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Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

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EVALUATION (PHASE 2)
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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	5
1.1. Introduction to SHERPA and its Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs)	5
1.2. SHERPA M&E approach	9
1.3. Structure of the report	10
2. Rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces	10
2.1. COMPOSITION: Creating a balanced science society policy interface.....	11
2.2. PREPARATION: Setting the agenda for engagement.....	14
2.3. INPUT: Evidence-based actor engagement	16
2.4. DIALOGUE: Meaningful science society policy interaction	20
2.5. OUTPUT: Effectively delivering policy messages	23
2.6. The art of running a MAP.....	26
3. The Benefits and added value of Rural Interfaces	27
3.1. How rural interfaces contribute to rural policy processes.....	28
3.2. How rural interfaces enrich rural dialogue.....	31
3.3. How rural interfaces stimulate rural development	32
3.4. How rural interfaces strengthen rural capacity building	35
3.5. The art of creating added value through actor engagement	38
4. Reflections on the achievements and the future.....	40
4.1. Sustaining horizontal and vertical actors' engagement	40
4.2. Tasks completed, mission fulfilled?	42
4.3. Concluding recommendations for Science-Society-Policy interfaces	43
5. Acknowledgements	44
ANNEX 1: M&E tool second phase.....	45
ANNEX 2: Dynamic Learning Agenda on rural interfaces.....	46
Glossary	47



Executive Summary

Key messages for enhancing rural actor engagement in policy and research

The SHERPA Science-Society-Policy interfaces effectively engaged rural actors in these domains in dialogue with the aim of informing future policies. They highlighted environmental, social and economic challenges being faced, knowledge gaps, and the impacts and effectiveness of existing policies and measures. These interfaces demonstrated an approach of bottom-up contributions to contribute to the EU's goal of involving citizens in shaping future policies and align with the OECD's exploration of innovative rural development approaches, fostering collaboration between and within levels of governance, and empowering rural residents, businesses and stakeholders to identify their aspirations, needs and recommendations for policy and research.

The SHERPA experiences and lessons learnt show how rural actor engagement can be operationalised through science society policy interfaces. SHERPA has developed a framework and built the network and social capital required to put it into practical operation. The insights and added value of these interfaces in terms of policy contribution, improved dialogue, rural development, and capacity building provides a solid basis for advocating systematic support to science society policy interfaces in service of the Rural Pact and the realisation of the EU's Long-Term Vision for rural areas.

The SHERPA results indicate what is needed to leverage the potential of rural interfaces for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas in the fabric of European society, which are principally: 1) Allocate resources to support rural facilitator roles in science society policy interfaces. 2) Enhance transparency in policy processes, so rural actors know when and how to engage. 3) Extend clear invitations for engagement in rural policy endeavours. 4) Push research projects to produce practical knowledge products for rural dialogue. 5) Facilitate the active involvement of researchers in rural development efforts. 6) Sustain the resolute intention to align EU policy and rural realities. 7) Make a firm commitment to listen and integrate rural recommendations into policy.

Summary

The SHERPA project created rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces to engage citizens, stakeholders, policy-makers and scientists in the joint development of strategic thinking and practical recommendations for the formulation of modern rural policies. SHERPA captured and capitalised on the results of ongoing and previous research projects and created spaces and mechanisms for meaningful rural multi-level interaction. SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) as science society policy interfaces have been the main fora for co-learning and co-creation of knowledge with actors at European and regional levels. After the project ended, over half of the MAPs actively continued their operations to engage actors in rural governance. More than a quarter of the MAPs search for support and opportunities to progress rural engagement.

During the first phase of the project, 20 MAPs were established, and a SHERPA process including the MAP cycle, was developed and tested in different settings across Europe. The findings from the first phase formed the basis for establishing an additional 20 MAPs in the second phase and for improving the SHERPA process and MAP cycle. The first monitoring phase also resulted in a learning agenda with questions that needed further attention. **This report presents the findings of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the 40 SHERPA MAPs during the second phase,** it illustrates the experience-based answers to learning questions. The central question in the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plan has remained the same throughout the project:

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?

Data and insights were collected by the dedicated MAP Monitors, using a specifically developed M&E tool. The findings presented in this report are based on observations made by the Monitor, reflections in the MAP teams, exchanges between the MAP teams and a joint analysis by the SHERPA consortium and the M&E team. The focus of the first phase was on the first part of the question; 'How to design, support and run a



MAP?'. During the second phase these lessons were consolidated, and the focus shifted to the second part of the M&E question 'the meaningful engagement in policy and research'. The aim was to understand the diverse ways in which the MAPs generated added value for rural governance and development. This report presents recommendations for building on the MAP experiences and for sustaining the added value of rural actor engagement in policy and research.

Findings on design, support and running of rural science society policy interfaces

Composition: creating balanced science society policy interfaces - Balancing science, society, and policy in Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) is a dynamic process demanding expertise and ongoing attention from MAP teams. It goes beyond the presence of members of the rural population to requiring comprehensive representation of diverse perspectives on specific topics. Achieving this necessitates understanding the unique interests and intentions of each MAP member, guiding the design of dialogue to fulfil their objectives effectively. Additionally, to maximize the policy impact of SHERPA MAPs, early involvement of policy actors from various levels is important in enabling meaningful contributions to policy processes.

Preparation: setting the agenda for engagement - Bridging specific rural issues with broader, long-term European policy processes, is a critical factor for successful actor engagement. Within overarching topics, MAPs require flexibility to tailor discussions to specific circumstances and define focal points aligned with the interests of involved actors. Moreover, fostering future engagement through agenda setting could benefit from increased transparency in the policy agenda and a clear invitation for rural areas to actively contribute, ensuring meaningful participation in policy processes. Building bridges between EU and rural areas requires common responsibility and shared learning, it requires rural actors to engage in policy processes, as it requires policy makers to make an effort to understand and connect to rural realities.

Input: evidence-based actor engagement - There are three key findings to consider. First, the identification and summarising of relevant sources of information demands thematic expertise and a good understanding of the local rural perspective. Secondly, the use of the SHERPA discussion paper is perceived positively, as it serves as a shared and impartial foundation for science society policy dialogues. Lastly, an in-depth understanding of the issues, urgencies, perspectives, positions and networks to effectively inform and focus the conversations is needed to establish a strong and relevant evidence base for the MAP dialogue.

Dialogue: achieving meaningful science society policy interaction - Several critical aspects come into play in science society policy dialogues. The facilitator assumes a key role, as the success of a rural science society policy dialogue heavily relies on their experience, network, interpersonal skills, and dedication in leading the effort effectively. A multitude of paths and methods can be taken to promote fruitful actor engagement, flexibility is needed to use diverse methods and align them with local needs and circumstances. Finally, building trust and establishing safe spaces for dialogue are necessary, which needs explicit attention within the MAP process to ensure an environment conducive to open and constructive conversations.

Output: effectively delivering policy messages - The MAP Position Papers hold significance as a tangible focal point and output representing a shared outcome, and with value in debates in rural areas beyond those directly represented in the project. The MAP Position Paper is a reflection of the desire of rural actors to have their recommendations heard and taken into account. Challenges arise when selecting the content in such an output as it necessitates a delicate balance between the specific messages and the translation into general policy areas and the right language to use. While the primary aim of the position papers was policymakers at the EU level, the position papers have also demonstrated effectiveness in informing and influencing regional and national policymakers, expanding the outreach and impact of local actors.

Valuable insights and experiences have been gathered on engaging rural actors in science society policy interfaces. While there are no strict prescriptions for delivering policy messages, in part reflecting the diverse nature of European rural areas, these insights show that it is possible to build a multi-level, multi-actor mechanism for engaging rural people in processes of eliciting ideas for public policy and in its development. Some of the key conditions for constructive science society policy interfaces include the pivotal roles of the facilitators and monitors, the combination of clear purpose and flexibility of the interface, and the stimulation



of dialogue through clear invitations from policymakers. The experience based findings provide inspiration and guidance for creating suitable spaces and channels to strengthen science society policy interactions throughout rural Europe.

Findings on the meaning of science society policy interfaces for rural development

The M&E in the second phase was tailored to gain detailed insights to the benefits and added values of engaging rural actors in rural governance. This aligns with the specific aim of testing and exploring mechanisms and possibilities for improving the policies and development of rural areas.

- **Rural interfaces contribute to policy** in various ways. Firstly, the SHERPA process contributes to strengthening the bottom-up evidence of EU policy relating to rural areas. Secondly, the SHERPA science society policy interfaces also influenced national, regional and local rural governance. Thirdly, engagement within the MAPs contributed to the empowerment and emancipation of rural areas in the policy process.
- **The science society policy interfaces strengthen the quality of the rural dialogue** by enriching the knowledge base for rural conversations, engaging new actors in the dialogues, building trust and creating safe spaces and mechanisms for dialogue, and most importantly by bringing together science, society, and policy actors into a single forum.
- **The rural interfaces contribute in direct ways to take actions that progress rural development.** Some MAPs inspired new rural development initiatives. The dialogue between science society and policy actors expands the horizon of existing rural initiatives and enriches their knowledge base. In general they generate some excitement and invigorate the rural areas.
- **The rural interfaces inspire capacity building.** The operation of science society policy interfaces in diverse settings contributed to the authority of the facilitators in their roles, and to their facilitation skills in particular for actor engagement in rural policy dialogues. The actors involved in the rural interfaces strengthened their capacity to understand different perspectives, and gained understanding of the working of multi-level governance and policy processes. They strengthened rural connectivity by the expansion of networks and the creation of new institutional and personal connections. These strengths, skills, capacities, understanding and connections are valuable social capital for future engagement of rural actors in processes of developing, implementing or feeding back on policies.

Rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces have demonstrated their potential to play an important role in the development and governance of rural areas. The interfaces are designed as spaces to debate policy frameworks, co-create recommendations in a conducive environment, feed the research agenda with relevant insights, apply research findings, build local capacities to drive change, and for the emancipation of rural communities. Each rural interface defines their own purpose, focus and role. Insights were gained on coordinating and guiding their engagement process, while empowering them to define their roles based on local needs and aspirations. Rural science society policy interfaces then become vehicles for multi-level trust building and multi-actor learning. Firm commitment is needed to build on these lessons and insights for the development of effective frameworks for rural engagement. It requires trust building at multiple levels and multi-actor learning. The goal is to leverage the potential of rural interfaces for the creation of stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas in the fabric of European society.



1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to SHERPA and its Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs)

SHERPA has created rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces to engage citizens, stakeholders, policy-makers and scientists in the joint development of strategic thinking and practical recommendations for the formulation of modern rural policies. SHERPA captured and used results of ongoing and past research projects and created spaces and channels for meaningful interaction. SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) were the main fora for co-learning and co-creation of knowledge between actors at European and regional levels. During the four-year project period, 40 regional MAPs and one EU-level MAP were set out to explore and test possibilities for improved policy stimulation and multi-actor and multi-level governance of rural development. The purpose was to tune local activities, policies and research to foster rural development policy by engaging citizens, rural stakeholders, researchers and policy makers. The assessment of existing knowledge to identify research gaps and the evaluation of the practical role and effectiveness of implemented policy in regional development was the basis for co-constructing recommendations for future rural development policies. A specific endeavour was put into inspiring and skill-building MAPs' capacities such that they continue after the end of the project.

This report shares the findings resulting from monitoring and evaluating the functioning and experiences of the 40 SHERPA MAPs during the second phase of the project between July 2021 and August 2023. Figure 1. provides an overview of the 40 regional and national SHERPA MAPs. The findings delve deeper into the initial lessons of the first phase of the project and additionally focus on understanding the diverse ways in which the MAPs generated added value for rural governance and development. It presents recommendations for building on the MAPs' experiences and for sustaining the added value of rural actor engagement in policy and research. The aim is to share experience-based recommendations on how rural actor engagement can be organised and what is needed for effective multi-level, participative, and collaborative governance in rural areas. Hence the target audience of this report consists of policy makers, researchers and societal organisations who are interested in supporting multi-actor engagement in policy processes. The report provides detailed and practical insight supporting and facilitating the establishment and functioning of science society policy interfaces and how to avoid or overcome hurdles. Furthermore, it provides insight into the specific value these Science-Society-Policy interfaces create for rural development and how this value can be sustained. This is relevant for institutionalising appropriate support and resources to effectively connect rural areas to flows of information and processes of decision making and to enable policymakers to respond effectively to rural areas' needs and aspirations.

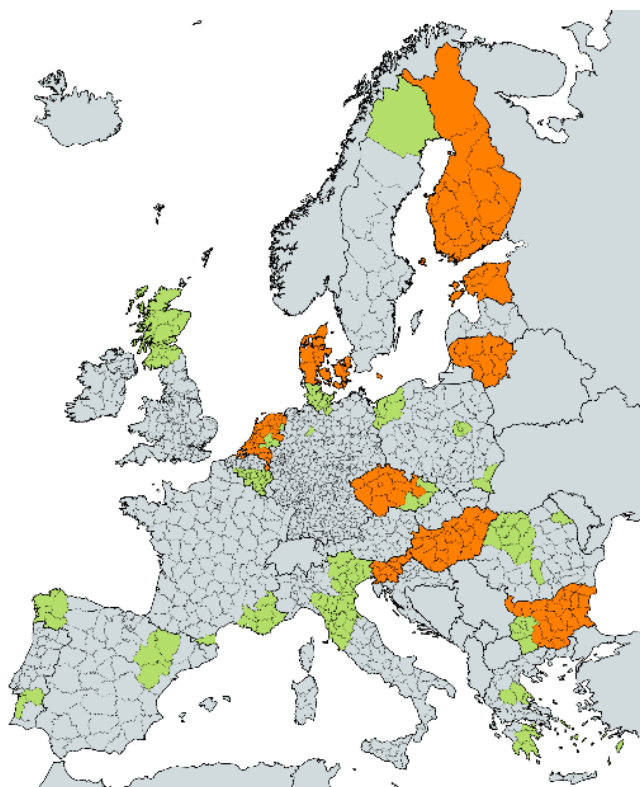


Figure 1. Location of the 40 regional and national MAPs

All SHERPA MAPs were based on the same general principles (Slätmo et al, 2021), while showing diversity in their origin, context, focus and specific design¹. The MAPs were either newly established or operated within, or closely aligned with existing structures. The composition of each MAP comprised a balanced representation of three actor groups: society, policymakers, and researchers. Each MAP had a facilitator and a monitor from the local SHERPA project partner who supported and oversaw their operation. The MAP teams identified and invited membership of the MAP, aiming to involve at least 10 active members, and occasionally also invited external stakeholders with relevant domain expertise or local knowledge. Members were invited based on criteria of interest and willingness to participate, availability and commitment, relevance, appropriateness, representativeness, gender, age, actor groups (science, society and policy), and geographical distribution. Figure 2. illustrates the overall SHERPA process.

