendering procedure.

The following questions can help in this task:

- 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?

2.2.3 Implementing

Conducting the evaluation

After the tendering process, the evaluation contract is awarded and the evaluator can get to work. Even though the evaluator does most of the work at this stage, the MA and the evaluation SG should support the evaluator 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.

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 methods and tools used in the evaluation are also created in this phase. It is recommended to produce an "Inception Report" at this stage setting out in detail the work plan, risk assessment, and it can include fieldwork tools.

The observing phase covers the collection of information and data. The evaluator first prepares tools and approaches for gathering information. Then, all relevant information and data is collected from various sources, using a number of 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. The aim is to use different kinds of tools and techniques to triangulate factors behind the impacts against objectives and targets.

In the final stage of the evaluation, the judging phase, the evaluator develops answers to the evaluation questions and draws evidence-based conclusions⁶⁴.

Assuring quality and progress of the evaluation

The more numerous the evaluations are, the more important it is for the MA to set up a quality assurance and quality control systems. 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 most typical quality assurance tools used in evaluation process are checklists, content lists, overall and detailed process maps and different kinds of plans⁶⁵. Quality control, on the other hand, is typically conducted through a quality control grid or checklist.

The evaluation steering group, if set up, monitors the evaluation progress. If there is no SG, this is the task of the MA. Different reports (such as the inception report, the intermediate report(s), the draft final report, and the final report) that are specified in the ToR, should be submitted by the evaluator at key stages of the evaluation process. These reports should be analysed by the evaluation SG and the MA, preferably through specifically developed quality control grids/checklists. 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.

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?

Assessing the quality of the final report

After the evaluator submits the final report by the deadline agreed in the ToR, the final report should undergo a thorough quality assessment by the Managing Authority 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 reporting⁶⁶).

⁶⁴ Further information on the four evaluation phases can be found at CMEF Guidance Note B Evaluation Guidelines

⁶⁵ WFP evaluation quality assurance system at <http://www.wfp.org/evaluation/methods-and-tools/eqas-evaluation-quality-assurance-system>

⁶⁶ Annex 6 'Quality Assessment Form', DG Markt Guide to Evaluating Legislation at pages 87-97

2.2.4 Communication and dissemination

Communicating evaluation findings

Communication occurs throughout the evaluation process, but the main communication effort comes at the end, after the results and recommendation 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 feature on the website of the NRN/MA. Furthermore, to increase transparency, the evaluation report should be disseminated to the participants of the evaluation process and all the relevant 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 in workshops and other events (such as the Monitoring Committee Meetings).

Following-up evaluation findings

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

The main questions concerning the follow-up of evaluation findings are:

- What are the issues that need attention/change and what kind?
- Who can do it?
- What are the practical steps for improving the issue?
- What is the timeline for achieving the improvements?
- How can we make sure that it will happen?
- What kind of issues are important for the design/operation of the network in the future?

3 PART II – FOR EVALUATORS (AVAILABLE AS SEPARATE DOCUMENT!)

This part contains information on structuring, observing, analysing and judging in the evaluation of NRN and particular steps which should be covered during the evaluation process.

3.1 Structuring – conceptual framework for NRN evaluation

3.1.1 Revisit the intervention logic

3.1.2 Check the consistency of the intervention logic with evaluation questions and indicators

3.1.3 Set up the evaluation approach and select methods

3.1.4 Arrange data necessary for evaluation and their collection

3.2 Observing - collecting data and information for evaluation •

3.2.1 Collect data from existing data sources (monitoring, feedback forms, self-assessment data)

3.2.2 Collect additional information from evaluator

3.3 Analysing - analysing collected data and information

3.3.1 Description of methods suitable for NRN evaluation and their use

3.3.2 Example of outcome

3.4 Judging - answering the evaluation questions

3.4.1 Interpretation of findings

3.4.2 Answering evaluation questions

3.4.3 Formulation of conclusions and recommendation

3.5 PART III (Tool box)

3.5.1 ToR for NRN evaluation

3.5.2 Links to existing guidelines and what they contain for NRN evaluation emplates

3.5.3 Checklists

3.5.4 Examples of NRN intervention logic

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