European Network for Rural Development

Focus Group 4: Better Local Development Strategies

Final Report:

June 2012

Connecting Rural Europe

Table of Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms

AIR	Annual Implementation Report
APR	Annual Progress Report
CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
CP	Contact Point
CSF	Common Strategic Framework
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EC	European Commission
ECA	European Court of Auditors
ELARD	European LEADER Association for Rural Development
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
FG	Focus Group (of the LEADER Sub-Committee)
IADS	Integrated Area Development Strategies
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IT	Information Technology
LAG	Local Action Group
LDS	Local Development Strategy(ies)
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale', meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions'
LsC	LEADER Sub-Committee
MA	Managing Authority
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MS	Member States
MTE	Mid-Term Evaluation
NGO	Non- Governmental Organisation
NRN	National Rural Network
NUTs	Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics
PA	Paying Agency
RD	Rural Development
RDP	Rural Development Programme
RDR	Rural Development Regulation
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the final results of the work of Focus Group 4 on 'Better Local Development Strategies' established at the 6th LEADER Sub-Committee meeting of 17 May 2011. The work of the Focus Group was divided into two phases and the overall results are synthesized in this report.

1.1. OBJECTIVES

The central role of the Local Development Strategies (LDS) in implementing the LEADER approach is well recognised by the European Commission and the members of the LEADER Sub-Committee.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are responsible for designing and implementing the LDS. However, in practice, designing a high quality LDS can be demanding. The 2010 special report of the European Court of Auditors (ECA) on the implementation of LEADER[1] highlighted a number of weaknesses in relation to the LDS and emphasised the need for improvement. The report found that, although the LDS should be at the heart of the LEADER approach, in practice, LAGs did not focus on achieving the objectives of their local strategies.

These findings prompted the establishment of an ENRD Focus Group 4, officially launched at the 6th LEADER Sub-Committee (LsC) meeting on 17 May 2011. The aim of Focus Group 4 (FG4) is to advise the Member States (MS) with regards to the current and the next programming period so as to improve the quality of the LAGs' Local Development Strategies.

The following objectives were agreed for FG4 by the LEADER Sub-Committee:

- to advise the Member States with regards to the current and the next programming period; and
- to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the LEADER approach.

The two main operational tasks are:

- to identify the critical requirements in the design of a Local Development Strategy; and
- to identify the tools and good practices used at Local Action Group level that ensure the efficient implementation of the LDS.
  (The inventory of relevant examples collected by the FG4 on delivery practices on LEADER based Local Development Strategies (LDS) can be found in Annex 2).

1.2. PROCESS

The Focus Group was jointly chaired by;

- Petri Rinne, President of the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD);
- Sanna Sihvola, Finnish Managing Authority; and
- Ana Pires da Silva, Portuguese National Rural Network (NRN).

[1] The 2010 special report of the European Court of Auditors on the Implementation of the LEADER approach for rural development can be accessed via the following link: http://eca.europa.eu/portal/pls/portal/docs/1/7912812.PDF

Supported by the Contact Point of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD CP), the work of the Focus Group commenced in June 2011, during the ELARD seminar in Finland. The meeting of the co-chairs, the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and the ENRD CP agreed the work plan for the Focus Group and the key milestones and deliverables. The work was divided into two main phases.

The first phase, focusing on how local strategies are elaborated, designed and assessed by Managing Authorities (MAs), ran from July to December 2011 and was based around separate surveys of MAs and LAGs, as well as more focused discussions held in Lisbon and Brussels.

The second phase, which ran from January to June 2012, looked at the implementation, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of strategies. Similarly to phase one, the work was based on two separate questionnaires to Mas and LAGs.

Questionnaires of both phases were completed online through the SurveyMonkey tool (www.surveymonkey.com). **(The questionnaires completed by LAG and MA representatives are available for download from the FG4 webpage as supplementary documents to this report.)**

In phase one, the survey analysis was drawn from the direct responses received from 151 LAGs from 18 Member States and 24 Managing Authorities from 16 Member States. Further collective LAG responses were received from two Member States and these were also included in the analysis. Overall, all 27 Member States were involved during the process which reached some 200 LAGs and MAs.

In phase two, a total of 242 LAG and 15 MA questionnaires were completed by 7 March 2012. As per the survey design, the population of LAG and MA respondents represented a cross-section drawn from 22 Member States of the European Union.

This present analysis draws on the substantive elements of the first and second phases of the FG4 work, the survey questionnaires with Managing Authorities and LAGs, the first FG4 meeting in Lisbon in October 2011, the discussions during the extended 7th LEADER Sub-Committee in Brussels in November 2011 and the second meeting of the FG4 in Helsinki in March 2012. The FG4 meetings further developed some of the survey findings and analysis.

The final element contributing to this report was the ‘LEADER Event 2012: Local Development Strategies and Cooperation’ which took place on the 27-28 April 2012 and involved over 400 practitioners. Following input to the draft findings of the FG4, two workshop groups at the event explored related questions regarding the design of LDS and relevant practices employed. Whilst not a formal part of FG4 the workshops feedback has been taken into account in the preparation of this report.

2. STRATEGY PREPARATION

2.1. INITIATING THE PROCESS

Start dates for Local Development Strategy (LDS) preparation vary considerably in the different Member States, with most Local Action Groups (LAGs) starting the process post approval of the Rural Development Programme (RDP). In some cases the Managing Authority (MA) initiates activity ahead of approval. Some more mature and autonomous LAGs initiate preparatory actions prior to the formal start date.

Lack of continuity between the programming periods can cause difficulties. LAG and staff continuity is vital in maintaining valuable organisational memory, avoiding lengthy capacity-building requirements associated with new LAGs and avoiding a loss of energy, enthusiasm and momentum. Where closure of the previous programme overlapped with actions to launch the new programme this placed severe stress on resources. Both factors can result in time and resource pressures.

Finalising RDPs and domestic legislation can cause severe delays or gaps in necessary information e.g. regarding RDP requirements. Incomplete or poor quality guidance also causes delays.

The core issue is that impediments to Local Development Strategy (LDS) preparation prolong the time needed for LAGs to become operational and compress delivery timescales, resulting in pressure by the n+2 rule[2] to achieve spend.

Therefore, getting the process under way as early as possible is vital; there should be clarity as to what the essentials of the strategy are before the process starts. Thereafter momentum has to be maintained together with an accompanying degree of certainty and confidence in the process. MAs should therefore be geared-up to provide operational support and feedback to LAGs from the outset.

2.2. TIME ALLOWED FOR STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The period of time allocated to LDS submission is much less important than that needed for LDS development, due to the accompanying information and resource requirements. The LDS development and submission period is typically three to six months, but ranges between one month and two years. Most MAs consider the time allowed reasonable, but only one third of LAGs think it adequate and over half have difficulties with such deadlines.

The LAGs difficulties were most common where the development period allowed was five months or less. Recently established LAGs frequently require more time. The time required for data collection and effective community consultation varies considerably depending on the LAG type, experience, continuity, autonomy or situation. Pre-emptive LDS groundwork effectively extends the formal period allowed for strategy development.

[2] N+2 rule: At the beginning of each programming period financial allocations are made to each Rural Development Programme in an annual breakdown. Following the year in which funds are allocated, programmes are required to spend allocations by the end of the second year.

Shortcomings in the quality, scope, accessibility, communication and timeliness of guidance and support coming from the MA, also impedes LAGs. Late approval of strategies causes problems with delivery and financial progress.

The question which therefore arises is whether 'one size fits all' in the timing of strategy initiation, development and submission. Responding to differences between Member State (MS), variation of MAs and LAGs and the various continuity and delay factors of LDS preparation means that specific or tailored LDS development approaches are required e.g. a staggered or multiple stage approach.

2.3. STRATEGY SUBMISSION

LDS submission most commonly involves an open call with a single application window, either a standalone short development and submission window or one associated with a longer development period.

Where there was more than one submission window some unsuccessful applicants could revise and resubmit their LDS in a second round. **Multiple submission rounds** often reflected the need to give newer LAGs and expanded or new territories time to develop or to absorb guidance and feedback. Overall scope for feedback, revision and improvement of local strategies is relatively common and this is consistent with the LEADER approach.

The quality of the Local Development Strategies are improved where the approach taken to submission recognises that LDS preparation is a process which takes time and where multi-level governance structures are employed to enable effective feedback and a degree of flexibility.

Multi-stage approaches involving a formal expression of interest or pre-selection are employed by a substantial minority of MAs and involve varying degrees of formality. The criteria employed vary in nature, scope and complexity and may cover compliance, delivery capability and strategic aspects. Informal pre-selection also occurs, e.g. to best fit with the available resources or to avoid competition between LAGs in a single territory. Overall some form of iterative process is strongly favoured, a multi-step LDS approval process which allows discussion and improvement through detailed consideration of evaluation criteria appears sensible.

The majority of MAs surveyed reported some form of **targeting in the call for submissions**. The overwhelming majority of targeting was geographical, principally to expand the LEADER area and in these cases could also involve the targeting of leaders for this process.

In summary: if the overall objective of the process is the development of successful strategies, this implies use of an approach which allows feedback, dialogue and iteration, alignment with local, regional and national priorities and a level playing field for all prospective LAGs. The LAGs should start to prepare their strategies as soon as possible within the current programming period and ensure that they keep people engaged and motivated.

3. STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN FORMAT AND CONTENT

3.1. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY ELEMENTS

In almost all cases surveyed, MAs defined a specific LDS format, content and structure and only a quarter of the LAGs found any element of this to be excessive. There may nevertheless be merit in the European Commission (EC) **specifying minima and maxima** for strategy content.

LAGs and MAs **generally agreed** on the high importance of the **area covered** by the strategy and the territorial **SWOT analysis** (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). In the next programming period (2013-2020), multi-fund local development strategies would create a need to improve this local analysis and its external linkage. This latter aspect was ranked as essential but problematic and currently exhibiting some weakness.

The European Commission's legislative proposal on the support to rural development for the next programming period was released in October 2011. According to the proposal, LEADER will be continued in the future under the EAFRD and Local Development Strategies (LDS) will play a more important role in the programming process with the possibility to implement multi-fund local development strategies supported by other EU funds too. In this multi-fund context, the LEADER approach will be referred to as "Community-led local development" (CLLD)[3]. The other EU funds potentially available to support CLLD will be the European Regional Development Fund- ERDF, European Social Fund- ESF, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Funds- EMFF. An essential tool for helping EU policies to work together in the next programming period will be a Common Strategic Framework (CSF)[4] to cover the EAFRD and the other 4 EU funds.

In the future programming period, being exclusively rural may no longer be an option in a multi-fund context and this will again demand enhanced analysis e.g. to ensure that that local may remain local and doesn't become subsumed by the region.

Whereas MAs placed higher priority than LAGs on the presence of clear **evidence of the LEADER features**, LAGs commonly identified MAs as placing insufficient importance on the LEADER features. Besides the LEADER features, further elements which were regarded both by LAG and MA respondents of the surveys as being essential to be integrated in the LDS was the evidence of the community engagement and consultation process, and integrated character of the strategy, therefore clarity on these aspects is required.

Although few LAGs identified gaps or weaknesses in strategy content, **problem areas exist**. Innovation could be a stronger strategic priority. It appears likely that the main issue is risk aversion on the part of the MA or Paying Agency (PA) and this inhibits LAGs. The mainstreaming of innovations developed through LEADER should be a future priority for both LAGs and MAs.

[3] To understand more about CLLD, you can read the Factsheet on Community-Led Local Development produced by DG REGIO: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/what/future/proposals_2014_2020_en.cfm

[4] To read more about the Common Strategic Framework (CSF), you can visit DG REGIO's website: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/what/future/index_en.cfm

LAGs rank the presence of the **intervention logic** (hierarchy of objectives and actions) notably higher than MAs. This ranking by MAs is of concern and appears inconsistent with the priority placed on the SWOT.

The low rankings for quantified indicators and targets and the difficulties which LAGs and MAs identified in setting them suggests a significant lack of coherence and consistency in the logic underpinning the LDS. This is reinforced by the difficulties identified in the setting and quantifying of SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound), compliance with the RDP's priorities and exclusions and the identification, availability and gathering of reliable locally relevant data.

Notably the most frequently mentioned **missing element** in strategy specification was an **evaluation procedure** or a process of strategy review. Learning from others (networking) and learning from the past both received markedly low essential rankings from both LAGs and MAs.

Taken together, the ranking for intervention logic, strategic fit, setting and quantifying objectives and targets and learning from experience, suggests that there is a considerable lack of understanding and an urgent need for **clarification and guidance**. This appears to further underline the importance of planning and managing **effective transitions and continuity** between programmes.

3.2. ACTION PLAN ELEMENTS

The **LAGs and MAs agree** on the essential elements of action planning, which were often incorporated into the LDS itself, i.e. the composition of the partnership, the implementation plan, the financial profile, the decision-making structures, LAG functions and operational procedures. The priority for the action plan is to have clarity on the LDS implementation procedures, the LAG organisational structure and the attendant responsibilities.

Problem areas include the LDS monitoring system, evaluation plan, and LDS revision procedure which were all lowly ranked by MAs and LAGs; 25% do not address these at all. The gaps most frequently identified by MAs were the LDS evaluation plan and monitoring system.

A training action plan and provisions for interaction with other local/regional bodies were least frequently thought essential. Given the importance of the LAG staff and members' knowledge and skills and of continuity and capacity-retention between programmes, this is of some concern.

3.3. DIFFICULTIES AND GAPS IDENTIFIED

There is a lack of consistency between the elements regarded as essential in an LDS or action plan, particularly regarding the strategic fit, intervention logic, SMART objectives, quantified indicators and the SWOT analysis. The lack of priority placed on learning from previous programme periods, and from others, gives cause for concern regarding the sustainability of the approach. This, and specifically the inclusion of **evaluation plans** and **LEADER specific indicators** for monitoring and evaluation as part of the strategy, was a key concern for the Focus Group.

The weakness in the provisions for **developing and retaining staff** and thus contributing to continuity and transition between generations of the programme is as striking as it is surprising. It is a critical omission and a key strategic priority for LEADER.

According to the FG findings, it appears that a detailed common specification and interpretation of the essential core LDS elements (linked to that provided for in the draft Common Strategic Framework (CSF) Regulation) are of great importance.

4. LAG AUTONOMY

4.1. AREA SELECTION

Almost three quarters of LAGs surveyed had a **high degree of autonomy** in area selection; local people were best able to define their areas. Key factors include the importance of area coherence, natural fit and the ability to work across boundaries through partnerships drawing on people's local identification and knowledge of needs, what works and their history of working together. Securing widespread territorial and population coverage were critical MA success criteria.

Where LAGs had **little autonomy** in this regards, almost half reported problems. Fit with administrative boundaries has advantages, but these are less highly rated, with some LAGs criticising this as placing administrative concerns above coherence. Some cross-boundary LAGs experienced compatibility difficulties; others reported steps taken to address this with new relationships established around common issues.

Overall it seems that the greater the degree of autonomy which can be enabled, then the better the fit with the needs, development potential and capabilities of the area concerned. It is important that the parameters defined by the MA make sense locally as external parameters can be problematic.

4.2. THEME SELECTION

Three quarters of LAGs surveyed were able to **choose their themes** although this varied by degree. This was generally viewed extremely positively by MAs and LAGs due to the benefits in being able to identify and prioritise each areas' local needs and opportunities.

The primary governing parameters were the EU Regulation, the specific RDP and in some cases regional plans. On occasion, a role or set of measures was defined for LEADER, most commonly Axis 3. Amongst LAGs there was some criticism that aspects of theme selection were outside their control or influence. The requirement to fit within the RDP framework, an overarching central theme or a range of measures, might exclude local needs. For others this provided LDS focus and direction whilst still allowing sufficient scope.

