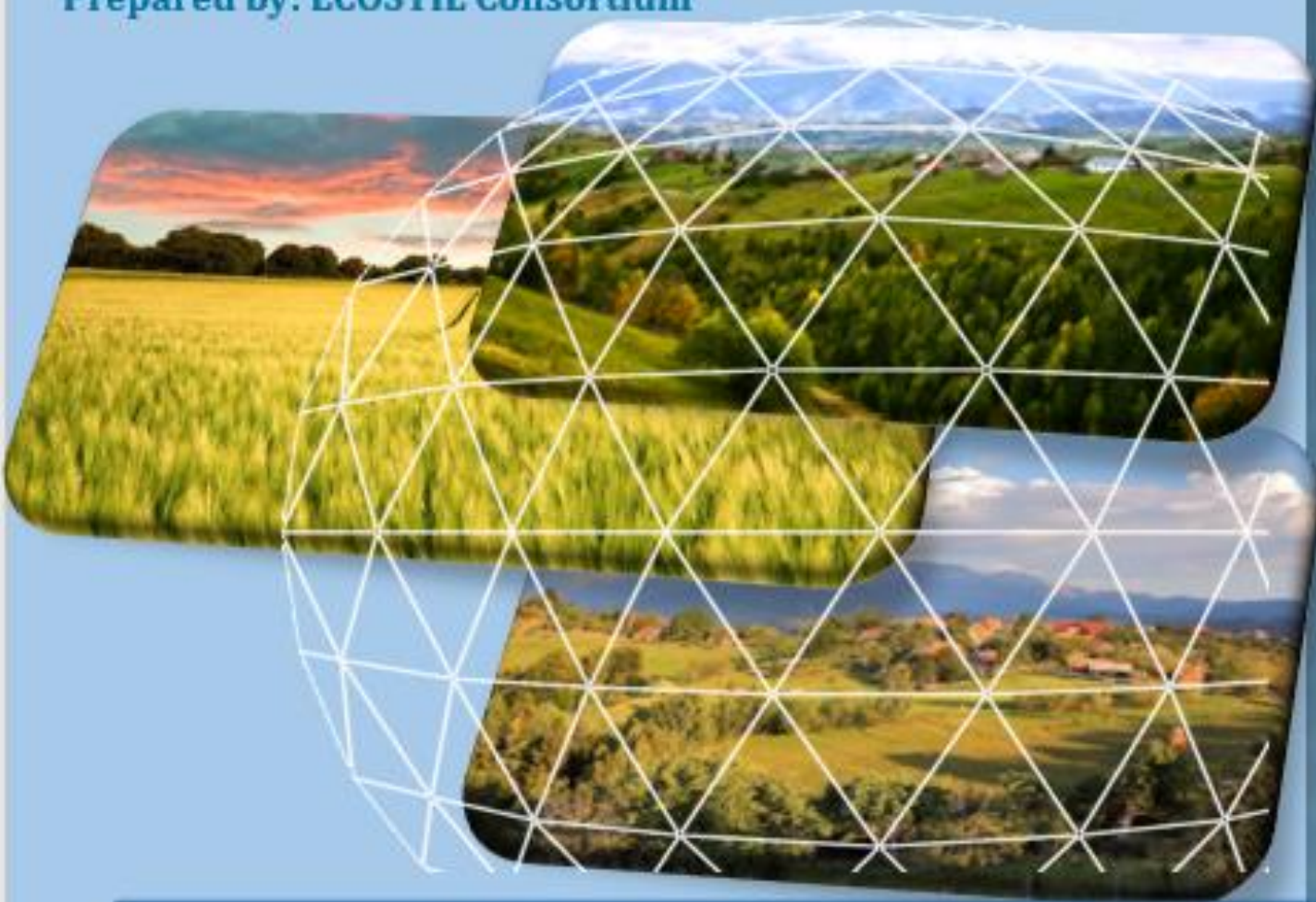


Evaluations of
Operational Programme Environment 2014-2020

Activity 4:
Evaluation of the implementation of
Operational Programme
"Environment" 2014-2020 through
Community-Led Local Development
approach

SUMMARY
of the Final Evaluation Report

Ministry of Environment and Water
Prepared by: ECOSTIL Consortium



Sofia, 26 November 2020

Summary

This summary presents the main conclusions and recommendations of the Evaluation of implementation of the Operational Program "Environment" 2014-2020 (OPE) through the community-led local development (CLLD) approach.

