



## D6.3 Ex-durante Intervention Case Study

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## List of Abbreviations

AP - Action Plan

AREI - Institute of Agricultural Resources and Economics

D - Deliverable

EU - European Union

KPI - key performance indicator

M&E - Monitoring and Evaluation

RAP – Regional Action Plan

SDM – System Dynamic Models

SemEx - Semantic Explorer

SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-based

VPR - Vidzeme Planning Region

WP - Work Package

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## Executive Summary

This is the final deliverable under the project Work package 6, "Regional Rural Change - Pilot Phase 3", whose goal is to contribute to rural change by introducing a mission-oriented approach geared towards rural regions' challenges. WP6 implementation focuses on delivering change in pilot regions by generating bottom-up solutions and co-designing transformative policies, providing support to actors who produce it, and measuring the impact of this change. This deliverable examines pilot teams' efforts to evaluate the first steps of implementing plans for transformative policies.

This deliverable aims to summarise the results of the mission-oriented approach implementation in the pilot regions. The report is based on an analysis of 12 *ex-durante* evaluation reports of Action Plan implementation prepared by each pilot region. It studies the results of these evaluations and the effects of the *ex-durante* evaluation exercise on the mission-oriented transformation processes in pilot regions. The report assesses implementation progress made during the reporting period, evaluates contributions to the key EU missions, and the quality of measurement framework of the planned interventions. It summarises the results of the pilots' work with stakeholders and looks for the changes in stakeholders' engagement, ownership, and capacity. D6.3 concludes with a set of recommendations linked to the above.

According to the *ex-durante* methodology (see Annex 1), the main task of the *ex-durante* evaluation is to document the progress made, review the involvement of primary stakeholders, and identify the first indications of intervention effects. The *ex-durante* evaluation results show that it is premature to assess any intervention effects as most pilots have not started implementing their Action Plans but have mostly worked on finalising planned measures, establishing governance and monitoring mechanisms, and reaching adoption from the decision-makers. Similarly, *ex-durante* evaluations do not refer to any direct contributions to the key EU missions yet but demonstrate improvements in understanding these missions and more specific and detailed contribution claims.

The *ex-durante* evaluation results show a slightly decreased but still high level of stakeholder engagement in the foresight processes. Stakeholder ownership of the results of this process and readiness to participate in implementing the Action Plans have remained at the medium level. Still, it shows a positive tendency in stakeholders' willingness to participate in AP implementation. The *ex-durante* evaluation results demonstrate an increase in stakeholders' learning and capacity gains mainly due to the unique possibility of highly relevant discussions and dialogue between various stakeholders that have stimulated critical reflection and learning.

## Keywords

*Ex-durante* evaluation, action plan, foresight package, vision, challenges, stakeholder involvement.

## 1 Introduction

Evaluation is an applied inquiry process for collecting and synthesising evidence that results in conclusions about the state of affairs, value, merit, worth, significance or quality of a program, product, person, or plan (Fournier, 2005). *Ex-durante* evaluation is conducted during the implementation phase of an intervention to support decision-making for the implementation and enable corrections to be made to the intervention design early on (Rossi et al. 2004).

Conducting an *ex-durante* evaluation provides an opportunity to ask important questions, reconsider the choices made and provide useful information for decision making. Thus, it is helping to improve policies and programmes, as well as their implementation, assess the performance of involved actors, and the relevance and efficacy of measurement framework and management practices. If the *ex-durante* evaluation is done at the early stage of intervention, it has a formative focus that allows to improve the quality of planned interventions, provide information for future steering decisions, and enables relevant stakeholders to measure outcomes and impacts continuously. An additional benefit of an *ex-durante* evaluation is providing an opportunity for closer involvement of various stakeholders, increasing their engagement and ownership over implementing the Action Plans.

In the context of the PoliRural project, every pilot carried out two data collection tasks – before the start of interventions (*ex-ante*) and a few months later (*ex-durante*). For both tasks, the same methodology (questions) was applied. *Ex-ante* and *ex-durante* evaluations aimed to look for the differences between the two assessments and to identify changes that may be attributed to the PoliRural project.

The results of both evaluations are summarised in two deliverables:

- Deliverable D6.1 *Ex-ante* Intervention Case Study codifies baseline data from participants so that it can be compared with new responses in a few months (delivered by M32 – January 2022).
- Deliverable D6.3 *Ex-durante* Intervention Case Study redacts the results of the “after” part of the two-stage evaluation exercise (delivered by M39 – August 2022).

The *ex-durante* evaluations were carried out during the final stage of developing Foresight packages of the twelve pilot regions when pilot teams finalised Regional Action Plans and Roadmaps, worked on their adoption by decision-makers and started the implementation of first actions. The main task of *ex-durante* evaluations is to document the progress made with primary stakeholders’ involvement and identify the first indications of intervention effects. The PoliRural project pilot teams conducted *ex-ante* evaluations in September – December of 2021 while drafting the first versions of the Regional Action Plans. The *Ex-durante* evaluation follows the *ex-ante* evaluations seven months later.

The *Ex-durante* evaluation is performed under the PoliRural project Work Package 6 (WP6). This WP aims to contribute to rural change by introducing a mission-oriented approach to rural regions' challenges. WP6 comprises three tasks: first focused on delivering change by generating bottom-up solutions and co-designing transformative policies, second on supporting those who bring the difference, and third on measuring the impact of this change. The *Ex-durante* evaluation primarily concentrates on measuring the impact of expected policy transformations. It may be followed by a series of *ex-durante* evaluations whose purpose will be to document the progress made, review the involvement of primary stakeholders, and identify the first indications of intervention effects. This report summarises the results of the first *ex-durante* evaluation exercise done in June-July 2022. During the Regional Action Plan implementation process, *ex-durante* evaluations may be done several times as different activities or integrated into broader monitoring processes and systems.

## 1.1 Purpose of the report

This *Ex-durante* Intervention Case Study Report (Case Study) is based on an analysis of 12 *ex-durante* reports prepared by each pilot region. It studies the results of these evaluations and the first indications of intervention effects in pilot regions.

The purpose of the Case Study report is to summarise information provided by pilots on implementation progress, analyse contributions to the key EU missions, summarise the first effects of the policy changes, assess the quality of the *ex-durante* tasks related to the assessment of measurement framework and summarise results of the pilots work with stakeholders.

The purpose of this report should be distinguished from the purpose of *ex-durante* evaluations done by each pilot region. According to the Grant Agreement, before the start of interventions, every pilot has to carry out a data collection task (*ex-ante* evaluation), laying the baseline for the following data collection task a few months later (*ex-durante* evaluation). This report presents results of consecutive *ex-ante* and *ex-durante* evaluations focusing on finding differences between assessments to identify changes attributed to the PoliRural project. Detailed methodology for the *ex-durante* evaluations is described in the next section.

## 1.2 Methodology of the *ex-durante* process

From a methodology perspective, the *ex-durante* evaluation process was divided into five consecutive steps:

1. Scoping (analysis of context).
2. Intervention progress.
3. Measuring changes and assessing the contribution.
4. Assessing performance and engagement.
5. Integrating data and compiling a report.

Figure 1 Main steps of ex-durante evaluation



The goal of the **scoping** phase (phase 1) was to understand the context of the planned evaluation and to define what, why, in what time frame, by whom and for what purpose will be evaluated, thus forming the analytical framework of *ex-durante* evaluation. The scoping phase in each pilot region included a definition of the evaluation purpose, evaluation focus or what should be evaluated, the time horizon for *ex-durante* evaluation, forming of the evaluation team and other stakeholders' involvement, and expected use of the evaluation results.

The **intervention progress** analysis phase (phase 2) goal was to review the progress of interventions and to test if the implementation practice follows the theory outlined in the intervention logic of the Regional Action Plan. The expected result of this step was a description of what has happened, what changes can be observed at what level of the intervention (inputs, outputs, outcomes or impact), and whether the links between intervention and intended changes are plausible.

The second phase also included an assessment of evidence indicating contributions made to the key EU missions (the reasoning behind each of them concerning PoliRural project ambitions is provided in project deliverable D1.10 "Regional Recommendations"):

- Achieve a JUST transition to NET-ZERO by 2050 (the Green Deal),
- RECOVER from the pandemic and improve the RESILIENCE of the regions,
- Implement a NEW MODEL of AGRICULTURE in Europe (post-carbon, CAP reform),
- Implement a nature-based model of sustainability based on BIODIVERSITY.

