



European Evaluation Network  
for Rural Development



European Commission  
Agriculture and Rural Development

SYNTHESIS OF THE ANNUAL  
PROGRESS REPORTS  
FOR 2007 CONCERNING  
ONGOING EVALUATION

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European Evaluation Network  
for Rural Development

The European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (abbreviated to “Evaluation Expert Network”) operates under the responsibility of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development. The overall aim of the Network is to increase the usefulness of evaluation as a tool for improving the formulation and implementation of rural development policies by helping to establish good practice and capacity building in the evaluation of rural development programmes up until 2013.

Additional information about the activities of the Evaluation Expert Network and its Evaluation Helpdesk is available on the Internet through the Europa server ([http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/network/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/network/index_en.htm))

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**MAY 18, 2009**

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# I. Introduction

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From 2007 onwards, the Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU) were required to put in place a system of ongoing evaluation for each rural development programme (RDP). EU Regulations further require MS to inform regularly about the progress achieved in the development and implementation of these systems.

As part of this obligation, Managing Authorities (MAs) have to present detailed reports on their ongoing evaluation activities to the national or regional Monitoring Committees (MC). Summaries of these activities are included in the Annual Progress Reports (APRs) that the MS are sending to the European Commission (EC). The APRs cover calendar years and must be submitted by June 30 each year (i.e. following the year in question), starting with 2008.

The European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (EENRD) is supporting the EC in assessing the APR *sections on ongoing evaluation*. The Evaluation Helpdesk of the EENRD provides a yearly review of these documents and a set of deriving recommendations (i.e. the synthesis), useful to both the EC and the MAs. The aims of this activity are manifold:

- ✓ to identify possible areas for the fine-tuning and improvement of the ongoing evaluation systems in the MS;
- ✓ to enhance the quality of the evaluation reporting by fostering consistent approaches across the MS and a common understanding of the legal framework and the reporting obligations; and
- ✓ to identify and promote European good practice in conducting and reporting about ongoing evaluation activities.

This synthesis is based on the first set of APRs, submitted in June 2008 and covering the early (2007) activities related to the development of the ongoing evaluation systems for 2007-2013. The paper looks into the total of 94 RDPs approved for the current programming period: 19 national programmes, 69 regional, 2 national framework and 4 network programmes. It is important to emphasize that the assessment that follows does not review the more comprehensive reports that the programme authorities are submitting to their MC.

The analytical work was organised along the following steps: (1) the Evaluation Helpdesk developed an assessment grid to collect the relevant information from the annual evaluation reports; (2) the Helpdesk's Geographic Experts (GEs) analysed the reports, completed and returned the filled-out grids to the Helpdesk, and (3) the Helpdesk synthesised their findings, carried out the EU-wide analysis and drafted a set of recommendations for both the MS and the EC.

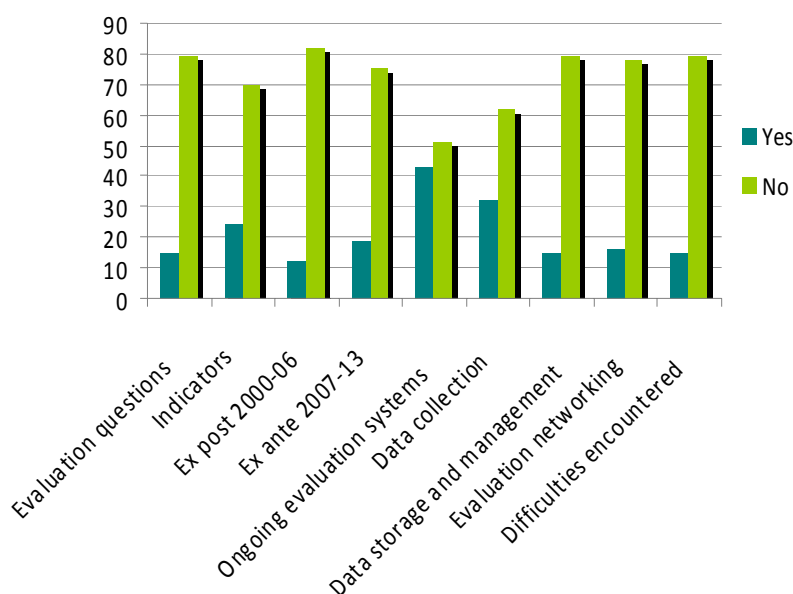
This synthesis paper is structured as follows. Section II presents an overview of the ongoing evaluation sections in the APRs for 2007. Section III looks into the provisions MS made in setting up their ongoing evaluation systems. Sections IV and V deal with ongoing evaluation activities, and data collection and management, respectively. Section VI focuses on issues insufficiently addressed in the current reports and concludes the synthesis. Throughout the paper, boxes are used to illustrate (good) practices across the EU countries and regions. Each section concludes with a set of concise recommendations, addressed both to the MS and to the EC. These are aimed at enhancing the quality of the ongoing evaluation processes and of the related reporting.

## II. The Ongoing Evaluation Sections in the Annual Progress Reports for 2007: An Overview

1. **The reporting on the ongoing evaluation systems is the first exercise of its kind.** The current programming period marked a major change in the regulatory environment for the evaluation of the EU rural development policies. The reporting obligations of the MS also changed in reflection of that. In contrast to the 2000-06 period MS now have to submit *annual* reports concerning evaluation. Only in 2010 and 2015 these take the form of the usual mid-term and ex-post evaluation reports. In this context, the MS have to supply detailed and regular information about the new systems they set up for conducting the ongoing evaluation of their RDPs.

