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Evaluation of EU Rural Development Policy 2007-2013 - the Evaluation Expert Network: A continuous process of know-how dissemination and the development of specific skills

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Abstract

The overall aim of the Evaluation Expert Network is to help establish good practice and capacity building in the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes, thereby increasing the utility of monitoring and evaluation as tools for improving the formulation and implementation of Rural Development Policy.

The idea of the Network is drawn from the experience with evaluations carried out during previous rural development programming periods. In the past, the programme evaluations, which fall under the responsibility of the Member States, revealed shortcomings in applying the Community evaluation guidelines and indicators, which led to a heterogeneous quality of the results. This in turn had implications for the syntheses prepared by the Commission at EU level. The "ongoing evaluation" of Rural Development Programmes introduced by Council Regulation (EC) 1698/2005, and the creation of the Evaluation Expert Network, are intended to address these shortcomings.

The Network is targeted at the evaluation functions established by national authorities, evaluation experts, and academic bodies dealing with evaluation.

Implementing the multiple tasks of the Evaluation Expert Network exceeds the technical capacity of the Commission. Therefore, the Commission will be supported by an Evaluation Helpdesk recently established by an external contractor. This Helpdesk will serve as a central information point concerning the evaluations of Rural Development Programmes, and will provide continuous assistance to evaluation actors at the level of the Member States and regions in running the system of ongoing evaluation.

Key words: European Union, rural development, networking

Full text

Evolving Evaluation Practice

The evolution of evaluation practices for the EU co-funded Rural Development Programmes has taken an important step forward during the previous and current programming periods (2000-2006, 2007-2013). Building on past experience, a strategic approach to planning, programming, monitoring and also evaluation has been introduced. The enhanced emphasis on evaluation mirrors mainstream efforts by the Commission to improve the performance of Rural Development Programmes and ensure the accountability of rural development spending.

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Member States recognise the relevance of this new approach and have agreed requirements that are set out in the EU's current Rural Development Policy (Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005)¹. This Regulation introduces a comprehensive set of evaluation requirements for Member States which aim to improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of programme implementation. They have been explicitly designed to evaluate impact vis-à-vis the Community's Strategic Guidelines, as well as the specific rural development priorities of different Member States and regions². The Regulation specifies that impacts will be monitored on a regular basis throughout the programming period by means of an ongoing evaluation system that Member States are required to establish.

Ongoing evaluation covers all the evaluation activities carried out by the Member States during the entire programming period. This includes ex-ante, mid-term (in 2010), and ex-post evaluations (in 2015), which will subsequently be synthesised at Community level; thematic studies initiated by the Commission, examining specific aspects of Rural Development Policy in more detail; as well as any other evaluation-related activity that can be useful for improving programme management, such as refining monitoring indicators or data collection methods. Capacity building and best practice exchanges are also considered an important aspect of ongoing evaluation systems. To this end, support at Community level is initiated by the Commission and delivered by a new Evaluation Expert Network, which is assisted by an Evaluation Helpdesk.

This ongoing evaluation system will provide programme managers at regional, national and EU level with regular, up-to-date information about the state of play of rural development interventions in comparison to the programme objectives. A shift from 'measure-led' programming interventions towards an 'objective-led' approach has further facilitated this ability to track progress, and ongoing evaluation offers an opportunity to provide managing authorities with a new tool for steering Rural Development Programmes more effectively towards their strategic goals.

Extending Consistency

Results from the ongoing evaluation work will also provide valuable information for policy makers at Member State and EU levels in terms of developing new initiatives to improve performance and target resources more efficiently. This process of assimilating and analysing data will rely heavily on the consistency of evaluation approaches applied for different Rural Development Programmes across Europe, and the Regulation has established a Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) to foster harmonisation within the ongoing evaluation systems.

The CMEF includes the lists of common indicators for use during the development of baseline data as well as the monitoring of programme outputs, results and impacts. Scope is provided for additional, programme specific, indicators and a handbook has been issued which provides guidance on common methodologies for data collection, analysis and reporting³.

