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D5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SELF-SUSTAINABILITY OF MAPs POST-SHERPA

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1. Introduction

Stakeholder and citizen engagement are essential for enhancing the legitimacy and accountability of rural policymaking processes and ensuring that policies developed are sufficiently place-based to meet the needs of rural areas. The European Commission has, therefore, been committed to increasing the role of rural stakeholders and citizens in policymaking through the introduction of various measures, including: policy consultation processes in the development of the EU Rural Vision and Action Plan; the Rural Pact Initiative; Local Action Groups (LAGs) to help implement EU Regional Policy; and funding the exploration of different stakeholder and citizen engagement models within research projects, such as Living Labs in the EU Horizon ROBUST project and the Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) at the heart of the EU Horizon SHERPA project.

Despite these efforts, the sustainable and long-term involvement of stakeholders and citizens in rural policymaking structures remains a challenge (Slätmo et al. 2021, p.10). Previous research on activities similar to those of MAPs, shows that it can be challenging to ensure that they continue to be active beyond the lifetime of EU projects. In a review of 60 EU-funded information- or decision-supporting systems (IS/DSS) developed during the periods 2002–2006, and 2007–2013, Zasada et al. (2017) highlight that only 30 of the tools developed (50%) had been updated by the end of the project. Larsson and Grönlund (2014) furthermore note the issue of technical sustainability such as ensuring the availability of homepages and web forums for communication over the longer term. Setting-up Multi-Actor Platforms through external funding and resources is likely to have a low probability of them continuing over the longer term (Poocharoen and Sovacool, 2012). In those cases, risks to the existence of Multi-Actor Platforms over the longer term needs to be assessed carefully, and the challenges addressed. These challenges also raise important questions regarding how to establish more permanent structures for open and inclusive stakeholder and citizen engagement throughout rural policymaking cycles, from policy formulation to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The notion of MAP sustainability was built into the SHERPA project structure, so participants had the opportunity to reflect on the challenges of long-term MAP continuity and stakeholder engagement (Slätmo et al. 2021 p. 21). Members of the MAP were invited based on criteria that included interest and willingness to participate, availability and commitment, relevance, appropriateness, representativeness, gender, age, actor groups (science, society, and policy), and geographical distribution. Each member and external stakeholder were required to complete a consent form, which complied with the ethics process of SHERPA (Chartier et al. 2019).

SHERPA project has facilitated conversations on how to develop a strategy for the long-term self-sustainability of the MAPs beyond the end of the project. A number of different SHERPA events and activities (see methods and data section below) have been targeted on discussing and developing ideas and recommendations for fostering MAP sustainability. This report highlights the key findings, ideas and recommendations from these activities in relation to: 1) MAP participation benefits; 2) MAP functions; 3) MAP integration with other rural networks; 4) MAP leadership; 5) MAP internal processes; 6) MAP composition; 7) MAP policy directions; 8) MAP target audience and communication activities; and 9) MAP funding.



2. Research Methods and Data

The research data, findings, conclusions and recommendations outlined in this report are based on the results of a survey and workshop discussions with MAP participants. These research methods were selected as they provide an opportunity for project participants to outline their own views and perceptions on the long-term sustainability of the MAPs. MAP participant workshops on long-term MAP sustainability were held at the SHERPA conference 31 January to 1 February 2022 and the SHERPA Consortium meeting in June 2022. The early thoughts and ideas developed during these sessions informed the creation of a wider MAP sustainability survey which was sent around to all project and MAP participants and included a mixture of multiple-choice questions and open text boxes for wider reflection. The survey received 199 responses from across all MAPs. Respondents included representatives from SHERPA core actor groups of society, science, and policy, in addition to responses from SHERPA consortium partners. The survey results were compiled and analysed against key discussion points from the 2022 SHERPA conference and consortium meeting minutes. On the basis of this analysis, a first draft of the sustainability report was constructed. The results of the draft report were shared with consortium partners and MAP members at the 2023 SHERPA conference. Conference participants were given the opportunity to consider and build on these results in workshop discussions on sustainability on the second day of the conference. The final ideas and reflections from these sessions are included in this final draft of the sustainability report.

3. Results

3.1. MAP Participation Benefits

The survey results reveal that there is a high level of interest in continuing the MAPs after the completion of the SHERPA project. 75% of survey respondents support maintaining MAP activities post project (see Figure 1 below); furthermore, 73% of respondents also expressed a willingness to continue their own active involvement in MAP endeavours moving forward (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 1 - Do you think the MAP should continue its activities after the completion of the SHERPA project?", n=184