The task of each *ex-durante* evaluation team in pilot regions was to examine if and how the implemented actions have contributed to the objectives of these missions and to reassess to which extent the planned measures respond to the challenges and needs related to the implementation of these high-level missions at the regional level, especially in rural areas.

The goals of phase 3, **Measuring changes**, were to measure the transformative changes at the policy level and to reassess the measurement framework of the regional Action Plan. As most pilot regions are at the very start of implementing their Action Plans, there was a limited possibility of observing any policy-level changes that could be attributed to the PoliRural project. In such cases, the *ex-durante* evaluation was a possibility for testing the established measurement framework of the regional Action Plans.

The *ex-durante* evaluation teams in each pilot region were expected to collect and verify data for all policy level KPIs, compare the data with the baseline values looking for differences,

assess which of these changes can be attributed to the implemented actions, and review the procedures for monitoring and evaluation of the Action Plan.

The goal of the stakeholder **performance and engagement** phase (phase 4) was to assess stakeholder engagement and the effects of the foresight process on involved stakeholders. It was expected that this phase's results would help to identify how effectively the stakeholders have been engaged in the foresight process in the last eight months, assess their level of ownership and readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation and their significant capacity gains. As this was the second measurement of stakeholder engagement, it was expected to compare the results obtained during the ex-ante evaluation. The assessment results of this phase were summarised using evaluation rubrics allowing interpretation and summarising of evidence in a systematic and transparent way.

The goal of the **data integration and report compilation** phase (phase 5) was to summarise the *ex-durante* evaluation report results highlighting lessons learned and outlining pending issues that shall be taken into account during the implementation of the Regional Action Plans and examined under the following *ex-durante* evaluations.

### 1.3 Methodology of the Case Study report

Pilot teams in their *ex-durante* evaluation reports have followed the structure provided in the *ex-durante* evaluation methodology; therefore, the results of the analysis in the Case Study report are structured following the main sections of the *ex-durante* evaluation reports. The Case Study Report is prepared based on 12 *ex-durante* evaluation reports from the pilot teams. The Case Study report reflects the situation as of the closing date of *ex-durante* reports (July 15, 2022).

The Case Study report is prepared by the Vidzeme Planning region (VPR) evaluation team. The report contains an aggregation of the content of the individual pilots' *ex-durante* reports and an assessment of the pilots' quality within the task. Assessment of the quality is based on criteria provided in the checklist of the *ex-durante* evaluation methodology where complete correspondence to the criteria is awarded 1 point, non-correspondence by 0 points but partial compliance by 0,5 points. Results of section 4, 'Stakeholder performance and engagement,' are assessed and summarised using evaluation rubrics provided in the *ex-durante* evaluation methodology by the VPR evaluation team.

The results and conclusions of the Case Study report are structured around the following key evaluation questions proposed by the VPR evaluation team:

EQ1. What progress can be observed in implementing the AP in terms of inputs, outputs, outcomes, or impacts?

EQ2. What specific actions are taken that contribute to key missions of the EU at the national and regional levels?

EQ3. Is any difference observable at the policy level, and is there any evidence that the intervention has contributed to these changes?

EQ4. What is the quality and relevance of the M&E framework, including the availability of the data for measuring the indicators and KPIs?

EQ5. Are there any observable changes in the stakeholder engagement, their level of ownership, readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation and their perceptions of major capacity gains from participation in the foresight process?

VPR led the *ex-durante* evaluation task. VPR distributed guidelines and methodology documents to all partners. The overall methodology (explained in the previous section and available in the annexe of this report) provided a framework and sequence of actions that allowed each pilot team to consider each region's nature and context and choose how the pilots would apply these analytical actions.

The planning and organising of individual *ex-durante* evaluations at the pilot level were based on the specific context of each pilot region. In some cases, it was conducted as an internal evaluation done entirely by representatives of the pilot teams, usually involving all the organisations participating in the pilot (Flanders, Häme, Galilee, Slovakia) or inviting an evaluation expert to the team (Mazowiecki). Pilot teams were encouraged to separate responsibilities by entrusting evaluation to persons not directly involved in drafting the regional Action Plans but who have been involved in the foresight activities. Regional stakeholders (e.g., members of the local community, members of the administration of public and private bodies, and experts with a high level of knowledge) were primarily engaged in the evaluation process as survey respondents. Still, in several cases, they were also involved in the assessment process of the proposed interventions (Central Greece, Central Bohemia, Monaghan, Apulia, Vidzeme, Gevgelija-Strumica, Segobriga).

During the reporting period, pilots reached out to stakeholders (primarily through surveys, interviews, and questionnaires) to obtain feedback on the Action Plan's readiness for implementation in terms of stakeholder engagement and the effects of the foresight process on involved stakeholders. This activity's results helped identify how effectively stakeholders have been engaged in the foresight process, assess the level of their ownership and readiness to participate in the Action Plan implementation and their major capacity gains. The outreach results were summarised using evaluation rubrics developed to assess stakeholders' engagement, ownership and acquired capabilities.

*Ex-durante* evaluation has provided each pilot with a closer, more critical in-depth look at their Action Plans. It has significantly benefited them, contributing to the quality of their proposed Action Plans and the PoliRural project in general. The following sections summarise the aggregated results of assessing the *ex-durante* reports of 12 pilots. The VPR evaluation team did the evaluation between June 1 and August 25, 2022, based on information provided in *Ex-durante* Reports.

## 2 Context: visions and challenges

The main subjects of *ex-durante* evaluations are Regional Action Plans and Roadmaps developed by pilot regions during the almost three years long foresight process. The primary purpose of Regional Action Plans is to define actionable solutions for tackling the identified challenges within the foresight process.

The Regional Action Plans are based on regional **Visions** formulated by pilot regions during the foresight process. Vision statements have undergone several iterations during the foresight process. As concluded in a detailed assessment of Regional Action Plans in April 2022<sup>1</sup>, Vision statements closely correspond to identified challenges and measures, showing a good level of internal coherence; Visions represent a broad variance of pilot interpretations of rural attractiveness according to their specific regional context. Thematically, most Visions focus on two themes: i) Governance, collaboration, and society; and ii) Economy development and transition. Other themes of focus involve iii) Agriculture and climate adaptation, iv) Depopulation & young people, and v) Digitalisation infrastructure.

In line with these Visions, pilot regions have identified 25 **challenges** for their regions' development. In deliverable D6.2. Regional Action Plans the identified policy challenges and measures are analysed and clustered by the four main strands of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (Stronger, Connected, Resilient, and Prosperous rural areas)<sup>2</sup>.

Most challenges identified by pilot regions are primarily related to the PROSPERITY of rural areas, particularly to the various reasons currently hindering the diversification of economic activities. Issues of governance, quality of policy planning and execution, and collaboration among stakeholders are the second most common group of challenges considered as main preconditions for STRONGER rural areas. The absence or low quality of digital infrastructure, limited skills and abilities to use advantages of good broadband, and poorly digitalised traditional sectors of the economy are central issues hindering pilot regions from becoming better CONNECTED rural areas. Pilot regions have identified just a few RESILIENCE-oriented challenges related to the ability to adapt to climate change, reducing the carbon footprint and nature protection. Selected measures correspond well to the identified challenges and have a good potential for bringing expected transformative changes.

The results of the *ex-durante* evaluation show that during the reporting period (since December 2021), several pilot regions have made changes in their Action Plans. These changes have mainly affected selected measures, refinements of intervention logic, KPIs and monitoring and evaluation processes. *Ex-durante* reports refer to no changes related to regional Visions and challenges described and assessed in more detail under the deliverable

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<sup>1</sup> PoliRural deliverable D6.2. Regional Action Plans. April 2022

<sup>2</sup> COM 2021, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, Brussels, 30.6.2021

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D6.2. Regional Action Plans in April 2022. The *ex-durante* evaluation reports attempt to measure and assess the first outcomes of the implementation of Regional Action Plans in the 12 pilot regions, their contribution to key EU missions and their influence on engagement, ownership and capacity of regional stakeholders.

### 3 Implementation progress and contribution

This section of the *ex-durante* evaluation reports aimed to describe results from two tasks:

- 1) to summarise information provided by pilots on implementation progress,
- 2) to analyse contributions to the key EU missions.

Completing these tasks would provide pilot teams with updated status of intervention progress to be later used as a reference for further monitoring and evaluation purposes. It may also have raised insights on necessary changes or corrective actions in the interventions. This exercise also led to a critical review of the logic used to describe how proposed interventions in the Action Plan would contribute to the objectives of key EU missions. The analysis results are compared with the ones provided during the *ex-ante* evaluation in December 2021.