There is a **balance to be struck between the RDP fit and the desire for a more flexible approach**. A lack of focus is an issue for some LAGs who propose broad strategies with vague and general themes. In some cases the complexity of the Rural Development Regulation (RDR) and national regulation mix resulted in difficulties in agreeing a common MA/LAG position on their applicability to LEADER. The importance of joint MA and LAG participation is therefore considerable and supports the development of trust between the actors involved.

Flexibility for the LAGs to **move budgets** from one measure to another during the programme to reflect changes, emerging needs, opportunities or performance is thought important. In a number of cases LAGs had to modify their strategies **post submission** either to ensure wider coherence or because their budget allocation differed from expectations. These issues suggest a need for clearer guidance or better communication.

The main issue regarding autonomy is the degree of **flexibility afforded to LAGs to meet local needs** and employ the LEADER methodology. In future this may include structuring multiple funds with local priorities, an area of current difficulty which will demand some flexibility. The requirement to fit actions and budgets with specific measures has been a significant constraint in some cases.

Clear, consistent and effective guidance is important in helping LAGs set effective and practical strategic themes. There are indications of a need to strengthen the strategies fit within the RDP and with other programmes, whilst maintaining their local focus. A clearly structured framework setting relevant and appropriate parameters appears to be needed here.

5. DRIVING PRIORITIES

Most LAGs are driven by the **development priorities of the area** rather than by the financial considerations of a funding bid. Most respondents thought that this needs focused basis of the strategy was very successful and this reflected the effects of the LEADER method in the LDS development and its application. It tended to result in an increased responsiveness to local need with increased collaboration between local partners and delivery through local people together with the fit between tools, resources and implementing bodies.

Where LAGs identified that their strategies were totally driven by local development priorities it was rare for the presence of a wider strategy to be identified. In case of those LAGs where success in addressing local priorities was limited, the limiting factors included the reliance on consultants in strategy development and wider strategic fit considerations (e.g. some cases where funded projects have succeeded but other projects that the LAG wanted to support did not fit identified priorities and could not be funded.

This suggests a need for greater and wider LAG awareness of and fit within the overall operational and contextual parameters, with clearer guidance for LAGs needed prior to strategy development.

6. BASIS OF BUDGET ALLOCATION

6.1. INDICATIVE BUDGET

LAGs reported that an indicative budget either had little effect on strategy development or that it had helped keep aims, objectives and expectations **realistic and focused**. MAs generally indicated that this had a positive effect on the quality, realism and prioritisation of strategies and avoided unrealistic or overambitious approaches. Where no indicative budget was provided, LAG strategies were more likely to be aspirational and largely or totally needs-driven.

The benefits of such an allocation must be balanced against any greater weighting this may place on financial considerations. This may occur through prioritisation of the financially expedient 'low-hanging fruit' whereby more easily achieved outcomes are targeted rather than high priority but also high cost options.

6.2. BUDGET ALLOCATION

Alignment with **national or regional budgetary** priorities was a significant factor in budget allocation to LAGs. Match funding[5] negotiations played a significant part in setting the overall budget for some LAGs, however some LAGs appear to have anticipated difficulties and focused on the art of the possible. Indicative budgets have had a number of positive effects on allocations within the strategy, however where indicative or actual budget is set, the local absorption capacity and the way in which this linked to and reflects in local strategic priorities must be taken into account.

LAG responses suggests their approach to budget allocation within their LDS is **rather unscientific** and lacking in strategic focus being either largely preordained, distributive or demand driven. Evidence of analysis and use of intervention logic was very limited, suggesting a gap in any strategic rationale employed in quantification and the allocation of resources.

The majority view is that budget allocation to LAGs should be based on the **quality of the strategy**, either relatively between LAGs or assessed against a common standard and thus it could improve the LDS quality.

7. STRATEGY SELECTION

7.1. LAG SELECTION CRITERIA

The selection of LDS should involve an assessment of quality using **clear, systematic and consistent criteria** communicated to LAGs at an early stage. The selection process should be objective first and foremost and based on both quantitative and qualitative criteria.

There was an acceptance that LAGs should **compete** for their resources but this need not necessarily be with one another. It was strongly suggested that the LAGs local strategies should compete on the level of quality achieved against a common LEADER standard rather than with each other.

Clarification is required to address some confusion over EU competition rules and their applicability to the process of LDS selection.

[5] Match funding refers to the amount of non–European funding required to make up the full cost of the project. (this includes private and national public support)

7.2. SELECTION PROCESS

There are a number of evident weaknesses in both the LDS selection and feedback processes.

The LAGs and MAs expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the **transparency of the LDS selection processes** but LAGs desire more and **better feedback**. Only limited examples of selection criteria were provided.

Selection was commonly by a regional or national selection committee with varying degrees of **stakeholder representation**, input and expertise. In over half of the cases, membership involved only MA, PA and regional management representatives. A minority of case involved wider groups of stakeholders, community representation or used a Programme Monitoring Committee.

The relevant knowledge and experience of the decision-makers was therefore concentrated at a programme management level. Little 'on the ground' experience was cited, although limited use of external experts or practitioners was reported.

Formal validation or endorsement of the LDS within the local community was normally considered in the selection process, LAGs appear to have pursued this actively although the extent, degree of formality and rigour applied varies considerably.

There is an apparent risk of an **overly administrative** approach to decision-making with little informed practitioner involvement. Guidance and training on the process and conduct of decision-making would be beneficial, particularly in light of the CSF Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) proposals.

Feedback provision methods vary widely in approach, effectiveness and transparency ranging from PA web page notifications to open and on-going dialogue. Feedback is rated more highly by its providers than by its recipients.

LAGs found feedback provided through individual correspondence or dialogue on an **on-going and iterative** basis to be more effective in improving LDS quality. Group dialogue helped facilitate joint learning and enabled communication of consistent messages. This is consistent with the LEADER model and good practice in multi-level governance but requires careful planning and resourcing given strategy submission workload demands.

The most significant LDS changes resulting from feedback concerned budget reductions due to financial allocation and in some cases the budgetary feedback was substantial enough to require a complete refocusing of the strategy. Adjustments were also made to geographic targeting, project selection criteria and LAG decision-making procedures and where this was the case, due to lack of local knowledge these adjustments tended to have negative effects on implementation.

Significant improvement (levelling all up to the standards of the best) is required if feedback is to be effective in improving strategies. The greater the clarity, quality, scope, timeliness of guidance and support provided prior to strategy submission the lower the variance between the LAG expectation and the feedback received.

8. INVOLVEMENT AND METHODS

8.1. INPUTS

Local community groups, individuals and staff of local authorities were most likely to **formally take the lead** in the local development process and along with elected local representatives, were most strongly involved in higher level roles. Regional administrations and sectoral or service related public bodies participated less overall.

Local community groups, local authorities (and particularly their staff), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) and individuals were most likely to provide time, skills and knowledge, these three attributes being valued by LAGs in that order of importance. Businesses or business organisations were least likely to be involved in leading, their main contribution being time and a higher level of skill.

This **differentiation in people's involvement** should be taken into account by LAGs in planning LDS development and mapping who should contribute what, when and how, as well as for any support needs.

8.2. METHODS

The high importance of mobilising different stakeholders in LDS preparation suggests that the use of innovative **participatory techniques** should be encouraged, e.g. for securing business and as a priority micro-businesses involvement. **LAG and staff continuity** and involvement is critical in facilitating the process.

LAGs use multiple methods including extensive use of participatory approaches, often animated by LAG staff and members. LAGs often work with a wide range of methods and tools on a trial and error basis. Participative or active methods were highly rated but need careful management to succeed, and to avoid e.g. the risk of the LDS preparation being dominated by a few loud voices and also that the approach is being too general (which can result in apathy). Participatory methods were found worthwhile however organising these events can be challenging and they are expensive drawing from either the administrative budget or public sector contributions.

Meetings are useful for information provision, networking and increasing buy-in but can be limited in scope for action. Other methods, such as workshops or focus groups, are more participative and enable in-depth work, e.g. LDS refinement, but they need to have a sufficiently strong focus. Themed groups were particularly good for securing involvement and specialist local knowledge.

Passive approaches such as questionnaires need careful targeting and one-way communications e.g. by electronic media, the press or publications, are met with mixed success, being limited by physical or digital delivery capability in rural areas.

There is a need for **effective guidance for LAGs** to clarify **what methods can and should be used** in future. It is important to recognise that there is a difference between new and experienced LAGs, they have different guidance needs. New LAGs have specific needs and a lot to **learn from past experience** either directly or from previous evaluations, etc.

9. STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

9.1. SUPPORT PROVISION

The LAGs and MAs' perspectives on the availability and use of support strongly concurred. The availability of support is of fundamental importance in meeting the diverse needs and capabilities of the LAG population.

Almost all LAGs had access to and employed **mixed forms of support.** The most commonly used direct support was consultancy and LAG staff resources (>60%) followed by local training and partner staff input. MAs rank their own technical assistance provision more highly than LAGs. Various forms of mentoring and exchange of experience between LAGs and the instigation of this by LAGs, appears to be important and effective.

The **duration of support** for LAGs for LDS development varied greatly - from one month to four years - with **no clear patterns** emerging. Consultancy, LAG staff costs and MA technical assistance were available for the longest period but this too varied widely from a few days to many months. The availability of consultancy support varied from two days to 18 months, LAG staff involvement from a single month to 2 years, whilst MA technical assistance was generally provided over a long period or even on a constant basis but also including some very short inputs of one to three months). Partner staff resources and local training tended to be available for shorter periods of time than other support. Mentoring commonly took place over periods of nine months or more.

Data on the **financial value of support** provided indicates that consultancy and LAG staff resources were accorded the highest financial values although the range was wide. **Training and mentoring** represent two of the lowest financial values for support but are **highly valued** overall by LAGs and may also be appropriate to MAs, e.g. in annual MA gatherings.

Some MAs make an LDS development budget available to LAGs and this could refund LAG costs by up to €25 000. However, where only finally-approved LDS had their costs refunded, this presented a serious disincentive to some prospective LAGs.

Continuity from the previous LEADER+ programme and transferring knowledge and skills between periods was deemed to be vital despite some difficulties regarding support for drafting continuity strategies and knowing what was possible and eligible. LAG, MA and partner staff involvement in **mentoring** is an vital resource and ensuring continuity in this area appears to be of critical importance. Whilst mentoring may help address other guidance and support deficits, clear rules coupled with effective guidelines and systems are nevertheless required for an effective LDS preparation process.

Knowledge and skills transfer within the programme, from LAG-to-LAG, generation-to-generation, MA-to-LAG or MA-to-MA, all appear important and effective in strengthening the transfer of good practice and defining effective methods. Encouragement of **LAG and MA mentoring** and networking is therefore a high priority.

The **provision of guidance** to LAGs on strategy development is a high priority consideration. Uptake is almost universal with any gaps appearing to reflect accessibility or communication difficulties. Delivery is either by the MA, PA, regional authorities or National Rural Networks. Quality of provision was at best excellent and at worst poor and administrative in approach.

Guidance for intermediate bodies was also thought necessary, particularly where their inexperience limited the advice they could provide to LAGs.

9.2. GUIDANCE

The **guidance provided** varied between relatively narrow technical direction or specification to, less frequently, the provision of wider and more comprehensive guidance on LDS preparation, content and method. Wider approaches used a variety of tools and approaches e.g. LAG application events, seminars, meetings and workshops (national, regional and local), templates and guides. In some cases events and materials were differentiated by LAG development stage.

The extent of **prescription** of LDS methods and content varies by MAs. Balancing an avoidance of over-prescription with the diverging needs of LAGs is challenging. This suggests that a greater degree of needs assessment is required to inform guidance design. Training and guidance should be based on analysis founded on dialogue with LAGs, possibly using a common framework.

Guidance content mainly related to methodology and any prescribed elements. Narrower guidance was directive and limited to, e.g. RDP elements or strategic objectives, basic eligibility criteria and minimum LAG requirements. The most detailed guidance concerned the eligibility, population minima and maxima, LDS structure, compulsory data, selection criteria and annexes required.

Strategy content and method guidance was infrequently mentioned and tended to take the form of practical guides or handbooks. In some cases these are very detailed, e.g. covering partnership creation, identification of a LAG area and population and LDS components, such as SWOT and needs analysis, administration and finance.

The completeness and quality of the LAGs work depends on the comprehensiveness and consistency of the forms of guidance, support and training provided, together with how this is communicated and applied. **Effective knowledge transfer** of consistent information between different levels in a multi-level governance system is essential for the success of that system and the production and delivery of quality LDS.

Key requirements looking ahead include, as from the start of the process, **a clear framework** of the rules, regulations, degree of LAG autonomy, process, timetable and the support mechanisms and opportunities available to LAGs for LDS development. These should include the available funding envelope per LAG to enable preparation of financially realistic proposals.

Guidance on the **strategy design process** detailing the key LDS development steps and components is a priority and should form a common basis for LAGs. For the forthcoming period this should include multi-fund approaches and associated rules. A common methodology would strengthen consistency and make it easier to facilitate effective knowledge transfer. Guidance on and specification of evaluation requirements is an essential element of this. This should be developed and made available as soon as is possible.

In summary, therefore, there is clear demand for **guidance which is needs-based**, supportive, timely, consistent and clear. Adaptability and responsiveness are also important.

There may be merit in developing a standard or framework of essentials which enables sufficient flexibility to allow local strategic priorities to be addressed.

9.3. TRAINING

Training provision was widespread, was delivered by the MA or PA and to a lesser extent NRNs or consultants, and utilised by over 60% of LAGs. Comprehensive programmes covering all aspects or stakeholder types are rare. Collective training could be challenging with effectiveness being limited by the diversity of programmes and stakeholders. There is no common level at which training is delivered.

Overall, training provision **lacks consistency**, is frequently **basic** and appears to have been concentrated in the programme start-up phase with a focus on the LEADER process, principles or LAG administration. Provision was often thought to be theoretical or bureaucratic. **Skills development is not sufficiently prioritised**, a significant issue for a programme predicated on the strategic priority of developing and employing human and social capital.

There is little training on how to develop an LDS and any such provision is either too general or overly-complex and lacking in specificity. There is a need for **LDS preparation training** and an on-going programme of training and updating for LAGs and their staffs. Training provision should also be addressed as a core element in the LAGs' LDS.

Professional management standards are important for the LAG and for strategy development. There are skills gaps and capacity development needs which are not being adequately addressed by the training currently provided. A **common vocational standard** with an associated professional training programme was therefore suggested as a means of raising standards.

Less formal iterative approaches described variously as 'information days' or 'information sessions', enabled dialogue and problem-solving between LAGs and MAs across a range of issues. Networking, information exchange and mentoring were facilitated nationally or at regional levels but knowledge transfer was less well developed than it could be. **Mentoring** of new and emerging LAGs is both **highly effective** and a high priority.

The proposed increased budgetary allowance for LAG management provides an **opportunity** for a proportion to be used for training and capacity building, perhaps as an obligatory element.

9.4. CONSULTANCY

Some 73% of LAGs report **using consultants** in strategy preparation, although the extent and nature of this varies considerably: a third uses them extensively and a quarter does not use them. Involvement was largely in the fields of process design, training and undertaking non-technical consultation. Consultancy input was considered to have been relatively successful in saving time, providing dedicated or specialist resources and ensuring impartiality, objectivity and brokerage.

They are an important resource but one which should be **targeted and used carefully** to address identified needs which achieve the best value for the LAG. Where there is a new challenge external specialist expertise may be essential.

If a consultant is engaged in the preparation of the LDS, it is important to ensure that they do not lead but instead serve the local communities.

9.5. TRANSITION

A minority of MAs **differentiated between the level of guidance and support** provided to **new** and **more experienced** LAGs in the present period, with some actively encouraging mentoring of new LAGs by experienced LAGs. There was some limited additional support for 'non-LEADER+' LAGs. More experienced LAGs required less funding and support than did new LAGs.

Given the current extent of LEADER coverage, new forms of LAGs, e.g. multi-fund, may well represent more of a challenge than new LAGs per se.

The increased complexity of the institutional and operational framework for LDS in the new programming period is challenging and the demands for LAG guidance and support in this **transition period** must not be underestimated.

