



Rural Evaluation News
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The newsletter of the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development

In This Issue ...

The new HNV guidance document and a German example; critical analysis of the RD evaluation system plus Member States needs; the Network's 2009 work programme; focus on ex-ante evaluations of RD programmes 2007-2013; how Italy is organising its National Evaluation Network; and news in brief, Q&A, events.

Contents

New guidance on the application of the HNV Indicator	1
The implementation of the HNV farmland indicator in Germany	4
SWOT analysis and assessment of the Member States' needs for the rural development evaluation system 2007-2013	6
The Evaluation Expert Network's Annual Work Programme 2009.....	8
Synthesis of ex ante evaluations of rural development programmes 2007-2013	9
Ongoing evaluation in action: Italian National Evaluation Network for Rural Development (NEN)	11
News in Brief	14
Network events	17
Other events	17

New guidance on the application of the HNV indicator

Guy Beaufoy, European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism

This month sees the launch of the Evaluation Expert Network Guidance Document on the application of the High Nature Value Impact Indicator.

The High Nature Value (HNV) Impact Indicator is one of seven indicators provided by the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) to assess the impacts of the 2007 – 2013 rural development programmes. Along with the Farmland Birds Indicator, the HNV indicator is intended to contribute to assessing the impact of programmes on biodiversity.

Indicators for HNV farming and forestry are in their infancy, and this HNV Guidance Document is intended to assist Member States in developing a workable HNV monitoring framework. The document is developed from, and replaces, a draft HNV Guidance Document that has been in circulation since 2007¹. Both documents build on a study carried out for DG Agriculture of the European Commission in 2007 (IEEP, 2007).

The challenge for Member States is to devise a set of indicators that will provide meaningful information on changes in the extent and in the condition of HNV farming and forestry, during the seven years of the rural development programmes.

Logically, the first step is for each Member State to assess the baseline situation against which the changes can be measured. This means estimating the extent of HNV farming and forestry, and gathering information on its condition in terms of farming practices and associated wildlife species and habitats.

¹ IEEP, 2007. *Guidance Document to the Member States on the Application of the High Nature Value Indicator. Report for DG Agriculture. Contract Notice 2006-G4-04.*

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Your feedback is welcome

This newsletter is intended to be applicable, accessible and approachable for anybody dealing with the evaluation of rural development programmes and measures in the EU. We therefore welcome your feedback on the content presented and we would encourage you to provide suggestions regarding appropriate articles or regular features. Please send us your comments to: info@ruralevaluation.eu

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The HNV Guidance Document emphasises that the objective is not to delineate or designate particular areas as HNV. The policy priority for HNV as set out in the Community's Strategic Guidelines for rural development is to use measures to preserve HNV farming and forestry systems. The idea is to contribute to nature conservation by supporting the broad types of farming and forestry that favour biodiversity, not to designate particular areas as HNV.

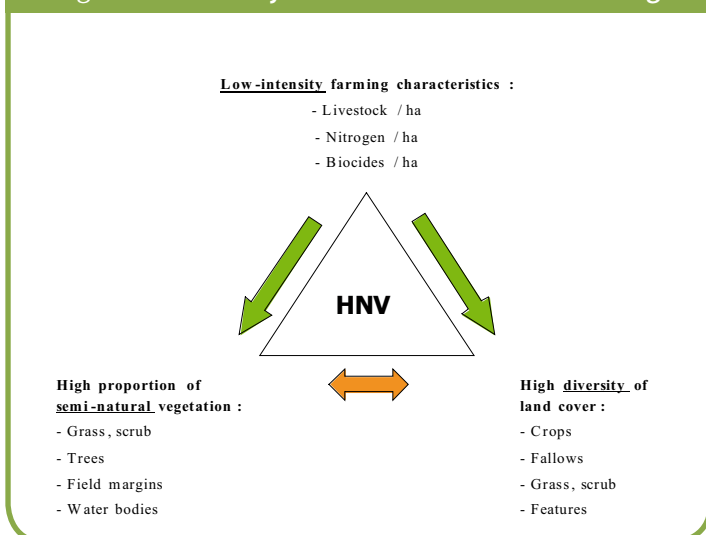
So what are these HNV farming and forestry systems, and what indicators can be used to monitor changes in their extent and condition? In simple terms, they are types of farming and forestry that, because of their characteristics, can be expected to be high in "nature value", meaning biodiversity generally, or particular species of conservation concern.

The HNV Guidance Document explains the broad land-use characteristics that are known to be critical for supporting nature value, and which then provide the basis for designing indicators for HNV farming and forestry. Figure 1 summarises these characteristics.

As the diagram illustrates, high nature value results when certain patterns of land cover (those with a high proportion of semi-natural vegetation and a diversity of types) are managed for production in a particular way (under low intensity systems).

This situation occurs most frequently with low-intensity livestock farming. This type of farming is unique in harbouring numerous habitat types from Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive, ranging from hay meadows to wood pastures and heaths, which depend on the continuation of low-intensity grazing and/or late mowing for their conservation.

Figure 1: Three Key Characteristics of HNV Farming



The Spanish dehesa is a classic example of HNV farming and forestry. As with all HNV systems, appropriate management practices are needed.

Most arable farming is too intensive to be HNV, but there are some areas where this is not the case, especially in southern and eastern Europe. These are usually low-yielding, low-input dryland systems retaining a significant proportion of fallow and semi-natural vegetation.

Traditional orchards and olive groves can be of high nature value. Key characteristics are large old trees, a semi-natural understorey – which is often grazed by livestock – and no or minimal use of nitrogen fertilisers, biocides or broad spectrum insecticides.

Semi-natural features such as hedges, copses and ponds, are significant for some types of HNV farmland, especially low-intensity cropping and bocage landscapes. Where semi-natural features survive on intensively managed farmland they conserve vestiges of biodiversity in landscapes that otherwise are of limited nature value.

The HNV Guidance Document explores these key characteristics in more detail, and explains how they can form the basis for the design of indicators to monitor trends in HNV farming and forestry. A four-step approach is presented, with sufficient flexibility to be adapted to the conditions of different Member States, which can be summarised as follows:

Step 1 – Describing and characterising the main types of HNV farming and forestry in the Member State

The first step is to gather information on existing types of HNV farming and forestry, and particularly on aspects that can provide the basis for designing HNV indicators:

- The predominant *land cover* associated with each HNV system, such as the types of semi-natural vegetation



Photo: courtesy of Eric Bignal, EFNCP

Kindrochaid farm, Islay (Scotland) is a good illustration of an HNV farm with livestock and crops in a mosaic.

and of cropped land, highlighting features that make a significant contribution to nature value.

