



**Ex-durante
Evaluation Report
Pilot 11 North
Macedonia**



Pilot Leader: **AgFutura Technologies**



Pilot Partner: **GGP**



July 2022

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Executive summary

The Ex-durante evaluation for Pilot 11 Gevgelija –Strumica was conducted by the two partner organizations in North Macedonia, AGFT, as pilot leader and GGP, as pilot partner. The main focus of the Ex-durante evaluation process is the final version of the Regional Action plan (RAP) for Pilot 11 and the readiness for implementation. Based on continuous consultations with relevant stakeholders about the policy challenges, the two main areas of future intervention (**young farmers and rural extension**) were confirmed as essential structural changes with potential for multiplicative effect across the topic of rural attractiveness. Additionally, the initial vision of the Pilot 11 was confirmed with the stakeholders and further adapted based on the conclusions and recommendations derived from the consultation round focused on Action Plan development, led by CKA. The development of the two policy measures that need to be introduced in order to address the challenges and contribute to the vision implementation in the Gevgelija-Strumica region, was performed in coordination with relevant policy actors and their critical position was taken in consideration in the final RAP version.

The results from the interviews with the stakeholders in context of the updated version of the Action plan and the Foresight exercise, show that majority of the respondents support the developed RAP. The respondents also trust the results of this process and highly appreciate its positive impact on the cooperation between stakeholders, dissemination of information, and improve the overview of various possible development scenarios and acquisition of new knowledge and skills. It is particularly worth mentioning that more than 80% of the respondents from the stakeholders foresee their participation in the implementation process.

The recommendations include further use of ex-durante evaluation methodology after the start of the Action Plan implementation phase for the purpose to improve and support decision-making process in the implementation and to enable necessary corrections and adjustments.

Introduction

The Ex-durante evaluation methodology is one more process within the Polirural project that contributed for development of realistic RAP. Similar to the other methods used in the process of development, the main idea of the ex-durante evaluation methodology was to develop RAP which will be consistent of the real needs of the rural actors, as well as the available technical capacities of the main actors in the implementation process. Simply said, this method is one more controlling mechanism that should assure that the anticipated measures will culminate with visible and measurable results that will contribute to higher rural attractiveness of the Gevgelija-Strumica region.

The process of developing Pilot 11 Action plan was managed by the team members from the two project partners' organizations (AGFT and GGP) supported by active involvement of relevant policy actors and other stakeholders from the regional panel group. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the process of stakeholders' engagement in this and other project activities was performed mainly through online discussions and consultations, one- on-one meetings, and individual telephone interviews.

The process of ex-durante evaluation encompassed assessment of different segments of the RAP (*the intervention logic in terms of inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts; the contribution of the chosen measures to achieve the targets of key missions of EU; the measurability and relevance of the indicators for measuring expected transformations; the proposed monitoring and evaluation plan*) resulting in this ex-durante evaluation report.

1. Scope and focus

The evaluation object of the ex-durante method is the final version of the RAP for the Gevgelija-Strumica Pilot 11 which includes the proposed interventions considering the scenario that the implementation has not started yet¹. The key policy challenges identified in Pilot 11 RAP are: *Supporting policies for the key stakeholder with a mediating role (rural extension) in the process of policy creation and execution and Supporting policy for attracting the young population to return in rural areas*. These policy challenges were once again confirmed as the most relevant structural reforms that promise highest multiplicative effect for achieving rural attractiveness through tackling the issues of two target groups, young population and rural extension, as main drivers for the development in the given environment of the Pilot 11.

The transformational measures for the Pilot 11 region are list of activities that are envisioned to be performed in order for the structural changes to be achieved. These activities include: *Organizing a multi stakeholder workshop; Establishing a temporary body for structural reforms; Developing a specific Action plan for enhancing the role of rural extension in policy development and policy execution considering the future development trends within the EU policies, as well as the role of the youngsters; Developing a plan for technical development which should determine the scope and the scale of technical improvement; and Developing a financial plan for support of the measure for rural extension and young population*. Therefore, according to the evaluation team, the planned interventions are considered as relevant and directly focused on supporting the specific needs of the 2 target groups (rural extension and young population) in context of enhancing the rural attractiveness in the region.