#### 3.1 Implementation progress

In this subsection, each pilot was evaluated using the two criteria from the checklist provided in the *ex-durante* methodology (subsection “Implementation progress”). Use of already introduced and applied criteria, simplified evaluation, and assessment tasks without introducing unnecessary new concepts that pilot teams were unfamiliar with beforehand.

Criteria to be analysed in this subsection:

- 3.1.1. Intervention progress and any observable changes are sufficiently described, and changes are measured using the intervention level KPIs.
- 3.1.2. Necessary changes or corrective actions in the interventions are identified.

Compliance with each statement was rated with one point if the compliance was distinctive and the VPR evaluation team agreed with the statement, zero points if no compliance could be noted and 0,5 points if compliance was partial. While this is an artificial simplification of the evaluation task due to levelling the importance of each quality statement and not having detailed criteria for each, this is the only viable time-efficient way to provide a general overview of how well pilots have dealt with this task.

By the cut-off date of the *ex-durante* evaluation (July 15), three pilots have started implementing the first activities of their Action Plans. In two cases, these activities are part of development processes that have been started by some regional stakeholders even before formal approval of the Action Plan and are not conditional upon its finalisation (Segobriga, Vidzeme). In one other case pilot team has undertaken activities included as part of AP measures related to advocacy for AP implementation from national level decision makers (Eastern Galilee).

Most pilots have worked on finalising their Action Plans and Roadmaps during the reporting period. This included iterative improvement of the Action Plan with feedback from stakeholders. These discussions were related to the refocusing of objectives (Apulia, Segobriga), measures (e.g., on innovative approaches to needs-based consulting for entrepreneurs in the Mazowieckie region) or refining the regional Vision (Monaghan). E.g. the Apulia pilot team, in discussions with their regional stakeholders, have changed the direction of the final objectives of the Action Plan. Initial very ambitious goal - the return of young people to rural areas and agricultural work - was narrowed down to more focused investments in the digitisation of the agriculture sector by supporting existing and new farms in rural areas as well as assisting policymakers with identifying policies that would allow creating new opportunities for youth in Apulia.

In other cases, changes in the Action Plan measures were made due to external influence. E.g. the Action Plan of the Flanders region is very closely linked with the CAP Strategic plan of Flanders, which was submitted to the European Commission at the beginning of 2022. Comments received from the EC required a review of planned measures and may result in changes in the Action Plan.

Two pilots during the reporting period have actively involved stakeholders in analysing trends and exploring their impact on the regions (Häme, Monaghan). E.g., the Monaghan pilot team has actively engaged stakeholders in undertaking two Deep Dives to examine the effect of the critical regional issues of COVID-19 and CAP reform. Monaghan and Häme pilot teams have actively involved stakeholders in experiments with System Dynamic Modelling (SDM) tool and other tools developed by the PoliRural project (Text Mining, Atlas/Digital Innovation Hub). In the case of the Häme pilot, the SDM tool has served as an enabler of serious discussions in a safe and collaborative environment, bringing together policymakers and authorities in a unique forum. These discussions have allowed stakeholders to recognise the need for a new innovative governance model and structure for rural development.

Many pilots during the reporting period carried out preparatory activities for starting the implementation of AP by establishing governance and monitoring mechanisms, engaging stakeholders in them, and concentrating their efforts on reaching adoption of the APs by stakeholders and decision-makers (Eastern Galilee, Häme, Monaghan, Northern Macedonia, Segobriga, Slovakia, Vidzeme). The involvement of key decision-makers in the monitoring mechanisms of the Action Plan is seen as an essential precondition for securing the adoption and successful implementation of Action Plans by several pilot regions. E.g., the Northern Macedonia pilot team is launching the Action Plan implementation by establishing the Monitoring Body led by a responsible person from the national Ministry and involving representatives of the regional panel group. The pilot team considers the involvement of a representative of the European Commission Delegation in this body as an essential precondition for the success of the AP implementation process.

*Ex-durante* evaluation reports show that it is premature to report any implementation progress of Action Plans. During the reporting period, pilot teams have finalised the APs, established governance and monitoring mechanisms and concentrated on adopting the APs by decision-makers. Pilot teams have used the *ex-durante* evaluation as a repeated exercise for reviewing the intervention logic of the Action Plan, analysing the internal coherence of the intervention, relevance of objectives and measures, and assessing the roles and responsibilities of involved relevant stakeholders. In this regard, the *ex-durante* evaluation can be considered as a follow-up or a second phase of *ex-ante* evaluation. The review of implementation progress and its assessment would be the task of following *ex-durante* evaluations carried out during the implementation process of the Action Plans.

Overall, out of 12 maximum points, pilots have reached 5 points for the first criteria (Intervention progress and any observable changes are sufficiently described, and changes are measured using the intervention level KPIs). Comparatively, low performance is mainly attributable to implementation not being yet started in most pilot regions. Pilots demonstrate better results for the second criterion (Necessary changes or corrective actions in the interventions are identified), reaching 8,5 points (out of 12 maximal). These results reflect efforts made by pilot teams in refining, focusing and improving AP interventions and signalise that pilot teams have used the evaluations as a process for critical feedback and learning.

### 3.2 Contribution to key missions of the EU

The twelve PoliRural pilots should demonstrate how their Action Plans contribute to high-level EU missions like climate neutrality, the new model of agriculture, and healthy soil and food, considering local and regional priorities. Whether and how these missions are addressed was highlighted in a deliverable D1.10 on regional recommendations as one of the tasks for the *ex-ante* evaluation in WP6 (D1.10 Regional Recommendations, 2021). The *Ex-durante* evaluation now follows this with an assessment of contributions made by the pilot teams to key EU missions during the first months of AP implementation.

Following the same assessment method outlined in 3.1, the authors analysed the compliance to the criterion from the checklist provided in the *ex-durante* methodology:

3.2. Level of the contribution of the intervention to the key EU missions is assessed.

In addition, the authors prepared an overview of changes in pilots' focus on the key EU missions during the reporting period and compared it with the results of the *ex-ante* evaluations and a detailed analysis of the Regional Action Plans made in April 2022<sup>3</sup>.

The four main EU missions that the PoliRural project has identified are:

- Achieve a JUST transition to NET-ZERO by 2050 (the Green Deal),

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<sup>3</sup> PoliRural deliverable D6.2. Regional Action Plans, April 2022.

- RECOVER from the pandemic and improve the RESILIENCE of the regions,
- Implement a NEW MODEL of AGRICULTURE in Europe (post-carbon, CAP reform),
- Implement a nature-based model of sustainability based on BIODIVERSITY.

Pilot contributions toward these key missions were assessed in December 2021 and April 2022. A breakdown of these expected contributions is provided below, indicating how many of the 12 pilots chose specific key EU missions and how the focus has changed during the reporting period.

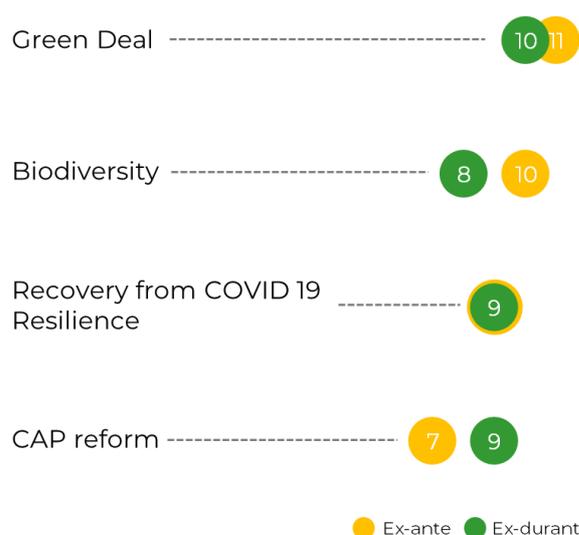


Figure 2 Contribution to key EU missions

From this breakdown, we can get a preview of the most and least targeted key EU missions. Of the four identified key missions of the EU (Green Deal, Biodiversity, Recovery from COVID19 and resilience, and CAP reform), the Green Deal is the most often mentioned and well-articulated, while biodiversity is the least mentioned. Results of ex-ante evaluations in December demonstrated that the CAP reform was the least targeted EU mission by pilot regions. During the reporting period, pilots have paid closer attention to the new agricultural policy and have identified how their Action Plans can also contribute to this policy. This may be explained by more active consultation processes in regions on the new CAP documents.