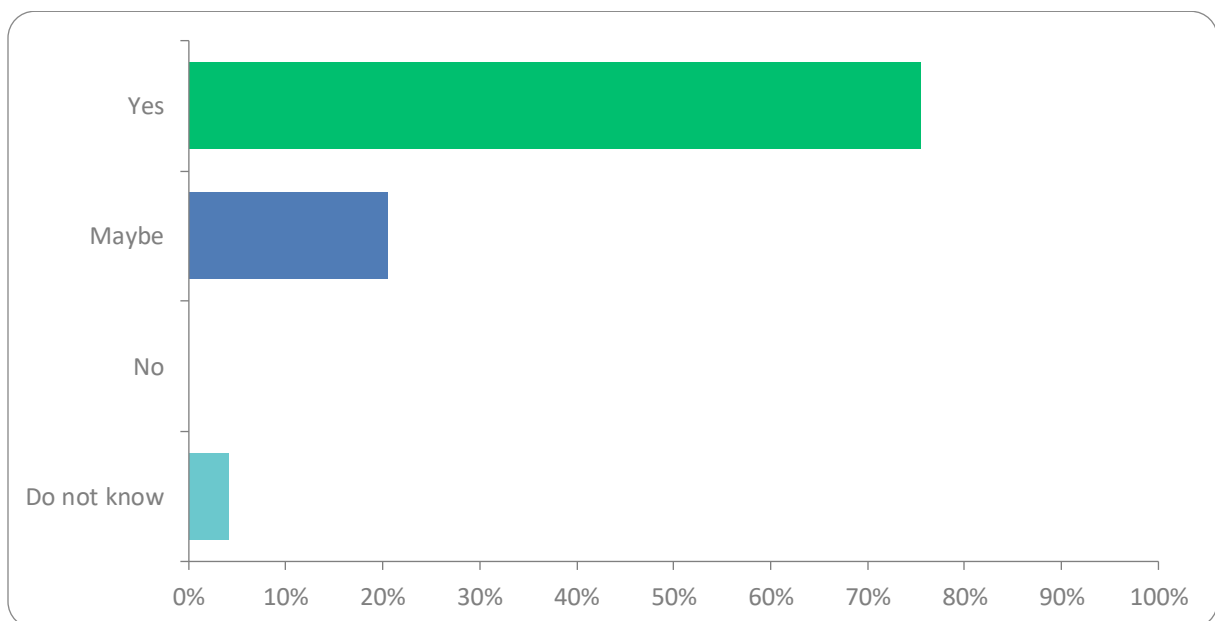
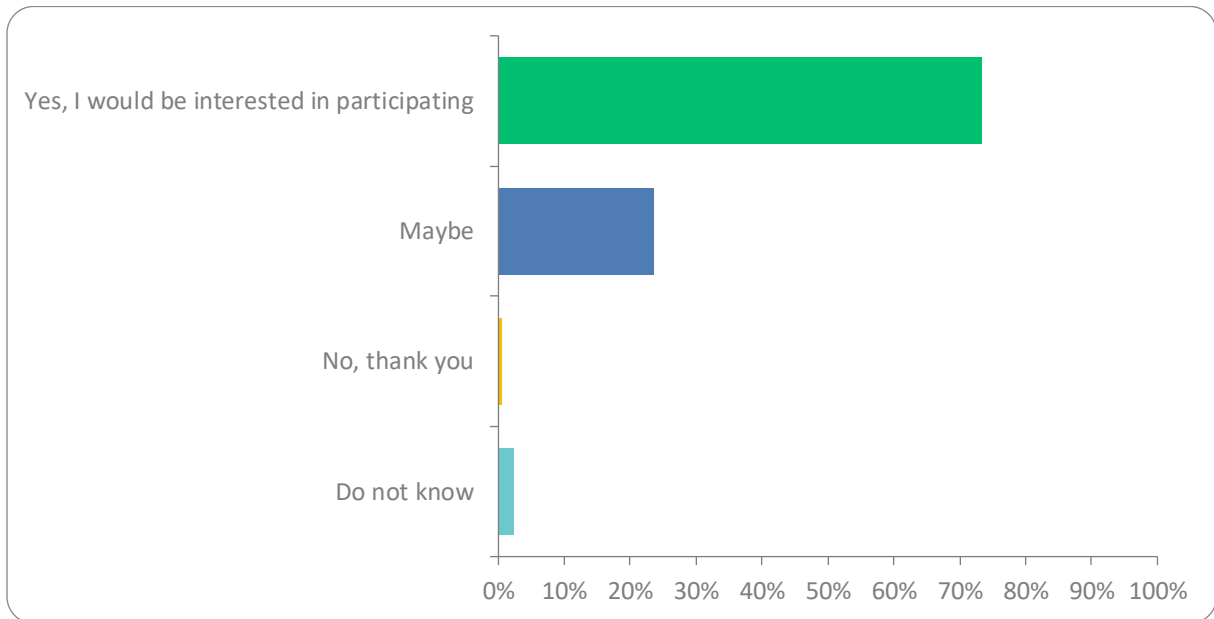
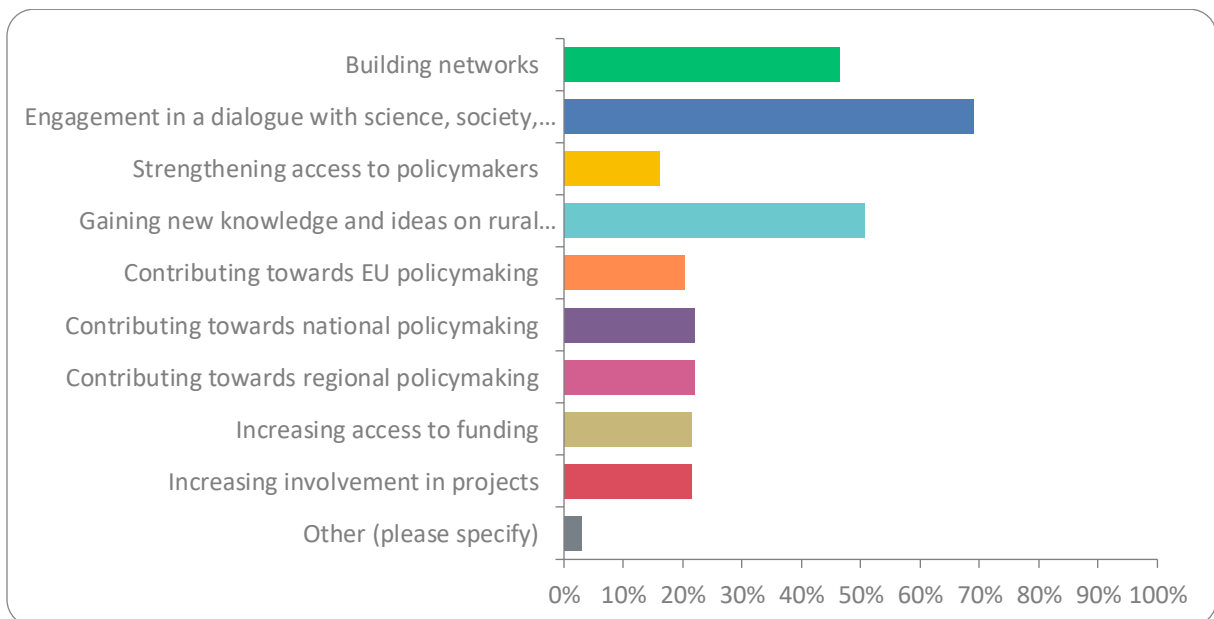


Figure 2 - Would you personally be interested in participating in a future MAP?" n=181



Interestingly, funding provision for MAP members was considered as a less important factor for MAP continuation (see Figure 5). This might indicate that stakeholders are prepared to participate for free and give up their own time and resources if they find involvement beneficial. Indeed, MAP members need to be incentivised to continue working with the MAPs, with one survey respondent noting that 'MAP members must see the benefit in participating.' Survey respondents were asked to highlight the three most important factors to keep them engaged in MAP activities after the completion of the project and the results are shown below.

Figure 3 - What are the 3 most important factors in order to keep you engaged in MAP activities after the end of the project?". n=180



The results outlined (figure 3) are a strong indicator of what MAP participants regard as the most beneficial elements of MAP involvement. The highest number of survey respondents viewed the opportunity to engage in a science-policy-society interface as the most important factor for continued participation. MAPs bring added value by providing a platform for participants to engage in open dialogue and debate in key rural policy areas with a diverse range of stakeholders. The second most important factor for engagement was to gain new knowledge and ideas on rural trends and dynamics. As MAP activities are built around independent evidence-based information and data, participants undertake a learning process that will enhance their understanding of rural challenges, opportunities and best practices policies. The third most significant reason for remaining a member of the MAP was to build networks. MAP membership brings opportunities to build social capital and trust between new stakeholders outside of existing rural networks.

Survey respondents are less likely to continue MAP involvement to gain access to funding and projects. This is most likely because other rural networks, such as LAGs, are more focused on building consortiums around funded projects. Survey respondents did also not regard strengthening access to policymakers or making a contribution to EU, national, and regional level policymaking as such a significant reason for continued participation in MAP activities. Influencing policymaking processes through the MAPs was a key objective of the SHERPA project. Since the participants do not perceive this as a significant benefit of continued participation it could indicate that this aspect has not been adequately communicated to the MAP members. It is also possible that the recommendations have been presented at an abstract level informing the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) (Miller et al 2022), making them less personally relevant and therefore less motivating for individual members of the MAPs. Alternatively, it is possible that this survey was conducted too soon in the MAP processes and that MAP impacts on policy are only becoming more apparent towards the end of the project. For example, presentations at the 2023 SHERPA Conference showed that the MAPs have influenced policy development strategies at the EU and regional and local levels. If the survey was taken again today, perhaps results related to the impact of MAPs on policymaking would look differently.