The evaluation was carried out in the period **June 2020 - December 2020** by experts of ECOSTIL Consortium with leading partner Ecorys South East Europe Ltd. and a partner - BIM Consulting Ltd., under contract D-30-24/01.04.2019 concluded with the Ministry of the Environment and Water.

The evaluation presents the results as of **31.10.2020**.

The main objective of the evaluation was to provide an independent analysis of the implementation of the CLLD approach, thus assisting the Managing Authority (MA) of the Programme in the effective and efficient management, monitoring, evaluation and control.

The evaluation was carried out during the implementation of the Programme and is an **ad-hoc evaluation**, which was not initially included in the Evaluation Plan of the Operational Programme. The evaluation was carried out in the context of the applicable European and national legislation and strategy papers, as well as the European Commission's guidelines for carrying out such type of evaluations.

The evaluation answers predefined **evaluation questions**, structured in the following **evaluation topics**: relevance of support, effectiveness of delivery of results; efficiency of implementation.

Existing monitoring data from the OPE monitoring system as well as data from the Managing Authority of the Rural Development Program,¹ strategic and regulatory documents and previous studies and analyses were used to carry out the evaluation. **Primary data** were collected through the following methods: desk research, meetings with key stakeholders;² an online survey among 64 Local Action Groups (LAGs) that have approved funding strategies from the Operational Programs; and a focus group with the LAG³, whose strategies are supported under the Operational Program "Environment" 2014-2020 and with the participation of a representative of the Bulgarian National LEADER Network.

Analyses were carried out through a set of tools, according to the evaluation questions as follows: analysis of the intervention logic of Priority Axis 3 of the Operational Program "Environment" and the Strategies of the Local Action Groups; stakeholder analysis; needs analysis, indicator analysis, financial performance analysis, descriptive statistics, SWOT analysis; analysis of the contribution to the objectives of Priority Axis 3, analysis of

¹ As responsible body for the implementation of the approach, according to the provisions of DCM 161/4.07.2016

² MA of the Operational Program "Environment", Coordination Committee of (Ministry of Agriculture Food and Forestry), National Association of Local Initiative Groups in Bulgaria; Directorate "National Service for Nature Protection" in the Ministry of Environment and Water, National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria; Central Coordination Unit and Beneficiaries (Municipality of Kardzali and Municipality of Pomorie)

³ LAG Belene - Nikopol; MIG Hisarya; MIG Samokov; MIG Tutrakan-Slivo Pole; MIG Svilengrad Areal; LAG Stambolovo-Kardzali

costs/achieved results, analysis of the administrative burden in applying the approach and analysis of good practices.

The **main findings** of the evaluation report are presented below for each of the evaluation topics.

Relevance of the support

The measures supported by the Programme, through the CLLD approach, namely: direct conservation activities for species and habitats reported in unfavourable condition, correspond to and are part of the eligible interventions under OPE within the scope of Priority Axis 3 "Natura 2000 and Biodiversity". These measures are specific and limited to measure 109 of the National Prioritised Action Framework (NPAF), and exclude a number of other possible activities to support the scope of the priority axis, which are recognized by the LAG as more appropriate and responsive to their needs and capacity. Such measures are, for example, improvement of the conservation status of birds, information campaigns and environmental events.

The implementation of conservation measures requires specific expertise, and this is difficult for beneficiaries. Therefore, the interest of the LAG in the implementation of measures supported by OPE is weak. Only 9 out of a total of 64 supported LAGs have included in their strategies measures that fall within the scope of OPE, while in other programs this number is significantly higher.⁴

Notwithstanding the above, the CLLD approach could be successfully applied within the framework of OPE, it can complement national level measures. Suitable for support from the OPE, through the CLLD approach, are measures for conservation of biodiversity, but with wider scope, as well as measures for improving waste management, in which there is significant interest from local communities.

