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EVALUAREA ON-GOING A PNDR 2014-2020 ÎN PERIOADA 2017-2020

# THE ON-GOING EVALUATION OF NRDP 2014-2020

## Evaluation study III – Performance framework

### Executive summary

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# 1. Introduction

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Evaluation study III - Performance framework was elaborated on the basis of the findings highlighted during the observation, analysis and evaluation stages of the NRDP 2014-2020 interventions, whose main aim is to examine the results of the programme from the perspective of reaching the targets set for 2023 and the milestones set for 2018.

In order to ensure the representative and comprehensive character of the analyzes carried out at the level of Evaluation Study III, during the research activities were pursued:

- Identificarea principalilor factori endogeni și exogeni care au influențat atingerea obiectivelor de etapă 2018 și modalitatea de adresare a acestor factori din perspectiva atingerii țintelor 2023.
- Evaluating the achievement degree of milestones in 2018, including identifying possible deviations and external factors that influence their attainment;
- Analysis of the reasoning that was the basis of the calculation methodology applied in order to quantify the 2018 milestones and the 2023 targets for the performance indicators established at the NRDP 2014-2020 level;
- Verification of compliance with the payment agencies' structures of the procedures for collecting the data necessary to calculate the predefined indicators of EC/ alternative indicators, applicable at the level of priorities (financial indicators and performance indicators);
- Identifying the main endogenous and exogenous factors that have influenced the achievement of the 2018 milestones and how to address these factors from the perspective of reaching the 2023 targets.

During the evaluation activities carried out, the team of experts used methods and techniques of qualitative and quantitative analysis, which based the answers to the evaluation questions and allowed the development of conclusions and recommendations presented at the evaluation study level.

The data that were the basis of the analyzes performed reflect the situation as of 31.12.2018.



## 2. Evaluation context

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The on-going evaluation of the NRDP aims to analyze the effectiveness (the extent to which the set objectives have been met), the efficiency (the optimal relationship between the resources used and the results obtained), the relevance (the extent to which the planned objectives are in line with the needs, other aspects encountered in the programme implementation) and the socio-economic impact generated by programme interventions on the sustainable and balanced development of Romanian rural space.

The overall objective of the contract is to carry out the NRDP 2014-2020 evaluation studies, both mandatory and foreseen by European regulations, and those identified by the Managing Authority for four years between 2017-2020. Seven evaluation studies will be provided, including two evaluation studies required to prepare the annual consolidated implementation reports to be transmitted to the European Commission in the years 2017 and 2019, and five thematic evaluation studies on the following issues: Performance Framework, mountain farming, small farms and the development of associative forms, Administrative capacity in the implementation of NRDP and the Environment and Climate Measures in the NRDP 2014-2020.

In addition to the seven evaluation studies, during the implementation period of the contractual activities starting in 2017, with an annual frequency up to and including 2020, the provider will analyze the net contribution of the NRDP interventions to the change in the value of the SEA indicators as well as the analysis of the degree to achieve the objectives of each measure in the NRDP.

## 3. Methodology

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The methodological approach used for the elaboration of Evaluation Study III includes a set of techniques and tools that bring together and combine the literature review, the analysis of administrative data from the monitoring system, the semi-structured interviews with the programme management authorities, the logical model and quantitative methods for analyzing the values recorded by the predefined or alternative performance indicators.

The literature review is one of the benchmarks used in the on-going evaluation of the programme and the main transversal method applied for the preliminary context analysis and the completion of the answers to the evaluation questions. The main criteria for selecting the documents included in the literature were: (1) availability; (2) relationship with the evaluation theme and (3) reference to sources of high scientific reputation (scientific articles/evaluations/public policy papers). For the literature review, both internal resources of the programme (e.g. the programme document, guides and technical sheets, evaluation studies) and external resources (e.g. European Commission Guidelines) were used.



