



European Evaluation Network
for Rural Development



European Commission
Agriculture and Rural Development

PAPER ON

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN THE MEMBER STATES

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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)

PAPER ON

**THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT
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1. The Purpose of the Work

The assessment of needs was carried out with a view to highlighting the priority issues of the Member States stemming from the evaluation of their rural development programmes. Through this activity, the Evaluation Helpdesk establishes a strong base for a focused response to the Member States' needs in the near future. The assessment of needs was foreseen as a distinct activity (no. 1.4.2.) in the Annual Work Programme for 2008 of the Evaluation Helpdesk, and will have a follow-up in 2009, as the activity no. 1.4.1 of the Annual Work Programme 2009 foresees an updating of the current paper on the needs assessment.

2. Organizing the Assessment of the Evaluation Needs across the EU¹

The Evaluation Network for Rural Development organized Focus Groups to assess the needs and wishes of stakeholders in the Member States in relation to capacity building, networking and knowledge transfer. The needs assessment will feed into the mid-term priority setting of the Evaluation Expert Network (up until 2010). An additional objective of the Focus Groups was to activate the network itself: stakeholders have been asked to contribute to the network and the Helpdesk, through its Geographic experts, established communication with the evaluation community 'on the ground'. Therefore, the Focus Groups have also performed an important social and awareness raising role.

The Focus Group meetings have been held starting on the 38th week of 2008. The following countries have been covered: Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It should be noted, however, that in countries with regional programmes, only some regions may have been covered. Only five countries have not been reported on, for miscellaneous reasons: the Netherlands, Belgium-Flanders and Lithuania (lack or late approval of the Geographical experts), Belgium-Wallonia (reduced interest in organizing a Focus group), Denmark (counterparts expressed preference for a direct meeting with the Evaluation Helpdesk), and Portugal (Focus Group meeting foreseen at a later date). The countries where Focus Groups were not held should be given priority in the planning of the Evaluation Helpdesk's missions to the Member States.

The Geographical experts of the Evaluation Helpdesk took the lead in organizing the Focus Group meetings. The experts liaised with the evaluation communities in the Member States and facilitated the discussions. For both the organization of the meetings and reporting purposes, they followed the "Guide for the Organization of Focus Groups", as prepared by the Evaluation Helpdesk. A wide range of evaluation stakeholders were invited to the meetings: Managing Authorities, Implementing Bodies for the four rural development axes, evaluation experts, and beneficiaries. When needed, invitations were extended to ensure an adequate representation of the sub-national programmes. Attendance at the meetings varied across regions and countries, but overall the Managing Authorities have been represented on every occasion. In contrast, to date, no beneficiaries participated in the Focus Group meetings.

Most of the Geographical Experts viewed their experience as positive and highly encouraging, and in most cases it was a timely opportunity to incite dialogue between the different evaluation stakeholders. The Geographical Experts captured the main findings of the Focus Group discussions in reports that they first circulated to the participants for feedback and then submitted to the Evaluation Helpdesk.

The needs assessment is presented below and structured in three main sections related to the "General Considerations Regarding the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF)" (Section 3), "The Assessment of the Evaluation Needs Across the EU" (Section 4) and "Addressing the Needs: the Role of the Evaluation Helpdesk" (Section 5). The evaluation concerns raised by the Member States will feed into the multi-annual programming of the Evaluation Helpdesk. To that end they are classified and prioritized according to two main criteria: (1) their time sensitivity and (2) their prevalence across the Member States. They are presented at the beginning of each section. Also, a country by country summary of the

¹ This paper is the expected output of activity 1.4.2. "To carry out a theme-orientated needs assessment" foreseen in the European Evaluation Network for rural development Plan 2008"

issues raised during the Focus Groups is presented in Annex 1. Interventions are proposed in Annex 2. However, they should be read as indicative, as the current report is only a supporting document for next annual work programmes of the Evaluation Helpdesk.

3. General Considerations Regarding the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF)

The Section below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the CMEF, as expressed by the Member States. For legal or practical considerations, there are virtually no intervention actions needed or possible for the current programming period (2007-2013).

The findings are nevertheless valuable for streamlining the rural development evaluation system ahead, over the next financial period.

CMEF structures and steers the evaluation of the rural development programmes in the Member States. The CMEF consists of a well defined set of indicators, which are simple and harmonized across the EU. By setting the hierarchy between the indicators, it provides a clear distinction between inputs, outputs, results, and impacts, and explains the logic that connects them. Together with the accompanying guidelines, including the glossary and the FAQ, the CMEF provides a solid common reference for all Member States with regard to the evaluation of their rural development programmes. The existence of a common set of evaluation questions is largely seen as positive, given that it steers activities in a well-defined direction and clarifies the relationship between monitoring, evaluation and audit, as well as between the indicators and the measures.

In addition, it enables a better organization of the evaluation processes. The CMEF is viewed positively as it provides a set of good working templates allowing objectives to translate into actual deliverable schemes. It also clearly defines the tasks and responsibilities of the stakeholders (Managing authorities, Implementing bodies, evaluators) in the monitoring and evaluation process, and that enables a more disciplined approach than in the previous programming periods. The CMEF package specifies a clear timetable, identifies data needs and sources, and outlines key procedures. It is a useful reference for developing reporting requirements across the entire implementation process. It enables better coordination in setting and meeting objectives and targets, benchmarking and guiding/targeting selection criteria.

