

Citizen Summary for Implementation Year 2020 - Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

Introduction

Malta's Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 covers the entire territory of the Maltese Islands. It was formally adopted by the European Commission on 24 November 2015, outlining Malta's priorities for the Programme. The Programme currently has a budget of € 129 million of public money that is available for the 7-year period 2014-2020 (€ 97 million from the EU budget (EAFRD) and € 32 million of national co-funding).

As the Programme began to draw to an end in 2020 in relation to the original budget allocation, further progress was registered throughout the year across most of the measures both in terms of commitments and payments as well as outputs. In fact, despite the challenges faced in the implementation of the Programme in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Managing Authority (MA) within the Office of the Prime Minister and the Agriculture and Rural Payments Agency within the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Right continued accepting applications and payment claims, respectively, in relation to sub-measures launched in 2020 and previous years.

A transitional regulation extending the Programme by 2 years up to 2022 has been adopted at EU level, with additional budget allocation expected to be introduced into the Programme to cover for the 2-year extension, later in 2021.

Progress Achieved

Measures Launched

In 2020, the Managing Authority launched calls for applications under the following 12 sub-measures, for which applications were received through an open rolling system with set cut-off dates. Through this procedure, which applies to investment projects, measures remain open unless otherwise notified by the MA. Land-based measures were processed, as usual, through the payment claims submitted on an annual basis.

The table below further illustrates information on the measures launched and applications received in 2020.

TABLE 1: CALLS FOR APPLICATIONS LAUNCHED IN 2020 PER SUB-MEASURE

Sub-Measure	Objective	Closing Date	Amount Requested (€)
2.1	Support to help benefitting from the use of advisory services.	September 2020	€500,000
3.1	Support for new participation in quality schemes.	January, April & June 2020	€684,238
3.2	Support for information and promotion activities implemented by group of producers in the internal market.	July & October 2020	€0

4.1	Support for investment in agricultural holdings.	January, April & July 2020	€7,842,503
4.2	Support for investment in infrastructural related to development, modernisation or adaption of agricultural forestry.	April 2020	€2,256,937
4.4	Support for non-productive investments linked to the achievement of agri-environment-climate objectives.	April 2020	€505,434
6.4	Support for investment in creation and development of non-agricultural activities.	January, April & June 2020	€840,765
10.2	Support for conservation and sustainable use and development of genetic resources in agriculture.	February 2020	€170,557.04
16.2	Support for pilot projects and for the development of new products, practices, processes and technologies.	February & April 2020	€3,775,676
16.4	Support for horizontal and vertical co-operation among supply chain actors for the establishment and development of short supply chains and local markets and for promotion activities in a local context relating to the development of short supply chains and local markets.	February & April 2020	€629,913
16.6	Support for cooperation among supply chain actors for sustainable provisions of biomass and use in food and energy production and industrial processes.	February & April 2020	€0
19.2	Implementation of operations under the CLLD Strategy	Numerous calls were launched by the different LAGs throughout 2020	€3,677,680

Committed & Realised Amounts

Meanwhile, the committed and realised expenditure during 2020 was distributed as follows:

Priority/ Focus Area	Priority Description	Committed Expenditure 2020	Realised Expenditure 2020*
P1/FA1A	Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry, and rural areas	€0	€0
P1/FA1B		€0	€0
P1/FA1C		€500,000	€0
P2/FA2A	Enhancing farm viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture in all regions and promoting innovative farm technologies and the sustainable management of forests	€5,306,647	€6,819,097
P2/FA2B		€140,000	€84,000
P3/FA3A	Promoting food chain organisations, including processing and marketing of agricultural	€1,060,118	€619,504

	products, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture		
P4/FA4A	Restoring, preserving and enhancing eco-systems related to agriculture and forestry	€13,966,790	€6,864,337
P4/FA4B			
P4/FA4C			
P5/FA5A	Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift towards a low carbon and climate resilient economy in agriculture, good and forestry	€ 12,180,342	€3,258,683
P5/FA5B		€0	€0
P5/FA5C		€0	€7,853
P5/FA5D		€0	€14,070
P5/FA5E		€2,226,368	€1,886,586
P6/FA6A	Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas	€648,491	€0
P6/FA6B		€2,188,267	€451,134
P6/FA6C		€0	€0

* There are instances where realised expenditure is higher than committed expenditure since realised expenditure could also be in relation to commitments that occurred in previous years.

The above commitments contribute towards a Programme budget commitment rate of more than 90% as at the end of 2020.

Progress Across Measures

In 2020, as the Programme's implementation matured and having launched multiple calls for applications, awarded various operations and implementation on these was well in place, the Managing Authority's focus was that of utilising the remaining Programme budget in the most effective manner. This was possible following the experience gained during the past 6 years in implementing Malta's Rural Development Programme together with regular bilateral meetings with beneficiaries and key stakeholders.

This year in review also saw the delivery of MCAST training programmes which offers bespoke training courses to individuals operating in rural areas, a project started at the end of 2019 and which is closely linked to the provision of training in farming and business management practices and specific training linked to the Agri-Environment-Climate Measures (AECMs) of the Rural Development Programme, an initiative which falls under sub-measure 1.1. During 2020 alone a total of 205 participants attended one or more of the six courses that were offered by MCAST. These courses covered topics related to weed management, maintenance of autochthonous Maltese species, introduction of bee boxes in agricultural parcels and their management, integrated pest management plan, and farm and business management practices. Given that this project is implemented via in-person sessions the delivery of the courses was interrupted in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, MCAST was able to reopen the courses once again between August and October of 2020.