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The collection and analysis of administrative data underpin the methodological approach used to formulate the answers to the evaluation questions. The analysis of the administrative data represented the first stage during the evaluation, through which the measures / sub-measures and the implementation of the programme were analyzed, respectively based on which the field research activities were planned.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with the representatives of the authorities involved in the programme management (MA NRDP, AFRI, PAIA) aimed at collecting information on the implementation stage of NRDP at the end of 2018, reasoning the calculation methodology applied in order to quantify the 2018 milestones and 2023 targets for performance indicators, success or failure factors that influenced the results obtained, as well as suggestions for improving the programme.

The quantitative methods were used in order to analyze the values recorded by the predefined indicators and alternative indicators of NRDP performance framework.

The logical model was used to rebuild the intervention logic and to check the changes and updates made on different versions of the NRDP. The central notion of the logical model is the idea of the causality of the programme, namely the ordering of the events in such a way that the presence of an event or action determines, or is the cause, of a subsequent event or action. The development of a logic model is therefore based on identifying a causal link between the internal and external elements of the program.

The reconstruction of the intervention logic involved the analysis of all measures financed through the NRDP 2014-2020, based on the last approved version of the NRDP 2014-2020 during the reporting period (version VIII, approved in December 2018). The second level of the analysis is related to the performance indicators and the way they are set in relation to the relevant measures. The third level of the logical model is related to areas of intervention and associated result/target indicators. The upper level of the intervention logic is represented by the priorities defined at the level of the NRDP, thus demonstrating the causality and the way of integrating the interventions financed by the programme.



## 4. Overall analysis of programme effectiveness

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### 4.1 Effectiveness assessment

This section assesses the programme effectiveness, which is the capacity to reach programme targets and planned values. In this regard, evaluation study II supporting the official delivery to the European Commission of the Annual Implementation Report has already fully assessed the programme effectiveness as well as efficiency and relevance<sup>1</sup>. Considering the specific focus of the present report, the evaluation of effectiveness regards performance framework indicators.

### 4.2 Performance framework and NRDP

The performance framework is an accountability tool introduced by the EU regulatory framework to reinforce and monitor the result-orientation in programmes. At the level of each priority, it includes financial indicator, key implementation steps and output indicator milestones for 2018 and targets for 2023. The PNDR performance framework includes some indicators preliminarily defined by the European Commission and some additional alternative indicators. Key implementation steps have been introduced to monitor notably measures regarding basic infrastructure, irrigation investments, in other terms all the types of interventions which are expected to take more time to be implemented (e.g. Priority 6, where project specificity requires a higher level of complexity and a longer implementation and completion period of investments).

The calculation methodology applied to quantify the performance targets for 2023 has been established primarily on the basis of the provisions of Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013, Regulation (EU) No. 480/2014, Regulation (EU) No. 215/2014 and the methodological guide provided by the EC. At the same time, when setting the targets for 2023, the experience and lessons learned during the previous programming period 2007-2013 were taken into account.

EU Regulation 215/2014 establishes the thresholds of achievement and failure for a priority. By the end of 2018, a priority is deemed to have achieved its milestones (1) with no more than two indicators in the performance framework, if all indicators have achieved at least 85% of their 2018 milestone; (2) with three or more indicators in the performance framework, if all but one indicators have achieved at least 85% of their 2018 milestone and the other has achieved at least 75% of its milestone value.

At the end of the period, financial corrections may be applied. In this regard, a priority will be deemed to have seriously failed: (1) with no more than two indicators in the performance framework related to a priority, if any of these two indicators has failed to achieve at least 65% of

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<sup>1</sup> The assessment of efficiency investigates how 'costly' is the programme implementation, while the assessment of the relevance concerns the capacity of the programme to address the main rural development needs.





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the 2023 target value; (2) with more than two indicators in the performance framework related to a priority, if at least two of these indicators have failed to achieve at least 65% of the 2023 target. A similar assessment (with similar thresholds applied to milestones) of 'serious failure' of the performance framework is conducted for the mid-term review at the end of 2018.