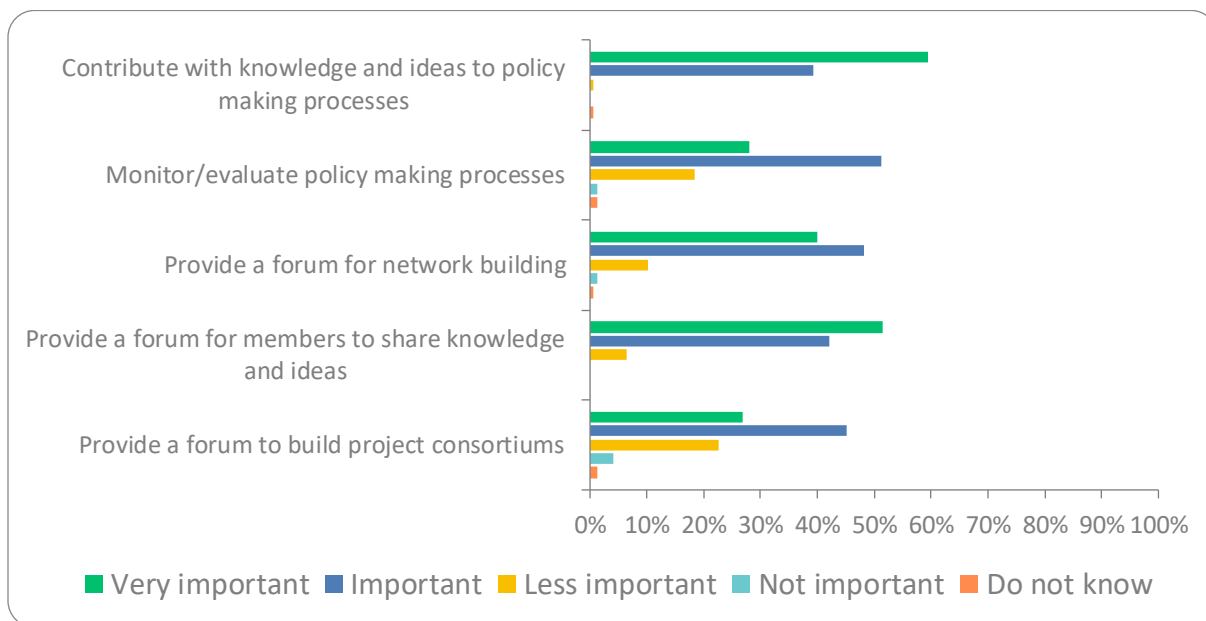
A challenge for MAP sustainability is establishing stronger connections with policymakers as this is a core aim of the MAP model and approach. SHERPA project organisers need to advertise and market the benefits of stakeholder participation within the MAP model to encourage existing MAPs to continue with their activities and foster the potential development of new MAPs in other European countries and regions. This point was made clearly by one survey respondent who noted that 'the concept of the MAP is not so well known yet by rural actors and therefore requires further promotion.' As participants at the 2023 SHERPA Conference pointed out, the focus needs to be on advertising where the MAPs have influenced policymaking processes, particularly at the EU and national levels.

3.2. MAP Functions

Participants in the 2022 consortium meeting emphasised that having a clear understanding of the main purpose and function of the MAPs is central for setting up structures for longevity. This perspective was confirmed by survey respondents who noted that it is very important (58%) or important (39%) that the MAPs have a clear direction in terms of aims and objectives (see Figure 5). One survey respondent noted that "a clear purpose and remit is required to justify the members of the EU MAP to invest the time when it is not within the context of a set project." Indeed, survey respondents were asked to consider the most important functions of the MAPs and the results are shown in Figure 4 below.



Figure 4 What are the most important functions of the MAPs moving forward?" n=181



Contributing new knowledge and ideas to policymaking processes was seen as the most important function of the MAPs moving forward. This response is unsurprising as the main focus of the MAPs within the SHERPA project setting has been to contribute knowledge and ideas to policy development processes. The second most very important function identified was providing a forum for members to share knowledge and ideas. The MAP model is unique in this regard as very few existing rural platforms and networks provide a forum for stakeholders to exchange knowledge and ideas freely within a policy formulation context. In contrast, LAGs largely focus on the implementation of predetermined policies, so the MAP model provides members with the opportunity to set the agenda and define the range of policy topics to be discussed.

Providing a platform for network building was also seen as an important MAP function. One survey respondent noted that 'on the networking and forum building, the MAP works also as a meeting platform for stakeholders that very often have supposedly conflicting objectives, as such it is a place of dialogue and bridge making.' Monitoring and evaluating policymaking processes and providing a forum for building project consortiums were seen as less important functions moving forward. Existing networks, such as LAGs, probably already serve these functions adequately so there is no need to duplicate functions across forums.

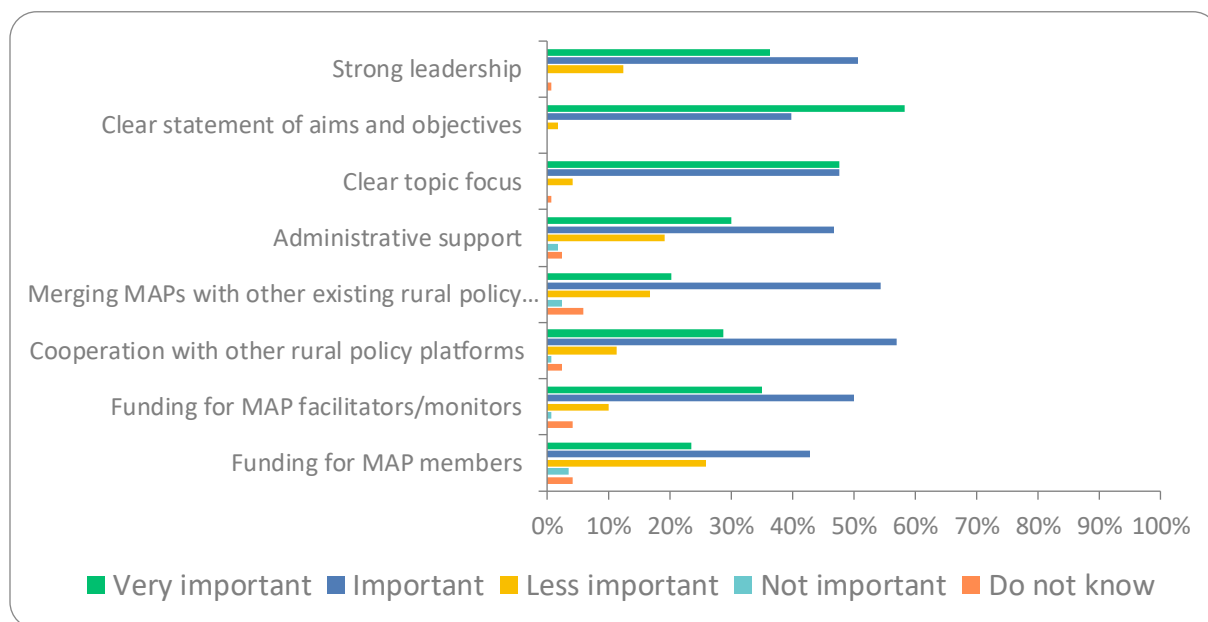
One survey respondent noted that an important function not highlighted in survey is for MAPs to constantly monitor socio-economic develop trends and focus their work on finding solutions to regional societal challenges or practical tools for maximising regional development opportunities. Consistently monitoring development trends and emerging challenges and opportunities would leave MAPs well placed to provide policymakers with new knowledge and policy ideas at policy formulation stages. Another participant at the 2022 consortium meeting also raised the possibility of MAPs playing a role in developing and facilitating public consultation or direct citizen involvement in rural policymaking processes. Whatever direction and role MAPs take post project, it is essential that any discussions surrounding future functions and objectives are set within the context of existing rural networks. Indeed, in determining the future purpose of the MAPs, it is vital that members find a niche role that is not already covered by existing stakeholder engagement structures.



