

*How great expectations in Brussels are dashed in Apeldoorn¹;
Or, why it is amazing that EU programs work at all*

A paper on the Europeanization of Dutch executive agencies
Motto: “high priority for low politics”

Work in progress

Comments are invited!

Abstract:

The research on Europeanization shows little interest in the contribution national agencies make in EU implementation. This study wants to fill in this gap. The driving question behind this study is the way Dutch agencies anticipate to Europeanization, in other words, what is their response strategy? The study will focus on executive agencies. This paper is about the study to be conducted and describes the motivation, the core questions, the theoretical framework and the research design. The study will follow a bottom-up approach of Europeanization, with a case study method.

¹ After the well known title of Wildavsky on the implementation of federal policies. “Apeldoorn” hosts a large department of the Dutch tax agency, but stands as a metaphore for every Dutch city where a agency is settled. It could also have been Zoetermeer, Groningen, Leeuwarden or Almelo.

1. Introduction

Recent years Dutch researchers show a growing interest in aspects of implementation of EU policies. We see:

- The ongoing debate on the matter of the implementation deficit, mainly focussing on transposition (Mastenbroek, 2007; Haverland, Romeijn, 2006);
- Studies on enforcement, mainly focussing on the issue of compliancy to EU legislation (Versluis, 2003);
- A growing interest in EU institutions that play a central role in implementation, such as the comitology (Brandsma, 2010) and the EU agencies (Groenleer, 2009).

In our study we want to further widen the scope of the implementation debate. What is missing in our view, is an understanding of the “last link” in the chain of EU implementation: the domestic level of the actually delivery of EU policies. At this level we find different kind of actors: regional and local government, private sector, civil society, and national agencies.

The importance of the domestic level of EU implementation has been stressed in several official reports to the government (Programma Andere Overheid, 2005; Raad van State, 2005), in the aftermath of the ‘No’ in the Referendum on the European Constitution. Also some “incidents” with implementation were analyzed, showing the importance of participation of the domestic implementation level in the EU policy making and delivery. Famous examples are the Environmental Directives (“fijnstof”)(Rood et al, 2005) and the Habitat Directive (“korenwolf”) (Van Keulen, 2007).

In this study we focus at a specific kind of actors at the domestic implementation level, namely national executive agencies in the Netherlands. These are organisations like the tax agency, the cadastre or the vehicle and license authority. This focus is for a number of reasons:

- First, these organisations form most of the “face” of government to citizens and businesses. They are an crucial interface between (EU and national) government and society, and in doing so, also play an important role in the legitimacy of the EU. To speak with Martens (2005): “agencies matter!”
- Second, these organisations make up for a large portion of the national budget. High investments are done in management, human resources and IT-systems. This makes national agencies vulnerable to new EU regulations, because of possible adjustments they have to make in their processes and systems.
- Third, these agencies are front-runners when it comes to the innovative use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The innovation at this lower administrative level of policy delivery could also positively influence the way policies are made at a higher EU level of policy making, or the policy delivery in other member states.
- Fourth, with the deepening of the EU agenda, high level policy goals touch at low level administrative practice. Especially the success of the EU single market policy depends more and more on interoperability between administrative systems of member states. This is where national agencies and their processes and systems come into the picture.

The driving question behind our study is the way these Dutch agencies anticipate to Europeanization, in other words, what is their response strategy?

There is quite some literature on the EU impact at the domestic level. In fact the whole discourse about Europeanization is focussing on this aspect. Surprisingly the attention for agencies is very limited.

We would expect quite some research on this issue in countries with a decentralized administrative structure with influential agencies. In fact, the only studies we found were mostly on the situation in the Nordic countries. Martens conducted a study on national regulatory agencies (2005) and an informal network between the European Commission and national environmental agencies of various member states (2005). Also a study of Norgard (2005) addressed the EU dimension of the Danish IT and telecom Agency. Others we found were Barbieri (2004) with an assessment of the Italian Antitrust Authority and Environment Agency. Also the interesting studies of Bulmer and Burch on the UK, with a considerable “quango-state”, don’t mention the agencies.

