Monitoring and evaluating Multi-Actor Platforms: Brief step-by-step guide[1]

By Agricultural University of Athens, 2021

Purpose. Monitoring and evaluating stakeholder engagement and operation of the Multi-Actor Platforms gains insight to the effectiveness of these forms of engagement, to learn lessons, and to adapt the processes used in a project, on how to integrate knowledges from across the science-policy-practice nexus fostering co-learning and co-construction of transitions to sustainable farming systems.

> **What are Multi-Actor Platforms?**
> Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) are forums which are increasingly used as a central element of a transdisciplinary approach in the EU research projects. MAPs are designed to enable meaningful co-learning amongst the project partners and all actors involved in the research activities, and the on-going involvement of individuals drawn from science, policy and practice at different levels.

Project background. The UNISECO H2020 project employed a Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) within a transdisciplinary framework in order to strengthen the sustainability of agro-ecological European farming systems. The main objective of the monitoring and evaluation framework was to assess the performance of the Multi-Actor Platforms in co-learning on the topics of the project at case study and EU levels, knowledge exchange, and building capacity. An on-going evaluation was developed and applied following each instance of engagement and interaction with the relevant actors, with particular attention paid to the processes of the participatory events carried out at European and case study levels. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used, through observations, reporting sheets, debriefing sessions and written questionnaires. Feedback was obtained from partners and external actors in order to adjust and improve the participatory processes as the project progressed, with the aim of fostering constructive multi-actor engagement. In the final stages of the UNISECO project, a final evaluation was carried out which aimed to explore the influence of participatory processes on the policy-science dialogue, and on the capacities of the case study actors

Step-by-step guide to applying the methodology

1. Setting up a monitoring and evaluation framework

A monitoring and evaluation framework will be designed with the aim to guide the steps for assessing the interactions with actors through the various participatory processes within the project. The framework sets the objectives of the processes, specifies the evaluation questions, and selects the assessment criteria. It also proposes a method for the assessment by defining a systematic process for collecting, analysing and reporting the data.

Carrying out consultation process internal to the project identifies key research questions to be addressed for the elicitation of information required for the evaluation. Table 1 summarises key elements of the framework using the key research questions identified in UNISECO as examples.

Table 1. Framework with identified key research questions

Aspects Addressed		Key Questions
Assess the effectiveness of the Multi Actor activity	Engagement of participants	Did the research activity reach all relevant target groups?
	Achievement of intended objectives and outcomes	Did the actor engagement meet its objectives?
		Did the actor engagement achieve the intended outcome?
Methodological appraisal	Method(s) of engagement selected	Were the selected method(s) useful?
		Constraints/difficulties occurred through planning
	Preparation and execution process	What worked well?
		Challenges faced during the implementation process
Impact appraisal	Estimate of the degree to which the Multi Actor activity promoted transdisciplinarity and facilitated mutual learning	Did the activity promote mutual learning amongst participants and the co-construction of knowledge?
		What were the lessons learnt for the project team and participants involved?
		What should be changed for future activities?

2. Selecting evaluation criteria and methods

The evaluation criteria cover the steps of preparing and conducting the research activities in which actors have been involved, and the feedback from actors on the effectiveness of the process. The members of the MAPs are not involved in the design of the evaluation process, to avoid influencing the evaluations by awareness of criteria being developed whilst they are also working on other project activities.

The tools that will be chosen for collecting data include participant observation, a Reporting and Debriefing sheet completed by project partners and a feedback questionnaire completed by event participants. At the later stages of a project, semi-structured interviews with selected MAP members are suggested to collect in depth qualitative information. Table 2 summarises the set of evaluation criteria applied to the evaluations of research activities. It is suggested to differentiate between operational, process and impact criteria.

Table 2. Evaluation criteria

On-going evaluation		Final evaluation
Operational	**Process**	**Impact**
Participant profiles	Representativeness	Network building
Design of the process	Access to resources	Capacity building
Level of involvement	Group dynamics	Policy outcome

Operational criteria set

- **Participant profiles**: Quantitative information about the number of actors engaged in the activity, proportion of actors by gender, age, professional background, and geographic location.

- **Design of the process**: Description of the preparation of the activities, including aspects related to information provision, identification and selection of actors, establishing transparent and objective justification of who is involved in the research activity and how the activity was planned and executed.

- **Level of involvement**: The consistency and loyalty of participation of each MAP member, in the case of multiple project activities.

At the end of an event with the MAP a Debriefing/Reporting sheet will be completed by event organizers to provide quantitative and qualitative information on the operational criteria to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the practicalities of each interaction (Step 3.1 below).

Process criteria set

- **Representativeness**: When a participatory process takes place, it is essential to ensure that representatives of the key actor groups are involved, and that their legitimacy is recognized and respected by all participants. This contributes towards the representation of diverse viewpoints, interests and values.

- **Access to resources**: Relevant and appropriate research information should be available and accessible to all participants. This is to aid the effectiveness of their participation. Sufficient time should be allocated for actors to be able to access the information, use it, and follow-up with any queries about its content.

