

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

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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](#).