The CMEF offers a response to difficulties experienced during previous programming periods when the programme evaluations, which fall under the responsibility of the Member States, revealed shortcomings in applying the Community evaluation guidelines and indicators, which led to a heterogeneous quality of the results. This in turn had implications for the syntheses prepared by the Commission at EU level. However, the fundamental aim of the CMEF is to provide clarity for rural development practitioners by

¹ Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

² Article 84 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/index_en.htm

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presenting a clearly focused set of operational guidelines for evaluating outputs, results and impacts throughout the EU. In addition, the European Commission and Member States also see the CMEF as a foundation stone for building capacity around the common indicator sets.

Tackling Challenges

Some aspects of the CMEF are new and initial indications are revealing challenges within Member States during the implementation of common approaches. Concerns relate to differences in the interpretation of CMEF handbook guidance and a lack of awareness about the guidance has also been noted. Furthermore, the development of individual evaluation systems by managing authorities in isolation from one another weakens the potential synergies that can grow from a common EU approach.

These concerns were anticipated by the Commission and the aforementioned Evaluation Expert Network⁴ has been established, under the supervision of DG Agriculture and Rural Development. Its intention is to assist Member States in evaluating Rural Development Programmes effectively. The Evaluation Expert Network is an integral part of the wider European Network for Rural Development. The Evaluation Expert Network is open to anyone dealing with the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes and measures in the EU. This includes the evaluation functions established by national authorities, evaluation experts and academic bodies dealing with evaluation, and other interested stakeholders. The Network is tasked to help establish good practice and capacity building in the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes, thereby increasing the utility of monitoring and evaluation as tools for improving the formulation and implementation of Rural Development Policy.

Helpdesk Support

Implementing the multiple tasks of the Evaluation Expert Network exceeds the technical capacity of the Commission. The Commission is therefore assisted by an external contractor (the "Evaluation Helpdesk"), who acts in close co-operation with and under the supervision of the Commission, but operates independently in its daily management of technical tasks.

Helpdesk support includes providing expertise in relation to programme evaluation and facilitating the exchange of good practice in this area. More specifically, it offers expertise and guidance on evaluation methods and tools, and data collection. It also assists the Commission and Member States in dealing with evaluation reports.

Priority actions for the Helpdesk, since its launch in April 2008, have concentrated on undertaking a detailed appraisal of evaluation support needs in the Member States. These are being carried out with the help of focus groups in each Member State, using adapted SWOT analysis techniques. The findings will represent the EU 27's first comprehensive assessment of Rural Development Policy evaluation needs and the results will inform various packages of capacity building services that Helpdesk staff will tailor to fit the specific requirements. They will be reflected in the annual work programmes, which will be discussed with Member States' representatives in the Evaluation Expert Committee⁵, an expert group that shall follow the work of the Network.

Parallel Helpdesk actions currently underway include work by the Evaluation Expert Network on improving guidance in the CMEF handbook. Particular attention is being paid to areas noted as a priority by Member States, such as the new indicator for monitoring and assessing Rural Development Programme contributions to High Nature Value Farmland. Here, the Helpdesk has established a working group of Europe's key experts in

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/network/index_en.htm

⁵ Article 5 of Commission Decision of 20 February 2008 setting up the organisational structure for the European Network for Rural Development (2008/168/EC)

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this field, and a guidance note for the Member States will be produced within a matter of months to help explain, in practical terms, a systematic approach that will be applicable across the EU.

This approach, to facilitating the development of common methodologies and best practice portfolios, will be echoed throughout the Helpdesk's future operations, and the outcomes from the Evaluation Expert Network's work will be widely disseminated through a coordinated communication strategy. The communication activities will all incorporate capacity building remits and a set of self-help tools is being developed, featuring FAQs and an on-line library of relevant studies, initiatives and evaluation-related products.

Peer learning is being actively promoted with the Helpdesk providing support services to organise transnational exchanges on topics of mutual interest. These exchanges will be demand-driven and the Helpdesk's client-oriented approach will be sufficiently flexible to cover a wide scope of subject matter, ranging from identifying best practice in thematic evaluation processes to planning for the mid-term evaluations.

Concluding Remarks

The EU's new ongoing evaluation system for rural development builds on previous experience and represents an innovation in policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The integrated elements at Programme and Community level represent valuable and productive management tools, which require a continuous commitment by Member States and the Commission over the entire programming period. This new approach is not a one-off exercise but a dynamic process that is expected to produce better evaluation results for Rural Development Programmes and measures, and also a higher quality input for the future development of the Rural Development Policy.