2. **The new requirements regarding the contents of the Annual Progress Reports are framed in regulations<sup>1</sup> and guidelines<sup>2</sup>.** According to these documents, the first ongoing evaluation sections of the reports that the MS submitted for 2007 were expected to concentrate on the provisions for the establishment of the evaluation systems in the national/regional contexts. Their primary focus therefore had to be on indicators, administrative arrangements for evaluation, and data collection. The subsequent reports, in 2009 and 2011-14, will present the evaluation activities that the MS undertake.

3. **Predictably, few of the reports for 2007 follow closely the guidelines on structure.**



**Figure 1: The coverage of key topics in the evaluation sections of the APRs** (number of reports)

Only 11 reports are fully in line with the structure proposed in the guidance document, while more than three quarters are not. This is hardly surprising, given the novelty of the exercise and the specificities of the first reporting year. In fact, the reports refer to the key topics presented in the outlines only to some extent (see Figure 1). The administrative preparations for hiring evaluators are the best covered aspects (in more than half of the reports), followed by the arrangements for data collection (described in about a third of the documents). There is very

<sup>1</sup> Commission Regulation (EC) No. 1974/2006, article 60 and Annex VII, in conjunction with Council Regulation 1698/2005, articles 84(5) and 86(1) and (2).

<sup>2</sup> *Guidance Note B – Evaluation Guidelines* to the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), in particular Section 6.

little reference to the institutional arrangements for operationalizing the ongoing evaluation, including the networking, or to the difficulties encountered and the needs to be addressed in the future.

**4. The evaluation reports hence vary in quality, length and in their information content.** While some of the reports are highly informative (e.g. Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany, see Box 1), very many are as short as a paragraph. Brevity is one way to remain at a very general level of information about the evaluation activities. Excessive reference to legal requirements is another. Some of the evaluation reports contain extensive descriptions of the legal provisions or of the EU guidelines regarding ongoing evaluation. These references tend to divert focus from the activities and actions undertaken, are unnecessary and detrimental to the quality of the reports. In some reports it has been difficult to distinguish between activities that have been effectively carried out and those that are intended. The reports tend to neglect ‘the obvious’, which however creates considerable reporting gaps. An alternative and preferred approach would be to indicate the current status of the activities (even if very preliminary), and provide a timeline for initiating or further developing them.

**Box 1: The structure of the ongoing evaluation section of the APR**

**Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany** reports in a concise but very informative way on: a) the evaluation system; b) the evaluation activities; c) data-collection; and d) networking activities.

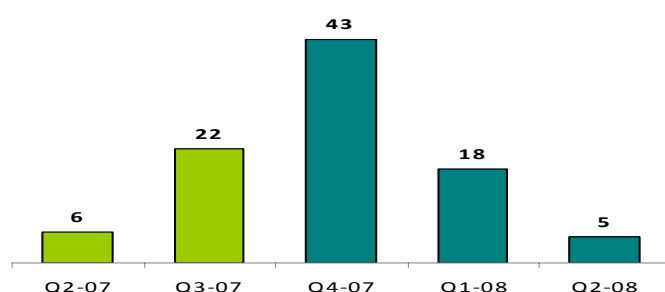
Under the first heading the report provides information on who has tendered the contract, when the selection procedure took place, who won the tender and who are the consortium partners. A short section describes the five evaluation phases as well as the agreed principles of the ongoing evaluation (further development of methods, evaluation as an open process, interactive cooperation between the evaluators and the managing authority).

Under the heading “evaluation activities” the report informs about the kick-off meeting, its participants, the objectives and the further procedures for the conceptual development of the evaluation.

The procedures for “data collection” are explained in the respective section: bilateral meetings between evaluators and technical managers from the MA are scheduled in order to agree which databases will be used for the individual indicators.

Under “networking activities”, though the contracting of the evaluator has only been concluded very recently, it is indicated which general networks the evaluator is part of: the evaluator has carried out the ex-ante evaluation of the RDPs in 3 German Länder and therefore has taken part in various networking activities. Further opportunities for networking result from the engagement in research projects such as the FP7 Project *Rural Development Impacts* (RuDI), which is being coordinated by the evaluator, Institute for Rural Development Research (IfLS).

**5. The late start of many of the RDPs is the main explanation for the scarcity of information.**



**Figure 2 : The number of RDPs approved, by quarter**

(from the second quarter of 2007, or Q2-07 through to the second quarter of 2008, or Q2-08)

The APRs follow calendar years, and the first set of reports covered the period from January 1 through December 31, 2007. However, most of the RDPs were approved in the fourth quarter of 2007, or later (see Figure 2). Consequently, most of the MS had a late start in the planning of their ongoing evaluation activities (with the exception of the ex ante), and therefore had rather few activities to report in 2007.

### III. Setting up the Evaluation Systems

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6. **The first evaluation reports provide limited indication about progress made in the setting up of the evaluation systems.** Three quarters of the reporting countries or regions do not specify any advancement with regard to the preparation of the *evaluation questions and indicators*. The others reveal wide-ranging approaches and various levels of progress (see Box 2). Even the latter fail to distinguish between the treatment of the common and the programme specific evaluation questions and indicators. It should be noted that reviewing the common evaluation questions<sup>3</sup> and developing programme-specific ones, as well as related indicators, are very important and rather time critical. This is a key step towards assessing what needs to be done in terms of collection of information and analysis, so that the questions can be answered in a meaningful and appropriate manner, particularly in view of the upcoming mid-term evaluation (MTE).

#### Box 2: The preparation of the evaluation questions: a few examples

**France-Héxagone** reported work being carried out to ensure that synergies are created and explored between the previous and the current programming period. The ex-post evaluation for the 2000-06 period is used for drawing lessons, including on the use of evaluation questions.