3.3. MAP Integration with other Rural Networks

At the beginning of the SHERPA project, it was acknowledged that MAPs constructed on the basis of already existing rural network structures (e.g., LAGs) were more likely to continue post-project than MAPs that brought a disparate group of stakeholders together for the first time (see SHERPA deliverable 5.1). The survey results outlined in Figure 5 below support this perspective as respondents regard merging MAPs with other existing rural policy platforms as one important factor for the potential continuation of the MAPs.

Figure 5 Which of the following factors are important for the continuation of the MAP?" n=181



The merging of MAPs with other existing rural platforms can be achieved on several levels: firstly, incorporation on a personnel level through the introduction of new MAP members into different networking platforms. Secondly, integration on a functional level: the MAP focuses on knowledge and idea sharing in relation to policy development distinguishes it from the core functions of other platforms such as LAGs that focus on policy implementation and networking. Thirdly, merging on a conceptual level through the incorporation of the science-policy-society interface approach as a platform working model. The MAP model is unique from other platforms in that it attempts to establish an open dialogue between different stakeholders in the development of alternative policy options.

The optimal solution for the long-term continuity of the MAPs is for the MAP model to either completely replace current rural networks or integrate into existing networks. Competing rural networks is a waste of resources if each network does not have a clearly defined differentiated role. A multiple network environment also runs the risk of creating stakeholder fatigue or forcing stakeholders to choose which groups to focus their involvement in due to limited time and resources. If MAPs do not replace or merge with existing networks, survey respondents noted that enhancing cooperation between MAPs and other rural platforms was important for longevity (see Figure 5). One survey respondent noted that 'greater connectivity between MAP members of the MAP and with other regional MAPs is needed within the project.' Participants at the 2022 consortium meeting also pointed out that enhancing interaction and knowledge exchange between MAPs was important for sharing best practices. Others pointed out that stronger connections could be made with stakeholder-led platforms from other EU projects such as living labs in the Horizon ROBUST project.



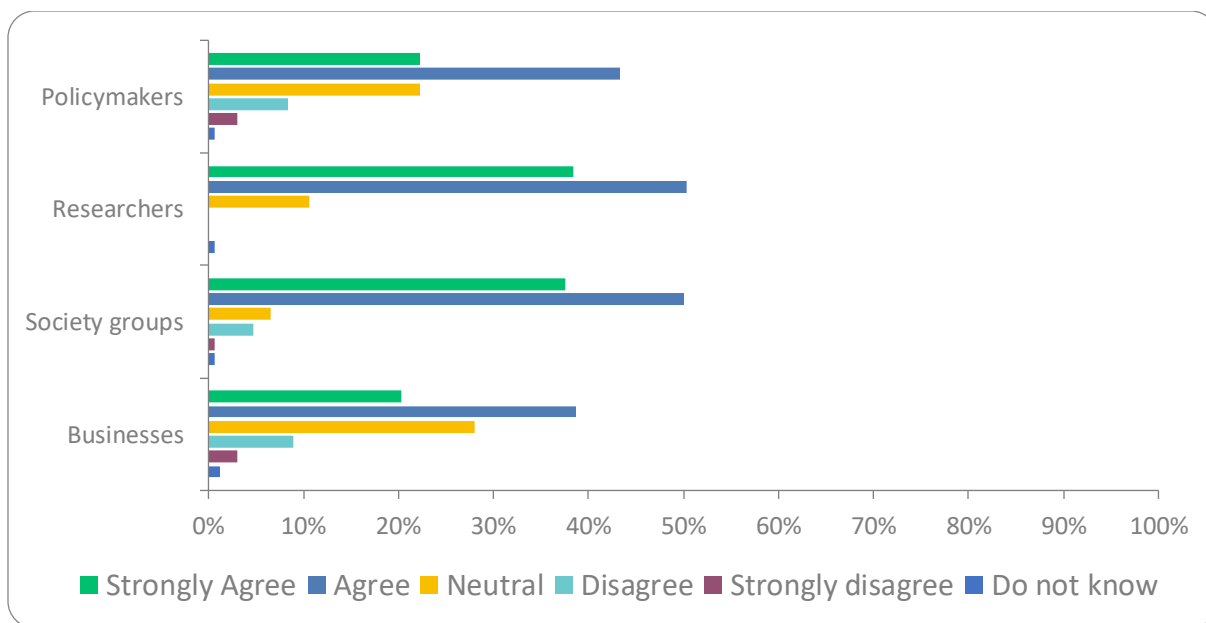
Establishing links between EU, national and regional level MAPs could also make a significant contribution to enhancing multi-level governance and policy cohesion across different levels.

3.4. MAP Leadership

Figure 5 above highlights that 86% of survey respondents regard leadership as a key factor for the long-term functioning of the MAPs. This was confirmed by participants in the June 2022 consortium meeting who pointed out that the role of facilitator is critical for the sustainability of the MAPs. Significantly, they noted that the most effective facilitators should, where possible, have certain essential capacities and skills, including: 1) a good background knowledge and understanding of rural challenges and opportunities; 2) a strong network and contact base with a range of key rural stakeholders; 3) the ability to understand power relations within the group and facilitate discussions where all voices are heard.

Survey respondents were asked which groups are most suitable for organising MAP activities. Respondents identified researchers and societal groups as best placed to lead MAPs in the future. There was less support for policymakers and business stakeholders taking a leadership role (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6 The following groups are most suitable to organise MAP activities moving forward.



There are both positives and negatives in placing leadership responsibilities in the hands of one MAP actor group. Out of all the stakeholder groups, researchers might have the most time to organise MAP events and they have played a key role in providing evidence-based information (e.g. discussion papers) that have structured MAP meetings and discussions; however, researchers might lack the network base and political leverage to encourage other stakeholders to continue participation. Societal groups and businesses possess essential practical knowledge of rural challenges and best practice solutions, but probably do not have the time and resources to take on organisational responsibilities. Policymakers have access to broad networks and the political clout to encourage participation, but as participants at the 2022 consortium meeting highlighted, it has been challenging to engage policy actors in the MAP process. MAPs often had to reach out to second level politicians or civil servants that lack decision-making power and influence thereby reducing the potential impact of MAPs on policymaking processes.