The structure of this paper is as follows:

- In paragraph 2 we will introduce the Dutch agencies and their national and EU context;
- In paragraph 3 we formulate our research questions;
- In paragraph 4 we present our theoretical framework;
- In paragraph 5 we briefly comment on our research design and method;
- In paragraph 6 we introduce results and formulate some first conclusions and discussion.

2. Dutch executive agencies

Executive agencies in the Dutch public sector have a long tradition. Agencies like the tax agency and the cadastre date back to the early 1800’s. After the second world war many more agencies were set up with the growth of the modern welfare state. A peak showed in the ’80 and ’90 of the last century, where the Dutch government, as many other western European governments, implemented administrative reforms. This led to a further national agencification, inspired by ideas of New Public Management, promising more cost-efficient administration (RMO, 2005).

Nowadays the administrative landscape shows several hundreds of semi-autonomous institutions, with varying formal-legal status. The most important differentiation can be made between²:

- Internally decentralized institutions (*agentschappen en diensten*) and
- externally decentralized institutions (*ZBO’s or zelfstandige bestuursorganen*).

² It takes too far for this paper to distinguish between RWT (rechtspersonen met een wettelijke taak) en ZBO. “Schools” for example are RWT and not ZBO. There are also RWT who are ZBO.

We reserve the name agencies for these kind of institutions, more or less synonym with “quango” (quasi autonomous non governmental organisation) or “ndpd” (non-departmental public bodies).

In this study we are interested in executive agencies. The most distinctive features of these institutions are the following:

- They operate under ministerial jurisdiction, but their operations often are not limited to one ministry;
- Their roles and objectives are stated by law;
- They enjoy managerial as well as financial autonomy, within the constraints of a prefixed budget;
- For some their budget varies with the income they generate with (information) services they deliver;
- They are obliged to report periodically to their department;
- They have a high service profile, due to the fact that their customers are mainly citizens and businesses;
- Their processes are characterized by high volume decisions on individual cases (permits, taxes, grants etc.);
- Their systems are all very intense on information and ICT;
- They operate more and more in networks with other agencies, because of their informational interdependency.

The position of the agencies is not without discussion within the Dutch administration. Political focus is on matters as accountability and transparency. Also governance is a continuing source for discussion, especially when it comes to the ministerial responsibility (and the question if the board member of an agency may earn a higher salary than the prime minister ...).

When it comes to EU matters, it is obvious that the further widening and deepening of the EU agenda affects the core of the work of agencies. From the perspective of the agencies this influence is threefold:

First they are affected in their **vertical specialized domain of operation**. EU policies on taxes, environment, transport, justice etc. have impact on specific systems and procedures performed by national agencies. They have to implement a pan-European system, use different standards for information systems, adjust their procedures, cooperate with new partners, train their own staff etc.

Examples:

Het Centraal en Justitieel Incassobureau (CJIB) is involved in the implementation of the Framework Decision 2005/214/JHA on the application of the principle of mutual recognition to financial penalties. This indicates CJIB has to start an information exchange with surrounding countries to collect fines for traffic speeders.

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De *Rijksdienst voor het Wegverkeer (RDW)* is also involved in Framework decision on mutual recognition to financial penalties. There are plans to connect all the national license registers. The RDW is also involved in a pan-European network for tracing stolen cars (Eucaris) and the implementation of the EU drivers license.

The *Informatie Beheer Groep (IBG)* hosts “Europass”, being a broker service for cv’s for students and employees.

The *UWV (uitkeringsinstantie werknemersverzekeringen)*, the *SVB (sociale verzekeringsbank)* and *CvZ (college voor zorgverzekeringen)* are involved in the implementation of the coordination of the social security scheme introduced by EC regulation no 1408/71 (to be replaced by EC regulation no 883/2004).

The Dutch Tax Agency is involved in the EU program e-Customs, a pan-European system aiming at harmonising and modernising the procedures for import and export for businesses in all the member states.

Second, there are **vertical EU policies having a horizontal effect** on the agencies. Some vertical sector specific programs have a general impact on the way agencies operate. A good example is the EU Services Directive, that introduced a new practice on electronic service delivery from government to businesses. Another example is the EU directive INSPIRE: an European infrastructure for spatial information. This directive aims at harmonizing and standardizing geodata of national agencies and creating an infrastructure for access and exchange of geodata cross border.