In **Thüringen, Germany** the evaluators further developed and fine tuned the intervention logic as a basis for answering the evaluation questions. The hierarchy of objectives was formulated in a more rigorous way and cross-checked with the respective hierarchy of indicators. For specific evaluation questions, additional indicators were defined with a view on data-availability and cost-efficiency. For each evaluation question and outline of the respective indicators and evaluations methods was given.

In **Brandenburg-Berlin, Germany** the task description of the evaluation tender specifies that the future evaluator will need to deliver an evaluation concept, including the completion of the indicator system for answering the evaluation questions.

7. **In relation to administrative preparations for evaluations, only half of the countries or regions report progress.** This leaves 45 reports that do not specify any actions taken towards establishing the ongoing evaluation systems. The vast majority of them explain the lack of information through the late approval of their RDPs. However, the reports that indicate progress has been made also differ greatly in the level of information and detail they provide. About half of these only specify that the administrative preparations for contracting evaluators are at a very early stage, i.e. activities being planned to commence in 2008.

8. **Even with limited information, some trends in tendering out the ongoing evaluation emerge clearly.** Based on the data available, almost half of the EU programme authorities opted for contracting out the ongoing evaluation activities as a **“single package”**, or are planning to. This means that they are bundling together the various evaluation activities and are outsourcing them as one set. As indicated in the guidance documents, this is a cost-saving solution that also has the advantage of improving the continuity and consistency of evaluation throughout the programming cycle. Yet, only few reports describe the tasks and responsibilities of the ongoing evaluators, as described in the respective *terms of reference* (for an example, see Box 3).

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<sup>3</sup> This should be understood as adapting them to the national or regional contexts.



### Box 3: The tasks of the ongoing evaluator in Belgium-Wallonia

The evaluator in Belgium-Wallonia is contracted for the following activities:

A. **monitoring and evaluation of the RDP**, i.e.:

- validate the system of monitoring and evaluation indicators proposed by the MA
- develop data collection methods for the result indicators
- carry out any thematic studies or other evaluation-related activities required by the MA
- assess/quantify the impacts of the RDP, and carry out all other tasks required for completing the evaluation of the RDP (e.g. answering the evaluation questions, assessing the efficiency and the effectiveness of the RDP etc)
- draft an annual report on the ongoing evaluation activities

A synthesis of this report will be included in the APR, while, in 2010, this report will become the mid-term evaluation report.

B. **strategic monitoring**, i.e.:

- follow the trends of the baseline indicators included in the Regional Strategic Plan, and update the indicators as statistics become available
- in 2010 the evaluator will take part in the drafting of the summary report required by the EU regulations

C. **networking**, i.e.:

- participation in the Evaluation Expert Committee meetings
- participation in thematic working groups and workshops dealing with evaluation matters

9. The “single package” option has, nevertheless, variations across the programmes. The reports are rather scarce on information, and inconsistent about the types of data provided, thus failing to build a solid basis for comparisons and conclusions. Still, some interesting insights into how the process is organized in various EU regions can be derived. For instance:

- 8 countries or regions out of the 11 providing information organized open tenders, which laid the ground for a competitive selection of evaluators;
- 10 countries or regions out of the 13 providing information selected a consortium as opposed to a single organisation; this presents the advantage of drawing on a wider base of expertise, which is important given the multi-sectoral impacts of the rural development measures;
- 7 regions in Germany<sup>4</sup> (hereafter referred to as DE-7) opted for organizing a joint tender and hire the same evaluators for their respective programmes. This is a cost-saving solution that also allows for administrative simplification. The downside of it is that it might result in evaluations and reporting that do not sufficiently take into account the regional specificities and are therefore not sufficiently differentiated.
- The countries or regions where information was available revealed different preferences regarding the duration of the contracts for ongoing evaluation; many hired the evaluators for the whole programming period (e.g. Brandenburg-Berlin and Thüringen Germany, or Lombardia, Italy), while others preferred either a succession of shorter term contracts, or phased contracts. The cut-off point of these includes the completion of the mid-term

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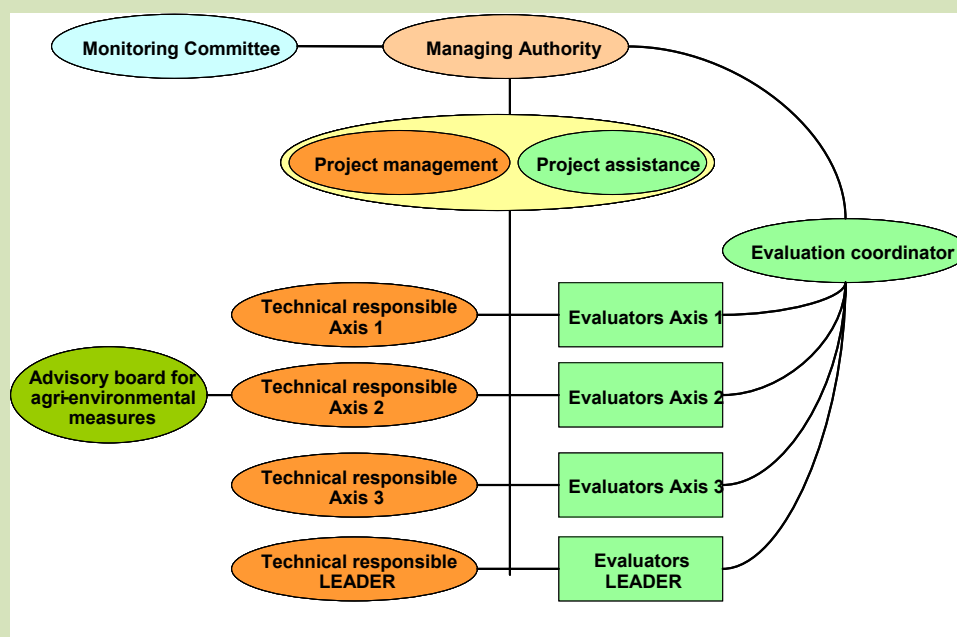
<sup>4</sup> Hessen, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Niedersachsen-Bremen, Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Note that two regions (Niedersachsen-Bremen) have a joint RDP.

evaluation (e.g. Bulgaria, Saarland-Germany), or the year before the ex-post evaluation (e.g. Belgium-Wallonia).