One of the shortcomings identified in *ex-ante* evaluations was that, when describing their contribution to key EU missions in their APs, pilots choose concise general statements, for example, "Action Plan will contribute to X mission", or "Action Plan is aligned with Y mission". Another characteristic was a very optimistic outlook, not considering the considerable differences in scale between key EU missions and interventions they are planning. Only a few pilots described it with little more precaution, highlighting some risks or weak points in intervention between activities and key EU missions.

According to *ex-durante* evaluations, pilots have become more specific in describing how exactly the activities they plan to implement would contribute to key EU missions. Contribution claims have become more specific and detailed, giving their assessment a more

grounded feel and credibility. However, this cannot be said about all Action Plans. The vaguest part is insufficient description of mechanics on how exactly partners plan to contribute towards these ambitious missions. In some cases, this may be due to a language barrier or an attempt to be brief and concise. *Ex-durante* evaluation reports do not provide enough information on potential reasons for drawing conclusions in this regard.

During the project implementation, new EU-level strategic frameworks emerged that were initially not addressed by the project. In June 2021, the European Commission adopted its long-term vision for rural areas outlining a strategy for making Europe's rural areas stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous by 2040. The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (LTVRA) aims to build on the emerging opportunities of the EU's green and digital transitions and the lessons learnt from the COVID 19 pandemic, and by identifying means to improve rural quality of life, achieve balanced territorial development and stimulate economic growth in rural areas<sup>4</sup>. Detailed analysis of the contribution of regional Action Plans toward the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas is made in the PoliRural project deliverable D6.2. Regional Action Plans (April 2022).

The main task of the *ex-durante* evaluation was to assess the contribution made during the reporting period to the implementation of key EU missions. *Ex-durante* reports show that during the reporting period, only a few pilots have started the implementation of their Action Plans, and it is premature to assess any effects of these activities. Similarly, no results are observed evidencing contribution to the key EU missions. However, *ex-durante* reports reveal several process effects. E.g. a mission-oriented approach and regular evaluations have prompted pilots to look at how their planned actions may contribute to the goals of EU-level missions. Many pilots before the project had not paid close attention to these missions because they were not attributed to the regional level as being “too high” level strategies being dealt with at the EU or maximum national level. During the foresight process, pilots have followed the development of these policies more closely and, in some cases, have become local knowledge brokers in this regard. All pilots faced a new and influential external factor during the reporting period. Russian war in Ukraine and its consequences to energy, economy, environmental and social processes have emerged, requiring reassessment and adjustment of measures and activities of many pilots.

Out of 12 *ex-durante* reports, four pilot regions' activities that may be qualified as partial contributions have been identified. Potential contributions shall be assessed during the following evaluations in the remaining eight pilot regions. Out of 12 maximum points, the quality of this criteria is rated at 2 points.

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<sup>4</sup> COM 2021, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, Brussels, 30.6.2021

Table 1 Overview of quality assessment per 3 criteria used in section 3

Criterium:	Number of reports meeting the requirements			Total score (yes=1p, no=0p, partially=0.5p)
	Yes	Partially	No	
3.1.1. Intervention progress and any observable changes are sufficiently described, and changes are measured using the intervention level KPIs	2	6	4	5
3.1.2. Necessary changes or corrective actions in the interventions are identified	6	5	1	8,5
3.2. Planned measures contribute to key EU missions.	0	4	8	2

The lowest performance is related to the slow progress in starting AP implementation (1<sup>st</sup> criteria). Only three pilots have begun to implement the first actions under their APs. The remainder has concentrated on finalising APs, getting them adapted by decision makers and setting up implementation and monitoring mechanisms. Pilot team efforts in adjusting the interventions and introducing corrective actions are reflected in comparatively high results of the second criterion. The pilots understand the importance of key EU missions and look forward to contributing to them; however, it is premature to assess any direct contribution.

## 4 Measuring policy changes

This section of the *ex-durante* evaluation aimed at multiple tasks related to measuring transformative policy changes and testing the quality of the measurement framework. Tasks of each pilot *ex-durante* evaluation team included:

1. collection/verification of data for all policy level KPIs,
2. comparison of data with the baseline values looking for difference (if applicable),
3. assessment of which of these changes can be attributed to the implemented actions,
4. review of the procedures for monitoring and evaluation of the Action Plan.

Successful completion of these tasks would allow testing of the measurement framework of the regional Action Plans, its relevance and applicability for evaluation of future implementation progress. It would also enable collecting the first evidence of AP implementation progress, comparing changes and assessing the potential contribution towards the expected policy transformations.

The first two tasks are related to policy-level indicators that are the core of the AP measurement framework and represent tools used to assess progress towards expected objectives. Tasks comprise collecting the last available data on selected indicators, testing data availability and verifying the relevance of the indicators for measuring the desired changes. The third task is focused on identifying potential changes during the reporting period and identifying if PoliRural project activities have contributed to these changes. Lastly, the fourth task is to review how well the monitoring and evaluation system is articulated in Action Plans. Its focus is whether authors of APs have specified what data, at what time shall be collected and by whom to ascertain that progress towards the desired change is made.

Further subsections take a closer look at each task for a generalised overview to identify recurring issues and patterns. The subsections follow the same sequence and structure as the functions mentioned above.

In these subsections (4.1., 4.2. & 4.3.), each *ex-durante* report was assessed using a three-criteria checklist (available below). Criteria were chosen by the VPR evaluation team using the checklist provided in the *ex-durante* methodology (subsection “Measuring changes”). Each of the three criteria corresponds to a specific task (the first criteria correspond to both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> tasks). Compliance with each of the checklist's statements that correspond to a particular criterion in the Action Plan was rated with one point if the compliance was distinctive and the evaluation team agreed with the information, zero points if no compliance could be noted and 0,5 points if compliance was partial.

Criteria to be analysed:

- 4.1. Selected policy level KPIs are SMART, suitable and relevant for measuring transformative changes.

4.2. AP actions have contributed to observable transformative changes at the policy level.

4.3. The Action Plan contains a precise monitoring and evaluation section outlining what data will be collected, by whom, in what way and for what purpose.

#### 4.1 Quality and relevance of KPIs

Overall, most pilots report significant improvements in the quality of the KPIs during the reporting period. Such progress is closely related to the pilot efforts in finalising and adjusting final versions of Action Plans, including KPIs review. Pilot teams have tested the KPIs, assessed and verified their measurability, and set baseline and target values.

Results of the *ex-ante* evaluation identified a lack of a more in-depth assessment of impact and outcome indicators and indicator values, revealing that most indicators in the Action Plans were not consistent with the SMART framework. According to *ex-durante* results, during the reporting period, several pilot teams have made efforts to improve the quality of indicators by determining if they are consistent with the SMART framework. Indicators were assessed for their specificity, measurability, achievability, relevance to the proposed actions, expected outcomes or changes and time frame in which change will be achieved. According to *ex-durante* reports, these efforts have led to better-articulated indicators at all levels of intervention logic for several pilot regions (e.g. Central Greece, Eastern Galilee, Mazowieckie, Monaghan, Northern Macedonia, Segobriga).

Results of *ex-durante* evaluations reveal several other KPIs-related problems. Lack of appropriate data has been highlighted as a problem already during the *ex-ante* evaluations, where almost no information was given about the availability and reliability of data for the chosen indicators. Under *ex-durante* evaluation, most pilots have undertaken a detailed review of baseline and target values; in some cases, that involved collecting baseline data, setting target data, and updating data. Most pilots report that by the time of *ex-durante* evaluation, the quality of chosen indicators is satisfactory. However, few pilots specifically refer that there still exists a problem with data availability for specific KPIs, where data are collected and provided only at the national level and no further division at the regional or local level is provided (e.g., Northern Macedonia, Vidzeme). This issue is characteristic of KPIs that are based on official statistical data. Another data availability problem is related to the timing of data. If official statistical data are provided with a 0,5-1 year delay, then data from the monitoring systems for instruments of agricultural policy and cohesion policy are available to the public with a much longer delay of several years, following the reporting practice of these financial instruments (e.g. Mazowieckie, Vidzeme).