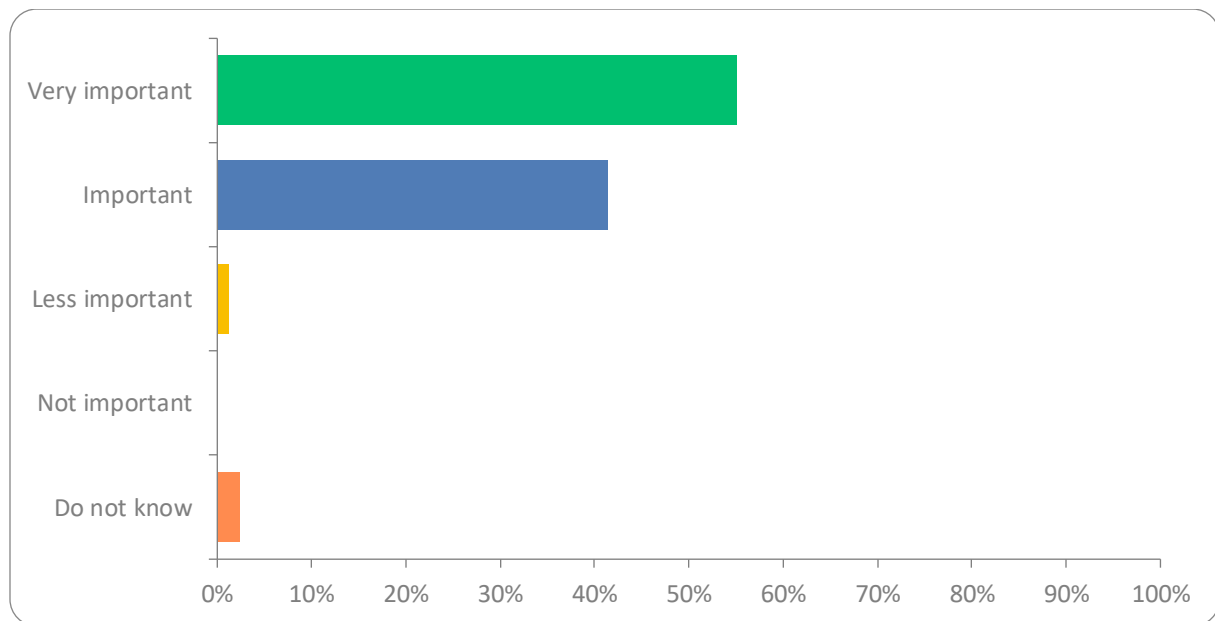


As participants in the 2022 consortium meeting noted, the central element of the MAP model is establishing a science-policy-society interface, therefore, the optimal solution for organisational responsibilities moving forward is to develop a core leadership group with 1-2 representatives from each key actor group. It would be the responsibility of this core management team to organise and facilitate MAP meetings in response to newly emerging rural policy and development trends, challenges and opportunities. Survey respondents also noted that funding provision and administrative support for MAP facilitators would be important for the long-term continuation of the MAPs. It would be beneficial to explore the possibility for a small amount of EU, national and regional level seed funding to help cover ongoing MAP administration and organisational costs. Another possibility put forward at the 2022 consortium meeting is to look for possibilities to continue MAP activities through newly emerging EU funded projects. For example, Nordregio included 10 SHERPA MAPs in the winning H2020-tender on the topic of migration (PREMIUM EU). SHERPA project partners met with actors from the Horizon EKLIPSE project to learn from them on how to sustain a H2020-project long-term. The Horizon Europe GRANULAR project also includes 7 Living labs and 9 Replication Labs which overlap with SHERPA MAPs.

3.5. MAP Internal Processes

For project participants, a unique selling point of the MAP model is creating a research-policy-society interface in which researchers play an important function in providing independent, evidence-based information and data to inform policy discussions. 96% of survey respondents viewed academic research as very important (55%) or important (41%) for informing future MAP discussions and working activities (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8: How important is the role of independent evidence-based academic research for informing the work conducted in the MAP?" n=181



Participants at the June 2022 consortium meeting highlighted the vital role that research-based discussion papers played in structuring MAP internal processes. The discussion papers are viewed as a catalyst for facilitating debate and ideas in meetings as they help enhance MAP member knowledge and awareness of policy and theoretical developments in key thematic areas. Indeed, the role of researchers within the MAPs is an important feature that distinguishes the MAP model from other existing rural networks, such as LAGs. While research institutes and independent academics participate in other rural networks, they are present



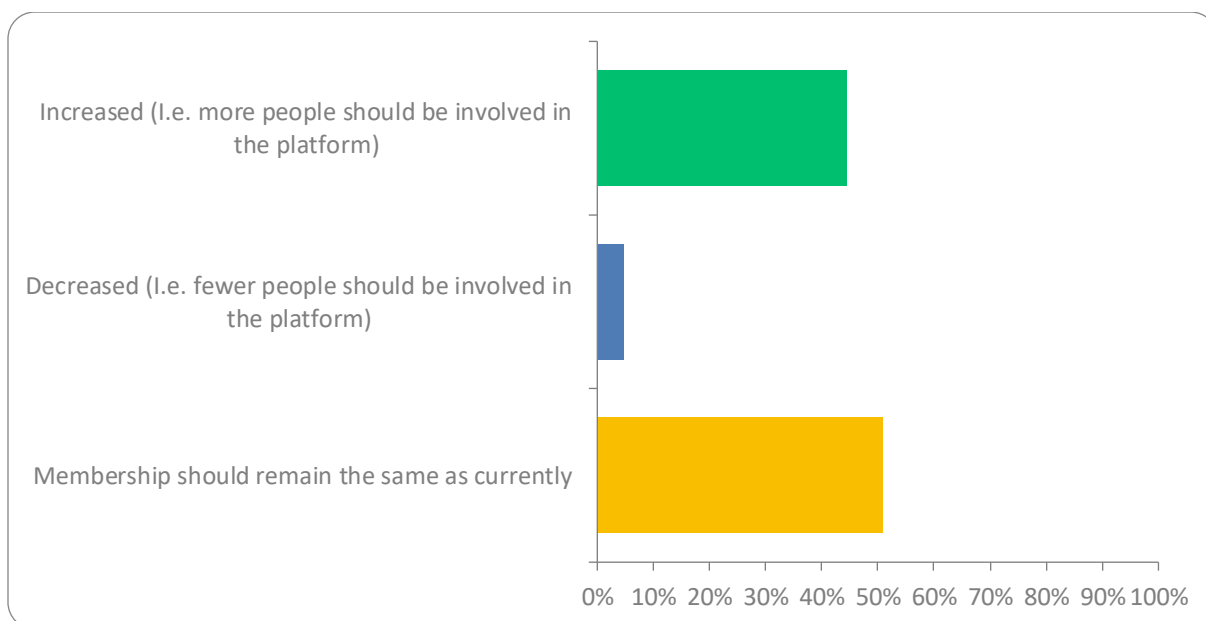
largely to further their own interests regarding funded project opportunities rather than to act as neutral facilitators.

The researcher role within the MAPs is both instrumental in terms of increasing stakeholder knowledge and understanding, but also facilitatory in guiding discussion processes. The legitimacy of researchers in this role is contingent on them providing balanced information (through discussion papers and verbally) that reflects a broad spectrum of policy and academic perspectives, rather than focusing on their own individual or institutional priorities and interests. If the role of neutral and independent researcher is performed effectively, it creates an environment in which other MAP stakeholders are exposed to alternative options. This has the potential to stimulate a process of discussion and reciprocal persuasion where stakeholders focus is on identifying common challenges and a shared vision or solutions.

3.6. MAP Composition

Survey respondents are largely split when it comes to reflecting on the overall size of MAP membership moving forward. As Figure 9 below shows, 50% of respondents think that the overall size of MAP membership should remain largely the same as it is now; whereas 44% would like to see the number of members increased, with 44% indicating that fewer people should be involved in platform activities. When it comes to assessing whether the composition of the MAPs are well-balanced, (see Figure 10), 16% strongly agree and 46% agree that all relevant stakeholders are included; however, 13% disagree that the composition is inclusive of all relevant stakeholders and that some key actors are either missing or need increased representation within MAPs.