10. **A limited number of countries or regions report alternative approaches.** Thus, some decided to outsource the various evaluation activities as a set of separate tenders. One way of breaking down the activities is by topic (e.g. Estonia, Austria – see Box 4). Such a choice allows for more flexibility in finding the best suited evaluators for assessing wide-ranging impacts: economic, social and environmental. It also facilitates overcoming difficulties in forming multi-disciplinary consortia to respond to the calls for tenders. The risks are, however, that the approaches taken by the different evaluation teams are different, or insufficiently coordinated. That can be a danger particularly when assessing the cross-sectoral spill-over of the measures (e.g. a farm investment produces not only economic effects, but also social and environmental).

**Box 4: Multiple tenders for ongoing evaluation in Austria**

The organisation of the evaluation process in Austria is based on the experience gained in the last programming period. It is currently organised as a “project”, managed and coordinated by an evaluation unit in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, in close cooperation with the “evaluation coordinator” who is responsible for the single evaluators of the 4 axes. The various evaluation tasks are contracted out to 7 single contractors (of which 6 are public institutions and 1 private). Furthermore, the MA has nominated contact persons for the evaluators, who provide information concerning specific measures. The contact persons receive the recommendations of the evaluators and oversee the follow-up. Due to the specific relevance of measures in Axis 2, the contact person is here additionally supported by an advisory board.



11. **Very few countries or regions chose not to tender out the ongoing evaluation as such** (except for the mandatory mid-term and ex-post evaluations), e.g. Bayern, Germany or Romania. However, this does not exclude the outsourcing of specific thematic studies, in addition to the common activities, as it is reportedly planned, for instance, in Romania. Such a choice may allow for certain budgetary savings on the evaluation activities. Nevertheless, the most significant risks of this practice are that the obligatory evaluation milestones will be conducted in isolation and without adequate preparation. To illustrate, one such danger is that MAs provide the evaluators with insufficient data or of unsatisfactory quality. Given that data collection is costly and time consuming,

MAs may not be able to adapt and meet the needs of the evaluators if the latter are only appointed late in the process. Under such a scenario, the quality of the evaluations might be impaired.

**12. A distinctive approach was described by Umbria, Italy, where the evaluations of the rural and regional programmes are closely linked.** The ongoing evaluation system for the region's RDP will be articulated with the system developed for the programmes financed from other EU funds (i.e. structural and cohesion). To bolster synergies, the regional RDP authority in Umbria has planned to develop a single evaluation plan for the rural and regional policies during 2008. The plan is in line with both the National Strategy Plan for rural development and the National Strategic Framework for the regional/cohesion policies.

**13. Overall, few reports describe the evaluation-related institutional designs.** For effective results, the independent evaluators need to rely on and interact with a significant number of parties, under the coordination of the RDP authorities. This is what the CMEF Handbook advises for, by referring to regular consultations between the evaluation stakeholders and the setting up of a steering group to accompany the evaluation process. However, only about 15 of the APRs present the way in which the evaluation activities are managed (this observation does not refer to the data collection and storage arrangements, which are discussed in Section V). A comprehensive yet clear description of the actors involved in the ongoing evaluation system and of their roles is provided by Marche, Italy (see Box 5).

#### **Box 5: The ongoing evaluation system in Marche, Italy**

The ongoing evaluation system in Marche, Italy rests on the following institutional structure:

- ***An "evaluation unit" within the MA***

Is in charge of the running and coordination of the evaluation activities. In this, it coordinates with other partners responsible for, e.g. the monitoring of the RDP, the regional agricultural information system, the communication plan for the RDP, statistical data, the environmental monitoring and analysis.

- ***A steering group called "complementarities and horizontal issues"***

Consists of public officials representing various sectors and themes, either horizontal (environmental protection, equal opportunities), or complementary to rural development (intervention supported by other EU funds).

- ***The independent evaluator***

Possessing adequate competence and selected in compliance with the national and EU competition rules, the independent evaluator will carry out the ongoing evaluation. This covers the mid-term and ex-post evaluations for the 2007-13 programming period, as well as additional assistance to the MA (e.g. drafting of the APRs and quantification of result indicators). The selection of the independent evaluator was due to be finalized by the end of 2007, and is supported from technical assistance funds.

- ***The Regional Environmental Agency***

Is responsible for drafting the biannual environmental reports and, in that context, will also gauge the environmental impacts of the RDP through indicators drawn from the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

- ***The Monitoring Committee of the RDP***

Is made up of the relevant economic and social partners of the MA, and fulfils all the tasks provided for in the EU regulations.

- ***The Ministry for Agricultural and Forestry Policies (national) and the National Rural Network***
- ***The European Commission and the European Network for Rural Development – and, in particular, the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development***

14. **The complexities of the interactions within the ongoing evaluation systems are typically greater than most individual reports show.** As in the case above, the ongoing evaluation system relies on a complex architecture. Yet most of the reports fail to present it in its entirety, focusing instead on specific components. Even with these limitations, more insights into the organisation of the ongoing evaluation are possible on an EU-aggregate. Most German regions report about MAs setting up Steering Committees, where concepts, activities as well as outcomes of the evaluations are discussed. It is furthermore mentioned that these meetings should have low formality and stimulate open discussions. Such a practice presents several benefits, including a stronger role of evaluation in the policy-making process and higher effectiveness all throughout the evaluation process. Some countries or regions have also set up special working groups, interacting with evaluators usually on a measure level. This approach is particularly practical in countries or regions that opted for multiple tenders, such as Austria.

