



European Evaluation Network  
for Rural Development



European Commission  
Agriculture and Rural Development

UPDATED SWOT ANALYSIS

# RURAL DEVELOPMENT EVALUATION SYSTEM

## 2007-2013

NOVEMBER 2010

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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://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation>).

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
DG	Directorate General
MC	Monitoring Committee(s)
MTE	Mid-term evaluation
RD	Rural Development
RDP	Rural Development Programme(s)
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

# 1 Introduction

The first 'SWOT Analysis of Rural Development Evaluation System 2007-2013 including CMEF' was carried out in 2008 and aimed to

- a) highlight areas in which the Evaluation Expert Network needs to undertake structural work;
- b) suggest potential topics for thematic working groups;
- c) identify other elements that can be improved by further work.

**The findings of this first SWOT** exercise were summarized in a paper that was used for structured exchange and discussion with evaluation stakeholders in the Member States:

[http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app\\_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=8D8DEE16-B70B-AA65-84A7-ABE2BADAFDC8](http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/app_templates/filedownload.cfm?id=8D8DEE16-B70B-AA65-84A7-ABE2BADAFDC8)

**The review of the SWOT analysis** in 2010 has the specific aim to

- ▶ understand the main challenges of the current CMEF and of the related evaluation methodologies and processes;
- ▶ identify needs for further guidance after the mid-term evaluation;
- ▶ identify possibilities for improvement of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the next programming period.

The **method chosen** for the review of the SWOT analysis was an expert assessment, based on desk research of various sources from both practice and academic world, such as

- ▶ Focus group reports
- ▶ Information requests from Member States
- ▶ Minutes of missions, Evaluation Expert Committee meetings, conferences, etc.
- ▶ 'Problems encountered' section in Annual Progress Reports 2007, 2008 and 2009
- ▶ Working Papers of Thematic Working Groups of the Evaluation Expert Network
- ▶ Other sources (e.g. research project RuDi; Advanced Eval, etc.)

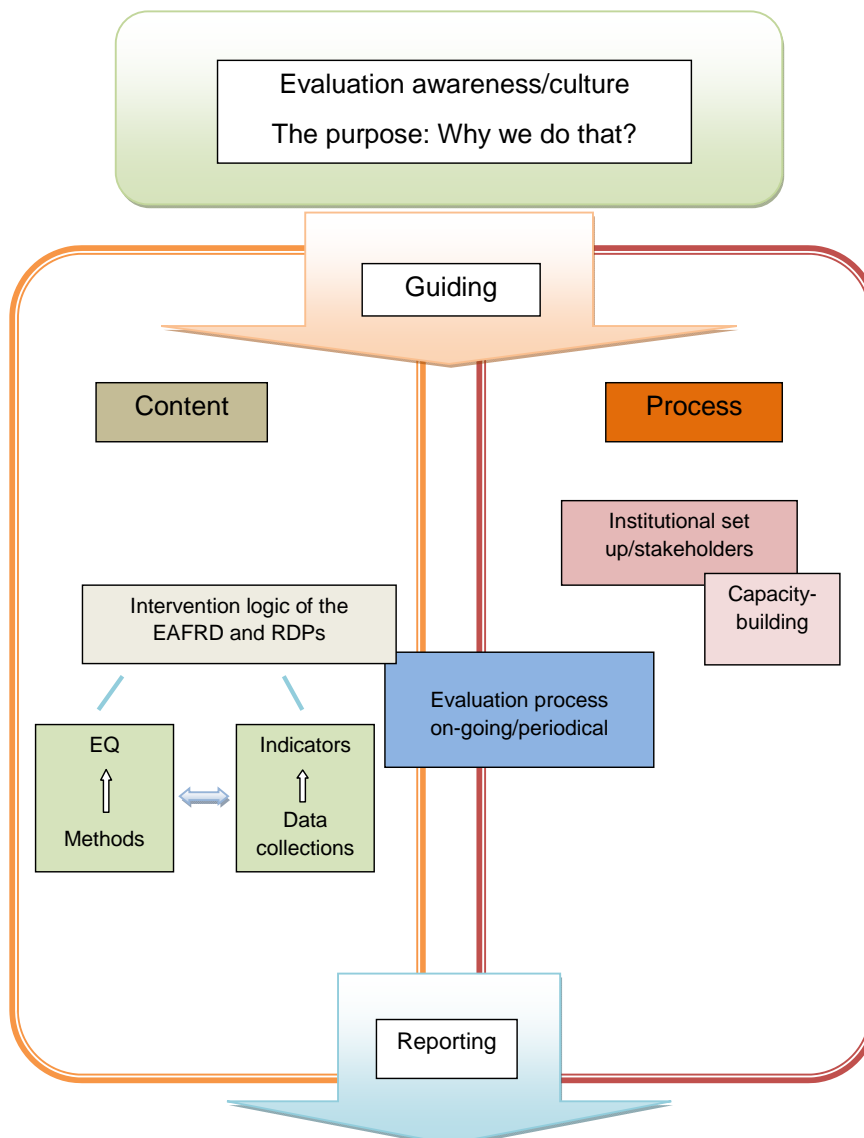
The **output** of the exercise is an 'Updated SWOT analysis of the Rural Development Evaluation System 2007-2013' (see chapter 2). The challenges for the CMEF post-2013 are incorporated at the end of the SWOT (see chapter 3).