Figure 9 The number of members in the MAP should be: 1.) Increased; 2.) Decreased; 3) Same as currently." n=181



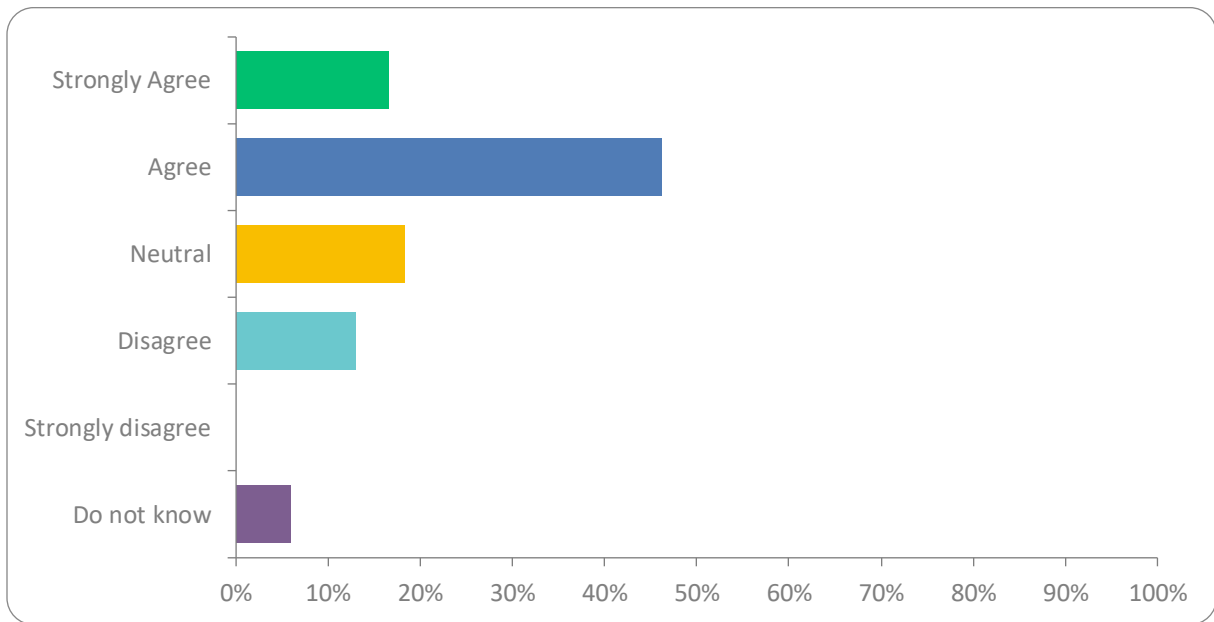
Respondents were asked to elaborate on which essential actors they think should be more broadly included in future MAP activities and the following stakeholders were identified:

- Representatives of vulnerable societal groups including the elderly, minorities and migrants.
- Rural resident associations
- Increased representation from local industries and small and medium sized businesses
- Policy research institutes and think tanks specialising in regional development



- Local government associations
- Youth organisations
- Enhanced involvement of civil society groups and community organisations.
- Rural environmental sectors

Figure 10 Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: All relevant stakeholders are included in the MAP" n=181



Engaging industries, businesses and civil society actors is a perennial challenge as these stakeholder groups often lack the capacity, time and resources to fully participate. Survey respondents view industry and business sector involvement as important for establishing stronger rural value and supply chains. Civil society organisations are regarded as essential for helping to overcome the socio-economic challenges currently facing rural areas as a result of multiple ongoing crises. An enhanced role for community group actors is also envisioned with one survey respondent noting that 'future roles for volunteer groups and third sector organisations in rural areas are needed in response to the cost-of-living crisis.' Respondents emphasised a vital role for youth groups who can potentially offer a positive and forward-thinking perspective in relation to environmental and social issues: 'There needs to be included young people – not just university students, but also secondary school attendees to bring the "anything is possible" attitude.' There was youth involvement in the Norbotten MAP through local youth groups, but their engagement was short-term, and they have recently confirmed that they do not have the capacity to continue involvement.

One participant in the June 2022 consortium meeting pointed out that MAPs need to show flexibility in relation to membership composition. They noted that the policy topic or theme under discussion should largely direct MAP composition. Indeed, a certain degree of adaptability in MAP membership is needed to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are included, especially those actors that possess the prerequisite knowledge and capacities required to contribute to discussions.

3.7. MAP Policy directions

Rural economies and societies are in a constant state of flux and must be adaptable to rapidly changing global forces and emerging policy shocks. Consequently, MAPs need not be driven, or constrained, solely by



policy development cycles but must be responsive to newly emerging socio-economic challenges and opportunities. Predetermined policy thematic focus areas and goals need to be consistently reassessed and reevaluated in relation to new rural development trends, data, and information. At the June 2022 consortium meeting, one participant raised the idea that MAPs which decide not to remain active could become “sleeping MAPs” and can be reactivated when challenges and opportunities arise that need a collaborative policy-research-societal response.

One survey respondent pointed out that MAPs should focus on ‘more suitable topics that are tailored to meet the needs of the regional context.’ This point was elaborated on at the 2023 SHERPA Conference workshops with one participant noting that there needs to be a more systemic approach to selecting policies for discussion based on rural contexts and specificities. Indeed, a large number of survey respondents noted that a key factor for the continuation of the MAPs is having a clear topic focus with 47% of respondents saying this was very important and 47% saying this was important moving forward. Survey respondents were also asked to highlight policy topics that they regard as essential for future discussion within the MAPs, as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - Future MAP discussion topics

Topic	Description
Health and Wellbeing	Examine ways to improve the quality of life, health and wellbeing of rural citizens, focusing on vulnerable groups (e.g., elderly, migrants, youth) and citizens working in essential occupational areas.
Sustainable Food	Analyse the adaptation of agriculture to climate changes to ensure sustainable food production and security.
Water Usage	Explore investments for water infrastructure; water governance; water and working conditions; and the links between water-related skills, innovation, and decent job creation.
Land Use	Land use competition and local co-ownership/land use partnerships in relation to green transition and biodiversity processes.
Social Innovation	Identifying areas of hidden rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness, along with establishing new ways to strengthen value and supply chains between rural and urban areas.
Nature Protection	Share best practice examples of nature protection measures introduced across rural regions.
Culture and Heritage	Examine the potential of natural, cultural, and heritage assets to maximise rural tourism opportunities.
Regional Resilience	Practical measures for building resilient rural regions that can survive global shocks and capacity building for implementing transitions.
Just Green Transitions	Define the notion of a just transition and assess the impacts of green transitions on existing socio-economic inequalities and challenges in rural areas.



Labour Markets	Identify new labour markets and citizen skills and training provisions that meet the needs of industries and businesses.
Energy Production	Examine green energy production opportunities in rural areas and their related governance and investment needs.
Rural Proofing	Exploring how EU and national rural policies and technical and financial tools like LEADER/CLLD can be better adapted to meet the needs of specific rural areas, including evaluation, and monitoring of policy development and implementation.

The identification of key policy themes and topics for future discussion is an important practical step for MAP continuation in the short to medium term. Before the end of the project, MAP facilitators could present this provisional list of future topics to MAP members to gauge their level of interest in discussing new themes post-project. The above list of policy themes is not exhaustive and MAP members could of course identify other new topics. What is essential, however, is that MAP members identify themes for future discussion that are highly relevant to their own country or region and can generate enough interest for their continued involvement in MAP meetings. This process would lay the foundation for the planning of concrete MAP activities after the completion of the project.

3.8. MAP Target Audience and Communication

One survey respondent said, ‘the MAP idea is wonderful and appreciated but the principal issue is how to make it more influential in terms of ideas, positions, proposals to be better recognised and embodied by decision-makers.’ Indeed, the impact of MAPs on policymaking has been questioned. The share of MAP facilitators and monitors that think MAPs can impact on policymaking has decreased since the start of the project from 50% in the 2020 MAP survey to 30% in the 2021 MAP survey. If influencing rural policymaking at different governance levels is the main purpose of the MAPs, then exploring ways and means to maximise the impact of MAPs on policymaking is an important task moving forward. Participants at the 2022 consortium meeting noted that it was essential for MAPs to have a clear target audience and recipient of their policy ideas and recommendations if they are going to have a greater impact on policy development processes. They continued that MAPs can be better anchored at EU, national and regional/local levels by establishing stronger communication links with relevant rural policy actors within key DGs (e.g., DG Regio, DG Agri, DG Reform), the European Rural Parliament, or national and regional level departments with a focus on rural affairs.