**Recommendations for the MS:**

- ✓ Refer to progress on every component of the ongoing evaluation system: administrative matters, hiring of independent evaluators and evaluation questions and indicators
- ✓ Distinguish between common and programme specific evaluation questions and indicators
- ✓ Be clear and specific about how the ongoing evaluation is implemented: e.g. (a) explain whether the ongoing evaluation is contracted out as a single package or subject to a set of different tenders, (b) reveal the duration and the phasing of the contracts, (c) in this context, explain whether they also cover mid-term and ex-post evaluations etc.
- ✓ Provide clear information about how the activities of the evaluators are planned to be organized, particularly on the evaluators' responsibilities, and their interaction with the MAs and other evaluation stakeholders

**Recommendations for the EC:**

- ✓ Ensure that the reporting on the ongoing evaluation systems adequately informs on their key components
- ✓ A set of more detailed guidance points (also made known to the MS) could be a useful tool for that purpose

## IV. Ongoing Evaluation Activities

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15. **Only a limited focus on describing ongoing evaluation activities was expected for the first set of APRs.** The CMEF Handbook advises the MS to centre their reports for 2007 on the provisions for the setting up of their ongoing evaluation systems. This is an early step, subsequent to the approval of the RDPs and laying the foundations for the whole evaluation exercise throughout the programming period. Only once this is completed, the bulk of the ongoing evaluation activities are expected to fully unfold, and be duly reported on from 2008 onwards. These include capacity building and methodological work, data collection and references to difficulties encountered.

16. **Confusion is observed about capturing “borderline” activities in the evaluation reports.** The “borderline” activities refer to those placed at the fringes of the programming periods, notably the ex-post and ex-ante evaluations. The evaluation sections of the APRs reveal very different understandings about the necessity to reflect these activities in the reports for 2007. While some countries or regions report that no evaluation activities were undertaken in 2007 because their RDPs had not yet been approved, others provide detailed descriptions of how the ex-post evaluation for 2000-06 and/or ex-ante evaluation for 2007-13 were organized.

17. **A look into the past ex-post evaluations was not required but may resonate with the spirit of ongoing evaluation.** It could be argued that the ex-post evaluations for a previous programming period should not belong to a report dealing with the current period. However, about 10 reports judge otherwise. Within these, contexts and levels of detail surrounding the reporting on the ex-post evaluations differ. Some countries or regions only mention that the ex-post evaluations for 2000-06 were carried out over the course of 2007, while others also provide information about the independent evaluators who drafted them (e.g. type/name of contractor, start and end dates for the contract etc.). That is the case, for instance, in Toscana, Italy, or in Flanders, Belgium. However, such an approach reveals little about building bridges across programming periods. The preferred way of dealing with the ex-post evaluation activities – if at all – would be one that is more explicit about applying lessons learned from past evaluation activities to the systems in current periods, and about the synergies that can be thus derived. An example is given in Box 6.

### **Box 6: The ex-post evaluation for 2000-06 in the ongoing evaluation section of the APR in France-Héxagone**

The ex-post evaluation for 2000-06 in **France-Héxagone** is being conducted with the aim to use the lessons learnt in 2007-13. The rural development measures have been grouped and are assessed within four vertical thematic groups:

- “structural intervention”
- “forestry”
- “support for less favoured areas”
- “agri-environmental support”

On top of these, a “synthesis” group deals with the horizontal evaluation questions, i.e. those looking into the combined effects of the RDP.

The French approach is exemplary in at least two regards:

- ✓ First, it relies on a wide participation of stakeholders, who support the MA and add to their capacities and technical expertise. The actors connected to the groups described above are partnerships involving administration, researchers and other experts. They are not conducting the evaluation themselves, as their role is rather to *steer the work of the independent evaluators*. They hence ensure that the evaluation work is adequate and meets the required standards.

- ✓ Second, it is aimed to feed into the current programming period. The ex-post evaluation as such has been scheduled to be completed in 2008, while additional work has been foreseen in 2009 (impacts of LEADER), and 2010 (meta-evaluation). The organization of the evaluation work for 2000-06 anticipates, to a certain extent, the axis-based approach in the current period. Moreover, there is an early incorporation of the impacts on climate change, even since 2000.

**18. The ex-ante evaluations for the current programming period are covered to a limited extent.** According to the European regulations<sup>5</sup> and the subsequent guidance documents, the ex-ante evaluation is the first milestone in the flow of ongoing evaluation activities of a given programming period. However, the ex-ante evaluation is part of the drawing up of each RDP, therefore it needs to be completed before the RDP is approved and the programme starts. Although the current RDPs should have started on January 1, 2007, their completion and/or approval was delayed in actual fact, sometimes by more than a year. This left the ex-ante evaluation as the only or as the primary evaluation activity carried out during the reporting period, hence its inclusion in about 20 reports.

**19. However, the levels of detail for the reporting on ex-ante evaluation vary greatly.** Most of the countries or regions reporting on the ex-ante evaluation activities focus on procedural aspects. That is the case, for instance, of Finland, Hungary, and Romania, of Lombardia, Marche and Umbria in Italy, of Castilla y León and Murcia in Spain, and Ile de la Réunion and Guyanne in France. They provide information about the tendering process (type of tender, type of contractor, duration of the contracts etc.), although there is no consistent approach to that, in the sense that these pieces of information are presented inconsistently across the EU. For instance, 4 countries or regions report that the ex-ante evaluation was subject to an open tender, while 6 refer to the type of institutions being awarded the contract (private and public in one case each, academic and mixed consortia in two cases each). A different approach is taken in Malta, where the findings of the ex-ante evaluation are presented in detail, and little reference is made to the procedural aspects.

