

Evaluating LEADER

**Handbook for Ireland's
LAGs/Financial
Partners/Implementing
Partners**

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Introduction

Background

In May 2018 a LEADER Evaluation event took place in Finland. It saw the launch (by FARNET (Fisheries and Aquaculture Monitoring & Evaluation)) of a new handbook for Local Action Groups (LAGs) funded under one or several of the EU's Structural and Investment Funds. Its aim is to provide easy-to-use evaluation tools, methods and practical examples to relevant stakeholders.

The Department have extracted the key points from the original booklet, summarising them in the following pages - the aim of which is to provide a short easy-to-use guidance document for evaluating the LEADER programme in your respective areas.

NOTE: The full booklet can be found at:

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/evaluating-clld-handbook-lags-and-flags_en

NOTE : *Where the term LAG is used in this handbook (and original booklet), it refers to Irelands LAG's, Financial Partners & Implementing Partners.*

Why Evaluate?

Evaluation is a compulsory component of LEADER. However, the time spent evaluating and reflecting on a LAG's contribution to its community is invaluable for a range of reasons:

- Knowing if the LAG has achieved its original aims and objectives
- Helping to critically reflect on how to improve the LAG's activities and processes
- Obtaining knowledge to demonstrate achievements

The learning that comes from assessing one's work is fundamental to optimising the use of public funding and improving the potential of LEADER to bring tangible and positive change to local communities.

1.Planning your Evaluation

1.1 What is evaluation?

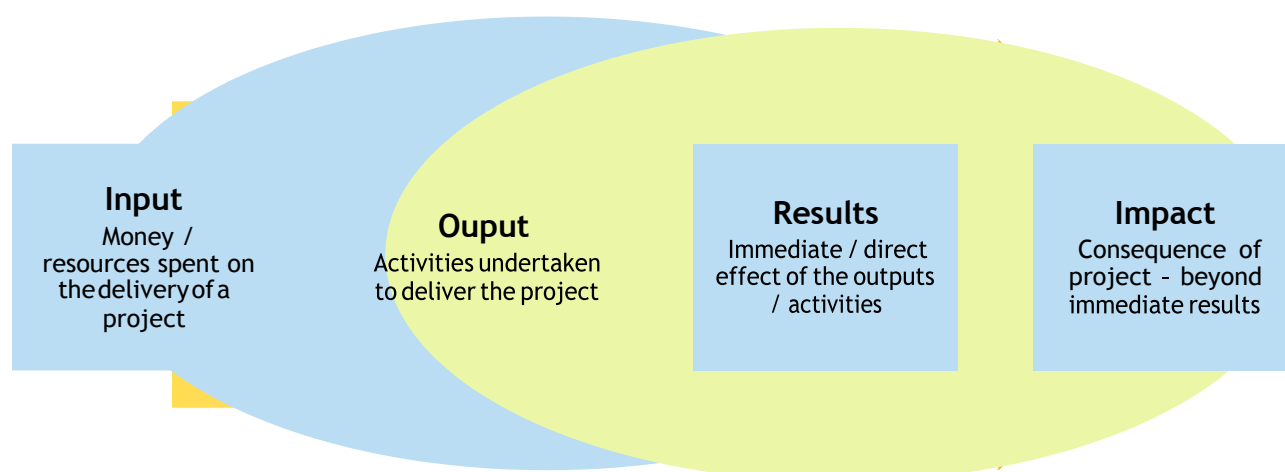
Monitoring

Monitoring is about counting things and keeping activities on track. Numbers – of events, participants, projects – are all examples of monitoring data. It is important to be clear what information is needed for management, control, demonstrating progress and for **evaluation**. Correct entering of data on the IT System is paramount. Please see the LEADER Performance Monitoring Guidance document (available on the department's website) for further information on data requested via the IT System and explanation of same.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a periodic assessment of the design, implementation and outcomes of an ongoing or completed process. **In the context of LEADER, evaluation is assessing the local development strategy and/or the LAG's work.** The purpose is to help in decision-making, to ascertain achievement or value, to gain insight into prior or existing initiatives, to enable reflection and help identify future change.

The Annual Progress Report (completed by each LDS area) is one method that demonstrates that the LAG is monitoring the status of their agreed LDS Objectives in line with their financial allocation i.e. so is one method that feeds into the LAGs Monitoring and Evaluation requirements.



What is special about evaluating LEADER/CLLD?

Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) involves a specific methodology, developed originally for rural development (the so-called LEADER approach).

This added value of CLLD* can come from some/all of the following 3 areas:

Improved Social Capital

Improved social and human capital is expressed in increased levels of trust, the development of new skills and capacities, the establishment of new networks etc., making the community more resilient and adaptive to changes.

Improved local governance

Improved local governance through community and stakeholder involvement in decision making, the LAG's role in multi-level governance and its ability to manage public-private funds

Enhanced project results

Enhanced project results due to increased leverage, more sustainable projects, new project promoters and more innovative projects at local level.

When evaluating CLLD, it is important to keep such elements in mind and focus on identifying where the LAG aims to bring added value to their local community

1.2 When does Evaluation happen?

The process of monitoring and evaluating LAG work is an integral part of CLLD and should be:

Designed during the preparation of the local development strategy (LDS) **but be an ongoing activity for the area**

1.3 Process

The illustration depicts the main elements that LAGs should consider including in an evaluation plan.