The related problem highlighted by pilots is the lack of appropriate indicators measuring the transformative changes in domains targeted by key EU policies (e.g., biodiversity, climate changes etc.). Official data sources in several pilot regions lack data that can reflect social, economic and environmental changes that characterise rural areas. To solve this problem,

pilots have identified various strategies. E.g., the Häme pilot has introduced a measure focused on developing continuous and transparent monitoring and predictive system for rural ecosystem actors in the Action Plan. The Segobriga pilot is advocating for aggregable and interoperable data systems that allow an analysis of local trends, homogenizable on a large scale. Other pilots are looking for project-based solutions that would support the collection of such data and further potential inclusion in official statistics.

Consultations with regional stakeholders and their involvement in SDM experiments in several pilot regions have helped to adjust and introduce new KPIs (e.g., Häme, Monaghan, Northern Macedonia). Such consultations have allowed identifying KPIs that are better focused and allow more precisely measuring the area of interest. Consultations have also helped to identify data gaps and stimulated discussions on potential solutions with the decision-makers. E.g., the Häme pilot has identified a lack of data reflecting the spread of bioeconomy and circular economy activities among regional enterprises and a lack of data on the number of competent working-age people.

Overall, out of 12 maximal points, the quality of this criteria is 11 points, demonstrating significant improvement compared to the *ex-ante* results (6 points). There is room for improvement as not all pilots have finalised their Action Plans. They would need to reassess the quality and relevance of their KPIs and data availability in further evaluations.

## 4.2 Contribution to transformative changes

Considering the fact that AP implementation either has not started or is at the very first stage of implementation (see section 3.1), it is premature to observe and report any changes at the policy level. Several *ex-durante* reports reveal evidence of essential preconditions reached in pilot regions that may significantly influence the further implementation of APs and foster transformative policy changes:

- I. In May 2022, the government of the Czech Republic approved the Action Plan of the Smart Cities Concept by 2030, a central precondition for activities included in the Central Bohemia region Action Plan. This document now provides a basis for regional authorities to elaborate their SMART strategies, which in many cases are a condition for receiving state funding.
- II. In 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Slovakia developed “The Concept of joint procedures in building modern agriculture in the horizon of 2035”. The Slovak pilot team had provided substantial comments to this document before its approval by the Slovak government in December 2021. These consultations have helped to establish a regular dialogue that is being continued with discussions related to enshrining the Vision in the constitutional law (the primary goal of the Slovak AP).
- III. The pilot team of Galilee has met with the Minister of Communication to inform about the AP and to advocate for turning Eastern Galilee into a pilot project for the

digitalisation of Israel's regions. Meeting has resulted in agreements on follow-up and setting off further steps.

- IV. Segobriga Regional Action Plan has served as an inspiring source for developing a candidate strategy for a call for aid from the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plans financed by the Next generation funds in Spain.
- V. Vidzeme Planning Region Development Programme, which incorporates challenges and measures from the Regional Action Plan, has been widely used as a source of information and guidance in other strategic planning processes at the municipal and local levels, as recognised by more than half of respondents of the survey of stakeholders. This indicates apparent spillover effects of the foresight process and the programme's high level of utility.

In some of the cases mentioned above, direct intervention of pilot teams demonstrates the potential for further transformative changes.

Overall, out of 12 maximal points, the quality of this criteria is 3,5 points. Contribution toward the transformative changes shall be examined in more detail by the following evaluations carried out during the implementation of APs.

### 4.3 Monitoring and evaluation procedures

By the cut-off date of the *ex-durante* evaluation, most pilot teams have finalised or almost finalised their Actions Plans, including the monitoring and evaluation sections. Seven pilots have elaborated in their Action Plans a clear and comprehensive description of the monitoring system, indicating both the parties involved and their roles and responsibilities in the monitoring process and the conduct of it, have established a clear measurement framework and specified the planned use of data. Four pilots have provided mainly general information on involved stakeholders and intentions to monitor the Action Plan implementation in their Action Plans. One pilot has not provided any relevant M&E details yet. Overall, out of 12 maximal points, the quality of this criteria is 9 points, which shows an increase compared with the *ex-ante* evaluation results.

For most pilots, monitoring and evaluation of APs will be ensured by a monitoring committee composed of either the pilot team members entirely or including some stakeholders. In most cases, the Monitoring committees are just established or will be set after the finalisation of the Action Plan. The composition of the Monitoring Committees is seen as an essential factor for the adaption and implementation of APs by some pilots (Northern Macedonia, Slovakia) who are currently working on including crucial policymakers in the MC to secure its status. Some pilots plan to use existing monitoring procedures and bodies in the region (Monaghan, Vidzeme) but adapt them and enlarge the representation of stakeholders (e.g., by adding the members of established Advisory boards). In one case, the M&E function is entrusted to an external stakeholder, but in another case, establishing an M&E system is included as one of the AP interventions.

Table 2 Overview of quality assessment per criteria used in section 4

Criterion:	Number of AP meeting the requirements			Total score (yes=1p, no=0p, partially=0.5p)
	Yes	Partially	No	
4.1. Selected policy level KPIs are SMART, suitable and relevant for measuring transformative changes	10	2	0	11
4.2. AP actions have contributed to observable transformative changes at the policy level	0	7	5	3,5
4.3. Monitoring and evaluation procedures are sound and described in sufficient detail	7	4	1	9

The provided overview shows that pilots have made considerable progress in updating and improving KPIs suited to monitor transformative changes. There is also noticeable progress in developing monitoring and evaluation systems and involving stakeholders. It is premature to observe and report any transformative changes at the policy level, and the potential contribution of AP actions shall be analysed under the following *ex-durante* evaluations.

## 5 Stakeholders' performance and engagement

This section of *ex-durante* evaluations aimed to assess how effectively stakeholders have been engaged in the foresight process in the last seven months to determine their ownership and readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation and their major capacity gains.

Each *ex-durante* evaluation team from pilot regions assessed the performance and engagement of their stakeholders along three main dimensions:

- 5.1. **stakeholder engagement**, including their involvement in the foresight process, openness and inclusiveness of it, their trust in the results and the extent to which they endorse the results,
- 5.2. **stakeholder ownership**, including assessment of their understanding of responsibilities for implementation, ways of implementation and their readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation,
- 5.3. effects on **stakeholder capacities and capabilities**, including increased cooperation opportunities, insights, obtained knowledge and skills, and capacity to implement and monitor plans.

This section shows the results of the pilot's work with stakeholders during the foresight process and the development of Regional Action Plans during the last seven months from December 2021 to July 2022. From the beginning of the foresight process, every pilot was surrounded by a community of stakeholders whose input was required several times during the project. Pilot teams identified four main categories of stakeholders, including policy actors, stakeholders representing rural communities, rural newcomers, and stakeholders with scientific interests (academic and other experts).

Three dimensions selected for assessing pilot work with stakeholders reflect both the openness and accessibility of the foresight process. They indicate stakeholders' understanding of its objectives, the responsibilities for implementing developed Action Plans and willingness to engage in their Action Plan implementation. They also show the benefits of participation in the foresight process in networking opportunities and acquiring new insights, knowledge, and skills on new tools and approaches.

Under *ex-durante* evaluations, half of the pilot teams conducted surveys (collecting 165 responses), two pilot teams conducted in-depth interviews (with 43 stakeholders) or asked for stakeholders' feedback in open discussions or meetings to assess stakeholder engagement, ownership, and capacity gains. The results of this phase were summarised using evaluation rubrics allowing interpretation and summary of the evidence in a systematic and transparent way. According to the evaluation methodology, similar questions were applied under both *ex-ante* and *ex-durante* evaluation allowing for comparison and assessment of changes.

Assessment is provided in four levels: a very high level representing exemplary performance and best practice, a high level representing good performance and broad coverage with room for more profound effects, a medium level representing overall satisfactory performance with partial coverage, and a low level representing weak performance with several limitations. For more details, see Annex 1 *Ex-durante* evaluation methodology.

### 5.1 Assessment of stakeholder engagement in the foresight process

Results of the assessment show a very high level of stakeholder engagement. Almost half of all pilot teams report engagement at the highest level, one-third at a high level and three at a medium level. Most stakeholders have appreciated the openness and inclusivity of the foresight process – stakeholders from almost half of the pilots (5) rated it as 'very high' and six as 'high'. Stakeholders' trust in the results of the foresight process is at a slightly lower level, with stakeholders from 4 pilots rating it as 'very high', five as 'high' and three as 'medium'. The lowest rating stakeholders gave for endorsing the results of the foresight process and the elaborated Regional Action Plans.