**20. Some reports also refer to wider methodological concerns, mainly in the context of thematic studies.** Although early in the process (the reporting year is 2007), some countries or regions have already looked into the methodological aspects that will require further study. No patterns can be established on the EU level, as the methodological issues at stake differ from programme to programme. Here are a few examples, although the list is not meant to be exhaustive. Sweden is undertaking an in-depth study on the baseline indicators, and a second one on the criteria for the less favoured areas, in order to assess how the different production conditions across the country influence profitability. Austria is carrying out, among others, a study on the farmland bird index. Similarly, Scotland, UK, reports work being done to progress indicators where it was not possible to include baseline information into the RDP. In that vein, a technical working group has been established to take forward the development of baseline indicators for high nature value farmland.

**21. However, only few mention the methodologies they (will) employ in the evaluation of their RDPs.** Such is the case of DE-7. These German regions refer to the use of specific evaluation methods for individual measures, such as the use of the counterfactual analysis for the agri-environmental support schemes. Their report reveals, for instance, that “the assessment of the supporting programme of agri-environment investments include a before and after comparison of

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<sup>5</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), art.85: “ex-ante evaluation shall form part of drawing up each rural development programme”.

enterprises receiving support and of those not subject to intervention". In other reports, more general references were made to the evaluation methods and tools used, such as survey instruments and analytical methods which shall be used under cost-benefit considerations, or expert- or group-interviews. Although only the countries or regions well advanced in their evaluation process were able to report on these topics in the first year, such information will need to be provided on a much wider basis in the years to come.

**Recommendations for the MS:**

- ✓ Present the ex-post evaluation activities for 2000-06 only if they have a clear relevance and follow-up in the current programming period
- ✓ A concise reference to the activities undertaken as part of the ex-ante evaluation should be sufficient
- ✓ However, it is more important to report on how the recommendations resulting from the ex-ante evaluations are followed up on
- ✓ Clearly state any additional supporting activities that are undertaken or planned (e.g. thematic studies)
- ✓ Refer to the methodologies developed or planned to be applied for the evaluation of your RDP

**Recommendations for the EC:**

- ✓ Encourage MS to provide more information about the methodological work they are undertaking or planning in relation to the evaluation of their RDPs (e.g. type of studies, timelines for their completion, how they are carried out etc.)  
Such information could be centralized and analysed by the Evaluation Helpdesk, and shared for the benefit of all the evaluation stakeholders in the EU. In particular, it would be an important resource for identifying good practice EU-wide

## V. Systems for Data Collection and Management

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22. **Member States have the legal obligation to provide the necessary data to the evaluators.** The Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005, article 84 (5) stipulates that MS “shall organize the production and gathering of the requisite data, and shall use the various pieces of information provided by the monitoring system”. To this aim, MS are free to choose the most appropriate way to organize their systems for data collection and management.

23. **Overall, the reports are informative about the arrangements that the MS made with regard to data collection and management.** Ensuring appropriate data flows is one of the tasks that need to be set up very early in the evaluation process. Several reasons justify such necessity: (1) establishing data collection systems is time consuming and costly, and it usually involves the coordination of a wide range of participants; (2) data needs to be consistent and comparable throughout the programme implementation, hence the need for establishing clear and stable methodologies early on; and (3) data needs to be provided with regularity from the very beginning of policy intervention, in order to ensure a correct observation of the programme effects. The arrangements for data collection are described in 32 reports, of which 15 also present provisions for data management. The information supplied is detailed, and reveals a wide array of approaches.

24. **With few exceptions, the reports do not highlight specific challenges in collecting various types of data.** The data collection systems are designed to jointly meet monitoring and evaluation data needs, under the same institutional architecture. Most reports only describe these common arrangements in a general manner. However, there are objective differences between the handling of various indicators and data. The common impact indicators, for instance, require more complicated data collection methodologies and are subject to lower registration and reporting frequencies than the output or result indicators. Only few reports highlight that. Such is the case of Scotland, UK, where the whole methodological set for data collection combines administrative records, sample surveys and other tools (the latter in relation to the impact indicators and in the context of evaluation). These latter tools are planned to be developed over 2008.

25. The reports reveal that MAs act as a centralizer, pooling data from various suppliers. The paying agencies (PAs) are the first-hand source of information, as they are in direct contact with the programme beneficiaries and cover the totality of support schemes. The PAs usually get data from the programme beneficiaries through application and/or claim forms. Many reports also reveal additional sources of data. For regular inflows, these can be national/regional statistical services (e.g. as in Luxembourg, Finland, Austria) or research institutes (e.g. in Finland, Hungary). A particular case is that of Sweden, where the collection of accountancy data for farms is outsourced to an agency specialized in advisory services and bookkeeping; this agency covers a large percentage of Swedish farms and also supplies data to the Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN). Information from these sources can be complemented, as needed, with surveys/interviews among beneficiaries (e.g. in many of the German Lander, Romania) or various studies (e.g. Romania, Sweden).

26. **Most reports describe the division of responsibilities or even the detailed procedures established between the MAs and the PAs or other bodies** (e.g. Lithuania, Poland, and Romania). Within the MAs, a central service/unit is usually established, in charge with the drawing together of all the data necessary for monitoring and evaluation. However, in some of the countries or regions, measure managers may also play an important role in supplying data to this central service/unit (e.g. Luxembourg or Galicia, Spain).