- ☐ Objective & focus
- ☐ Data sources & collection
- ☐ Evaluation tools & methods
- ☐ Timeline
- ☐ Resources
- ☐ Roles & responsibilities
- ☐ Using evaluation results

1.4 What to evaluate?

The evaluation questions should be in line with what the LAG wants to find out and with the basic intervention logic of the local development strategy. They usually deal with some or all of the following issues:

- Was the intervention **relevant**?
- Was it **effective**?
- Was it **efficient**?
- Was it **useful**?
- Was it **sustainable**?

LDS Intervention Logic

Implementing a local development strategy involves translating the **needs** (problems, opportunities) of an area into **objectives and trying** to address those needs (achieve the objectives) through a set of projects/activities, with support/funding (**input**) from the LAG.

Evaluation is an assessment of:

- What has been done through individual projects/activities (**outputs**)?
- To what extent these outputs have contributed to addressing specific problems (**results**).
- How have these results helped to achieve the broader objective of the strategy (**impact**).

The link between the needs/problems of the area, objectives of the strategy, activities/projects, outputs, results and impacts is called **intervention logic**.

Assessing your Indicators (LEADER LDS)

As well as asking the right evaluation questions, selecting good indicators is fundamental to ensuring the LAG obtains the information it needs. Indeed, once the LAG has identified what it wants to know, it will need to establish **how it will assess these things**. For example, how will it assess to what extent the objectives laid down in its LDS have been met (what constitutes success?) and whether the process went smoothly?

Whatever the indicators selected, they should be both **well-defined and explained to those** expected to provide the information e.g. project applicants. This will help ensure that the right data and relevant evidence is provided and that it is as consistent as possible.

Once the LAG has defined its indicators (for example, number of community facilities improved or increase in visits to a local attraction), it can set itself a **target** for each (e.g. 5 community facilities improved, 800 additional visits to a local attraction...). It will also have to establish **who should collect the necessary information and how**. Progress towards reaching its targets can then be monitored if the right data is collected.

You should review the performance monitoring document (available under the LEADER section of the departments website), and from that, what indicators you want to use to assess your LDS (in terms of 'are the Local Objectives and the Strategic Actions achieving what they set out to do? – See Performance Monitoring & Guidance document & section 2 Data Collection & Monitoring of this document).

A full list of Indicators are contained in the LEADER Performance Monitoring Guidance document (available on the department's website).

LAG's may also wish to use their own area specific indicators which would be additional to those on the LEADER IT System.

2. Data Collection and Monitoring

- ☐ Strategic monitoring
- ☐ LAG meetings
- ☐ Project monitoring
- ☐ Project meetings

While data collection starts right from the beginning of the LDS implementation, it should be a continuous activity throughout the programming period. The first contact with potential beneficiaries offers an opportunity to collect information, right through to the payment phase and beyond.

3. Putting Evaluation into Practice

- ☐ Desk research
- ☐ Self-assessment
- ☐ Surveys
- ☐ Interviews
- ☐ Case studies
- ☐ Focus groups
- ☐ Peer review and learning
- ☐ Most significant change
- ☐ Social return on investment
- ☐ Social network analysis

While monitoring data is likely to form the basis of a LAG evaluation, **additional data collection and, in particular, consultation with relevant stakeholders will be important for understanding what is working and what needs to be improved.**

The graphic above refers to some of the additional data collection methods which may be used. Further details are available in the full version of the handbook (located at https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/evaluating-clld-handbook-lags-and-flags_en).

It should be noted that case studies are a particularly useful tool and **must** be submitted (as part of the LAG's Annual Report) to the department each year.

4. Using the Findings

Arguably the most important part of the M&E process is the use made of the findings. Reporting the results to the programme management is a basic first step for your own information - This is done via the IT System i.e. Monitoring data collected from the IT system is used to report mandatory data to the Commission – **this is the reason it is critical to input accurate data into the IT System. Again, please refer to the Performance Monitoring Guidance document which is available on the department’s website.**

However it is most important for the LAG to establish a learning curve in terms of its process and implementation.

- ☐ Reporting your findings
- ☐ Implementing your findings
- ☐ Communicating your results

The key is to identify where the LAG has added value to their local community as follows - Added Value of CLLD can come from: -

- **Improved social and human capital**, expressed in increased levels of trust, the development of new skills and capacities, the establishment of new networks etc., making the community more resilient and adaptive to changes.
- **Improved local governance** through community and stakeholder involvement in decision making, the LAG’s role in multi-level governance and its ability to manage public-private funds
- **Enhanced project results** due to increased leverage, more sustainable projects, new project promoters and more innovative projects at local level.

Please see the presentations (available on the department’s website) on the three areas of added-value (highlighted above) – The presentations depict the added-value of LEADER and how these can be assessed/evaluated in your respective LDS area.

Useful Links

LEADER - Monitoring & Evaluation 2014-2020 (Department of Rural & Community Development website) - <https://drcd.gov.ie/about/rural/rural-development/leader/monitoring-evaluation-leader-2014-2020/>

Evaluating CLLD Handbook for LAGs & FLAGs - https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/evaluating-clld-handbook-lags-and-flags_en

European Evaluation Helpdesk - 'Guidelines: Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD' - https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/publications/evaluation-leaderclld_en