### 4.3 Data collection and quality control procedures

It is important to underline that programme monitoring builds on the activities of two agencies: Agency for Rural Investment Financing (AFIR) and Payment and Intervention Agency for Agriculture (PAIA).

AFIR data collection procedures build on regional / county centers, collects data related to the indicators well before the start of the project, more precisely, as soon as the documentation for the grant application is submitted. At the evaluation stage, these data are verified, and if they prove to be real, they remain in the system. Based on the score, the best projects are selected, and later, notices are sent to the beneficiaries for contracting selected projects. AFIR takes data on indicators into its systems and records at the time the project is contracted.

With regard to data verification, this takes place at the project evaluation stage, when information on monitoring indicators is verified as well, some of which are found in technical memos. At the evaluation stage, the project is fully verified, and if it is considered eligible and selected, the data related to it remains in the system and transposed into the AFRI tables.

For each payment installment (which takes place over several years) field checks are carried out and, if the beneficiary does not comply with the technical documentation submitted, the project is terminated. If the project passes these on-the-spot checks, the data of the indicator remains in the AFRI system.

If we refer to the additional indicators, besides those on payments and the number of farms, they were requested by the NRDP or were introduced on the basis of AFRI's past experiences. The Agency collects data and information that is not mandatory now, but which may prove to be beneficial for the next programming phase after 2020.

Monitoring difficulties occur when changes to the regulations, legislation or rules, underlying the collection and monitoring system, happen. An example in this regard would be to request new indicators (other than those initially foreseen), or to break down the indicators into one or more components that were not initially foreseen.

PAIA ensures the management, monitoring and control of data on payment requests submitted by farmers through the Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS). The key variable that verifies the correctness of the data on the amounts actually paid to the beneficiaries is the farmer's unique ID. Centralized databases with payment entitlements are transferred from IACS to the financial accounting system through this link variable.

The approach that PAIA use to centralize and collect the data underlying the indicators reported in the AIR is the same for both the common indicators (EC predefined) and the NRDP alternative ones.



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The data presented in the RAI were processed as a result of the examination of the IACS system, as well as due to the payment management approach applied by PAIA.

When calculating the physical and financial indicators, only the farmers and expenses covered by the advance payment, the final payment or the final payment made in the year preceding the submission of the RAI are taken into account, excluding farmers and expenses for which only payment in the advance was made.

Regarding the measures managed by PAIA, it is observed that the performance indicators reached (or even exceeded) the milestones set for 2018, due to the frequency of payments made to the beneficiaries (at the campaign level), as well as the relatively low incidence of beneficiaries who fail to honor their commitments.

Among the solutions adopted for the improvement of the implementation of measures 10 and 11, PAIA uses activities of informing the beneficiaries on different channels of communication e.g. mass media, development, display and distribution of leaflets at the level of the eligible ATUs for each measure, etc. Communication activities came in support of potential beneficiaries, providing them with information on the available measures and the eligibility conditions they would have to meet to access the measures.

According to the analyses of PAIA, taking into account payments made by mid-2019, it is expected that the M10 financial budget will be exhausted in 2023, the M11 ceiling in 2020 and the M13 ceiling in 2019.

According to the internal procedure, the PAIA checks the data taken from the IACS system, prior to their transmission to the MA of PNDR. For example, between June-July, the control statistics for the European Commission are produced and transmitted until the 15 July 2019. In order to ensure the quality of the collected and centralized data in the IACS system, a sample set of files from the beneficiaries applying for the support in the 2018 campaign are randomly selected and sent to the PAIA county centers. Checks are made by comparing the data in lettered form declared by farmers with the reference data in electronic format stored in the IACS database.

- In the 2018 campaign, the sample was selected from approximately 400,000 beneficiaries and was previously agreed with the Audit Authority (the Court of Auditors).
- Although at the beginning of the programming period (2015 campaign) there was a reluctance to request support for M10 and M11, this impediment was overcome. There is an increase in payments to beneficiaries between 2015-2018, reflecting also an increase in the areas for which support was requested, at the level of each measure and package.

