



THEMATIC EVALUATION

Soil

RDP 2014-2020

November 2022



0. Executive Summary

This Thematic Evaluation relates to Focus Area (FA) 4C of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) for Malta. The focus area is concerned with the prevention of soil erosion and the improvement in soil management. This FA is chiefly addressed through Measures 4.4 (support for non-productive investment linked to the achievement of agri-environment-climate objectives) and 10.1 (payment for agri-environment commitments) of the RDP, with the bulk of the budget being allocated to Measure 4.4.

The evaluation first describes Malta's agricultural and environmental sectors with a specific focus on soil as well as the direction given by the National Agricultural Policy for Malta, and the Rural Development Programme's measures that support Focus Area 4C.

The methodology of the evaluation is based on the '*Guidelines on the Assessment of RDP Results: How to prepare for reporting on evaluation in 2017*' issued by the European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development¹. As advocated by the European Evaluation Helpdesk, the evaluation consists of a mixed-methods approach which ensures appropriate triangulation of different data sources. More specifically, the evaluation design consists of the following elements:

- Overview of the implementation of Measures 4.4 and 10.1;
- Interviews conducted with beneficiaries of Measure 4.4;
- Structured focus group with selected beneficiaries of Measure 4.4; and
- An analysis of the data collected during implementation of Measures 4.4 and 10.1.

The valuation notes that Malta has poor soil quality and faces a high risk of soil erosion in addition to facing severe water challenges, both in terms of water quantity and water quality. This situation could be further aggravated by climate changes impacts including reduced precipitation, increasing risk of droughts, and extreme heat rendering the agricultural sector particularly susceptible to these impacts.

Taking into account the main threats to soil quality, the 2014-2020 RDP aims to address soil quality and preservation of Maltese soil through the implementation of measures 1,2, 4.4, 10.1 and 16.2. The budget allocated towards Focus Area 4C in the Programme stands at €27,636,125, representing approximately 14% of the total budget.

Since measures 1, 2, and 16 only indirectly contribute to soil management, the focus of the evaluation was on measures 4.4 and 10.1. The uptake of both measures registered very good progress with the allocated budgets for both measures being exceeded. The target of 3% of agricultural land under management contracts to improve soil management and/or prevent soil erosion was exceeded and the indicator is currently estimated at 12.6%. The indicator is very close to the EU target of 14%. The success of the measure is attributed to the uptake of AECM 5.

In terms of soil erosion and soil organic matter, data obtained shows that 171,960 linear metres of walls were funded (of which 78,645 m were in Gozo and 93,315 m in Malta). It was further estimated that the area of soil protected by the rubble walls in Malta and Gozo is 8,104,499 m².

¹ [Assessment of RDP Results: How to Prepare for Reporting on Evaluation in 2017 | The European Network for Rural Development \(ENRD\) \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/enrd-portal/enrd-portal-2017-2020/evaluation/evaluation-2017-2020)

Assuming that the UAA is 10,730 ha² (or 107,300,000 m²) then the area of soil protected by rubble walls in the RDP is 7.55% of the UAA.

In terms of soil erosion, it was estimated that the average annual soil loss for those parcels that benefitted under measure 4.4 is substantially reduced because of the rubble walls. It was estimated that there is a 66% reduction in soil loss due to the rubble walls.

With regards to soil organic matter the data obtained from the beneficiaries of AECM 5 was collected and analysed for the years 2018 to 2020 (the years where SOM data was collected). The evaluation showed that there has been a substantial increase (over 50%) in SOM between 2013 and 2018. Furthermore, when the AECM was launched in 2018 the average SOM has also increased by about 11% over the two years on those parcels that implemented AECM5. Although these results are very encouraging both in terms of the general improvement in SOM between 2013 and 2018 and also as a result of the programme (2018-2020), the SOM values are those obtained from beneficiaries and not part of a national study – which was used to compute the SOM value in 2013. Therefore, results need to be interpreted with caution.

In terms of recommendations, on a national level there is the need to halt and reverse the depletion of natural resources in agriculture by supporting management practices that reduce water-induced soil erosion, and investments in modern productive systems, enhancing sustainable water management and other practices lowering nutrient losses to water and air.

In line with the National Agricultural Policy, the incentivization of the consolidation of land parcels as well as incentives to improve soil, need to be taken forward for both the sustainability of the agriculture community as well as to protect soils. Sustainable cultivation practices are also advocated in the National Agriculture Policy as well as the importance of organic farming. The development of a Soil Action Plan is required to improve soil quality. New CAP instruments or measures should be designed to address harmful practices and on-going trends (e.g. use of plastic in fields, use of continuously heavier machinery, land abandonment occurring on terraces, enlargement of field size) whose impact is increasingly significant.

It is clear that Measure 4.4 was a successful measure both in terms of uptake as well as its potential impact on preventing soil erosion. In order for the measure to be more effective, selection criteria relating to topography, soil depth, and state of the walls should be used to select projects where the impact on soil is likely to be the highest.

The continued popularity of the AECMs indicates that accompanying training measures are having a positive effect on farmers. It is therefore recommended to support the consolidation of knowledge and its transmission to farmers through quality advice on sustainable soil management.

Soil management is also expected to play an important part in the future CAP strategic Plan. Measures that clearly impact soil and therefore contribute to the indicators on soil should be identified and incentivised and data collection related to the implementation of the measures should be in-built into the requirements of the measure.