**27. Alternative models for data collection are also available.** Several countries or regions have opted for more decentralized approaches. Responsibilities for data collection can be divided by data type. For instance, in England, United Kingdom, axis 2 follows a separate institutional arrangement from axes 1 and 3. Data collection for axis 2 is shared between three specialised agencies<sup>6</sup>, whereas data collection for axes 1 and 3 (and the related part of axis 4) is under the responsibility of England's Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Since 2007 the RDAs are benefiting from a project to enable them to collect the monitoring and evaluation data. Similarly, in Bayern, Germany two ministries are responsible for gathering monitoring data: agriculture and environment. They draw data from the different measure-specific IT-programmes, as well as from certification authorities. The measure-specific data is prepared and controlled by the responsible units and compiled by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. For this purpose, the recommendations of the German "Handbook for EAFRD/GAK-reporting 2007-2013" have been considered.

**28. There is rather limited information about data collection methodologies.** Some countries only specify the responsible body for developing these methodologies – typically the MAs (e.g. Romania). Further details are sometimes provided. For instance, in Scotland, United Kingdom, the decisions on data collection methodologies are taken based on the delivery mechanism for each measure and on each type of indicator. Other countries or regions report on the current status (e.g. methodologies under preparation in Baden-Württemberg, Germany). Only few reports present comprehensive information about their data collection methodologies. For instance, Sachsen, Germany mentions the methodologies for collecting agri-environmental data. These include (1) accompanying surveys, (2) control beneficiary groups for specific indicators, (3) model-based calculation of impacts, (4) pilot-areas and (5) case studies.

**29. Adequate IT systems are developed or upgraded for data management purposes.** According to the EU regulations<sup>7</sup>, the MA "shall be responsible for ensuring that there is a system to record and maintain statistical information on implementation in computerised form adequate for the purposes of monitoring and evaluation". Countries and regions report various stages of progress, and experience with EU membership plays a role. Some of the new MS (e.g. Romania) report having outsourced the development of new IT systems for monitoring and evaluation. In turn, many of the older MS report adjustments being made to existing systems, to accommodate the new requirements of the CMEF (e.g. France-Héxagone, or Galicia, Spain).

**30. There are several alternatives in place for organising databases.** In most of the reported cases, the MAs are using a single database for all the data needed. While the MAs are typically solely in charge of the management of the IT system, in a few countries or regions (e.g. France-Héxagone or Baden-Württemberg, Germany) they have partnered with research institutes (see Box 7). Alternatively, distinct databases may be set up for different kinds of data. In the case of Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, for instance, a common database is being set up for axes 1 and 3. It was user tested in 2007 and was expected to be completed early 2008. However, data collection for axis 2 is to be undertaken at measure level. Finally, a distinct case is that of DE-7, which have outsourced the ongoing evaluation jointly. In the same vein, they have developed a single and shared database.

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<sup>6</sup> Natural England, which delivers agri-environment schemes, the Forestry Commission which delivers woodland schemes and the Rural Payments Agency which is the delivery agent responsible for the Hill Farm Allowance.

<sup>7</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), article 75(b)

### **Box 7: The data management system in France-Héxagone**

For the 2000-06 period, **France** has tasked INRA, a research institute, with the development of an IT platform for managing rural data, i.e. *The Observatory for Rural Development*, or *l'Observatoire du développement rural*. INRA works in partnership with the French MA and PA, and a steering committee has been set up between these partners to manage the system.

Initially designed to meet the information needs of the previous RDP, the *Observatoire* is now considered for adaptation for an adequate use in the 2007-13 context. To that end, various studies are underway or in the pipeline, e.g. further development of the data analysis utilities of the system, further extension of the database, development of dynamic cartographic applications etc.

The IT platform consists of a database and utilities allowing for a statistical and cartographic treatment of data, and is accessible online. The database pools information necessary for the development of output, result and impact indicators from various sources – the services of the Ministry of Agriculture, the PA, as well as statistical services, producers' organisations etc. Data also carries territorial tags, which allow for a sound spatial analysis of the effects of the RDP.

#### **Recommendations for the MS:**

- ✓ Highlight progress and/or difficulties encountered with regard to data collection methodologies
- ✓ Indicate the data sources used as well as the inter-institutional information flows established for data collection (diagrams could be used)
- ✓ Refer to the arrangements made to develop/adjust the IT systems (including databases) for data collection and management
- ✓ Distinguish, as appropriate, between the various types of data collected (by common versus programme specific indicators, by axes/measures etc.)

#### **Recommendations for the EC:**

- ✓ Pay particular attention to the details of data collection provisions, especially during the early years in which reports are submitted (2008, 2009)
- ✓ Monitor progress in the following years

## VI. Topics for Further Consideration and Final Thoughts

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31. **The reports provide little information about networking activities, difficulties encountered or needs for future work.** A significant part of the explanation lies in the inherent specificities of the first reporting year, as already discussed. Nevertheless, early consideration of these issues comes through to a certain extent, particularly in the reports from the old MS.

- Information about *evaluation networking* is prevailing in the multi-region countries, where the needs for convergence and coordination among evaluators are more visible. Most of the German reports mention exchange with the scientific community and evaluators within and between regions. More limited reference to networking is made in other reports, such as Estonia (an evaluation network on axis 2 matters, with the involvement of the MA and various institutions), or Austria (workshops and seminars involving the MA and evaluators).
- The *difficulties encountered and needs for future work* are highlighted in about 15 reports, and cover a very wide range of topics.

Most challenges are reported in relation to *systems and methodologies for data collection*. This is the natural consequence of the focus on these types of activities early in the programming period. To illustrate, Sweden is focusing on enhancing the usability of its IT systems (particularly for axes 1 and 3), as well as on improving data quality. New MS are more concerned with the functionality of their systems (e.g. Poland, Hungary), or with developing better tools for collecting information from the programme beneficiaries (e.g. Lithuania). A different type of challenge is reported by Marche, Italy, which faces difficulties in quantifying certain environmental indicators. This is primarily because of the difficulties in finding regional data, and because data provided by the administrative sources is not collected in line with the methodologies proposed within the CMEF.