- **Group dynamics:** Actors should have the opportunity to participate and influence the process and its outcomes, with sufficient time allocated for interactions between all participants.

At the end of each MAP engagement questionnaires will be distributed to the MAP members to provide feedback on the activity in relation to representativeness, access to resources and group dynamics. The questionnaire comprises 16 questions, using a five-point Likert scale approach, with answers ranging from 'strongly disagree', to 'strongly agree'. Respondents could also make comments in responding to each question for further explanations and insight (Step 3.2 below).

Questions about interactions and dynamics of the events will be answered by project partners who organized the activities. Group dynamics will be assessed using 10 questions with a four-point Likert scale, answers to which are in the range: not at all, to a small extent, to a moderate extent, to a great extent. (Step 3.1 section on group dynamics below).

Impact Criteria set

Impacts can be evaluated at different levels depending on the level of actor involvement. In UNISECO actors were involved in a EU-level MAP and in case study MAPs (local level). Impacts are thus evaluated at the EU and case study levels. The first approach, used with the EU level MAP, focused on the influence of the overall project activities on a policy-science dialogue. The second approach, used with the local level MAPs, primarily examined issue related to the capacities and empowerment of participants.

At the European level

The EU level MAP provides an important interface for science-policy interactions, and co-production of knowledge. In-depth interviews will be carried out with selected members of the EU level MAP to explore the prospective influence of the participatory processes on policy making. These will be designed to obtain the

views of actors on aspects of the processes such as openness, inclusivity of actors from different levels and sectors, the legitimacy of the knowledge, and usability of the co-produced knowledge.

- **Policy outcome:** Conditions are created that influence the co-production of knowledge, and generate values or benefit from co-produced knowledge for policy making and governance practice[2].

At the local level

To avoid "stakeholder fatigue" and to allow for flexibility throughout the data collection process, case study partners can either use questionnaires or semi-structured interviews with members of their Multi-Actor Platforms. The aim will be to assess the extent to which there were changes in their networks, skills or knowledge, associated with their involvement in the project. Questions to be included in the questionnaire are shown under Step 3.3. Respondents can also make comments in responding to each question for further explanations and insight. The same questions will serve as a basis for the closed-ended questions posed during the semi-structured interviews.

- **Building networks**: Professional opportunities can be created through the strengthening of existing social networks, or the formation of new networks or collaborations as a result of involvement in the project.

- **Capacity building and learning:** An outcome of the process and content of the co-creation of knowledge, and its application in practice, builds capacity and learning. This leads to changes in knowledge, skills, relationships, understanding, and the development of trust which can lead to changes in behaviour, and engagement in on-going learning.

3. Applying the monitoring and evaluation framework

The monitoring and evaluation framework needs to be designed to enable consideration of both the process and impact of participatory research activities at the level of the EU and case studies.

Feedback on **on-going process of engagement** will be obtained from the actors participating in activities at European and case study levels, and the relevant project partners. At the EU level, a debriefing session will follow each MAP event. At this, partners will discuss and reflect on the positive and negative points of the process, providing written feedback with their observations of the interactions amongst participants during the workshop sessions. The actors who attended the workshop will also fill in a questionnaire to provide their feedback on the effectiveness of the process. The aim of this assessment procedure will be to revise the process and operation of the event based upon the lessons learnt, aiming for continuous improvement and better engagement of actors in the research process.

Towards the end of the project, a **final evaluation** will be undertaken with respect to the set of impact criteria of the transdisciplinary approach, and on the overall process. The elements of the monitoring and evaluation framework, evaluation aspects and criteria, are presented in Table 3.

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[2] Frantzeskaki N. and Kabisch N. (2016). Designing a knowledge co-production operating space for urban environmental governance—Lessons from Rotterdam, Netherlands and Berlin, Germany. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 62, 92-98.

Table 3. Operational framework

Criteria Aspects addressed	On-going evaluation		Final evaluation
	Operational	**Process**	**Impact**
Engagement of participants	Participant profiles	Representativeness	Network building
Accomplishment of intended objectives and outcomes	Level of involvement	Group dynamics	Capacity building
			Policy outcome
Method(s) of engagement selected	Design of the process	Access to resources	Capacity building
Preparation and execution process		Group dynamics	
Transdisciplinarity and mutual learning	Level of involvement	Group dynamics	Network building
			Capacity building

→ Step 3.1: Debriefing/reporting sheet to be filled out by the partner/organizer after the MAP event

→ Step 3.2: Participant Questionnaire to be filled in by participants after each MAP event

→ Step 3.3: Final evaluation of case study MAP members with multiple participations

Step 3.1: Debriefing/reporting sheet to be filled out by the partner/organizer after the MAP event

Team member/organiser	
Activity/Task	
Purpose/objective of the meeting	
Date and location of event	

Participants' profile

1. Total number of participants involved in the activity (#)

2. By gender (#, %)

Female	Male

3. By age category (#, %)

<29	30-39	40-49	50-59	>60

4. By participants' types (based on their professional background) (#, %)

Farmers	Authorities	NGOs	EU, international bodies	Advisors	Consumers	Retailers

Other...

