



Deliverable 3.5. Development of Regional Work Plans – Main aspects, approach and strategies for their implementation

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Genesis of Regional Work Plan (from 2017 to 2022)

Legal basis

The first reference to Regional Work Plan (RWP) appears in Article 9 of the Regulation EU 2017/1004¹. This article specifies that *Member States shall coordinate their data collection activities with other Member States in the same marine region and shall make every effort to coordinate their actions with third countries having sovereignty or jurisdiction over waters in the same marine region* (article 1). The following articles refer to the setting of Regional Coordination Groups (RCG) and the RWP comes in paragraph 8: *Regional coordination groups may prepare draft regional work plans, which shall be compatible with this Regulation and with the multiannual Union programme. Those draft regional work plans may include procedures, methods, quality assurance and quality control for collecting and processing data [...], regionally coordinated sampling strategies and conditions for delivery of data in regional databases. They may also contain cost-sharing arrangements for participation in research surveys at sea.* Then, in paragraph 10, it is specified that *a regional work plan shall be considered to replace or supplement the relevant parts of the national work plans of each of the Member States concerned.*

Stemming from the Regulation (EU 2017/1004) as a brand-new concept, Regional Work Plans took time to take shape and contents.

fishPi2 first reflexions

As soon as 2017, the project FishPi² was tasked in its Work Package 1 to make suggestions on the desired aspects of the new Regional Coordination Groups (RCG) replacing the Regional Coordination Meetings (RCM). The objectives identified included the development and establishment of regional workplans and regional sampling plans, end-user driven data collection and transparent quality assurance and assessment of collected data. In FishPi², there was then the first description of Regional Sampling Plans presented as building blocks of Regional Work Plans.

RCG NANS&EA and Baltic initiatives

In 2018, the RCG NA, NSEA and Baltic created a pan-regional intersessional sub-group on the development of Regional Work Plan (ISSG/RWP). The mandate given to the ISSG was as follows:

1. To draft a regional work plan with limited elements covering the aspects of procedures, methods, quality assurance and quality control for collecting and processing of data and regionally coordinated sampling strategies.
2. To develop the format and content for proposed submission for the following work plan elements as identified during the RCGNA 2018 annual meeting and including the following:

Discussions and clarifications on RWP can be found in subsequent RCG (2019, 2020, 2021) and it is important to note that the ISSG/RWP developed the first RWP concept with the proposed non-binding RWP 2021 launched in 2020 by the RCG NANS&EA and Baltic.

DG-MARE Call for proposals

In 2020, the EU Commission released a call for proposals (MARE/2020/08) on strengthening regional cooperation in the field of data collection. The ISSG/RWP took the lead in composing a large consortium to propose the Fishn'Co project, and the Mediterranean and Black Sea experts proposed the alter ego

¹ REGULATION (EU) 2017/1004 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 17 May 2017 on the establishment of a Union framework for the collection, management and use of data in the fisheries sector and support for scientific advice regarding the common fisheries policy and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 199/2008 (recast)

STREAMLINE project. The two projects encompassed the full range of activities in the RCGs, except for RCG Long Distance Fisheries which declined participation since they felt there was not enough collaborative initiatives to be part of a RWP at that time.

Fishn’Co initial work

The project Fishn’Co initiated a second RWP test run (RWP NANSEA and RWP Baltic test run 2022) as soon as the first months of the project. This was intended to take care of the STECF recommendations on the first RWP test run proposed by RCG in 2020 and seek feedback from National Correspondents for the preparation of the further project proposals. This second test run RWP, based on the exact NWP format which was just approved for the period 2022-2027, received a better appreciation than the first one, especially the table I.2 on regional coordination developed by the ISSG on National Correspondents.

STECF feedbacks

STECF point of view and evaluation of RWP was along since 2018 with the first references to RWP being made in EWG_18-18 and preparing the ground for further evaluation of RWP (EWG_19-18). Then in their 2020 session, STECF anticipated the links to RWP in the NWP/AR template for the period starting in 2022 (EWG_20-18). The main feedback came in 2021 and 2022 when STECF evaluated the two consecutive non-binding RWP for 2021 and 2022 proposed by RCG NANS&EA and Baltic (EWG_20-18 and EWG_21-17). In its last RWP evaluation (EWG_21-17), STECF suggested that it was time for the RCGs, Fishn’Co and Streamline to focus on official RWPs 2025-2027 which would need to be approved by 31st December 2023. The objective of such an anticipation of deadline was to have RWP ready when MS will take care of their NWP for the period 2025-2027, that is during spring and summer 2024.