- *Farming/forestry characteristics and practices*, i.e. how the land cover is managed, the grazing and mowing regimes, cropping patterns, livestock densities, nitrogen inputs.
- The nature value associated with these types of land cover and farming/forestry practices, especially *species and habitats* of conservation concern.

Step 2 – Developing indicators of the extent of HNV farming and forestry systems

The HNV Guidance Document proposes using a basket of indicators for estimating the extent of HNV farming and forestry, drawing on a range of data sources, such as land cover data, farming statistics, or the distribution of wildlife species.

For example, an indicator of the extent of HNV livestock farming could be the total area of semi-natural vegetation used for grazing or mowing. Another could be the total area of forage declared by holdings with a livestock density between thresholds that are associated with HNV. These would be defined on the basis of information gathered in Step 1. Similarly, data on the extent of arable land with a proportion of fallow within defined thresholds can provide one indication of the extent of arable land that is likely to be HNV.

Existing data sources on land cover and farming characteristics are far from perfect, and will afford only an approximate picture of the extent of HNV farming and forestry. Data showing the distribution of wildlife species on farmland can provide a complementary picture.

Step 3 – Developing indicators for monitoring changes in the extent and condition of HNV farming and forestry

Changes in the extent of HNV farming and forestry can be monitored by means of the indicators developed in Step 2. Changes in condition are more difficult to assess, as the baseline situation cannot be defined so clearly. The HNV Guidance Document proposes using sample surveys to assess trends in the most relevant farming practices. Changes observed in suites of species associated with different types of HNV farming and forestry will provide another indication of trends in HNV condition.

Step 4 – Applying the indicators to assess changes in HNV farming and forestry in the context of the rural development programmes

Assessing the impact of rural development programmes on HNV farming and forestry is not a simple exercise, and cannot depend on indicators alone, given that development of these is at an early stage. Also, there are inherent difficulties in evaluating what proportion of the changes observed may be attributed to the programmes themselves. A considerable input of expert analysis will be needed, with the information gathered in Step 1 providing an essential background.

To conclude, the HNV concept has come a long way since the early 1990s (some of the reports that have marked this progress are listed below). Nevertheless, these are still early days in HNV monitoring. The new HNV Guidance Document is not the end of the story, rather it is part of an evolving process. Effective monitoring of HNV farming and forestry will require further adaptation and development of existing data bases. Ground-truthing of indicators through local case studies will be important.

By investing in appropriate data collection and monitoring schemes now, we can build a true picture over time of the biodiversity benefits and impacts of rural development programmes.

Find out more

- o Read the [HNV Guidance Document](#) and [Annexes](#).
- o The list of reference material used to write this article is available to interested readers. Send an email to the Evaluation Helpdesk at: info@ruralevaluation.eu

The implementation of the HNV farmland indicator in Germany

Armin Benzler, Federal Agency for Nature Conservation

As a general rule, in Germany nowadays you will only find high nature value (HNV) farmland in very small areas on farms where the rest of the land is either intensively farmed or under nature conservation management. Traditional extensive farming systems have virtually disappeared, only playing a subordinate role in the creation or conservation of HNV farmland. Using satellite-supported land cover data (CORINE Landcover) to calculate the extent of HNV farmland will give figures well under the true picture, due to the low resolution of the satellite data. And you cannot do this calculation using operating data from extensively managed farms, for the reasons mentioned above.

In the context of a feasibility study (Projektgemeinschaft 2008) the following points had to be clarified:

- Which of the established monitoring programmes could be used to identify relevant HNV areas in Germany, and to what extent were these programmes suitable sources of data for the HNV farmland indicator?
- How could one collate data that had been gathered using different methods from monitoring programmes which differ from region to region?
- How could the indicator be assessed within the proposed time frames?

As a result, the federal government and federal states joined forces to map the HNV farmland using a sampling method as the most cost-effective possible way to find a total for HNV farmland. The major advantage of this procedure was that a suitable monitoring design already existed and it could be used directly to monitor HNV farmland. This survey design was developed for a nationwide biodiversity monitoring project in Germany (Hoffmann-Kroll et al. 2000) and is currently being used by the Federation of German Avifaunists (DDA) (Mitschke et al. 2005) at national level to monitor common breeding birds. Both the sustainability indicator for species diversity in connection with the national sustainability strategy (including various sub-indicators) and the Farmland Bird Index are derived from this data source.

HNV farmland units

To start with, the HNV farmland biotopes had to be specified and assigned to the units of the biotope classifications generally used in Germany. For this task, use was made of the federal biotope classification (Riecken et al. 2003) and the classification of habitat types in the Habitats Directive. These units generally correspond to Type 1 in the definition



Typical agricultural landscape of the mountainous parts of Central Germany partly structured by HNV features (hedgerow, water course).

of Andersen et al. (2003). Type 2 implies the presence of structural landscape elements. Work is still in progress on the concluding specification of Type 3 as defined by Andersen et al. (2003). Type 3 contains areas which serve as a habitat for rare species or for a high proportion of European or global populations of plant and animal species. There are ongoing discussions on the species listed in Annexes II and IV of the Habitats Directive whose habitat lies in agricultural land, and on endangered and protected species in Annex I of the Birds Directive or the Red List of Breeding Birds in Germany. The work of determining the extent of habitat areas for bird species sets high standards for the methodology, since such areas can only be identified very approximately and with varying degrees of descriptive accuracy.

It is not a hard and fast rule that extensively farmed areas represent areas of high nature value. For areas or biotopes to be classified as “agricultural land of high nature value”, their characteristics must be of sufficiently high ecological quality. The land must – apart from meadow orchards, which automatically constitute HNV farmland – be assessed on the basis of the diversity of its botanical species. This classification of the biotopes and structural elements in farmland is achieved by recording characteristic species. The biotope in question is only assigned to the HNV farmland category once a certain minimum quality has been exceeded. This method makes it possible to observe quantitative changes and also to record qualitative changes within the HNV farmland category.