Allowing sufficient time for LDS to be adequately developed, shaped and prioritised is essential and suggests that both a mechanism for financial support will be vital over the transitional period. All LAGs should be **proactive, creative and opportunistic** in anticipating what is needed, resourcing LDS development and starting this work.

Rural MAs representing different EU funds could network at EU or Member State level to help facilitate the wider implementation of CLLD and LDS. Transferring their LEADER local development experience to new partner organisations could help develop a balanced, effective and manageable framework for multi-fund LDS preparation and ensure that established **CLLD principles** such as the bottom-up approach are **not diluted** in national implementation.

10. STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

10.1. FUNDING

Significant issues arise in relation to the **adequacy of available LEADER and match funding** to enable achievement of LDS objectives. The LAGs typically develop their objectives and identify the required budget prior to LDS submission and subsequent budget allocation. Key factors influencing the LAG budgetary award are the allocation to LEADER under the RDP, the quality of the LDS submitted and the capacity of the LAG to deliver on the objectives and thus absorb funding.

There is a discrepancy between the **LEADER funding** thought needed and what is required in reality. Two thirds of LAGs reported they had been awarded the LEADER budget sought in their LDS submission. Of these, only 54% reported that the award was 'wholly' (10%) or 'largely' (44%) adequate, a further 10% reported the award was 'wholly' inadequate (2%) or of 'little' adequacy. This suggests either **weaknesses in financial planning,** e.g. regarding project costs, yields, or higher than anticipated intervention rates due to match funding shortfalls.

LAG satisfaction with the adequacy of the available **match funding** (42% 'largely' or 'totally', 41% 'to some extent') was lower than for LEADER budgets whilst the proportion of those markedly dissatisfied (17%) was higher. Shortfalls in LEADER funding resulting in higher demand for match funding may be a contributory factor.

Of those LAGs faced with inadequate funding to achieve their objectives, the majority (76%) had an opportunity to adjust their LDS. This leaves 24% who were unable to adjust their strategy accordingly in light of this funding shortfall. This ability to adapt the LDS to the available budget was identified as a priority by the Focus Group.

There therefore appear to be **three main funding issues** in strengthening the financial capabilities of LAGs and enabling them to meet their financial and strategic objectives:

- The need for LAGs to more accurately assess and plan the overall costs of achieving their LDS objectives and proposals;
- The need for LAGs to more accurately estimate the need for and availability of match funding; and
- The need for LAGs to be capable of and permitted to adjust their strategies where the level of funding awarded or available is lower than anticipated.

Clarity and transparency on budgetary allocations and scenarios from the outset will help LAGs in this process and the provision of an indicative budget figure provides a useful starting point. LAGs may build on this to include other funding allocations and sources.

Where funding is lower than anticipated a LDS which is founded on a **strong analysis** of the areas needs and potential will be **better equipped to prioritise** the allocation. Such analysis could also enable LAGs to manipulate intervention rates to address priorities and optimise the available match.

10.2. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

Almost all LAGs reported that their method of implementation was adapted to help to **ensure the achievement of the LDS objectives** to a greater (66%) or lesser (29%) extent. The most important steps in the implementation method are grouped into the following key areas, which are consistent with core elements of the LEADER methodology and consist of **good practice in strategy preparation**:

- A high quality LDS
    - Starting early and good planning
    - Good research and area-needs analysis, e.g. in preparing the SWOT
    - Well designed, defined and measurable objectives contributing to realistic goals with an evident overall 'strategy'
- Effective community engagement including the use of participative approaches in LDS development (leading to strategy ownership and realism)
    - The involvement of the local community, consultation and the 'bottom-up' approach
    - The capacity of local leaders, in particular their previous experience of LEADER and building on the LAG experience and continuity
    - Co-operation, collaboration, partnership with other agencies and good support
    - Including public and private funding
    - Employing LEADER methods within projects

- An effective and regular review process for LDS performance and relevance
  - Monitoring and evaluation using well defined indicators linked to the LDS objectives
  - Continual cross-reference and review with the LDS, 'relating projects back'.

10.3. TOOLS

The fundamental tool to steer applicants towards the LDS strategic objectives and used by almost all LAGs is **the project application process.** This is used by the vast majority (90%) of LAGs saying that project targets are aligned with the LDS objectives and targets. A key factor influencing effectiveness is the clarity and transparency of these LDS targets and their **effective communication** to applicants.

The investigation of how the LDS implementation approach steers applicants showed that although a wide **range of tools** were used (promotion and publicity through workshops, seminars, public meetings, training events, targeted marketing to key stakeholders, targeted thematic calls, local media etc.), a proactive, on-going and effective process of animation underpins all of these. The Phase 1 survey showed that 66% of LAGs targeted, animated or promoted actions in specific sectors or activities in support of strategic priorities. What was less clear from the Phase 1 analysis was evidence of clearly structured and planned approaches to informing such targeting activity.

Two tools stood out by some considerable margin, these were **'Animation by LAG staff'** and '**LDS promotion and publicity'** used by around 70% of LAGs. 'Application guidance', 'Targeted calls focused on LDS themes', 'Animation by LAG members', 'Calls to target groups', and 'Structured application materials' were used by between 39% and 28% of respondents. Other proactive approaches mentioned include promotion through partner organisations and targeted marketing to key sector stakeholders.

LAGs consider that the **prioritisation of project selection** by their potential contribution to achieve the LDS objectives is essential and LAGs are employing a structured approach through a variety of tools and criteria. This is most notable in relation to project eligibility and project selection criteria. Clear communication of these to applicants is essential. The 'allocation of funding / intervention rate, feedback re conditions of award' tool is thought effective but applied to a lesser extent and by a smaller proportion of LAGs.

Managing authorities can also **incentivise the achievement of LDS objectives,** e.g. through staged financial allocation or a performance reserve linked to successful delivery. This can be applied on a rolling basis or at given points and the criteria should be made known to LAGs from the outset. This also allows for flexibility, e.g. to let LAGs adjust to changing circumstances or MAs to address exchange rate fluctuations.

10.4. BALANCING ACHIEVEMENT: SPEND OR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

A common criticism amongst LAGs is that their ability to concentrate on their LDS objectives has been compromised by pressure from MA and Paying Agencies to prioritise achieving commitment and spend. Both LAG and MA respondents were asked about the balance for LAGs between achieving LDS outcomes and addressing the financial imperative to spend their allocation through delivering volume of projects.

Almost half of LAGs (46%) responding appear to be able to **focus on the achievement of the LDS outcomes** rather than project volume to meet spend or n+2 requirements. The proportion of LAGs driven entirely by financial considerations is very small. There are however marked variations within the population of LAGs in this regard, both between and within Member States.

Where LAGs were able to focus on LDS objectives, commitment to **applying the full LEADER method** and the **quality of LDS** are identified as important factors. Most commonly this was expressed in terms of LAG choice and determination. For many this involved focusing on projects addressing clearly identified needs, consistent with the LDS analysis.

From the MA perspective ensuring LAGs achieve anticipated spend levels is a key concern and there may be a need to encourage LAGs to spend e.g. through over commitment of budget, profiling of budgets etc.

Achieving spend and objectives are not mutually exclusive, the strategic objectives and the practical realities of project volume and spend can (and should) be combined particularly where LAGs and MAs appreciate and anticipate the issue. Preparing and approving LDS as early as possible in the process provides a stronger opportunity to achieve this. Smaller than anticipated budgetary allocations and high levels of demand can have the indirect effect of driving LAGs to only support top quality projects.

10.5. REGULATORY AND DELIVERY FRAMEWORK

Although not a direct focus of the work of FG4, the importance of an appropriate, supportive and enabling regulatory and governance framework for LAGs to work within, emerged frequently in all strands of its work. The relevance is widespread and multidimensional. Where LEADER works well - with LAGs focusing on delivering their strategies and achieving spend its implementation - it is frequently supported and enabled by a **well-structured framework with associated mechanisms and systems**. Ideally this links the LAG, MA, PA and EC. The **involvement of an informed PA is thought essential**. Such an approach is founded on an understanding of and commitment to the LEADER method and principles. This should result in LDS which are designed to meet local needs and to address RDP conditions.

Effective communication and information flow between LAGs, MAs and PAs is important in both the design and implementation of the LDS. It can take a wide range of forms and benefits from proactive design and management. Clearly-defined rules (or legislation) supported by effective guidance, training and feedback are important elements of this. This applies equally to dialogue and exchange between LAGs and the local community and beneficiaries.

Adequate and appropriate levels of **LAG and MA staff resources** are essential prerequisites of effective LDS delivery, particularly in the avoidance of bottlenecks and enabling the **essential on-time decision-making, reporting, claims and payments**. This necessarily involves **top-down and bottom-up processes working effectively together** in a coordinated manner. Key factors in this are the awareness of and familiarity with the other parties operational environment, systems and constraints, e.g. the LEADER approach's operation for MAs and reporting requirements for LAGs.

10.6. STRATEGY MONITORING AND REPORTING

There is a need for a systematic monitoring and reporting mechanism between the LAGs and the MAs. Although there appears to be a comprehensive programme of monitoring activity, there is a **degree of variation and inconsistency,** e.g. in terms of what is done, who is involved and the frequency of such activity. Monitoring of **LDS performance is less well addressed** overall than financial elements. Clearly there are elements of the local approach (or added value of LEADER) which are not readily monitored, measured and reported. Phase 1 results suggest that this activity could, and should be better planned.

The overwhelming majority (87%) of LAGs responding **employ a structured system** for regularly monitoring the LDS performance; two thirds of MAs provided such a structured system. The main purpose of LAG monitoring activity was reporting progress to the MA (75%) although financial revisions and revision of strategic priorities were also thought important. This finding was consistent across both phases of the focus group.

The elements most monitored are 'financial progress' (e.g. spend, commitment, match funding, total project costs and progress against targets) and monitoring of the 'number and types of projects', 'physical progress, i.e. output and result indicators' is also very common. Monitoring of additional indicators was less frequent even if reported by 72% of LAGs and only three MAs said that LAGs regularly reported on equal opportunities.

The LAGs which **do not employ a structured system** appear to use a considerable mix of approaches employing ad hoc and localised approaches e.g. discussion at meetings, or periodic reviews (annual reviews or self-assessment undertaken by the LAG). Lacking consistency, such reporting does not always focus on LDS performance, with some LAGs suggesting that this was too difficult (although this may reflect a lack of structuring). MAs which did not require structured monitoring relied on either annual or bi-annual LAG reports on LDS implementation. Some MA coordination of LAG activities was emerging.

The most common **LAG reporting frequency** is annual (59%) and is split fairly equally between physical and financial reporting. Quarterly reporting is only very marginally less common, with quarterly and monthly reporting being markedly more concentrated on financial reporting. Other frequencies were either ad hoc or systems driven or project cycle driven.

There are differences in terms of **to whom performance monitoring information is communicated**. In all cases it is **most frequently to the LAG** itself with MA reporting clearly being to a lesser degree. In some cases the extent to which LAG reporting exceeds this is rather surprising. The more locally relevant the information is, the greater is the proportion of reporting which is directed to the LAG. There is **very limited reporting to the local community** and this appears to be rather ad hoc and unstructured.

Financial reporting information goes equally to the LAGs and MAs, whereas the number and type of project information most commonly goes to the LAG and physical progress reports to the MA.

This rather confirms the Phase 1 findings which suggest that the reports prepared by LAGs **could be used to greater effect** locally and centrally in terms of monitoring the performance of the strategy and in informing the Annual Progress Reports (APR) respectively.

Although the Phase 2 findings suggest that structured monitoring by LAGs is perhaps more common than Phase 1 did, it is clear that there are common issues over the **extent, frequency and consistency** of approach and that a proportion of LAGs have no such approach. There is a heavy reliance on annual reports particularly as far as physical performance is concerned.

These points towards a need for evaluators, NRNs and others to be involved in better identifying EU level **best practices in LDS** and **learning from evaluation** experience. Learning about alternative evaluation processes is a further important consideration.

11. MEASURING PERFORMANCE

11.1. LDS TARGETS AND OBJECTIVES

There is some tension evident in LEADER between broad and enabling strategies and those which are more strategically focused. It is vital to **ensure that both LDS and project objectives are measurable**. The vast majority of LAGs were required to have quantified LDS performance targets or objectives however 11% reported that their LDS did not. Some 90% of LAGs with such targets have project targets aligned with them, for reporting purposes. A key concern for the Focus Group was that **LDS objectives were often too general to enable effective performance measurement** particularly given the challenges of measurability of LEADER effects.

11.2. PROJECT PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

The two principal methods identified by LAGs for monitoring project performance against the LDS are 'performance reporting by project holders' (75%) and 'performance checks and visits' by the LAG (72%). Use of the claims process (35%) or auditing (26%) was much less frequent. This figure for the claims process is lower than might ideally be expected and may represent a missed opportunity in making use of existing data sources and mechanisms.

11.3. INDICATORS

The use of performance indicators by LAGs to measure physical achievement against objectives appears to be almost universal (97%) and required by all but one MA. When types of performance indicator were investigated there were clear differences in perspective between MAs and LAGs regarding the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF)[6], with 80% of MAs saying that LAGs used relevant CMEF indicators as opposed to 63% of LAGs who said they did. Some **37% of LAGs therefore appear not to use CMEF indicators**.

[6] More explanation on the CMEF can be found here: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/index_en.htm

LAGs reported use of additional programme or LDS-specific indicators was much less common, use of other area specific indicators was even less frequent.

As all the LAGs are using some form of performance indicator it appears a significant proportion are using **multiple indicator types** suggesting a **lack of consistency in approach and indicator use**.

Approaches employed by LAGs nominally not using performance indicators were rather unclear as many did in fact appear to use indicators. Around half of these LAG responses closely match indicator categories discussed above. Alternative approaches adopted appeared to be largely qualitative and at set points e.g. annual or bi annual reporting or qualitative case studies.

The CMEF indicators were most commonly identified as being **capable of aggregation** by both LAGs (60%) and MAs (86%), a surprisingly low outcome given the common nature of these indicators and their aggregation-based design. All other categories of indicators are thought much less capable of aggregation, e.g. only 21% of LAGs report that area-specific indicators can be aggregated.

Clearly the trend is that **the more specific** to programmes, LDS or areas the **indicators become** the **less capable they are of aggregation** appearing to confirm that this remains a central and fundamental challenge for LEADER and LDS monitoring and evaluation.

Some 18% of LAG respondents report that this is 'not a consideration at LAG level'.

Monitoring and evaluating the **effects of the LEADER method** is linked to the apparent need for **additional or modified indicators** and the diversity of LEADER reporting. A high proportion of the additional indicators being used apply to one or other of the seven LEADER features. The most commonly applied additional indicators were for 'local development strategy priorities'.

Investigating the use of the various types of **additional indicators** suggests that many of these indicators are not wholly additional, with a proportion duplicating or closely related to Axis 1, 2 and 3 CMEF indicators.

Improving the **capacity to understand and use** monitoring and evaluation methods at all levels should facilitate greater compatibility and consistency between the CMEF and additional or locally-specific indicators. The LAG staff or members could be actively engaged with MAs regarding indicator development. This would further be encouraged by having the **common indicators available as LDS development starts**.

CMEF indicators were thought to be **markedly less adequate** than additional indicators in both **quantitative and qualitative** terms; they are narrow and lack flexibility in application. Consideration should be given as to how to make these more capable of local application.

Additional **qualitative** indicators achieved a greater adequacy rating from LAGs than those under the CMEF. Some 67% of respondents reported additional qualitative indicators to be 'largely' adequate or to 'fully' meet requirements as opposed to the (surprisingly high) 47% rating the CMEF indicators achieved. The pattern of responses for the **quantitative** indicators suggests these are marginally less adequate. While 61% of LAGs rated the additional quantitative indicators as 'largely' or 'fully' adequate only 46% rated the CMEF quantitative indicators thus (a rather surprising finding again).