EU-wide comparability facilitates exchange, adaptation and learning. The CMEF defines a common language and thus is becoming a key communication tool for all implementation levels, from regional to EU-wide. Equally, common indicators allow for an EU-wide comparability and aggregation. As a result, a much needed sharing of evaluation experience and know-how between Member States is becoming possible and meaningful. In particular, this galvanizes the development of evaluation methodologies and structures in the new member States where experience and capacities are weaker. On a national and regional level, the evaluation knowledge is spreading out to all stakeholders and this calls for an improved quality of data collection by the implementing bodies and a better understanding of the evaluation results by the Managing authorities. In this context, the Evaluation and Monitoring Committees have become real platforms for structured discussions and knowledge sharing.

As a consequence, the link between evaluation and policy making is stronger. Compared to the previous programming periods, the importance of the evaluation activities is increasing, driven by the new regulatory framework. Evaluation has now become part of the programming process (notably through its **ex-ante** component) and its aims are becoming increasingly evident to the Managing authorities. Furthermore, the newly-introduced principle of ongoing evaluation should result in a better understanding of the status of

each rural development programme at any given stage and should give relevant feedback to the organisations involved in the implementation of the programme. Policy making and evaluation therefore should become nested activities with positive feedbacks in both senses.

All these factors are conducive to increased transparency and accountability for the rural development policy. A common methodological framework facilitates an easier understanding of the aims and achievements of the rural development programmes. Clearly defined responsibilities for the evaluation actors and a stronger link between evaluation and policy making improve accountability. Furthermore, the operationalization of the EU evaluation system relies on important sets of data that need to be collected and analyzed. A tremendous amount of information is therefore made available to the wider public, i.e. the European taxpayers, who can thus get a clearer sense and measure of how their money is invested.

In spite of benefits, many Member States perceive the CMEF as fairly complex, with too many common indicators, which are not fully articulated with programme objectives. Some Member States noted that the choice of the common indicators seems to be driven by the pragmatic rationale of allowing for EU-wide data aggregation. However, as a general remark, impact indicators are regarded as not sufficiently specific, whereas the output indicators are judged as too numerous and too wide-ranging. The CMEF is widely seen as a top-down approach, which imposes a straight-jacket particularly when judging the benefits of Axes 3 and 4. Some Member States pointed out that the CMEF fails to allow for national or regional specificities to adequately be reflected when the evaluation is carried out. In order to ensure flexibility without undermining EU aggregation, a Member state proposed to classify indicators according to their geographical relevance: European, national, regional.

As a consequence, many Member States – mostly the new ones – tend to address evaluation as an administrative obligation, rather than a tool for improving the quality of their rural development programming. They do not fully see the utility of the evaluation for policy-enhancement and are unclear about how to integrate it into their policy-making process. While an evaluation tradition is lacking in many of these countries, the perceived complexity of the CMEF risks reducing their enthusiasm for developing such culture. However, even some of the old Member States also judge that a too comprehensive list of common indicators shifts the focus away from the wider scope and significance of evaluation.

The views on the benefits of the additional indicators are mixed. Council Regulation no. 1698/2005 requires Member States to complement the common indicators with others, that are specific to the programme (article 81 (2)). Some EU members welcomed the flexibility thus offered, by pointing out the possibility of conducting in-depth analyses on specific issues. Others, mainly the New Member States, expressed reserves about putting the additional indicators into practice. Their concerns related both to the costs of operationalization and the capacity of developing specific methodologies. On the latter, a need was expressed for methodological guidelines on soil quality, and adequate means need to be found to also tackle such individual requests.

Small countries have a specific standpoint. The comprehensive and extensive CMEF presents particular challenges for small countries, and the way evaluation is structured adds a further burden. Limitations refer particularly to competencies, structures and staff, and reporting timescales should take that into account. Equally, the administrative requirements are particularly burdensome for small countries or small programmes. The implementation of the CMEF comes with a set of “fixed costs” that do not take into account the scale of the recipient of funds. Such demands are out of proportion for small countries operating on low implementation budgets. A “non-standard” and more flexible approach across member States or categories of countries was suggested.

Member States need a timely provision of relevant documents, and in their official languages. Delays in the availability of the CMEF guidelines in the Member States are a widespread concern. The translation of the documents into the countries’ official languages adds to the challenge. Some Member

States consider that these documents are not legally binding unless translated, and translation requires additional time. Many countries commented that an earlier circulation of the CMEF Guidelines would have been critical for allowing the evaluation structures to be set up in advance, to address baseline data requirements and to adequately carry out the ex-ante evaluation. This is an important issue to be addressed particularly in view of the future programming periods. However, for the current financial period, some Member States argued that deadlines for setting or changing CMEF guidelines and procedures in the evaluations should be established.

Better timing of the evaluation reports is critical. Member States expressed wide-ranging points of view with respect to the timetable of the evaluation reports, and particularly to the timing of the ex-post evaluation. Some consider that the ex-post evaluation comes too early to adequately capture slowly-unfolding impacts (e.g. environmental or of measures with long term commitments), others judge that it comes too late to be effectively used for the next programming cycle. This problem can be overcome with a clarification of the objective for which the ex-post evaluation is needed. However, timing is equally critical for other evaluation activities, such as the annual progress reports. Some Member States fear that deadlines are set before results and impacts can be observed, and for this reason it is difficult to capture them on the required annual basis.

4. The Assessment of the Evaluation Needs Across the EU

A. Needs for Information, Clarification and Awareness Raising

The Section below presents the main issues on which the evaluation communities in the Member States could benefit from further information and awareness raising. Together with the European Commission, the Evaluation Helpdesk can play a critical role in all of the points below, mainly via communication tools. For most of these issues a swift response, provided over the course of the next year, seems to be the most beneficial. While efforts need to be particularly intensified in the beginning, communication should, however, remain a sustained activity and need to be adequately taken up in the years to come.