The purpose of the evaluation process is to assess the final RAP and support the implementation process. The ex-durante evaluation team together with the pilot team agreed that the focus of the evaluation process should be to assure the readiness of the Action Plan to implement the transformational measures according to the real needs and specific situation and challenges in the implementation environment. This process was performed in the period from May until July 2022.

¹ According to the process of implementation of the Regional Action Plan it is anticipated that activities will start in September after establishing the Monitoring Body which is consisted of representatives of the regional panel group and led by responsible person from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy

There was also a review and improvement of the RAP as a result of continuous stakeholder involvement, which contributed to the final version of the RAP in July 2022. The evaluation team was consisted of members from the two partner organizations (AGFT and GGP) in the Polirural project supported by the representatives from the regional stakeholder group (policy makers). Each part of the Action Plan was evaluated through direct consultation with the evaluation team and Action Plan authors from both organizations (AGFT and GGP), as well as through interviews with relevant stakeholders representing different groups of the regional panel. The evaluation results will be used by authors of the Action Plan and the stakeholders involved in the process of implementation and monitoring, in a form of recommendations that need to support and improve the process of implementation.

2. Intervention progress

The indicators and target values for inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts in the intervention design of Gevgelija-Strumica Pilot Region action plan are additionally adjusted and confirmed as logical, complementary, consistent and clearly linked. Preparatory actions for the intervention program have been conducted, by including the opinions of the policy actors about the policy measures and KPIs. Additional planned preparatory action is organizing a multi stakeholder event in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (Ministry). Continuous discussions with policy actors from the Ministry (department managers and state secretary) has contributed to increased awareness about the importance of the multi-stakeholder approach in policy creation and execution. Also, the engagement of representatives from the National Extension Agency and EU delegation in North Macedonia in the process of AP development can be considered as key aspect that should contribute to successful adoption and implementation. The organization of the multi stakeholder event in August 2022 will be an official start of the implementation of the RAP. All relevant actors in the areas of rural development will be involved in order to achieve overall consensus about the current state (technical and financial), the capacity for change and defining the key areas of intervention with its specifics (budget, chronology, roles of actors, and allocation of resources), and expected results in the area of improving the rural extension and maintaining/attracting young rural population. The preparatory actions present an important base for achieving the expected outcomes and impacts, thus, achieving the regional transformation. The cause-effect relationships are justified but it should be considered that the continuous political instability is anticipated as very strong and realistic influencing factor that can cause distortion in achieving the planned changes.

The two intervention areas included in the Pilot 11 RAP have strong contribution in achieving the key missions of the EU. Preparatory action has also been considered in order the multiplicative effect derived from the planned structural reforms to be correlated with process of achieving the EU key missions. This action includes presenting to the Monitoring body and the implementation actors how specific activities in the AP will contribute in achieving the EU key missions, and making sure that key decision makers are aware for this strong correlation.

In the context of the activities of intervention covering the issue of **rural extension**, the role and the capacity of this mediating body is essential considering the high level of **perceived trust** for the advisors among the rural population and the **strong infrastructure** which enables broad geographical coverage of rural areas and solid communication with final beneficiaries. The importance of the role of the rural extension becomes even greater when dealing with complex issues such as *sustainability, digitalization, climate change* or similar, where trust and strong technical capacities are key for the success of the policy. Considering this implementation environment of the key EU missions, it is essential to highlight the strong relationship among the advisors within the rural extension and the rural population which allows much better insight about the potential bottlenecks that can appear in the process. When specific measures in the context of Green Deal are defined on the central level, the role of the advisors within the rural extension is essential in the execution part, especially in supporting the Ministry to understand what type of progress is achieved (**monitoring and reporting role**) and in supporting the final beneficiaries how to implement the specific measures enforced by the Ministry (**supporting role**). By introducing policy measures for enforcing these two roles of the rural extension the AP contributes for setting up the foundations of the process of implementation of the principles derived from the EU green policies and EU climate policies. The main impact on EU missions by intervening in policy directed to **young population** is derived from the capacity of this category of population to understand, anticipate and accept modern and sustainable policies. Key contributor for this is the fact that younger population is more open to new technologies, have less language barriers, they have had more opportunities to travel outside of the national borders, and they are more exposed to modern digital media (social media). All these attributes present a much better environment for implementation of the demanding EU policies. Therefore, policies that enforce better economic and social life of youngsters resulting in maintaining current and attracting new young people increases the overall absorption capacity of the rural areas to accept the sustainability principles. Additionally, stimulating the entrepreneurial and innovative capacities of existing young population in rural areas and the potential newcomers increases the possibility for **diversifying the economic** activities in rural areas by incorporating environmentally friendly technologies and developing climate resilient businesses.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the proposed two policy measures should adequately respond to the specific regional challenges and needs related to the implementation of the EU high-level missions in development of rural areas.