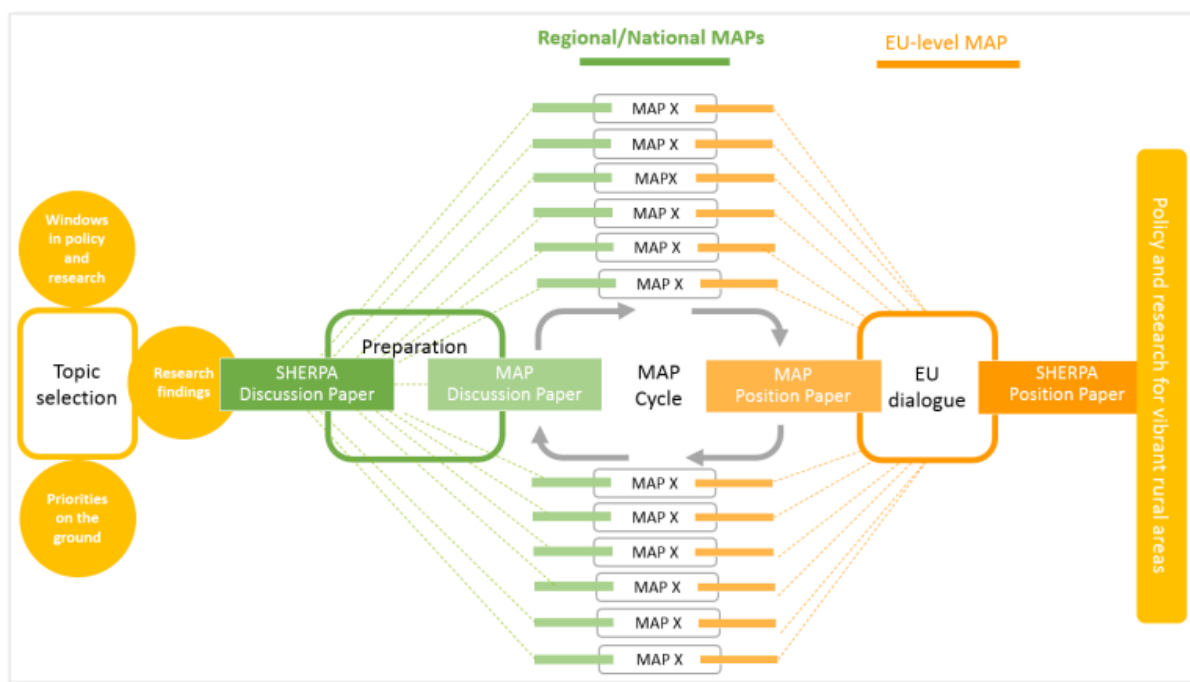


Figure 2: The SHERPA process: how SHERPA engages rural actors in rural policy.

The MAPs capitalised on research results summarised in the SHERPA Discussion paper and developed a participatory process to engage citizens and civil society, researchers and policymakers in a dialogue about future policy. The main conclusions and recommendations of this process are presented in the MAP Position Paper summarising the opinions and recommendations of the MAP on a specific topic. The set of Position Papers from national or regional MAPs has contributed to the EU dialogue to prepare a single SHERPA Position Paper. The whole SHERPA process resulted in recommendations for developing modern rural policies at European, national and regional levels, and concrete proposals for future research agendas.

Within this SHERPA process, the MAP cycle provided structure and coordinated the work of the MAPs. Figure 3. illustrates the different steps of the SHERPA MAP cycle. The cycle starts with the **Composition** of the MAP: The MAP team identifies and invites the MAP members from the science, society and policy sectors to join the MAP. During the **Preparation** step, the topic is interactively selected, relations are built and the MAPs make a Dynamic Action Plan (DAP) to guide their operations. The MAP Discussion Paper is the main **Input** and the starting point for the MAP **Dialogue** which aims at the co-creation of recommendations. These are documented in a MAP Position Paper as the main **Output**, which is fed into appropriate levels of policy making. The MAP cycle continues with **Evaluation** and reflection on the MAP cycle to draw lessons

¹ https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SHERPA_D5.1_updated.pdf

learned as input to the next MAP cycle. The MAP Position Papers on a specific topic are summarised and integrated in a Draft SHERPA Position Paper which was the starting point for the EU dialogue.

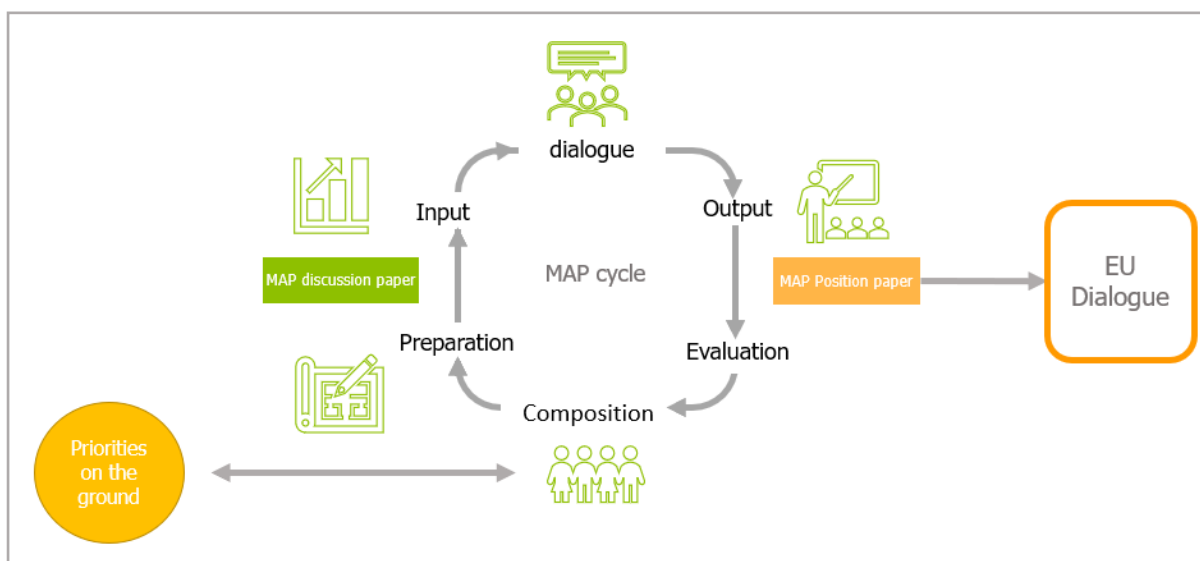
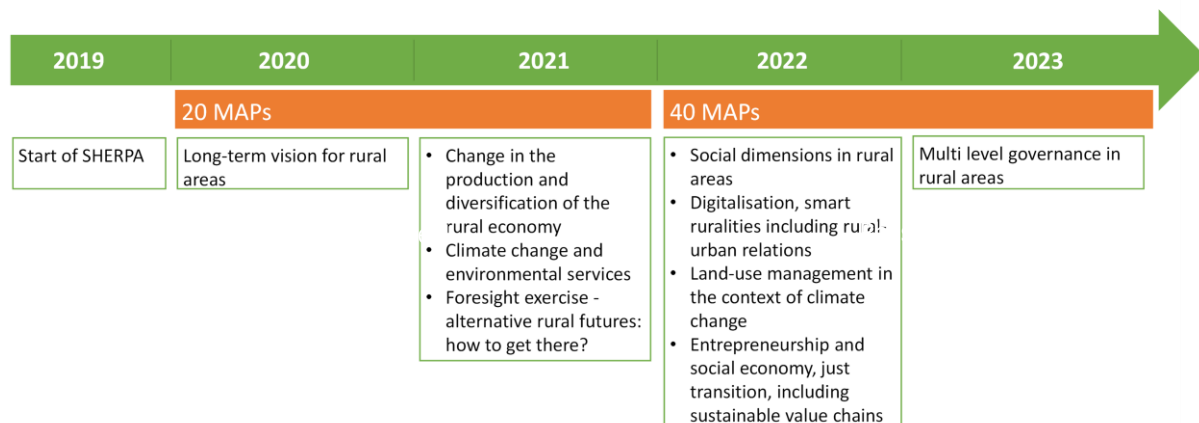


Figure 3: The steps in the SHERPA MAP cycle



With this process, a total of four MAP cycles were carried out between 2020 and 2023. Box 2. provides an overview of the two phases and the topics treated in each of the four MAP cycles. The Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) of the first phase was reported in D6.2. The current report presents the main findings from the M&E of the second phase.

Box 2. Overview of topics in the four MAP cycles and the number of papers produced.



List of the richness of papers produced in the SHERPA process

DP = Discussion Paper, PP = Position Paper, PN = Position Notes

Cycle	Topic	SHERPA DP	MAP DP	MAP PP	MAP PN	MAP Fiche	SHERPA PP
0	Pilot – Biodiversity	1	0	4			1
1	Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas	1	19	18			1
2	Climate change & environmental aspects	1		6			1
2	Foresight exercise	1		8			1
2	Diversification	1		5			1
3	Social dimension	1		9			1
3	Digitalisation	1		4			1
3	Climate change & land-use	1		10			1
3	Sustainable & resilient value chains	1		12			1
4	Multi-level governance	1			31	31	1
Total		10	19	76	31	31	10

All papers can be found on <https://rural-interfaces.eu/publications/?cat=position-paper>

1.2. SHERPA M&E approach

This deliverable draws on the M&E of experiences of the 40 SHERPA MAPs established during the first and second phases of the project. During Phase 1 the monitoring aimed to understand how to: (i) run MAPs; (ii) effectively include results from past research and policy analysis into the activities of regional platforms; (iii) effectively feed EU and national policy processes and research agendas. During the second phase an additional focus was also aimed i) to co-construct and validate recommendations and ii) to inspire MAPs to continue their roles after completion of SHERPA. The M&E was guided by a SHERPA M&E plan. The First Phase M&E resulted in the findings in deliverable 6.2 (Potters et al., 2021) and a dynamic learning agenda on effective and sustainable science society policy interfaces (see attachment 1 for a summary)². This learning agenda has been a guide for the M&E in the second phase of the SHERPA project.

A practical M&E tool developed specifically for SHERPA supported the reflection and learning in and between the MAPs. A summary of the questions in the M&E tool can be found in Annex 1. The central question for M&E has remained the same throughout the project:

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?

During the second and last phase the M&E zoomed in on the second part of the M&E question; the meaningful engagement of the relevant actors in policy and research. What is the meaning, what are the benefits and what added value is created in the SHERPA process?

The M&E approach and procedures were similar in both phases. Each MAP had a dedicated Monitor collaborating with the MAP facilitator. The monitor fostered reflexivity and supported learning and the functioning of the MAP. The MAP monitors were trained in the M&E method and a SHERPA M&E team supported the MAP teams and monitored the overall SHERPA process. The M&E tool for the second phase consists of an Excel file with a series of open and closed questions zooming in on the five types of added value. The tool was meant to inspire the observation, reflection and documentation of insights and experiences during the MAP cycles. Altogether, the following eight interrelated moments of reflection and learning were the backbone of the M&E:

- Monitors created moments of reflection within the MAP team and in the MAP events inviting members to share their impressions, opinions and ideas.
- Monitors documented their observations in the M&E tool.
- At regular intervals, the M&E tools were shared with the M&E team to analyse the results and identify preliminary lessons learned to input into cluster meetings and consortium meetings.
- Regular cluster meetings of MAPs working on the same broad topic provided a platform for the exchange and consolidation of experiences and lessons learned between the different MAPs.
- Informal exchanges during the weekly SHERPA Call for work package leaders when issues arose that required attention.
- Preliminary and final analysis of the M&E tools and the insights from the MAP meetings.
- Presentation and discussion of the preliminary findings and insights during the consortium meetings and with a wider audience during the first SHERPA conference.
- The findings from the M&E were shared, discussed and deepened with all the MAP teams during a full-day online M&E workshop with all monitors and facilitators of the MAPs.

Together this process of documentation, exchange, reflection, analysis and discussion provided a rich basis for joint learning and drawing the findings as they are presented in the next chapters.

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



1.3. Structure of the report

The deliverable follows the logic of the monitoring, after this introduction to the project and the M&E methodology Chapters 2 and 3 form the main body of the report. Chapter 2 focuses on the *process* of engaging rural actors in policy and running a Multi-Actor Platform. It presents the key findings on the five steps of the MAP cycle: composition, preparation, input, dialogue and output. The chapter ends with concluding remarks about the art of running a MAP. Chapter 3 zooms in on the learning questions on the *benefits, added value and effects* of running a MAP and shares lessons learned on sustaining the positive effects. For the long-term sustainability of the MAPs and rural actor engagement it is important to have a detailed understanding of the value of MAPs and what is needed to sustain this. The chapter presents the highlights and main observations on the added value of the SHERPA MAPs in terms of four aspects: 1) rural policy 2) rural dialogue, 3) rural development, and 4) capacity building are presented. Chapter 4, the final chapter of this report provides some reflections on the relevance and future of rural interfaces. What are the strengths and limitations of the Multi-Actor processes as carried out in SHERPA, what is the meaning and what messages can we share with the world?

2. Rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces

Within the SHERPA project rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces were developed and tested as instruments for empowering regional and local actors and institutions in decision-making processes. This contributes to effectively addressing the challenges and needs of the diverse rural European rural areas and to ensuring the harmonization of EU, national, regional and local policy levels. Within this context the SHERPA MAPs were purposely designed as a dynamic two-way rural interface, facilitating rural actor engagement in the policymaking that shapes their livelihoods, and the interface between science society and policy connecting different levels of policy making. The MAP members highlight which future policy and research are needed to improve the development and implementation of rural policies and foster rural development. This chapter delves into the insights gained throughout each of the five steps of the MAP cycle, namely: composition, preparation, input, dialogue and output (figure 4). Each section starts with a recap of the principal findings from the first phase and the outstanding learning questions. Then, it elaborates on the consolidated lessons during the second phase, the answers to the learning questions are presented in coloured boxes. To wrap up, the chapter offers concluding reflections on the art of running a MAP as a rural Science-Society-Policy interface to foster meaningful rural engagement in policy processes.

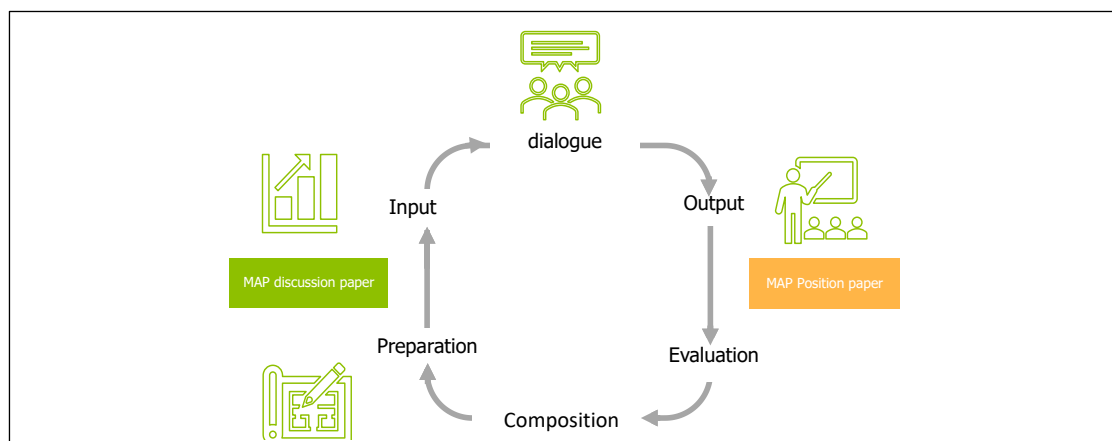


Figure 4: The steps in the SHERPA MAP cycle as structure for this chapter.