The main tools to be utilized for addressing the needs presented in this section include but are not limited to the public website (including its FAQs section), the newsletter, the missions of the Evaluation Helpdesk to the Member States. Equally important, the Evaluation Helpdesk, in close coordination with the European Commission, may also provide answers to specific technical questions regarding the aspects below.

The European Commission together with the Evaluation Helpdesk need to intensify their efforts of explaining the concept and the use of the ongoing evaluation. Many Member States stated that the concept of ongoing evaluation was not clear to them. Several EU countries have also revealed a need for a better understanding of how the ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluations are used at the EU level. In particular, it is important to explain to what extent these evaluation reports are intended to enable a comparison and a better overview of the rural development policy across the EU and to what extent they are also intended as a basis for improving the CMEF for the next programming period.

Member States expect feedback from the European Commission on the evaluation reports they submit. This concerns both the annual reports on ongoing evaluation and the mid-term and ex-post evaluation reports. Such feedback would provide additional motivation to the national or regional authorities responsible for conducting the evaluation activities and would help them fine-tune their evaluation activities. In addition, it would allow them to better position themselves in relation to other Member States and identify opportunities for information and knowledge sharing.

However, the European Commission needs to clarify some legal aspects regarding the evaluation-related reporting obligations:

- (1) Member States reported that the criteria for the acceptance of the evaluation reports were lacking. This subsequently creates confusion with regard to the requirements regarding the quality of the reports and may also become an obstacle to the synthesizing efforts foreseen at the EU level. Missing quantifications of indicators are a part of this question. In particular, this refers to the legal obligation of utilizing the common indicators as defined under Art. 81 of the Council Regulation 1698/2005. While the Guidelines offer the possibility to make qualitative assessments where data is not available, the Regulation and its detailed implementation rules require that progress on indicators be included in the reports. The acceptable balance between the two is not clear.
- (2) Clarity is also needed on the legal consequences of the non-acceptance of the evaluation reports. One should note the regulatory gap, as the Commission Regulation 1974/2006 only

foresees potential sanctions in case of late submission of the evaluation reports. Unless clarified, these issues leave a loophole in the interpretation of the legal texts and their related guidelines and dampen the Member States' efforts to collect data and provide quantitative assessments, thus also undermining the significance of the CMEF.

In conjunction with the above, a better grasp of the legal implications of the CMEF and its Guidelines is critical, and the European Commission should play a decisive role in fostering that. Not all Member States are clear about the legal implications of the CMEF and its Guidelines, and about the boundary between the two. For instance, several Member States questioned the legality of the CMEF Guidelines, while others fully acknowledged it. In the same vein, inquiries were expressed as to the legal value that the interpretation of the CMEF Guidelines provided by the Evaluation Helpdesk might have. Certain Member States would only find such a service useful if such legitimacy was acknowledged. Particularly with regard to the latter, the European Commission and the Evaluation helpdesk should join efforts to better explain the scope of the Evaluation Helpdesk services.

B. Short to Medium Term Needs for Support on Evaluation Procedures and Methodologies

With the evaluation costs perceived as high, joint efforts are needed to maximize the benefits of evaluation for policy-making. Most Member States judge that the implementation of the evaluation systems is very demanding in terms of financial and human resources and they put a great stress on the resources available. Some Member States are particularly concerned about having to take up the costs for the operationalization of additional indicators as well as for bridging certain methodological gaps (e.g. develop methodologies to calculate the deadweight). There are cases in which monitoring and evaluation requirements are judged as overly ambitious in relation to the funds earmarked for certain measures under the rural development programmes (e.g. for the measures in the field of education).

i. INSTITUTIONS, RESOURCES AND PROCEDURES

The Section below presents the needs related to the main administrative challenges that the Managing Authorities in the Member States are facing when implementing the ongoing evaluation. However, one should note that, according to the Council Regulation 1698/2005, article 84(5), "Member States shall provide the human and financial resources necessary for carrying out the evaluations (...)"

The needs expressed at points 0 and 0 should be best addressed at the national or sub-national level.

The Evaluation Helpdesk can offer meaningful and timely support primarily regarding the mid-term evaluation (points 0 and 0). This should be a priority for 2009.

The Evaluation Helpdesk can also play a critical role in the exchange of information among Member States on ongoing evaluation systems. This would primarily address the need expressed at point 0. To that end, Missions to the Member States, in which the results of the Paper on the Needs Assessment of the functioning of the ongoing evaluation systems are disseminated, are particularly beneficial if targeted to the

New Member States, where there is an increased demand for strengthening capacities.

In response to all points under this section, complementing the synthesis based on the Member States reports on ongoing evaluation activities, a comprehensive “Working paper on the evaluation systems”² across the EU can also be envisaged for 2009. It would be based on a direct assessment of these systems in (selected) Member States.

There is a strong demand for guidance on operationalizing on-going evaluation, and the impending mid-term evaluation makes this time critical. Member States for further guidance on setting up a call for tender for their evaluation activities. There were two main concerns in this respect: (1) what tendering procedure to use, and (2) how to select the evaluators. On the first issue, Member States inquired whether it is advisable to use only one contract for all the evaluation reports or, instead, to organize a specific tender for each independent evaluation report. On the second issue, most concerns referred to the drafting of the terms of reference for the evaluators. Requests pointed to a need for specifying the criteria for selecting the contractors, which should not be limited to the cost factor. Further demands on the operationalization of the ongoing evaluation covered (3) detailing the indicative structure of the mid-term evaluation report, and (4) providing support in the preparation of annual progress reports on ongoing evaluation activities.