Consideration of **indicator gaps** produced a wide variety and diversity of responses with the two most common issues raised by only around 15% of respondents. These related to a perceived incompatibility between the CMEF indicators and those used by the LAGs or MAs and to gaps in qualitative indicators, specifically their ease of measurement. Concerns were raised that the very essence of the **LEADER method and its added value** is **difficult to capture** including aspects such as multiplier effects, social and human capital, 'liveability', environmental capital, local cooperation and networking.

LAGs appear to face considerable difficulty in **interpreting and applying relevant indicators** or in developing or modifying indicators to better fit LEADER specificities and to better enable aggregation and comparability. Clearly there is demand for differentiated indicators to capture the small scale, local or incremental effects which LDS deliver. CMEF indicators are thought to be too generic and inflexible and it was suggested that mainstream indicators such as 'number of jobs created' may miss sustainable development effects, e.g. a diversification that keeps a farm family on the farm and safeguards the farm family income but which may not result in a 'net' increase in employment.

The 'additional' indicators chosen by the LAG or the MA could be more adequate in order to measure the effects of the LEADER method but this seems only marginally to be the case. This appears to be in tension with the relatively high perceived adequacy of their additional indicators and the large amount of **area and project-specific data** which is said to be collected. This may however be more of an issue of indicator selection and **poor alignment of data collected and indicators** used.

It is clear however that the development and implementation of **ever more specific indicators results in fragmentation** and only reduces their value as measurement tools. It therefore appears that there is a need for **substantial guidance, support and development in relation to performance indicators** and their use; this applies equally to the CMEF and to any additional indicators employed.

11.4. STRATEGY REVIEW

Three-quarters of LAGs report conducting a **formal progress review** or other formal steps to revise their LDS; a similar proportion of the MAs indicate that they authorise LAGs to modify their LDS although they perceive a lower uptake (50%) perhaps reflecting perspectives on the formality of the review. Phase 1 analysis certainly raises questions over the formality and consistency of the review process. The vast majority of such reviews or strategy revisions take place annually. The other MAs allowed more limited changes, e.g. in relation to consequences of the economic crisis (external/macro conditions).

The principal factor(s) precipitating **strategy revision** by LAGs were 'changing external / macro conditions', 'changing local conditions' and 'performance against the strategy' each identified by around half of LAGs. The main additional factor cited was 'financial constraints', specifically reduced budget allocations.

Modifications to financial allocations were the most commonly reported and extensive revisions with 72% of LAGs reporting these. Revisions to action planning and adjusted LDS targeting were also common and these are all consistent with the MA expectations and reports. Considerable variance occurred between MA expectations (64%) and LAG revisions (31%) of 'LDS priorites'. The MA experience was of little actual modification. Few LAGs modified their 'LAG structure and organisation' or 'LAG area' to levels substantially below MA expectations.

Overall there is evidence of a **reasonable level of formal review and revision**. The focus perhaps unsurprisingly is on financial allocations but also includes action planning and targeting. Viewed positively this indicates adaptation to changing circumstances and a **positive approach to continual improvement**. Less positively, it could indicate **poorly devised original strategies**. No doubt the truth lies **somewhere between these poles** in the vast majority of cases. Where such revision is undertaken it is vital that the revised objectives remain measurable.

Of greater concern perhaps are the **25% of LAGs who are not undertaking a formal review** (even if they may undertake informal reviews). Overall it appears that the specification of such procedures in action plans is a priority.

12. MONITORING, TARGETING AND EVALUATION

This first phase of FG4 explored a variety of different aspects of monitoring, evaluation and targeting, mainly as a preliminary enquiry to inform their subsequent work but also to identify any strategy design considerations. This included whether guidelines were provided to LAGs, self-evaluation by LAGs, progress reporting and amendments to LAG strategies. Consideration was also given to the use made of evaluation findings. These findings have now been edited into the material developed in Phase 2 which addressed these topics directly.

12.1. STRUCTURING OF EVALUATION

Almost all LAGs report employing a structured system for evaluating the outcomes and performance of the LDS; MA perspectives on this differed with a third stating that LAGs did not use a structured approach. The most common systems employed are self-evaluation or mixed approaches specified by the LAG itself or specified by the MA. Evaluation specification was split almost evenly between LAGs and MAs. Specification to LAGs of the form of evaluation by MAs was very mixed and lacked specificity. The Focus Group was clear in its view that both **internal and external evaluation of LAGs is required**. Furthermore the importance of linking the LAGs, MAs and PAs in the design and implementation of evaluation was stressed; this should be informed by those with LEADER expertise.

12.2. PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

Survey responses suggest that LAGs have a strong appreciation of the **importance of LDS evaluation**, its relevance and benefits. That evaluation 'is a requirement' was ranked as being of least relevance overall. Nevertheless it is thought that **understanding of the**

role of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in governing buget allocations **needs to be strengthened**.

'Learning from experience' and **'improving the future LDS'** were ranked by LAGs as being the two most relevant purposes of evaluation activity. The LAG focus therefore appears to be on learning and then making use of that learning in the current or future programme. MAs prioritised 'demonstration of achievement' and 'improvement in current LDS performance / action plan' and were clearly more focused on current programme performance. These perspectives are entirely consistent with those of the DG Agri 'Monitoring and Evaluation for CAP post 2013' stakeholder conference held in Brussels in September 2011.

The 'achievement of LDS objectives' is the central element of the **scope of strategy evaluation** (recognised by 93% of the LAG and 84% of the MA respondents) How this is achieved is less clear, given the inconsistency with the ranking of 59% for the 'coherence of delivery with the LDS', a surprisingly low figure in its own right, and the relatively low priority placed on 'economic impact', 'environmental impact' and 'expected effects'.

The ways in which LAGs operate locally, e.g. in animation and governance and their effects on the population in terms of knowledge acquisition, networking, innovation, cooperation and social and human capital were strongly identified as linked components of the central elements.

Dissemination, working with the results of evaluation and receiving and providing feedback are priorities for LAGs. While evaluation results are reportedly disseminated in 80% of cases, the perspectives on who evaluation results are disseminated to vary between MAs and LAGs. According to LAGs, **LAG members** were the **most frequent recipients** of evaluation results (94%), followed by MAs (78%). However, MAs perceived a much lower level of dissemination to LAG members (60%).

Dissemination of results to **the 'local community'** and 'partner organisations' (69% and 60% respectively) suggests a rather higher level of communication than is the case with monitoring information, although the extent, content and quality of this is not assessed. Dissemination of evaluation results to **'other rural development stakeholders'**, the 'NRN' and with 'other LAGs' is less common. This seems rather inconsistent with findings regarding the purpose of such evaluation and the priority LAGs placed on knowledge transfer and shared learning elsewhere.

Dissemination occurs via a **wide variety of means** with some differentiation by target group. The use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in disseminating evaluation results is high across all LAGs surveyed with 84% using their website and 64% using email, with the use of social networking also being evident. Favoured non-ICT based approaches included special evaluation meetings and the use of the local press.

There is an obvious need to **think more carefully about dissemination** and feedback and to link this to LAG publicity. This should be carefully structured and targeted with clear objectives in mind.

The majority of LAGs (70%) had **contributed to the Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE)** directly and just over half of these received support (37%). Only in a small minority (14%)

of cases did MAs indicate that LAG participation in the MTE was compulsory. This suggests that neither receipt of support nor compulsion were particularly significant factors.

12.3. MONITORING AND EVALUATION RESOURCING AND SUPPORT

A small proportion of LAGs had staff members fully (100%) committed to monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation activity most commonly takes up **between 10% and 25% of total aggregate LAG staff time**. Less than one third of staff members spend more than 25% of their time on these activities, with administrators and managers being most involved overall. It is thought essential that this activity be given **sufficient priority** to ensure it is not overlooked in favour of everyday activities.

Regarding the nature and extent of **monitoring support** provided to LAGs, five main forms of support were considered in the survey: training; templates; mentoring; guidance and; one-to-one support. Various forms of monitoring support was available for LAGs, however it was comprehensive or substantive in only 20% to 30% of cases. . Guidance was the form of support most frequently provided (88%) but only 27% said such guidance was substantive or comprehensive. Slightly lower levels of overall support were reported for training and templates with similarly substantive or comprehensive rankings to guidance. Where 'other' forms of support were reported this was principally given internally within and between the LAGs by staff or through sharing resources. Having considered mentoring support, it appears to represent **a development opportunity**.

There **is less support available for evaluation** than for monitoring and there are more instances where no support was offered to LAGs, otherwise the pattern is almost identical. Comprehensive or substantive support levels again range between 20% and 30% in all categories. The greatest overall level and intensity of support is through guidance (81%) with 28% reporting substantive or comprehensive guidance. This is also where MAs focus their attention. Training and template provision were again the next most common even if levels were somewhat lower. Mentoring and 'one-to-one' support provision were again very low. The 'other' forms of support again related to that provided internally by LAG staff or self-support, which **appears to represent an opportunity**.

Monitoring and evaluation **support could be considerably stronger**, as around 50% of LAGs only appear to get 'some' support at best with just 20% reporting 'substantive' or 'comprehensive' support. MAs appear to focus mainly on passive support through guidance and the provision of templates. A third of MAs provide no financial support to LAGs for evaluation activity. As there are evident needs in this regard, this appears to be a **clear priority.** Training and the development of mentoring and other self-help approaches are indicated, so providing LAGs with an M&E toolkit should be considered. Within this the strengthening of understanding of the benefits of M&E should be a priority.

12.4. LAG SELF-EVALUATION

LAG self-evaluation uptake indicates that it is a **widespread practice** which LAGs were encouraged to undertake. In some cases it is written into their LDS. Over three-quarters of LAG respondents confirmed that they undertook some form of self-evaluation and 55% of MAs state this is expected, although a considerable degree of LAG discretion is evident. Where self-evaluation is not required more centralised approaches, often employing consultants, were favoured. There are however some **evident challenges,** e.g. over the degree of trust in the approach and the extent of public sector involvement. Self-evaluation is important but is **not sufficient overall**; there is also a need for external objectivity and effective feedback.

Self-evaluation occurs on an annual basis for 50% of LAGs with 35% doing so less frequently and 15% more frequently. Almost half undertake this self-evaluation on an on-going basis, a third do so only in relation to the main evaluations. The FG4 takes the view that **self-evaluation should be an annual occurrence**.

LAG staff is most involved in self-evaluation. They are more than twice as likely to be involved as are LAG members (the next most involved group). The main activities are gathering data, feedback and dissemination and steering the evaluation. LAG member involvement is proportionately greatest in steering the evaluation and in feedback and dissemination.

Levels of **project holder or beneficiary involvement are very much lower** and tend to be restricted to aspects of self-evaluation directly related to projects, specifically providing and collecting data. Although they are also involved in feedback, the overall level of this is lower than might be expected. As this is the level at which the LEADER effects are experienced, there appears to be an opportunity for wider involvement. As there appears to be a risk that **LEADER 'professionals' may dominate** the process, the potential and means for others to contribute should be examined. Informing beneficiaries and other local stakeholders and **improving their capabilities** to contribute to evaluation should be prioritised along with the structures, to enable them to do so in an appropriate way.

Self-evaluation process and evaluation question design is also mainly undertaken by LAG staff and members. Some 58% of LAG respondents report that self-evaluation questions were developed based on other examples or best practice, with a quarter of respondents using networks to do this. Some 46% of LAGs developed questions from first principles.

Analysis of the main self-evaluation tools used shows a **heavy reliance on generic indicators**, data analysis, surveys, consultations or project records. The FG4 identified real weaknesses here, e.g. in the lack of specific indicators. Amongst the more interactive methods used, discussion or focus groups was most common but case studies - a commonly identified LEADER evaluation tool - were only employed in 30% of cases. The least common self-evaluation tool was 'peer review' which scored just 11%.

Self-evaluation largely appears to take place in isolation with **little coordination** evident between LAGs either within a region or the wider MS; only 36% report some form of coordination. These findings seem to suggest that rather than self-evaluation, **the majority of LAGs are undertaking self-administered conventional evaluation**. The very low rating for other tools tends to confirm this interpretation.

Given the evident gaps and difficulties in monitoring and evaluation e.g. over the use of indicators and the low levels of high quality support provided the finding that 46% of LAGs developed questions from first principles gives some cause for concern and suggests a need for **support and some kind of framework or guidance**. A simple tool such as an evaluation checklist could provide a strong starting point. Taken together with the earlier findings in relation to evaluation support these results emphasise to the relevance of one to one, exchange, networking and mentoring support.

Self-evaluation support was highly valued when it was present and clearly in demand when it was not. Analysis of the support provided by MAs for the 75% of LAGs who undertake self-evaluation shows that although the overall pattern of forms of support provided is broadly similar to conventional M&E support the proportion reporting no support at all is higher (at least 30% in all cases). **Substantive or comprehensive support levels are even lower, reported in at around 20% of cases.**

Guidance, (73% of cases) was once again the most prevalent form of support provided. Closely followed by support for training and templates, these were the areas where support was **most needed**. Under Phase 1 it was found that guidance for self-evaluation is often absent, with 60% of MA respondents indicating that they were unable to provide specific guidelines.

Support for mentoring and one-to-one support was lower with a large proportion (41%) indicating that it was not present. Other forms of support for self-evaluation were again those given internally by LAG staff or self-support.

The clear inconsistency and significant **gap in guidance and support** to LAGs creates risks of a fragmented and inconsistent approach. Consequently, downstream effects are likely in terms of the adequacy and reliability of the evaluation approach being taken within and between programmes.

The specific monitoring and evaluation needs which have been identified reinforce the issues emerging elsewhere regarding overall evaluation capabilities and competencies and, understanding of the value and importance of support and resourcing. In all these areas the main difference between self-evaluation needs and the conventional evaluation was a greater demand for MA support.

The current gaps and priorities identified largely fell under three common themes which applied to both evaluation and self-evaluation.

The first requirement is for **better and more consistent definitions** and agreement as to what comprises monitoring and evaluation. This should provide clarity, with a well worked out, **commonly understood** (by LAGs and MAs) and consistent method as to how to undertake M&E. Integrally connected to this was a need for **better and more relevant indicators** to access both real and subjective results in a quantifiable and objective way. A common **menu of relatively simple core indicators** which LAGs could draw on for their strategies is strongly supported; worked examples of these indicators illustrating how they may be applied locally would be very valuable.

There is scope for both common indicators and for LAG-specific approaches, which would allow some of the specificities of LEADER to be addressed. The **illustration of local effects is important**. Local feedback is essential to this process and common tools and approaches are needed to include such voices in the group of evaluation stakeholders. There is however a need to be able to **balance such specificity** with the **ability to aggregate** these indicators at LAG, regional, national and EU levels.

One important suggestion involves a structured approach to **learning more from LAGs' evaluation experience** and their use of indicators to create an evaluation resource tool. In this context the experience of indicator use under LEADER II is particularly relevant.

Secondly there are gaps in specific types of support, specifically those related to **building the evaluation capacities of LAG staff and members**. This includes elements such as exchange of good practice, guidance, templates, mentoring and the most commonly mentioned was training with training on the CMEF and its requirements being specifically highlighted. These suggestions therefore include both the most and least common forms of current support provision. Ensuring that LAGs' access to relevant external support is also a priority.

Finally, the need for **greater resourcing** to enable LAGs to commit to evaluation and in particular to self-evaluation was clearly evident. Fundamental to this is the need for **adequate and appropriate IT** systems. **Peer-to-peer evaluation** between LAGs- as occurs in Finland - appears to offer **much potential** but this demands both human and financial resources if it is to succeed. In some cases, LAGs may already be undertaking activities which could contribute to self-evaluation, e.g. in monitoring participation or press reports. Improved evaluation knowledge should also help improve resource awareness and use.

13. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter draws together the conclusions from the various elements and components of the work of the Focus Group 4 on Better Local Development Strategies. They have been prepared on a synthetic basis and therefore do not directly reflect the structure of the foregoing thematic chapters. There is considerable 'read across' between elements reflecting the integrated nature of the LEADER process, the multi-level governance structure employed and the area based LDS which LAGs prepare, deliver and evaluate. These conclusions focus on the main factors which are important in order to produce and deliver a high quality strategy.