Preparing the ground for an official RWP 2025-2027

Consultation to National Correspondents

The consultation to all EU National correspondents (EU/NC) was intended to prepare the discussions during the RCG 2022 technical meetings regarding the development of Regional Work Plans (RWP), based on RCG/ISSGs regular work and Fishn’Co contribution to adapt all coordination initiatives in a RWP format. The aim of the consultation was also to inform EU/NCs on the work progress of the project as well as asking for feedback on the overall setup of RWP and the suggested decision-making process for future RWP.

The consultation was successful with 24 MS out of 26, responding with comments and feedback on 30 questions on the following topics

1. General principles
2. Decision making process
3. RWP contents with specific focus on PETS, recreational and small-scale fisheries, on stomach sampling and large pelagics and also on some generic tables
4. Monitoring the work progress

The main outputs of the consultation have been presented to the RCG NANS&EA, Baltic and Large Pelagics 2022 Technical Meetings. Responses for the Mediterranean & Black Sea countries have not been displayed during these presentations but forwarded to Streamline project for a dedicated consideration and presentation to RCG Med&BS Technical Meeting.

Here below (Figure 1) is a synthesis of the positiveness indexes from the consultation showing the differences in readiness to go further in early 2022. A first set of elements capturing more than 90% approval are (i) the general tables of the Work Plans templates (i.e. Table I.2 on International coordination, Table I.3 on Bi and

multilateral agreements, Table 2.1 on Stocks and Table 2.6 on Surveys at sea), (ii) the monitoring of work progress with the infographics developed by the Fishn’Co project (which is not part of a RWP content) and (iii) the decision-making process for developing a RWP Rules of Procedures. Some refinements on the RWP proposals were taken into consideration by Fishn’Co, but the elements presented in these sections were given to be solid bases for the future.

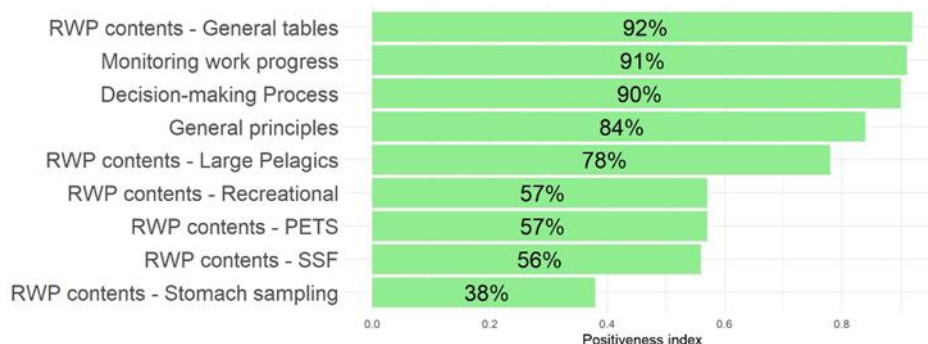


Figure I: Positiveness index per section of the report. Sections are reordered by decreasing order of their index.

The second set of questions receiving between 70 and 90% approval included the general principles for developing a RWP and elements for the Large Pelagics RWP. A third set was composed of the PETS, recreational and small-scale fisheries issues, which, moreover, included the greatest number of specific questions. Lastly, there is the stomach sampling with the lowest approval rate, but this low rating may also be explained by the fact that only one coordinated action is ongoing in the North-Sea and a few scattered initiatives elsewhere and some questions never meant to gather 100% of positive answers (e.g. are you willing to analyse stomach sampling from other countries, ...). All these feedbacks and suggestions were thoroughly evaluated by the relevant RCG/ISSG and Fishn’Co in view of the RWPs 2025-2027 proposals. The full report compiling all responses and feedbacks is available online².