Complementary to that, support is needed on possible policy adjustments occasioned by the mid-term evaluation. The potential for timely policy adjustment is underpinning ongoing evaluation. This is aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of the rural development policy delivery. However, in practice, any changes to the rural development programmes are extremely costly in time and resources. Bearing these in mind, many Member States called for guidance to decide when policy adjustments are opportune and with what margins for manoeuvre. For instance, some Member States wanted to know when it is justified to adjust target indicators to policy and when vice versa. In this context, they proposed envisaging an “alert system” to signal deviations and prompt for fine-tuning, or for a user-friendly tool, based on a few selected indicators, based on which corrections can be decided. Other Member States inquired about the possibilities of making regional corrections, even under a national programme.

Increased dialogue between evaluators and managing authorities can improve processes. There is a dialogue gap between policy makers, local actors and evaluators. Bridging it would result in a better quality of the evaluation activities. The evaluators’ feedback on terms of references and evaluation processes is a highly valuable resource. For instance, evaluators may aim towards more ambitious goals than originally asked for by the managing authorities. On the other hand, they may duly propose timelines that are judged inadequate by the managing authorities. Bringing together these different points of view and understanding their drivers and rationales can be a relevant tool for managing authorities, particularly in preparing future calls for tenders and refining the implementation of their future programmes. For this, specific feedback obligations and a relevant budget can be included in the tender dossiers.

Moreover, such a dialogue can make the evaluation results more relevant for policy-making. Very often, the Managing Authorities find that the evaluation reports they receive are of limited use in their policy decisions. They explain that the reports are generally too long and too complex, and written in a very technical language. Detailed guidelines on the evaluation reports, along with further methodological support and dedicated capacity building can help address these concerns.

² This paper will be the output of the activity 2.2.2. “Assess the functioning of the ongoing evaluation systems in Member States” of the Work Programme 2009.

In the light of the abovementioned, strengthening the evaluation functions and capacities, particularly within the Managing Authorities, would be beneficial. Many Member States inquired about how to effectively incorporate the evaluation functions into the organizational structures of the Managing Authorities. The need for developing evaluation capacities was particularly manifest in the New Member States. Some Member States called for suggestions and examples of good practices concerning the management of relationships between the evaluators and their stakeholders. In this context, some pointed out the advantages of having dedicated staffers (“Ms/Mr Evaluation”) to deal with evaluation issues within their Managing Authorities. This would increase the quality, effectiveness and visibility of evaluation in a policy programming or policy revision context. It would equally ensure a better management of the evaluation activities at the programme level, by avoiding evaluation become marginal in staffers’ tasks.

ii. DATA COLLECTION AND AGGREGATION

The Section below presents the difficulties that the Managing Authorities report on fulfilling their obligation to “organize the production and gathering of the requisite data” (Council Regulation 1698/2005, article 84(5)).

These data-related needs spread across methodologies and procedures and lie on the borderline between monitoring and evaluation.

Many aspects regarding data collection systems (as highlighted at points 0, 0, 0 and 0) go beyond the mandate of the Evaluation Helpdesk and can be best addressed by the Member States themselves, or by the Member States in cooperation with Eurostat or other relevant European Commission services.

Yet, since difficulties in data collection may impede on the content and quality of evaluations, the Evaluation Helpdesk should consider them and, where possible, take them up in its activities.

The aspects regarding data-related methodologies (points 0 and 0) are the best such an example, and they can be integrated in the wider Helpdesk’s activities concerning indicators. The Evaluation Helpdesk can provide guidance on what should be counted versus what should be surveyed, can facilitate the exchange of information and good practices between Member States, and can also provide alternative solutions for addressing data gaps (indirectly addressing points 0 and 0 as well).

However, given the fine line between monitoring and evaluation, the Evaluation Helpdesk should work in close coordination with the Contact Point of the European Rural Development Network.

Several data sources specified in Annex 3 of the Handbook on the CMEF are not easily accessible or readily available (e.g. particularly environmental data). In cases where databases for statistical information do not exist and need to be established, additional budgetary resources will have to be made available. Because of data collection costs, there is a demand for some alternative indicators, especially from small countries operating on a small budget. One example is the case of fertilizers and pesticides, where a quantification of the reduction of input in comparison to standard methods could be used as a proxy when looking into water quality issues.

Data collection may equally be hampered by insufficient coordination among domestic institutions. Data feeding into the rural development monitoring and evaluation system is supplied by a variety of institutions (including statistical services and paying agencies). Managing authorities, as end-users, need clarity as to what data these institutions can provide, under what conditions and at what quality. Unless adequate coordination is ensured, risks have been reported that data for several indicators are not collected at all. Some Member States signalled that the managing authorities do not have direct access to certain monitoring data. Paying Agencies are an important resource pool, but there are instances in which data sharing procedures between these institutions need to be enhanced.

Member States reported specific challenges in collecting data for the baseline indicators. Some countries asked for a revision of the data survey systems, in order to develop tools that allow for an immediate quantification of indicators. This can be done in collaboration with the National Rural Development Networks. For certain indicators, baseline data is either not available or difficult to measure, and that presents difficulties in establishing targets and measuring progress towards them. There are issues over resourcing baseline data collection, centrally specified requirements and what is possible operationally.