## 2 Findings of the SWOT analysis

For the analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats the different components of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation System (context, stakeholders & evaluation capacity, tools, technical issues) have been thoroughly analysed. The SWOT is structured around the following key features of the RDP evaluation framework:

- evaluation awareness and culture, and the use of evaluation results
- the CMEF as the guiding tool for implementing RD evaluation
- the content of the evaluation comprising the intervention logics of the EAFRD and RDPs as evaluation topics
- the methods for the assessment of RD impacts, Evaluation Questions, the common indicators set and the data collection
- the evaluation process containing the institutional set up/stakeholders and the capacity building and the evaluation process itself
- reporting

*Structure of the SWOT analysis*





## 2.1 Evaluation awareness/culture and the use of evaluation results

*Does the CMEF increase the importance of monitoring and evaluation in the Member States? Do evaluation results have an impact on policy making? Do evaluation stakeholders feel "ownership" of the system?*

### 2.1.1 Strengths

- ▶ **Existence of a solid framework for RD monitoring and evaluation.** The CMEF and its promotion by the European Commission represent substantial drivers for increasing evaluation awareness in the Member States.
- ▶ **Stronger integration of evaluation into programme implementation.** The concept of ongoing evaluation has overall established a stronger link between programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- ▶ **Inclusive set-up of the system.** The concept of ongoing evaluation encourages close communication between the Managing Authority, evaluators and other evaluation stakeholders.

### 2.1.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ **Insufficient level of awareness about evaluation** can still be observed at the decision-making level. In several cases programme adjustments are more driven by concerns regarding the absorption of allocated budgets than rather by a critical assessment of needs and programme impacts.

### 2.1.3 Opportunities

- ▶ **The relevance of evaluations at EU level may further increase.** Evaluation reports and studies are gaining importance due to the overall increasing concerns about accountability and the demand of the European Parliament to demonstrate results and impacts of policy interventions.
- ▶ **Monitoring and evaluation of RDPs show great potential** to become even more interactive tools to enhance the evaluation culture and to encourage the communication between evaluation stakeholders.
- ▶ **The effective transfer of evaluation results into programme implementation practice** (modify, change or accelerate process in implementation, etc.) and encouragement of the "user friendly" presentation of findings, can have a major influence on the enhancement of evaluation awareness and its role in future political decisions.

### 2.1.4 Threats

- ▶ **The ongoing evaluation system may be undermined** by insufficient "ownership" of the evaluation process/results by evaluation stakeholders at the European Union, Member State and programme level.

- ▶ **The limited use of evaluation results by the responsible Managing Authorities** and politicians at national and regional levels may threaten the credibility of the evaluation process and the development of evaluation culture.

## 2.2 The CMEF and its Handbook as the guiding tool for implementing RD evaluation

*Is the approach outlined in the Handbook on CMEF consistent and clear for the concerned evaluation stakeholders? Is the complementary guidance useful to facilitate the implementation of the CMEF?*

### 2.2.1 Strengths

- ▶ **The existence of a consistent framework for monitoring and evaluation - the CMEF** - where all evaluation requirements are brought together in a single document and which serves as “reference point” for evaluation stakeholders within and between Member States.
- ▶ **The CMEF focuses on the information needs at EU level** and assesses if the funds are adequately allocated to meet the goals, objectives and priorities of the European Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development.

### 2.2.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ **A rather complex and demanding monitoring and evaluation system** (CMEF), which presents many challenges for its implementation especially for programme authorities.
- ▶ **Guidance documents of the Evaluation Helpdesk** are sometimes perceived as too prescriptive or published too late to be used by programme authorities and evaluators.
- ▶ Some countries are **still lacking the practical experience, capacities and resources** for full implementation of the CMEF at the programme level (especially in the area of evaluation).