13.1. MAKING A START

Start Early

The need to start the LDS process early is an issue that necessarily affects and involves both LAGs and MAs. There is a tendency to overly focus on preparedness at the expense of initiating the process. The priority for LAGs and MAs is to ensure that sufficient time is allocated to preparing a high quality LDS. Some LAGs take pre-emptive action to start the process.

There is a need to create and maintain local momentum, which is extremely valuable and should not be lost. Building capacity and systems takes time and needs resources therefore it is important to allow enough time for an effective process and to plan carefully.

It should not be assumed that all the parts have to be in place before the process starts: It is important to keep an eye on the real objectives of the exercise. LAGs should consider what is strictly necessary and what the risks are. Administration is part of the means and should help enable the process.

Take Responsibility, Avoid Delays

An effective early start needs clear guidance and support which can cascade and feedback through the multi-level governance tiers. Effective communication between the EC, the MAs and the LAGs allows maximum progress at each stage. MAs should focus on an enabling approach. Waiting to secure the last administrative detail, or on domestic legislation and regulations, may cause undue delays and have significant knock-on effects. Difficulties often arise through a lack of foresight of operational realities and bottlenecks are caused as a result. Such delays compromise the LDS process, consultation and engagement, putting all actors under unnecessary pressure.

LAGs need to take responsibility too. They need to anticipate, initiate, communicate, consult, engage and feedback. LAGs need to plan and take a progressive approach; they should not make unreasonable or uninformed assumptions which in turn cause future delays.

In short there is a need to implement multi-level governance as soon as practically possible. Effective subsidiarity is required, which should be planned, with all stakeholders assuming their responsibilities within the process and taking initiative. No stakeholder should wait to be 'spoon fed', each should seek to give others confidence and be confident.

Allow Enough Time

The time period or window allowed to LDS submission is much less important than needed for LDS development. Realistically, a minimum of six months is required for an effective local process leading to a high quality LDS and even longer for new LAGs.

The adequacy of the time allowed is affected by wide range of factors which have to be taken into account; not least the wide variation between LAGs' capabilities. There is a need to differentiate between LAGs and a 'one size fits all' approach is unlikely to succeed.

In the coming programming period all LAGs will be facing changes. It is therefore important not to underestimate the time which will be needed to adapt, which will also depend on the availability of the required information and resources. There is a need to avoid 'time thieves' such as those mentioned above. This applies to LAGs as well as to MAs. The key lesson for LAGs is to anticipate, to act responsibly and to communicate, thereby extending the time frame available for action.

Involve People

Mobilising the different types of stakeholder group and planning their involvement is extremely important to the LDS process. Who may contribute, what their skills are, when they should become involved and what the support requirements will be, all need to be taken into account by LAGs in planning the strategy. In this context, a skills analysis, using a template to map who is involved and at which stage, can be a useful tool for LAGs. Ideally such analysis could be conducted based on a competence standard.

Within this analysis, the need for consultancy support should be assessed and employed only if there is a clear need; such support should be clearly targeted and actively managed. Consultants must understand that they work for and are to be guided by the LAG.

A wide range of facilitation methods have been used, principally involving LAG staff, partners and members, with limited use of specialist external support. LAG and staff continuity is a critical factor in facilitating the process.

The use of participative methods was highly rated but they are challenging and need careful management, e.g. to ensure adequate involvement and participation. However, this is considered worthwhile and innovative participatory techniques should therefore be encouraged.

Given these challenges and the lack of consistency in approaches employed, LAGs would benefit from guidance building on resources such as the LEADER Tool-kit for LAGs. New and experienced LAGs have different guidance needs (including guidance on other EU Funds). New LAGs can learn from the previous experience of more experienced LAGs or from previous evaluations. In the coming programming period LEADER preparatory support will be important.

Continuity and Resourcing Development

Starting the process early and involving people requires resources (both financial and human resources) and as this has been a problem in the past, a sustained approach is required. There are problems associated with both gaps and overlaps between programmes of the consecutive programming periods, e.g. with heavy resource demands from overlaps of programmes or the absence of resources when there is a gap between programmes. The primary consideration is not the cost but the value of the available resources required for the implementation of the programme(s).

How can capacity which has been developed in LAG staff, MAs and elsewhere be sustained between generations of LEADER. It is one of the main recurring issues as building capacity and systems takes time and resources. This has been a major challenge for MAs and LAGs in the start-up phase of the programmes. It is important to avoid losses caused by gaps between generations of programmes and continuity of the personnel involved is critical in the transitional phase. This is likely to be a bigger issue in the forthcoming transition and priority should be given to securing human capital and organisational memory of LAGs, MAs and other LEADER stakeholders. The importance of mentoring approaches is also relevant in this context.

LAGs and MAs should work together and plan how the transition is managed. MAs should consider how to lighten the resourcing burden; LAGs how to innovate in developing, sustaining or securing resources. It is important to resolve any issues regarding financial support or eligibility, which is why clarity is required at an early stage in EU legislation, RDP provisions and domestic enabling legislation.

Take Advantage of Mentoring

The value of mentoring is considerable and it is highly regarded. LEADER has developed a valuable knowledge resource. Typically, the focus is on best practice and capacity building, which strengthens and speeds up processes and approaches within LAGs and MAs. Access to this is particularly important for new LAGs where there is often a gap in terms of the provision of differentiated guidance and support. Used as a form of consultancy, this can be more appropriate than relying on contracted experts.

Mentoring can occur from LAG-to-LAG, between LAG and MA and also from MA-to-MA. It has a relatively low cost and it provides a direct means of knowledge and skills transfer, both within and between programmes and between generations. It can also be effective in strengthening multi-level governance by extending common understanding and complementary mentoring approaches. A sustained approach is needed and there is evidence that a structured and more formal system would be supported and employed by LAGs and MAs working together.

Where a Member State promotes community-led local development throughout all CSF funds, a group of the most involved actors in this country could develop the detailed framework for multi-fund LDS development and ensure that established local development principles do not become diluted.

Plan a Staged Approach

The development and submission of the LDS appears to commonly take place through multiple submission rounds and multi-stage processes, both formal and informal. This may involve an expression of interest phase or multiple application periods with feedback provided. There is no single best approach; the most important point is to employ a structure which allows for an effective LDS development process.

Time is needed to focus on quality. The LDS process should be treated like a LEADER project, i.e. it is looking for winners in supporting successful submissions and should avoid unfruitful work by both LAGs and MAs.

Using a formal expression of interest stage enables MAs to provide LAGs with feedback and guidance and it supports the implementation of local and multi-level partnerships in the process. This can involve varying degrees of formality, e.g. in the use of criteria and levels for pre-selection. The evidence suggests that, overall some form of iterative process is favoured with pre-screening of submissions that takes account of the LAG's stage of development and maturity. Clear criteria are necessary and these should be in place from the outset.

13.2. GUIDANCE

Coordinate Within the Support Package

The provision, availability, relevance and adequacy of strategy development guidance for LAGs is a high priority and needs have to be viewed in the context of the whole LDS support package. There is a significant degree of variation in the guidance provided, the extent to which this includes strategy preparation and how it is done. Issues emerge mainly over the completeness, clarity, complexity, quality and consistency of the guidance and the deficiencies in differentiated provision for new LAGs.

Guidance must be developed as soon as possible in order for territories to be defined (where appropriate) and to allow time for the LDS to be adequately developed, shaped and prioritised. This could be provided in stages reflecting timing considerations and should be linked to and coordinated with similar provision for implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Guide the LDS Development Method

Guidance for LAGs on strategy content and method is required. MAs either provide narrow guidance principally of a technical or administrative nature or, a lot less frequently, wider more comprehensive guidance on strategy content, method and preparation. A common methodology, which details the key steps in the development and implementation of the LDS, would strengthen consistency and facilitate knowledge transfer on the strategy design process. This should be developed and made available as soon as is possible.

The emerging local development proposals in the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and the increased complexity of developing the institutional and operational framework for LDS must not be underestimated. This will present significant LAG guidance and support need. Specific EU guidelines should be prepared regarding multi-fund approaches.

Overall, a clear framework of the rules, regulations, process, timetable and opportunities available to LAGs, including how subsidiarity will be implemented, is required. Communicating this will be a key contributor to establishing an effective system of multi-level governance. There will not be any 'one-size-fits-all' solution.

There is also clear demand for guidance which is supportive; responsive and needs-based; it means balancing the avoidance of over-prescription with the diverse requirements of LAGs depending on their capability, experience and autonomy. A greater degree of needs assessment is required in guidance design. This can be achieved through dialogue with LAGs and there may be merit in developing a framework of essential elements with sufficient flexibility to enable local strategic priorities to be addressed.

Improve Standards through Training

Skills gaps exist in both new and existing LAGs with clear capacity building needs regarding LDS development. Trainings organised for LAGs have not addressed this to any significant degree being either too general or overly complicated but lacking adequate strategy development guidance. Addressing this is a priority.

LAG strategies seldom include training plans. Knowledge transfer within programmes and within and between LAGs appears to be less well-structured than it might be and skills development is not sufficiently prioritised. This is a serious issue for a local development programme predicated on the strategic priority of developing and employing human and social capital. Training provision should be addressed as a core element in the LDS. The overall level of competency to be achieved should be an obligatory element with a budget allocation.

There is a need to ensure the professional management of the LAG, this is also important in strategy development, delivery and review. An on-going programme of training for LAGs and their staff is suggested, possibly working towards the establishment of a common vocational standard.

13.3. ELEMENTS OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Specify More Clearly

Greater clarity on what is being specified by MAs as an LDS format, content and structure is required. There is merit in considering specifying minima and maxima for strategy content, to ensure the coverage of elements in the strategy and action plan. Many of the common elements are relatively straightforward and unchallenging, whereas others need urgent attention.

- **SWOT Analysis**

The MAs and LAGs both think that the territorial SWOT analysis is a very important element of the LDS. Given its high importance, it needs to be more targeted, comprehensive, analytical and integrative.

It is important, especially in the multi-fund context in the next programming period, to improve this local analysis and definitions e.g. in relation to territories, and for substantial improvements in quality, particularly in terms of the analysis.

- **LEADER Principles**

Including the LEADER principles in the LDS is an important way to reinforce the process; they are assessed in the majority of programmes. The implementation of LEADER principles needs to be evidenced in practice; this requires clarity and consistency of the implementation procedures for the LDS, the organisational structure of the LAG and the attendant responsibilities.

- **Ensuring Local Participation**

The extent and process of local engagement is viewed as a highly important element of the LDS as this validates the strategy and is often an essential assessment criterion. This aspect of the LDS should be reinforced.

Improve Innovation

Innovation appeared to have relatively low priority but will have increased prominence in the new programming period. In some cases barrier have arisen, e.g. due to risk aversion, and this clearly needs attention. The priority is to develop a more common understanding of the principle of innovation - what it is, its value, how it contributes to development and growth and why it is part of LEADER. This common understanding must be shared amongst LAGs and between LAGs, MAs and PAs.

Strengthen the Intervention Logic

Very significant weaknesses were illustrated for four LDS elements, namely: intervention logic; strategic fit; setting and quantifying objectives; and targets and learning from experience.

Importance given to intervention logic by MAs was worryingly low and it appears inconsistent with the high priority given to the territorial SWOT analysis, , as at the same time there are weaknesses in data analysis, low priority and identified difficulties for identifying and quantifying indicators, targets and SMART objectives etc. The apparent lack of knowledge and understanding of the importance of the coherence and consistency between these elements and the low priority observed gives considerable cause for concern. These concerns are reinforced by the evident weaknesses in evaluation and in learning from previous experience. There is a clear need to strengthen the intervention logic approach to improve the targeting, prioritisation, quantification and justification of the LDS. An urgent need for clarification and guidance is thus indicated and applies to both LAGs and MAs: it is clearly linked to the findings and conclusions regarding monitoring and evaluation capabilities and support needs.

Plan Monitoring and Evaluation

The three linked elements of the LDS monitoring system, the evaluation plan and the LDS revision procedure are all poorly represented in strategy and action plan specifications. LDS evaluation plans or monitoring systems were the gaps most frequently mentioned by MAs. This issue is therefore common to both LAGs and MAs. When considered along with the findings in relation to the essential elements of the strategy this gives considerable cause for concern. As evaluation is specified as a LAG function and in the post 2013 proposals the inclusion of monitoring and evaluation plans in strategies is a prerequisite. Specific training and guidance is likely to be required, a view also supported by the Phase 2 analyses.

Prioritise Training in the Strategy

A training action plan was not considered essential by any MA. Such a plan is a key strategic priority for LEADER and as such can be considered as a critical omission in an area of MA influence. Given the capacity-building orientation of the LEADER approach, the importance placed on the knowledge and skills of the LAG staff, members and other partners and the concerns over continuity between programmes and capacity retention, this is a worrying finding and should be addressed as a priority.

13.4. AUTONOMY

Seek a Balance

Two specific aspects of LAG autonomy - with direct bearing on the definition of the strategy- were explored, these were the definition of the LAG territory and the definition of the strategic themes.

Levels of autonomy are not black or white, but many shades of grey are evident in the degree of flexibility (depending on given parameters or constraints).

Overall it appears that LAGs were largely free to select their areas and themes within given (LEADER) parameters and they were subject to some MA influence, e.g. regarding wider objectives, and this approach was generally successful. Not all LAGs having autonomous area selection had autonomous theme selection and vice versa.

LAGs and MAs agreed that local people were best able to define their territory, especially. in terms of coherent economic, social and environmental issues. Where LAGs were able to build on people's history of working together, this ultimately contributed to fewer tensions and challenges and easier decision-making.

LAGs which did not have autonomy in theme selection frequently appear to have a degree of flexibility within the constraints and in the degree of definition of the themes. There was however some concern, that aspects of theme selection were outside of the LAGs control due to the requirement to fit within the RDP framework. The balance to be struck between RDP fit and the LAGs' desire for a more flexible approach suggests a need for clearer guidance and for LAGs to be involved in the process of deciding the level at which themes and priorities are set. The importance of joint MA and LAG participation is considerable in supporting the development of trust between the actors involved.

Overall, it seems that the greater the degree of autonomy which can be enabled, the better the LDS fit with the needs, development potential and capabilities of the area concerned.

13.5. LOCAL PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIC FIT

Achieve Flexibility within the Parameters

Regarding the driving strategic priorities of LAGs it was clear that the development of their LDS was either largely driven by the development needs of the area rather than by the financial considerations of a funding bid.

The needs-focused basis of the strategy was thought to be very successful in demonstrating the LEADER method effects in the LDS development and application. This reflects the degree of flexibility afforded to LAGs in adapting RDP and LEADER themes and their delivery, in order to meet local needs and the LDS methodology.

In future this may demand further flexibility. In structuring the fit of multiple funds with local priorities, complementarity will be essential; this should be integrated into the LDS design. Clear, consistent and effectively-communicated parameters and guidance will be important in helping LAGs set practical strategic themes which are appropriately focused. The basis of strategic links and complementarity should be defined. A clearly structured framework which recognises the essential and necessary constraints (e.g. strategic fit) and sets relevant and appropriate parameters, appears to be indicated here.

Strengthening LAG awareness of the overall operational and contextual parameters of the multi-fund context should improve the quality of the LDS. Whilst it might be suggested that this is primarily a LAG responsibility it also reinforces the need for clearer guidance and monitoring that such guidance has been received and understood.

13.6. STRATEGY SELECTION

Use Objective Quality Criteria

The preparation of the LDS should involve an objective assessment of its overall quality using clear and consistent criteria, possibly in the form of checklists. These should in effect represent a system to measure quality in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Provide Quality Feedback

The split in feedback provision methods is remarkably stark, ranging between very basic presentation of information and real interaction and dialogue. Iterative approaches are clearly designed to improve the quality of the strategies and add value to the process. This may be more resource heavy but appears to be more consistent with the LEADER model and good practice in multi-level governance. Programming feedback mechanisms will need careful planning as there are some indications from MAs that peak workloads are associated with strategy submission and could cause real difficulties here.

