

REPORT

Meeting: **Validation Workshop as part of the mid-term European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) evaluation study**

Parties: **Tetra Tech, stakeholders**

Date: **17 June 2024**

Location: **MS Teams**

Chair: **Melanie Kitchener and Ninon Gautier (Tetra Tech)**

Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

1. Welcome and presentation of the study

Melanie Kitchener and Ninon Gautier from Tetra Tech welcomed participants to the validation workshop, organized to share and validate the findings of the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) mid-term evaluation study. The workshop aimed to complement previous consultation activities and generate a shared understanding of the results. It focused on selected draft key findings, as no major issues were identified during the consultation.

The EMFAF mid-term evaluation study began in December 2023. The draft Final Report was submitted to DG MARE on May 29, 2024. The study's objectives include assessing:

- The effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and Union added value of the EMFAF
- The implementation of simplification measures
- The use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs)
- The flexibility to respond to new challenges
- The contribution to the European Green Deal
- The response to recent and ongoing crises and market disruptions
- The use of selective criteria by Member States in choosing aquaculture projects for funding

As part of the study, a stakeholder consultation was conducted in February 2024, involving 26 surveys of managing authorities, 223 surveys of target groups, and input from 36 EU and national level authorities. The surveys revealed significant differences in EMFAF implementation across Member States.

The workshop focused on five key evaluation aspects, rather than addressing all results:

- Effectiveness
- Efficiency

- Relevance
- EU Added Value
- Coherence

2. Selected key findings on effectiveness

Findings on effectiveness can be divided into five categories: implementation level, first operations, monitoring and reporting, stakeholder involvement, and financial instruments.

Implementation Level:

- Delays in initial implementation due to COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and capacity challenges from the closure of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).
- Low financial execution, with only 1% of the budget spent.
- Continuity of national EMFAF programmes with the EMFF and adaptation based on lessons learned.
- Expected increase in implementation levels in 2024 for all priorities except Priority 4 (international ocean governance), where uptake is slow.

First Operations:

- Focus mainly on strengthening the institutional environment for the sector, rather than providing direct support to economic operators.

Monitoring and Reporting:

- Lack of uniformity in the format and detail of the performance framework methodology papers.
- Challenges in setting targets for output indicators.

Stakeholder Involvement:

- Improving collaborative development, stakeholder diversity, and consultation methods, leading to effective preparation of national EMFAF programmes.
- Opportunities for more innovative contributions exist.

Financial Instruments:

- Limited uptake, with only six projects including financial instruments.
- 13 Member States plan to use financial instruments in the coming months.

3. Breakout session on effectiveness

After presenting the results, participants were split into two groups to provide feedback.

Key reasons for **implementation delays** included:

- Timing overlap between EMFAF launch and EMFF closure.
- Structural issues with the funds.
- Overlap with the previous programming period causing complications.
- Late approval of national legal frameworks.
- Bureaucratic reporting procedures slowing down implementation.
- Delays from mid-2021 EU legislation affecting Member States' work starting mid-2022.
- COVID-19 requiring attention to EMFF issues.
- Digital requirements.

Proposed solutions:

- Start preparations before formal programme adoption.
- Simplify implementation processes.

Regarding **monitoring and reporting systems:**

- Lacked guidance during initial phase, which led to unclear target setting.
- Lessons learned emphasize providing guidance from the outset.
- Setting targets under EMFAF is generally easier than under EMFF, focusing on clearer and more logical indicators.

On **stakeholder involvement**, participants noted that it is:

- Crucial for considering needs and fostering innovation.
- Supports reaching joint conclusions effectively.

4. Presentation of draft key findings on efficiency

Key findings on efficiency highlighted limited improvements in **application and selection procedures** compared to EMFF. Concerns were raised over the excessive number of documents required to verify eligibility criteria. Issues with new IT systems, procedural changes, and governance were also noted.

EMFAF **implementation** has begun with flexibility in budget reallocation, use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs), risk-based analysis, and digital processes. However, these benefits primarily accrue to beneficiaries only.

Administrative costs for managing authorities are deemed reasonable despite an increase from EMFF levels. Concerns were raised about disproportionate costs for landlocked countries.

5. Breakout session on efficiency

On application and selection procedures, participants noted **limited possibilities for simplification in EMFAF** compared to EMFF, despite regulatory flexibility. The application process remains administratively burdensome. Despite digitalization, both digital files and paperwork are sometimes required, leading to redundant efforts for managing authorities and beneficiaries. Stakeholders expressed mixed views on digitalization's impact: while beneficial for some, traditional sectors like fisheries find it complex. Overall, there's a call for more automation to reduce human intervention.

Fisheries and aquaculture face distinct challenges under different priorities within the fund structure, hindering value chain project implementation. Lessons learned emphasize improving coordination among managing authorities at central and regional levels to streamline procedures.

Feedback from certain Member States indicates **varying implementation success**: some struggle due to limited staffing and regional interest, while others manage effectively. Addressing administrative costs, priorities for the next period include reducing costs for smaller administrations and providing exemptions for low-budget programmes.

6. Presentation of draft key findings on relevance & EU added value and responses to preparatory questions regarding missing aspects

The **relevance** of EMFAF appears to be one of the least controversial items based on the study feedback received during the study, though its early stage of implementation limits a full assessment of relevance.

Improvements in relevance were highly rated across stakeholder groups, particularly in addressing specific aspects like biodiversity and Priority 4. However, social aspects appear to not be addressed in the EMFAF.

Regarding **EU added value**, EMFAF is seen as crucial for supporting the CFP with significant cross-border cooperation and regional-specific solutions. However, concerns were raised about **EMFAF's cohesion with other EU policies**, distinguishing between its internal coherence and broader policy coherence.

Participants noted that while EMFAF improves aquaculture development, it falls short of broader EU policy objectives like food security and self-sufficiency due to structural and bureaucratic challenges. Flexibility and increased funding are positive aspects, but alignment with certain EU policies remains problematic, which consultants acknowledged as beyond the scope of EMFAF evaluation but relevant to mention in the report.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion **priorities for future programming** should include:

- Addressing programming delays through systematic involvement of all target groups.
- Conducting broad consultations and engaging with industry and stakeholders.
- Ensuring a strong alignment with the objectives of the CFP.
- Clarifying rules for the use of Financial Instruments.
- Balancing flexibility in choosing measures with EU regulatory requirements.

Additionally, it is recommended to reduce and simplify rules, as seen in the last programming period, to alleviate administrative burdens. Clearer regulations are also advised for the next programming period to avoid differing interpretations of the same provisions. Careful attention to regulation translation and improved rule interpretation are crucial.

Consultants noted the forthcoming finalization of the study. **All in all, feedback from breakout groups aligned with the study's findings, with nuances to be included in the final report based on received feedback.**