Example:

The EU Services Directive (2006/123/EC) was agreed upon after intense political debate. The directive, also called the “Bolkenstein directive”, after the Commissioner that initiated the directive, aimed at taking away all the administrative government barriers private companies, especially SME’s, had to go through in the case of cross border service delivery. There were two main political topics for discussion:

- 1) the principle of the “country of origin” (for working conditions), leading to fear for the “polish plumber”;
- 2) exclusions of certain sectors (e.g. health, transport, gambling).

During the implementation Member States discovered that a major effort was needed:

- All existing regulations on SME’s had to be screened on discriminatory procedures for other European SME’s;
- They had to set up national electronic Single Points of Contact for SME’s;
- The principle of “lex silencio positivo” was introduced, meaning that procedures had to be within a strict time period.

In the Netherlands the ministries of Economic Affairs, the Interior and Justice were responsible for the implementation. The Directive was transposed in de *Dienstenwet* (2009). No gold plating had taken place, except for a more strict regime on the lex silencio positivo and an expansion of the targetgroup for the national single point of

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contact: also Dutch SME's were welcome. The actual adjustments to implement the Service Directive have been made by local and regional governments, and agencies, that are dealing with SME's. Besides the direct implications of the Directive, there are also indirect implications. In fact the Directive sets the stage for all service-oriented processes of national government institutions and agencies..

Third, they are affected by **horizontal EU policies**. EU programs such as "better regulation" or the "digital agenda" have a general effect on the operations of the agencies, in terms of innovation, reduction of administrative burden, and service delivery.

Example

The Digital Agenda and its predecessors (eEurope 2002, eEurope 2005, i2010) focus on stimulating the European Information Society. Within these programs the public sector gets separate attention: Actionplans on eGovernment define more and more the ICT infrastructure of the European Public Administrations. This is not only done by soft regulation (best-practices, benchmarking, eGovernment Awards), but also by large scale pilots (e.g. on electronic identities, on eprocurement, on ehealth) that lay the fundament for further national implementation.

Origin EU policy	EU impact on agency	Example
Vertical	Vertical	eCustoms, eJustice, eHealth
Vertical	Horizontal	Services directive, INSPIRE
Horizontal	Horizontal	Digital Agenda, Better Regulation

When it comes to the national EU governance of the agencies, the classic principal-agent model is still in place. In black and white: most of the departments do the negotiations in Brussels by themselves and after decisions are reached, agencies get orders what to implement. Agencies are hardly involved in the national EU coordination model. For example, they do not participate in the BNC-committee, where only departments, regional and local government are represented. They also have almost no relation with the units International/Europe of the departments, who mostly focus on the high politics and not the implementation.

This way of working has justifiable reasons: 1) the ministries are the formal contacts for Brussels, not any agency, 2) during the phase of policy making it is not always clear what consequences will be for the implementation, 3) the complex fragmented model of the Dutch administration makes it not easy to consult agencies, especially not with strict EU timeframes.

To summarize this paragraph:

- Executive agencies play an important role in policy implementation;
- They are affected by vertical and horizontal EU policies;
- They have a meagre role in the national EU coordination model.

3. Core questions

We formulate four core questions for this study.

What is the actual impact of the EU on domestic agencies?

It is relevant to see by what kind of EU policies domestic agencies are affected. We have to be careful not to over-emphasize and distinguish EU impact from other impact, such as globalization or transitions at a national level ((Vink, Graziano, 2006). With this in mind, we ask ourselves what is the actual impact of EU policies on the agencies? Does it take considerable or only fractional efforts to implement EU policies? Which kind of operation is affected?

Also, what is the difference in impact between horizontal policies (e.d. the Digital Agenda) and vertical policies, especially in relationship with the fact that mostly agencies are not directly linked to the principal department responsible for the horizontal policy.

What is “new” about this impact, in other words, what is the difference between impact by EU and national regulations? In the national context the issue of executability of regulations has been on the agenda for quite some time. Nowadays several procedures are in place for assessment of executability of regulations (e.g. impact assessments for new regulations in general, Gateway reviews for large ICT projects). How does this work with new EU policies, where some (directives) are transposed in national law, but others (regulations) are directly imposed on national level or come into practice in a different way (comitology, pilots etc.)?