Several proposals were made to increase efficiency in these areas. Member States first need clarifications as to what data Eurostat can provide on a regular basis and what data should be collected on a national or regional level and how. Refining and/or complementing the existing guidelines, enhancing the coordination between statistical services and exchanging information on relevant practices are essential for addressing these challenges. Standard definitions of some calculation methods for indicators calculated by Eurostat could also be adopted. Furthermore, setting up a *Statistical Network* among data producers and users could establish common processes for the construction and the survey of data, and communication flows for data transmission would become more fluid and direct.

Data aggregation is equally demanding. Statistical data are often highly diversified and lack standardization. Differences occur both within Member States and at the EU level. Also, particularly in the federal states, some data may be collected using various sources and methodologies that in the end do not allow for their aggregation at the national level (e.g. land cover information in Germany). This aspect is further exacerbated in the light of the EU aggregation. Several Member States questioned whether data aggregation at the EU level is possible and needed. One Member State even suggested that indicators should be classified according to their geographical relevance: European, national, regional.

Commonly agreed approaches on data aggregation are needed. On the one hand there are the different database structures which are not interlinked, and on the other hand, there is an important problem in relation to the scale of the collected data. For instance, the environmental data is often gathered on a parcel scale, whereas other data refers to various NUTS levels. It should be established what data should be aggregated and in which format.

iii. DATA ANALYSIS AND BEYOND

The Section below presents the main methodological challenges that the evaluators in the Member States are facing in carrying out their tasks.

To these, the Evaluation Helpdesk can provide significant methodological support in many respects.

During Focus Groups, the Member States expressed wide-ranging needs in terms of utilizing impact and result indicators. The report already identifies only the most prevalent themes for which further

methodological support is needed (points 0, 0 and 0). Climate change, water quality, biodiversity, quality of life and LEADER emerge as the main vertical themes that the Evaluation Helpdesk can address in a medium-term horizon. These themes are ranked from high to lower priority, according to the demand expressed by the Member States. The measuring of the gross value added in supported holdings/businesses (result indicators no. 2 and 7) also adds as a potential topic to be considered.

The cross-cutting issues should be equally embedded into the work programme of the Evaluation Helpdesk over a short to medium-term perspective: multiple intervening factors (point 0) in relation to the measurement of (selected) indicators and improving the coordination between the evaluation systems across various EU programmes (points 0 and 0). Whether they should be addressed as an accompanying issue to horizontal themes or as a self-standing topic is a matter that is to be decided on a case by case basis.

The evaluation questions (point 0) and data related aspects, as identified at points 0 and 0, should also be included, mainly as accompanying topics to the vertical themes.

All these aspects and the connections between them can be looked at from different perspectives, and therefore have various time ranges and will necessitate differentiated methodological tools and approaches. The leading approaches stemming from the needs assessment are:

- A. Covering the attribution gap and ensure better intervention logic; this is meant to support the evaluation community for conducting the evaluation reports. It is time critical but methodologically sophisticated (covers common and additional indicators, spreads across complex cross-cutting issues). It requires in-depth research but can also substantially build on the expertise already developed or substantially developing in some of the Member States.*
- B. Providing support for the quantification of existing indicators; this is an ongoing exercise. A special attention needs to be given to defining the baseline indicators and adequately setting and adjusting the target levels. This can be taken up as a self-standing working group theme. In addition, support on specific issues can be provided on request, as the needs arise in the Member States. Depending on the level of technical sophistication of the request for information, more detailed research can be undertaken.*
- C. Improving the assessment of impacts, through better use of evaluation methodologies and of indicators; this is a forward-looking exercise. It should build on the findings and expertise built on the two aspects presented above, and should equally address the issues presented under Section II. This would be follow-up work on themes and topics initially addressed during the first years of the Helpdesk's activity, but can also include new ones that can be later identified. This work will provide substantial support to the European Commission and the Member States in streamlining the CMEF for the next programming period.*

The preferred tool to address these issues is the collection and capitalization of good practices – but also bottlenecks and challenges – across the EU. This can serve both as a platform for spreading the evaluation knowledge and as a first stage for a more in-depth analytical work, that would result in thematic working papers or guidance documents. Even in the absence of follow-up research, the collection and capitalization of good practices will aim at more than just performing an information function and will also be

accompanied by conclusions and recommendations. The thematic working papers and the guidance documents are intended for selected topics only, generally for those for which in-depth research is needed. In addition, thematic workshops with the Member States will be organized when needed and possible, while responses to requests for information will function on an ongoing basis.

All the resulting findings will be widely disseminated via the communication tools the Evaluation Helpdesk has, and according to well-articulated and well-targeted communication strategies.

USE OF INDICATORS AND ASSESSMENT OF IMPACTS

Climate change, water quality and the quality of life emerge as key topics/indicators where substantial methodological support is needed from the Evaluation Helpdesk. Member States pointed out some confusion with respect to the definitions of various indicators, and their articulation with the measures throughout the intervention logic chain. With the CMEF Guidelines seen as fairly complex and, at times, ambiguous, it has been observed that, on occasions, scheme managers are beginning to apply their own definitions of indicators. Member States expressed a wide range of needs in terms of fine-tuning the indicators and assessing the impacts.

Climate change received the most attention. It was, on one hand, seen as an indicator whose commonly defined measurement is insufficient, and that creates difficulties in meaningfully linking it to the contributing rural development measures. On the other hand, climate change is also a factor that impacts on the measurements of non-environmental indicators (e.g. stemming from Axis 1 interventions), and whose influence needs to be singled out (see also point 0). *Water quality* and *the quality of life* were also frequent in the Member States' expressed needs for methodological improvement, followed by *biodiversity*, *LEADER and networking*, and *high nature value farming*. These needs also cover a wide range of perspectives: guidance on utilizing common indicators, articulating them with additional indicators and redefining them to better reflect policy objectives.