One survey respondent noted that there needs to be ‘a clear recipient of the work conducted by the MAPs.’ Establishing direct contacts in key recipient institutions would help ensure that MAPs findings and recommendations are targeted and disseminated to the right people across different governance levels. One survey respondent argued that timing communication and dissemination is particularly important at the EU level through ‘channels to communicate with EU level policy, mandate, and insight into EU policy calendar to determine when to provide input to what.’ Another respondent pointed out that there needs to be ‘clear channels to the EU, insight into how the EU works and how MAPs can contribute to the EU.’ Participants in the MAP 2002 consortium meeting also noted that policymakers could also increase the visibility of MAPs by clearly citing MAP ideas and contributions within formal policy documents. Finally, one survey respondent highlighted the need to ‘strengthen communication and information exchange within MAPs which requires more time and resources for animation.’ Participants at the 2022 consortium meeting confirmed this point arguing that improved internal communication tools are required so MAP members can contact each other informally on a regular basis outside of formally arranged MAP meetings.



3.9. MAP Funding

Identifying sustainable funding sources is critical for the long-term continuity of the MAPs. As Figure 5 above shows, finding a consistent source of funding is vital for covering MAP administration costs, particularly the important roles of facilitator and monitor, or the development of a potential leadership group, who are essential for driving and structuring MAP activities. At the 2023 SHERPA Conference, one workshop was devoted to the issue of finding innovative funding sources and opportunities that could be used to facilitate future MAP engagements. Public funding through the EU agricultural and cohesion policy funds were regarded as the most important revenue sources available. One idea put forward was looking into opportunities for MAPs to become a flagship initiative of the Rural Action Plan, an arm of the European Rural Parliament, or building MAPs into future EU research projects. National and regional vouchers were considered as alternative potential funding options, while the idea of community led crowd funding approaches or private philanthropic contributions were also floated during discussions. Cost-reducing measures were also considered, such as holding more meetings online. Overall, however, it was agreed that it is too early to guarantee the financial viability of all MAPs, but steps could be taken to encourage funding, like developing concrete MAP action plans that could levy financial support from public and private funders.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

There is widespread support amongst MAP members and other project participants for the continuation of MAP activities after the completion of the project. The MAP focus on policy formulation and the science-policy-society model at the heart of the MAP approach offers something new and innovative in relation to the modus operandi of other rural networks. However, as one participant in the 2022 consortium meeting noted, it is important to recognise that there can be no one-size fits all MAP model due to the high level of diversity across MAPs. Indeed, the future direction each MAP takes should be considered within their own unique context, including regional socio-economic trends, challenges and opportunities and existing stakeholder engagement structures. The MAP model has long-term potential as a platform for fostering dialogue and consensus between a range of stakeholders. If MAPs can establish a permanent presence in rural policymaking processes across governance levels they can, in time, help build trust and social capital between institutions, stakeholders and citizens. The following recommendations can help build the long-term sustainability of the MAP model post project.

4.1. MAP Benefits Recommendations

Market and advertise the benefits of the MAP participation: The MAP model is still new and relatively unknown to rural actors and stakeholders outside of the project. Project partners, MAP facilitators/monitors, and MAP members need to market and advertise the benefits of MAP participation to encourage new stakeholders to participate and incentivise current MAP members to continue their involvement. The survey results indicate that MAP members perceive the main benefits of participation as: 1) the opportunity to engage in an open science-policy-society dialogue; 2) to gain new knowledge and ideas about rural trends and dynamics; and 3) building new networks. Project participants need to advertise and market these benefits using a range of communication and dissemination channels available, including project reports and policy briefs, EU project workshops and conferences, social media channels, local newspapers and radio, and presentations at local events such as LAG meetings and town hall events.

Highlight the unique selling points of the MAP model and process: The MAP model is unique from other existing rural networks for two main reasons: 1) their focus on policy development and influencing policymaking processes; and 2) the science-policy-society interface approach at the heart of the MAPs. Indeed, other rural networks such as LAGs focus more on policy implementation and networking than policy formulation. In contrast, MAPs create a platform through which a diverse group of stakeholders can engage



in an open dialogue around key policy themes. This process facilitates knowledge and information exchange which forces actors to consider alternative perspectives beyond their own self-interest. This approach has the potential to help stakeholders identify shared rural challenges and build consensus around a shared future vision that provide solutions to problems or maximise opportunities.

4.2. MAP Future Functions Recommendations

The core function of MAPs is to contribute to policymaking processes across governance levels:

The most reflected viewpoint expressed by participants at the 2022 consortium meeting is that the longevity of the MAPs is dependent on establishing a clear function and purpose moving forward. For survey respondents, the primary function of MAPs should be to provide knowledge and ideas into policymaking processes. This has been the key role and objective of the MAPs in the SHERPA project and the focus on policy formulation is what distinguishes MAPs from other rural networks. One attendee at the SHERPA 2023 Conference noted that it is vital that: 1) the policy focus of MAPs is closely aligned with emerging EU and national policy themes; and 2) MAP activities are synchronised with policy cycles, particularly providing inputs at the policy formulation stage in the development of EU agricultural and cohesion policies.

MAPs can play a vital role in monitoring socio-economic challenges and opportunities: Survey respondents highlighted that MAPs have an important future role in monitoring socio-economic development trends in rural areas. The MAP model is unique in that it brings together actors from diverse backgrounds and perspectives (science-policy-society) who can identify important development trends that need policy attention, in addition to finding solutions to rural challenges or practical tools for maximising regional development opportunities. Consistently monitoring development trends and emerging challenges and opportunities would leave MAPs well placed to alert policymakers to new development trends and provide policymakers with new knowledge and ideas at the policy formulation stages.

MAPs can help facilitate citizen engagement in rural policymaking processes: Attendees at the SHERPA 2023 conferences highlighted that MAPs can be used to help explain what EU policymaking does for rural areas to citizens and help engage citizens in rural policymaking processes. Indeed, researchers within MAPs could play a key role in building the capacity of policymakers to use citizen engagement methods, including new digital tools, while society groups could attract citizen involvement. As one participant at the 2023 SHERPA Conference noted, the MAP model could be used as a potential Rural Pact Initiative at the regional and local levels to give citizens a more direct voice in rural policymaking processes. Giving citizens direct access to policymakers and policymaking processes could help enhance policy legitimacy and accountability, while also increasing citizen awareness and support for rural policies, thereby helping to reduce geographies of discontent.

4.3. MAP Integration Recommendations

Consider whether the MAP model can be merged or integrated in existing rural networks: A conglomeration of different rural networks could be viewed as a waste of time and resources and could potentially lead to stakeholder participation fatigue. If MAPs are to continue long-term as independent bodies, they need to identify a niche role that clearly distinguishes them from the functions of other networks. Rural stakeholders need to consider whether the MAP model should replace existing networks or alternatively be integrated and merged into existing structures. Integrating the key features of the MAP model into existing LAG networks would be particularly beneficial for a number of reasons, including: 1) LAGs have an existing structure and financial resources to continue activities; 2) adding new MAP members into LAG processes could make LAGs more open and inclusive as many LAGs have become dominated by the usual groups of stakeholders; 3) the MAP science-policy-society interface approach would foster evidence-based discussion between different groups ; and 4) Give LAGs a more significant focus and role on the policy formulation stage.