*Figure 3 Summary of stakeholders' rating on their engagement as reported by pilots*

Compared with the results of stakeholder assessment under the ex-ante evaluation, the engagement level has decreased. In comparison, stakeholders rated their engagement slightly lower (-1%) than in December. The most significant changes are related to the endorsement of results (-4%) and stakeholder assessment of the openness and inclusiveness of the process (-1%). On the other hand, stakeholders' trust in the foresight process results has slightly increased (+0,6%). These changes in stakeholders' engagement are probably related to the fact that several pilots are still designing their Action Plans and Roadmaps.

High ratings from stakeholders indicate that the pilot teams have organised a foresight process with a very high level of openness, good ethics and inclusion creating high trust in the process and approval of its results. In the Mazowieckie region (PL), stakeholders stressed the high relevance of topics discussed during the foresight process as one of the main factors motivating their engagement. Stakeholders from the Segobriga region (ES) appreciate the increased interactions with the stakeholders during the finalisation of the Action Plan and the possibility to express their opinions, feel being listened to and see how their ideas materialised in the proposed actions. Stakeholders from the Vidzeme region (LV) reported that they have

already used the results of the foresight process in developing other strategic planning documents at the municipal and LAG level, thus indicating apparent spill-over effects of the foresight process.

## 5.2 Stakeholder level of ownership and readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation

Overall, stakeholders have rated their level of ownership relatively high. Most stakeholders indicate a high level of understanding of who is responsible for implementing regional Action Plans. Stakeholders from 4 pilots rate it as 'very high' and five as 'high'. Their understanding of how the plans are to be implemented is comparatively lower, with three pilots rating it as 'very high', four as 'high', three as 'medium' and two as 'low'. Willingness to participate in the implementation of plans stakeholders have rates slightly higher. Stakeholders from four pilots rate it as 'very high', three as 'high', three as 'medium', and one as 'low'.

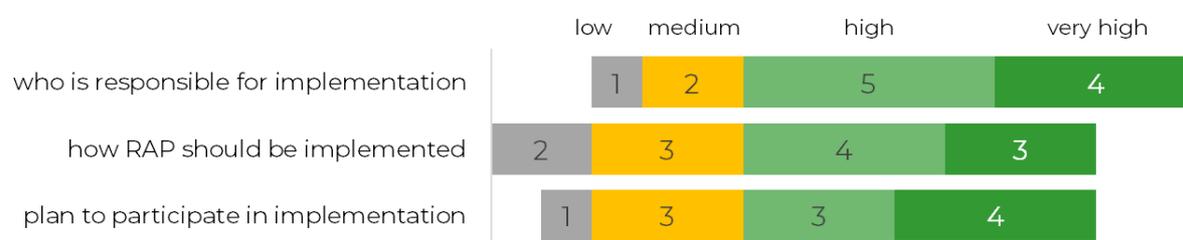


Figure 4 Summary of stakeholders' rating on their ownership as reported by pilots

Compared with the results of the ex-ante evaluation, stakeholders' assessment of ownership and understanding of implementation responsibilities has notably decreased (-2,6%). The highest decrease is noted in stakeholders' perception of who is responsible for implementing the AP (-2,1%). On the other hand, understanding how exactly the Regional Action Plans should be implemented has slightly increased (+0,5%). Stakeholder willingness to personally participate in the implementation of the AP has increased significantly (+2%). This is probably because the Action plans have become more precise and elaborated, allowing stakeholders to see their role in these processes more clearly.

Similarly, as in the case of ex-ante evaluations, surveys and interviews were carried out primarily with regional stakeholders closely involved in the foresight process. It raises the question of the extent of reach and involvement of decision and policymakers in the implementation of the results of the foresight process. In *ex-durante* reports, pilots highlight this issue again, emphasising difficulties in reaching decision-makers and getting them to take ownership of the Action Plans and integrate them into political agendas. E.g. stakeholders from the Mazowieckie region (PL) consider the main risks for the effective integration of proposed measures into local policy in sustaining the attention of local authorities and the failure to identify specific sources of long-term support for economic transformation. Stakeholders from the Vidzeme region (LV) have more critically assessed their potential

involvement in the Action Plan implementation as they have more clearly realised their potential role.

### 5.3 Main capacity gains from participation in the foresight process

When pilots launched the foresight process, it was assumed that participation in it might create additional benefits. Results of the *ex-ante* evaluations confirmed these assumptions showing that involvement in the foresight process benefits involved actors and organisations as networking, possibilities for closer cooperation, increasing skills, reducing uncertainties by identifying risks, and increasing knowledge by building alternative visions and scenarios.

Results of the *ex-durante* evaluations provide more evidence showing that effects from participation in the foresight process are comparatively stable but are conditional upon regular interactions between pilot teams and stakeholders.

As acknowledged by several pilot teams, elaborating the Foresight packages and Regional Action Plans has promoted the implementation of new practices stimulating a good collective learning and cooperation environment within and between the stakeholders and pilot teams. Stakeholders acknowledge very high-level effects on their capacities and capabilities; they demonstrate slightly lower effects regarding increased insights, reduced uncertainties, and improved cooperation and networking.

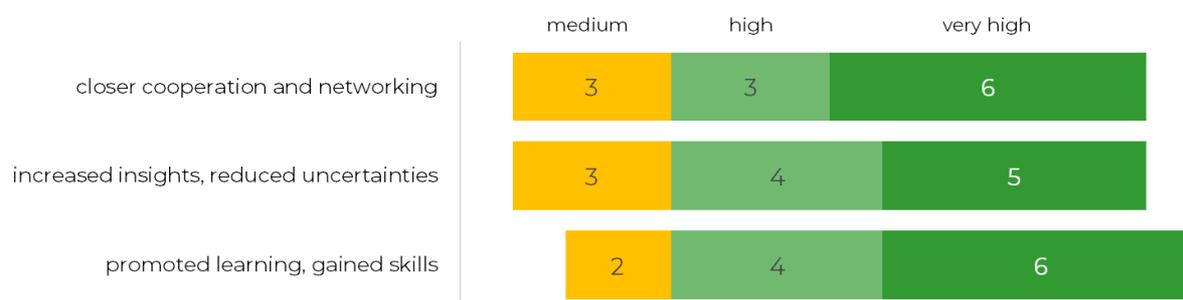


Figure 5 Summary of stakeholder's rating on main capacity and capability gains as reported by pilots

Stakeholders' participation in the foresight process has increased their cooperation with other stakeholders due to additional networking opportunities. Overall, stakeholders from six pilots rate it as 'very high, three 'high' and two 'medium'. E.g. stakeholders from the Mazowieckie region (PL), as the main effects of the foresight process, see its ability to identify the challenges facing the region's development and to effectively mobilise local actors to discuss the region's future. Thanks to the Foresight process, stakeholders from the Segobriga region (ES) recognise that trust and relationships between the different stakeholders have been strengthened. Stakeholders from the Monaghan region (IE) stressed that a variety of involved stakeholders' possibilities to interact regularly and to discuss topics outside of the usual agendas are among the main effects of the foresight process that created a unique forum in rural Ireland.

Stakeholders appreciate the effects of the foresight process related to increased insights by building alternative visions and scenarios, complementing information needs, and reducing uncertainties, almost like the ones of networking. Overall, stakeholders from five pilots rate it as 'very high', four as 'high' and three as 'medium'. Here, the stakeholder's involvement in SDM experiments has the highest effect. E.g., stakeholders from Segobriga stressed that their ability to build scenarios had improved thanks to the SDM tool, whose experiment was of great interest and forced conversations and reflections with a longer future-term perspective as usual.

Stakeholders most highly value the knowledge and skills acquired during the participation in the foresight process. Overall, stakeholders from 6 pilots rate it as 'very high', four as 'high' and two as 'medium'. Learning effects are conditional on the intensity of interactions between pilot teams and stakeholders during the reporting period. Here again, participation in the SDM experiments has created possibilities for more in-depth discussions, enabling people to think more strategically and outside the box, thus stimulating learning. E.g. stakeholders from the Monaghan region (IE) recognise that participation in the process has broadened their view of what is possible and what they can do individually and as a community. Participation in the foresight process has empowered stakeholders by allowing them to express their opinion and feel influence over the development processes in their region.