Set Evidence-based Budgets

Indicative budget allocation per LAGs, as a guide in advance of strategy development, have positive and negative, but mainly positive effects on LDS quality. Although LAGs and MAs identify benefits arising from the indicative budget on the realism and prioritisation of strategies, this budget must be balanced against the greater weighting it may place on financial considerations. This may result in prioritisation by what is financially expedient rather than what is indicated by the evidence. It is clear that the objectives, possible effects and timing have to be considered very carefully prior to such an approach being implemented.

Approaches to budget allocation within the LDS generally appear to be rather unclear and to lack strategic focus. The evidence suggests a real gap in any strategic rationale employed in the quantification of strategies and the allocation of resources within them. The lack of a clear and systematic analysis-based approach is connected to the issues that are apparent regarding the intervention logic, i.e. there is little intervention logic evident and therefore justification for budgetary allocations is similarly weak.

Compete on Quality

Whilst there is some debate over the merits of competition between LAGs, opinion was quite unequivocal in that budget allocation should be linked to and based on the assessment of the quality of the strategy. A quality strategy should clearly identify the link between the territory, its population, area, needs and opportunities, thereby addressing issues of proportionality. Competition should therefore take place either relatively between LAGs or against a common standard and thus prioritise the improvement of LDS quality overall.

13.7. FUNDING

Improve planning

Although most LAGs received the funding they requested for their LDS, a large proportion found this to be inadequate to some degree. Whilst the emergence of the financial crisis and its effects on, e.g. available match funding, could not have been fully anticipated, the majority of LAGs were permitted to adjust their budgets. However, the evidence suggests weaknesses in financial planning either in the development of the bid and the allocation of costs and resources, for contingency planning for increased costs or for higher than anticipated intervention rates. There are three main factors which emerge:

- the need to assess costs accurately;
- the need to assess required and available match funding accurately; and
- the need to plan for elasticity and to enable adjustment.

13.8. DELIVERING OBJECTIVES

Be strategic, pursue proactively

Almost half of LAGs were able to focus on achieving LDS outcomes rather than on financial objectives. In some cases, this was a result of circumstances, e.g. high demand of project beneficiaries but low available budgets or a convergence of good quality project suggestions coming forward with the LDS. In other cases, LAGs had anticipated the need to achieve both, had planned and started early and thus avoided difficulties. Frequently outcomes were best where the LEADER method had been actively employed to animate, develop, prioritise and deliver projects in a strategic approach. LEADER represents best practice and should be the common or default approach.

Employ the LEADER methods

In implementing their strategies, LAGs have adapted their implementation methods to help achieve their LDS objectives; most commonly these involve employing the various LEADER methods. The fundamentals are starting early and building on experience and continuity to develop a strong LDS process which is strongly bottom-up with good local ownership, is realistic and founded on strong analysis and is supported by dynamic delivery informed by active performance review. In achieving this, effective engagement by LAG staff and the active promotion of the LDS were critical success factors. The use of targeting, guidance and application materials supported this. Wider application and strengthening of such approaches should be promoted.

A number of the tools available to LAGs were underutilised and may offer potential for further improvement or fine tuning, particularly in the current financial climate where resources are at a premium. In order to strengthen the focus on key outcomes and to achieve value for money, increased use could be made of more active approaches, such as the use of variable intervention rates or application feedback.

Review LDS performance

LAG reviews of strategy performance were common but rather mixed in approach. They tended to focus on financial implementation, with a minority considering performance against objectives. A quarter of LAGs undertake no such review and a further fifth only do so infrequently. The extent of LDS modifications resulting from the LDS performance monitoring is limited mainly to finances. There appears to be considerable scope for improvement here and this should be actively pursued, using improved monitoring procedures.

13.9. MONITORING AND INDICATORS

Focus, plan and structure

A majority of LAGs employ a structured monitoring approach; this is most frequently annual and is focused on financial progress which is reported to the MA. Other forms of reporting include physical performance and other more local effects, which are more usually reported to the LAG. Reporting to the local community is infrequent, if at all. Only 35% of LAGs report using their project claims information to generate data. LAGs that do not employ a structured approach have a mix of ad hoc and localised approaches.

Although there is widespread involvement in monitoring activity with some evidence of structuring, it involves a variety of means and different end-users resulting in a high degree of variation and an associated lack of consistency. There is an apparent need for greater focus, planning and structuring of the approach taken to performance monitoring. The proposal to generate more monitoring data from application and claims data in future gives this additional urgency.

Improve consistency and understanding of indicator selection and use

There are weaknesses in the LDS intervention logic and this is also evident in the planning of targets and associated indicators. A relatively small proportion of LDS do not have quantified targets and objectives and a relatively small proportion of those which do so, do not align project targets with their LDS. Overall, therefore, around a quarter of LAGs do not have operational performance indicators aligned with quantified LDS objectives and targets. This gap should be addressed through training or guidance.

Overall LAGs rank additional indicators to be more adequate than CMEF indicators in both qualitative and quantitative terms, and all indicator types are thought more adequate in qualitative measurement rather than quantitative. This is a surprising finding given the nature of the indicators concerned and rather counters the commonly-held view of the appropriateness of LEADER indicators; this finding may reflect some lack of understanding.

Two thirds of LAGs use the CMEF indicators to report physical achievement and half use LDS-specific or additional indicators. Overall there is some evidence of a mismatch or incompatibility between what LAGs are collecting and what the RDP requires under the CMEF. As all LAGs are involved in monitoring this suggests that many are using multiple types in different ways and that this is resulting in a lack of consistency.

When considered along with the difficulties LAGs report in working with the CMEF, it suggests that these indicators and their use is not fully understood and that guidance or training is required.

Smarter additional indicators

Many additional indicators are targeted at more qualitative LEADER effects and a high proportion could be linked directly to individual elements of the LEADER method to a greater or lesser extent. The more specific these become the less capable are they of wider application or aggregation. Furthermore their focus does not apply to all aspects equally, for example assessment of LAG operation is a low priority in most cases.

In fact when subjected to scrutiny it appears that a very large proportion of what are termed 'additional indicators' either duplicate (at least in part) or are very close to CMEF indicators, e.g. those under other Axes. Whilst additional indicators can be useful in illustrating local effects, their design and use should ensure that they add something of additional value, e.g. by building on the core CMEF indicators to deepen the interpretation of the LEADER effects.

Better specific indicators

Although overall both the CMEF and additional indicators were seen to be largely adequate in both qualitative and quantitative terms there is a strong demand for indicators which are more specific to LEADER. The current indicators are seen to be deficient in their quality, relevance and measurability, in some cases there are too many, in others too few. At present any added value of the LEADER approach has to be extracted from the evidence of other non-specific indicators. These are not designed to capture the full range of LEADER results and outcomes, such as those which are related to the empowering and enabling processes of Community Led Local Development. Alternatively, LAGs seek to do this through additional indicator development and use. If further proliferation of ad hoc or additional indicators is to be avoided, the development of appropriate LEADER-specific indicators appears to be a priority.

Strengthen and support the system

There are clearly issues amongst LAGs with regard to indicator selection, interpretation and fit with the LDS or RDP. Frequently this result in the development of additional indicators which are specific to the LDS or the activities supported rather than measuring the achievement of the strategic objectives. Whilst this bottom-up process of indicator development or selection is understandable, it is neither systematic nor strategic and results in fragmentation of the assessment of LDS and LEADER progress, rather than providing useful additional information.

LEADER monitoring and evaluation needs to be more systematic and realistic to enable aggregation and analysis (apparently a non-issue for 18% of LAGs). This can be done by providing relevant and more applicable indicators whilst setting out clearly how and why the elements fit and work together to strengthen relevance, understanding and buy-in. LEADER may be differentiated within this but this should not be in isolation and clear links should be established. There is therefore a need for guidance and support along with further indicator development to establish a clearly understood, consistent, achievable and repeatable monitoring system.

13.10. EVALUATION

Design a common structure

Analysis of LAGs shows that a considerable majority of them is using some structured form of evaluation; LAGs perceive this to be at a higher level than MAs do. The form of evaluation can be specified both by the LAGs themselves or the MAs. The applied evaluation systems can be very mixed both by design and effect but they lack overall consistency of approach. The most prevalent common element is self-evaluation, which is undertaken by three quarters of LAGs.

Overall the approach can be seen to be rather fragmented and diverse and it appears that this would benefit from some common basis to strengthen consistency and facilitate meta-analysis. This should be supported by some simple guidelines and would have the advantage of supporting the incorporation of monitoring and evaluation plans into the LDS. The guidance should take full account of the purpose and objectives of any such evaluation activity. This could be facilitated at European or MS level but EU comparability would be desirable.

Align purpose and methods for stronger learning

Clarity of purpose in undertaking evaluation is important. LAGs exhibit a relatively highly developed appreciation of the various purposes of evaluation, its relevance and the benefits which can be achieved.

LAGs identify learning - in various forms - as the most important purpose of evaluation activity; they focus on learning with a view to improving the quality of the LDS. They also prioritise other LEADER effects, e.g. on human and social capital. MAs are much more focused on demonstrating achievement and improvement. The importance of learning for the future was consistently highlighted by both LAGs and the MAs.

On the other hand, while achievement of LDS objectives is highlighted as an important priority, the assessing of impact and effect scores relatively lowly and the coherence of delivery with the LDS objectives also ranks markedly lower (surprisingly so, given the earlier findings regarding achieving

LDS objectives). When taken together with Phase 1 and the findings that learning from the past was accorded low importance in LDS preparation, it suggests some confusion and a lack of consistency and clarity.

Improved planning and alignment is therefore required to contribute to guiding and strengthening the learning achieved, and its implementation.

Dissemination and feedback for action

Dissemination of evaluation outcomes is undertaken by some 80% of LAGs. The approach is not consistent in method or in targeting, with different, mostly passive, communications channels being employed. Most commonly this dissemination is to LAG members or the MA. Reporting or feedback to the local community is much less prevalent. Sharing with other stakeholders and particularly other LAGs is uncommon. Given the strength of feeling about the importance of learning this is somewhat surprising and may represent a missed opportunity. Consideration should therefore be given to means of structuring this sharing in order to optimise the value for LDS and evaluation methods.

13.11. SELF-EVALUATION

Strengthen relevance through broader involvement

Involvement in self-evaluation activity tends to be very concentrated amongst LAG staff and members who may be perceived to have a direct interest in the outcomes. These groups also undertake most of the higher level functions, such as steering and dissemination. Involvement of those directly affected by the LAG interventions - the beneficiaries and project holders - is very much lower and tends to be concentrated on a more narrow range of tasks, e.g. data provision or collection. Opportunities for wider involvement tend to be constrained by the methods employed. As with strategy development, there appears to be considerable scope for improvement through the wider involvement of stakeholders such as beneficiaries. These are, after all, the people who are targeted by the LDS and they could provide an important reference point for ground-testing the evaluation.

Improve design to achieve value and compatibility

As with its conduct, the design of self-evaluation is concentrated amongst LAG staff and members. Questions arise as to the effectiveness of this given the identified deficits in guidance, transfer of best practice or application of consistent methods. Almost half of the method and evaluation design was based on first principles, with the balance drawn from unspecified examples or guidance.

When the evaluation methods employed are considered it is evident that these rely on conventional approaches to a very great extent. Participative approaches involving beneficiaries, communities, stakeholders and LAG members are scarce. A small proportion of LAGs undertake peer review. The analysis suggests that rather than real self-evaluation what is happening is a self-administered conventional approach and the capacity and competence to undertake such evaluation is unclear. The added value of self-evaluation therefore appears highly likely to be compromised by the low levels of coordination and comparability.

Strengthening evaluation and particularly self-evaluation capability is a high priority given its prevalence, especially if the LAGs are to continue to drive the design of this locally. Wider compatibility and comparability needs to be ensured, if change of real value is to be achieved.

Self-evaluation alone cannot robustly meet the full spectrum of evaluation needs and requirements. There is, therefore, a clearly indicated need for training, guidance and relevant, well-explained good practice examples.

13.12. MONITORING AND EVALUATION SUPPORT

Improved support is a priority

Monitoring and evaluation support was only considered to be comprehensive or substantive in between 20%-to-30% of cases. Evaluation support was rated lower overall and the gaps were greater. Guidance was the most common form of provision followed by templates. Training was less common and the most direct forms, such as mentoring, were very uncommon indeed. Support for self-evaluation was lowest overall.

Provision of support by MAs clearly tends towards the more passive approaches and support for the more interactive forms was often very low or nil. It is therefore self-evident that if monitoring, evaluation and self-evaluation performance is to be improved then the knowledge, skills and capabilities of those involved (mainly LAG staff and members) need to be strengthened. This support needs to be clearly targeted and proactive; the requirement for some form of needs analysis is therefore indicated.

Support needs derive from the other issues

Monitoring and evaluation support needs do not exist in isolation from other needs related to elements of LDS design and implementation. The needs can be summarised thus; there is a need for:

- a better definition of what monitoring and evaluation is and how to do it;
- clarity, i.e. a well worked out method which is consistent and commonly understood;
- needs-based training, guidance, mentoring and exchange, and its resourcing; and
- a standardised approach or a common framework with more relevant indicators and adequately supported, e.g. thorough IT systems.

13.13. IN CONCLUSION

It is evident from the work of the Focus Group that there are common themes or strands relating to the improvement of the quality of Local Development Strategies. These apply not only to improving the design and development of the strategies and the associated processes, but also to their implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The importance of effective links between these different elements is clearly evidenced and should be addressed as a priority. This will strengthen and justify the real added value of the LEADER approach. The principal common themes emerging and which should be pursued in LEADER programming and LDS development, relate to:

- the importance of LAGs and MAs capitalising on the depth and breadth of LEADER experience in an organised and coherently structured way;
- building on this experience for improved LEADER, LAG and LDS organisation, structuring and delivery;

- achieving greater consistency and clarity to enable and strengthen LAG autonomy, accountability, knowledge transfer and learning; and
- being proactive, taking a lead and starting now.

The prominence of these themes reinforces the importance of implementing of the 'full' LEADER method - i.e. bottom-up, integrated, innovative and local needs focused - but in an improved, better structured and more accountable way. This should be supported by improved guidance, common and shared tools and structured networking and exchange made available and accessible sufficiently early in the process. In so doing LAGs, MAs and the EU will be better able to capitalise on the investment in multi-level governance and endogenous local development through a renewed and refreshed LEADER.

Annex 1: Members of the Focus Group on Better Local Development Strategies

Country	Nominee	Organisation
Austria	Günter Salchner	Local Action Group (LAG)
Belgium	Nele.Vanslembrouck	National Rural Network (NRN)
Bulgaria	Gergana Vasilis Papadopulu-Bancheva	Local Action Group (LAG)
Bulgaria	Marina Brakalova	Local Action Group (LAG)
Cyprus	Michalis Zanos	Local Action Group (LAG)
Cyprus	Efi Charalambous Snow	Managing Authority (MA)
Cyprus	Ourania Menelaou	Managing Authority
Cyprus	Makis Papamichael	Managing Authority
Czech Rep.	Helena Hanoldová	Paying Agency (PA)
Czech Rep.	Lenka Zárybnická	Paying Agency
Czech Rep.	Jitka Doubnerova	Local Action Group
Czech Rep.	Jan Florian	LAG Network
Czech Rep.	Petr Kulisek	Local Action Group
Czech Rep.	Marcela Pankova	Local Action Group
Czech Rep.	Jaromir Polasek	Local Action Group
Czech Rep.	Hana Slovakova	Local Action Group
Denmark	Connie Mark Skovbjerg	Local Action Group
Denmark	Rita Munk	National Rural Network
Estonia	Ave Bremse	National Rural Network
Estonia	Vivia Aunapuu-Lents	Managing Authority
Estonia	Konstantin Mihhejev	Managing Authority
Estonia	Silva Anspal	Estonian LEADER Forum
Finland	Petri Rinne	ELARD, LAG
Finland	Sanna Sihvola	Managing Authority
Finland	Marjo Lehtimäki	Local Action Group
Finland	Tiina Laurila	Paying Agency
Finland	Laura Jänis	Managing Authority
Finland	Juha-Matti Markkola	National Rural Network
France	Hélène PAULY	Managing Authority
France	Marjorie Deroi	Managing Authority
France	Hanane ALLALI-PUZ	Managing Authority
Germany	Sabine Weizenegger	Local Action Group
Greece	Panos Patras	Local Action Group
Greece	Anastasios M. Perimenis	Local Action Group
Greece	Iro Tsimbri	Local Action Group
Greece	Dimitris Liakos	Managing Authority
Greece	Maria-Christina Makrandreou	National Rural Network
Hungary	Parizán Anna	Managing Authority
Hungary	Ferenc Juhász	Paying Agency
Hungary	Sándor Matuska	Paying Agency
Hungary	Géza Gelencsér	Local Action Group
Hungary	Istvàn Finta	Local Action Group
Hungary	Judit Rácz	Local Action Group
Ireland	Deirdre Kelly	Managing Authority
Ireland	Ryan Howard	Local Action Group
Italy	Rafaella di Napoli	National Rural Network

Italy	Dario Cacace	National Rural Network
Latvia	Inga Krekele	Local Action Group
Lithuania	Žaneta Jucaityte	National Rural Network
Lithuania	Ilona Sadovskaitė	Local Action Group
Luxembourg	Jacques Fons	Local Action Group
Luxembourg	Françoise Bonert	National Rural Network
Malta	Robert Naudi	Managing Authority
Malta	Marisa Marmara	Local Action Group
Malta	Silvio Schembri	Local Action Group
Malta	Katya Scicluna	Local Action Group
Netherlands	Rolf Oldejans	Local Action Group
Netherlands	Bart Soldaat	Local Action Group
Netherlands	Mireille Groot Koerkamp	Local Action Group
Netherlands	Jan Beekman	Local Action Group
Poland	Beata Krajewska	Managing Authority
Poland	Ewa Grodzka	Managing Authority
Poland	Joanna Gierulska	Managing Authority
Portugal	Ana Pires da Silva	National Rural Network
Portugal	José Francisco da Veiga	Managing Authority
Portugal	Luis Chaves	LAG association
Romania	Maria Ciobanu	Local Action Group
Slovakia	Zuzana Schottertová	Managing Authority
Slovenia	Tomaž Cunder	Expert form Agricultural Institute of Slovenia)
Spain	Marta Angoloti	National Rural Network
Spain	Maria Larrea Loriente	Managing Authority
Spain	Carmen Caro	National Rural Network
Spain	Ángeles Arranz	National Rural Network
Sweden	Johan Fors	Managing Authority
UK	David Wilford	Managing Authority
UK	Alistair Prior	Managing Authority
	Alessandro La Grassa	Expert

Key: LDS (Local development Strategy); LAG= Local Action Group; N(R)RDP = National (or Regional) Rural Development Plan; BoD = Board of Directors (of the LAG); NRN = National Rural Network; ECA = European Court of Auditors; CSR= Corporate Social Responsibility; CMEF = Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

Abbreviations and acronyms

AP	Action Plan
BoD	Board of Directors
CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CSF	Common Strategic Framework
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EC	European Commission
ECA	European Court of Auditors
GAP	Global Action Plan
LAG	Local Action Group
LDS	Local Development Strategy(ies)
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale', meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions’
MA	Managing Authority
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MSA	Multi-Sector Analysis
NMS	New Member States
NRN	National Rural Network
PA	Paying Agency
PTA	Problem Tree Analysis
RD	Rural Development
RDP	Rural Development Programme
NRDP	National Rural development Programme
TWG	Thematic Working Group

Annex 2: Relevant Examples of delivery Practices on LEADER based Local Development Strategies (LDS)

Notes:

No.	MS/Region	Objective(s) and Topic	Reason for the approach	Implementation	Communication	Benefits/Improvements	Burdens/Barriers	Lessons learnt
1	**MS:** Finland **Region:** Mainland **LAG or MA:** Managing Authority - Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	**Objective:** Improve LDSs quality and knowledge of LAG actors, and reduce duration of LDS/LAG approval. **Topic:** Multi-step LAG Selection Procedure **Focus:** 1) Description of application procedure and/or process for a LAG including the LDS; 2) Guidance on how to develop a LDS; 3) Quick and effective launch of a new programming period.	Poor LAGs/LDSs lead to rejections and delays in their approval. The MA's LDS and LAG selection procedure is a multi-step exercise in Finland. This enables MA to give early feedback and help improve the quality of LDS throughout the strategy design and approval process. It also helps the LAGs to ensure that targets are realistic and measurable. LDS preparation before the NRDP approval speeds up the operational launch of a new programming period.	The MA sets mandatory and qualitative selection criteria for the LAGs and LDS. • Firstly the MA evaluates the LDS. • Secondly the MA sends written feedback to LAGs to improve where needed the LDS and sets enough time for the LAG to make the necessary corrections in reality and not only on paper. • These steps are carried out in advance to the approval by the EC of the RDP. • Thirdly MA formally approves the LAG and its LDS immediately after the EC formal approval of the NRDP. Concurrently public funds are allocated to each of the approved LAGs. If funding is less than a LAG's request, the LAG has to adapt its targets.	In step one, the MA organises a public call for tenders, with the mandatory and seven qualitative selection criteria (bottom-up, innovative, multi-sector, sustainable, co-operation, budget and municipal commitment). The criteria, LEADER method and strategic planning are also explained in several national and regional training sessions targeted at the practitioners. During the second and third steps the MA communicates individually with those LAGs that successfully passed the first step.	Compared to the one-step LAG selection procedure (LAGs approved or disqualified), the multi-step selection procedure produces better quality LDSs and improved interaction and trust between MA and LAGs, which in turn improves LDS implementation. LDS were improved on targeting, indicators, budgeting, equity issues, communication plans and the LAG Board structure. Starting the procedure well in advance of the NRDP approval (2 years before) allows shortening of LAG approval procedure.	The multi-step LAG selection procedure requires more resources from the MA than a one-step process. However it pays back in the higher quality and more structured LDSs. The MA was also able to use external evaluators in the process, which helped dealing with all LAGs at the same time.	The multi-step LAG selection procedure has increased the quality and efficiency of LDSs in Finland. It can also be an effective training and capacity building mechanism, if more Member States are aiming to cover their full rural territory with LEADER during the 2014-20. The weakest areas can also be offered extra training sessions during the second and third step of the selection procedure. As major delays in approving and operationally launching the LAGs have been a significant problem in many Member States in 2007-2013, quick and effective start-up allowed by the multi-step selection procedure should be warmly welcomed in 2014-2020.
2	**MS:** United Kingdom **Region:** Scotland **LAG or MA:** Local Action Group- Argyll and the Islands LEADER	**Objective:** Improve application design and project implementation **Topic:** Multi-stage project evaluation and continuous monitoring scheme **Focus:** 1) Description of application procedure and/or process for a LAG including the LDS; 2) Guidance for LAG based M&E; 3) Ensuring policy coherence; 4) Capacity building.	Poor applications lead to loss of scarce resources allocated to a LAG. The Argyll and the Islands LAG applies a multi-stage project evaluation and continuous monitoring scheme and actively participates from project planning to implementation. This ensures the high level of the approved project applications as well as sound and successful project implementation.	Since the start of the process, the LAG staff assess the applicant's project idea (compliance to selection criteria: eligibility, relevance, etc.), and assists the applicant in application preparation. Then the LAG Board of Directors appraises independently and approves (or not) the application. The LAG staff and Board carry out continuous monitoring of the implemented project until the final report. In every stage of the process, the project is in risk of dropping out if it fails to mature into a project application, to answer LAG Board queries or if it faces irresolvable implementation problems.	The scheme is based on continuous dialogue between the LAG staff and the project applicant. In cases where the project idea drops out during one of the stages a sound argument must be given to the applicant on why this has happened. Rejection can also be a learning experience to the applicant, for example in a case where an entrepreneurs' investment plan is proved unprofitable.	The scheme improves the quality and impact of the approved LAG projects and builds the planning and implementation capacity of the project applicants. This continuous re-assessment and monitoring procedure ensures that only the most relevant and influential projects will be selected to implement the LDS. It also reflects good and efficient management of the scarce public funds appointed to the LAG The scheme is also a clear "road map" to be followed by the LAG staff and directors in order to respect and follow the LDS priorities and project selection criteria.	The multi-stage application and continuous monitoring scheme requires that LAGs' staff resources and number of projects are in balance, as well as quality LAG human resources. However this approach saves staff resources during the implementation, reporting and claiming phases due to minimisation of unexpected problems.	The multi-stage application and continuous monitoring scheme has improved the quality and impact of the LAG projects in the Argyll and the Islands area in Scotland. It has also strengthened the connection between the LDS and the selected projects – the LDS role as a guiding document is now stronger. This will be even more important in the 2014-2020 multi-fund local development environment.

Annex 2: Relevant Examples of delivery Practices on LEADER based Local Development Strategies (LDS)

No.	MS/Region	Objective(s) and Topic	Reason for the approach	Implementation	Communication	Benefits/Improvements	Burdens/Barriers	Lessons learnt
3	**MS:** Greece **Region:** Nationwide **LAG or MA:** Managing authority of the Hellenistic Ministry of Rural Development and Food	**Objective:** Improve transparency, representativeness and participation to guarantee broad based multi-sector integration in the LDS design and implementation. **Topic:** Clear rules and methodologies at both MA and LAG levels **Focus:** 1) Guidance on how to develop a LDS; 2) Guidance for LAG based M&E; 3) Ensuring broad based multi-sector integration; 4) Improving governance.	The claimed small circles and channelling the funds to narrow LAG related interest groups (based on business, ethnic or language or even religion) has been one of the ECA criticisms to the LEADER approach. The current financial crisis may fuel misbehaviour, including the local level public sector seeking external funding to fill in their budget gaps. In order to avoid this negative pressure there should be clear rules and methodologies at both on the Managing Authority (MA) and LAG levels ensuring the transparency, representativeness and participation in the Local Development Strategy (LDS) design and implementation.	The NRDP rules that: (a) LAGs cannot be beneficiary of a project within its own funding allocation; (b) public expenditure for projects implemented by LAG's shareholders cannot exceed 30% of the LAG's funding allocation (25% for local government organisations and bodies projects); (c) public expenditure for projects implemented by Local Government Organisations themselves cannot exceed 15% of the LAG's funding allocation. In Greece, LAGs are responsible to make project funding as well as payment decisions and monitor project implementation. Monitoring reports are submitted to the MA information system accessible to all LAGs	The MA communicates its rules to all LAGs as part of the NRDP. LAGs must use a variety of participatory and animation techniques involving different interest groups in strategy design and implementation. Local media proved to be a very effective strategic partner in this work. Communication skills are also highly relevant when carrying out the project supervisory checks. Rather than assuming the project owner guilty or non-guilty the checks create conditions for a mutual learning process and dialogue between the LAG and project representatives.	The clear rules effectively prevent individual or a few closely related interest groups taking the lion's share of the LEADER budget and encourage multi-sector integration. The Greek monitoring practice jointly implemented by the MA and LAG levels helps ensuring the multi-sector integration (that is one of the seven key features of the LEADER approach) in the LDS planning and implementation and prevents the creation of small circles around the LAG and misuse of the LEADER funds.	The LAGs must continuously follow how much of their funding is directed to their own shareholders and the Local Government Organisations. The LAGs must also have adequate staff resources to carry out their supervisory tasks and to follow the separation of duties. However close distance monitoring is both more effective and cost-efficient than long distance external supervisory procedures, which also cause a risk of overlapping work on the different levels of the hierarchy.	The risk of the creation of small cliques and potential misuse of LAGs' funds is minimised if the MA and LAGs perform their monitoring tasks diligently. MA can set the monitoring and project selection criteria at the RDP level in a way that supports broad based multi-sector integration in the LDS design and implementation. The LAG shall do its own part at the project level when carrying out on-spot supervisory checks. This is more effective when the LAG has been given more authority.
4	**MS:** Ireland **Region:** County Cork **LAG or MA:** Local Action Group- IRD Duhallow	**Objective:** Improve LDS objectives, targets and output indicators **Topic:** Ensuring coherent links between broader goals, objectives, project actions and outputs; **Focus:** 1) Methods used effectively to develop a LDS; 2) Structure of a LDS; 3) M&E techniques used by LAGs – for self-evaluation; 4) Ensuring policy coherence.	LEADER has been criticised for its inability to demonstrate and justify the results achieved and the value added. The LDS has a hierarchy of aims: from broad goals (e.g. enhancing the quality of rural life) to more precise objectives (improving the youth and education work) and further to concrete project actions and outputs. Sometimes the links between the different levels are not obvious or missing – this makes targeting and monitoring and thus the documentation of the LEADER added value a difficult exercise.	A broad objective can be split into smaller and measurable elements. Each LDS main goal has a list of measures animated and monitored through Thematic Working Groups (WG) covering more than one measure and cooperating on topics of shared interest. The WG are responsible for their own target setting but subject to LAG Board approval that can request changes to targets to be achieved. The targets must be factual and measurable by the LAG staff monitors using output indicators: The WG meets 8-9 times a year to analyse target achievements and plan next steps.	The LDS objectives, targets, output indicators and their monitoring practices are created through a participatory process of the local inhabitants and the WGs and approved by the LAG Board of Directors. Monitoring can be done by following the project reporting and documenting the results in a table format.	The clear definition of the LDS objectives, targets and output indicators has improved the LDS consistency and power to initiate and coordinate the local development work on LAG territory. Achieved results can be reported to the local media and authorities at any time and reflected back against the LDS goals and objectives. The up-to-date output indicator table also keeps the LAG well aware on the areas where it should increase the animation work and encourage the new initiatives in order to meet LDS targets.	A clear definition of the different level LDS objectives and their monitoring system saves rather than adds the LAGs' administrative burden.	This case proves that local needs and LDS targets are far more sophisticated and diverse than the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) can handle. This is why in many cases the CMEF fails to catch many LEADER impacts and thus provide true aggregated EU level impacts. The solution is to pay more attention to the design and monitoring of the LDS level objectives, targets and indicators – and their possible aggregation to the regional and NRDP reporting along with the CMEF indicators. The diversity of the LDS indicators should not be an administrative headache but it should be seen as reflecting the diversity of the EU's rural territories and LEADER's ability to answer their needs.

Annex 2: Relevant Examples of delivery Practices on LEADER based Local Development Strategies (LDS)

No.	MS/Region	Objective(s) and Topic	Reason for the approach	Implementation	Communication	Benefits/Improvements	Burdens/Barriers	Lessons learnt
5	**MS:** Sweden **Region:** Nationwide **LAG or MA:** MA - Swedish Board of Agriculture	**Objective:** Improve the LDS quality by providing detailed evaluation check lists **Topic:** MA check lists assisting LDS development Focus: **Focus:** 1) Guidance on how to develop a LDS; 2) Structure of a LDS; 3) LAG selection criteria if it includes LDS selection; 4) Use of check lists as a guiding tool.	LAGs are in need of simple and user friendly tools for the efficient elaboration of their LDS. The MA provided its LAG evaluation check lists as a practical instrument to the LAGs for the preparation of their 2007-2013 LDSs.	LDSs must include four parts 1) Territorial analysis; 2) LAG as an organisation; 3) LAG territory and; 4) Quality of the LDS. The MA detailed check lists follow the same structure in parts and in logic. The check lists also define the minimum level for each point a LAG must reach in order to qualify. Every LDS compliant to the check list qualifies. The MA has its internal guidelines in case of more than one LAG for the same geographic territory.	The MA makes the LAG selection check lists and the minimum criteria for each point public and available to the LAGs that are planning their LDSs. The material is also explained in the MA training and capacity building events to the LAGs.	Opening the process of LAG and LDS selection criteria in detail has improved the LDS quality. The evaluation check lists have proved handy to use both by the MA and the LAGs.	The MA had to first design and write down the LAG evaluation check lists and the minimum criteria but this effort has been well worth it.	This is a transferable practice that can be used by other MAs. Design and use of "multi-fund" LAG selection check lists in the Swedish way could be one very practical solution for the programming period 2014-2020.
6	**MS:** Finland **Region:** Nationwide **LAG or MA:** MA – Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	**Objective:** Define the appropriate legal form of LAGs to safeguard the LEADER features and ensure unbiased decision making **Topic:** LAGs' legal structure and unbiased decision making **Focus:** 1) Guidance on how to develop a LDS; 2) Structure of a LDS; 3) LAG selection criteria if it includes LDS selection; 4) Use of check lists as a guiding tool; 5) Defining LAGs' legal structure and ensuring the unbiased decision making	The different legal forms of LAGs inevitably influence their LDS development and implementation. Finnish municipalities have strong roles in service provision and tax collection and if LAGs were part of the administration, the LEADER features would be bureaucratized. The MA defined the LAG as an organisation and ensured its decision making process is unbiased and objective.	The MA evaluates the LAG as part of the LDS selection process. Criteria are the legal status and the Board of Directors (BoD) (election, duration, delineation into public, private and independent civil sectors to which each member belongs, and other stringent criteria on confidentiality and conflict of interest as regards to project applications and evaluation). The LDS must show the LAG's organisation and tasks division for sound technical and financial management.	The MA requires the LAG organisation based information as part of the LDS planning process. Through the annual reporting the MA also monitors that these "LAG principles" stay valid for the whole programming period. The LAGs, assisted by the NRN, have the responsibility to train new Board members to follow the MA rules.	As the Finnish LAGs are not constrained by the public authority status they are freer to animate, create and innovate – and to be on the applicant's side. The unbiased status makes them easy to approach from whatever local organisation. The constant circulation of Board members prevents the creation of power cliques in the decision making. Confidential application process and avoiding the conflicts of interest build trust between applicants, the LAG and the whole local community.	Keeping the membership lists as well as the other "LAG principles" updated is a negligible part of administrative routine.	The ECA report suggests the aggregation of LAGs into local governments, which may cause trouble in some counties where local governments are eager to take over the method and use it for their own purposes. The LAGs' legal form should always be left to the MS to define, based on local governance context and grassroots needs.

Annex 2: Relevant Examples of delivery Practices on LEADER based Local Development Strategies (LDS)

No.	MS/Region	Objective(s) and Topic	Reason for the approach	Implementation	Communication	Benefits/Improvements	Burdens/Barriers	Lessons learnt
7	**MS:** Finland **Region:** Southern Finland **LAG or MA:** LAG Päijänne and Pohjois-Kymen Kasvu LAG	**Objective:** Improve the LAG self-evaluation and exchange of experiences **Topic:** Inter-LAG evaluation process **Focus:** 1) M&E techniques used by LAGs – for self-evaluation; 2) Capacity building; 3) Using LAGs' own expertise in the LDS impact evaluation.	Evaluation of LAG's development work is a complex task for external evaluators due to the specificity of LAG development work, resulting often in poor quality assessments that do not provide concrete tools to further development activities.	The managers of two neighbouring LAGs agreed to carry out a peer-to-peer inter-LAG evaluation combining some of the features of self- and external-evaluation. The suggestion made to, and accepted by, their respective BoD was that the managers would exchange territories for a period and carry out a targeted mid-term evaluation of the other LAG. The findings of the evaluation and the operational recommendations on the quality of the LAG's services, the results of the LAG projects and the cooperation with the regional MA office were presented to the neighbouring LAG Board.	The inter-LAG evaluation requires strong mutual trust between the LAGs and the staff members involved. Sometimes it may be easier between the LAGs that operate far from each other than between the neighbouring LAGs. From the project point of view the communication with an unfamiliar LAG manager during the evaluation process is easier and more honest than with an "own" manager. Reporting the conclusions and recommendations is a sensitive task.	For both LAGs involved the inter-LAG evaluation process was the best learning experience during the whole programming period. A fellow manager knew precisely what to look for and which things were relevant from the LAG and LDS point of view. The recommendations were concrete and applicable. The learning experience was not only fuelled by the evaluation results themselves but also by the opportunity to look closely into another LAG's processes, find new perspectives and exchange good practices.	The inter-LAG evaluation process didn't require extra staff resources: the same time that would have been spent on the self-evaluation of the own LAG was now spent on evaluating the neighbouring LAG. Moreover both LAGs saved the costs of contracting an external evaluator.	In addition to this peer-to-peer evaluation example more interaction and cooperation should be promoted between the LAGs, not only project based but also process based, domestic as well as transnational, in particular exchanges between more experienced and less experienced LAGs, low-performing and high-performing countries and territories.
8	**MS:** France **Region:** Nationwide **LAG or MA:** MA Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation, de la Pêche, de la Ruralité et de l'Aménagement du Territoire	**Objective:** Improve the LAG selection procedure **Topic:** Decentralisation of LAG selection **Focus:** 1) Description of application procedure and/or process for LDS; 2) LAG selection criteria if it includes LDS selection; 3) Capacity building	In the 2000-2006 period France used a national level selection procedure. Although successful, the centralised procedure showed some drawbacks that have been greatly improved with the decentralisation (regionalisation) of the process in the 2007-13 period, including a NRDP with a single MA but with LEADER measures delegated to 21 Regional Prefectures.	To ensure transparency, the MA published a national LEADER Practical Guide and then issued a notice to the Regional Prefects aimed at standardising the procedure establishing the methodological framework. This notice included the objectives of the regional selection of call for projects and the method of preparation of the call for proposals and of regional selection system. On the basis of this notice the Regional Prefectures launched the call for LEADER projects (in one or two stages).	The LEADER Practical Guide included the main elements (LAG, territory, strategy, when and how to establish a LAG and a few reference texts, including regulatory). The call for projects launched by the Prefectures included the general principles of LEADER, of LAGs selection, applications eligibility and assessment criteria, LDS and regional rural development strategy links, financial allocations, number of LAGs, calendar and LAG support systems.	The decentralised selection allowed to: Better shape the regional selection criteria according to their specificities, allow the choice of one or two stages selection procedures, better involve regional partnerships, and achieve good public awareness. Ultimately it improved the quality of strategies achieved better geographical coverage and allowed the use of regional experts familiar with their territory for the analysis of the LDS.	The decentralised approach required that the MA to support the Regions who had little LEADER experience with national experts to ensure compliance with eligibility criteria and selection process and for the overall consistency of selection procedures. Also contracting procedures between the State and the LAG proved to be cumbersome to implement and not enough framed at the national level notably involving decentralized public services that did not have much experience.	The decentralization procedure adopted in France has been overall a success and should be applied in the next programming period. Care has to be put in the training of decentralised services and the tools (applications, templates, specifications for computer applications) proposed to the LAGs require simplification. The absence of indicators defined in advance rendered monitoring difficult.

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9	**MS:** Spain **Region:** Catalonia **LAG or MA:** LAG Fundació Garrotxa Lider	**Objective:** Increase the added value of the LEADER approach. **Topic:** Integration of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in LEADER Grant Beneficiary companies **Focus:** 1) Description of application procedure and/or process for LDS; 2) Description of application procedure and/or process for a LAG including the LDS 3) Ensuring policy coherence 4) Capacity building	To raise as much as possible the quality of the region and promote its balanced and sustainable development, the LAG used the LEADER + (2000-2005) initiative as a tool to stimulate the voluntary integration of economic, socially and environmentally responsible management criteria in the companies awarded with public grants. The Catalonia MA has included the promotion of socially responsible companies in rural areas within the guidelines of the RDP 2007-2013 and, in axis 4, in the administrative procedures for managing LEADER grants.	This methodology is based on the "Sustainable Management Code", a diagnostic and monitoring tool, and on provision by the LAG of tutors for the implementation of CSR actions by the beneficiary companies. The Code defines general CSR measures, guides the enterprises in the economic, environmental and social impact assessment of its activities. With the assistance of the tutor the enterprises define an improvement action plan and indicators for measuring outputs and impact. Incentive allocations for CSR actions are foreseen but the final amount of public aid is related to the degree of plan fulfilment.	The integration of CSR in the LEADER has been publicised and now it is included in the RDP and related regulations.	[The impact on the improvrement of LDS implementation has to be explained e.g. improving the quality of projects is improving the LDS quality] The implementation of CSR in small and medium companies in rural areas is a powerful mean to: • improve competitiveness and management practices; • contribute to balanced economic development; • increase sustainability, especially in resource use; • enhance social cohesion between actors and between them and the local territory (participative character and solidarity); • favour equal opportunities and improvement of people's quality of life.	The key burden falls on the LAG that has to provide the CSR instructor and monitor the progress of the CSR programmes. However, the closer involvement of the selected beneficiary companies, the presence of the tutor, the definition of clear indicators in the improvement programme, are conducive to a better programme implementation and LDS monitoring.	This practice is very relevant and could well be adopted in the context of the future multi-fund local development strategies, which will embody wider and different thematic priorities in the overall framework of the economy, civic society and the environment.
10	**MS:** Spain **Region:** Andalucia **LAG or MA:** MA - Dirección General de Desarrollo Rural y Política Forestal	**Objective:** Improve LDS design and monitoring mechanisms **Topic:** Need for wider territorial planning and to incorporate harmonised as well as territory specific monitoring indicators in the planning process **Focus:** 1) Description of application procedure and/or process for LDS; 2) Guidance for LAG based M&E; 3) M&E techniques used by LAGs – within the frame of the CMEF; 4) M&E techniques used by LAGs – for self-evaluation; 5) Ensuring policy coherence (links between broader goals, objectives, and project actions and outputs); **6)** Capacity building;	Many LAGs, in addition to having access to funds EAFRD/Axis 4 LEADER, also participate to other EU programs (Ruraland, Integrarbim, Fishery Development Groups, etc.), as well as to national, regional or local level initiatives. The example approach addresses the need for a wider territorial planning of which the LDS is an integral part and to incorporate harmonised as well as territory specific monitoring indicators in the planning process.	Each LAG elaborates a territorial Multi-Sector Analysis (MSA) wider in scope than the LDS. The Management Center (MC) [MA? explain what it is] elaborates a Global Action Plan (GAP) consisting of the sum of all the possibilities of intervention that could be funded through LEADER and a technical manual. Based on the MSA and the GAP, the LAGs prepare their LDS. There are two mechanisms for LDS monitoring and evaluation. The compulsory indicators are defined by the MC and consist of disaggregated applicable CMEF indicators. The voluntary indicators, customised per territory, are presented by LAGs in their LDS.	The technical manual prepared by the Management Center for LDS planning but also for describing all the existing possibilities in terms of operations, beneficiaries, eligible costs and aid rates, was of great help in strategy implementation together with the common methodology and counselling provided by the Cordoba University that were provided to LAGS.	The main advantages of the regional planning mechanisms are: a) the possibility of setting up multi-fund strategies contained in the Joint Strategic Framework represents an opportunity to implement comprehensive multi-sector strategies capable of making a real impact on local rural development; b) the implementation of a common strategic planning system for all LAGs facilitates the implementation of joint coordination, monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement of the strategies; c) the design of compulsory and voluntary mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating local development strategies allows comparison between different programs and could be used for comparing LDS implementation in different member states.	The planning and monitoring approaches developed for Andalusia have not created incremental burdens.	A common European strategic planning system would facilitate synergies, knowledge sharing and the development of common mechanisms for coordination, control and monitoring of the LEADER method. The implemented monitoring mechanisms highlighted a number of issues that should be improved for 2014–2020: • Some indicators included in the CMEF 2007-2013 are difficult to measure at LAG level; • Specific gender indicators are absent; • [not relevant] • There is a lack of tools for assessing the LEADER features (degree of citizen participation, local networks created, etc.).

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11	**MS:** Italy **Region:** Nationwide **LAG or MA:** National Rural Network	**Objective:** Improve/customize information systems for improving LEADER monitoring **Topic:** Monitoring of LEADER **Focus:** M&E techniques used by LAGs – within the frame of the CMEF	The available national instrument (Monitoring Information System for Rural Development) failed to capture the special LEADER characteristics and did not provide aggregated information on the LDS implementation. The NRN therefore developed a specific "LEADER approach Integrated Design and Monitoring System" for the collection and elaboration at regional and national levels of relevant information. The system is aimed at MA (and rural development policy implementing bodies).	The new LEADER integrated Monitoring System does not overlap the CMEF ?, but is an interface that integrates existing system, enabling the storing and processing of incremental and more specific information that are not collected by them. The monitoring system includes 5 areas of data collection: 1. LAG selection; 2. LDS selection; 3. Local Action Group; 4. LDS; 5. Animation of Activities.	N.A.	The new LEADER integrated Monitoring System allows the: • understanding of the terms of partnerships and their organisational structures; • detailed analysis on the characteristics of beneficiaries and projects financed; • collection and analysis of animation activities; • identification (and measuring) of additional output and outcome indicators, currently not considered in the Regional Development Plans; • geo-referencing of LEADER operations.	The system (including software) was designed and established by the National Rural Network.	• The CMEF indicators do not meet the requirements associated with LEADER monitoring. Output and outcome indicators should be customized to the objectives assigned by participatory and bottom up planning; • Need to collect, from the beginning of the programming cycle, qualitative information enabling to draw the LEADER profile (stakeholders, activities performed, organisational mechanisms) and provide specific SMART indicators; • Need to standardise the systems for collecting and processing data in order to ensure their aggregation and comparison.
12	**MS:** Italy **Region:** Sardinia Region **LAG or MA:** National Rural Network	**Objective:** **Topic:** Use of participatory methodologies for LDS quality design **Focus:** 1) Guidance on how to develop a LDS; 2) Methods used effectively to develop a LDS; 3) Structure of a LDS (mandatory and optional elements); 4) M&E techniques used by LAGs – for self-evaluation; 5) Participatory methodologies; 6) Capacity building.	The bottom-up approach implies the adoption of appropriate LDS design methods fostering effective participation of local actors that are sometimes unknown at local level. The selection of the participatory planning methodology varies on the time factor (both for preparation of LDS and the design of actions to be implemented); LAG available budgets and the need to ensure transparent decision-making. The "problem tree analysis (PTA)" methodology, has been selected by the NRN and explained to LAGs during training workshops	Several LAGs have chosen to use the PTA to design their LDS and to monitor progress during implementation. The PTA: • Links problems and solutions that can be framed into a strategy with well-defined targets and monitoring indicators; • Allows to map the paths from the general to the specific objectives, the intervention priorities; • Facilitates the development and use of self-diagnosis tools; • Requires minimal costs and relatively short time to involve a high number of stakeholders.	Awareness and information to general public and stakeholders was needed to inform about LEADER training opportunities and for participation to the LDS design.	This methodology helps to: • create a "momentum" that binds individuals, through the LEADER vision; • reinforce the sense of belonging and of active participation in a specific organisation that is able to follow the identified path using available opportunities; • disseminate a development culture; • create an efficient working atmosphere and obtain active cooperation in the work to be done by adapting their relational behaviour.	The activity did not generate additional costs for LAGs. LAG training activities were supported by the NRN which has provided methodological experts and support materials (documents, etc). In the case of the Sardinia Region, the MA has chosen to give additional support to the LAG by assigning mentors to groups. In this case resources of the technical assistance budget were used.	Based on the Italian experience, in order to favour the use of such methodologies by the LAG is important to: • allow sufficient time for the LAGS to activate consultation processes during the LDS preparation phase; • monitor (using appropriate indicators) the implementation by the LAG of such activities both during the LDS selection and subsequently during LDS implementation; • provide adequate financial advance to the LAGs for the start of operations; • advances for immaterial operations should be eligible (training, cooperation, events, etc.).