3. Measuring policy changes

Considering the fact that the implementation of the RAP has not started, the ex-durante evaluation for Pilot 11 is focused on testing the established measurement framework. Based on available data, the identified policy level KPIs are considered as measurable, attainable and relevant. For some of the identified indicators baseline values do not exist, they are poor or not applicable, so the desired values are mainly determined based on available reliable data and are considered as realistic to be achieved. Some of the KPIs have been adjusted according to the suggestions of the evaluation team and policy actors involved. Finally, it can be concluded that the indicated KPIs are clear, specific, measurable and appropriate to the intervention logic.

The ex-durante evaluation process provides a review of the proposed monitoring and evaluation mechanism for the implementation of RAP for Pilot 11. The procedures of the monitoring and evaluation process are clearly described, highlighting the responsibilities of each involved party in the process of implementation and monitoring of the AP. Additionally, the procedures also include how the Monitoring body and the actors in the implementation process will collaborate, what type of data they should collect and use in order to make sure that progress is made and changes are achieved.

4. Performance and engagement

The members of the regional stakeholder group were actively involved in the Gevgelija-Strumica regional Foresight process and Action Plan development mainly through online discussions, one-on-one meetings and interviews due to Covid-19 crisis. The continuity of stakeholder engagement was safeguarded at a high level during ex-ante and ex-durante evaluation and all other project activities.

The performance and engagement of stakeholders in the process of ex-durante evaluation was assessed by telephone interviews in Macedonian language based on the 10 sampled questions divided in 3 sections (stakeholder engagement, ownership and acquired capacities), in order to obtain comparable results. The proposed 4 level answers scale was used for the evaluation purpose (low, medium, high, very high).

The interviews were conducted from 20 June to 5 July 2022 with 35 regional stakeholders from different groups (3 policy makers, 5 researchers, 7 newcomers and 20 farmers).

The results from the interviews are presented below.

The first section of the analysis is dedicated to assessment of the stakeholder engagement in the foresight process

In Pilot 11, the analysis of results shows that 100% of the respondents answered with “Yes” regarding their involvement in the process of elaborating Foresight package/NMK Regional Action Plan. However, 85,7% of the respondents assessed the level of trust to the results of this process as Very high, and 14,3% as High (Figure 1). The extent to which they endorse/approve the results of this process is assessed as Very high by 88,6% of the respondents, and 11,4% of the respondents answered with High (Figure 2).