² https://www.fisheries-rcg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-on-the-NCs-consultation_final.pdf

Strategy for implementation of the RWP 2025-2027

Timeline

During the March 2022 NC meeting, DG-MARE proposed three timeline options for the adoption of the first formal RWP which would cover the period 2025-2027. All options consider the proposal of the RWP 2025-2027 in the second quarter of 2023 and differ on the further adoption or not by the Commission services. Two options are proposed in case of formal adoption, one which would require evaluation by STECF in June 2023 for an adoption in January 2024, the other would pass through STECF evaluation in November 2023 for an adoption in May 2024. This was then discussed in RCG 2022 and the timeline without formal adoption (Fig. 2) by COM was adopted (RCG NANSEA and Baltic 2022, Decision #4). More details from Fishn'Co WP2 are given in the project deliverable describing the agreed decision-making structure³.

Regional Work Plans no adoption timeline (3)

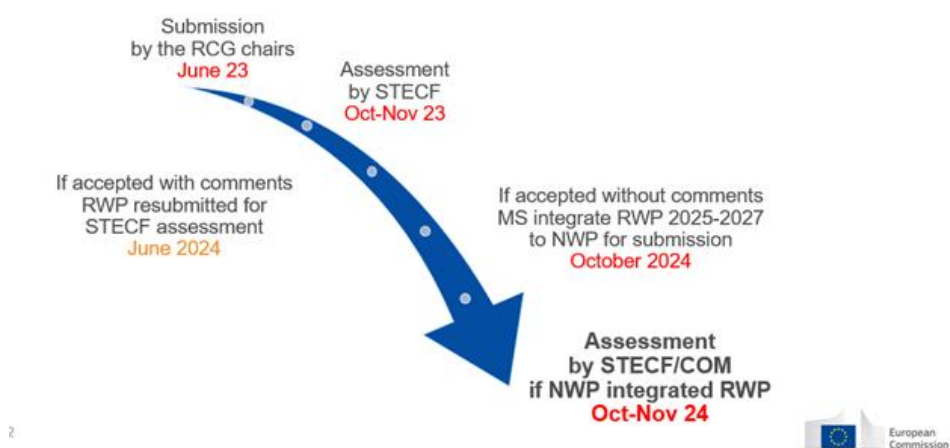


Figure 2: Timeline for RWP 2025-2027 without adoption by COM (slide from DG-MARE presentation to NC meeting)

Format

The format of the first non-binding RWPs for the year 2021 was a specific format meant to accommodate a multi-countries structure of tables, with, for example, all countries in column. Comments by STECF (STECF_EWG_18-16) were that some of those tables were overly complex and that they were based on the 2014-2021 template so not suitable for the future. In October 2021, the Fishn'Co proposal for non-binding RWP NANSEA and Baltic 2022 was based on the exact NWP template for the period 2022-2027 which was adopted that same year. STECF (STECF_EWG_21-17) thoroughly commented the proposal but not the format, implicitly indicating they had no issues with it.

The final proposal for RWP format is the exact same template as the NWP for the period 2022-2027 with some adaptations, mainly in the front page where the reference to Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/39 of 12 January 2022 linked to NWP was removed and references to national activities replaced with regional activities in the textbox headers and general comments. Textbox 1B had its scope modified, replacing other data collection activities by other data collection related activities, to accommodate the need to describe

³https://www.fisheries-rcg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/D3-Description-Decision-making-Structure_FISHN%20B4CO_final.pdf

agreed and coordinated tools and means such as RCG secretariat, RDBES, ISSG activities and any other specific regional developments.

Linkage between NWP and RWP

From the early discussions in RCGs and STECF to Fishn’Co, the RWP contents and mechanics of linkage to NWP lead to numerous expressions and literature. The last attempt to simplify these into principles by Fishn’Co was proposed in the consultation, which also led to feedbacks and comments, essentially pointing out ambiguities and unnecessary. The very basic principles which remain and was used for the proposed RWP 2025-2027 is as follows:

Principle 1: RWP should only contain elements agreed at RCGs and conversely any type of agreement reached in a RCG should find a place in a RWP.