#### 4.4 Regulatory amendments and the current performance framework

The amendments to EU Regulation 215/2014 have modified the legal framework governing the performance framework across the ESI (European Structural and Investment) Funds through the adoption of Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2018/276. The most relevant innovation of the amended regulation is that financial indicators and output indicators and related milestones and





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targets can be calculated based on projects under implementation (physically initiated) and / or completed projects. However, a necessary condition to apply this amendment of the regulation is the capacity of the monitoring system to monitor projects under implementation.

With the changes to the regulation, for financial indicators and output indicators monitored by AFRI (Agency for Rural Investment Financing), milestones and targets are also calculated on the basis of physically initiated projects. As to ensure the application of the amended regulation, AFRI had to introduce a specific column 'Contract status – Finalized (F) / Cancelled (R)' within the programme monitoring system database. This column shows three different conditions of the contracted projects: finalized (letter F), reziliat – canceled in English- (letter R) and physically started (letter D). Although verifications for each payment instalment were made, AFRI did not have the information in the electronic system if the beneficiary physically initiated the project. Specifically, it was not known whether a certain payment instalment registered in the system corresponds to the physical initiation of the project or whether to only service-related expenses. Therefore, in order to collect information on the type of expenditure, specific forms already in use on the payment flow (payment authorizations) were used, to which additional headings were added. The administrative effort to collect these data was significant, especially for those projects in the first or second instalment. AFRI applies the same data collection, centralization and monitoring procedures and procedures for both common indicators (EC predefined) and for alternative indicators (as defined by the NRDP); indicators are not treated differently, and data comes from the same system.

All in all, despite the administrative effort, the amendments to the EU Regulation 215/2014 had a positive influence on the achievement of 2018 milestones.

The amendments to Regulation (EU) No. 215/2014 did not generate any changes in the way of data collection and centralization at PAIA level. The regulation, as it is conceived, only influences the reporting of indicators in RAI, and their calculation at the end of the calendar year does not take into account farmers who have received only advance payments, their number being by the tens of thousands. Therefore, the amount of payments made to farmers is higher than that reported in RAI.

Last but not least, in the current programming period, changes were made to the target values for financial indicators, primarily by reallocating funds and introducing new sub-measures, and thus by recalculating EAFRD contribution (the value of financial indicators was automatically calculated in SFC). At the level of the alternative indicators, correlations with Chapter 11 of the Indicator Plan were made considering the introduction of M14, sM17.1, M5 and sM7.4 in the NRDP, while maintaining the percentage of the 2018 key implementation steps.

## 4.5 Performance reserve and milestone achievement

In addition to the performance framework, the EU regulatory framework in force has introduced the performance reserve (which does not apply to European Territorial Cooperation Programmes), which represents 5-7% of the fund allocated. The performance reserve applies as a percentage of the financial allocation to a programme priority to be allocated definitively in 2019 to the priorities



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which achieved their milestones in 2018. While milestones of the performance framework do not include the value of the performance reserve, targets already take into account this amount.

It is relevant to highlight that transfers to the EAFRD from the 1st pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (Article 20(c) and (d) CPR) are excluded from the performance reserve, despite being under performance framework review as the other EAFRD priority resources.

Considering the achievement of the milestone values in 2018, the evaluator cannot identify any relevant obstacle to the allocation of the performance reserve to the programme and priorities. The final decision will be taken by the European Commission.

#### 4.6 Milestone and target achievement

Section 1.d of the Annual Implementation Report as well as tables F1 and F2 of the Monitoring Annex of the Annual Implementation Report allows drawing conclusions on the capacity to achieve milestones for 2018 and preliminary insights about target values for 2023.