### 2.2.3 Opportunities

- ▶ The Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework is an **opportunity to harmonise approaches towards the monitoring and evaluation** of Rural Development Programmes and thus facilitate the comparison at EU level.
- ▶ The complementary guidance prepared by the EC and the Evaluation Helpdesk, concerning the application of the CMEF and its Handbook, related methodologies and practices may help to **further reduce uncertainty among evaluation stakeholders**.
- ▶ The flexibility of the CMEF towards embracing a broad range of different evaluation experiences throughout the Member States might **generate innovative approaches**, which, if proven useful, could be further utilised across the EU.

## 2.2.4 Threats

- ▶ The **risk of a changing evaluation framework** and context (Health Check, reforms, reviews, etc.) might threaten the evaluation design. The requirements of the Health Check have created practical problems for the Member States in terms of data processing and the assessment of impacts.
- ▶ The **implementation of the CMEF is threatened by some inconsistencies** in its basic architecture e.g. relation between objectives, Evaluation Questions and indicators (e.g. especially under Axes 3 and 4), unclear use of key terms etc.

## 2.3 Intervention logics of the EAFRD and RDPs as evaluation topics

*Does the overall intervention logic of RD Policy in the current period facilitate the assessment of RD impacts? Can evaluation effectively show the contribution of RD policy to overall EU objectives?*

### 2.3.1 Strengths

- ▶ **The strategic approach** to Rural Development Policy leads to a clear rural development strategy targeting rural areas in Europe.
- ▶ Clear and understandable **definition of objectives in the EC Regulation 1698/2005** on rural development.
- ▶ **Simplification of Rural Development Policy compared to previous period**, through single funding system and single set of programming, financing, monitoring and auditing rules.

### 2.3.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ Non-existence of a **common "rural eligibility" criterion** in order to target the intervention more effectively and consequently the risk of misidentification of rural areas most in need of interventions.

### 2.3.3 Opportunities

- ▶ **Strategic focus on competitiveness, environment and quality of life** and further breakdown into priorities and measure specific objectives enables Rural Development Policy to be incorporated into wider European policies and to demonstrate the contribution to EU objectives.

### 2.3.4 Threats

- ▶ Too much focus on the **evaluation of the contributions of EU funds towards the objectives of the EU strategic guidelines** of RD might overlook other important effects of EU RD Policy, which are not reflected in the indicators.
- ▶ **Different perceptions, traditions and history of Rural Development Policy among the EU Members States** can threaten the comparison of the evaluation results across the EU.

## 2.4 The methods for the assessment of RD impacts and Evaluation Questions

*Are the evaluation methods and approaches promoted by the CMEF adequate to cover the impacts of RDPs? Do the Evaluation Questions and indicators sufficiently address the expected impacts? Is the comparability of results at EU level guaranteed?*

### 2.4.1 Strengths

- ▶ Overall **tendency for harmonized approaches and methodologies** regarding monitoring and evaluation of RD policy across the Member States can be observed. At programme level, there is however much flexibility given to further develop evaluation approaches.
- ▶ **Use of Common Evaluation Questions** across RD programmes, further ensure the focus and comparability of RD evaluations.

### 2.4.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ A **common methodology for the ex ante evaluation is still not developed**, although it is a compulsory part of the evaluation process.
- ▶ **Several methodological challenges in the assessment of RD impacts** are not yet resolved (e.g. to capture the net impacts, unexpected impacts or to deal with the attribution gap, to establish the counterfactual, bottom-up estimation of impact etc).
- ▶ Some **horizontal Evaluation Questions are not reflected by the indicators**, and similarly, some measure specific questions are not supported by indicators.
- ▶ There are overall **too many Evaluation Questions** in the Handbook on CMEF and in some cases it is difficult to identify criteria which could enable comparisons of answers across the EU.
- ▶ There are problems with the evaluation of the **overlapping commitments of the two programming periods** – the previous and the current ones. For old commitments, partial objectives are not set up and their impact is therefore difficult to measure.