Survey design and method

The survey design at federal level consists of 1,000 random sample units of one square kilometre (1 km²) each. This random sample is stratified according to two characteristics: the first is 'object types' from the DLM25 (a digital landscape model on a scale of 1:25.000), while the second is the classification as ecoregions (Schroeder & Schmidt 2001). Whereas the first stratification describes the current land cover (and hence land use characteristics), the location types are based on predominantly abiotic parameters (soil, orography, climate). This stratification makes it possible to reflect the heterogeneity of the terrain and to obtain statistically meaningful results with a small sample size. This opens up additional assessment potential. For instance, in addition to observation at federal and federal state level, it is also possible to relate the development of HNV farmland to physical regions and regions which are defined according to ecological criteria (e.g. the North German Plain, the Alpine Foothills). It can also be expected that the joint assessment of the data for the HNV farmland indicator and of the bird data gathered by the same method has further potential to gain a deeper understanding of how different agricultural land use factors affect each other.

One analysis identified around 900 units from the random sample set consisting of at least 5% agricultural land. These units were used for the mapping of HNV farmland at federal level.

Terrain mapping supported by aerial photography is used for gathering data in the random sample units. The list of items to be recorded in the terrain includes: FFH habitat types, species-rich and/or extensively farmed land, landscape elements and minor structures. For the recording of Type 3 HNV farmland, the habitats of rare animal and plant species will be included as additional criteria in the future. The units are allocated to five quality levels on the basis of a list of features, and are only assigned to the HNV farmland category once they have reached a certain minimum quality (Level 3 or higher). To this end, relevant assessment criteria have been drawn up for each land type or landscape element. Assessment on the basis of characteristic species plays an important role here. The listing of all units and landscape elements to be mapped and assessed, the assessment criteria and the additional mapping instructions are collated in a mapping manual and made available to the cartographers together with an aerial photograph for each sample area. The units are then surveyed on the ground using the technique of trans-sectional field walking.

The mapping results entered on the aerial photograph are digitised and centrally collated. This ensures that the data are assessed uniformly at federal level.

Calculation of the indicator

The indicator to be calculated is an area indicator. It is calculated from the combined set of HNV farmland areas of Types 1 to 3 in the sample units. As the selection probability of the individual sample units is known, it is possible to extrapolate the overall quantity, i.e. the overall area of HNV farmland in Germany. Regular data gathering makes it possible to build up a picture of qualitative and quantitative changes in HNV farmland over time. This calculation is also possible for individual HNV farmland types (e.g. meadow orchards, HNV grassland etc.).

The chosen method offers the following advantages:

- It makes it possible to quantify the total area of HNV farmland in Germany very precisely.
- It makes it possible to record quantitative and qualitative changes in the physical regions of Germany in addition to developments at federal and federal state level.
- Trends in development can be displayed for individual HNV farmland types.
- The statistically ingenious design of the survey minimises the cost of gathering data in the field and thus reduces the most significant cost factor.
- Coordination of data gathering across Germany, together with the use of a uniform method, ensures the homogeneity of the gathered data at national level.
- The simultaneous use of a survey design for different biodiversity relevant monitoring programmes opens up a number of possibilities for extended utilisation, so that the causes of any desired or harmful developments can be identified quickly, and appropriate management measures taken where required.



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Find out more

- o View the [presentation](#).
- o The list of reference material used to write this article is available to interested readers. Send an email to the Evaluation Helpdesk at: info@ruralevaluation.eu

SWOT analysis and assessment of the Member States' needs for the rural development evaluation system 2007-2013

Enhanced support for the evaluation community

Identifying the priorities in supporting the European evaluation community (Managing Authorities, evaluators, other evaluation stakeholders) was an early task for the Evaluation Expert Network. To this end, the Evaluation Helpdesk, as the executive and advisory arm of the Network, carried out a SWOT analysis of the rural development evaluation system, and surveyed the EU evaluation community. These two activities were part of the Evaluation Network's work programme for 2008, and helped shape and target the activities for 2009.

The findings of the SWOT analysis and the needs assessment were presented to the Expert Committee on Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes on December 15, 2008 (for further information see the article "First meeting of Evaluation Expert Committee" on page 15).

Highlights of the SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis was the first step towards understanding the evaluation needs. The experts of the Evaluation Helpdesk examined different elements of the rural development evaluation system and concluded that:

The **context of the evaluation of the rural development programmes** has improved significantly from 2007. There are clear policy objectives, a results oriented approach and a simplified system for delivering the EU rural development policy. However, there is a threat that important policy effects could be overlooked with too much of a focus on indicators in the evaluation process.

The **concept of ongoing evaluation** creates a common base for comparing policy effects across the EU, and facilitates better use of evaluation as a policy adjustment tool. The downside is that the concept still creates confusion among stakeholders, while unresolved methodological challenges may result in a variety of approaches regarding the common indicators that would weaken the comparability and aggregation of the policy effects EU-wide.

The CMEF and its Handbook are strong **tools** for describing how measures, indicators and evaluation questions interconnect. However, while these tools include some flexibility to Member States in how they are applied, they also have certain limitations (e.g. insufficiently clear demarcation be-



Photo: courtesy of Dimitris Lianos

Focus Group meeting with representatives of the Greek managing authority. Athens, Greece, September 18, 2008.

tween monitoring and evaluation) and gaps (e.g. the common impact indicators do not adequately cover the objectives under Axes 3 and 4). That is why it is important to perceive the CMEF Handbook as an open document that will allow further methodological development.

The **evaluation processes** are benefiting from the introduction of ongoing evaluation. An important advantage of this is closer communication between managing authorities and evaluators, also presenting the opportunity to make evaluation an interactive process. However, it is important that this does not jeopardise the independence of evaluators.

The **evaluation capacity** remains insufficiently developed across the EU, and the lack of training – particularly in the New Member States – risks becoming an obstacle to the appropriate implementation of evaluation processes. In turn, the Evaluation Expert Network is a significant asset to the evaluation community, providing an opportunity to exchange knowledge on approaches and methodologies.

Key findings of the needs assessment

The needs assessment gave the evaluation community EU-wide the opportunity to directly describe the challenges they are facing with regard to the evaluation of rural development programmes. Managing authorities, evaluators and various other experts participated in the focus group discussions facilitated by the Evaluation Helpdesk. The participants welcomed this initiative, and very useful and positive outcomes emerged.

Support on evaluation processes

Member States expressed strong demand for guidance towards successful completion of the **mid-term evaluations** of their rural development programmes, as part of the requirements for ongoing evaluation. With the deadline in 2010, the topic has become a priority for the Evaluation Network in 2009.