Member States have also raised highly relevant issues in relation to other (result) indicators. Most of the needs of the Member States referred to Axes 2 and 3, with a particular focus on the environmental indicators. Streamlining the measurement of the result indicator on *gross value added in supported holdings/businesses* was a major point raised. As challenges encountered, some Member States reported that the measurement of this indicator is based on provisional data which are included in the applications of potential beneficiaries. Secondly, small countries perceive that the collection of the required data is a particular burden on small-scale beneficiaries. Thirdly, a Member State pointed out to insufficient clarity about the articulation of the respective result and impact indicators (e.g. gross versus net value added). Finally, the result of an investment is not reached immediately. In general, it takes some time since its completion to assess the actual results of the investment. Consequently there is a significant methodological issue in relation to the assessment of the results on an annual basis.

CROSS-CUTTING METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Netting out the multiple intervening factors is critical. The relationship between indicators and objectives needs to be assessed adequately in order to filter out double counting, deadweight, multiplier effects. Otherwise, there is a risk that the relevance of the indicators measured risks gets reduced. Member States particularly stressed the importance of singling out the impacts of the policy interventions (counterfactual analysis) and of separating them from other (related) policies (e.g. regional policy), and of

developing methods to net out the contextual trends. Several instances were mentioned where this latter exercise is particularly important, such as the annual trend in watercourse pollution. The netting out of the contextual trends is furthermore important in a highly dynamic global environment, where food inflation, climate change effects (including adverse weather conditions) and global recessions are significantly affecting policy results.

The coordination with other programmes should be increased. This is a widespread proposal from the Member States and it refers primarily to the operational programmes supported under the EU regional policy. The proposed coordination is looked at from various perspectives. Firstly, some Member States suggested that the evaluation questions across various programmes need to be cross-checked to avoid overlaps. Secondly, other Member States referred to the evaluation experience under the regional policy operational programmes as a source of good practice. Thirdly and finally, other countries suggested that the various evaluation systems under different programmes need to be compared side by side to ensure synergy and avoid overlaps.

For many of the indicators, qualitative methods should complement quantitative approaches. Such a need was expressed by many Member States. It referred primarily to the assessment of projects pertaining to Axes 3 and 4 of the rural development programmes. If a qualitative approach is encouraged, guidelines need to be developed as to its applicability and methods used (e.g. expert interviews, case studies). Furthermore, several Member States even inquired whether common methodologies, including common sets of questions, can be developed in order to allow for an EU-wide aggregation and/or comparability of data.

Guidance for the interpretation of the evaluation questions is also needed. Some Member States pointed out that the evaluation questions were fairly complex, and not fully articulated with the indicators. Furthermore, once the indicators are quantified, there are no guidelines in place to support the interpretation of numbers and their connection to the evaluation questions. Equally, they do not allow for a clear distinction between national and EU priorities.

The overall impact of the rural development programmes needs to be better captured. Several Member States asked for a methodology to be developed in order to provide a consistent understanding of the total impact of a programme. The evaluation, as it now stands, is judged as highly fragmented and appears to be rather driven by a measure logic. Several Member States expressed a need for a certain ranking of objectives and related indicators, so that the different impacts of the programme can be better weighed in order to have a better judgement of the programme as a whole.

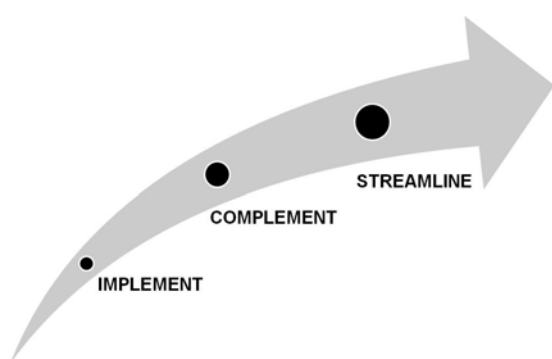
5. Addressing the Needs: the Role of the Evaluation Helpdesk

The Evaluation Network and its Helpdesk are instrumental to addressing the evaluation needs and concerns in the Member States. The setting up of the Evaluation Network is a critical step forward, as it can function as a forum for exchanging information between Member States. This responds to the needs expressed by most countries, who consider that knowledge and good practice sharing are a major tool for improving evaluation methodologies and processes. Furthermore, it is particularly welcomed in the New Member States, where the evaluation expertise is in its early stages.

However, first the Evaluation Helpdesk needs to further explain its mandate. Currently there is a lot of confusion as to the way in which the Evaluation Helpdesk relates to other institutions and structures. *In relation to the European Commission*, some Member States inquired whether the interpretation of the CMEF Guidelines, provided by the Evaluation Helpdesk, would need further endorsement of the European Commission. There are also some who consider that their questions should be addressed directly to the European Commission as they do not identify the Helpdesk as an unequivocal source of information on evaluation matters. *In its relation to the European Rural Development Network and to the national rural development networks*, several Member States indicated insufficient knowledge about the roles of each of these networks and their interaction. All these aspects need to be clarified in order to ensure the effectiveness of the Helpdesk's support services.

The use of communication tools should be particularly emphasized at the early stages of the Evaluation Helpdesk's activity. The toolkit at hand includes a public website (with a FAQs section), a newsletter, missions of the Evaluation Helpdesk to the Member States and the participation to various events on rural evaluation matters. As the mission of the Evaluation Helpdesk becomes widely known and its content development activities progress, the focus of the communication tools will shift accordingly.