What is the EU playing field for the agencies?

We are curious how the playing field looks like for agencies, formally and in practice. Agencies are formally bound to their principal department for EU matters. What is their formal legal status in respect to the EU? What kind of discretion do they have?

Also on the EU level, what is formally stated about the participation of agencies when it comes to EU policy making and implementation? How is the “top-down” view and appreciation of domestic agencies?

It is also interesting to see how agencies cooperate cross border and participate in European networks with other (EU) agencies, and how these networks relate to the way domestic agencies deal with EU impact.

What challenges do agencies experience in this EU playing field?

By the word 'challenges' we mean chances and threats that agencies experience from Europeanization. We want to distinguish two ways of looking at challenges (Borzel, Princen)

First, the challenges in implementing EU regulations (taking the EU or downloading the EU)? How do agencies know what is relevant for them at EU level? Who informs them? How are they consulted by the ministries? How do ministries take the interests of agencies into account? How do agencies participate in EU impact assessments etc?

Second, the challenges in uploading best-practices to the EU (shaping the EU)? What space is given to agencies to upload their own best-practices? How is this perceived at the EU level? What kind of interplay with the principal is necessary?

What is the strategic response of agencies to Europeanization?

In this study we mean by "strategic" 1) the way in which agencies adjust their own organizations to external changes but also 2) the way in which they succeed in adjusting their (direct) environment to these changes.

On the level of the organisation we ask ourselves what kind of preconditions are necessary to operate successfully in the European arena? What kind of adjustments are taken at the level of the organisation to fulfil these preconditions (e.g. training, set up of EU information functions).

On the level of the (direct) environment of the agencies, we are interested in adjustments:

- At the national level (e.g. national EU coordination model, relationship with the principal department, networks)?
- At the EU level (e.g. more participation in expert groups, stakeholder meeting, uploading best-practices, networks)?

4. Theoretical framework

In this study we are interested in the response of domestic agencies to EU impact. Several theories have been designed around the concept of the Europeanization of national administration (Knill, 2001; Cowles, Caporaso, Risse, 2001; Falkner, Treib, et al, 2005). These theories all take more or less a top down approach according to a standard model, (...) "based on a chain where EU pressure mediated by intervening variables, leads to reactions and change at the domestic level, including resistance and inertial responses. Pressure is clarified in terms of "goodness of fit", which is not just the fit or lack of between EU and domestic policies, but covers structural-institutional fits as well" (...) (Radaelli, Pasquier, 2005).

This study we want to start at the end of the chain: the agencies that deliver the needed results of the EU policies. What drives them to participate (or not) in the EU arena? What kind of challenges do they experience? What is the response strategy? With this point of view we take a more bottom up approach.

The before cited Radaelli and Pasquier (2005) advocate this approach: (...) “The bottom-up approach follows different tracks (than the standard model as described above). Instead of starting from the EU policy/politics as independent variable and tracking down the consequences for domestic institutions, policies and politics, it starts and finishes at the level of domestic actors. The idea is to start from actors, problems, resources, policy style, and discourses at the domestic level (that is, the system of interaction at the domestic level)” (...)

With “Europeanization” we refer, amongst many other definitions, to the definition of Radaelli (2003): (...) processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies (...).

The attraction of this definition for our study is twofold:

- It stresses the notion of a dynamic and encompassing process of influencing between the supranational EU-level and the domestic level. This process not only takes place by “hard” system formal procedures and structures, but also along the route of “soft” system identities, discourse, styles etc.
- It is not restricted to only EU laws or decisions, but also open for other modes of governance, such as the open method of coordination. It is not only about vertical policy making, where Brussels imposes policies onto the member states, but also about more horizontal processes where policies are based on the cooperation among member states and cross national policy transfer.

We also like to add three comments to this definition:

- First, we see ‘incorporation in the logic of the domestic level’ not as a pure “downloading” activity, but as an activity that also leaves room for “uploading” (Yesilkagit and Princen, 2010), and in that way influencing and/or changing politics and procedures at the EU level.
- Second, with the term ‘domestic’ we like to refer to both national and subnational systems and processes of policy making and policy delivery. These levels differ in the way they respond and adapt to the impact of the EU, due to their differences in objectives, positions, systems, beliefs and stakeholders.
- Third, Europeanization involves policies, politics and polities at the EU level who have an effect on policies, politics and polities at the domestic level. We like to distinguish between “horizontal” and “vertical” Europeanization, from the perspective of subnational actors and the EU impact on their processes and systems.