Accordingly, the Evaluation Helpdesk is preparing a set of recommendations that will draw on past mid-term evaluations and on the examination of the current ongoing evaluation systems. The Helpdesk support in 2009 will range from advice and suggestions on tendering aspects, to providing examples of good practice, and to reporting obligations.

Many managing authorities – but mainly those from the New Member States – require support for strengthening their **evaluation capacities** and improving dialogue with the independent evaluators.

The focus group meetings revealed that good practice and information exchange are among the most appropriate tools to address such needs. As a result, the Evaluation Helpdesk is in the process of identifying good practice across the EU, and selected cases will be presented starting 2009.

Support on evaluation methodologies

Extensive discussions on evaluation methodologies took place during the focus group meetings with the stakeholders, and a wide range of topics were covered. Needs identified reinforce the findings of the SWOT on the importance of capacity building. In a nutshell:

Improving ways to **better capture and understand the impacts** of rural development programmes are a key concern of the evaluation community. Work on this is time sensitive and methodologically complex. It will address issues such as narrowing the attribution gap, ensuring better intervention logic, and disentangling the effects of multiple intervening factors. Significant focus will be given to environmental impacts.

Related activities are part of the 2009 work programme, and will be conducted through two dedicated thematic working groups. To the extent possible, they will build on the work already developed in the Member States. To this end, the Evaluation Helpdesk is planning to conduct a screening of the relevant practices in the EU.

Work on the **application and use of existing indicators** is an ongoing exercise. The needs assessment revealed the key indicators for which Member States request further methodological support: climate change, water quality, biodiver-

sity, quality of life and LEADER. Quite significant demand emerged for assistance in the use of complementary qualitative methods.

As a first step, the Evaluation Helpdesk has just finalized the Guidance Document on the Application of the High Nature Value impact indicator. Environmental indicators will be captured in the activities described under the section above, referring to the assessment of impacts. Further work will be carried out with respect to quality of life and LEADER, starting in the second half of 2009.

In addition, the Evaluation Helpdesk provides support mainly through directly answering specific questions and through developing topics from its “thematic pool” (see also the article on 2009 Annual Work Programme, page 8).

Improving the assessment of impacts, through better use of evaluation methodologies and indicators is a forward-looking exercise which started in 2008 and will be continued throughout the entire programming period. This work will provide substantial support to the European Commission and the Member States in streamlining the CMEF for the next programming period.

More information and communication

The needs assessment identified a wide range of issues where Member States require further information, including the concept of ongoing evaluation, how the evaluation reports are used at EU level, and on the role that the Evaluation Helpdesk can play in supporting them.

In addition, Member States expect feedback from the European Commission on the evaluation reports they submit and require clarification on a series of legal aspects regarding their evaluation related obligations. Examples include the criteria for acceptance of the evaluation reports and the consequences in the case of non-acceptance.

Together with the European Commission, the Evaluation Helpdesk plays a critical role in addressing these information gaps, mainly via communication tools. For the Evaluation Helpdesk, these include but are not limited to the public website (with a FAQs section), the newsletter and missions of the Evaluation Helpdesk to the Member States.

Find out more

- o Read the [SWOT Analysis](#) and [Needs Assessment](#).

The Evaluation Expert Network's Annual Work Programme 2009

Operationalising objectives

The Annual Work Programmes (AWPs) make operational the three specific objectives of the Evaluation Expert Network:

- To increase capacity in the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes
- To increase capacity in managing evaluation processes
- To share good practice in the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes

An important element of content development in 2009 will be the activities of the **thematic working groups (TWGs)**, which are set up on a case-by-case basis in response to needs assessment identified through wider Network activities. Membership typically involves up to 15 representatives including from managing authorities, evaluation practitioners, academics and policy institutes, researchers, other experts, the Commission and Helpdesk team members.

TWG work in 2009 will build on 2008 progress on approaches for identifying impacts in the context of “**multiple intervening factors**”, including socio-economic impact indicators (i.e. CMEF indicators 1, 2 and 3) and environment impact indicators (i.e. CMEF indicators 4, 5, 6 and 7). The work will identify problem areas, take stock of ongoing and planned practices in the EU-27, identify good practices from Member States, and also provide suggestions for improvements to evaluation methodologies, tools, systems and approaches.

Two additional themes will be worked on in a combined thematic working group:

- To develop the intervention logic and appropriate measurement for the **impact of the LEADER Axis**.
- To highlight viable approaches to measuring **quality of life**.

Thematic Pool

Other topics included in a “**Thematic Pool**” for further content development work (possibly commencing in 2009) are:

- To streamline the measurement of the result indicator on **Gross Value Added** in supported holdings/businesses

- Use of **Geographic Information Systems (GIS)** for monitoring and evaluation of effects of RD Programmes (experiences from Member States)
- Viable **approaches of fostering programme adjustments** as a result of ongoing evaluations

Support of preparation for the **mid-term evaluation (MTE)** of the Member States' RD programmes, will build on research already conducted by the Helpdesk on ongoing evaluation systems, the SWOT analysis of evaluation systems, and a needs assessment of Member States. Next steps include carrying out and analysing a survey on the state of preparation for the MTE in the Member States. Recommendations concerning the preparation and implementation of the MTE will be drafted for programme bodies, evaluators and the EC.

Good practice

Suggested topics for collection of **good practice** in evaluation methodologies and processes are: management of relationships between the managing authorities, evaluators and other stakeholders; organization models in the managing authorities; the organization of the evaluation processes; methodological aspects regarding the assessment of impacts and the measurement of indicators.

For harmonising the use of terminologies to improve the comparability of evaluation results and activities, the Helpdesk will continue compiling an inventory of existing **glossaries** from EU and Member State levels. The Frequently Asked Questions (**FAQ**) facility will make available the questions commonly asked by Member States and the specific answers approved by the Commission.

Training of EC desk officers will be provided by the Helpdesk from early 2009 to increase the capacity in managing evaluation processes including assessment of annual evaluation reports. And support to **capacity building in Member States** will include preparation of supportive material and presentations during missions to Member States.

Find out more

- o Read the [Work Programme 2009](#).