Create stronger connections between EU, national and regional level MAPs, and other rural networks: If MAPs are to continue as independent bodies it is essential that MAPs across different levels of governance are in regular contact and build stronger interrelationships. It is particularly important that regional and local level MAPs are in regular contact with EU and national level MAPs so the voice of regional and local stakeholders and citizens is better reflected in EU and national level rural policymaking. This would be an important step in reducing policy fragmentation across and establishing greater policy coherence across governance levels. It would also be vital for MAPs to create better links with other existing rural networks, especially LAGs, so that the new knowledge and ideas on rural trends, challenges and opportunities generated through MAP science-policy-society dialogues can be shared with other key networks.

4.4. MAP Internal Process Recommendations

Develop MAP long term action plans: One suggestion to come out from the SHERPA 2023 conference was the need to develop MAP long-term action plans that outline each MAPs core functions, leadership structure, composition requirements and future policy topic focus areas. The Action Plans would provide a foundational guidance document for future MAP activities and serve as a concrete plan to influence funding bodies to finance MAPs beyond the projects end (see finance section below).

Establish a core MAP leadership team with members from each key actor group: Survey respondents highlighted that the longevity of the MAPs is incumbent on good leadership. One person or representatives from MAP core actor groups (i.e., science-policy-society) cannot lead the MAP effectively. Policymakers, businesses, and societal groups lack the time and capacity to take an active leadership role. Researchers could have more time and capacity but might lack the networks and political clout to encourage other stakeholders to engage fully in the process. If MAPs are going to function effectively, then leadership must be a joint initiative. Establishing a core leadership team with 1-2 representatives from science-policy-society would be the optimal leadership solution to ensure political influence, a balanced composition of knowledge and widespread networking opportunities in terms of membership. It would be the responsibility of this core group to monitor emerging rural socio-economic trends and policy developments and organise MAP meetings at policy relevant times. This core leadership team is independent from MAP facilitators and monitors but work closely with them to ensure that the content and direction of MAP meetings is aligned with the policy thematic focus identified. Participants at the SHERPA 2023 conference noted that the most important characteristics of any leadership group is that they are motivated, knowledgeable of rural policy developments, and have broad networks.

Ensure that independent evidence-based research continues to have central role in guiding MAP internal processes: All participants at the 2022 SHERPA conference agreed on the importance of evidence-based science as a key ingredient for the future of the MAPs. "Reflecting on actual data helps people to weigh ideas and back them with a more complete understanding," was said by a participant. Others added that science is a way to create a common ground to kick-off the discussion, especially due the diversity of actors, and "to get legitimacy and guide the discussion" in the context of each MAP. MAP members and survey respondents pointed out that MAP discussion papers, based on independent evidence-based knowledge, were essential for driving discussions within the groups. The MAP discussion papers are important for ensuring that discussion processes are not based solely on member self-interests. It is important that MAP discussion papers, therefore, that researchers who develop the discussion papers reflect a broad range of academic and policy perspectives in relation to a given topic and not just their own research focus and interests. This forces MAP members to consider alternative viewpoints which can help identify common interests and challenges and build consensus around solutions and opportunities. In addition, as one participant in the 2023 SHERPA conference noted researchers can be inspired by MAP findings for their own investigations, as well providing a rich source of information to assess theory and validate results from the ground and identify gaps for future research.



Beneficial if MAP facilitators and monitors come from an independent research background: If MAP discussion papers are integral to internal meeting processes and facilitating dialogue it makes sense that researchers should take on the roles of MAP facilitators and monitors. It is important that researchers in this role maintain a position of neutral independence and ensure they facilitate in a way that all voices and perspectives are heard equally during meetings, including voices from different academic perspectives. It is also important that discussion papers are not overly academic and highlight policy issues relevant and understandable to stakeholders and citizens.

4.5. MAP Composition Recommendations

Ensure that all relevant groups are represented in the MAPs: Survey respondents highlighted that it is important that MAP membership is balanced across the three core groups (science-policy-society). Moving forward, survey respondents specified a need to increase the participation levels of businesses and societal groups, particularly the role of youth associations in topics related to climate, education, and employment. One participant in the 2023 SHERPA conference noted that each MAP could develop an action plan that outlines the type of balanced membership composition they are looking for.

Flexibility and adaptability are needed in the composition of MAP membership: Survey respondents pointed to the need for flexibility and adaptability in MAP membership. While core membership is desirable to promote trust and social capital, it is important that MAPs do not become closed shops dominated by the same actors. SHERPA 2023 Conference participants noted that membership needs to be flexible and adaptable according to the topic under discussion.

Build MAP practical expertise and competences: It is important to ensure that MAP members can contribute with knowledge, expertise, and ideas relevant to the subject matter. Participants in the SHERPA 2023 conference working groups noted that MAPs should be open and inclusive, but attention needs to be paid to ensuring that people with the right competences, knowledge and expertise are included. While academic guidance and facilitation through discussion papers important, it is equally essential that discussion is not overly focused on academic concepts, but direct policy issues, challenges, and opportunities relevant to local stakeholders and citizens.

4.6. MAP Future Policy Directions Recommendations

Focus on policy topics that are targeted on the specific needs of rural areas: Survey respondents noted that moving forward, MAPs need to outline a number of focused policy topic areas that are highly relevant to their own rural regions socio-economic challenges or opportunities. Indeed, one participant at the 2023 SHERPA Conference noted that a more systemic approach to the selection of topics is needed, based on contextual specificities and an analysis of current regional development challenges and opportunities. Another participant noted that focusing discussions on local policy needs will enhance local policy impacts. Another participant pointed out that an important aspect to be addressed by MAPs in the future is identifying relevant regional and local data, promoting a better level of granularity in such data, and making sure this data is available and accessible. As outlined above, MAP members indicated a range of policy themes that they regarded as essential topics for future discussion. It is vital that facilitators present these options to MAPs before the end of the project so a relevant and place-based policy agenda can be laid for future MAP meetings and discussions.

4.7. MAP Impact Recommendations

Establish target group recipient/s for MAP outputs: To help maximise the future impact of MAPs on policymaking processes it is important to identify clear target group recipients for MAP outputs and



deliverables. This requires MAPs to build relationships and contacts with key policymakers across different governance levels. One way to do this would be to ensure that each MAP has one contact person in EU, national and regional/local level public authorities who is willing to receive and review MAP outputs.

Enhance visibility and communication of MAP impacts on policy processes: MAP organisers and members need to increase the visibility of MAP outputs and success stories in networks and social media, particularly highlighting when MAPs have influenced policy development processes. There is evidence now emerging that certain MAPs have had an impact on the content policy strategies at EU level, and particularly at regional and local levels. MAP impacts on policy need to be well communicated, so MAP policy ideas and best practices can be shared and learned from across European rural regions. Participants at the 2023 SHERPA Conference noted that it was important to create a tool that can measure and assess MAP contributions and impacts on policymaking. One such indicator would be for policymakers to clearly cite where MAP ideas have informed policy directions within key policy documents. Enhancing the visibility of MAP impacts will play an important role in encouraging new members to join and maintaining the interest of current members.

4.8. Map Funding Recommendations

Build MAP financial resources by highlighting MAP achievements and future plans to potential funders: Public, private and community resources are available for MAPs to continue their activities, particularly funding available through EU agricultural and cohesion policy funds. However, funding bodies need to be persuaded and given good reasons to continue supporting and financing MAP activities. It is, therefore, important for MAPs to showcase their main achievements to potential funding bodies, in addition to highlighting concrete future aims and objectives to policymakers. On this latter point, MAPs could develop future orientated action plans that display to funders the continued relevance of MAPs, as well as their future policy priorities and activities.



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