In Fishn’Co it was commonly agreed that a RWP could be considered as a ‘book of agreements’ at a Regional level. This means that anyone searching agreements reached in a region would simply have to refer to a RWP.

Principle 2: RWP will contain information on a more general level so that there will not be a need to update it every year when some numbers in one MS NWP table will change. RWP may be amended during interim years, only if the amendments do not lead to modification and resubmission of all MS NWP in the region.

The question on the invariability of the RWP over a three-year period did not reach consensus. The utility of being able to modify the RWP on a yearly basis (addition/termination/modification of agreements) was understood but the need to resubmit NWPs to mirror the modifications was deemed a step too far.

Principle 3: MS full program is reflected in their NWP tables and textboxes.

Each MS is required to hold one set of tables and one text document for the NWP which contains information on both national and regional aspects (Fig. 3). The regional aspects should match those of each RWP relevant to the MS. MS should copy all relevant information from RWP tables directly into the corresponding table in the NWP to ensure consistency between NWPs and RWPs, and when reporting in the AR. It is possible that NWP text may summarise RWP text and provide a link to the RWP for more details. When the evaluation of a MS NWP takes place, only the national parts need to be evaluated as the RWP part will have already been evaluated and accepted.

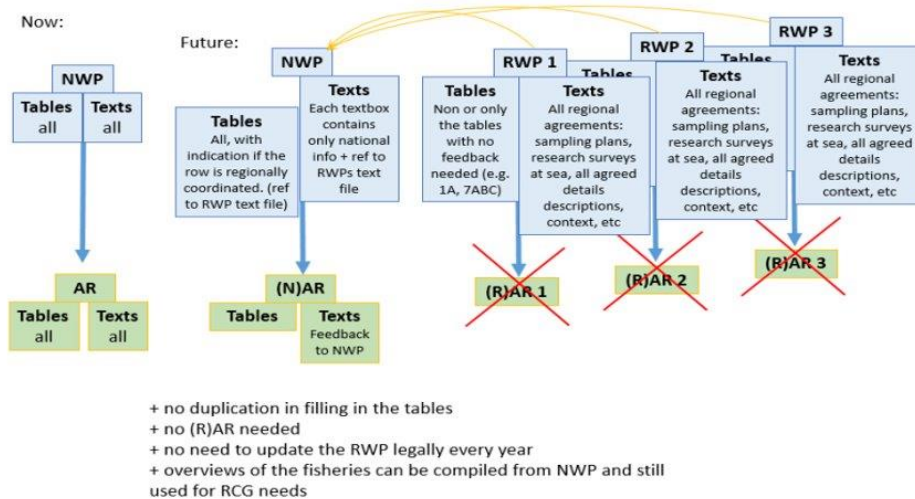


Figure 3: Schematic view of linkages between NWP and RWP.

Content

The prime concept and content of a RWP are the agreements that cover a large range of issues such as survey coordination and execution, but also regional sampling plans including data sharing mechanisms, data quality checks, sampling protocols, optimization of sampling designs, field work on data sampling, etc. A RWP should consist of a number of different building blocks and a number of (bi or multi-lateral) common approaches proposed by RCG and agreed at NC Decision Meeting.

The proposal by Fishn’Co was that a RWP should only contain elements agreed at RCG, with two specific text boxes giving insights on elements of coordination almost ready to be part of a future RWP (Textbox IA on case studies) and insights of tools and services of relevance for all MS to the region (Textbox IB).

It is to be noted that each ISSG is developing regional coordination, with agreed objectives and roadmaps. In the 2nd test run RWP for NANSEA and Baltic, all this information described in the infographics (see Fishn’Co WP4 for details) was also reported in relevant textboxes of the RWPs, which led to confusion and complexity. The feedbacks from the test runs were that only agreed coordination should be reported in a RWP (Principle #1). Fishn’Co proposed an exception to this rule, using Textbox IA (case studies) in order to inform on elements which are planned to be ready in the coming years. In Fishn’Co it was named “the RWP kitchen” and it was thought informative for all MS to be aware of the outstanding work.