Figure 1 Level of trust for the results of the process

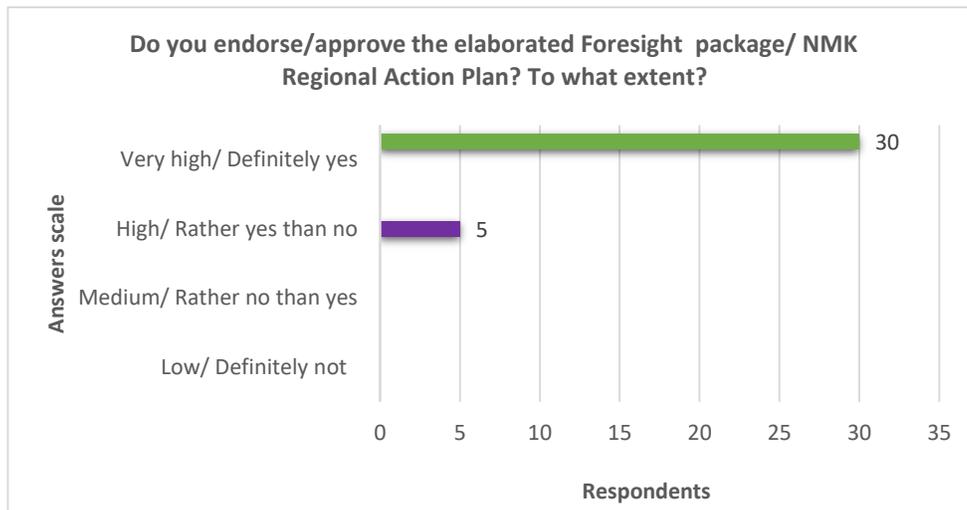


Figure 2 Extent of approval to the elaborated AP

Considering the answers to all questions assessing the **stakeholder engagement** it can be concluded that the process of elaborating Foresight package / NMK Regional Action Plan has been performed with *Very High* trust to the process and approval of its results. This points at clear and excellent example of stakeholders' engagement.

The second section of the analysis is dedicated to assessment of stakeholder level of ownership and readiness to participate in Action Plan implementation.

The analysis of results shows that 85,7% of the respondents indicated the extent to what they agree with the statement for their understanding on responsibilities about the process of AP implementation as Very high, and 14,3% answered with High (Figure 3).

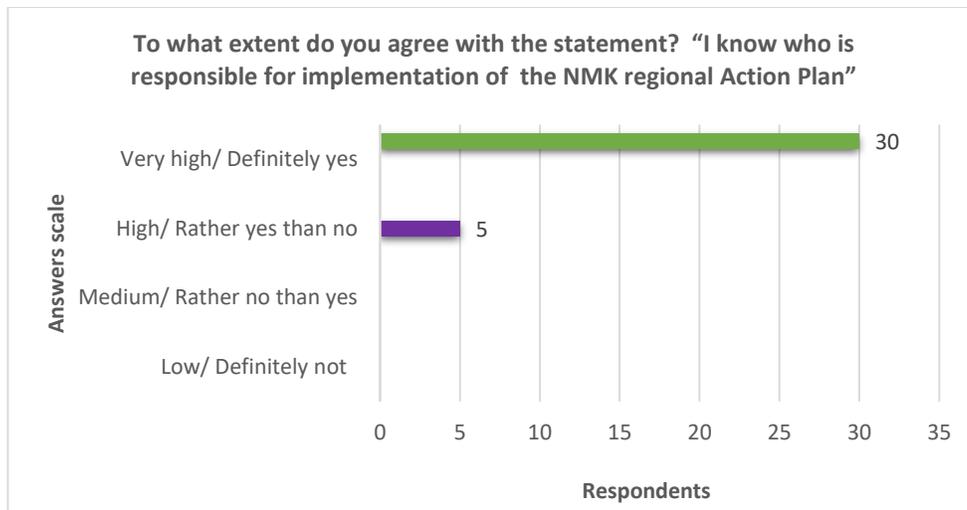


Figure 3 Understanding about the responsibilities for AP implementation

However, 74,3% of the respondents assessed the extent to which they understand the ways how the regional AP should be implemented as Very high, 17,1% as High and 8,6% as Medium (Figure 4). Furthermore, 82,8% of the respondents indicated that they are not personally involved in the implementation of the RAP, and only 17,2% indicated that they are involved. Considering this, 69% of the respondents foresee their involvement in the implementation of the regional AP as Very high, 20,7% of the respondents indicate as High, 10,3% of the respondents as Medium (Figure 5).