### 2.4.3 Opportunities

- ▶ **Increasing use of supplementary methodological guidance** (e.g. for assessing impacts of Rural Development Programmes in the context of multiply intervening factors, HNV guidance document etc.) can further support evaluators to overcome methodological difficulties.
- ▶ **The combination of qualitative and/or quantitative methods** shows potential to ensure high quality evaluation results across the EU and in Member States in the future.
- ▶ **The use of advanced quantitative approaches in the ex ante evaluation phase** instead of only qualitative methods, could significantly improve evaluation.
- ▶ **The key point is to use advanced evaluation methodologies in mid-term and ex post** to construct the appropriate counterfactual baseline (determining supported and non-supported units) in order to determine the direct and indirect programme effects and extrapolate them from other exogenous factors.

- ▶ **The use of programme specific Evaluation Questions and additional indicators** can improve the quality of impact evaluations where the existing common questions and indicators of the CMEF do not cover the whole scope of interventions (e.g. Axes 3 and 4).

#### 2.4.4 Threats

- ▶ Not having one methodological background for assessing impacts can bring **non-comparable answers to the common Evaluation Questions** (e.g. traditional naïve methods against advanced methods in counterfactual analysis or too much focus on qualitative methods in evaluation).
- ▶ Problems in data availability and quality of the data may threaten the **quality of evaluation results** as well as answering the common Evaluation Questions across the EU.
- ▶ The 7 impact indicators of the CMEF create methodological **problems in assessing impacts of Axes 3 and 4 at macro level.**
- ▶ A range of various data sources (e.g. referring to the HNV indicator) including **the poor reliability of the baseline situation** description can create major threats in mid-term and ex post evaluations and monitoring approaches of individual Member States.
- ▶ The impact indicator “combating climate change” may **not sufficiently cover the impacts of the range of RD measures on the climate** (e.g. it does not cover changes in farm management such as reduction of N fertilizers, manure management improvements, changes in cultivation practice, afforestation, short rotation forest on agriculture land etc.).

## 2.5 The common indicator set and data collection

*Is the CMEF indicator set consistent in order to cover the impact of all RD axes? Are the definitions unambiguous and clear? Is the data for the indicators available?*

### 2.5.1 Strengths

- ▶ The existence of a **common indicator set and their quantification** at each level (baseline, output, result, impact) supports Members States in establishing sound monitoring and evaluation frameworks of RD programmes.
- ▶ The existence of the **FADN data collection system** provides information for economic impact indicators at EU level.

### 2.5.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ The overall **number of common indicators** is too high for output and result indicators. In the case of impact indicators, the number is too low to cover the horizontal objectives of the European Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development and RDPs as well as some specific objectives and/or potential effects in particular related to Axes 3 and 4.
- ▶ There is some **inconsistency between Evaluation Questions and indicators** which complicate the evaluation of the respective measures.

- ▶ There are **some inconsistencies in the proposed measurement** of the same parameter under different indicators (e.g. labour productivity in agriculture and food industry).
- ▶ Indicators **related to quality of life** and **Leader axis** are very broad and general and cause methodological problems when using them in evaluation.
- ▶ **Data availability** for some indicators related to measures of Axes 2, 3 and 4 remains problematic and causes gaps in the assessment of impacts of these measures at programme and EU level.
- ▶ **Changes in the definition and the measurement of indicators** required the adaptation of the IT systems in the Member States and created problems for comparison over years.
- ▶ **Data collection systems such as FADN** (except the changing sets of farms on an annual basis), in agriculture are missing or are not unified across countries in the forestry and food sector.

### 2.5.3 Opportunities

- ▶ The possibility to **generate programme specific indicators** gives flexibility to complement the common indicator set where specificities of the programme need to be covered.
- ▶ The **clear institutional division of responsibilities** in data collection can improve the evaluation of programmes effects.

### 2.5.4 Threats

- ▶ There is some **inconsistency regarding the indicators and the Evaluation Questions** within the CMEF which might make them less useful to establish the measures intervention logics and consequently also the evaluation of impacts.
- ▶ **Unclear definitions of some of the common indicators** can lead to problem of comparability, as Member States may interpret them differently.
- ▶ Various **result indicators might not be measurable before 2011**, and consequently MTE reporting could in some cases be more an observation than a real assessment.
- ▶ Programme specific indicators often require additional data and analysis which means **additional effort in terms of time and money**, which might prevent some Member States from using them.
- ▶ **Problems in data availability** for common indicators can threaten their use for conducting the assessment of impacts at EU and Member States level.

