Rural Interfaces
A learning agenda

About Multi-Actor Platforms in SHERPA

SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) are the main fora for co-learning and co-creation of knowledge with actors at European and regional levels.

During the first phase of the project, 20 MAPs were established or consolidated, a SHERPA process and MAP cycle was developed and tested.

This short document is based on Deliverable 6.2 on Findings of Moniroting and Evaluation of MAPs looking at the functioning and the results of the SHERPA MAPs during Phase 1 of implementation between M3 (December 2019) and M22 (July 2021).

The overarching question driving these findings was:

How to effectively design, support and run Multi-Actor Platforms to engage science, society and policy actors in a meaningful way in the formulation of policy and the research agenda on rural development?

The learning agenda focuses on five main aspects: Composition, Praparation, Input, Output and Overall process. More in depth details can be found in the report D6.2 available online:

→ https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/SHERPA_D6.2.pdf
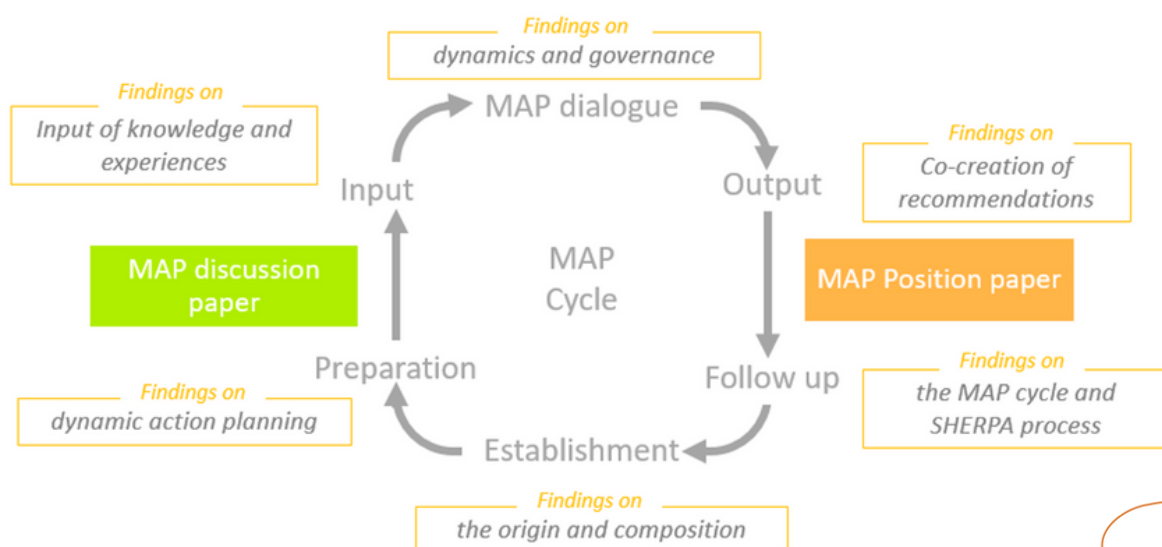
1. Composition

The main objective of the SHERPA MAP is to ensure a balanced representation of active members from the three actor groups: science, society and policy. MAP team can invite external stakeholders to provide relevant input or represent a specific group with regard to that topic.
Both the origin and composition of the MAP influences the MAP functioning. Out of the 20 SHERPA MAPs, 3 of them were already existing platforms, 9 were built on existing platforms and 8 were completely newly established.

What did we learn?

It is most important to understand the starting position and the biases that come with it. To create lasting MAPs, an existing platform seems to have advantages due to its integration in existing structures. For newly established platforms, creating linkages with existing structures and communication channels from the start is crucial.

The initiator has an influence on the composition and intentions of the MAP since actors have a different perspective on the purpose of the MAP. Understanding the specific interests of the MAP members allows the facilitator to design the MAP dialogue to fit the interests of all the MAP members. This strengthens the chances of longer-term commitment.

What did we learn?

Running a successful MAP requires a good understanding of the specific interest and intentions of each member and design the dialogue in a way that will facilitate the accomplishment of their intentions. Meeting the diverse intentions of society actors requires specific attention in the design and operation of the MAPs.

Creating the appropriate MAP composition requires attentive observation of the developments within and around the MAP to identify and invite appropriate members. It works well to build on existing groups, well-known actors and relations, but be aware of the potential biases in the discussions.

What can be explored further?

- How to balance between science, civil society and policy actors?
- How to optimise the added value of the MAP process for each actor group?
- How to involve civil society actors? What is in it for them?
- How to involve the hard to reach?
- How to get the MAP composition right?
- How to deal with civil society, citizens and private sector?
- Should a MAP be representative of the rural area or operate as a rural think tank?

2. Preparation

The MAP cycle starts with the selection of topics by matching the interest of the MAPs with opportunities to influence policy development.

During Phase 1 an opportunity arose to contribute to the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LVTRA). Contributing to the Long-term Vision on one hand allowed for diversity and flexibility for the MAPs, and on the other hand provided an excellent window for a meaningful contribution to policy development.

What did we learn?

MAPs need room to adapt to changing circumstances, to select topics that are of interest to the actors, create an attractive dialogue and make sure there is added value for each of the members and the MAP as a whole.

What can be explored further?