2.1. COMPOSITION: Creating a balanced science society policy interface

The composition of a MAP as a Science-Society-Policy interface deals with the delicate question of who is invited to join when and where? How design and organize the space for engagement? The issue of finding the right balance between science, society and policy actors, reaching an appropriate kind of representation, accommodating a diversity of interests, and creating linkages to the appropriate levels of policy making early on in the process all require due attention in this step. The first phase of M&E already resulted in insights and highlighted the main learning questions for this step (see box 4.)

Box 4. Summary of insights and remaining questions after phase 1

Key insights

- It is important to be aware of the origin and **starting position** of the MAP and understand the biases that come with it.
- Creating a MAP requires exploring and **understanding** the context and dynamics in and around the MAP to invite appropriate actors.
- It works well to build on **existing groups**, well-known actors and relations, but be aware of the potential biases in the discussion.



Remaining learning questions from first phase addressed in this section

- How to balance between science, society policy actors?
- How to involve the hard to reach?
- How to involve civil society actors?

Based on the findings from the first phase, the general principles were kept the same during the second phase. However, MAP teams used the gained experience and understanding for composing the second phase MAPs. Also, the MAP teams were given more flexibility and encouragement to explore different ways to include actors and voices that tend to be weakly represented in governance processes and to explore various modalities for engaging rural actors and organising the dialogue. The main insights and conclusions from the ongoing learning in the second phase are shared in the sections below.

2.1.1 Finding the right balance

The composition of the MAP as well positioned interface with a balanced representation of the three actor groups of science, society, and policy, is a dynamic process which requires expertise and ongoing attention of the MAP teams. MAP members leave the platform and others are invited to join to improve the balance. How a balanced and well-positioned rural interface is composed in a specific moment and situation depends very much on the topic, the objective, the setting, and the network of the actors involved. At the same time, the composition of the MAP also influences the specific focus, the

How to balance between science, civil society and policy actors? By careful attention and coordination, considering local perspectives and biases, the dialogue process becomes more inclusive and meaningful. Do not strive for numerical equality, but for balanced representation of different perspectives on the topic. It helps to critically monitor the process, the choices, the effects and taking action to reduce biases. Balance is not a situation it is a process.



objectives, the setting, and the alignment with broader networks. This dynamic interplay, where adjustments and refinements occur iteratively, embodies the art of facilitating MAP creation. As the facilitators and monitor gained more and more experiences, their understanding of the nature of the SHERPA process grew, and they gathered insights and skills in organising the MAP to get meaningful dialogue and valuable results.

For example, the facilitator of one of the Greek MAPs explained “With the experience in the first MAP cycle, we understood the process better and it became easier to invite and meaningfully engage actors”³. The balance between science society and policy does not mean equal numbers of members from each group. In general, the proper representation of society actors often requires a higher number of members to include the different backgrounds and perspectives of this actor group.

2.1.2 The Issue of representativeness of the MAP

Beyond merely aiming to be representative of the rural population, the SHERPA MAP teams strived to be comprehensive in representing different perspectives on the topic in the specific situation. Therefore, one could consider the SHERPA MAPs as deliberate participatory think tanks or rural dialogue platforms for science, society and policy actors. Representation was a point of attention and deliberation throughout the entire project. One of the aims was to strive to include otherwise excluded groups and create balanced contributions. The MAP teams did their best to be inclusive of all voices. Based on the experiences of the first phase, many MAPs deliberately took action to involve underrepresented actor groups like youth, elderly, more remote populations, or ethnic minorities. For example, in the German Schleswig-Holstein MAP, there was a wish to include more young people in rural dialogue. Through collaboration with an Applied University and by actively engaging young farmer representatives in the rural dialogue, the MAP was able to provide an open space to explore the future vision of young rural actors.

How to involve the hard to reach? First of all, it is important to carefully consider which groups are less represented, or not often heard. Identify appropriate ways to contact new members. Often personal connection works better than written or online engagement. However, for some groups meeting online may facilitate engagement as it requires less time and allows them to engage from their own environment. Tailor a comprehensive strategy to ensure that each group can voice their perspective. Written comments, break out groups or individual conversations are constructive ways to make the softer voices heard. Finally, it is important to periodically evaluate potential exclusions by actively seeking feedback from participants and other relevant actors.

In some cases, these actors were invited as participants in the dialogue, while in other cases, their involvement was facilitated through phone calls or a survey to allow them to bring in their perspectives. In this way, the SHERPA dialogue made some contributions to engaging the harder-to-reach actors. With regard to representation, there are two important points to consider:

Firstly, it's already quite challenging to organize dialogues that bring together scientists, community members, and policymakers and make sure rural areas are heard at the European level. It might be over ambitious to also expect big changes in the engagement of groups that are usually not connected to these processes.

Secondly, we shouldn't expect everyone to be perfectly equally represented in these MAPs. Even in citizens assemblies with randomly selected invitees, the representativeness of the group of participating citizens is

³ European Commission (2021) A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/strategy/strategy_documents/documents/ltvra-c2021-345_en.pdf



often biased towards the white, politically interested, middle-aged middle class. We cannot expect SHERPA to completely solve this. This does not release the responsibility to be self-critical and work on inclusion, it does support the value of deliberately striving for balanced representation as a strategy next to randomly selected citizens panels or representative democracy.

2.1.3 Accommodating a diversity of interests

Establishing a meaningful MAP requires a good understanding of the specific interests and intentions of each MAP member and designing the dialogue in a way that will facilitate the accomplishment of their goals. The question “What is in it for them?” requires a different answer for each actor group. And, in practice, even each member brings in their specific perspective and may take on different roles. To accommodate the interests of the three actor groups, it is useful to understand the archetypal different roles in the MAP dialogue (see Figure 5). The science, society policy interface ideally brings together values, evidence and decisions.

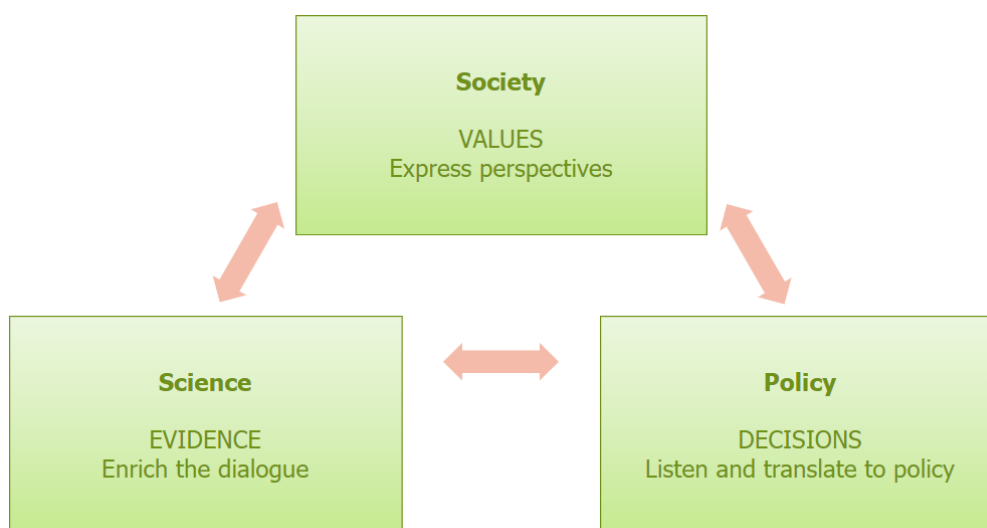


Figure 5: Archetypal roles of science society policy actors in the MAP dialogue.

Compared to the other groups, civil society actors generally can be characterized by their focus on taking action and their commitment to realizing impact. Meeting the diverse needs and interests of civil society actors seems most challenging and this should be an important focus in the design and operation of the MAPs.

How to involve civil society actors? What is in it for them? Make a distinction between different type of society actors SME, family business, NGO, citizens initiatives. Each have their own perspective and interests which need to be understood and accommodated. For citizens it is often more of a stretch to engage in dialogues, as they all have less formal position. It is most important to talk with a lot of people and actively ask for different opinions.



2.1.4 Involve policy early on

As SHERPA MAPs aim to contribute to policy processes, it is key to reflect on the desired policy impact early in the process.

Policy actors can participate in the dialogue directly or be kept informed through a second ring of engagement, keeping them in the loop. Involving policymakers from the start can pay off in ways that have a high impact, as was the case in the MAP Rural Scotland; policymakers were involved from the beginning of the first MAP cycle and the MAP was able to formulate coherent statements on the topics discussed in the

How to optimize the added value of the MAP process for each actor group?

By understanding the perspective, interests, and values of each actor group and design the process deliberately to meet their unique needs. For society actor it is crucial the focus of the dialogue is connected to their real life situation and to steer to concrete action. For science actors the process should allow connection to current research and should invite them to provide a broader perspective, bringing in knowledge and experiences from other areas. Allow the policy actors to specifically connect the dialogue to their policy area.

MAP. This paid off unexpectedly with the perfect timing of the COP26 held in Glasgow, creating positive conditions for the MAP to share knowledge and evidence and highlight new ideas for improving approaches to tackle climate change and the roles of rural areas and communities. However, inviting higher-level policy actors in the MAP dialogue can also reduce the experience of safety or freedom.

Some MAPs decided not to include higher-level policy actors in the initial dialogue, opting instead for a separate conversation at the ministerial level to discuss the outcomes of the dialogue.

2.2. PREPARATION: Setting the agenda for engagement

Enabling the engagement of rural actors in policy processes requires connecting bottom-up with top-down processes. The challenge is to make sure that relevant topics are on the agenda at the right moment and to ensure that policy is connected to rural reality. Besides linking the bottom and top it is needed to strike a balance between supporting the MAPs to prioritise and develop their agenda and dynamics on one hand and maximising the possibility of contributing to policy and research agendas, on the other. Defining the topic of the dialogue is a delicate key step which importantly determines the success and impact of the multi-actor dialogue on rural policy making. After a summary of the insights and learning questions from the first phase (Box 5.), the insights and conclusions from the ongoing learning in the second phase are shared.

Box 5. Summary of insights and remaining questions after phase 1

Key insights

- MAPs need **room to adapt** to specific conditions and 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.



Remaining questions from first phase addressed in this section

- How to combine the need for coordination with flexibility to follow the interest of the MAPs?
- How to effectively link local level priorities with EU level policy windows?
- How to select the topics for MAP dialogue?

Based on the experiences in the first phase, MAPs were more closely involved in determining the topics for each MAP cycle during the second phase. As a basis, an inventory of the themes of interest for the next MAP cycle was included in the finalisation of each MAP cycle.

2.2.1 Connecting local and EU level policy interests

Effectively connecting specific issues in day-to-day rural life with general themes and slow, long-term European policy processes and vice versa is one of the critical challenges for rural actor engagement.

Both, starting with an EU-level policy window (the top), and starting with the felt needs in the rural reality (the ground), have advantages and disadvantages, as demonstrated through experimentation in SHERPA. During the first MAP cycle, SHERPA coordination adopted a top-down approach, where the topics and the general method were proposed by the coordination team.

How to combine the need for coordination with flexibility to follow the interest of the MAPs? This balancing act requires determining the topics for the dialogue in an iterative process in collaboration with the science society policy interfaces and make sure the perspective of each MAP is accommodated. It is important participants understand the value of coordination for strengthen learning and increasing policy impact. Allow the MAP teams to adapt the topic to the interest of the MAP. Explore together how the agenda can meet the needs of both realities, of the higher policy level and local actors.

This decision aimed to take the opportunity to contribute to the European Commission's initiative on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA). Indeed, the more guided approach also provided a structural framework for the MAPs to face the uncertainty during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project adopted a combination of a more top-down approach in determining the broad focus and methodology while allowing flexibility for the MAPs to define the specific topics and methods in organising the dialogue. During the subsequent three MAP cycles, the agenda-setting strategy started with an inventory of interests on the ground. The LTVRA served as a guiding policy framework, but the MAPs were actively invited to collectively define their topics of interest. For the sake of exchange and coordinated action from the wide variety of topics of interest, for each MAP cycle, three to four broader topics were defined in such a way that each MAP could choose the topic of their interest. Thus, clusters of MAPs were formed that work on the same broad topic. This creates the possibility for valuable exchange between MAPs and join forces on the same topic.

2.2.2 Focusing from broad topic to specific interests

Within the broad topics, MAPs need flexibility and room to specify the topic to specific circumstances and to define a topical focus at the heart of the interest of the actors involved.

The experience shows that setting the agenda for meaningful actor engagement is not simply about matching urgent issues to policy areas. It also requires an iterative process of linking and adapting the broad agenda to fit both realities.



Once the broad topics for a MAP cycle were determined, in many cases a next step was needed to translate the broad topic to specific rural reality to prepare a meaningful dialogue. This requires relation building and significant attention of the MAP teams to understand and connect to the perspectives, problems, and interests on the ground right away – a crucial aspect of democratic groundwork. Besides translating the topic to context, the MAP composition also often required refinement to suit the topic. Furthermore, the ease of connecting also depends on the topic. For MAP members some policy topics are easier to engage with than others. In general, it helped when topics were concretely defined, explicitly clarifying their implications for local realities. **Concrete content, specific learning questions, and the relation to an emotionally urgent theme make it easier to engage actors.** On one hand, some policy domains such as climate change are more clearly connected to EU policy and linked to local interests. On the other hand, for other topics, such as social dimensions and governance, it seemed more of a stretch to connect local urgencies with EU policy issues.

How to effectively link local level priorities with EU level policy windows? This requires a dedicated iterative process. Starting point is a deep understanding of policy processes and windows and of the local processes and issues on the ground. The iteration can start with the level of policy or reality, but requires a translation between the abstract and the concrete. Transparency of policy agenda's, active invitation to contribute, and the translation of policy topics to concrete issues and questions help to effectively link.

How to select the topics for MAP dialogue? Seeking for the connection between interest of the local actors with the urgent topics of EU policy. Translate general topics to specific issues at lower levels. Formulate suggestions and related questions to potential topics to help people choose for topics. Focus on those topics which evoke emotions.

2.2.3 Fostering future agenda setting

The agenda setting for actor engagement would benefit from more transparency about the policy agenda and a clear invitation to contribute. Many MAP teams indicated that local actors find it hard to be aware of opportunities to contribute to policymaking. The simple invitation for local actors to contribute their ideas and opinions on a specific topic to EU policy had an empowering effect and increased local interest in European policy. For example, some members of the Dutch South East Drenthe MAP expressed their surprise that the EU would be interested in how they look at the topic. An important role of the MAP teams was to explain how EU policy cycles work and clarify the opportunity to make contributions at various stages. If the EU is serious about engaging rural actors in policy processes, it is crucial that policymakers actively search for channels to connect policy to rural realities; to make sure there is a clear recipient of the work conducted by the MAPs.