Synthesis of ex ante evaluations of rural development programmes 2007-2013

A synthesis of the 94 ex ante evaluation reports established at programme level for all rural development programmes co-financed by the EAFRD in the 27 Member States was commissioned by DG Agriculture and Rural Development and carried out during 2008. In addition to the ex ante evaluation reports, the respective rural development programmes, the 27 National Strategy Plans, and the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) reports attached to each ex ante evaluation were fully screened. The final report of this synthesis is now available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/rurdev/index_en.htm

The synthesis provides a thorough stocktaking of the rural development programmes 2007-2013, as well as interesting results on the way the ex ante evaluations have been carried out in the different Member States in the broader context of the definition of the programmes. The authors of the synthesis analyse in detail each of the steps that led to the finalisation of the programmes: analysis of the needs of the programme areas, formulation of the rural development strategies, including the definition of policy objectives, and the choice of the most appropriate measures to implement these strategies. The description of the systems established by the Member States for the monitoring and evaluation of the programmes, and first thoughts about the newly established concept of “ongoing evaluation” complete the synthesis report.

New strategic approach

This in-depth screening of the different programming documents has also permitted useful conclusions to be drawn about the extent to which the new strategic approach to rural development has been interpreted and applied by the Member States. This new approach has indeed introduced significant changes with respect to previous programming periods. First, preliminary broad National Strategy Plans, consistent with EU policy priorities (in particular the Lisbon and Göteborg strategies for growth and jobs and sustainable development) and with national and regional priorities had to be defined by the Member States. Then, based on these reference frameworks, the programming authorities had to develop each rural development programme by focusing on the specific strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the individual programming areas. In light of this analysis, the choice of rural development measures to be included in the programmes was expected to reflect the identified specific needs of each programming area.

Furthermore, more stringent requirements were foreseen in terms of quantification of the expected results and impacts

*Guido Castellano, DG Agriculture & Rural Development:
Evaluation of measures applicable to agriculture, studies*



of the programmes. Baseline indicators had to be applied for assessing the situation of each programme area at the beginning of the programming period, thus providing the basis for the establishment of ex ante targets; precise target levels were then expected to be established, by using a range of common and – where relevant – programme-specific output, result, and impact indicators. The accompanying role of the ex ante evaluators throughout the whole programming preparation period was expected to play an essential role for improving the quality and reliability of the rural development programmes.

The results of the synthesis show that the Member States devoted considerable efforts in the development of their strategies, mainly based on SWOT-analysis methods and the establishment and application of the CMEF¹ baseline indicators. This process encouraged the programmers to think “out of the box” and look at their programming areas in far broader and deeper terms than in previous programming periods. The results of the SWOT analyses revealed a high level of accuracy of the programming authorities in capturing the most relevant problems of the respective programme areas. These were identified in relation to a variety of issues of social (ageing population, scarcely populated areas, low quality of infrastructure and services, etc.), economic (small size of farms, low quality of food products, low level of modernisation of farms, etc.) and environmental (biodiversity loss, climate conditions, low availability/quality of water, etc.) nature.

¹ The “Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework” is defined by article 2 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 as a general approach developed by the Commission and the Member States defining a limited number of common indicators relating to the baseline situation and the financial execution, outputs, results and impacts of the programmes.

The policy objectives defined at the level of the programmes were considered as consistent with the provisions of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005, and overall coherent with the National Strategy Plans and the problems/needs identified. However, the synthesis evaluators noticed that more efforts could have been made by the programme authorities to better fine-tune the general objectives of the Council Regulation to the national or regional contexts of the different programme areas. Examples of good practices in this respect are given.

Measures balance

Measures of axes 1 (with a focus on “farm modernisation”, “adding value to agricultural and forestry products”, and “infrastructures for the development of agriculture and forestry”) and 2 (with a focus on “agri-environmental payments”) accounted for 78% of the EAFRD funding at EU level. EAFRD funding was homogeneously shared between the different measures of axis 3, while measures concerning “quality of life and diversification” were the most represented within axis 4.

The measures included in the programmes were generally considered by the ex ante evaluators as appropriate regarding the objectives to be pursued, although in some cases a concentration of resources towards agriculture and/or the environment, reflecting a clear strategic orientation of the programmes, was found. However, according to the synthesis evaluators, the observed high concentration of budgetary resources on a relatively limited number of measures was not always justified with respect to the variety of needs identified and objectives to be achieved. In addition, they observed that pending commitments from previous years (e.g. early retirement and agri-environmental schemes) played a substantial role in the choice of measures. Similarly, in some cases, the choice of measures has also been influenced by political decisions.

Significant problems were experienced in quantifying the expected impacts, in particular as regards the application of the seven common impact indicators. The incomplete quantification of these indicators did not permit their aggregation at European level, and therefore the assessment of the expected impacts was carried out in qualitative terms. In this context, the expected impacts of rural development programmes were reported to be positive in terms of environmental, social and (in a less prominent way) economic achievements. The combined effects of rural development measures (e.g. on biodiversity or the social capital of rural areas) were frequently referred to in the ex ante evaluations.

Monitoring and evaluation

The EU requirements concerning monitoring and evaluation were taken into account in the context of the definition of the programmes. However, the description of the opera-

tional arrangements for monitoring the programmes and for ensuring data collection was developed only to a limited extent in both the programmes and the ex ante evaluations. Examples of innovative approaches are highlighted in the synthesis report (e.g. exploiting synergies with already existing regional information systems or combining monitoring requirements related to different funds).

The concept of “ongoing evaluation” was generally appreciated by the different actors involved in the evaluation of rural development programmes. However, the synthesis evaluators underlined that the managing authorities still tended to consider evaluation as a mere “indicator exercise” rather than as a tool for improving the management and quality of the programmes. The European Evaluation Network for Rural Development was very well regarded by the Member States. The high expectations associated with this Network are in line with its planned activities: collection and dissemination of good practices, methodological support, thematic studies etc. Methodological support is mainly expected in the areas of quantification of indicators (in particular as regards axes 2 and 3), as well as concerning the treatment of cross-cutting common evaluation questions.

Future challenges

Overall, the outcomes of this synthesis of ex ante evaluations show that the implementation of the new strategic approach to rural development was challenging for the Member States. The new elements introduced for the current programming period, as well as the more rigorous approach to programming, monitoring and evaluation, proved to be difficult to apply. A smooth transition towards an “objectives-led” rural development policy is going on, but its full application still requires further work by both the Commission and the Member States, as well as capacity building activities in favour of the evaluation Community at large. In this context, the synthesis provides a very useful tool for feeding into this process: a careful reading of the report by the Member States can allow them to identify those elements of their respective programmes which are most in need of revision; the examples of good practices and the recommendations included in the report represent a useful reference for critically reflecting about the programming process and for identifying possible directions for changes; the potential further improvements of the Community framework identified by the synthesis evaluators will be thoroughly analysed by the Commission with a view to possible future activities of the European Evaluation Network.