Compared with the results of the ex-ante evaluation, stakeholders' assessment of their main capacity and capability gains is the only area where the score has increased (+1%). Stakeholders' rating of the opportunities for collaboration created by the foresight process has increased most explicitly (+2%). Also, their rating on the insights gained from participating in analytical processes on alternative scenarios has increased (+1%). Only decrease can be noted regarding their assessment of the knowledge and skills gained from the process (-1%). Such changes can be explained by the fact that some pilots' stakeholders had fewer opportunities to engage in collaboration and analytical methods during the reporting period.

The *ex-ante* evaluations showed a very high level of stakeholder engagement, medium level of ownership, and high-level effects on stakeholder capacities. The results of *ex-durante* evaluations show a slightly lower but still high level of stakeholder engagement, with trust in the results still being the weakest criterion. Stakeholder ownership has remained at a medium level, with positive tendencies in understanding how APs should be implemented and increased readiness to participate in implementing APs. Participation in foresight processes has contributed to a high level of stakeholder capacities and capabilities, and these effects have been increased during the reporting period. The results indicate the necessity for continuing efforts to enhance collaboration effects for stakeholders and strengthen stakeholder ownership in implementing the Action Plans.

### Engagement in the process

Open and inclusive process

Trust to the results

Endorsement of results

### Ownership and understanding

Who is responsible for implementation

How RAP should be implemented

Plan to participate in implementation

### Acquired capacities and capabilities

Increased cooperation & collaboration

Increased insights & reduced uncertainties

Promoted learning and gaining skills

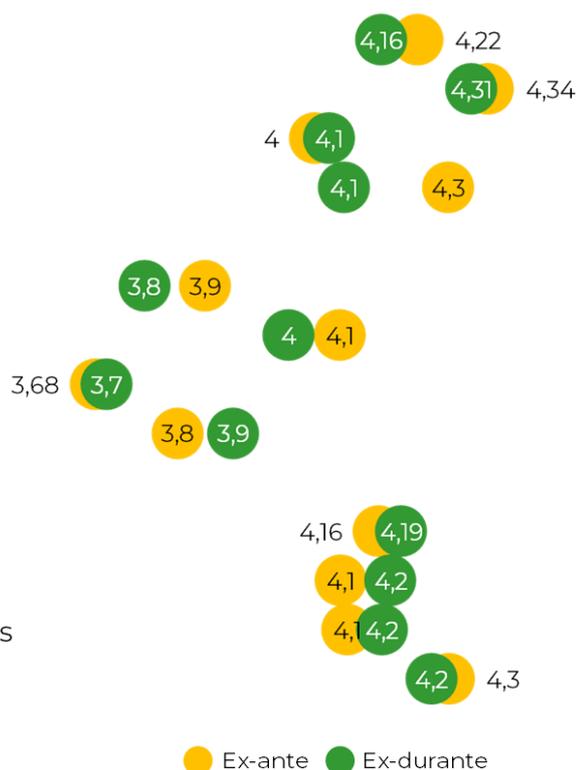


Figure 6 Comparison of changes in stakeholder's rating in ex-ante and ex-durante evaluations

## 5.4 Influence and effects on the pilot teams

The analysis of ex-ante evaluations summarised in the D6.1 Ex ante Intervention Case Study report recognised changes and effects in the pilot teams attributable to the evaluation process and participation in the foresight process. The primary outcomes were improved focus of intended interventions, more active and comprehensive communication with stakeholders, forums for mutual exchange and feedback, mutual learning, and direct process value in boosting pilots' work on the Regional Action Plans.

The results of *ex-durante* evaluations confirm the positive effects of the evaluation process for the pilot teams. The most considerable effect is related to the analysis of stakeholder engagement, ownership, and capacity gains. Pilots have continued active communication with regional stakeholders involving them in discussions and experiments using tools developed by the PoliRural project. This has resulted in further improved Action Plans, new insights, the increased status of pilot organisations and capacity gains among the pilot teams. E.g., *ex-durante* evaluation in Apulia allowed the pilot team to reformulate the Action Plan changing the main goal and focusing on the proposed measures. In the Segobriga region, *ex-durante* evaluation has allowed verifying that necessary corrections identified during the ex-ante evaluation have been taken into account during the foresight process. Engagement of stakeholders in the foresight process and their regular evaluation have been recognised as

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best practice (in Slovakia) and included in the guidelines for the government organisations (in Latvia), thus increasing the recognition and status of pilot organisations. As reflected in some *ex-durante* reports, the pilots have more clearly seen the benefits of regular evaluations. They are planning to continue periodic *ex-durante* evaluations during the AP implementation process.

## 6 Conclusions and recommendations

### EQ1. What progress can be observed in implementing the Action Plans?

During the reporting period, almost none of the pilots started implementing their Action Plans. Most pilots have worked on the finalisation of their Action Plans and Roadmaps, establishing governance and monitoring mechanisms, engaging stakeholders in these and concentrating their efforts on reaching the adoption of APs by decision-makers. Pilot activities included iterative improvement of Action Plans based on feedback from stakeholders or reacting to external influence (e.g., EC comments on the national CAP Strategic Plan for Flanders). Pilot teams have actively involved regional stakeholders in analysing trends and exploring their impact on the regions using the project's elaborated tools. As the Segobriga (ES) pilot team reflected, *“The new Action Plan has improved its internal coherence, consolidating itself as a solid tool to respond to the needs of the territory.”*

#### **Recommendation:**

- 1) Pilot regions should regularly monitor progress in implementing Action Plans and assess their implementation effects under the following evaluations.

### EQ2. What specific actions are taken that contribute to key missions of the EU at the national and regional levels?

During the reporting period, only a few pilots have started the implementation of their Action Plans. Therefore, it is premature to assess any effects of these activities, and there are no observable effects of any contributions to the key EU missions.

Several changes and improvements can be observed compared to the *ex-ante* evaluation results. Pilots were prompted by a mission-oriented approach and regular evaluations to explore these missions in detail and to articulate specific ways how their planned measures would contribute to them. As a result, contribution claims in the Action Plans have become more specific and detailed, giving their assessment a more grounded feel and credibility; however, not for all pilots. The mission-oriented process has stimulated an increase in knowledge and a change of attitude among individual pilot team members.

Russian war in Ukraine and its consequences on energy, economy, environmental and social processes has been a new and very influential external factor that pilot regions faced during the reporting period. It has served as a valuable lesson demonstrating how quickly situations may change and that every plan shall be able to adapt and adjust its measures. It also showed the necessity for regular self-reflective assessment/evaluation exercises that allow timely noticing of such changes, initiating a detailed exploration (Deep Dive) and further reassessment and adjustment of measures. As the Mazowieckie (PL) pilot team emphasised, *“The Action Plan deliberately overlooks the fundamental change in circumstances due to the war in Ukraine and the changes in local economies. Once the changes are visible, the Action Plan will need to be revised and an adaptation plan prepared.”*

**Recommendation:**

- 2) Despite improvements, more attention is still needed to articulate and measure the contribution level to key EU missions.
- 3) Pilots are encouraged to add a review of external factors as part of regular evaluations of Action Plan implementation.

**EQ3. Is any difference observable at the policy level, and is there any evidence that the intervention has contributed to these changes?**

Since Action Plan implementation has not started or is at the very first stage of implementation, it is premature to observe and report any changes at the policy level and pilot contributions to those.

Several pilot regions have reported on developments that may serve as essential preconditions for transformative changes in policies. Pilot teams have participated and contributed to the strategic documents elaborated and approved by national governments or ministries or established regular consultations with national decision makers that may significantly influence the further implementation of Action Plans. Action Plans developed by pilot teams have served as sources of inspiration and guidance for developing other strategic documents at national, regional, municipal, and local levels, demonstrating spill-over effects of the foresight process and the high utility potential of developed Action Plans.

**Recommendation:**

- 4) Pilots shall be encouraged to maintain a high level of awareness of the current and future actions of the Regional Action Plan to enable its modification in line with changes in the socio-economic and environmental conditions in the region.
- 5) Pilots also are encouraged to look for and promote synergies with regional and national programmes and other initiatives that may increase the potential impact of transformative actions.

**EQ4. What is the quality and relevance of the M&E framework, including the availability of the data for measuring the indicators and KPIs?**

Pilots have made considerable progress in updating and improving KPIs suited to monitor transformative changes. Progress has been reached thanks to numerous iterations and regular evaluations that helped to test the intervention logic and its measurement framework. Still, problems with data available at the appropriate territorial level (regional, local) or for a specific period exists. The widespread problem is the lack of relevant indicators and data for measuring transformative changes in domains targeted by key EU missions. The use of project tools, in particular, involvement in SDM experiments, has helped to adjust and introduce new KPIs, identify data gaps and stimulate discussions on possible solutions with decision-makers.