2.3. INPUT: Evidence-based actor engagement

One of the pillars of the SHERPA approach is to capitalise on research findings to provide a sound evidence base to strengthen the quality of actor engagement and the rural dialogue. In the SHERPA process, this was done through the SHERPA Discussion Paper which brought together summarized research findings and policy issues on specific topics and by inviting science actors and experts to the topic of dialogue. The SHERPA Discussion Paper was then translated to the local language and context in a MAP Discussion Paper or at least a discussion starter. The M&E brings an understanding of how this input of knowledge and experience from outside the platform supports the dynamics of the platform. Following the recap of the key takeaways and remaining learning questions from the first phase (Box 6.), the findings and outcomes from continuous learning in the second phase are presented.



Box 6. Summary of insights and remaining questions after phase 1**Key Insights**

- The SHERPA Discussion paper provided structure and focus.
- Rewriting and additional data collection on the ground was needed to add specific data and scientific information at national/regional level.
- MAPs successfully accessed other sources of evidence and adapted their paper to the local context.

**Remaining questions from the first phase addressed in this section**

- How to translate research findings to local contexts?
- What are suitable formats and channels to share information with the MAP members?
- What type of information best enriches the MAP dialogue?
- What could a facility look like that provides research findings to local engagement?

Based on the lessons from the first phase, MAP teams were more actively involved in the preparation of the SHERPA Discussion Papers to improve their local relevance. Continued effort went into translating science and theory into common simple terms and using visuals to enhance its usefulness for the different actors. It was recognized that a better understanding the role of the Discussion Paper in the dialogue is important for the longevity of MAPs and the engagement process. This understanding helps to be able to determine what aspects need to be sustained. The principal findings from the second phase deal with the preparation of the SHERPA Discussion paper, its function and use and some observations on how the support for evidence-based dialogue can be sustained in the future.

2.3.1 Preparation of the discussion paper

Identifying and summarizing the relevant research findings of information and preparing the discussion paper is laborious work which requires specific topical expertise and a good understanding of the local rural perspective. Once the topics for the dialogue were determined through the iterative process as described in the previous section, the next step was to identify relevant content from finalised and ongoing research projects. In general, writing a SHERPA Discussion Paper about a broad topic, such as Climate change or the Social dimension of rural development, and at the same time taking into account the diversity and settings of the 40 SHERPA MAPs, is highly ambitious. Capitalising on

How to translate research findings to local contexts?

This is craftsmanship of the facilitator in interaction with the science, society, and policy actors. Rather than just translating the language to national language and practical wording, it is a process of applying research findings and insights to the local situation. This involves adaptation on the basis of sound understanding of the local context and of the content of the research findings. For this reason, it is valuable to bring together science actors, policy actors and society actors in a non-politicized space to exchange, listen, and think together, making sense of a specific issue or topic.

research findings to enrich the quality of actor engagement is therefore also an ambitious task. The Discussion Papers were found rather broad and general, but valuable as a starting point for rural dialogue. The value of the discussion papers is especially demarcated in the context of a clear invitation to contribute to policy with opinions and insights. Without such an invitation, the value of the discussion paper is less clear. Making research findings relevant to a specific context requires knowledgeable tailoring. What helps is



enabling researchers with a broad overview and understanding of the topic to actively join the dialogue and making research findings accessible in practical and understandable language.

What are suitable formats and channels to share scientific information with the MAP members? As a discussion starter a Discussion Paper in clear and simple language can function as boundary object in engaging actors in EU policy. Information should be as practical and applied as possible with relevant examples and graphs to serve as a common ground. Involving well-informed researchers with a broad overview directly in the MAP was experienced as the preferred modality to enriching the dialogue with up-to-date information.

2.3.2 The use of the SHERPA discussion paper

The general impression was that the SHERPA Discussion Paper was appreciated by MAPs as a common and impartial starting point for the MAP dialogues. The original idea was to have the Discussion Paper translated into a MAP Discussion Paper. In practice, not all MAPs developed a MAP Discussion Paper, however, all MAPs found their own way of using the SHERPA Discussion Paper as a starting point to prepare the MAP dialogue. The SHERPA Discussion Paper was used differently by different MAPs. Especially the MAPs that were newly established in the SHERPA project tended to take the Discussion Paper more literally as a starting point for the dialogue. Existing MAPs with a longer history and their own purpose tended to require more adaptations to or even completely newly creating a common informational starting point. At the very least, MAPs used the questions and the paper as a reference to structure the MAP dialogue. Some MAPs literally translated the Discussion Paper to the local language. In general, MAPs invested quite some time to gather specific relevant additional content as starting point for the MAP dialogue. Indeed, the translation of the topic to the MAP reality required a lot of attention and dedication of the MAP teams. This process involves a couple of crucial steps, including specifying and tweaking the topic to align with the local context, translating complex concepts, and conducting thorough research to identify relevant research findings and data. This is the groundwork for the dialogue.

Quite some MAPs commented the Discussion Paper created a safe and impartial field for constructive discussions and allowed all perspectives to be heard and respected. As the Polish Zachodniopomorskie MAP

What type of information best enriches the MAP dialogue?

Besides information to provide overview of the meaning of a topic within the broader policy arena, it is science-based evidence, as specific and practical as possible which is most useful. This requires a good understanding of the local situation and of the state-of-the-art knowledge and the ability to make information relevant to practice.

indicated: "Evidence-based introduction to a topic is a very stimulating way to initiate a comprehensive discussions". The SHERPA Discussion Paper was especially appreciated as a common ground for topics and situations surrounded by controversy or polarisation. It was a general

experience of the MAPs that the SHERPA Discussion papers did not so much provide new information and insights but rather introduced the topic, provided boundaries and definitions, and provided some overview of the relevant policy context. The inclusion of specific questions in the Discussion Papers was very much appreciated as a clear invitation to contribute and as discussion starters.

2.3.3 Providing a relevant knowledge base

Positioning the MAP dialogue and providing a relevant knowledge base requires a thorough insight into issues and urgencies, perspectives, positions and networks. Understanding the sensitivities, programmes, projects and initiatives, and the historical development of the topic is crucial. Translating general topics to a specific setting of a MAP requires much attention. In some MAPs, many bilateral and group conversations were organised to define the appropriate thematic focus of the MAP



dialogue. This step itself plays an important part in the rural dialogue, and in turn influences the previously determined MAP constellation and agenda setting.

It is important to mention that, in addition to the Discussion Paper, the science actors in the MAPs also often deliberately took on the role to provide a sound evidence base and bring in relevant knowledge and experiences. For example, in the Emilia Romagna MAP, the involved researchers presented local technical information to start and guide the dialogue. In those cases, the knowledge was not limited to, nor specifically aimed at H2020 projects, but rather presented relevant data and insights and state-of-the-art science.

In general, making research findings accessible is valuable for rural and other actors to use evidence as a basis for dialogue and to drive positive change. Stimulating and enabling science actors to actively participate in rural discourse and initiatives also holds significant value.

2.3.4 Evidence-based dialogue in the future

Three recommendations for strengthening the capitalisation on research findings and providing a sound evidence-based rural dialogue:

- Include rural dialogues and local rural development as specific beneficiaries in new research calls for topics relevant for rural areas. The Long-term Vision for Rural Areas can provide guidance. Communication strategies should include simple easy-to-use terminology and be specifically targeted at findings for rural development. The current practice abstracts can be a good starting point. As we have been doing in the SHERPA Discussion Paper it is advisable to involve the science society policy actors early on in drafting the materials. Including the role of science in multi actor governance processes in important research calls can strengthen the evidence base for future rural dialogues and the engagement of rural actors.

What could a facility look like that provides research findings to local engagement processes?

The MAP experiences illustrate how human craftsmanship that is based on understanding and listening is required. The Discussion Paper is especially valuable in the context of an invitation to contribute to the conversation. Nevertheless, it would be valuable to improve the translation of research findings to practical and clear formats. A good practice would be that besides a *policy* brief, projects also develop an accessible *practice* brief on relevant topics.

- Financial resources should be made available within research projects for researchers to engage in Science-Society-Policy interfaces and rural dialogue. Including science, society and policy actors as an executive board for new projects and initiatives is just one way of building on the SHERPA experiences within this regard.
- Finally, the capacity to translate research findings to local settings and to provide practical state-of-the-art knowledge in a certain domain are important social capital. The MAP teams and the science actors in SHERPA have gained this valuable experience. This is a basis for further developing this capacity.



2.4. DIALOGUE: Meaningful science society policy interaction

Engaging rural science, society policy actors in the dialogue is a key process in SHERPA. Building on the input provided through the SHERPA Discussion Paper, the aim of the dialogue itself is to enable the exchange of ideas, co-learning, and co-creating knowledge and recommendations on topics of interest. Some of the challenges of facilitating this dialogue are to allow all actors to participate equally, to make good use of the available time and resources, to maintain the energy and engagement and to realise concrete outcomes. Below is a summary of the insights and learning questions from the first phase (Box 7).

Box 7. Summary of insights and remaining questions after phase 1

Key insights

- **Adapt** facilitation methods to the preferences and capacities of different MAP members.
- Use **diversity of methods** for engagement, e.g., interviews, informal conversations, surveys, group discussions, allowing everybody to contribute in a manner that suits them.
- **Survey and focus groups** are good methods for balancing strong positions of the different actors.



Remaining questions from first phase addressed in this section

- What methods and tools are suitable for what engagement?
- How to integrate different types of knowledge in the MAP dialogue?
- How to combine remote with face-to-face engagement?
- How to deal with power relations within group constellations?
- How to serve different motives of actors for engaging in policy processes?

Based on the lessons learned and experiences gained during the second phase, the MAP teams were stimulated to experiment and had more liberty to deploy methods and develop their strategies as suitable to their local circumstances. The general instruction was to organize the dialogue with at least two meetings to discuss the chosen topic and document the results in a MAP Position Paper. This resulted in rich learning and ample lessons learned. Some main insights and conclusions that resulted from the ongoing monitoring during the second phase are shared below.

2.4.1 Key role of the facilitator

Facilitating a rural science, society policy dialogue is a human endeavour that relies strongly on the experience, network, interpersonal skills and dedication of those leading the effort. Building on the initial training and most of all on their experience and understanding of the situation, relations and circumstances, each MAP team designed their strategy to organise the dialogue, invite strategic thinking and come up with practical recommendations for modern rural policies and research agendas. Facilitating and guiding a MAP dialogue requires specific skills and capabilities. The quality of the MAP dialogue very much depends on the network, skills, and sensitivity of the facilitator. Simultaneously, participating in the MAP process also supports the development of new skills. The Lithuanian facilitator stressed that her experience with the SHERPA MAP overall helped her to personally become a better facilitator, to facilitate the MAP participants to bond and to make connections to higher-level politics. As was explained in the former sections, many choices need to be made along the way: “Who is invited (and who is left out)?”, “What questions are on the agenda (and which not)?”, “Who can speak?”, and “Who is listened to?”, are only a few of the most obvious questions. The answers to these questions importantly influence the further process and the outcome. Additionally, the ambiance created during the MAP dialogues can profoundly influence what is said and heard, thereby influencing the evolution of the dialogue. Designing and running a MAP can never be an objective act, it is therefore crucial to be sensitive to own personal inclinations and biases. Actively engaging rural actors in policy processes is human-driven work. Incorporating moments for reflection, implementing specific checks and inviting reflections from MAP members and others are valuable strategies to enhance the MAP process. The collaboration between an involved facilitator and a somewhat more distanced monitor often proved beneficial in this respect. The success of the SHERPA project owes much to the dedication and expertise of the highly motivated MAP facilitators and monitors. Their adept use of subtle and interpersonal facilitation skills has been instrumental in fostering a flourishing Science-Society-Policy interface. They used their skills to creatively navigate power differences, trying to make sure that all voices were heard and valued. Their genuine passion for both the subject matter and the people has been a driving force behind the SHERPA achievement.

What methods and tools are suitable for what engagement?

This question cannot be answered uniformly. Designing spaces for actor engagement is an art which requires tailoring the process to the situation based on insights, skills and experience. Three general tips: 1) Use communication channels and language that suit the actors; 2) Combine informal, relaxed and fun interactions with more formal and content-based activities; and 3) Smaller groups help to take tensions away and deepen the dialogue. The SHERPA Online Stakeholder Engagement Tool, that was developed in SHERPA and builds on many other projects and experiences, provides many relevant methods and tools to foster actor engagement.

The SHERPA MAP teams were well-prepared and experienced to start with and have developed valuable insights into what works when and how and have developed their skills and gained rich experiences in how to design, support, and, facilitate the dialogue between rural actors. Facilitation of multi-actor dialogue requires being flexible and adaptable on one hand while keeping track and the purpose clear on the other hand. The room for experimentation and spaces for support and exchange between MAPs have been mentioned as beneficial for the further development of skills and experiences.



2.4.2 Diverse methods for dialogues

How to integrate different types of knowledge in the MAP dialogue?

It is important that all actors share a certain level of agreement on the topics of the dialogue. Closely involve different actors in deciding about the aspects of the topic that needs to be addressed. Using methods that invite dialogue instead of debate and working in smaller groups allows members to listen to each other. Building trust and relationships enlarges the capacity to be comfortable with differences in perspectives. Reflecting different views and insights in the Position Paper, so that all views are represented. If needed, define sub-topics that consider varying perspectives of a topic.

There are many roads that lead to fruitful actor engagement, it is important to use a diversity of methods that suit different actors and fit local needs and circumstances. Throughout the four MAP cycles, the MAP teams have been exploring and learning about appropriate methods to facilitate the MAP dialogue. The choice of methods importantly shapes the space and character of the interaction. However, lessons learned in the SHERPA MAPs do not point to one specific method as preferred above other methods.

Round tables, focus groups, break-out groups, world cafés, conversations in pairs, voting and ranking, bilateral conversations and interviews, online surveys, and informal conversations were applied in different settings by the MAPs. The choice of methods can better be left to the professional judgement of the facilitator. Two methodological lessons are worth sharing, firstly it is crucial to skilfully adapt the methods used to the specific situation, the topic and especially to the preferences and capacities of different MAP members. In order to allow all actors to share their views, it is secondly important to carefully select and combine different formats. Some members may feel more comfortable in a 1 on 1 conversation or a survey, where other topics can be better broached in group discussions or informal conversations.

Creating different modalities for engagement can allow different members to contribute. For example, online meetings make it possible to meet with actors that do not live close by or have a busy schedule at home or at work, but is also experienced as more formal and distant, thus less engaging for some. The Galician Rural Interfaces MAP organised an informal dialogue too facilitate familiarity and building a relation among the participants before the actual dialogue. This relaxed atmosphere helped the actors to get to know each other better, fostering a more comfortable environment for the dialogue.

How to combine remote with face-to-face engagement?

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for this. It is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of both remote and face-to-face meetings. The combination of both depends on the possibilities and on the needs of the actors. Talking about needs and expectations regarding the engagement can help the facilitator in decision-making.

2.4.3 Build trust and safe space

Building trust and creating safe spaces for dialogue is essential and should be included as a deliberate task that needs explicit attention in the MAP process. Clear communication of expectations was experienced as essential to form a basis for trust.

