Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus

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# Evaluating complex policy for rural development at a time of dynamic change

**A CECAN Evaluation Policy and Practice Note for policy analysts and evaluators**

From 2016 to 2018 Defra worked with the CECAN case study team, led by Newcastle and York universities, to help inform and improve their approach to evaluating rural development policy in England. Sitting under Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) the EU's rural development policy is a €100 billion programme to help rural areas address "the wide range of economic, environmental and social challenges of the 21st century" (European Commission). The complexity of the policy presented particular challenges for evaluation. The case study aimed to help DEFRA meet these challenges through the testing and development of evaluation methods and building capacity to incorporate complexity thinking throughout the policy cycle.

## Why is this policy area important?

Until now the Rural Development Programme has been a major source of investment into rural areas in England – worth £3.5 billion to rural areas between 2014 and 2020. It supports:

- Rural growth and agricultural productivity.
- Environmental land management by farmers and land managers.
- Socio-economic development for rural communities and small businesses.

Following the UK's decision to exit the European Union, new domestic policy will have to be designed to replace EU agricultural and rural development policy. This is likely to mean:

- Public subsidies for farming will only be available for supporting the production of public goods, for example, paying farmers to manage land for wildlife conservation. Direct payments that support production are to be phased out by 2027.
- Policy and investment to support rural growth and communities will be spread across several government departments.

## What are the evaluation challenges?

As a complex policy involving numerous stakeholders and beneficiaries, with multiple variables and measures across different scales, rural development presents a number of challenges for policy evaluation including:

- Identifying of adequate counterfactuals: what would have happened without such a policy?
- Establishing attribution and causality, given the range of programme interventions and system variables.
- Capturing and measuring socio-economic and environmental interactions.
- Measuring impact against a broader range of market and non-market outcomes.
- Comparing programme level and scheme level impacts.
- Designing and evaluating new policy to replace EU rural development policy after the UK's exit from the EU in 2019.

## What activities were employed and why?

CECAN worked with Defra to design and implement activities through two work streams:

**Work stream one**

- Identified and examined the complexity in evaluating the Rural Development Programme for England.
- Expanded policy analysts' knowledge and awareness of complex systems thinking.
- Introduced innovative methodological tools as an aid to decision making when evaluating complexity.

**Work stream two**

- Helped to embed complexity at the early stages of designing new policy for the future agriculture, environment and rural system.
- Developed the capacity to incorporate complexity thinking into policy design and evaluation throughout the policy system.

## What methodological innovation was involved?

**Work stream one:**

- An interactive one day workshop introduced policy analysts to a novel tool *Choosing Appropriate Evaluation Methods* (Befani and Bond, 2016) .
- The tool provides a means to identify which methods are appropriate to use in any given situation, and ultimately helps policy makers design evaluation into policy from an early stage.
- The tool helped the workshop participants to assess key evaluation questions in order to choose which methods are most suitable in any given situation. It provided an understanding of the characteristics of particular evaluation methods and enabled stakeholders go through the use of the tool in detail.
- Stakeholders included Defra, its delivery agencies (e.g. Natural England and the Forestry Commission) and representatives from the devolved administrations.

**Work stream two:**

- A process of co-production to design and facilitate a series of interactive workshops with Defra was used to map the animal and plant health and welfare; environmental land management; productivity and resilience; and rural economies and communities policy domains.
- The workshops enabled Defra policy analysts to construct individual maps, which were then combined into one 'meta-map'. This involved identifying a) the different factors or variables that were thought to be relevant to each policy domain and b) making explicit the connections within and between these policy areas. The maps identified the policy levers, vulnerabilities (e.g. trade arrangements, climate) and trade-offs (e.g. in the use of land) that could influence policy effectiveness and thus aid design of new policy.

## What learning and insights did this case study produce?

DEFRA and CECAN worked together through a process of co-production that enhanced policy making practices, developed methodological innovation, provided learning and helped build capacity for evaluation throughout the policy cycle.

### Policy making practices

- The evaluation methods tool emerged as valuable heuristic for critical appraisal of evaluation questions.
- The tool demonstrated optimal methodological approaches for complexity appropriate evaluation: moving away from the idea of a 'gold standard' to the concept of 'local best option'. It helped to shift policy makers' thinking away from experimental evaluation designs as the best option for evaluating complex policy to thinking about choosing the most appropriate design to suit the project.
- It was demonstrated that the systems mapping can embed complexity thinking at policy design stage.
- The mapping demonstrated crucial linkages between policies and policy system that impact effectiveness and can help policymakers design smarter policies.

### Co-production

- Valuable knowledge was exchanged through the processes of co-production and co-design of future policy and evaluation spaces.
- Evaluation support that was external to the department helped policy makers to keep thinking open and not close off methodological options too soon. The value of bringing together different kinds of knowledge was recognised by stakeholders.
- However, sufficient time was needed to build trust and develop relationships between the policy makers and the CECAN team.

### Learning and capacity building

- Policy makers in Defra and its delivery agencies gained enhanced understanding of complexity that has helped to embed a better understanding of rural development policy as a complex 'nexus' with multiple variables, interactions, scales and system attributes.
- The workshops introduced policy makers to new methodological approaches and practical tools for evaluation across the policy cycle, from policy design to 'ex post' evaluation. These approaches have challenged ideas of an evaluation 'gold standard' to thinking about local best options in relation to specific evaluation challenges.

## How is DEFRA developing the work for the future?

Defra is:

- Considering different approaches to evaluation that are complexity-appropriate for the evaluation of the Rural Development Programme.
- Taking a fresh look at the availability of suitable data, and commissioning new work to fill research gaps.
- Using systems mapping to construct the Future Farming and Countryside 'system' to help with design of new policy and its evaluation.
- Using this work to engage further with stakeholders.

## What are the implications for future policy evaluation?

Policy makers and analysts should:

- Seek to understand the complexity inherent in the policy system and its effects.
- Think about how complexity can be managed as part of the process of policy design.
- Consider evaluation from the earliest stages of policy design, being clear about the purpose and objectives of the evaluation and the hence the best approach to achieving those objectives.
- Avoid defaulting to designs that may not be appropriate to the needs of the evaluation nor reflect the complexity inherent in the system.

**CECAN has developed a set of co-produced case studies, working with government departments and agencies to tackle their intractable evaluation challenges in complex policy areas. These case studies have involved sustained dialogue and an orchestrated succession of activities and relationship building. They are providing experiments in bringing together the expertise of evaluation practitioners, methods and domain specialists, social and natural scientists and policy analysts to develop shared understandings of evaluation challenges and to identify evaluation needs and solutions.**

## References and further information


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