- How to effectively link local level priorities with EU level policy windows?
- How to link bottom-up with top-down processes?
- How to select the topics for MAP dialogue?
- How to balance the need for coordination with flexibility to follow the interest of the MAPs?
- How to dynamically plan the engagement process?
- How to ensure ownership of the action plan?

3. Input

Stocktaking of research results and the development of a SHERPA Discussion paper. MAP teams translate and enrich the SHERPA discussion paper with their local circumstances, which results in a MAP Discussion Paper. This is a significat effort and remains a challenge. It is important to provide the discussion paper well in advance to allow the MAP teams to translate the discussion paper to the local context and prepare the MAP dialogue.

What did we learn?

Increase relevance of discussion papers by involving the MAPs in defining the focus. Translate science and theory into common and simple terms and use visuals to enhance its usefulness for the different actors. If needed, carry out data collection on the ground to compensate for the lack of specific data and scientific information at national/regional level.

What can be explored further?

- How to capitalise on research findings to enrich the quality of actor engagement?
- How to translate research findings to local contexts?
- What exactly is the contribution of the MAP discussion paper to the MAP dialogue?
- What type of information best enriches the MAP dialogue?
- How does the MAP discussion paper enrich the MAP dialogue and what aspects are particularly valuable?
- What are suitable formats and channels to share information with the MAP members?
- What could a facility to provide research findings to local engagement processes look like?

4. Dialogue

The MAP discussion paper provides the introduction to the topic and suggests issues to be discussed. Different events and activities are organised using a diversity of methods to engage actors.

The COVID pandemic posed restrictions on face-to-face meetings. It was difficult to engage all participants and create active dialogue between members in an online setting.

What did we learn?

Adapt facilitation to the preferences and capacities of different MAP members. Create different opportunities for engagement, e.g., interviews, informal conversations, surveys, group discussions, allowing everybody to contribute. Surveys and focus groups are good methods for balancing strong positions of different actors.

What can be explored further?

- How to create meaningful engagement and dialogue?
- How to deal with power relations within group constellations?
- How to integrate different types of knowledge in the MAP dialogue?
- How to find a balance between controversy and consensus?
- What methods and tools are suitable for what engagement?
- How to combine remote with face-to-face engagement?
- How to serve different motives of actors for engaging in policy processes?
- How to link to appropriate levels of policy making along the MAP dialogue?
- How to optimise added value in MAP dialogue?
- What is needed to sustain the MAP dialogue process after SHERPA project?

5. Output

The MAP process results in the co-construction of a MAP position paper by each MAP. An aggregation of all MAP position papers results in an overarching SHERPA position paper, which is complemented with co-construction in the EU-level MAP.

What did we learn?

In order to create meaningful outputs such as position papers that indicate research gaps and enrich future policies, position papers should not be too broad. Local contexts and concrete applicability should be addressed, or local stakeholders should be assisted in applying general outputs to local contexts.

The experiences of the few MAPs that organised follow-up activities at local, regional and national levels suggests that such activities can be very interesting and add value to the MAP cycle. Additional support may be useful to stimulate MAPs to organise relevant follow-up activities. This may also help to better connect the work in the MAPs to local, regional and national policy.

For added value and thus the longevity of actor engagement, it is important to further explore and develop ways to connect with existing structures and institutions and strengthen the delivery of messages to different levels of policy making.

What can be explored further?

- How to link actor engagement to appropriate levels of policy making?
- How to capture controversy and diversity in the messages for policy?
- What are effective ways to deliver messages from the MAPs?
- How to bring together and discuss the local perspectives at EU MAP level?
- How to influence the research agenda?
- What is the impact of actor engagement on policy and research?
- What other types of output can MAPs generate?
- How to maximise influence and impact in feeding into policy processes?
- How to sustain the channels to influence policy and research?

6. Process

What is the added value of the SHERPA process? How can that be improved? What do you want to change in the next MAP cycle? And what would you do differently if you start a new MAP? It is important and stimulating for future engagement to improve the visibility of the outcomes and impacts of the SHERPA process, and increase the sense of ownership.

There is a strong dependence on written material, the English language and the dominance of North Western European realities in policy paradigms.

MAP teams and members have expressed their desire to join forces between MAPs. This relates to strengthening the feeling of belonging to a bigger movement of rural engagement in policymaking.

SHERPA could also provide a forum for finding allies on specific topics and join forces to influence policy. The main added value of SHERPA is by influencing policy and research to better reflect and address the needs and ambitions of rural areas.

What did we learn?

Create room, invite and support MAP teams to experiment, discuss and exchange different approaches. Allowing MAPs the flexibility to take their own approach enables MAPs to adjust to (changing) needs and interests. Diversity in approaches to engage actors and connect to policy processes is an important basis for co-creating effective and sustainable Science-Society-Policy interfaces.

There are a number of challenges and new learning questions that remain to be explored.

What can be explored further?

- How to balance between central guidance and context specific requirements?
- How to overcome biases in language, power and perspectives?
- How to create, strengthen and show added value of the SHERPA process?
- How to ensure the benefit of engagement for each of the actor groups?
- How to link to existing initiatives, structures and institutions?
- How to be relevant for EU policy and allow MAPs to choose their own methods and timing?
- How can local MAPs effectively join forces?
- What is the added value of actor engagement?
- What is in it for each of the actor groups?
- What are promising alternative ways for engaging actors?
- How to sustain the process and mechanisms after the life of the project?

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