The core mission of the Evaluation Helpdesk is to provide critical support to the Member States in their evaluation activities. This will be pursued following a phased approach, as illustrated in the graph. The support provided by the Evaluation Helpdesk should be planned according to the time sensitivity of the needs expressed by the Member States.



(1) The top priority now is to assist Member States to implement the CMEF, as currently laid out in the regulations and guidelines. A leading objective for 2009 is to strengthen the capacities of the Member States, but also to support the European Commission, in *carrying out mid-term evaluation activities*. Targeted activities are foreseen to that end. Equally important at these early stages of operationalizing the ongoing evaluation is to *strengthen the evaluation capacities* in the countries where gaps were identified. This exercise will be mainly directed towards the new member states, through planned visits and related knowledge spreading.

(2) Starting in parallel with the above, but running stronger with the years, it is equally important to complement the CMEF Guidelines, by closing the various methodological gaps. The prevalence across the EU countries was a criterion used in prioritizing the Evaluation Helpdesk's activities in that direction. A Guidance Document on the High Nature value Farming has just been released, and guidance on the assessment of impacts (aiming to address the attribution gap and including the filtering out of multiple intervening factors) is in the pipeline. Further topics will be added, including the quality of life and LEADER,

and the quantification of indicators (with a focus on target indicators). Cross-cutting issues such as qualitative assessments and data collection methodologies may be embedded in these themes as needed.

(3) Finally, a third phase may be envisaged for 2011+, as a follow-up work aiming to streamline the application of the current evaluation framework. This work will build on the experience gained to date and will have in view the next programming period.

Annex 1: A Country by Country Overview of the Main Topics

§ Nr		AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK
<i>Error! Reference source not found.</i>																												
0	The CMEF structures and steers the evaluation of the rural development programs in the Member States.							*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*				*		*	*	*	*
0	The CMEF enables a better organization of the evaluation processes.							*		*	*	*	*	*	*			*										*
0	EU-wide comparability facilitates exchange, adaptation and learning.									*	*															*		
0	The link between evaluation and policy making is stronger.							*	*			*			*			*								*		
0	The CMEF improves transparency and accountability for the rural development policy.																									*		
00	The CMEF is fairly complex, with too many common indicators, which are not fully articulated with programme objectives.	*			*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*				*	*		*		*
0	The views on the benefits of the additional indicators are mixed.			*	*			*		*	*				*										*			
0	Small countries have a specific standpoint.				*													*	*									
0	Member States need a timely provision of relevant documents and in their official languages.	*								*	*					*								*	*	*		*
0	Better timing of the evaluation reports is critical.				*					*	*				*								*			*		

§ Nr		AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK
THE ASSESSMENT OF THE EVALUATION NEEDS ACROSS THE EU																												
NEEDS FOR INFORMATION, CLARIFICATION AND AWARENESS RAISING																												
0	A better explanation of the concept and use of ongoing evaluation is highly important.	*			*					*	*	*		*		*		*	*		*		*	*	*	*		*
0	Feedback is needed on the evaluation reports.																	*	*		*							
0	A clarification of the legal aspects of ongoing evaluation is required.					*		*										*										
0	A better grasp of the legal implications of the CMEF implementation is critical.				*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*							*			*				
SHORT TO MEDIUM TERM NEEDS FOR SUPPORT ON EVALUATION PROCEDURES AND METHODOLOGIES																												
0	The evaluation costs are perceived as high.				*			*		*	*	*			*				*								*	
INSTITUTIONS, RESOURCES AND PROCEDURES																												
0	There is a strong demand for guidance on operationalization of the ongoing evaluation.				*	*				*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*			*		*		*	*	*	*
0	Support is needed on possible policy adjustments occasioned by the mid-term evaluation.	*		*						*	*			*											*	*		*
0	Dialogue between evaluators and managing authorities can improve processes.	*			*					*	*	*	*		*	*				*		*	*	*	*	*		
0	Such dialogue can make the evaluation results more relevant for policy-making.							*	*	*			*		*													

§ Nr		AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK
0	Strengthening the evaluation functions and capacities, particularly within the Managing authorities, is highly needed and beneficial.				*					*		*	*		*	*			*		*		*	*				*
DATA COLLECTION AND AGGREGATION																												
0	Several data sources are not easily accessible or readily available.	*			*	*		*			*	*	*		*	*		*	*		*		*					*
0	Data collection may be hampered by insufficient institutional coordination.				*	*								*	*			*			*							
0	Data collection for baseline indicators is challenging.				*										*			*										*
0	There are several ways to increase efficiency of data management.			*		*		*			*		*		*	*												*
0	Data aggregation is a challenge.				*			*		*	*	*			*									*				
0	A common framework on data aggregation is needed.	*			*							*			*								*					
DATA ANALYSIS AND BEYOND																												
0	<i>climate change</i>	*			*					*	*	*	*		*	*		*					*		*			*
0	<i>water quality</i>	*		*	*							*			*	*							*				*	
0	<i>quality of life</i>	*		*		*				*			*										*	*				
0	<i>biodiversity</i>	*			*	*						*				*	*						*				*	
0	<i>LEADER and networking</i>									*				*	*			*					*	*	*	*		*