5. By origin (#, %)

Other...

6. Level of involvement: For each participant, was it the first, second, third presence in an event?

Design of the process

7.   Participants' identification/selection
Were all participants appropriately identified and selected from the pool of MAP members according to the selection criteria?

                        Yes   No

Please clarify if some participants were self-selected or proposed by other participants.

8.   Invitation process
a. Number of invitations sent

b. Invitation type selected (email, phone, mail, etc.)

c. Number of days before the event invitations sent

9.   Participation rate
    Number of individuals participated / Number of individuals reached (proportion of persons participate in the activity)

10. Practicalities
a. Did the meeting exceed its planned duration?

                        Yes   No

If so, please explain why this happened.

b. Was there a facilitator who coordinated the discussion/activity?

                        Yes   No

If so, please specify who was.

c. Was background information/material sent prior to the meeting?

                        Yes   No

11. Other issues that need to be considered/reported

Concerning the group dynamics, please indicate to what extent… (1. Not at all /2. To a small extent / 3. To a moderate extent/ 4. To a great extent)

	①	②	③	④	Comments
were all views well taken into account by others?					
did participants respect opposed opinions?					
did conflict/opposition occur during the activity					
did participants talk over each other?					
did all participants have the opportunity to communicate their opinions? (facilitator made a roundtable)					
were participants open to communicate and share their views with the project member (asking questions, providing feedback)?					
did participants collaboratively and constructively work?					
did participants start an open dialogue and discussion between them?					

were some voices more dominant than others?					
did certain individuals have more influence over the decision-making process than others?					

Step 3.2: Participant Questionnaire to be filled in by participants after each MAP event

Activity/Task: […………………………]   Code: [……………]

Gender: Female   Male   Prefer not to say

Professional background: Origin:

Please indicate the level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements, we would really appreciate a brief explanatory text with your evaluation.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Comments
Based on the information that was given when I was invited...						
1. The objective(s) of the meeting was/were clear to me.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
2. The information was relevant to the issues raised during the meeting.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
3. The information helped me understand the issues at stake.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
Considering that the [theme, objectives, ….] of the meeting was/were [……..]						
4. I think that all interests have been represented in today's meeting.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
5. I think that there were groups, associations, persons that could contribute to the discussion today but have not been invited.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
6. I think that all participants had a fair chance to express their opinion.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
7. I think that there was overrepresentation of opinions, interests.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
During the meeting						

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8. When today's meeting started, the objectives of the meeting and my role were stated clear to	①	②	③	④	⑤	
9. The content of the meeting was relevant and consistent to my needs and interests.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
10. There was enough time allowed to express views and pose questions.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
11. The facilitator was active in ensuring a good flow of the discussion.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
12. I felt that I could trust the team members with whom I collaborated.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
13. I felt comfortable in sharing my viewpoint.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
14. I had always the opportunity to express my point of view.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
15. I felt that all participants were open to constructive criticism.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
16. I felt being manipulated by powerful participants to accept their views.	①	②	③	④	⑤	
Other comments, issues you would like to mention						

Step 3.3 Final evaluation of case study MAP members with multiple participations

Gender: **Female**   **Male**   **Code: [……………]**
Professional background: **Origin:**

As a result of my involvement in the project activities

1. I have discussed the activities and outcomes of the project with colleagues, experts, family, etc.

       Yes   No
       ☐   ☐

   Could you please give some examples?
   …………………...
   ....

2. I have used the resources provided to me over the course of the UNISECO project (webpage, briefs, newsletters) in order to communicate, inform or discuss with others issues related to my professional activity.

       Yes   No
       ☐   ☐

   Could you please give some examples?
   …………………...
   ....

3. I have established communication links with persons for sharing information and experience on agro-ecology.

   Strongly disagree   Strongly agree
         ①   ②   ③   ④   ⑤
   Could you please give some examples?
   …………………...
   ....

4. I have participated at least in one meeting/activity/campaign for agro-ecological farming practices and sustainable agriculture (apart from the UNISECO workshops, meetings).

       Yes   No
       ☐   ☐

   Could you please give some examples?
   …………………...
   ....

5. I have joined at least one new group, organisation, network, partnership on agro-ecological farming practices (apart from the UNISECO project).

       Yes   No
       ☐   ☐

Could you please give some examples?

…………………..

....

6. I feel that I have learned something new about agro-ecological issues.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

①   ②   ③   ④   ⑤

Could you please give some examples?

…………………..

....

7. I will use the information/knowledge I acquired in my professional activities.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

①   ②   ③   ④   ⑤

Could you please give some examples?

…………………..

....

8. I feel motivated to change my actions/attitude towards sustainable agriculture.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

①   ②   ③   ④   ⑤

Could you please give some examples?

…………………..

....

Another more general or more specific comment you would like to mention:

....

....

....

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Thank you very much for your collaboration.