Find out more

- o Read the [Synthesis of ex ante evaluations 2007-2013](#).

Ongoing evaluation in action: Italian National Evaluation Network for rural development (NEN)

Patrizia Fagiani
National Rural Network – INEA



Italy's rural development policy for the programming period from 2007 to 2013 is being implemented through an integrated set of instruments which comprise the National Strategic Plan for rural development (NSP), 21 regional or provincial Rural Development Programmes (RDP) and a National Rural Network programme. More than 16 billion euro of EU and national funding are allocated to this portfolio of Italian rural development policy instruments.

The Ministry for Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (Mipaaf) manages Italy's National Rural Network, which in turn incorporates the operations of the Italian National Evaluation Network for rural development (NEN).

NEN's work programme started early and prioritised the development of a broad strategy targeting various activities such as: strengthening professional evaluation capacities in the different RDP managing authorities (MAs); undertaking strategic monitoring of the NSP; establishing an umbrella of organisational and methodological support for NEN stakeholders, including encouraging discussion on evaluation methods, results and their use; promoting dialogue with the European Evaluation Expert Network for Rural Development; and ensuring that the actions of the "National Evaluation System of unitary regional policy" complement and are in harmony with those provided by EAFRD evaluation supports.

The NEN strategy reflects requirements set out in the EC rural development regulations, and the official guidance concerning the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF). In particular, the following principles influence NEN actions:

- *Ongoing evaluation* is at the core of the NEN strategy, and is recognised as a process that can significantly enhance the quality of both programming and implementation;
- Quality is prioritised during the organisation, process and results of all evaluation activity;
- Ownership of the evaluation process is considered to be a pre-requisite for its quality and independence; and
- Regional differences in evaluation approaches create diversity, which can be a source of innovation and good practices.

Initial NEN actions focussed on helping to establish high-quality and well-governed regional evaluation systems. This work involved a careful consideration of suitable principles, concepts and operational solutions required to facilitate a quality approach by the MAs during the setting up and governance of the complete ongoing evaluation process.

These considerations for MAs are embodied in a guidance document that was prepared in collaboration with the regions. Although implementation of these guidelines by MAs is not compulsory, the NEN worked hard to convey the message that MAs' programme evaluation systems work most effectively when they incorporate and reflect regional specifics.

The organisation of ongoing evaluation

Key factors required for organising ongoing evaluation at a regional level, as proposed by the NEN, are the following:

- An appropriate internal MA organisation (monitoring and evaluation unit);
- The establishment of a **steering group (SG) of evaluation activities**;
- A continuous dialogue between administration and evaluator, ensuring the efficient technical management of the evaluation while retaining the evaluator's autonomy; and

- The drafting of an **Ongoing RDP Evaluation Plan** by each MA. This should use technical advice from the SG and be designed within the framework of the regional strategy for the evaluation activities.

The NEN guidance document for MAs suggests that a **monitoring and evaluation unit** should be established inside the MA. The role of this dedicated unit should include supervising and facilitating relationships between external evaluators and internal MA personnel (administration, access to data, etc.). In addition, it should coordinate the aforementioned **steering group** (SG). This latter task requires a sensitive approach in order to achieve the correct balance between: supporting the SG, in its mandate to ensure that evaluation actions actually follow all of the MA's technical evaluation requirements; and also safeguarding the evaluators from any pressures that might risk or threaten an evaluation's autonomy.

The EC documents emphasise the important roles that SGs play in maintaining the quality of evaluation processes and the NEN guidance for MAs suggests that membership of each SG should be clearly focussed on its main function, in order to maximise operational efficiencies and ensure a quality approach. In this regard a differentiation is made between SG functions that are more oriented towards technical management of evaluation and those that are more oriented towards consultation purposes.

Where SG's are focussed on technical management of evaluation, the members' role involves responsibility for assisting evaluators with methodological competences, as well as controlling the performance of the evaluation

process. The SG should thus feature a suitable number of appropriate methodological experts and other stakeholders would participate on a more limited basis.

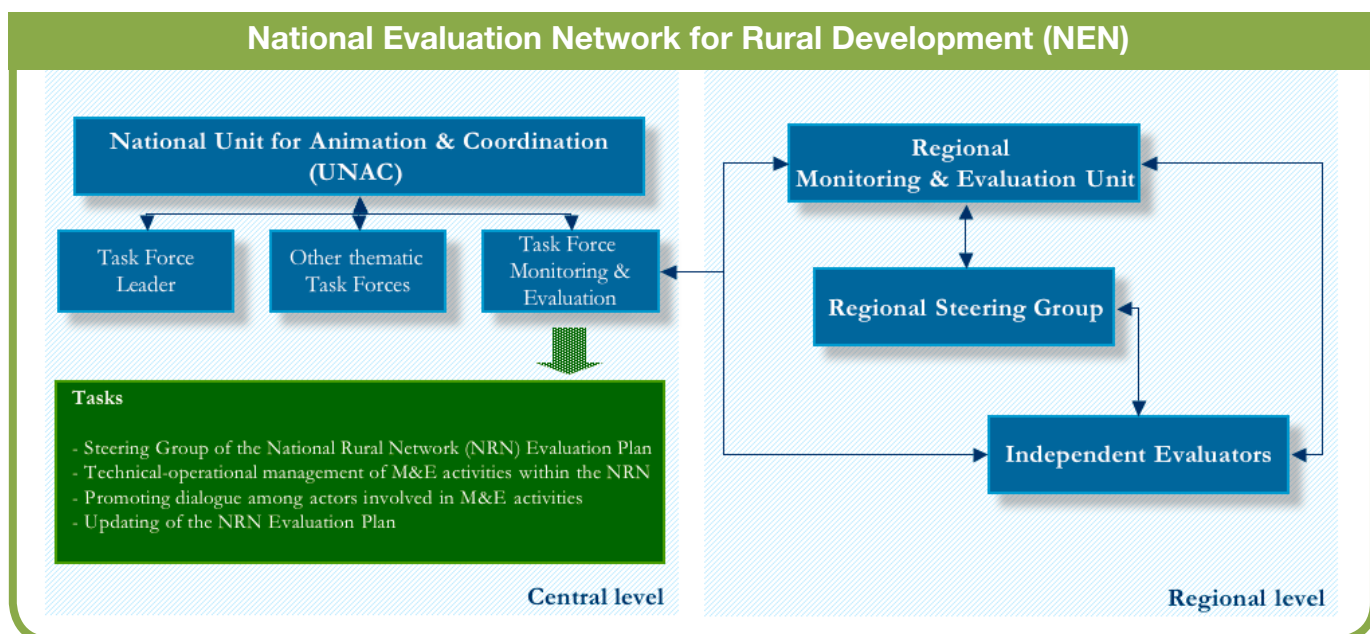
Where a SG's main function relates to consultation, the NEN guidance encourages MAs to ensure that SG membership should involve all of the parties concerned with the RDP planning, implementation and deployment of effects. The composition of this type of SG would be designed to cover a wide rural development remit and include members from other MAs or Funds.