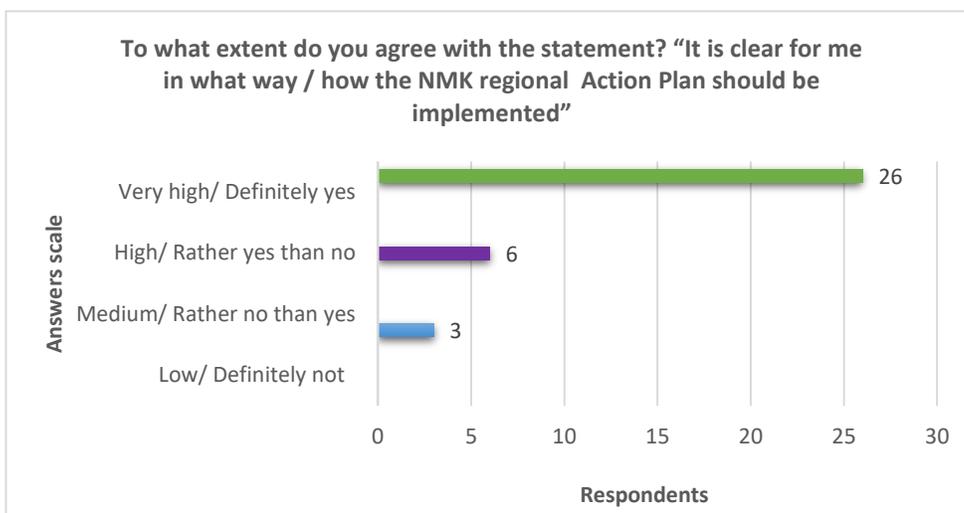


Figure 4 Understanding about the ways for AP implementation

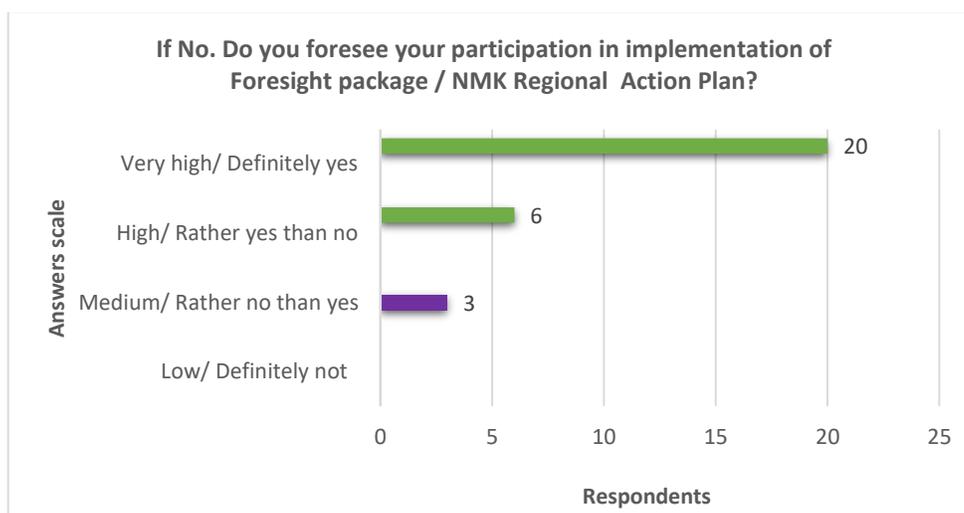


Figure 5 Readiness for participation in AP implementation

Considering the answers to all questions assessing the **stakeholders’ ownership** it can be concluded that it is *Very High*, due to a critical mass of stakeholders participating in elaboration of Foresight packages / Regional Action Plans which have clear understanding on ways how Action Plan shall be implemented and how they can take part in this process. They express strong ownership of it and are already involved or are ready to engage in Action Plan implementation.

The third section of the analysis is dedicated to assessment of stakeholders’ main capacity gains from participation in foresight process.

The analysis of results shows that 74,3% of the respondents assessed the cooperation opportunities due to the participation in elaboration of AP as Very high, and 125,7% answered with High (Figure 6). The level of increased insights due to the participation in elaboration of AP was assessed as Very high by 71,4% of the respondents, 22,9% answered with High, and 5,7% answered with Medium (Figure 7). The obtained knowledge and skills at individual, organizational and community (regional) level was assessed as Very high by 80% of the respondents and as High by 20% of the respondents (Figure 8).