This year also saw the introduction of the first recognised Farm Advisory Service body through AgriConnect FAS, as per Articles 5 & 6 of L.N. 99 of 2019. AgriConnect FAS were awarded this role under M2.1 Support to help benefitting from the use of advisory service, with an allocated budget of €500,000. This will allow the AgriConnect FAS to provide free advisory services to the end beneficiaries (farmers) of up to €1,500 per event. The advisory support being offered is various, including assisting farms adhere to Cross compliance and legal obligations, drafting of fertilizer plans, assisting in the management of records and documentation, and advising on the use of new technologies.

In 2020 headway was made in one of the Programme's largest projects, that under M4.3 Support for investment in infrastructure related to development, modernisation or adaptation of agriculture and forestry, entrusted to Infrastructure Malta. This project, with a budget of more than €16.5 million focuses on the improvement in the quality and accessibility of rural roads serving as access to the land utilised by the local agricultural sector. By

the end of the year Infrastructure Malta had reconstructed more than 50 countryside roads in over 15 different localities in Malta with more than 50% of payments executed over the corresponding budget in the RDP.

As for other measures, similar to previous years, sub-measures 4.1 and 4.4 continued to be very popular amongst beneficiaries. In the case of M4.1, three calls were issued in 2020 for which a total of 106 different applications were received, out of which 77 operations were selected following the Project Selection Committee's evaluation. These projects falling under the cap of support for investment in agricultural holdings were very diverse, targeting the different facets of local agriculture, such as investment in energy efficient machinery, innovative farming solutions, and smart technology, which are now being implemented across Malta and Gozo. M4.1 also registered good progress in relation to payments executed reaching circa 50% over the corresponding budget in the RDP.

In 2020, 81 new projects were approved under sub-measure 4.4 Support for non-productive investments linked to the achievement of Agri-Environment-Climate actions. This continued to build on the achievements of previous years as various beneficiaries, including Local Councils, worked on repairing and restoring rubble walls bordering agricultural land. These interventions are critical in the safeguarding and conservation of the local ecosystem (that is the restoration of Malta's biodiversity, including its habitats and landscapes), as they prevent soil erosion by allowing only water to pass through these walls. The progress recorded in 2020 adds up to a committed expenditure of circa €6.9m, leading to a cumulative committed amount of €25m. This resulted in an overcommitment at the level of the measure. Progress was also registered for realised expenditure, which for the year totalled close to €4.3 million. Positive progress was also recorded in co-operation projects falling under M16.2 Support for pilot projects, and for the development of new products, practices, processes, and technologies, many of which are led by the University of Malta.

M19 Support for LEADER Local development (CLLD) managed by the Majjistral, Gal Xlokk, and Gozo Local Action Groups (LAGS) also registered significant advancements in 2020. Most notably under M19.2 as 78 operations were selected, resulting in a committed expenditure for the year of circa €2 million, amounting to a level of commitment that is more than double over the previous year. By the end of the year, this sub-measure was over-committed.

Challenges

COVID-19

The pandemic brought about great challenges for all stakeholders involved in the successful execution of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. The application, evaluation, and implementation of operations was interrupted as Malta together with the rest of Europe was in a quasi/partial-lockdown during many months of the year.

This meant that for example courses being delivered by MCAST under sub-measure 1.1 were put on hold during the months of March-Augusts and then again in October, with participants and trainers hesitant to return. In response to this challenge the MA issued beneficiaries extensions to their projects, this was done to allow beneficiaries to complete their projects in a timely manner and for their original aims to be achieved. The obstacles brought about by the pandemic also had a toll on the monitoring and evaluation of the programme as various in-person interviews and site visits had to be postponed/cancelled.

Data Management

In 2020, several meetings were held to discuss the data required measure by measure, on the basis of the experience acquired during the 2019 AIR. These meetings were held with the Managing Authority, ABACO, the database system administrator, and ARPA, the Paying Agency which collects data from beneficiaries for payment purposes. The objective of these discussions was to align data management systems and discuss data availability for monitoring and evaluation purposes. The MA, PA and other entities using the system, are engaged in continuous discussions to continue improving the IT system while building on the systems that are already available. Such improvements assist the MA and external evaluators in better monitoring and evaluation processes.

Communication

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, during 2020 consultation sessions were largely limited to online meetings, these included meetings held with critical stakeholders from both private and public entities, such as the Agricultural, Rural and Paying agency (ARPA), and Environment and Resources Authority (ERA).

Prior to this disturbance, at the start of 2020, the MA was able to organise four information sessions with potential beneficiaries of sub-measures M4.2 and M4.4. These sessions were particularly useful in notifying and briefing potential applicants of changes made in the application process in response to the pandemic, ensuring that applicants were armed with all the information necessary to successfully apply under these calls.

As a result of the pandemic and its effect on the MA's communication tools, in 2020 the EU funding websites www.eufundsmalta.gov.mt / www.eufunds.gov.mt were particularly important to inform relevant stakeholders of changes in procedures due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Highlighting procedural changes in the application process, obligatory documentation in applications, and extensions to project deadlines in view of the COVID-19 crisis. These websites were revised regularly by the MA to ensure that the information available was updated and still relevant. They acted as MA's means of communication with its stakeholders, informing them of the latest pre-announcements, calls, newsletters, events, circulars, guidance notes, contact points and other useful resources.



Rural Development Programme for Malta 2014-2020

Part financed by the European Union
Co-financing Rate:

75% European Union; 25% Government of Malta



***The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development:
Europe investing in rural areas***