How to deal with power relations within group constellations? The facilitator plays a crucial role in deciding which methods to use to hear all voices of the actors involved. Collaboratively deciding on rules for the dialogue is essential to create an inclusive space where everyone feels comfortable participating, not just those who speak the most. Subtle and gentle facilitation skills are highly beneficial in this regard, as they help maintain a balanced and respectful environment.



Successful dialogue requires a comprehensive understanding of each member's specific interests and intentions. Establishing and conveying expectations beforehand is crucial because it allows participants to have a common understanding of the desired goals, agree on rules of interaction and have a clear comprehension of what is in it for each of them. Building trust was experienced as both a starting point and an important outcome of a multi-actor dialogue which requires attention throughout the dialogue. In the case of the Lithuanian Circular Bio-economy MAP, dialogues were held in various locations to ensure neutrality and to maintain a fair and unbiased environment. Hearing the voices of people that normally are quiet in groups may require extra safety measures. Surveys and focus groups are good methods for making it safe to express oneself and to balance strong positions of different actors.

By sharing the Discussion Paper in a simple format beforehand, facilitators can create a neutral knowledge base and ensure that actors have equal access to information. The invitation to discuss and provide recommendations for EU policy was experienced by some MAPs as contributing to a safe space for dialogue and interaction outside the sometimes polarised local or national arenas. Trust building is one of the deliberate tasks in organising a rural dialogue. Eventually, when all the previous aspects are taken into account, there will be more trust between the actors and the facilitator and monitor. Trust should be nurtured, and it is key to not disappoint actors involved, taking their views and expectations seriously throughout the process. In this line, it is important to be honest on topics that cannot be discussed and areas where no agreement can be reached. This is also a valid result, exchange is, but agreement is not the objective of a dialogue. Some MAPs explicitly explained, as a general principle, that consensus is not the aim. The creation of meaningful engagement and dialogue has led to the enthusiastic continuation of the engagement of actors in many of the SHERPA MAPs.

How to serve different motives of actors for engaging in policy processes? Talk about it, without aiming for agreement! Make it safe for actors to make their motives explicit. Listen. Accept differences and agree to disagree. Let go of the idea that dialogue will inevitably lead to common understanding of what is important and how that should be realised.

Besides trust as a prerequisite, the building of trust and experience with trust-based approaches for policy is also an important outcome of the SHERPA experience and will be further discussed in the next chapter 3 on the added value of the science society policy interface. The meaningful dialogue between science society and policy actors has a meaning in itself and much of the added value sprouts from the quality of this dialogue.

2.5. OUTPUT: Effectively delivering policy messages

In SHERPA, A MAP Position Paper was the main tangible output of the dialogue. The format was specifically designed to feed findings and recommendations from the diverse rural dialogues to the EU level thus contributing to policy and research agendas. The MAP Position papers were summarised to a draft SHERPA Position Paper. Both the MAP Position Papers and the draft SHERPA Position Paper was used as an input for the EU MAP dialogue, which resulted in a final SHERPA Position Paper. The SHERPA Position Paper is tailored to policymakers, offering them a comprehensive overview of the main messages and recommendations on research gaps and recommendations for future policies. These accessible papers enable policymakers to better understand rural actors' perspectives and concerns, enhancing policy dialogue on the selected topics at both local and EU levels. Box 8 shows principal lessons on this step of the SHERPA cycle and remaining learning questions after the first phase of the project.



Box 8. Summary of insights and remaining questions after phase 1**Key insights**

- The organisation of the **follow-up activities at local, regional, and national levels** can be very interesting and add value to the MAP cycle. This may also help to better connect the work in the MAPs to local, regional, and national policy.
- **Connection with existing structures and institutions** and strengthen the delivery of messages to different levels of policy making seem to contribute to Added value and thus the longevity of actor engagement.

**Remaining questions from first phase addressed in this section**

- How to bring together and discuss the local perspectives at EU MAP level?
- How to capture controversy and diversity in the messages for policy?
- How to maximize influence and impact in feeding into policy processes?

In an attempt to reduce the workload for the MAP teams during the second phase, MAPs were invited to develop a 4-5 page Position note and a 2 page MAP fiche, to replace the more extensive MAP Position Papers. Furthermore, the MAPs were actively stimulated to increase impact of their work by reaching out, connecting and delivering messages to different levels of policy making and rural institutions.

2.5.1 The function of the Position Paper

The MAP Position Paper serves as tangible focus and delivers outputs to share beyond the project, but also between the MAPs. Sharing recommendations answers to the MAPs members' desire to be heard.

Being heard and making impact is important to MAP members. As the MAP team from the Polish Bieszczady MAP pointed out: they want European policymakers to hear their ideas and support their actions. Involving MAP actors in drafting and presenting the SHERPA Position Paper in EU dialogues is therefore a good practice to empower local

How to bring together and discuss the local perspectives at the EU MAP level? The Position Papers worked well to bring together local perspectives. Involving MAP members of selected MAPs personally in the EU MAP enriched interaction and engagement at the EU level. At the final conference, the presentations of MAP facilitators and monitors were very inspiring and these kinds of presentations help as a starting point to discuss local needs at the EU level. Other methods are workshops or visits to local areas.

actors. Co-design of recommendations is at the centre of the MAP process. Collaboration in the actual writing of the MAP Position Paper highly contributes to this aim, as indicated by e.g., the Spanish IDRA (Innovación en Desarrollo Rural de Aragón) MAP and the Dutch Greenport Gelderland MAP. This inclusive writing approach tenderly forces the MAP members to be even more precise in their wording and enhances the relevance and impact of the Position Papers by ensuring that the concerns and insights of all relevant stakeholders are adequately represented. To be most meaningful, the timing of the MAP Position paper should be aligned with the dynamics and planning of the MAPs' processes and other agendas in the MAP members reality. This allows the MAPs to follow their own processes in reaching agreement on results and feeding the results into relevant arenas outside SHERPA.

2.5.2 The content of the MAP Position Paper

Determining the specific content of the MAP Position Paper poses challenges in terms of balancing messages and translation. These challenges involve striking a balance between representing diversity and controversy without oversimplifying or becoming overly detailed. Additionally, translating local interests and concerns into the MAP Position Paper without losing their nuanced meaning can be difficult. However, these challenges can be addressed by iteratively seeking feedback from the actors involved to ensure that the messages are correctly understood and by sharing information back and forth to demonstrate how local actors influence policy levels. Maintaining clarity and consensus on the contents of the Position Papers remains an essential aspect of actor engagement in policy processes.

How to capture controversy and diversity in the messages for policy? To capture both, considering the viewpoints of message receivers is crucial. By doing so, different opinions can be acknowledged and accommodated without explaining every single one. Check with different actors if the message is captured well.

2.5.3 Increasing outreach

While the primary aim of the Position Papers was to reach policymakers on the EU level, they have also proven effective in informing regional and national policymakers. For instance, the French PACA south region MAP utilised the Position Paper to influence regional policy decisions. The connection with existing structures and institutions, along with targeted message delivery to different policy levels, contributes to added value and enhances the longevity of actor engagement⁴. Ideally, the Position Papers embrace the diversity of rural areas, strive for concrete applicability, and aim for real impact on both local and EU policy levels. In general, MAP members were very satisfied with the Position Papers.

For example, the Italian Montagna Toscana - MOVING MAP, which represents a very small community with a strong perception of being left out, embraced the opportunity to develop and share policy recommendations from the local level to higher levels of policymaking.

How to maximize influence and impact in feeding into policy processes? Be proactive in involving higher level policymakers in the dialogue, keep them informed about the process and progress. Some MAPs have connections to EU level (e.g. P10 MAP, the Netherlands). Connecting to EU level policy can for example be done by organising events/ workshops at existing EU events.

Organising follow-up activities at local, regional, and national levels is of added value to the MAP cycle and helps better connect the work in the MAPs to local, regional, and national policy. To embed recommendations in reality and increase outreach, it is beneficial to invite national and regional policymakers to MAP events and vice versa. As will be explained in the next chapter, this cross-involvement helps to bridge potential disconnects between policy levels and everyday practice and offers a more comprehensive understanding of the issues and interests from different perspectives.

As was pointed out by the Italian Emilia-Romagna MAP and Romanian Argeş MAP, the contribution at the EU level is not dependent on what is done in a single MAP but rather is the result of the whole SHERPA process (i.e. SHERPA Position paper and the SHERPA conferences) in that the interpretation and implementation of the regulations throughout the EU are unified and should of course not depend on the contribution of a single MAP. By increasing the relevance of recommendations regarding research gaps and future policies,

⁴https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SHERPA_D2.6-Compiled-proceedings-of-Annual-Conferences_.pdf



SHERPA promotes meaningful changes that benefit rural communities and contribute to informed policymaking at all levels.

2.6. The art of running a MAP

This chapter has illustrated the great richness in lessons learned and experiences on the dynamics and governance of science society policy interfaces for rural development. Starting with the many learning questions that were collected in the SHERPA Learning agenda (SHERPA, 2021) during the first phase, now at the end of phase 2 the MAPs have gathered multiple experience-based answers to most of these questions. Together these answers and experiences form a well-founded answer to the first part of the central monitoring question: *How to effectively design, support and run Multi Actor Platforms?* This by no means implies that these answers are decisive, nor does the learning stop here. The nature of the actor engagement and policy processes and the diversity of the European rural areas do not allow prescriptions for how a rural Science-Society-Policy interface should look or operate. Despite acknowledging the impossibility of prescribing a specific structure or operation for MAPs, the chapter provides valuable inspiration and guidance based on lessons learned within the MAPs. These insights, while not rigid prescriptions, can be applied to other multi-actor processes, serving as sources of inspiration for creating appropriate spaces and settings. Summarising some of the key conditions for constructive MAP processes are:

- The facilitator and monitor played a pivotal role throughout the whole MAP process. Their dedication, skills, and rapport with the actors play a pivotal role in the establishment of connections and an environment for fruitful collaboration.
- The engagement process requires both proximity and distance. Proximity is needed to understand local situations, engage actors, build trust and create a safe environment for dialogue. Distance helps to provide a broader scope, organize appropriate input, monitor the process and draw lessons learned.
- Engaging rural actors in policy dialogues requires a combination of a clear purpose and great flexibility and creativity to adapt to local situations, needs and developments.
- The project setting provided partners with the means and a structure to create deliberative spaces, this is an important condition for successful MAPs.
- Organising a dialogue and co-creating rural recommendations is highly stimulated by a clear invitation by policymakers.

This chapter focused on the dynamics and governance of the SHERPA MAPs. In the forthcoming chapter we will delve into the significance and added values of these MAP processes for improved policy stimulation and governance of rural development.



3. The Benefits and added value of Rural Interfaces

As testing and exploring possibilities for improved policy stimulation and governance of rural development is a specific aim of SHERPA, the M&E during the second phase deepened lessons on running a MAP, as discussed in Chapter 2. The specific focus of the M&E tool was on gaining a detailed understanding of the diverse benefits and added values of engaging rural actors in MAPs. In what ways do MAPs contribute to improved policy and rural development in general? Understanding the importance of rural interfaces is a prerequisite for supporting the continuation of the MAPs after the SHERPA project has ended.

Next to the benefits for actor groups, the added values and impacts of the process are explained in this chapter, also it is explained what is required to maintain and optimise these added values in the continuation of the rural multi-actor activities. It entails concrete recommendations on how these added values can be realised. The term added value is used to indicate all merits generated by the whole MAP process; i.e. the value that MAPs have added for rural development in the widest sense. Added value entails both the direct output and outcomes of the MAP process for different domains, but importantly what value will remain after the SHERPA project has ended.

The M&E of the first phase revealed that besides a contribution to rural policy, the MAPs create added value in three other domains: rural dialogue, rural development, and capacity building. Building on these findings, the M&E in the second phase further delved into these four aspects to deepen the understanding of the added values of a MAP.

Before diving into the added value, it is important to look into the direct benefits for the science, society and policy actors involved in the MAP. Based on their specific background and role the benefits of participating in the MAP varied considerably among the three actor groups. Table 1. provides a summarising overview of benefits reported for the three actor groups.

Table 1: Main reported benefits of participating in the MAP for each actor group

Actor group	Benefit
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research impact through co-creating of knowledge, generating experience-based pathways • Practical-oriented research to inform policymakers, including policy recommendations, ensuring tangible applications and policy shaping
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A space to voice their perspective and needs and to be heard • Gain a broader understanding of local issues and share their knowledge • Connect with actors and initiatives that have congruent interests, fostering a sense of community and seeking concrete strategies and solutions to address challenges
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge local and national/EU policies, addressing existing barriers and advancing their policy agenda • Collaborate closely with other actor groups in the MAPs to gain insights into socio-cultural aspects, map local initiatives, and effectively communicate their policy instruments to promote mutual understanding



In general, MAPs generated benefits for all actor groups through the added value of participating in a MAP, which is substantiated by success stories shared in this report. The following sections elaborate on the question of how MAPs influence policy, rural dialogue, rural development and rural capacity building.

3.1. How rural interfaces contribute to rural policy processes

The main aim of SHERPA is to gather relevant knowledge and opinions that contribute to the formulation of recommendations for future policies and research agendas relevant to rural areas in the European Union. The purpose was a policy to better reflect and address the needs and ambitions of rural areas. In the SHERPA design the co-construction of recommendations and research gaps communicated in the MAP and SHERPA Position Papers are the main mechanism for contributing to European policy and research agendas. However, another deliberate objective was to test and explore possibilities for improved policy stimulation and governance of rural development. This resulted in an understanding of the different mechanisms and potential of SHERPA MAPs to contribute to improved rural policy processes and governance of rural development. In the subsequent paragraphs, the key messages on the different ways in which the SHERPA MAPs have strengthened rural connectivity, these are explained.

3.1.1 Co-constructing recommendations for policy

SHERPA MAPs have contributed with knowledge and recommendations to seven important policy domains, most notably the contribution made to the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA).

MAPnificance Portuguese Alqueva MAP: "A regional approach was considered crucial for correct rural policymaking, research and stakeholder involvement in the issue of climate change, and specifically on the issue of regional land use for the benefit of the agricultural sector, the Alqueva region, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and public administration. To sustain the valuable work of the MAP, it is necessary to continue to prioritise a regional approach and encourage cooperation between stakeholders and knowledge transfer, while also promoting adoption of alternative energy sources and continuing to identify challenges and recommendations for the region."

The MAP process, which spans from Discussion Papers to dialogue and results in MAP Position Papers and SHERPA Position Papers, is deliberately designed to co-construct and collect opinions, knowledge, and recommendations that can contribute to EU-level policymaking. Chapter 3 provides an extensive illustration of how this process operated. The significant contribution of SHERPA MAPs to the LTVRA (Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas) was a result of close collaboration and communication between SHERPA partners and the Directorate General for Agriculture, along with the officers responsible for the LTVRA. This mutual coordination proved to be highly effective in facilitating active engagement and policy contributions.

However, it's important to note that the degree of direct linkages between SHERPA and other policy domains, such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), was more of a challenge. For future engagement processes this would mean it is important to foster transparent coordination between officers in charge of policy domains relevant for rural areas and the engagement mechanisms such as MAPs and citizens fora.