The following table reports the performance framework as contained in the Annual Implementation Report delivered to the European Commission in 2019, with some elaborations. The table shows achieved values in 2018 of all the common and alternative indicators of PNDR performance framework, milestone values for 2018 and target for 2023. Moreover, the table includes the following elaborations supporting the evaluation activities:

$$a) \text{ Milestone achievement rate} = \frac{\frac{\text{Achieved value in 2018}}{\text{Target value for 2023}}}{\text{Milestone value for 2018 in percentage}}$$

$$b) \text{ Target achievement rate} = \frac{\text{Achieved value in 2018}}{\text{Target value for 2023}}$$

c) *Probability of target achievement of the priority.*

This is the result of the relative capacity of the priority to reach the final target, based on the milestone achievement and other evaluation activities (e.g. document review, interviews). Overall, the probability is classified 'higher' when at least one of the two indicators or two out of the three indicators of the performance framework have achieved 65% threshold of achievement according to Reg. EU 215/2014. This would avoid the risk of serious failure according to Reg. EU 215/2014. Probability is 'lower' whenever two out of three indicators have not yet achieved 65% of the target.

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The analysis of the table shows the following evaluation findings



The milestone achievement rate is always beyond the minimum threshold of 85%, which makes the performance framework achieved in all the priorities for 2018. Achievement rate is below 100% only for the total public expenditure indicator in priority 5 and the targeted population of LAGs in priority 6. From the evaluator's point of view, considering the actual implementation of the LAGs, it seems unlikely to reach the expected 100% as the target value. However, this should not pose any risk of serious failure.



Although some indicators of the performance framework have exceeded the milestones set for 2018, the interview with the MA has shown that no changes to the 2023 targets are foreseen for this reason. Some changes could be made for introducing new measures/sub-measures rather than for the actual performance framework achievement level. However, it is important to underline that according to the EC Guidance on Performance Framework and reserve – section 2.4.3 *"If the milestones have been significantly overachieved in 2018, the Commission will insist – where appropriate – on more ambitious target setting for the end of the programme"*.



The probability of achieving the final target is higher for priorities 2, 4 and 6. In this regard, the MA expectation is that all priorities will achieve their target values. It was noted that before the amendments to Regulation (EU) No. 215/2014, priorities 2 and 4 presented a more advanced implementation stage and higher values of the financial and performance indicators compared to the other priorities of the programme. This situation is also confirmed after the amendments of the Regulation, because priorities 2, 4 and 6 show a higher probability to successfully achieve the final target of the priority because their output indicators and key implementation steps (for priority 6) has already overcome the threshold of 85%. Therefore, this situation shows the higher probability of these priorities and the lower risk of serious failure. As a matter of fact, a priority will be deemed to have seriously failed to achieve the milestone in the following cases: (a) if there are no more than two indicators in the performance framework related to a priority and any of these two indicators has failed to achieve at least 65% of the milestone value by the end of 2018 or, (b) if there are more than two indicators in the performance framework related to a priority and at least two of these indicators have failed to achieve at least 65% of the milestone value by the end of 2018. (occurring when at least two indicators are below 85%). Thus, the Managing Authority could focus its attention mainly on fostering and monitoring the public expenditure and thus the payments, since globally the implementation is not presenting any major issue. Although the other two priorities reached the milestone values in 2018, they are less likely to achieve the target values in 2023.

So far, the main measures adopted by the NRDP to accelerate the implementation / absorption of the programme and the achievement of the milestones were: i) Actions to inform the general public regarding access to the NRDP 2014-2020; ii) Simplification of procedures (introduction of the possibility of on-line filing of documentation, creation of reference price databases, etc.) and reduction of the number of requested documents for potential beneficiaries; iii) the reallocation of available funds from intervention areas that were under implementation bottlenecks (5D) to better



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performance areas (2A); Improving the implementation of less performing priorities e.g. P5: The last session of submission of projects under sM4.1 was directed to the selection of zootechnical projects contributing to DI 5D. Among the factors with potential negative effect in achieving the objectives of the performance framework are the delayed launch of the financial instrument (2018), which supports potential beneficiaries in securing the co-financing rate of the project.