## 2.6 Institutional set up/stakeholders and capacity building

*Is the CMEF's overall division of roles between evaluation stakeholders clear? Is coordination among all stakeholders ensured? Can the stakeholders build up the required capacities for implementing the CMEF?*

### 2.6.1 Strengths

- ▶ **Clear institutional roles and responsibilities** given by the EC Regulation 1698/2005, Art.77 – 87, in the monitoring and evaluation process between EC, Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, Monitoring Committees.
- ▶ Rural development stakeholders (at EC and programme level) get **support through the Evaluation Expert Network** and its Helpdesk. The network promotes ongoing methodological work regarding the assessment of rural development impacts and shares evaluation knowledge and practices.
- ▶ The CMEF itself **provides an important opportunity for discussion among the different stakeholders**, and facilitates institutional learning.

### 2.6.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ The **management of monitoring and evaluation still separates both processes** where different institutions are involved in conducting tasks at each level – EU, national and programme, leading to insufficient cooperation with one another.
- ▶ The **demarcation between monitoring and evaluation** does not lead to a clear division of responsibilities for data collection between Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies and evaluators.
- ▶ There is still **a rather low level of coordination between DG Agriculture and Rural Development, DG Regional Policy and other relevant DGs** in the evaluation process of EU policies.
- ▶ **Economic and social partners, local and non-professional stakeholders are still not sufficiently involved** in the process of evaluation except as part of the Monitoring Committees, as information providers or targets of the information dissemination.
- ▶ There are considerable **obstacles for new "evaluators" to enter the market** due to the specificity of the task, which leads to a certain lack of "fresh ideas". The limited "size" of the market (e.g. in "small" countries) causes similar effects.
- ▶ Many **Member States still show modest networking and capacity building activities** besides those with EC (via Desk Officers or the Evaluation Expert Committee meetings) and the Helpdesk (via yearly focus group). EU level evaluation conferences, seminars, and workshops are still rarely organised.

### 2.6.3 Opportunities

- ▶ **National Rural Networks can further strengthen their evaluation-related activities** and ensure a vital communication on current evaluation issues connected to the process, methodology and stakeholders.
- ▶ **Collecting and disseminating good practices from the MTE** is an opportunity to enhance the evaluation knowledge and promote tools, methods and processes in order to strengthen a straightforward assessment of the public resources used.
- ▶ **More targeted support for information exchange** facilitated by the Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network can enhance the evaluation work and speed up the capacity building process.
- ▶ **The capacity building activities for evaluation stakeholders** which are implemented by Managing Authorities could considerably enhance the quality of the evaluation.

### 2.6.4 Threats

- ▶ **Insufficient investment in evaluation capacities** may lead to ineffective evaluation processes, which limit evaluation information collection and do not create effective learning-processes.
- ▶ The **collection of data for evaluation purposes is under risk** where the institutional set up of the monitoring system remains too isolated from the evaluation process.

## 2.7 The process of evaluation of the RDPs

*Is the process, nature and timing of the evaluation process, as outlined in the CMEF, effective in order to ensure the fulfilment of the evaluation function? Is the relevance of the single evaluation activities ensured?*

### 2.7.1 Strengths

- ▶ **A strong process-orientation:** evaluation is organized in a series of evaluation activities instead of isolated, singular actions.
- ▶ The **ongoing evaluation enables the progressive** evaluation of Rural Development Programmes alongside their implementation. Monitoring of the programmes enables observation of their effects on an ongoing basis and the possibility to intervene when needed.
- ▶ **Preparation for MTE has improved** with methodological guidance, dissemination of information, dialogue with stakeholders from the side of the EC and the Helpdesk.

### 2.7.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ The **mid-term evaluation comes too early** in order to allow impacts to be captured comprehensively and comes too late in order to feed into the adjustment of the programme architecture for the next programming period.



- ▶ The mid-term evaluation together with the ongoing evaluation reports are the **only source for policy adjustments/refocusing** although they also may not provide sufficient and extended knowledge on the actual RDP short and long-term impacts.
- ▶ **The results of the ex post evaluations** are not used by Member States for future decisions although they are considered to be useful for the European Commission.

### 2.7.3 Opportunities

- ▶ The concept of **ongoing evaluation should be an opportunity** to balance the inconvenient timing of the mid-term and ex post (a progressive focus on impacts should also be included in the reports).

### 2.7.4 Threats

- ▶ **The ex post evaluation comes too late** to use the acquired knowledge and information as well as lessons learned for the design of the new Rural Development Policy and consequently Rural Development Programmes at national/regional level. It shows that evaluation and programming cycles do not match.
- ▶ **The timing in general remains a major threat in fulfilling the main role of evaluation** in accordance with the Article 84 (2) of Council Regulation 1698/2005, which stipulates that 'Evaluations shall aim to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of Rural Development Programmes'.