In order to build on these experiences and sustain the connection it is important to proactively identify policy gaps and areas where science society policy interfaces can inform decision-making, then actively invite and enable rural contributions.

MAPnificance Slovenian SVARUM MAP: "Realising that some issues, such as gender inequality, considered solved, were still very much alive in rural areas. Talking to representatives from different rural networks confirming each other's experience and talking about topics that are to some extent invisible, such as hidden poverty, domestic violence, alcoholism, loneliness and mental issues, as well as differences between rural and urban areas. Talking about these issues at an open forum and acknowledging them was valuable, but this momentum must be exploited to not remain letters on paper."

3.1.2 Influencing policy at multiple levels

Besides the policy influence at European level, the MAPs reported many direct and indirect ways of influencing policy preparation, formulation, and implementation at other levels. Table 2. below provides an overview of the effects on different levels of policy processes as reported by the MAPs. As the question "How did the MAP contribute to policy?" allows for multiple interpretations, the table includes mechanisms of influence, specific policy aspect impacted, and the type of contribution it made. MAPs have influenced policy preparation, formulation, implementation and evaluation. Note that policy contribution can vary widely, depending on the country. What is relevant and significant change in one country may not be relevant in the next. Similarly, the current connectedness of policy levels differs between countries as well.

Table 2: Effects as a result of the MAP process on different levels of policymaking

	Characterisation of the type of policy influence
Local level	MAPs have served to raise local government awareness of specific issues, inform local rural development plans, and increase government attention to citizen perspectives. Furthermore, they foster more active citizen engagement in policy discussions, empowering individuals in policy processes. Lastly, MAPs promote dialogue, exchange, and collaboration among stakeholders, facilitating the effective implementation of policies at the local level.
Regional level	MAPs have enabled policy actors to learn together and gain valuable insights into needs, problems, and possible solutions. Additionally, on some occasions the MAP Position Paper contributed significantly to policy discussions at the regional level. Furthermore, some dialogues facilitated by MAPs supported the progress of specific policy implementation processes.
National level	Firstly, the national MAPs have generated recommendations outlined in Position Papers. Secondly, with the assistance of facilitators, MAPs have shared insights, increasing policy actors' awareness of problems, issues, solutions, and initiatives. On a few occasions the MAP findings and recommendations have directly contributed to the development of the national Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) strategic plan.
European level	MAPs indicate leveraging the SHERPA network to establish connections with the European Union. With their recommendations through position papers, MAPs have contributed to the creation of the LTVRA and the implementation of EU directives and initiatives like the Green Deal. The monitor of the Portuguese MAPs was even interviewed by a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), thus enhancing their influence on European policy discussions and decisions.



The effects on policy are more human and concrete at the local level and become more abstract and paper-based at higher levels of policy. In general, all the MAPs contribute to the following steps in the policy process: i) Raising awareness of specific rural issues, influencing agenda setting, ii) Informing policy formulation; the LTVRA and the CAP, iii) Supporting collaboration and quality of policy implementation and iv) Linking different levels of policy. This last aspect of linking different policy levels is on the one hand about understanding which policy level is relevant to the topic and MAP setting, but also about communicating conflicts between policy levels and identifying needs for linkages and recommendations for improvements. By involving different levels of policy actors in the MAP dialogue, MAPs were able to actively facilitate the linkage of policy levels within the MAP process.

3.1.3 Emancipation of rural areas in the policy arenas

Beyond sharing opinions and co-creating knowledge and recommendations, MAPs play a valuable role in the empowerment of rural actors and the emancipation of rural areas.

Empowerment is a noteworthy outcome of these MAP-driven dialogues. Participants, including rural actors who might have previously felt marginalized, gain a voice through their involvement in policy dialogues. The MAP provides the opportunity to contribute their perspectives, expertise, and aspirations to shape policies that impact their communities and rural reality. The simple act of inviting contributions and genuinely listening to their perspectives creates a sense of recognition and inclusion, strengthening their commitment and engagement to policy processes. Firstly, the MAP process strengthens the engagement of citizens and the building of local capacity to engage in policy processes. In organizing the MAP dialogue, much effort is dedicated to explaining the complexities of policymaking to different actor groups, and how it influences their daily lives. This communication and understanding are valuable in itself. Particularly in polarised times, these aspects of good communication contribute to strengthening democracy. Secondly, the collaboration in the MAPs increased regional and national government interest and understanding of local perspectives. By listening to different perspectives and actively supporting the expressions of opinions and perspectives which are less powerfully voiced, facilitators enable policy actors to enrich their perspectives. Thirdly, the collaboration in the MAPs stresses the human aspect of rural development, shifting the focus from mere policies to the real people they affect. Applying a wider European perspective was reported to reduce polarization and allow for a trust-based approach to decision-making, to which the collaboration in dialogue and writing a Position Paper is contributing significantly. Finally, the collaboration in the MAPs between actors of different sectors, domains, and levels of policymaking contributes to strengthening coherence and linkages between actors. It is important to learn and appreciate different perspectives and levels. All too often there is some sort of 'blame game' between the levels of policy. Higher-level policymaking is being blamed for being too abstract, and lower levels for being too detailed. Collaboration in the MAPs helped to understand each other's perspectives and acknowledge that all actors do their best given their respective situations. This is valuable social capital for rural development. While the debate about rural development is sometimes solely dominated by technical, legal, or financial considerations, the MAP dialogue emphasises togetherness and the human face of rural development. The empowering act of involving rural areas in the policy processes that shape their future demonstrates the value of their perspective and substantiates the notion that rural areas matter in policy and development discussions.

Key messages on MAPs' added value for rural policy

MAPs contribute to policy via three ways. Firstly, the SHERPA MAP process contributed to strengthening the content of EU policy for rural areas. Secondly the MAPs influence different levels of policy processes. Thirdly, engagement in the MAPs contributed to the empowerment and emancipation of rural areas in the policy process.



3.2. How rural interfaces enrich rural dialogue

Besides defining specific recommendations for the policy and research agenda, the MAPs have contributed in various ways to strengthening the setting and capabilities for rural dialogue in general. A high-quality rural dialogue contributes to future actor engagement and rural development. Below the key messages on the different ways in which the SHERPA MAPs have strengthened the rural dialogue, these added values are illustrated below in more detail.

3.2.1 Enriching the knowledge base for rural dialogue

The SHERPA MAPs teams have developed skills and experiences to properly access, translate, and communicate available information as a basis for the rural dialogue. A specific objective of SHERPA was to capitalise on research findings and in section 2.3 it was explained to what extent and how this was realised. A Discussion Paper has proven to be a good starting point and invitation to engage. Maybe even more valuable is the concrete experiences and skills of the MAP teams in understanding what kind of information is useful in rural dialogues and how to organise this. These are important skills and experiences for future rural dialogues. Also, at SHERPA level the experiences in supporting the MAPs with scientifically based content and the recommendations for future research agendas are valuable for promoting the production of more relevant research findings. Furthermore, scientists and policymakers involved in area-specific dialogues can build on this knowledge to better connecting their research proposals to specific issues on the ground and developing more connected regional plans. It is important to continue to support the role of science and scientists to take part in rural development dialogue.

3.2.2 Growing understanding between actors and policy levels

The MAP experiences contributed to a better understanding of different actor groups and levels of operation. Furthermore, the MAP actors created experiences and skills to translate contents and perspectives between levels of operation and between actor groups. This capacity is an important added value for future rural dialogues. More than anticipated, engaging rural actors in policy and research requires a continuous translation of content and perspectives between policy levels and actors. From the local rural areas to regional, national and European levels of policymaking the language becomes more and more abstract.

MAPnificance Dutch Vital Villages MAP: “The essence of this MAP is in ensuring a meaningful dialogue with added value for the local actors. It provided much insight how far and abstract EU or national level policy is from the local dialogue. The act of inviting the co-creation of recommendations for EU level invited the MAP members to inquire what is the role of EU in their living environment in the first place.

The skill to translate general policy frameworks into easily understandable language and to explain how these same general policy frameworks appear in local settings is important democratic capital. Equally valuable are the skills and experiences required to translate and combine specific recommendations from local levels into relevant contributions at the EU level. The four MAP cycles have created ample opportunity for the MAP teams and MAP members to develop these skills and will continue to apply these in their future activities.



3.2.3 Creating spaces and mechanisms for rural dialogue

Beyond the content of the co-constructed recommendations, the significance of the MAPs also encompasses the safe spaces and conducive mechanisms that were created. In themselves, these are valuable for rural development. The facilitated open, trusting, and non-politicised settings invite exchange of ideas and exploring areas of disagreement, encouraging constructive talks and contributing to a positive feedback loop that reinforces further benefits for the rural dialogue process. The facilitator or the Hungarian Rural Prosperity MAP point out that: “The very friendly manner of participants contributed to an open and honest dialogue which could involve quite versatile points of view.

MAPnificence Portuguese SW MAP: “The great added value of MAP was that it promoted a lively discussion about a very current issue in a region that has several concrete social challenges, given recent events. It was possible to discuss distinct visions but seek solutions that allow the compatibilization of conflicting interests. It was possible to identify a set of needs for future policies and research initiatives that may contribute decisively to a territory that is simultaneously prosperous from the economic point of view, with an improvement in the social responses to its population and with a valorisation of the existing natural values.”

Some members had valuable extra inputs as well (e.g. good practices, written recommendations etc.)”. Meaningful bottom-up connection of policy to the reality of local actors and interests is crucial for rebuilding trust and creating impactful policy. Furthermore, it is beneficial to integrate the use of Science-Society-Policy interfaces and dialogues in programs for rural development and research.

3.2.4 Bringing together science society policy actors

Bringing together and creating connections between science, society, and policy actors is appreciated in itself and valuable for future rural dialogue. MAP monitoring documents the importance and appreciation of science and policy actors engaging in dialogue about the future of rural areas, while the dialogue is based on equality among diverse societal groups. Though the quadruple helix is quite a common strategy in innovation platforms, the nature of the encounter in SHERPA MAPs was sometimes different as there was no specific task other than the exchange of viewpoints, ideas and recommendations. This creates a different sphere which is appreciated by many MAP members.

Key messages

The MAPs contribute to strengthen the quality of the rural dialogue by enriching the knowledge base for rural dialogue by engaging new actors in the dialogue, building trust and creating safe spaces and mechanisms and most importantly by bringing together science, society, and policy actors.

Every actor brings something to the platform that is of value to other actors. The reciprocity among actor groups, with each offering unique expertise and insights, further strengthens the foundation of fruitful dialogues. The combination of expert knowledge and broader perspectives from science, society and policy actors, coupled with the practical insights into challenges, needs, and opportunities from societal actors, adds value to the dialogue process.

3.3. How rural interfaces stimulate rural development

The contribution of the SHERPA MAPs was envisioned through engagement of rural actors and strengthening the rural relevance of policy processes and the research agenda. However, the process of creating Science-



Society-Policy interfaces and organising rural dialogues also contributes in various ways to actions for rural development. This section shares some insights and glimpses of how rural interfaces galvanise forces to bring about positive change.

3.3.1 Fostering coalitions and initiatives for rural development

The collaboration and interaction in the MAPs have inspired the formation of new coalitions and stimulated initiatives for rural development.

Bringing together diverse actors from society with actors from science and policy in an open environment for exchange on rural development has the potential to inspire collaborative efforts. On some occasions MAPs reported the encounters in the dialogue resulted in a boost in collaboration. For example, in The Netherlands MAP dialogue collaboration between education, policy and farmers to set up a sustainable value chain for biobased insulation materials from crop to construction.

MAPnificance Polish Bieszczady MAP:

"The most exciting part of this cycle was the opportunity to look behind the different scenes of the social life and activities of the inhabitants - we observed the birth of new initiatives and the formation of a new association."

MAPnificance Spanish IDRA: "MAP members truly have realised after conducting the activities that social dimension is key for rural areas. Collecting the needs from the ground based on surveys has allowed to show MAP participants a real picture of the state of social networks and social inclusion in rural areas that afterwards have served to enrich discussions."

The Romania Iasi MAP organised diverse activities such as a local fair, to strengthen the actual integration of small farms into the food system. The members of the Rural Portugal MAP developed a strategy to promote diversification of the local economy and socio-economic development adapted to the dynamics of the current economy marked by globalization and digitalisation. Some MAPs developed educational activities. For instance, the German Schleswig-Holstein MAP describes the joint development of a new course for students on visions for rural areas and the role of social innovations in addressing climate change and other sustainability challenges.

MAPnificance Scottish River Dee Catchment MAP: "For the Dee Catchment Partnership, the highlight was completion of the restoration of the Easter Beltie Burn, Aberdeenshire. The management and implementation of the work was led by the Partnership, experiences of which informed inputs to SHERPA Discussion and Position Papers, notably on Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability."

The engagement of students representing young farmers and rural citizens in a multi-day workshop and course provided an open space to explore different future visions of young rural actors on how enhanced cooperation and networking of rural actors can contribute to innovative and sustainable rural communities. These are examples of how the MAP work contributes to rural development by developing strategies, initiating education or inspiring concrete events on the ground. Local MAPs that build on existing groups and initiatives tend to have strong linkages with action on the ground. In those situations, it works well to increase the relevance of the MAP by combining the rural dialogue with concrete activities that directly address the needs of the actors involved.



3.3.2 Broadening the scope and time frame

Bringing together science society and policy actors for a meaningful dialogue on relevant issues for rural development brings in new perspectives and connections between different developments, thus broadening the scope and time frame.

Beyond directly influencing action, the MAP dialogue increases the depth and broaden the scope of rural development initiatives.

Within the MAPs, connections are made between ongoing initiatives. As the monitor to the Italian Emilia Romagna MAP explained: "the MAP dialogue can contribute to bring a more comprehensive view of the problem, highlighting the need to deeply understand local contexts before making any intervention".

MAPnificance Estonia MAP: "The actors had the same goal, they didn't have to defend their position aggressively but they could calmly listen to everybody and sometimes even relate and find similarities in their mindsets. During the lunch and coffee breaks we noticed even some really intense, but pleasant conversations and there were many promises to be in touch afterwards."

More in general the organisation of events, bringing in new actors, and actively asking for opinions create movement that contributes to vibrant rural areas. The interactions and events within and around the MAPs serve as vibrant platforms for knowledge dissemination, awareness raising, and fostering dialogue. As ideas and solutions emerge, tensions surrounding specific rural development challenges are eased, paving the way for more comprehensive approaches to complex issues. The result is a landscape of animated rural areas, where stakeholders are actively engaged in seeking innovative solutions and collaborating to overcome obstacles.

MAPnificance Romanian Rural Transylvania MAP: "The dialogue was conducted more in the form of a brainstorming through which the diversity of solutions/ models of vertical integration on the value chains of small rural businesses was discovered. A veritable library of best practice examples results from such interactions, which can be a source of inspiration for others."

Rural interfaces can operate as "learning communities" where stakeholders engage in mutual learning, skill-sharing, and knowledge exchange. This collective effort promotes empowerment as actors actively participate in shaping their environment and building capacity.