Table 1.3 specifics

WP Table 1.3 lists bi and multilateral agreements. These agreements are signed arrangements between countries in a region to carry out sampling activities for one another (e.g. sampling foreign landings, otolith reading, maturity or stomach sampling analysis, ...). In previous NWPs, the signed agreements were attached as an annex of each involved MS NWP text document and listed with brief information in each of NWP table (ex Table 7C). Fishn’Co, in coordination with SECWEB, proposed to develop an agreement repository⁴ in the RCG website, where the signed arrangement would be hosted.

In the RWP it comes in Table 1.3 a line per involved country detailing briefly the arrangement (with the same wording) and a link to the RCG repository to get access to the signed document. The MS corresponding line in the RWP is to be copied into each of the NWP Table 1.3.

Table 2.1 specifics

WP Table 2.1 relates to listing the landings and quota shares of all species/stocks of the EU Delegated Decision (EU 2021/1167) Table 1. As soon as the test run RWP NANSEA and Baltic 2021, it was thought that a collaborative approach to fill in this table was far more relevant than letting each MS evaluate the percentage of their European catches and quota shares for a given reference period. An R script has been under development for years, with main involvement of the experts in ISSG on Catch and sampling overviews and help from DGMARE for providing key reference documents on quotas regulations. Fishn’Co WP3 contributed to improve the R script used, moved it to a collaborative development platform created specifically by ICES (rwp_tools⁵) and coded it as a R library with the objectives of easing the maintenance and use of the script in the future years. The work done in Fishn’Co could not be finished in time for the proposed RWP 2025-2027, but all efforts will be made in both ISSG/RWP and ISSG on Catches and Sampling Overviews to update the Table 2.1 for the RCG Technical Meetings 2023. The main principles guiding the filling of Table 2.1 is as follows:

- The priority source for National landings is the data uploaded in the RDB as a result of the RCG data calls, then EUROSTAT for completing the species/stocks not covered by the RCG database. MS are free to modify any values by National Statistics and justify in the comment section on the rationale for doing so

⁴ <https://www.fisheries-rcg.eu/repository/>

⁵ https://github.com/ices-tools-dev/eu_rwp_tool

- The information in support of the European quota share is the table provided by DG MARE mirroring the annual EU quota regulation figures.

Annex I.1 specifics

In a RWP, Annex I.1s are meant to inform on an agreed regional sampling design, thus meaning there needs to be a related regional sampling plan included in the RWP. In the Fishn'Co RWP 2025-2027 proposals, there is an Annex I.1 for

- RWP NANSEA : A regional sampling plan for stomach sampling in the North Sea (Textbox 4.3 and table 4.1);
- RWP Baltic : A regional sampling plan on the Baltic small pelagics fisheries (Textbox and Table 2.5);
- RWP Large Pelagics: A regional sampling plan for tuna sampling inshore for commercial fishing trips (Textbox 2.5) and for tuna sampling at sea for commercial fishing trips (programme Observe, Textbox 2.5).

Note that there is no Annex I.1 for any of the surveys at sea because, in the ICES areas, all coordinated survey designs are described in a survey manual⁶ and each MS may complement these with Annexes I.1 in their NWP.

Data quality specifics

Within WPI, the Biological Data Quality Thematic Focus Area aimed to develop common templates and tools that MS can use to complete Annex I.1 in a regional context to improve inter comparability of quality information. Objectives and tasks were defined to produce guidance for sampling design, sampling implementation, data checks, data storage, evaluating data accuracy and documenting methods of editing and imputing.

Regarding the precision analysis, an R implementation of an appropriate statistical algorithm for calculating the variance of point estimates from a multi-country, multi-stage, hierarchical commercial fisheries sampling program was developed. This work, done in collaboration with the ICES Group on Estimation with the RDBES data model (WGRDBES-EST) accepts input data in the ICES Regional Database & Estimation System (RDBES⁷) data format. In the near future, the data will be in the ICES Regional Database & Estimation System (RDBES) data format.