The choice between the two alternatives depends both on the overall MA's strategy and on context-specific factors.

The **monitoring and evaluation unit** and the steering group fill different but complementary roles. Their fruitful collaboration can significantly enhance the quality of evaluations.

An **Ongoing RDP Evaluation Plan** is central to the NEN system and the careful and early drafting of this plan can significantly affect the overall quality of the evaluation. The MAs are responsible for commissioning and overseeing high-quality evaluation services. As such, the Ongoing RDP Evaluation Plan should be written by the MAs with the technical advice of the SG and the plan should identify the minimum quality requirements of the evaluation activity¹.

¹ Including several operational aspects such as sources and methods, outputs of the evaluation, desirable characteristics of the evaluation team, timescale, etc. These aspects will then be more detailed in the Terms of Reference for the public selection of the evaluator.



In this way the Plan commits the MA to seek independent analysis and knowledge about the effects of rural policies in the specific regional context, additional to the CMEF evaluation demand. Creating such a plan forces the MA to elaborate their own, specific and autonomously defined evaluation demand - additional to that articulated in the CMEF - after an in-depth analysis of what they want and need to know about the effects of rural policies in their own territory.

Furthermore, the plan identifies the strategic themes for evaluation and defines objectives and modalities for the dissemination of evaluation results. Dissemination is critical for gaining ownership of an evaluation and evaluators should be explicitly requested to contribute.

Looking forward

In line with the concept of ongoing evaluation, the Italian approach to the evaluation of rural policies is “ongoing” in itself. There is in fact a deep awareness that lessons learned from implementation will feed back into the shaping of the NEN’s approach, allowing the network to refine and enrich its operations.

The requests arising from the regions, the evolution of the national and international evaluation practice, the interaction with the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development and the National Evaluation System of unitary regional policy will all be major drivers of NEN’s development and activities over the 2007-2013 programming period. These activities will include methodological work in specific areas, training, meta-evaluation, networking and exchanging good practices both at the national and international level.

If you are interested in finding out further information about the ongoing evaluation system in Italy and the NEN, contact Patrizia Fagiani: fagiani@inea.it or Alessandro Monteleone: monteleone@inea.it



The document *Organisation of Ongoing Evaluation*, issued in August 2008, is available on the website of the National Rural Network at web page <http://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/337>

National evaluation system of Unitary Regional Policy

The coordination and complementarity between all EC and national Funds (called for by EC Regulations 1698/2005 and 1083/2006) also requires coordination at the level of the evaluation activities. To support this, the National Strategic Framework 2007-2013 (NSF) established the **national evaluation system of Unitary Regional Policy**. The managing authorities involved in the unitary regional policy have to implement a unitary plan of evaluations, which describes the integrated approach to the evaluation of regional policy interventions, whatever the funding source. The **ongoing RDP evaluation plan** logically follows this plan and is coordinated with it.

News in Brief

First meeting of Evaluation Expert Committee

The first meeting of the **Expert Committee on Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes** (or the "Evaluation Expert Committee") was held at DG AGRI on 15 December 2008. Two representatives from the national competent authorities participate in Committee meetings, along with the Commission and the Helpdesk. The Committee will follow and provide advice on the work of the Evaluation Expert Network.

An early item on the agenda was a presentation by the Commission about the establishment of the **European Network for Rural Development (EN RD)** (read article page 15). Launched in Cyprus in October 2008, the EN RD is for networking of national networks, organisations and administrations active in the field of rural development in the framework of RD policy 2007-2013.

The Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network prepared four presentations for the Committee. **Applying the CMEF High Nature Value (HNV) Impact Indicator** provided summary details about the revised guidance document for this important priority area for rural development which aims to preserve and develop HNV farming and forestry systems (read article page 1). Results of the **SWOT Analysis of the Evaluation System** and the associated **Needs Assessment in the**

Member States [read article page 6] were also presented plus outline details of the Evaluation Expert Network's **Work programme for 2009** (read article page 8).

One of the three concluding presentations was **Preliminary Findings of the Synthesis of the Ex-ante Evaluations of the Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013** (read article page 9). This study aimed to improve the monitoring and evaluation of rural development programmes, and assess the extent to which the needs of rural areas in the Member States are covered by RD measures.

The Commission provided **Conclusions concerning networking and governance from the Cyprus conference on Rural Development**. Finally, to exchange experiences and good evaluation practice, a Member State (Italy) reported on its **ongoing evaluation system and the national evaluation network** (read article page 11).

A number of questions were asked on the various topics, to which the Commission replied. The next meeting of the Evaluation Expert Committee will be on 23 June 2009.

News in Brief

The European Network for Rural Development



Covering 27 Member States and four integrated policy axes, the broad scope of EU rural development activity provides more opportunities for more people to benefit from each others' experience. The European Commission recognises this and has established the European Network for Rural Development (EN RD), as foreseen in Council Regulation 1698/2005 (Article 67), with a wide remit that concentrates on exchanging good practice and expertise between EU rural development practitioners. The EN RD was launched last October during the conference organised by the Commission '[Europe's rural areas in action: Facing the challenges of tomorrow](#)'.

The EN RD is managed in a similar way to the Evaluation Expert Network. An external contractor of the European Commission runs all day-to-day operational matters through the EN RD 'Contact Point'.