Effectiveness

Of the BGN 38 million set aside for the approach, which amounts to 19% of the funds on the Axis 3, 9 strategies of LAG were supported with a total value of BGN 13.47 million, which represents 35% of the financial resource. Significant part of the funds set aside for the approach has not been used due to the lack of interest on the part of the LAG in the measures, mainly due to their specificity.

As of the end of October 2020, 14 procedures were opened by the nine LAGs that have measures within the scope of OPE. Five of these procedures were concluded without success. Three contracts were concluded, which utilized 44% of the total contracted financial resources for the approach. However, it is still possible for all nine LAGs that were supported through the OPE to contract measures under the Programme. Two procedures of two LAGs have been completed and beneficiaries have been selected. The procedures of the remaining four LAGs are open until the end of November 2020.

The implementation of the actual conservation activities under the contracts has not started yet and the respective payment is weak.

⁴ An exception is the Operational Program "Science and Education for Smart Growth" under which 12 LAG strategies are supported

The expected contribution of the CLLD approach to the performance indicators of the three currently concluded contracts is relatively small - 0.04% to the area of supported habitats and 1.79% contribution to the area of supported habitats of species. It is not expected to increase significantly due to the limited range of species and habitats included in the LAG strategies. Although there is an indirect contribution to the result indicator (species and habitats with improved status), the added value for the program is small, as the set target values will be exceeded even without the contribution of the CLLD approach.

Efficiency

Good procedural basis for implementation and control of the CLLD approach has been established within OPE. The difficulties for the LAG are mainly related to the planning of support and selection of beneficiaries under the measures. They are caused by the discrepancy between the expectations for possible measures and those eligible for support within the scope of Priority Axis 3 of the Programme. It is not yet possible to make a full analysis of the implementation difficulties, as the projects are in initial stage of implementation.

The main risks, related to the applying the approach, at the time of the assessment, are related to the non-implementation of the measures set in the strategies of the LAG and therefore incomplete absorption of the funds agreed under OPE. Opportunities to improve implementation relate mainly to the next programming period and concern all operational programmes.

When applying the OPE approach, due to the specifics of the measures, it is important to provide timely and sufficiently detailed information and guidelines to the LAG on the scope of support, so there is no discrepancy between LAG's expectations and the eligible for support measures.

The implementation of the CLLD approach in Bulgaria in the next programming period 2021-2027 is expected to be optimized by selecting a leading fund (this is expected to be the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), thus harmonizing management and unifying procedures. This is expected to facilitate both the LAGs and the administration.

Recommendations

The report makes the following recommendations:

It is recommended when preparing the CLLD Guidelines for the next programming period, attention is paid to the possibility of including in CLLD strategies of projects related to natural habitats and habitats of species listed in the annexes of the Biodiversity Act as priority for conservation, as is the logic of the National Prioritised Action Framework. "Soft" measures such as drawing up action/conservation plans or organising forums and seminars could also be supported. This will better meet the needs of local communities and contribute to strengthening their capacity in implementing biodiversity conservation measures.

It is also advisable, if possible⁵, to widen the approach to support measures in the field of waste management, where there is a strong interest from local communities and where the approach

⁵ At the time of the evaluation, in the version of the OPE 2021-2027, sent for comments to the EC, the financing of the priority axis for waste is provided only by the Cohesion Fund. This excludes financing of CLLD measures, as the draft Common Provisions Regulation for the next programming period does not provide for CLLD to be financed by the Cohesion Fund.

could contribute, in the long run, to implementation of waste management policies and better and more efficient achievement of their objectives.

It is recommended that the MA of the OPE provide, in a timely manner, information to the LAGs on the potential measures and activities eligible for support under the CLLD approach in the next programming period, as well as guidelines for the development of the strategies. This will enable LAGs to take this information into account when analysing and planning measures in their strategies.