WGRDBES-EST are also developing a package (“RDBEScore”) to support design-based estimation using the RDBES – as part of this work functions to estimate totals/means using a generalised Horvitz-Thompson estimator and estimate variance using the Sen-Yates-Grundy formulation have been written. For the Fishn'Co project an R-Markdown script has been written to display the estimates and variance values in an interactive way and another for identifying the most important bias topic is to compare the sampling programme data to the commercial fishing effort and landings data to illustrate its coverage. The latest version of the scripts can be found on the ICES github⁸.

More details on all the Fishn'Co project developments related to Thematic Focus Areas are given in the project deliverable on the overview of the state of play, data gaps and needs⁹.

⁶ https://ices-library.figshare.com/collections/ICES_Survey_Protocols/6315609

⁷ <https://github.com/ices-tools-dev/RDBES>

⁸ <https://github.com/ices-tools-dev/RDBEScore/tree/main/FishNCo>.

⁹ https://www.fisheries-rcg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/D1-Overview-of-the-state-of-play_data-gaps-and-needs_final.pdf



Organisational aspects

Timeline and procedure for adoption of a RWP

One of the primary purposes of the RCGs is to prepare Regional Work Plans, which should include sampling designs/plans, procedures, methods, quality assurance and quality control for collecting and processing data, and conditions for the delivery of data.

In order to cover the objectives of

- a. developing and describing processes needed in discussions among MS and in the RCGs about sharing responsibilities, expected contributions, decision making and adoption processes, and how to implement and manage RWP in a harmonized, cooperative and transparent way;
- b. Consulting with the RCGs and National Correspondents on the processes needed for the implementation of the RWPs including processes for discussions and decision making.

The following steps were proposed by Fishn'Co (see details in the project deliverable describing the agreed decision-making structure):

1. Mandate for drafting the RWPs – RCG chairs to send to all NCs an invitation for assigning experts to take part in the drafting of RWP;
2. Assigning experts to ISSG/RWP - NCs are assigning experts with a strong commitment from the countries, for drafting the relevant parts of the RWP in the ISSG/RWP;
3. Drafting of the RWP – ISSG/RWP is mandated to develop RWPs (first one in 2023 based on Fishn'Co outputs);
4. Consulting with NCs and presenting to RCG – Once the RWPs have been finalised by ISSG/RWP, they are sent to MS/NCs for feedback and comments in order to present the most updated version of RWPs to RCG Technical Meetings with deadline within one month after sending;
5. Final draft of RWP – The ISSG/RWP takes care of RCG Technical Meeting comments to finalise the RWP in preparation of the NC Decision Meeting;
6. Decision Making Meeting – Formal agreement on the draft RWPs for sending to the EU Commission;
7. Follow-up on RWPs – During the STECF evaluation meeting, ISSG/RWP experts and NCs should be available to participate to the real-time exchange (a.k.a. ping pong) to answer any pending question or issues. If more serious considerations (not able to be resolved during the STECF meeting session) are to be taken into consideration, the ISSG/RWP is given the task to prepare a new version to be approved by all NCs for evaluation by STECF in its next spring session;
8. Agreement of the RWP – The RWP is agreed by the EU Commission after the positive evaluation by STECF.

Revised RoP that accommodates for development and adoption of RWP

One of the objectives of Fishn'Co was to have a proposal for one version of the Rules of Procedure (RoP) for all RCGs with the focus on the decision-making process being similar for all regions and supra regions. Once the processes of discussions and decision making for adoption of a RWP were defined and described, the RoP of the RCGs were further discussed and analysed in order to be revised and adapted according to the decision-making structure for the adoption of RWPs. Within Fishn'Co, a comparison of the RoPs of all RCGs was carried out. In addition, an exercise, compiling Baltic and NANSEA RoP to check what is aligned and what is not was conducted.

In order to reach the Fishn'Co objectives, a proposal for revision of the present RoPs, by identifying possible burdens for the decision-making processes and by proposing solutions was provided as a combined RoP for

RCGs for Baltic and NANSEA. The combined version was agreed upon during the RCG Baltic and NANSEA decision meeting - Decision 9 of the decision meeting 2021 Report.

The final version of RoP for RCGs for Baltic and NANSEA are available online¹⁰ and all other RCGs should be recommended to compare their RoPs with this final version and if discrepancies are observed in the section "Decision-making on a draft regional work plan", amendments should be made in order for the goal to have one version of RoP for all RCGs with the focus on the decision process to be reached.