MAPnificance Lithuanian Circular Bio-economy MAP: "We truly find out, that the future of Lithuanian rural areas in terms of sustainable and resilient value chains is rooted in smart villages and their further development. We consider the aim of smart villages in Lithuania - searching for smart solutions for rural areas that meet the needs of local residents by creating long-term vision, based on ideas proposed by scientists and innovative technologies. We understand the principle of 'being smart' as focusing on the increase of attractiveness of rural areas, entrepreneurship, and creation of necessary infrastructure, empowering cooperation, and expanding stronger relations with neighbours."



The act of asking for rural areas' input of ideas fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, enabling rural communities to take charge of their development journey. Empowered by their involvement in the decision-making process, rural actors become proactive agents of change, driving tangible and sustainable actions on the ground.

Key messages on MAPs' added value for Rural development

Though not the specific aim of SHERPA, MAPs do contribute in different ways to action for rural development. Especially the local MAPs where society actors play a major role inspire collaboration and initiatives. Furthermore, bringing together actors from different broadens the scope and the time frame of existing rural development initiatives.

3.4. How rural interfaces strengthen rural capacity building

A final area of added value of the MAP experiences is the development of capacities relevant to rural development and the engagement of rural actors. These capacities of the facilitators and monitors and the MAP members. Deliverable 5.4. These capacities last after the SHERPA has ended. Deliverable 5.3 elaborates extensively on the capacity development in the SHERPA project (See Box 9). This section focuses on the content of four types of capacity: Understanding, insight, skills and network. These are especially relevant for future actor engagement in policy processes and rural development. Key messages are explained one by one in the paragraph below.

Box 9. Insights on capacity building (Deliverable 5.3)

A significant perspective emerges regarding the most valuable learning experiences for facilitators and monitors. Out of the respondents, 69% identified the process of identifying and formulating shared ground to develop recommendations as their most significant learning experience. Additionally, 23% acknowledged the challenge of keeping MAP members engaged, highlighting the importance of active participation. Furthermore, 7% expressed the value of exploring new rural thematic areas.

3.4.1 Building facilitation and dialogue skills

The experience has contributed to the development of facilitation skills, facilitating the establishment of Science-Society-Policy interfaces and its dialogue. This is valuable for organising future actor engagement and for facilitating rural development and policy in general. The MAP facilitators and monitors brought quite some facilitation skills to the project, to start with. Most of them were experienced in working as researchers or community worker with diverse groups of people in a rural development context. Working with a Science-Society-Policy setting and the process of actor engagement in higher level policy processes was newer to most facilitators. In facilitating the MAPs through the 2-4 MAP cycles the facilitators and monitors gained much experience and extended their facilitation skills. Some of the developed facilitation skills as reported in the survey at the end of the project (reported in Ljungberg et al, 2023) were:

- Creating connections and experimenting with facilitating tools and methods.
- The need for adaptable facilitation skills and addressing participation fatigue.
- Remote meeting facilitation and improving digital skills.
- Importance of synthesis in conveying diverse opinions and ensuring stakeholder involvement.
- Challenges and learning experiences during online engagement due to COVID-19.
- Developing group dynamics and active participation of MAP members.
- Learning about effective communication, adaptability, and continuous professional development.
- Encouraging knowledge exchange and embracing diverse perspectives.
- Reflecting on the timing of meetings, framing of issues, and gaining regional knowledge.



- Network management, treating individuals differently, and trust-building.
- Groundwork and smooth running of MAP meetings.
- Strategies for motivating and engaging multi-actor networks.
- Building organizational skills and translating knowledge into clear messages.

Overall, the comments highlighted the challenges faced, lessons learned, and areas of improvement related to facilitation, stakeholder engagement, coordination, communication, and skill development within the project. When asked what approaches they learned the comments highlighted workshops and participatory methods to collect information and shape the needs and desires of local actors, including from a policy perspective. The SHERPA engagement tools were valuable for reflecting on different approaches and involving diverse personalities. This well-experienced facilitation skills developed in 17 countries are a rich social capital for future rural actor engagement. It is important to further support rural facilitators and monitors to continue their engagement groundwork: connect, translate and design spaces and processes.

3.4.2 Strengthening capacity to understand diverse perspectives

The experience has contributed to strengthening the capacity to understand the diversity of perspectives, this is valuable for future actor engagement and rural policy in general. In engaging science, society and policy actors and developing appropriate interfaces the MAP teams have developed valuable understanding of the roles, interests and perspectives of these three actor groups in general and of specific actors more specifically. The MAP facilitators and monitors were quite well prepared to work as researchers or community workers with diverse people in a rural development context. Additionally, the initial training for facilitators and monitors included some support to explore different perspectives balancing interests and integrate of different types of knowledge. However, many facilitators and monitors report especially having gained a lot of understanding of the different perspectives and interests of science society and policy actors operating at different levels in the rural development arena. Thus, it was especially learning by doing during the establishment of the MAPs and the subsequent running of the 2 to 4 MAP cycles. Both the room for exploration and the exchange between the MAPs and the reflection in M&E supported this exploration and learning process. The first important point is the understanding is that between different actor groups (i.e. science, society and policy). Each level, local, regional, national and European, has its own perspective, modes of operation, rules and rationales. Working together in the MAP contributes to fewer prejudices and a more nuanced understanding of the different roles played by each level. Another important understanding gained in the MAP experience is that of the role and perspective of the three actor groups science, society and policy. This understanding is important social capital for future rural actor engagement in policy and development processes.

MAPnificance Italian Emilia-Romagna MAP: "Also from my perspective, facilitating and monitoring a MAP is a learning process. In particular, the writing of the position paper is a challenging task that require a balance between synthesis and representation of different viewpoints. In this Position Paper I tried, as much as possible, to describe the complexity that is behind environmental processes and that MAP members really contributed to understand. Understanding the complexity was, indeed, the MAPnificance of this MAP cycle."

3.4.3 Creating insight how policy works

The SHERPA MAPs have contributed to insight of MAP members how policy processes work in practice and how they are relevant for their livelihood.

As we saw in Chapter 2, establishing a MAP and organising a MAP dialogue involves much explaining how policy is organised and how EU policy processes function and on the other side how that is of interest to each actor group. It is important understanding that though all information is available and accessible on websites, it does not reach the reality of many actors. Organising spaces for MAP dialogues and putting



energy to prepare actors to enable them to engage with the discussion is important added value of the SHERPA MAPs. Though these one-on-one explanations may be of modest impact, this is the kind of insight that is needed for actor engagement in policy processes and more generally for a properly functioning democracy. This did not go perfectly well on all occasions, some actor groups were not fully included and, in some topics, and settings the gap between European policy and rural reality was too difficult to fully bridge, but important steps were made and capacity was built in.

Besides the MAP groundwork, also the Discussion Paper, the EU MAP and the SHERPA conferences were channels for creating actors' insight in policy processes. The SHERPA Final Conference at the Committee of the Regions was a lively arena where MAP members and EU policymakers engaged in a lively debate about what really matters and how that can be served. Thus, creating mutual understanding in policy in action.

3.4.4 Strengthened connectivity and sense of belonging

Collaborating in the SHERPA MAP allowed members to expand their networks and foster a sense of belonging to a broader movement, this is valuable social capital for future rural development collaboration.

MAPnificance – Italian Emilia-Romagna MAP: "One thing that I really appreciated was that, after a while, they started to ask questions among each other, showing a real interest and engagement in the discussion."

The MAP initiative yielded a wealth of fresh connections while consolidating or deepening existing ones, with a rich variety between MAPs. MAPs building on pre-existing networks and relationships, allows to deepen these connections, where newly established MAPs brought together many actors or groups who had often never met previously.

MAPnificance German Nienburg MAP: "The development of trusting relationships between the MAP members over the years was key to the open exchange of ideas and perspectives advancing discussions to agreeing on concrete steps in developing value chain solutions. It was particularly interesting to experience how the practical experience of different exemplary initiatives and insights from research inspired the discussion and co-learning."

In line with the purpose of the MAP, the relations between science society and policy actors in the MAP increased notably. The enhanced connection between society actors with policy and research, along with the increased engagement of researchers in regional development processes, were often specifically highlighted as positive outcomes. Besides these connections directly in line with the MAP design, MAPs especially appreciated the improved communication between value chain actors, the linkages between different sectors, and the coordination between various projects. The Transylvanian MAP indicated as an important merit of the MAP that different rural development initiatives that knew each other and used to work next to each other, in the SHERPA MAP sat down to discuss and coordinate actions. The provision of a neutral meeting ground and a shared goal emerged as important factors in strengthening these relationships. As the Estonian facilitator illustrated: "To sit behind the same table and work for the same goal brought people closer and enabled them to start communicating and understanding each other's perspectives". Generally, the expansion of the actors' professional network enables access to a broader pool of expertise and resources, this is social capital for future rural development endeavours.



Besides the connections and relations, a less tangible but as important aspect of connectivity is the creation of a sense of belonging. Strengthening a sense of belonging was specifically highlighted as an important added value of the SHERPA process. This sense of belonging is in the nature of the MAP process where actors are, sometimes even for the first time, invited to share their ideas, perspectives and opinions. A second factor strengthening the sense of belonging is the connection between the different MAPs and the possibility to discuss and exchange views between MAPs.

MAPnificance Greek Peloponnese MAP: The most important is that the MAP members highlighted regarding the primary sector is that farmers should be more actively engaged in cooperatives and that the strengthening of their role could enable the establishment of a common rule set for the operation of the cooperatives. That means that they understand that a new era is about to be created, building in collaborations and not only in individual actions.

Fostering connections between different groups and providing opportunities for exchange can strengthen the sense of community and shared purpose. Finally, the MAP members seeing their input represented in the SHERPA Position Paper, which is then read and discussed in the EU MAP can reinforce their sense of belonging and foster the idea that rural areas matter within Europe.

Key messages on MAPs' contribution to capacity building

The collaboration in the SHERPA MAPs has resulted in three types of capacity: 1) The capacity to understanding different perspectives, insight how multi-level governance and policy processes work and strengthened rural connectivity by expansion of networks, 2) the creation of new institutional and personal contacts, 3) the development of facilitation skills specifically for the rural dialogue and the engagement of rural actors in policy processes. These understanding, insights, skills and connections are social capital for future engagement of rural actors in policy processes.

3.5. The art of creating added value through actor engagement

This chapter illustrated the diverse ways in which MAPs contribute to improved policy stimulation and governance of rural development more in general. The meaning of the actor engagement rests firstly in the purpose for which the MAPs were initiated in the co-construction of recommendations on research gaps and future policies. Through four MAP cycles and numerous dialogue session and interactions, the MAPs have gathered their knowledge and opinions to contribute to current and future policy processes. Their contribution to the LTVRA is most significant. Besides the policy influence at European level, the MAPs reported many direct and indirect ways of influencing policy preparation, formulation, and implementation at different levels. The empowerment of rural actors and the emancipation of rural areas was another valuable contribution of the MAPs.

In addition to their contributions to policy, the MAPs have contributed to the conditions for constructive future rural dialogues. They have enriched the knowledge base for dialogue, brought together science society policy actors promoted mutual understanding among various actors and levels and created spaces and mechanisms where constructive rural dialogue can occur.

By collaborating in the SHERPA MAP, the MAP members created a sense of belonging to a broader movement and expanded their networks which enabled future collaboration in rural development. By collaborating in the SHERPA MAP several new institutional connections were made, which enable future engagement and collaboration in rural development. Rural interfaces strengthen Rural Development by stimulating coalitions



and initiatives for rural development, by broadening the scope and time horizons of local initiatives. Finally, rural interfaces strengthen Rural Capacity Building by developing facilitation and dialogue skills, by fostering an understanding of diverse perspectives. Furthermore, involved actors gained important insight into how multi-level policy processes work how influences their livelihoods and how they can influence these policy arenas.

MAPnificance Rural Scotland MAP: "MAP members contributed video interviews for running in the rolling presentation at the exhibit, extracts of which were also used in the SHERPA video created for the event and as stand alone videos used at other communication events (e.g. TB Macaulay Lecture exhibit, COP26, November 2021). These inputs from the MAP contributed to the institutional aims of their organisations (e.g. profile amongst key stakeholders; conveying key messages), further development of long-term relationships, and personal reward of participating in high profile international events."



4. Reflections on the achievements and the future

The former two chapters presented the experience-based answers to the central M&E question:

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

Insights were also shared on the needed conditions under which actors can come together and interact to create added value. In this final chapter, we take a bit of distance and reflect from different angles on the achievement of SHERPA's Science-Society-Policy interfaces and what remains after the four-year trajectory of SHERPA. The notion of self-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 throughout the project (Slätmo et al. 2021). Moody et al (2023) highlighted the key findings, ideas and recommendations for the longevity of the MAPs after the project has ended. This chapter enriches these insights based on the M&E in the MAPs and reflects on the implications of added value and process lessons for sustaining the MAPs after the project has ended. What needs to be sustained to sustain and support the function of the MAPs? First, a reflection on the horizontal engagement of rural actors and the vertical engagement of rural areas shed some light on the nature of what we have been doing and illuminates the prospects for the future. Then, we take the courage to go back to the original tasks to see how we have contributed to the completion of the mission. The chapter ends with messages to the world as the MAP teams developed them during the last M&E workshop in March. Expressing deep gratitude for the prosperous collaboration in M&E and learning our way forward completes the final chapter.

4.1. Sustaining horizontal and vertical actors' engagement

Rural interfaces serve several purposes. The interfaces can be spaces to debate policy frameworks, co-create recommendations for a more conducive environment, feed research agenda with relevant insights, capitalise on research findings, build local capacities to drive change, empower local communities and emancipate local communities. MAPs have defined their focus and purpose in this bigger picture. During the project, valuable insights have been gained on how to deal with language barriers, power relations and different perspectives. It has been found how to create, strengthen and show added values of the MAPs thereby answering how MAPs can be relevant for EU policy and how facilitators can guide the MAP process but at the same time allow for individual approaches based on local needs. The focus was on best practices and lessons learned on enhancing actor engagement in rural governance processes in various contexts. This can inform the development of effective engagement frameworks. Though designed as one process, it brings clarity to distinguish horizontal multi-actor engagement and vertical multi-level engagement between the MAP and other levels of policy.

The horizontal engagement of the actors in the MAP has value in itself as we saw it contributes amongst others to restoring trust, bridging gaps, building capacity, the co-creation of strategies and the emancipation of the rural areas. These capacities and experiences are developed within and

MAPnificance Czech VENUS MAP: "MAP VENUS, which in the course of 2 years was established as an ENERKOM consulting base, now works regularly and is de facto independent of the SHERPA project. In the Czech Republic, following the model of ENERKOM, other centres for rural areas are being created."

between the actors in the MAP. Thus, the continuation of these horizontal engagement processes can easily be supported. Throughout the project, the self-sustaining abilities of the MAPs have been discussed.