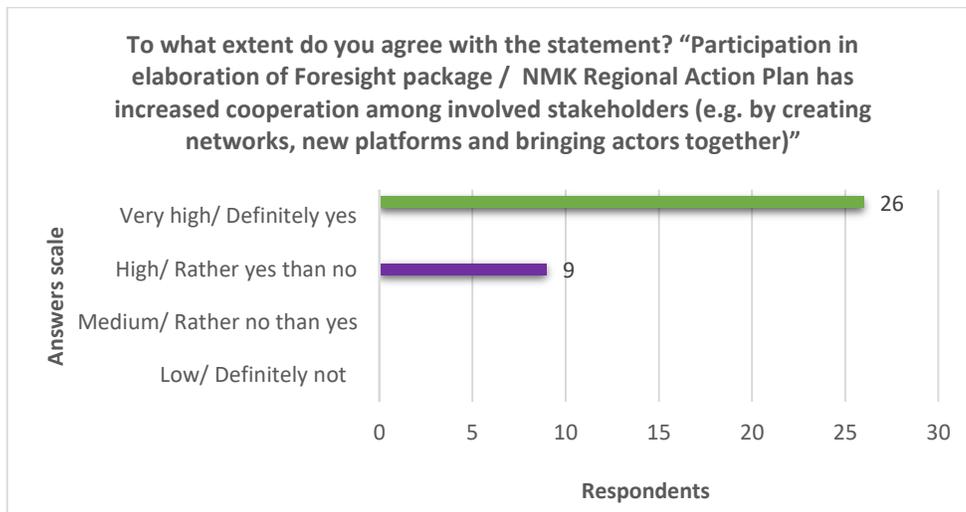


Figure 6 Cooperation opportunities

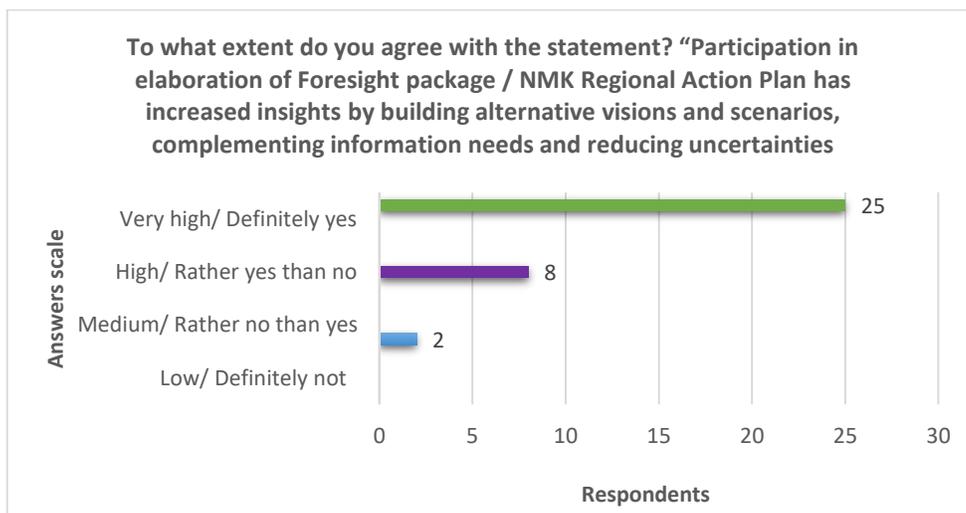


Figure 7 Increased insights



Figure 8 Obtained knowledge and skills

Considering the answers to all questions reflecting the **stakeholders’ acquired capacities and capabilities** it can be concluded that it is *High*, because the process of elaborating Foresight package / NMK Regional action plan has promoted good collective learning and cooperation environment within and between the stakeholders and pilot teams. Several stakeholders acknowledge that participation in foresight process has enhanced their capacities and capabilities, but there may be a room to enhance deeper effects.

