

What to look for in a good strategy?

Notes for evaluators of Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) and their strategies

NOTE: This is an adaptation of a guidance prepared to respond to a specific need of one of the Managing Authorities of EFF; readers from other countries might find some of the material less useful (e.g. references to specific chapters in the strategy might not apply to an application with a different structure), but most of the guidelines can be used in a variety of contexts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD STRATEGY

It should be kept in mind that there is no single model of strategy that would be appropriate in all circumstances, and therefore the evaluators should not try to apply their own concepts to the submitted applications. In accordance with the national ordinances, all applications will follow the same general structure and will probably contain similar elements. However, in order to distinguish a good strategy from a bad one, the evaluator must not only look at the contents of the strategy, but also at the way in which it is written, and he/she should try to understand the thinking of the authors of the strategy. Sometimes it will be necessary to “read between the lines” and connect pieces of information that are to be found in different parts of the application.

In analysing the strategy, the evaluator may find it useful to look for answers to the following Key Questions¹:

Key Question (i) – internal and external logic of the strategy: is there enough justification? Is there a logical connection between diagnosis, problem analysis, objectives and actions proposed? Does it take into account the activities of other actors/other policies?

Key Question (ii) – relevance to needs: does the strategy correspond to the needs of the area and its inhabitants? Are the proposals adapted to the specificity of the area? Are they likely to lead to the achievements of the strategic objectives?

Key Question (iii) – implementation capacity: can it be implemented? Who is going to do it and is there sufficient capacity for implementation?

Key Question (i) refers to the “internal” and “external” logic of the strategy. The “internal logic” means that the applicants clearly show the links between the various parts of the application, i.e. prove that the SWOT analysis is consistent with the analysis of the area; the problems identified are compatible with the conclusions from the SWOT, and there is a clear distinction between causes, problems and consequences. The strategic objectives should correspond to the key problems, and the types of activities should be likely to produce the desired results. As for the “external logic”, it is important to see if the authors of the strategy have sufficiently taken into account the other programmes and policies that have an impact on the area, including a critical analysis of their results, and that the scope of actions to be undertaken within the Axis 4 strategy is justified. The justification provided for selecting priorities should also be analysed.

In this part, the evaluators should in particular pay attention to those chapters of the strategy which describe: the conclusions from the SWOT analysis; links between the SWOT and objectives and measures; and links between the local strategy and other strategic documents.

Key Question (ii) describes the quality of the actions proposed in the strategy in relation to the needs of the area. It should be kept in mind that the actual projects will be designed and submitted by various actors in the course of the implementation of the strategy, and the applicants cannot (and indeed

¹ the Key Questions are based on evaluation criteria used in several EU Member States, notably on the criteria and guidelines for evaluation from France

should not) describe them in detail at the moment of submitting their proposal. However, it should be possible to see how the types of activities to be financed within the strategy are related to the specific characteristics of the given area, whether they respond to its specific challenges and are likely to bring value added to the area's unique combination of assets.

Within Key Question (ii) one should also look at the allocation of budget funds between the various types of actions – does it reflect the strategic priorities and are the funds allocated to the different strategic axes sufficient to achieve the objectives? It is also important to check if the strategy is really integrated in character, i.e. it does not focus on a single sector or group of beneficiaries but responds to the needs of the area as a whole. Sufficient scope should be allowed for projects that would bring together different types of actors and cover different sectors, as well as for projects that require imagination and the willingness to innovate and experiment. The involvement of young people and women, as well as the more vulnerable groups (e.g. long-term unemployed) should be analysed here.

Answers to Key Question (ii) are to be found throughout the application, although the evaluator should primarily look for them in the chapters describing the general and specific objectives, links between the SWOT and objectives and measures, as well as in the section dealing with the selection criteria of projects.

Key Question (iii), related to the implementation capacity of the partnership, is often dealt with separately from the strategy analysis. However, no strategy is complete without an indication of how it should be carried out, and the evaluators should compare the objectives and activities proposed with the available information about actors who would be involved and their ability and motivation to carry out the tasks allocated to them. The composition of the partnership (does it involve all the important stakeholders? all the relevant sectors?) and the degree to which it can be considered “representative” for the given area should also be analysed at this point.