Lessons learned and ways forward

Fishn'Co experience

If anything is to be learned from Fishn'Co, it is that **there is a huge gap between ISSG activities and their transcription into formal agreements**. This can be explained by the variety of coordination types which are all specific to each ISSG and which rendered difficult the comparison between them or the search of similarities and dissimilarities of approaches. In its first year of activity, Fishn'Co initiated the harmonisation of ISSG description of activities, ambitions and roadmaps and gave life to the infographics, now visible on the RCG website¹¹. This harmonisation and inter-comparability of ISSG activities needs to continue and develop further. It allows for each ISSG to better understand the work of other ISSGs and learn from each other on the possibilities and good practices. It is also highly valuable for RCG Technical meetings and NCs to monitor the ISSG activities and measure the progress made every year.

During the project, the **demonstration was made that the RWP is the appropriate vector of communication and presentation of all types of agreements** reached in a region. Fishn'Co often referred to RWP as a "book of agreements". Almost every RCG/ISSG could present some form of agreements in RWP textboxes and/or tables, which makes the RWP the reference document to consult all regional agreements for a given period of time.

The format of the RWPs were subject of lengthy discussions for years, until Fishn'Co proposed the **same format as the NWPs** with some adaptations. Having the same format for NWP and RWP has a lot of benefits, from their appropriation by all MSs to communicating with STECF and all stake holders.

Every expert/team collecting data on the field is in expectation of guidelines, good practices, recommendations and other reference documents helping to understand that the work carried out correctly and in accordance with end-user needs. The contents of RWP sections proposed by Fishn'Co followed this idea that **something was to be proposed in each section of the RWP**, even if the content was on basic agreements or even no agreement so far. The rationale was to demonstrate where the coordinated activities were standing at the moment and pave the way for future incremental progress. In other words, any information summarising about the status of the coordination of activities was better than leaving the section blank. **It becomes the responsibility of the RCG Technical Meeting to follow suit or not in each of the sections** on what will ultimately appear in the formal RWP 2025-2027, with the idea that it would be easier to remove something that to add a missing section.

The Rule of Procedures (RoP) for RCG NANSEA and Baltic were modified to accommodate for the inclusion of RWPs. One of the objectives of Fishn'Co was to have a proposal for one version of the RoP for all RCGs with the focus on the decision process being similar for all regions and supra regions. This

¹⁰ https://www.fisheries-rcg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/RoPs_210903_RCG-NANSEA_RCG-Baltic_210920.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.fisheries-rcg.eu/>



was not possible during the project, but it is thought that the harmonisation of RCG NANSEA and Baltic RoP can serve as an example to follow by the other RCGs

Ways forward

It is clear that **RWPs development is a stepwise approach** and the proposed RWP 2025-2027 are the first of their kind. This means that, whatever is eventually accepted as part of these RWP 2025-2027, the RWPs will be set up as a central element in the RCG activities for the years to come. In Fishn'Co this was called the “snowball effect”. The RWP 2025-2027 will structure the related NWPs 2025-2027 and all NCS and RCG participants will be able to learn from this implementation in order to define how the RWPs may evolve in the future.

The ISSG/RWP will take over Fishn'Co to finalise the proposed RWPs during the RCG 2023 sessions. The high energy and manpower available in Fishn'Co that could spark the development of the proposed RWPs is telling on the difficulty of the exercise. **The ISSG/RWP will not have the same capacity as in Fishn'Co to steer all elements in every section of the RWPs.** Some mechanism should be discussed during the RCG TM 2023 on how to ensure a structured flow from ISSG activities to RWP elements. It starts with the need to coordinate and harmonise the activities spanning all ISSGs in a region so that the same language is used for the same type of coordination.

Learning through implementation is the best way forward for a new initiative such RWP. **Every effort should be made in 2023 to finalise the first set of official RWPs** in advance of MS preparing for their NWP 2025-2027. By doing so and adopting a flexible attitude towards any issue or question emanating from MS in the following years will be key to preparing the future of regional coordination of activities in every section or module of the EU-MAP.