## 2.8 Reporting

*Is the reporting on evaluation activities consistent and useful? Does it provide the relevant stakeholders with the required information? Are the content structures clear?*

### 2.8.1 Strengths

- ▶ National authorities and other evaluation stakeholders (MC members, paying agencies) fulfil ongoing evaluation as an integral part of the programme implementation conducting the **Annual Progress Reports, Strategic Monitoring Report and periodical Evaluation Reports** (ex ante, MTE, ex post). This helps to build up awareness towards evaluation as well as to steer the programme implementation more efficiently and effectively in terms of the use of public resources.

### 2.8.2 Weaknesses

- ▶ **Ex ante reports were sometimes not critical enough**, and too focused on qualitative methods. They did not provide sufficient information for further periodical or ongoing evaluation exercises and do not allow broad comparisons across the EU.
- ▶ **Annual Progress Reports** shift too much information into the tables, while the evaluation sections in the main report tend to contain little information.

- ▶ The **proposed structure** of the Annual Progress Report leads to very different evaluation sections in terms of length and quality of the information.

### 2.8.3 Opportunities

- ▶ The development of **a more focused but detailed structure** to be followed by programme authorities when writing annual and periodical evaluation reports would be an opportunity to get a better overview about evaluation activities and needs in the Member States.
- ▶ **Guidance on how to present evaluation results** effectively to the diverse groups of evaluation stakeholders could improve the relevance and use of evaluation results in practice.

### 2.8.4 Threats

- ▶ The **technical level of reports** can threaten their use by a broader spectrum of evaluation stakeholders and consequently also their use in the practical implementation of the programme.
- ▶ **Low readability of the Annual Progress Reports and evaluation reports** prevents responsible authorities or other stakeholders (e.g. socio-economic partners) from paying deeper attention to findings/results. This might limit their use to a very narrow spectrum of stakeholders.

### 3 Main challenges for the programming period post-2013

Based on the findings of the SWOT-Analysis of the previous chapters the following challenges for the next programming period are emerging:

- ▶ **Involve all evaluation stakeholders at all levels – EU, national and regional**, to sensitise them and build capacities on how to use evaluation instruments for the everyday programme implementation as well as for the future effective and efficient policy design.
- ▶ **Ensure continuity** by maintaining and following the overall principles of the CMEF, keeping it stable within the same programming period, allowing for a comparison of results over several programming periods.
- ▶ **Prepare the new CMEF along with the new Rural Development Policy design** in order to ensure that evaluation and monitoring become an integrated part of the policy.
- ▶ **Distinguish clearly between information needs at EU and Member States level**. Use the intervention logic of the EU strategic objectives and priorities as the main ground of the future EU monitoring and evaluation framework (new CMEF), to be supported by the common EU evaluation questions, a rather narrow set of common indicators (both quantitative and qualitative) and straightforward methodologies and data collection systems.
- ▶ **Secure the continuity of evaluation processes across programming periods** by linking the assessment of impacts of consecutive rural development programmes.
- ▶ **Ensure more consistency and direct links** between baseline indicators, result and impact indicators, which should be directly related to measures.
- ▶ **Secure data correctness and availability** for the common set of indicators. Invest sufficient resources, to harmonise the information content and data collection systems in line with common indicators to be used across the EU.
- ▶ Ensure that the **common EU framework is fully followed by Member States** (e.g. precise guidance, benchmarking and control).
- ▶ **Complete the common EU monitoring and evaluation framework** with flexible programme specific elements which allow the Managing Authorities to set up their own intervention logics, evaluation questions, indicators, methods and data.
- ▶ **Invest in evaluators' capacities** in order to enhance their evaluation competence.
- ▶ **Divide evaluation roles between the EU and Member State level** by further sharpening the focus of the ex post evaluation for the EU level, while concentrating the ongoing evaluation at the Member States level.
- ▶ **Further develop the position and content of the annual reports** by including more information on evaluation findings and by providing a detailed structure and content.
- ▶ Introduce the methodology on how to determine **the contribution of rural development programmes along with other interventions – e.g. direct payments**, or other EU funds influencing rural areas and cooperate with other DGs in this respect when appropriate.

- ▶ **Ensure the dissemination, usability and practical implementation** of information collected and elaborated in reports as well collect and disseminate good practice in evaluation across Member States.



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