If we picture national agencies in this definition of Europeanization, we can draw the following conceptual model:

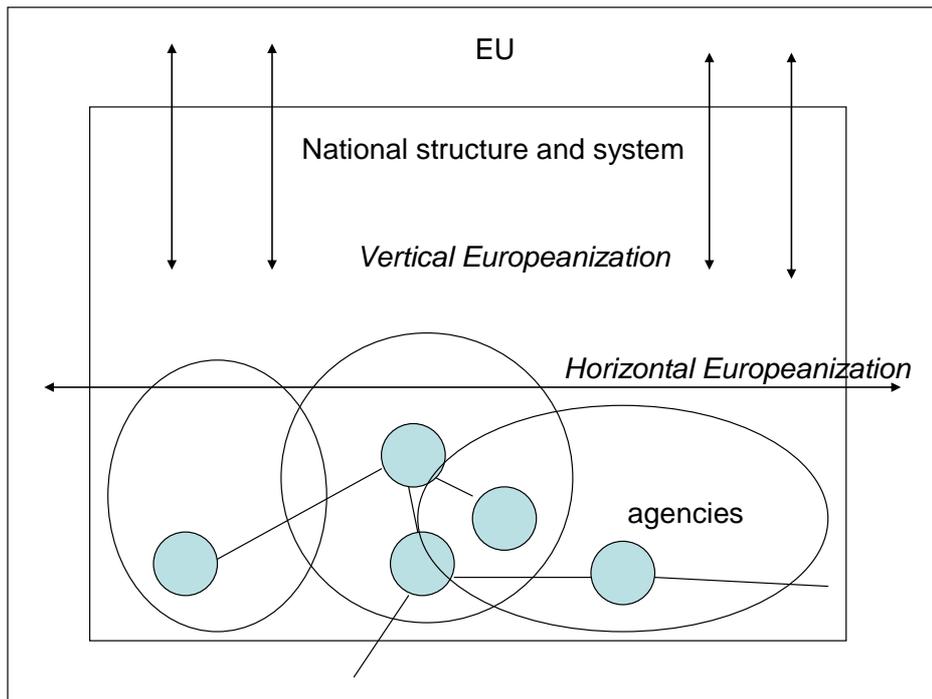


Figure 1: conceptual model Europeanization of domestic agencies

To answer our questions, several theoretical concepts are useful.

First of all, the **intergovernmental perspective**. Nation states are considered to be the dominant actors in the process of European policy process. Central gatekeepers in this process are the national departments. Subnational actors have to go through the national government to get their interests represented at the EU level. In this context the principal-agent model can be relevant for further exploration of the relationship between agencies and their departments. Especially the tension caused by 1) the information asymmetry between principal and agent and 2) the incongruence of goals between principal and agent offers a useful framework.

Second, **the multi level governance perspective**. The notion that EU decision making and implementation takes place within different levels of government (supranational, national, subnational) and with all kind of different actors (public, private, ngo's etc.) is important for our standpoint. Subnational actors can bypass national governments as gatekeepers, to participate directly in the EU arena. This also opens opportunities to participate in transnational networks. In our opinion network-models are relevant to describe and explain this multi level governance perspective. Core in the network-approach are notions like interdependency, cooperation and trust. With the network-approach we can study the various EU related settings the agencies operate in, at the national and the European level.

Third, the **organizational perspective**. Behaviour of actors is influenced by the organizational structure. For subnational actors not only the national administrative structure is relevant but also the institutional architecture at EU level.

On the other hand, structures are not everlasting entities. They can be influenced and changed. The concept of “strategy-follows-structure” versus “structure-follows-strategy” (Chandler, 1962) offers a framework to study the organizational behaviour of subnational actors, at the level of their own organization, at the national level (of the EU coordination model) and at the EU level.