There is noticeable progress in developing monitoring and evaluation systems for Action Plan implementation and involving stakeholders in those. Action Plan Monitoring Committees may

play a substantial role in securing adaption and successful implementation of the Action Plans. As recognised by Slovakia pilot: *“Creation of the Monitoring Committee at the end of the running of the project is highly appreciated and can guarantee a continuation of the activities after the conclusion of the project. One of the tasks of the newly established Monitoring Committee will be to continue further consultation processes after the end of the project.”*

**Recommendation:**

- 6) To strengthen the ability to measure changes related to key EU missions, pilots should closely follow developments related to data availability at the regional and rural levels, in particular EU initiatives related to the Rural Observatory and the development of new data and modelling platforms.

**EQ5. Are there any observable changes in the stakeholder engagement, their level of ownership, readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation and their perceptions of major capacity gains from participation in the foresight process?**

The *ex-ante* evaluations showed a very high level of stakeholder engagement, medium level of ownership, and high-level effects on stakeholder capacities. The results of *ex-durante* evaluations show a slightly lower but still high level of stakeholder **engagement**, with trust in the results still being the weakest criterion. In stakeholders’ view main factors motivating their engagement were the high relevance of topics discussed during the foresight process, increased interactions between stakeholders, and the possibility to express their opinions in such a unique forum and see the materialisation of their ideas. As reflected by several pilots:

- *“Häme pilot and foresight package has provided stakeholders, particularly policymakers and authorities, a forum to examine change drivers, obstacles, vulnerabilities, needs and current policies in a safe and collaborative environment.”* (Häme, FI)
- *“Stakeholders need to see that they can directly influence the policies affecting them and the space they live in. The foresight is the perfect model for guaranteeing this.”* (Slovakia)
- *“Foresight provides an innovative and inclusive approach to rural development in Monaghan, but the process is complicated. However, it’s worth the effort to gain insights and engagement from stakeholders. Rural areas are dynamic and complex, so a wide net should be used when engaging with rural stakeholders.”* (Monaghan, IE)

Stakeholder **ownership** has remained at a medium level, with positive tendencies in understanding how APs should be implemented and increased readiness to participate in implementing APs. Participation in the foresight process has helped stakeholders become more engaged and more clearly understand their potential role and critically assess their possible involvement. As reflected by several pilots:

- *“A comparison with the ex-ante evaluation from December 2021 reveals a more realistic view of the foresight process as the stakeholders have become more familiar with the process and learned its limitations. This suggests that we need to manage stakeholders’ expectations and not over-sell what is possible through our locally orchestrated and implemented rural development policies and supports.”* (Monaghan, IE)
- *“The survey showed a fairly high level of enthusiasm for the objectives of the adopted RAP, but a certain scepticism about its possible implementation (effectiveness), which includes a certain risk of diverging from the political assumptions of public strategies.”* (Mazowieckie, PL)
- *“The main challenge is how stakeholders will support or implement Action plan in short or long term. Two provinces in the Häme region cause specific challenges to rural developers on multiple levels: policymakers, authorities, innovators, developers, trainers.”* (Häme, FI)

Participation in foresight processes has contributed to a high level of **stakeholder capacities and capabilities**, and these effects have been increased during the reporting period. The foresight process has provided a good learning and cooperation environment, where regular interactions between pilot teams and stakeholders are an essential precondition. Participation in SDM experiments and related discussions has stimulated in-depth discussions, enabled more strategic thinking and provoked learning. In the stakeholder’s view, the most significant effects are related to the unique possibilities created by the foresight process to mobilise different local actors for serious discussions about the region's future. Regular interactions and discussions of topics outside of usual agendas have strengthened the trust and relationships among stakeholders. As reflected by the Segobriga pilot:

- *Use of the System Dynamics tool has been of great interest. In this exercise, scenarios have been proposed, which have forced conversations and reflections with a longer future-term perspective than usual. This entails changes in perspectives and new visions on the evolution of the territory, such as taking more into account the external factors that can condition the evolution of the territory. This exercise has also greatly helped to promote the involvement of stakeholders in the Foresight process. It has been verified that the stakeholders have taken a step forward in terms of supporting the Action Plan.”* (Segobriga, ES)

### **Recommendation:**

- 7) Pilots are encouraged to retain the active involvement of a broad stakeholder panel in regular discussions and interactions on locally driven initiatives to address the significant challenges and trends in their regions. Using various foresight tools and techniques, as well as tools produced by the PoliRural project, may serve as an essential process enabler.

## Lessons learned

Similarly, as for the *ex-ante* evaluation, the results of the *ex-durante* evaluation show the evident **process and learning effects** for the project and pilot regions. If the *ex-ante* evaluation process facilitated and accelerated the elaboration of Action Plans, then the *ex-durante* evaluation process helped to improve the internal coherence of the Action Plans and deepen collaboration and interaction with regional stakeholders, thus increasing the likelihood of plans being implemented.

Typically, an *ex-durante* evaluation should be carried out after a more extended period - at least one year –to observe any effects of implementation. The *ex-durante* evaluation was carried out more from a methodological point of view as a learning process to demonstrate the **usefulness of the evaluation process** and to reinforce the belief in the pilots that evaluations should be carried out regularly. For several pilots, the PoliRural project was their first experience with an evaluation, and we see an effect on pilot team capacity in this regard. Most pilots are planning to continue regular *ex-durante* evaluations. These are good preconditions for the development of evaluative thinking about rural development. As reflected by several pilots:

- *“Ex-durante evaluation served to verify the validity of the methodology proposed for the ex-ante evaluation, which has turned out to be a good tool for carrying out the evaluation analyses of the Action Plans and therefore guarantees the solidity of the comparative process between the initial versions of the Action Plans and the current versions.”* (Segobriga, ES)
- *“Regular Ex-durante evaluation twice a year would provide a reliable tool to progress with the implementation of the Action Plan and to look for alternative ways in case some risks to its functioning occur. It is also advised to monitor progress on a regular basis.”* (Slovakia)

A relatively long **time available for the foresight process** in pilot regions has proved to be one of the success factors of the PoliRural project. The foresight process requires time for all involved actors to understand and appreciate its benefits. Time is necessary for a new way of thinking to be absorbed and new habits/behaviours acquired. The PoliRural project provided an opportunity for a continuous process of mutual learning where pilot teams and their stakeholders have jointly ventured into this transformative journey and gained valuable experience and insights into its possibilities and limitations. As reflected by the Häme pilot:

- *“The long-term interaction (30+ months) with the Häme pilot stakeholder panel is a beneficial mechanism. More focus should have been done in the earlier stage to define the target of the PoliRural foresight process for reaching better implementation results with the stakeholders during this period. To achieve results, quite complicated measures have to be taken with large resources and a long time period.”* (Häme, FI)

The last year of project implementation was reserved for the mission-transformation process with pilot teams dealing with implementing the Action Plans. Most of that time was spent on the final phases of the foresight process – Action Plan, Roadmap and Endorsement. The pilot team’s reflections in *ex-durante* evaluation reports on difficulties in endorsing the AP by decision makers indicate that pilots are missing targeted support/resources for the implementation phase (e.g. on advocacy or work with decision makers) as the mission orientation support provided was concentrated more on the foresight tasks.

Other factors influencing the results and success of pilot teams can be related to **pilot team composition** and their institutional roles. As indicated in the previous analysis of Regional Action Plans,<sup>5</sup> the composition of teams, interaction within teams and involvement of public authorities have directly influenced the selection of transformative measures, ambition, scale and timeline of these measures. Similar effects have been noted in the different levels of success in the Action Plan adoption process by pilot teams. Pilot teams involving institutions with established institutional roles/responsibilities for rural or regional development processes have better opportunities to influence the adoption of plans by decision-makers than teams consisting primarily of research institutions. This should be considered during the partnership formulation process in the project design phase.

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<sup>5</sup> PoliRural deliverable D6.2 Regional Action Plans, April, 2022

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## 7 References

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## 8 Annex 1 *Ex-durante* Evaluation Methodology

*Ex-durante* Evaluation Methodology is available [here](#) (link to Google Drive location).

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## 9 Annex 2 *Ex-durante* Evaluation Reports of the 12 Pilots

*Ex-durante* Evaluation Reports of the 12 Pilots are available here ([Google Drive folder](#)).