Conclusion

The ex-durante evaluation had a significant contribution to the improvement and implementation of Pilot 11 RAP. Its main purpose which was to ensure the sustainability of the RAP as well making the RAP adoptable to the given implementation environment, is achieved. Additionally, the method provided an enhanced stakeholders engagement in the development process. The level of stakeholders' participation in the interviews was considerably high, 92% of the total number of Regional panel group members. The majority of respondents confirm that the process of developing the RAP was inclusive and they trust and support the proposed measures. The level of understanding of the AP implementation process among the stakeholder representatives and their foreseen participation is also well perceived. However, it is expected that the level of collaboration between stakeholders and knowledge sharing can be still enhanced in the period of AP implementation. Finally, considering the political instability during the project, which is expected to continue in the future, is taken as one of the factors that limits the already limited technical capacities of the involved parties, thus can jeopardize the scope and the scale of the developed action plan.

Recommendations

The ex-durante evaluation of Pilot 11 provides the following recommendations:

- **Conducting multi stakeholder event for starting AP implementation** – The implantation process of the RAP is recommended to start with the multi stakeholder event where key actors need to officially confirm the RAP and to appoint the managing body that will implement the action plan. Also on this event key institution such as the Ministry, the National Extension Agency (NEA) and similar need to define the **time line, the available technical staff and the potential budget** framework that can be put in function of execution of the RAP. Having a representative of EU Delegation in North Macedonia as part of the meeting is of a great importance. Direct insight of the EU local bodies in the process can contribute significantly to increase the awareness about the initiative to solve the issues of rural development/attractiveness which in the future can results in additional technical and financial support for this and similar processes. Additionally, strong and direct involvement of NEA from the beginning of the process is also crucial. As one of the target groups in the RAP, their direct involvement from the beginning will ensure better results and sustainability. Finally, involving relevant representatives of the young population in this event is also of a highest priority.
- **Establish the Monitoring committee to oversee the implementation of the RAP** – Past experiences in development and implementation of similar initiatives such as the RAP for Pilot 11 derived from the Polirural project have shown that monitoring and early recognition of bottlenecks is key for the sustainability of the process and achieving a positive result. This is why the RAP considers establishing a monitoring body which will include key individuals from each stakeholder group involved in the process. This Monitoring body should be led by the Ministry but representation thus the guaranteed influence of the representative of the key target groups should be of a highest priority.
- **Conduct annual ex-durante evaluations during the RAP implementation process** – The ex-durante method has provided significant contribution to the improvement of Pilot 11 RAP. Therefore, it is recommended for the Monitoring body to continue using this methodology in the implementation phase for the purpose of further improvements and necessary adjustments of the RAP.

Annex 1

Table 1 Interview results

North Macedonia Pilot 11 (Gevgelija – Strumica) Ex durante Evaluation							
Interview Results							
POLIRURAL		Low	Medium	High	Very high		
		Questions					
Engagement and endorsement	1	Have you been involved in the process of elaborating Foresight package / NMK Regional Action Plan?		Yes - 35		No - 0	
	2	At what level do you trust the results of this process?				5	30
	3	Do you endorse/approve the elaborated Foresight package/ NMK Regional Action Plan? To what extent?				4	31
Ownership and understanding	4	To what extent do you agree with the statement? "I know who is responsible for implementation of the NMK regional Action Plan"				5	30
	5	To what extent do you agree with the statement? "It is clear for me in what way / how can I participate in implementation of the NMK regional Action Plan"			3	6	26
	6	Are you personally involved in implementation of the NMK Regional Action Plan?		Yes - 6		No - 29	
	6a	If No. Do you foresee your participation in implementation of Foresight package / NMK Regional Action Plan?			3	6	20
Acquired capacities and capabilities after a while	7	To what extent do you agree with the statement? "Participation in elaboration/implementation of Foresight package / NMK Regional Action Plan has increased cooperation among involved stakeholders (e.g. by creating networks, new platforms and bringing actors together)"				9	26
	8	To what extent do you agree with the statement? "Participation in elaboration/implementation of Foresight package / NMK Regional Action Plan has increased insights by building alternative visions and scenarios, complementing information needs and reducing uncertainties"			2	8	25
	9	To what extent do you agree with the statement? "Participation in elaboration/implementation of Foresight package / NMK Regional Action Plan has promoted learning and gaining skills at individual, organisation, community (regional) level."				7	28