Very often, “implementation capacity” is understood narrowly to mean that the bigger (in terms of budget and/or staff employed) and more experienced the organisation, the more capacity it has for implementing the strategy. In such a simplified approach it is often forgotten that local development requires, above all, a good understanding of the local context and high level of personal commitment, and these do not always go together with the size or age of the organisation. In reading the strategy one should look i.a. for information about key people who were involved in its development and are likely to take an interest in its implementation. Much of the FLAG's capacity to implement the strategy depends on its ability to identify and maintain sustainable relationship with such people (irrespective of their organisational affiliation), and it is their qualifications and motivation that should be analysed in the first place. It is also good to keep in mind that motivation also includes availability – leadership skills, especially in remote rural areas, are often scarce and local leaders tend to have many commitments, so they may simply be too busy to really take part in the FLAG activities.

Sometimes the organisations and institutions officially listed as “partners” do not in reality participate in the development of the strategy and have no intention to contribute to its implementation; on other occasions they are practically excluded from the process by more dominant partners. The evaluator should keep in mind that in such a situation it might not be possible to achieve the strategic objectives, since one or more of the key partners might take the attitude of “passive resistance” (or even “active opposition”) to actions undertaken by the FLAG.

In answering Key Question (iii) the evaluator should pay particular attention to chapters dealing with the description of the partnership, activities of the FLAG in strategy implementation (especially division of tasks between partners) and the section on how the strategy was prepared and consulted on. However, it is important to see whether the partners are also mentioned in other chapters of the strategy, which would indicate their involvement throughout the process of its development.

HOW TO READ A STRATEGY – SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

In addition to answering the above mentioned Key Questions, many evaluators will find that there are other elements of the application that may help to judge whether the strategy has a chance to be implemented effectively and really contribute to sustainable local development or not. For instance, the following supplementary questions could be asked:

Is it participatory?

If the process of preparing the strategy was not really participatory, there is little chance that the local community will be mobilised to implement it. In this case, there might not be enough interest to submit projects, or the projects are not likely to be innovative and cross-sectoral. The evaluator should be able to distinguish whether the strategy was based on a genuine discussion with the community or was developed by a small group of local leaders or experts. Some truly participatory strategies are distinguished by the use of the pronoun “we” (“We consider this a major problem”, or “We would like to encourage more tourism” etc.). The excessive use of very technical language is often a sign of limited community involvement, as such an involvement would require the complex technical concepts to be explained in simple terms.

Is there “heart” in it (is it written with conviction)?

As has been said before, successful local development requires personal commitment. If the strategy is to succeed, there must be a sufficient group of people who are genuinely convinced that it is necessary to undertake the actions envisaged in the strategy, and that these actions will be beneficial for the area. The strategy should be built around a common “vision” for the future and should serve as a source of inspiration, and not merely a technical description of work to be done. Thus, the language of the application should not be too technocratic and entirely “neutral”. The best strategies are written with passion.

Does it show that attention has been paid to practicalities?

In the limited time available to develop a strategy too much attention is sometimes paid to the general vision and there is often little or no time to discuss how things will be done in practice. The point is not to provide too much detail – enough scope should be left for project beneficiaries. However, the strategy should not consist only of general ideas; if it mentions some practical issues (e.g. not only “we will organise a village festival”, but also “we have just the right space at the western end of the village...; we can host 150 tourists...” etc.) it means that (a) at least some of the actions envisaged in the strategy have been thoroughly thought through and reached the stage of maturity, and (b) some people with practical minds (as well as people with vision) have taken part in the development of the strategy.

Is it well-written, clear, and concise?

Too often the local actors forget that the strategy should contain only the most relevant information and cannot resist the temptation to include all the material they have accumulated in the course of strategy preparation in their application. The ability to select what is really important, and the ability to express the ideas in simple, clear language is not only courtesy to the reader, but also an indicator of valuable skills present in the local community.

The above questions (as well as many similar ones) should be seen as supplementary to the Key Questions mentioned above. They are not meant to establish clear-cut categories or to distinguish between “good” and “bad” applications, but they can help the evaluator to better understand the local capacity and thus formulate his/her recommendations accordingly.