Needs for future work are expressed mainly with respect to *methodological aspects* regarding RDP evaluation or *quantification of indicators*. The calculation of the net effects of intervention is the most prominent concern, surfacing in the reports of Sweden, and of the DE-7. Many German reports also express a need for further thematic work on model-based analysis in regional economics, as well as in the development of the HNV impact indicator. Finally, several reports, including from Germany and Spain, emphasize the importance of fully using the Evaluation Network for Rural Development as a forum for discussion, and for information and knowledge sharing.

32. **Little is said about evaluation capacities, including the needs or actions taken to enhance them.** The MAs in the MS are responsible for adequately organizing the evaluation activities and for ensuring all the necessary resources. In this context, the assessment that the Evaluation Helpdesk carried out in the MS at the end of 2008 revealed a significant need for strengthening the evaluation capacities, particularly among the MAs in the new MS. However, the outline for the ongoing evaluation section in the APRs does not explicitly advise the MS to report on actions they take with regard to their evaluation capacities. Even so, some of the MS did that. Poland, for instance, revealed that employees of the Ministry of Agriculture received training on evaluation techniques from the Polish Agency for Business Development. Although it can only be inferred from the respective report, another way of strengthening the evaluation capacities within the MAs is to promote partnerships with expert organisations, as in the case of France (see Box 7). If any activities are undertaken towards strengthening the domestic evaluation capacities, these should be reported

under the heading of “evaluation activities undertaken” (or point 3 of the outline provided in the Guidelines<sup>8</sup>).

**33. The evaluation sections of the APRs for 2007 would benefit from more information and clarity.** The novelty of the evaluation system and the late approval of the RDPs make the first reporting exercise (covering the year 2007) exceptional. An overview of the evaluation sections in the APRs reveals wide-ranging approaches and understandings as to how the ongoing evaluation activities need to be reflected. As seen, about half of the reports submitted in 2008 did not contain relevant information for the previous year. Many APRs do not even refer to entire components of the ongoing evaluation system. Similarly, confusion applies to reporting about certain evaluation activities (e.g. ex-post evaluation for the previous programming period), and to the expected level of detail that needs to be provided (see next sections for further comments).

**34. The focus of the future reports is expected to shift.** During the first year of programme implementation, i.e. 2007, MS were encouraged to refer mainly to the setting up of their evaluation systems and to the necessary preparations for adequate data collection and management. With the foundations thus laid out, further evaluative work will be undertaken, such as methodological development, ongoing data collection, and capacity building. The focus of the reports should change over time accordingly. In 2009, it will also be critical to provide insights into the preparation of the mid-term evaluation, due to be undertaken in 2010. Moreover, as the evaluation activities unfold, difficulties faced will become clearer, and so will the needs for more networking, future work and capacity building. It is therefore expected that these aspects will better come through in the future reports.

**35. However, important lessons can be drawn from the current reports.** Despite the limited amount of information available in the reports for 2007, many recommendations have been possible towards the improvement of the quality of future reports (presented at the end of each section). Most of the findings specific to the 2007 programme year are directly transferable to and applicable in 2008, particularly given the delays with which many RDPs started. More than half of the countries and regions will still need to report on their early ongoing evaluation steps in 2009.

**36. The Evaluation Helpdesk can significantly support the enhancement of quality and consistency of the evaluation reporting EU-wide.** The synthesis report concluded, *inter alia*, that it is important that all significant matters are covered in the evaluation sections of the APRs, and that they are addressed consistently across the EU. The Evaluation Helpdesk can deliver support in at least two ways: (1) **train and support the EC desk officers in charge of the APRs to apply the reporting standards and requirements in a more uniform way**, and (2) **provide detailed recommendations in each synthesis report that it prepares annually**.

37. Supported with inputs from the Evaluation Helpdesk, **the EC desk officers can play a key role in communicating and applying further recommendations for enhancing the quality of evaluation reporting**. Their contribution should not be limited to a feedback on the reports that MS submit. Through increased dialogue, the EC desk officers can provide support to the MS, as needed, during the process of drafting their APRs. In this timely way, MS can achieve a clearer understanding of their reporting obligations, with positive consequences for the quality of the evaluation sections of the APRs and, ultimately, also on the quality of the evaluation systems.

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<sup>8</sup> *Guidance Note B – Evaluation Guidelines* to the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), in particular Section 6.

**Recommendations for the MS:**

- ✓ Cover all the components of the evaluation system in your reports
- ✓ Focus on the activities you undertake rather than describe the legal requirements
- ✓ Even if activities are not yet started, provide an indication of their planned timetable
- ✓ In the same vein, complement the reporting about activities finalised or underway with a timetable of the activities planned for the following years
- ✓ Each year, report progress against previous year(s) only, without repeating information already provided in the past
- ✓ In 2009, also cover the topics not included in the report for 2007 (e.g. provisions for data collection and for the setting up of the ongoing evaluation systems)
- ✓ In 2009, also highlight the preparations undertaken for organizing the mid-term evaluation of the RDPs

**Recommendations for the EC:**

- ✓ Better explain the components of the ongoing evaluation systems to the MS (EC standardized presentations, made in/to the MS, are an option)
- ✓ Develop (with support from the Evaluation Helpdesk) a list of topics that need to be included in the evaluation sections of the APRs; the list may change focus depending on the stage in the programme implementation and evaluation process
- ✓ Check if all relevant points on ongoing evaluation (as outlined in the guidance documents) are covered
- ✓ If no progress has been made in the reporting year, ask for that to be clearly stated
- ✓ Ensure consistency of the ongoing evaluation sections of the APRs across programmes



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