§ Nr		AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	
0																													
0	<i>high nature value farming</i>							*												*				*					
0	<i>gross value added in supported holdings/businesses</i>				*											*								*	*		*		
0	Netting out the multiple intervening factors is critical.	*			*					*	*	*	*										*			*		*	
0	The coordination with other programmes should be increased.	*		*					*	*	*				*	*									*	*			
0	Qualitative methods should complement quantitative approaches.	*							*		*				*				*							*		*	
0	Guidance for the interpretation of the evaluation questions is also needed.					*				*	*				*														
0	The overall impact of the rural development programmes needs to be better captured.	*				*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*				*					*	*			*	

Annex 2: Tentative Action Plan for the Evaluation Helpdesk in Response to the Identified Needs (2009-2011)

§ Nr	DESCRIPTION OF THE NEED	PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADDRESSING THE NEED	ACTIVITY PROPOSED FOR THE <u>EVALUATION HELPDESK'S</u> WORK PROGRAMME	TENTATIVE ANNUAL PLANNING FOR THE <u>EVALUATION HELPDESK</u>
THE ASSESSMENT OF THE EVALUATION NEEDS ACROSS THE EU				
NEEDS FOR INFORMATION, CLARIFICATION AND AWARENESS RAISING				
0	A better explanation of the concept and use of ongoing evaluation is highly important.	Evaluation Helpdesk European Commission	Website, FAQs, responses to information requests, participation in events, missions to the Member States	Ongoing
0	Feedback is needed on the evaluation reports.	European Commission	Include the topic in the Training provided to the EC desk officers in 2009	2009
0	A clarification of the legal aspects of ongoing evaluation is required.	European Commission	N.A.	N.A.
0	A better grasp of the legal implications of the CMEF implementation is critical.	European Commission Evaluation Helpdesk	N.A.	N.A.
SHORT TO MEDIUM TERM NEEDS FOR SUPPORT ON EVALUATION PROCEDURES AND METHODOLOGIES				
<i>INSTITUTIONS, RESOURCES AND PROCEDURES</i>				
0	There is a strong demand for guidance on operationalization of the ongoing evaluation.	European Commission Evaluation Helpdesk	Guidance notes/documents, FAQs, responses to information requests	2009
0	Support is needed on possible policy adjustments occasioned by the mid-term evaluation.	European Commission Evaluation Helpdesk	Missions to the Member States	2009, 2010, 2011
			Working paper on target indicators	2009

§ Nr	DESCRIPTION OF THE NEED	PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADDRESSING THE NEED	ACTIVITY PROPOSED FOR THE <u>EVALUATION HELPDESK'S</u> WORK PROGRAMME	TENTATIVE ANNUAL PLANNING FOR THE <u>EVALUATION HELPDESK</u>
0	Dialogue between evaluators and managing authorities can improve processes.	Member States	N.A.	N.A.
0	Such dialogue can make the evaluation results more relevant for policy-making.	Member States	N.A.	N.A.
0	Strengthening the evaluation functions and capacities, particularly within the Managing Authorities, is highly needed and beneficial.	Member States (Evaluation Helpdesk)	Collection of good practices, missions to the Member States	2009, 2010
DATA COLLECTION AND AGGREGATION				
0	Several data sources are not easily accessible or readily available.	Member States	N.A.	N.A.
0	Data collection may be hampered by insufficient institutional coordination.	Member States (for domestic coordination) Member States and Eurostat (for EU-wide coordination)	N.A.	N.A.
0	Data collection for baseline indicators is challenging.	Member States Evaluation Helpdesk	Working paper on target indicator (also see point 0), follow-up work for the next programming period	2009, 2010 Follow-up 2011+
0	Data aggregation is a challenge. A common framework on data aggregation is needed.	Member States Evaluation Helpdesk European Commission	Responses to information requests	Ongoing
0			Collection of good practices	2009, 2010
0			Included in thematic working papers	In correlation with topics below
DATA ANALYSIS AND BEYOND*				
0	<i>climate change</i> <i>water quality</i>	Evaluation Helpdesk	Thematic working paper (attribution gap and intervention logic)**; collection of good practices	2009-2010, follow-up 2011+

§ Nr	DESCRIPTION OF THE NEED	PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADDRESSING THE NEED	ACTIVITY PROPOSED FOR THE <u>EVALUATION HELPDESK'S</u> WORK PROGRAMME	TENTATIVE ANNUAL PLANNING FOR THE <u>EVALUATION HELPDESK</u>
	<i>biodiversity</i>		Responses to request for information	Ongoing
00	<i>high nature value farming</i>	Evaluation Helpdesk	Guidance document	Completed in 2008
00	<i>quality of life</i>	Evaluation Helpdesk	Collection of good practices, thematic working paper	2009+ (TBD)
00	<i>LEADER and networking</i>	Evaluation Helpdesk	Collection of good practices, thematic working paper	2009+ (TBD)
00	<i>gross value added in supported holdings/businesses</i>	Evaluation Helpdesk	Collection of good practices (in-depth research TBD)	2009 (TBD)
00	Netting out the multiple intervening factors is critical.	Evaluation Helpdesk	Thematic working paper (to cover the attribution gap and clarify the intervention logic)**, collection of good practices, mission to the Member States	2009-2010
00	The coordination with other programmes should be increased.	Evaluation Helpdesk	Thematic working paper	2010
00	Qualitative methods should complement quantitative approaches.	Evaluation Helpdesk	Collection of good practices	2010+
00	Guidance for the interpretation of the evaluation questions is also needed.	Evaluation Helpdesk	Guidance notes/document	2009-2010
00	The overall impact of the rural development programmes needs to be better captured.	Evaluation Helpdesk	TBD	2011+

*For details about the connections between the topics, see Introduction to Section IV.

**Activity initiated in 2008.

NA – not applicable, TBD – to be determined



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