<i>Perspective</i>	Intergovernmentalism	Multi level governance	Organizational
<i>Models</i>	Principal agent	Networks	Strategy follows structure/ Structure follows strategy

Figure 2. Theoretical perspectives and models

Our general assumption is that agencies from their professional autonomous position, will face serious challenges to participate in the implementation of EU policies. Existing systems and procedures at the EU and the national level will be put under pressure, to facilitate the input of the agencies. Also at the level of their own organizations, adjustments will be necessary.

We challenge the general belief in the principal agent model for *single coordination* between department and agencies. We expect the strategies and operations of agencies to be more depended on a *multi-coordination* model, due to the often wide scope of EU policies. This demands a coordination model with multiple departments and multiple agencies trying to cooperate to implement EU policies.

We also challenge the standard model, or the top-down model (Beichelt, 2008), that assumes that EU impact can lead to pressures on national systems and structures, and as a consequence to adjustments and adaptation on the *domestic* level. We expect not only adaptation and adjustments on the domestic level, but also pressure to adjustments and adaptation on the EU level.

5. Research design and method

In this study we use a bottom-up approach for Europeanization of national agencies. The basic model for this approach is as follows:

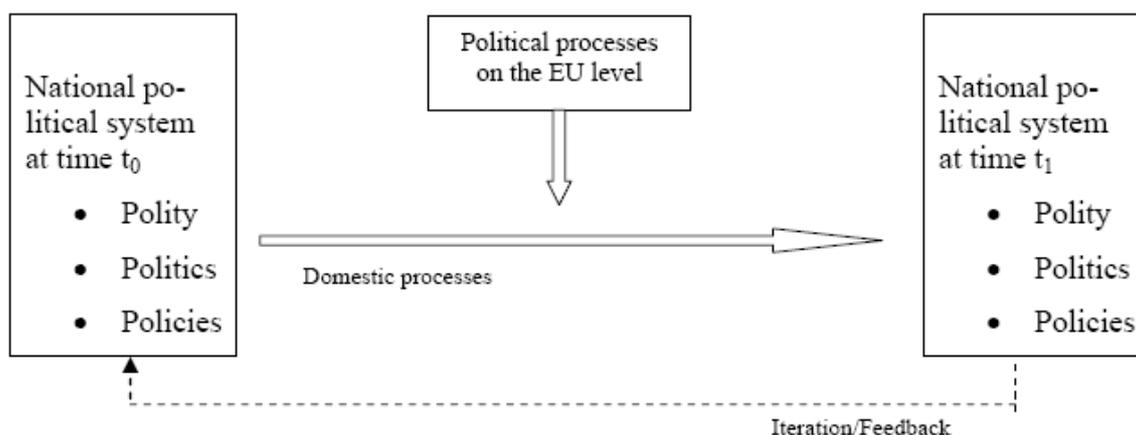


Figure 3: model bottom-up approach (Source: Beichelt, 2008)

In this model Europeanization is considered to be the cause of domestic transformation under the status of one variable amongst many. However, it is hard to completely single out the impact of the EU on domestic processes, where other variables, like globalization or regionalisation are also active.

Despite this notion, this model suits our study. We will conduct case studies, because they offers us qualitative insights of the “where abouts” of the agencies. These case studies deepen the general insights we already collected by a pre-study (Mulder, 2006), with open interviews with middle and upper-middle staff. This gave us a first insight in the issues at play.

We define a “case” as the situation of an agency, having to deal with EU impact. The cases will describe the response at the level of the own organization, the national level and the EU level (polities and politics).

Further, we will vary among the way of EU impact (policies):

- 1) vertical-vertical EU policies: EU policies having a mainly vertical sectoral effect on agencies;
- 2) Vertical-horizontal EU policies: vertical EU policies having an important horizontal effect on agencies;
- 3) Horizontal EU policies, horizontal EU policies having a horizontal effect on agencies.

We will select 6 cases in total.

Elements Case study	
<i>Politics and polities</i>	<i>Policies</i>
Own organisation	Vertical-vertical
National level	Vertical-horizontal
EU level	Horizontal

Figure 4. case study method

The cases will be conducted with a combination of methods:

- Open interviews, with staff of the agencies;
- Analysis of discussions and meetings with agencies;
- A survey on figures and facts of the Europeanization of the agencies;
- Deskresearch on websites and documents;
- Expertmeetings on the validation of outcomes.

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