A Coordination committee and a Leader subcommittee, composed of representatives from the National Authorities, the National Rural Networks and EU organisations who are active in the field of rural development or represent Local Action Groups (LAGs), are advising the Commission on the activities of the EN RD. The activities of the Evaluation Expert Network and the EN RD are coordinated in a way to ensure synergies and exchanges of information.

EN RD Work Plan

The EN RD's work plan has been developed to provide support for the Member States' managing authorities responsible for Rural Development Programmes, national rural networks, Local Action Groups and other EU rural development stakeholders.

A dedicated set of Contact Point services is being rolled out that includes:

- Organising special working groups to investigate relevant rural issues and identify appropriate development solutions. These will include examination of the relationship between agriculture and the wider rural economy, the production of public goods from rural development actions and how rural policies can target territorial specificities;
- Collecting and disseminating good practice in EU rural development activities;
- Coordinating exchanges between national rural networks;
- Assisting transnational cooperation between LAGs; and
- Analysing different performance aspects of EAFRD measures.

Information and knowledge exchanges form key components of these support services and the Contact Point is using a variety of communication tools to deliver its rural development remit. Regular electronic and printed publications illustrating EAFRD activity and good practice are being produced, a programme of workshops, seminars and conferences has started, and a suite of web-based services will be launched shortly on the ENRD's website (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>).

The first issue of "Rural News", the newsletter of the EN RD has been published. It is available in six languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Polish).

To subscribe, send an email to newsletter@enrd.eu

News in Brief

Evaluation Expert Network Question and Answer Service



In order to increase capacities and operationalize the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the current programming period, the Evaluation Helpdesk is available to provide answers to questions from anyone dealing with the

evaluation of rural development programmes and measures in the EU. The Q&A service is open to rural development evaluators, programme managers, policy makers, academics and researchers.

The Q&A service will operate as follows: queries can be sent directly to a dedicated electronic mail box which will be monitored daily; replies to requests for information will be prepared by the Evaluation Helpdesk and agreed with the European Commission before being communicated to the enquirer; a selection of the most Frequently Asked Questions will then be published on the "European Evaluation Network for Rural Development" website for wide dissemination within the network.

Since the Evaluation Helpdesk started its operations in April 2008, a number of questions have been registered from the managing authorities of rural development programmes, evaluators, researchers and academics. Their questions have been related to the following broad categories:

- Concept of ongoing evaluation
- Ongoing evaluation systems
- Evaluation methodologies
- Collection of data
- Work Programme of the Evaluation Expert Network

As the Member States are making preparations for the Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) of their Rural Development Programmes in 2010, a special set of Frequently Asked Questions on operational aspects of this exercise will be made available this year.

Further information about the launch of the Q&A online tool, will be published in future issues of the newsletter. We encourage you to submit your questions by email to: info@ruralevaluation.eu

Examples of Research Projects

RuDI – Assessing the impacts of rural development Policies (incl. LEADER)



RuDI is a research project funded by the European Community under the 7th Research Framework Programme 'European Knowledge Based Bio-Economy'.

The RuDI project aims to improve the understanding of the processes and structures underlying the formulation, implementation and impacts of European rural development policies. It is examining priority setting, design, targeting and delivery processes of the 2007-13 programming period. The project will address the question of how best to assess the impact of rural development policies at all levels and across the diversity of rural Europe.

RuDI started in February 2008 and will run until July 2010. A final conference will be held in Brussels in June 2010. More information and publications related to RuDI can be found on the website <http://www.rudi-europe.net>

Advanced-EVAL - ex-ante and ex-post evaluation tools of rural development programmes



ADVANCED-EVAL, is a research project funded by the European Community under the 6th Research Framework Programme. By developing interdisciplinary approaches to model rural development,

the research institutes involved in ADVANCED-EVAL are exploring the applicability of innovative quantitative methods which aim to improve the evaluation techniques applied to EU rural development programmes.

ADVANCED-EVAL is coordinated by the University of Kiel, Institute of Agricultural Economics, (DE), and includes well-known experts on rural development, agricultural policy, social networks and local government.

The project started its activities in March 2006 and will run until February 2009. The results of the project will be disseminated at various international workshops in 2009. More information on ADVANCED-EVAL project can be found on the website: <http://www.advanced-eval.eu>

Network Events

Network events listed in this issue of the newsletter refer mainly to thematic work. Keep an eye on the [news and events page](#) of our [website](#) for an up to date programme of ongoing Network activities.

April 2009	1st Thematic Working Group Workshop on “Assessing the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiple intervening factors” (date to be confirmed).
June 23 2009	Meeting of the “Expert Committee on Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes”
July 2009	2nd Thematic Working Group Workshop on “Assessing the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiple intervening factors” (date to be confirmed)

Other Events

Check your diaries to see if you are able to participate in these upcoming evaluation-related events:

March 26-27 and November 26-27 2009	<p><i>Evaluation and Monitoring of EU Structural Funds, Maastricht, The Netherlands</i></p> <p>These seminars, organised by the European Institute of Public Administration, are intended for practitioners who want to gain a clear understanding of all the monitoring and evaluation requirements associated with EU regional and cohesion policy. They will cover the evaluation cycle, key issues for ex ante, ongoing and ex post programme evaluation, good practice in evaluation (with case studies), the development of indicators and the quantification of programmes and monitoring systems.</p> <p>For further information, visit the EIPA's website (click on Training and Research).</p>
April 23 2009	<p><i>International Expert Group Meeting on RuDI project “Assessing the impacts of rural development policies” Rome, Italy</i></p> <p>Over the past year, the RuDI project (see the article on page 15) has conducted studies in all 27 EU member states which cover different aspects of rural development policy. Synthesis reports on policy priorities, programming, implementation and expenditure analysis will be available shortly. The main findings of these studies will be presented during this Expert Group meeting.</p> <p>For further information about the project, visit the RuDI website.</p>
June 4-5 2009	<p><i>Regions, countryside, environment 2009, Nitra, Slovakia</i></p> <p>This international scientific conference, organised by the Faculty of European Studies and Regional Development, Slovak University of Agriculture, will provide an opportunity to exchange knowledge and experiences in research methodologies in relation to the quality of life in rural areas and practical solutions in Slovakia and other European rural areas.</p> <p>For further information, visit the the Slovak University of Agriculture website.</p>

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The contents of this newsletter do not necessarily express the official views of the European Commission.