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**INDEPENDENT EVALUATION SERVICE OF THE REGIONAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR THE PERIOD 2014-2022 OF THE LIGURIA REGION**

**CIG: 7070449F14**

**ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT 2024 - Summary**

Rome, April 2024

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**Foreword**

**The Annual Evaluation Report (hereinafter AER) relates to the state of implementation of the RDP 2014-2022 of the Liguria Region as at 31 December 2023** and it is structured in line with the provisions set out in the Tender Specifications and with specific attention to the knowledge needs that emerged from the coordination meetings with the Regional Administration. The document includes the description of the evaluation activities carried out in the year 2023 in implementation of the RDP Evaluation Plan, as a contribution to the drafting of Chapter 2 of the Annual Implementation Report (AIR) for the year 2024.

This summary is structured as follows:

► **Update of the context analysis on the spending capacity of the RDP 2014-2022 of Regione Liguria** as at 15/10/2023;

► **Summary of the methodological support activities to LAGs on the self-assessment** of Local Development Strategies.

# 1 Update context analysis of the thematic report "Analysis of the progress of expenditure of Structural Measures"

During the month of December 2023, the Managing Authority of the RDP Liguria asked the Independent Evaluator to update the Socio-economic and programming analysis included in the Thematic Report on the analysis of the progress of structural measures expenditure delivered in 2022. The Thematic Report was focused on the analysis of the progress of the expenditure of the structural measures: the requirement of the Managing Authority of the Rural Development Programme 2014 - 2022 of the Region of Liguria (RL) was to deepen the analysis of the progress of the expenditure of the interventions with attention to the development of payments and to the detection of any criticalities linked to them, also identifying context factors that could condition the performance of farms.

In this framework, the updating of the chapter on context analysis has contributed to update the analysis of expenditure as at 15/10/2023 - with data provided by the National Rural Network - with a focus on the particular ratio between 'structural' and 'surface' measures of the Liguria RDP: which, while representing a constant of the EAFRD programming in Liguria, once combined with the above-mentioned external elements has progressively slowed down the overall expenditure. In particular, this ratio, which stands at approximately 82% of the resources for structural measures for the 2014-2022 programming period, makes the Liguria Region a peculiar case in Italy, where the weight of structural measures is 62.8%. As known, in fact, the two types of measures provide for different payment times and methods, with a much higher speed of expenditure for surface measures.

# 2 Summary of Methodological Support Activities for the Self-Assessment of Local Development Strategies

## LAG self-assessment process 2014-2022

Evaluation is a complex discipline with equally challenging objectives. The analysis of complex phenomena, even on a small scale as may be the activity of a LAG in a territory involving a multiplicity of other subjects, requires an evaluative maturity that is not always discernible among the competences of a LAG's internal working group. Moreover, considering the number of activities that staff must perform to fulfil all administrative and other commitments, the resources to devote to self-evaluation are limited. To try to comply with this, the IA, with the support of the Region, worked to stimulate the construction of a simplified methodology that could guide LAGs along this path. The aim has been to maintain a methodological structure that respects the principles of evaluation with the awareness of not wanting to place an excessive burden on the resources made available by the LAGs.

The process of supporting the Ligurian LAGs' self-assessment has reached an advanced stage. After identifying in a participatory manner the issues to be addressed and sharing the methodology to be used, the LAGs embarked on the self-assessment attempt. To support the LAGs, the IE provided a record of the various meetings and an *instruction booklet* for filling out the forms. The steps and events held so far are summarised below.

### *First meeting (2019) - The 'objects' to be evaluated in the self-assessment process*

On 26 February 2019, an evaluation session was held at the headquarters of the Liguria Region to jointly identify the objects of the self-assessment. The session involved the use of different techniques summarised below:

**A. Evaluative Brainstorming**, in turn divided into:

- creative phase (freely all participants identified all the elements that characterise the daily implementation process of Local Development Strategies, henceforth LSD)
- classification phase (the placing of each indicated element in a specific class, respecting in the aggregation of the different objects a principle of semantic proximity);
- reclassification phase (the identification in each class of further subclasses, the latter representing the final objects to be assessed).

**B. Analytic Hierarchy Process** the prioritisation of identified objects with respect to two dimensions:

- external effectiveness (what ensures greater impact of their strategies on territories),

- internal efficiency (what ensures a smoother implementation process of strategies).

For each identified object, a definition is described, an articulated definition that describes its meaning and underlies an evaluation question. The items classified in the brainstorming session were then prioritised to identify the LAGs' evaluation priorities. The meeting thus constituted the first step towards the establishment of a shared methodology. Once the topics had been identified, the IE proceeded independently to create self-assessment sheets that were presented at the next meeting.

### *Second meeting (2020) - Sharing the self-assessment methodology*

On 5 November 2020, a meeting was held to enrich the process of co-construction of self-assessment activities. The meeting, which took place in "remote" mode due to the continuing restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed to build on the results obtained and finalise the method to enable the LAGs to start the self-assessment activity.

After the 2020 event, the IE collected the LAGs' suggestions on changes to be made to the sheets and shared them again for the first self-assessment sheets. Together with the forms, the IE delivered a methodological support document so as to provide the LAGs with all possible indications for carrying out work that is exhaustive but above all useful. It is worth remembering that the purpose of the self-assessment is not only to serve as a moment of reflection for the LAG but also plays a fundamental role in communication. The self-assessment helps the LAG formalise any problems and achievements. This is intended to support the LAG both in a comparison with the MA and in the presentation of the achieved objectives to the partnership, the beneficiaries and the population. Moreover, self-evaluation has a natural outward projection because it is a classic example of the so-called "formative" evaluation, whose main purpose is improvement. It is therefore an exercise that must be carried out each year so that its results can be fed back into the LAGs' evaluation reports, into the AER and so that the IE itself can use them for its own analyses.

### *Third meeting (2022): sharing the results and next steps*

Considering that the methodology proposed by the IE is an experimental model defined through the participation and consultation of all the LAGs in two collegial events, it is important to verify whether it was adequate with respect to both the objectives and the knowledge and skills of those who implemented it. In the guidelines that accompanied the self-assessment forms, the IE explicitly clarified that each LAG could make its own choices and decide to gloss

over some issues and focus on others, perhaps developing a more accurate analysis of the dynamics that significantly influenced the implementation of their strategies. Nevertheless, the LAGs preferred to evaluate all the items identified in the previous meetings.

At the event held on 19.04.2022, an attempt was made to highlight the importance of using all the elements in the self-assessment forms to argue and support one's judgements. The logical structure of the constructed methodology may seem superfluous but is instead the basis for the clarity and transparency of the judgement made. The completeness of an evaluative response passes above all through the intermediate steps between question and judgement.

For this reason, the IE had carefully selected evaluation criteria and useful elements to support the LAGs in arriving at the formulation of the evaluation response. The suggestions made by the IE were not always taken up by the LAGs and they often failed to follow the proposed and shared methodological thread. This does not mean that the judgements are unfounded or cannot be taken into consideration, but it has been noted that the LAGs often tend to formulate responses in an informal and discursive manner. Instead, the self-assessment can be a moment when a decision is made to address issues in a different way. LAG staff often have a very thorough knowledge of the dynamics of the context in which they operate and of the difficulties encountered on the ground in supporting development processes.

► **Reflections on the effectiveness of the tested methodology and possible adjustments to it**

The methodological criticalities identified are several and are presented below:

- there is a clear lack of collection or use of data, which instead are very important both to stimulate the involvement of the territory and the beneficiaries and to avoid self-referential judgements. The construction of a questionnaire, even a simple and unarticulated one, to be circulated among stakeholders, is recommended in the methodological support document provided by the IA.
- Time and resources of LAG staff to devote to self-assessment are limited and there is not much to be done on this factor other than to try to carve out time with timely planning of activities.
- The involvement of the territory was not envisaged by any LAG at this stage of the activities, but it is highly desirable for the future to have feedback on the activities carried out, to collect information and to disseminate the results.
- Most LAGs showed difficulty in moving from an informal and discursive approach to an analytical and punctual evaluative response.
- A fundamental point of self-evaluation is its use (e.g. to verify organisational and management choices, to disseminate progress, to share good practices, to represent problems and possible solutions to the MA) and it seems that for now this is simply an end.

► **Suggestions for improving the outcome of the self-assessment**

Considering what has emerged from the self-administration of the forms, it is necessary to modify one's analysis procedure given the resources available to devote to self-assessment, it may be useful to examine only certain elements from year to year. To improve the quality of the evaluation responses, it is suggested to select only a few topics in order to further deepen the analysis and make it clear and comprehensible. In this case, it is desirable to focus on data collection and the involvement of the territory. Imagining selecting only a couple of cards, the IE thinks that the LAGs might be able to provide more exhaustive answers and follow more rigorously the methodological structure of the evaluation. For the selection of topics, one could

focus on specific aspects (e.g. of the strategy/goals set) or use what emerged in the various meetings with the IA.

## *Self-assessment activities in 2023*

Self-assessment activities continue throughout the programme so that certain topics of particular interest can be checked periodically. Considering the limitations encountered in the self-administration of the forms in 2021 and 2022, for this year the IE has chosen to focus, in agreement with the MA, the self-assessment on the theme of added value. This choice was made for a twofold reason: on the one hand, the time can begin to be considered ripe to address the issue of added value and, on the other, the opportunity was taken to stimulate the LAGs to identify a project that can be considered representative of their work.

## *2024 activities and fourth meeting*

On 16 April 2024, the evaluator organised the fourth collegial meeting with the aim of returning the results of the self-assessment exercise involving LAGs during 2023.

After retracing with the LAGs the main events that marked the self-assessment process, the Assessor introduced the participants to the objectives of the meeting; he then went on to recall the assessment matrix that guided the LAGs in the second self-assessment exercise, going into the merits of the assessment question and the assessment criteria into which it is declined. With reference to the presentation of the LAGs' judgements expressed by means of the self-assessment form, the evaluator decided to summarise the elements of response for each criterion, trying to stimulate the participants' interventions through a series of questions, illustrated below, developed from their input.

| |
|---|
| 1. *A very precise line of action of the Ligurian LAGs based on cooperation and a well-defined upstream planning was identified. What have been the results and the effects on the territory of these choices?* |
| 2. *Did such structured planning leave sufficient room to adapt to changes in the context that were inevitable over such a long period of time and which, moreover, saw the occurrence of extraordinary events?* |
| 3. *What role did the specific action of the SM19.3 cooperation play in fostering integration and creating added value on the territory?* |
| 4. *More than one LAG addresses the issue of the sustainability of projects over time, and in this regard, it is interesting to understand whether there have been any difficulties in maintaining the relationships created, considering that the centrality of partnerships in all LAGs' strategies clearly emerges.* |
| 5. *Has the territory's response in terms of joining complex projects and/or participating in calls for tenders been adequate to expectations?* |
| 6. *Were the management and administrative costs (e.g. related to the animation activities, the type of projects promoted, the number of small calls, etc.) high? Were they commensurate with the expected/achieved results? If and what would you redo? If and what would you improve?* |
| 7. *Do you consider that you have the necessary human resources, in terms of numbers and skills, to develop the animation and accompanying actions needed to implement specific actions and best involve the territory with respect to the challenges/new features introduced by CSR 2023-2027?* |
| 8. *The LAGs' assessment of their own work seems to positive; how do you plan to valorise the experience gained in this programming within the new strategy for 2023-2027?* |

### ► The projects identified by the LAGs

In the self-assessment form, the LAGs were asked to identify a project or initiative that best represented their work. The IE provided a form to be filled out to facilitate the collection of information: these projects could be the subject, following verification with the MA, of further in-depth study as part of the integration of the catalogue of good practices that is updated

every two years. During 2024, the IE chose to deepen the projects presented by the LAGs by supplementing the information collected with direct interviews with the beneficiaries.

### ► Main conclusions

In 2024, the one-sided approach to self-assessment was consolidated, which last year yielded discrete results, discussed at the fourth collegiate meeting.

The arrangements made by the IE to improve the work of the LAGs yielded satisfactory results, partly due to the modification of the structure of the form, the latter responded to a series of sub-questions that allowed a better argumentation of the overall assessment. A further measure was to include an additional section in which the LAG presented a project representative of its work. The projects selected by the LAGs were further investigated through interviews that the IE conducted with the beneficiaries indicated by the LAGs themselves.

The analysis of the self-assessment forms, the discussion with the LAGs during the collective meeting, and the input provided by the beneficiaries revealed several salient points that should be emphasised above all for the new programming. The approach adopted by the LAGs in Liguria explicitly favoured the aggregation and collaboration of stakeholders in the area concerned. In fact, various instruments (public-private partnerships, pacts, or territorial agreements) were promoted to coordinate individual actions and create a culture of cooperation. The experience gained leaves a solid base from which to build, and some LAGs emphasise the importance of giving continuity to what has been done so far. On the other hand, while not all the planning solutions tried out so far by the LAGs have proved effective, it is important to emphasise that the experience gained has enabled most LAGs to "adjust their sights" during programming and to project themselves into the new awareness of the limits and opportunities offered by a highly integrated planning approach, which in any case would seem to be the one best suited to responding to the specific characteristics of the area.

Some LAGs have experimented with innovative interventions involving actors (e.g. associations of various kinds) and supply chains (e.g. almond trees) that are often overlooked by the RDP, generating interesting results. These experiences have created awareness of the possibility of differentiating from the opportunities offered by the RDP, thus helping to generate added value by listening to the territory. Other LAGs intend to follow this approach in the next programming period, focusing on different interventions that allow the specific resources of each territory to be valorised, abandoning more traditional initiatives. Programming 2023-2027 offers LAGs new tools that can help implement strategies of this kind.

One of the major obstacles identified by all the actors involved in LEADER programming is that of the timing of the preliminary investigation of applications for support and for payment. The LAGs and the MA worked together to find a viable solution and, following the approach of other regions, concluded trying to entrust the LAGs with the processing phase for both support and payment applications. The LAGs seem to have accepted this responsibility positively. However, it will be important to check the adequacy of human resources, in terms of skills and numbers, to fulfil this new task efficiently. Above all, LAGs will have to manage these activities by ensuring that animation and accompanying activities remain the cornerstone of their work.