#### 4.7 External factors influencing the achievement

The main external factors influencing the achievement of the objectives / target encompass:

- 'Social factors' - Aging population and the reluctance of potential beneficiaries to access new packages negatively affect the propensity to invest in innovative practices and to apply for calls for projects;
- 'Legal and administrative factors not completely due to programme procedures but also related to them'. These include difficulties with the implementation of the public procurement law and difficulties with the introduction and start-up of the mutual fund (related to sM 17.1). These external difficulties were combined with the complexity of the conditions for applicants and the specific knowledge required, especially in the case of new packages, e.g. P 9, 10, 11 of the M10. Moreover, the late launch of the financial instrument did not support the programme implementation with the necessary co-financing for beneficiaries;
- Last but not least, new issues coming from swine fever required resources (e.g. sM 17.2)

The Managing Authority and the Agencies have improved communication and information activities, in spite of the slow start of M1 and M2 and in 2018, the financial instrument was launched and started to support farmers' investments.

PAIA has improved information towards potential beneficiaries, e.g. in the case of M15, if in the first session there were 16 beneficiaries with an area of 16.000 ha, in the second session there were 300 beneficiaries with 300.000 ha.

The Managing Authority has also launched various initiatives:

- activities to inform the general public regarding access to the NRDP 2014-2020;
- simplification of procedures (introduction of the possibility of on-line filing of documentation, creation of reference price databases, etc.) and reduction of the number of requested documents for potential beneficiaries;
- the reallocation of available funds from focus areas that were under implementation bottlenecks (5D) to better performing areas (2A);

- improving the implementation of less performing priorities, for example for P5, the last session of submission of projects under sM 4.1 was directed to the selection of zootechnical projects contributing to DI 5D.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

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### External factors and performance framework

Conclusions - The analysis of the milestones in 2018 shows the programme priorities have achieved the planned values in spite of the negative contribution of the following external factors: social factors (aging population and the reluctance of potential beneficiaries to access new packages ); legal and administrative complexity and swine fever. Meanwhile, the Managing Authority has also launched various initiatives to improve information and communication activities, simplifying the procedures (introduction of the possibility of on-line filing of documentation, creation of reference price databases, etc.), reducing the number of requested documents for potential beneficiaries, reallocating available funds from focus areas that were under implementation bottlenecks. In the evaluator's opinion, the aforementioned external factors should not hinder programme implementation in the future since all the possible remedies have been defined to reduce their impact. The main focus should be on the capacity of the single focus areas and measures to contribute to achieving performance framework final targets. However, this capacity is expected to depend on the programme implementation internal factors and project implementation rather than on exogenous factors. No specific recommendation is needed.

### Milestones for 2018

Conclusions - Considering the achievement of the milestone values in 2018, there seems not to be any reason related to programme performance framework why the performance reserve would not be allocated to the programme and priorities as initially planned.

Recommendations – No specific recommendation is proposed considering the positive result of the programme performance.

### Target for 2023 achievement

Conclusions – Priorities 2, 4 and 6 are more likely to achieve 2023 targets than priorities 3 and 5. Priorities 2, 4 and 6 show a higher probability to successfully achieve the final target of the priority because their output indicator has already overcome the threshold of 85% of the final target. Therefore, this situation shows the higher potential of these priorities and that the risk of serious failure (occurring when at least two indicators are below 85%) should be avoided. Financial indicators are still lagging behind the output indicators, however, considering the previous programme performance and the current programming period, target achievement is reasonable.



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Recommendations – In case of priorities 2, 4 and 6 the Paying Agencies should mainly take actions to monitor carefully payment procedures and public expenditure in order to achieve the final targets of financial indicators. Moreover, the Managing Authority should concentrate the main efforts on the implementation of sM 4.1 and 4.2 to ensure the adequate achievement of targets for 2023 respectively for Priority 3 and 5.