Lessons learned are discussed in a report with recommendations for the self-sustainability of the MAPs post-SHERPA⁵. The MAPs will self-sustain in different modalities; some MAPs continue in the current constellation within another project or using different funding, some MAPs will remain intact but reduce their activities, other MAPs will not continue as such, but still, the members take their capacities and experiences in other platforms and initiatives. Figure 6. provides an overview of the MAPs and their status after the SHERPA project. 22 MAPs continue as active science society policy interfaces for engaging rural actors in policy and rural development. 15 MAPs will remain dormant, meaning that contacts of members can be used for different purposes. These MAPs are also ready to be activated when a future opportunity or need arises. 3 MAPs will not continue after the project has ended, however, the members will of course take the contacts and build capacity with them in other activities.

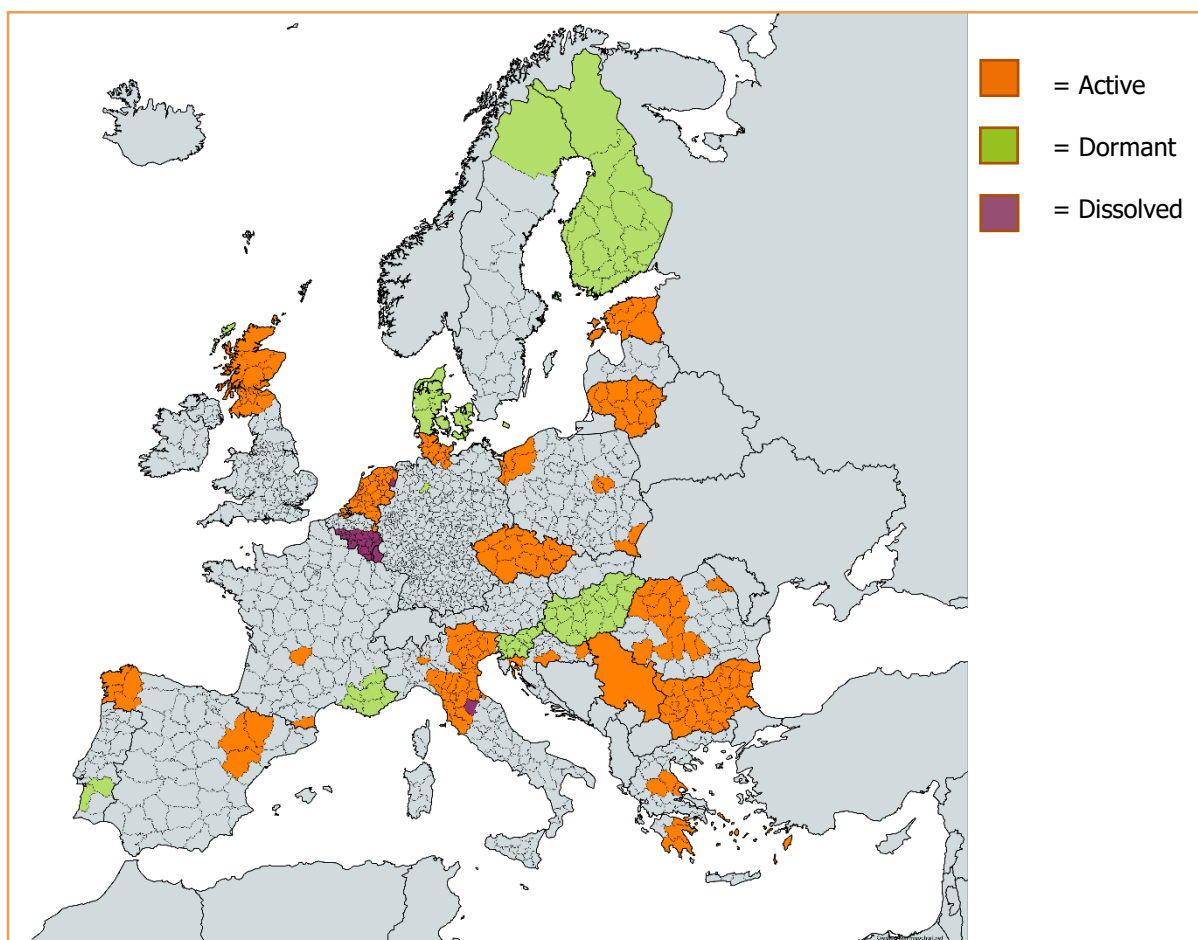


Figure 6. Overview of the status of the SHERPA MAPs after the project has ended

MAP actors also connected vertically in EU policy areas. In the SHERPA Position Paper, the EU MAP and the highly interactive SHERPA conferences the project created a mechanism to communicate and opportunities to meet and interact between local and EU levels. It is important to understand that this connection strongly depended on the EU institutions and their willingness to invite and listen. The SHERPA project was the driver of this connection and engagement, MAPs had little power or influence on creating these connections.

⁵ This report can be accessed here: https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/D5.4-Recommendations-for-self-sustainability-of-MAPs-post-SHERPA_.pdf



For future engagement, it is crucial to ensure these same opportunities, linkages and responsiveness to recommendations from rural areas.

The two levels are connected, the discussion paper and the invitation to engage in policy processes was the inducement of the MAP dialogue. The horizontal actor engagement aims to co-construct recommendations which feed into the vertical channel. If the vertical channel is not well connected, the horizontal connection weakens. However, in their requirements and needs the two types of engagement are also incongruent. For the connection of the actors in the MAP, it is pivotal to adjust the process carefully to the calendars of the actors and to focus on the topics of their interest. However, these topics and calendars do not always match the topical and temporal windows to contribute to EU policy. Sliding away from the local interests and realities is tricky as this connection to rural realities is the purpose in the first place. But completely following the interests of the MAPs makes it difficult to connect meaningfully to higher levels. Finding a balance is key to the quality and the outcome of the engagement process.

4.2. Tasks completed, mission fulfilled?

As originally envisioned, the 40 SHERPA MAPs set out to explore and test possibilities for improved policy stimulation and governance of rural development. The MAPs operated as Science-Society-Policy interfaces in four MAP cycles covering two phases. The task was to tune local activities, policies and research to foster rural development policy by engaging citizens, rural stakeholders, researchers and policy makers. Below is a summary of some insights from M&E for each of the original tasks of the MAPs future Science-Society-Policy interfaces can take on board.

How to assess existing knowledge with rural actors to identify research gaps for rural development

There are a variety of ways to assess existing knowledge and the identification of research gaps for rural development. Within SHERPA, the Discussion Paper and gathered data and research findings were used to adapt or enrich the Discussion Paper to function in that specific setting as a discussion starter. Much has been learned about the kind of information that is useful for Science-Society-Policy interfaces and the challenge translate translating general research findings to specific situations (see paragraph 3.3). In a way, this indicates research gaps or the desirability to develop research findings into practical and easy-to-read knowledge products and to actively support the involvement of researchers in rural dialogue and rural development processes.

Although it is desirable and interesting to assess existing knowledge and identify research gaps or what kind of knowledge and information is required to feed the Science-Society-Policy interface, a thorough analysis of existing knowledge and a rigorous identification of knowledge gaps for rural development seems to be quite a challenge for a local or regional or even national actors platform.

How to assess the role and effectiveness of implemented policy in regional development in practice

Similar to the difficulty of a systematic assessment of existing knowledge, it should not be expected of a local or regional Science-Society-Policy interface to make a thorough assessment of the roles and effectiveness of implemented policy. Of course, reflections on the effects of policy on regional development are useful, but should not be the main focus of a SSP interface. Rather, the goal should be to co-construct recommendations for future rural development policies.

How to co-construct (with regional actors) recommendations for future rural development policies

The construction of recommendations for future rural development policies should be a main focus. Paragraphs 3.4 on Dialogue and 3.5 on Outputs illustrated how the SHERPA MAPs negotiated and co-created recommendations. The integration of different types of knowledge and the accommodation of sometimes opposing views come together in the challenge and rich experience of writing the position paper. The equal interaction between EU institutions and regional MAPs is an inspiring example to build on for the future.



How to test improved governance models through Science-Society-Policy interfaces for regional development in practice

Insights on how to explore and test different modes of contributing to governance were reported in chapter 3. The SHERPA project has contributed to the development of new governance models for rural development. It should be noted that a governance model for actor engagement in policy is only effective if importance is attached to it and the recommendations and results are followed up. Within the SHERPA project, we have organised this. For the LTVRA this has worked well, some other topics have also contributed concretely, but others may take longer, or the effectiveness is less. The future value of these governance models lies at least as much in the longevity of Science-Society-Policy interfaces, as it depends on the degree to which institutions responsible for policy and research are willing to invite, support and listen to what rural actors and rural areas have to say.

How to inspire and skill these Science-Society-Policy interfaces such that they continue after the end of a project

Throughout the SHERPA project, the MAP teams have been inspired and dedicated to the purpose of engaging actors in a meaningful way in rural governance processes. As was illustrated in section 4.5 they have developed their facilitation skills and capacity to connect different levels of policymaking and understand different perspectives. The insights on how to operate and strengthen the SHERPA process were shared in Chapter 2. Within SHERPA, rural actors have been positive and collaborating, however, it can be a challenge to keep them engaged when the process is slow and the outcomes sometimes rather abstract. This highlights a key requirement for fruitful continuation after the project has ended. The success of engagement depends to a large extent on what happens with the recommendations, whether or not they are integrated in policy and contribute to change in rural areas. For the future of rural policy and realising the LTVRA, it is crucial to prioritise reconnecting EU policy with rural realities. The MAP network, as created in the SHERPA project, the experiences and lessons and the capacities and spaces created form important social capital to build on.

4.3. Concluding recommendations for Science-Society-Policy interfaces

To increase the possibilities for Science-Society-Policy interfaces to improve policy stimulation and governance of rural development, the lessons learned from SHERPA can be summarised in the following recommendations:

1. Assessing existing knowledge and consequent research gaps is a challenge. It is therefore recommended to translate research findings into practical and easy-to-read products and actively involve researchers in rural dialogue and development processes.
2. The main focus of an Science-Society-Policy should not be to assess policy effectiveness, but rather to co-construct recommendations for future rural development policies.
3. To effectively shape this co-construction of recommendations, we recommend facilitating or looking for opportunities for equal interaction of EU-level institutions and local actors.
4. A governance model for actor engagement in rural policy is only effective if importance is attached to it and the recommendations and results are followed up. This can for example be done by concretely connecting to current policy developments such as the formulation of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.
5. Such governance models stand a better chance of succeeding when Science-Society-Policy interfaces are longevous and responsible institutions are open to inviting and willing to listen to rural voices.
6. Fruitful collaboration with rural actors depends on the degree to which the outcomes of an Science-Society-Policy interface contribute to positive change in rural areas. It is therefore recommended to



strive for tangible recommendations that are connected to the lived experience and challenges of actors in rural areas and to reconnect higher policy levels (e.g. EU, national, regional) to local rural realities.

7. Supporting rural Science-Society-Policy interfaces can be done through: resources for the rural facilitator role, improving the transparency of policy processes, sending out clear invitations to contribute, encouraging research projects to deliver clear and practical knowledge products and facilitating the role of researchers in rural development.

The experiences and findings in the multi-actor multi-level Science-Society-Policy interfaces have the potential to contribute to implementing the EU's desire to engage citizens in the formulation of future policies. These mechanisms and capacities as tested and developed in SHERPA allow rural citizens and representative associations to make known and publicly exchange their views on those areas of EU's action relevant to rural areas. In this way the SHERPA project has contributed to the OECD search for new ways of thinking about rural areas and the Science-Society-Policy interfaces are proven examples of how multi-actor and multi-level governance mechanisms can operate in practice to support the development of new rural policy.

The findings of the monitoring and evaluation of the 40 SHERPA MAPs provide tested operational mechanisms, experience-based understanding of roles, challenges and opportunities and on-the-ground capacity to take this forward. This is precious social capital for boosting the Rural Pact's goal to inspire collaboration among governance levels and empower action in rural residents' needs and aspirations. By facilitating dialogue and knowledge exchange between rural science, society policy and actors, the Science-Society-Policy interface has proven to be of great relevance in supporting the creation of sustainable, connected, vibrant and prosperous rural areas.

5. Acknowledgements

This report is based on the rich experience of the MAP facilitators and monitors, the MAP members and all partners in the SHERPA consortium. We would like to thank all facilitators and monitors for their energy, enthusiasm, skills and experience they invested into running the MAPs and the collegial collaboration in learning our way forward. It has been an honour to work together for the future of rural areas.

Our special thanks go out to ECORYS for the excellent coordination and the Nordregio team for the enjoyable collaboration in co-organising different learning and sharing events. Finally, we share our thanks to the partners in SHERPA who contributed or commented on drafts of this deliverable.



ANNEX 1: M&E tool second phase

Questions in the M&E tool for the second phase

STEP 1 General data of the MAP

- 1.1 Country
- 1.2 Name of the MAP
- 1.3 Name and email of the monitor
- 1.4 Level of operation
- 1.5 Composition of the MAP

STEP 2 Assessment of desired outcomes, expected benefits and policy influence

- 2.1 What is the desired outcome of the MAP cycle?
- 2.2 What benefits do the three actor groups expect from the MAP?
- 2.3 What level policy actors are involved in the MAP?
- 2.4 What outcomes do the MAP members expect at a European policy?

STEP 3 Harvesting benefits, added value and effects along the way

- 3.1 How did/does the MAP contribute to policy processes at different levels?
- 3.2 How did the MAP contribute to the quality and content of the broader rural dialogue?
- 3.3 How did/does the MAP contribute to networking and connectivity?
- 3.4 How did/does the MAP contribute to action for rural development?

STEP 4 Reflection on the harvest

- 4.1 To what extent has your MAP realised the desired outcome?
- 4.2 How did each actor group benefit from the MAP?
- 4.3 What is the main achievement of the MAP?
- 4.4 What would you do differently next time?
- 4.5 What is your story of MAPnificance?



ANNEX 2: Dynamic Learning Agenda on rural interfaces

Messages to the World

During the final M&E workshop, the MAP teams discussed on different topics the question How we can build on the SHERPA experiences and strengthen rural actor engagement in policy processes? And they came up with a few key messages to the world.

On sustainably connecting local interests with EU policy windows

We should keep the SHERPA bottom-up approach. If we do not listen to the local interests, EU policies will neither be meaningful nor impactful.

On maintain meaningful engagement and dialogue

We need to create and sustain a space for people to be heard even if you do not agree with their opinion.

On the role science-based evidence for the functioning of the MAP

We can act as catalyst for action by convincing policy makers of the problem at hand and then engaging civil society!

On showing the added value of science society policy interfaces:

For scientists, MAPs are space to actively contribute to keep – and be part of – an objective discussion.

On Influencing the appropriate level of policy making

The SHERPA approach provided transparent, auditable, and co-constructive way of sharing aspirations from bottom to top (local to EU).

On sustaining rural interfaces

Those active in rural policy should fulfil their responsibility and make sure that funding is available for local Multi-Actor Platforms.



Glossary

CAP: Common Agricultural Policy

CLLD: Community-Led Local Development

EAFRD: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

EAGF: European Agricultural Guarantee Fund

ERDF: European Regional Development Fund

ESF: European Social Fund

ESIF: European Structural and Investment Funds

GNI: Gross National Income





SHERPA

Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces