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MID TERM EVALUATION OF RDPs IN ITALY: COMPARING MODELS

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Abstract

With the reforms of Structural Funds there has been a considerable tightening of the guiding principles of Community actions. Among these, a primary role has been given to evaluation. In this context, the paper deals with what has been realized for the evaluation of rural development policy, comparing various experiences in Italy with reference to the Rural Development Plans. The aim is to verify, on the basis of (meta) criteria, the methodological contents of the mid term evaluation reports of 14 RDPs in the centre-north of Italy. Through the analyses and the comparisons of these reports, the paper is an attempt to reconstruct the “quality” of the evaluations with specific reference to the methodological aspects, the models and the procedures adopted by the evaluators.

Key words: Evaluation, Rural Development Plans, Mid Term, Metaevaluation

1. Introduction

The planning and implementation of community operations for rural areas, as outlined in regulations for structural funds (Reg. EC 1260/99) and for rural development (Reg. EC 1257/99), has been based on Rural Development Plan (RDP). The Rural Development Plan, which has been an innovation with respect to the previous planning cycle, has financed all rural development operations covered by community regulations in areas outside Ob. 1. In the Ob. 1 regions the RDP has contained only the ex accompanying measures (agro-environmental incentives, early retirement and forestation) and compensation for areas that are disadvantaged and subject to environmental constraints. The other measures included in Reg. EC 1257/99 are integrated in the 7 Italian Regional Operational Programmes. The RDP has been, therefore, the only single programming document which comprehensively and systematically has put rural development policy into practice. The autonomous Italian regions and provinces outside Ob. 1 have in fact opted for single planning of rural development operations. Furthermore, with the reform of structural funds 2000 – 2006 there was a considerable tightening of the guiding principles of community action. Among these, a primary role has been given to evaluation. Structural funds have always been an important stimulus for spreading the practice of evaluation in all the European Union (Lion and Martini, 2006).

In this context it's particularly important to see what has been done for the evaluation of the instruments for implementation of rural development policy, comparing various experiences in Italy with reference to the Rural Development Plans of the regions outside Ob. 1. In particular, the mid term evaluations of these RDPs is analysed for two main reasons. In the first place because they are the most recent case of evaluative practice for carrying out rural development policy. Secondly because the object of the mid term evaluation is one and well defined (the RDP), as opposed to the evaluation of schemes carried out within Ob. 1.

The research comes from the observation that, although there is undoubtedly a multitude of evaluations of the planning of rural development, there doesn't appear to be a similar number of studies and analyses of “the evaluation” itself (Bustelo, 2003: 384) and in particular of the analyses of complex evaluations like those of the RDPs. From recent literature we can see a great interest in the problems of evaluation of subjects like landscape (Maragon, 2006; Idda and Pulina, 2006; Bartolini et al., 2005), which are certainly more defined than the evaluation of a RDP.

On the basis of the contents of the mid term evaluations of the RDPs, the aim is to verify the level of coherence of evaluative practice in Italy compared to the methodological debate that has grown in recent years over the evaluation of programmes and compared to the EU methodological guidelines for evaluation. The main purpose of the work is to verify, on the basis of (meta) criteria, the methodological contents of the mid term evaluation reports of the 14 RDPs in the centre-north of Italy. Through analyses and comparisons of these reports the “quality” of evaluations is reconstructed with specific reference to methodological aspects, models and procedures adopted by evaluators.

2. Main approaches to evaluation

In the copious literature on evaluation of programmes there are not only differing approaches, but also numerous classifications of the proposed approaches (chronological, typological etc.), aiming to define the boundaries, the contexts, and the practices of the evaluation processes.

This contribution briefly describes three classifications (and the criteria behind them) with the aim of establishing the general reference which can be useful for analysing the theoretical scheme of the mid term evaluation reports of RDPs.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) propose an interesting classification of evaluation approaches: 1) the technical approach; 2) the descriptive approach, that qualifies the activities, the strengths and weaknesses with respect to the given aims (the evaluator describes objectively); 3) the approach in which the evaluator makes judgements regarding standards while at the same time maintaining the technical and descriptive functions; 4) the approach that focuses not so much on objectives, impact and decisions as on statements, doubts and points of view expressed by those involved in some way in the initiative and its evaluation. For the authors, this classification should be interpreted in historic – evolutionary terms, tracing a hypothetical pathway starting from simple evaluations and reaching more complex ones.

The evaluation of programmes can be classified on the basis of various criteria (in addition to that previously cited), one of which could be that of the context of the evaluation. Clearly as the perspective varies so do the criteria and the procedures to achieve it. It is therefore possible to identify four main different contexts: internal audit, regarding evaluation of efficiency and results (usually physical); external audit, examining specific results of policies with respect to the resources used (utilized mainly for control and possible reduction of public expenditure); social accounting (in contrast to the limits of evaluations that consider only direct effects and financial costs), considering social and economic effects of a programme on the community; comprehension and explanation, or a detailed analysis of how programmes have reached or have not reached their objectives (Midmore, 1997).

Finally, in Stame’s contribution (Stame, 2001: 21-34), the classification of evaluative approaches is based on what is defined as a “benchmark”. From this standpoint, Stame (2001) identifies three approaches: 1) experimental pragmatist; 2) pragmatist – of quality; 3) constructivist – of the social process.

For the first of these, the fundamental distinction in the evaluation is represented by the objectives declared in the programme. The evaluation consists of seeing if and how these can be reached. Evaluator doesn’t look into the processes of implementation but waits to see the conclusion of the programme to decide whether it’s worth re-proposing. This approach was later partially modified by

including intermediate testing and monitoring of results. This, however, is limited to observing what we expected to see and is not suitable for discovering (and understanding) unexpected effects.

The approach defined as “pragmatist – of quality” is based on the comparison with a given quality standard. The evaluation becomes an exercise in comparison with a given standard. The evaluator must not be influenced by the objectives of the programme, nor must he measure how much an individual programme wants to achieve in a given situation: “the element of comparison is no longer what a single programme may want to achieve but what all similar programmes should aim at on a certain scale of merit if they want to be considered of good quality” (Stame, 2001: 29). In this case the phase of deciding what to compare it to becomes very delicate.

Finally, for the approach defined as “constructivist – of the social process” the evaluation takes into account the results and the impact that go beyond simple achievement of aims, in order to see processes that may have been triggered. The evaluation must take into account the fact that the implementation of a programme changes in certain contexts and try to explain why, in a given situation, it achieves certain results. This in itself is an activity that is affected by the context, which is by definition changeable. With this approach the attention is placed on contribution of the various parties, “and on what a programme becomes while it is being implemented, much more than on how it was designed ... the important thing is that the parties are involved in a participated evaluation, that the process is followed in its various phases by the evaluators who interact with the *stakeholders*” (Stame, 2001: 32). The idea of “understanding” becomes important as an aim of the evaluation.

3. Specificity of mid term evaluation of RDPs

The activities that make up the evaluation system of European Union development policies has without doubt evolved considerably. The system that applies for the mid term evaluation of RDPs considered in the paper is defined in Reg. EC 1257/99¹ for the reform of rural development policy. Mid term evaluation, with respect to the previous programming periods, is the phase of the evaluation process that shows the highest level of evolution because it must improve the quality and the relevance of the programmes. Moreover, the evaluation of the Rural Development Plans means to guarantee the adoption of a single evaluation model and allow the comparison of evaluations of rural development in a community context.

The rules regarding these evaluation activities are contained in Reg. 817/04, Art. 62-65 which, given their relevance, deserve to be described. In brief, Art. 62 provides that evaluations are carried out by independent experts, and that they are based mainly on a community evaluation questionnaire and supplied with performance criteria and indicators. Art. 64 deals with the object of mid term evaluation. This must look at the specific aspects of the RDP under examination and at the common evaluation criteria² that have relevance at a community level. If a common evaluation criterion is not thought to be relevant in terms of a specific RDP the reasons must be given. Furthermore, the mid term evaluation must take into account the evaluation criteria and examine the first results obtained, their importance and their coherence with the RDP, as well as their compliance with the given objectives.

¹ And by the Regulations for implementation and modification: Reg. 1260/1999 Art. 40-43; Reg. 1257/1999 Art. 48-49; Reg. 1750/1999 Art. 41-45; Reg. 445/2002 Art. 53-57; Reg. 817/2004 Art. 62-65.

² Among these criteria are: life conditions and structure of rural population, employment and income from agricultural and non-agricultural activities, agricultural structures, agricultural productions, quality, competitiveness, forestry and environmental resources.

The mid term evaluation must analyse the use of financial resources, the execution and monitoring of programmes. Finally, it is stated that the quality of evaluations is analysed using methods recognised by the competent authorities for the management of the RDP, by the monitoring committee, if it exists, and by the Commission. In Art. 65, the contents of the evaluation reports are outlined. These must show the methods applied, the implications for the quality of data and results, a description of the context and the contents of the programme, the financial data, the answers to the common evaluation questionnaire and to the questionnaires defined on a national or regional level, with their indicators, conclusions and recommendations.

Mid term evaluation of RDPs, therefore, takes on particular significance in understanding whether the measures implemented have been successful. It is an essential tool for a proper implementation of rural development policy.

The effort made by the European Commission to improve and above all standardise evaluation of RDPs can be seen in the common evaluation model based on needs, criteria and indicators. The model was defined in three working documents: STAR VI/8865/99, STAR VI/12004/00, STAR VI/43517/02.

The STAR VI/8865/99 document shows the orientations to follow in the evaluation phase, describes the criteria and the evaluation model. The STAR VI/12004/00 document follows and links the logical route to find the causal ties between the main variables in order to determine the results and the impact of the plan. In it the Common Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) is presented and described, both in general terms and in detail for every single measure. The questionnaire is structured in a series of 54 questions together with assessment criteria and indicators. The evaluator applies parts of the CEQ each time they are relevant to the eligible actions and to the context of a RDP. If this does not occur there must be a motivated explanation. The questions in the common evaluation questionnaire look at the effects of the programme expressed in terms of output, results and expected impact³. The answer to each question of the questionnaire is based on the criteria, the indicators and on any other relevant information. Finally, the STAR VI/43517/02 document gives clarifications regarding the mid term evaluation that must respond to criteria of quality, utility and value. In particular this document details the specific objects of the mid term evaluation (Doc. STAR VI/43517/02, pp. 4 – 8):

- checking of the validity of the strategy of the programme in relation to possible changes that have taken place in its context, of the SWOT analysis at the basis of the strategy, and of the relevance and coherence of the objectives;
- analyses of the activities carried out for the start and implementation of the RDP (implementation procedures, management and organisational aspects, functioning of the monitoring system) and for the use of resources (financial and non-financial);
- auditing of the initial results with respect to the objectives through the determination of effectiveness and efficiency;
- formulation of the first answers to the evaluation questions;
- formulation of proposals for correction of the RDP.

³ The output indicator quantifies the immediate and direct implementations, measured in physical or monetary units; the result indicator refers to the immediate but indirect effects; the impact indicator refers to the more general consequences (not immediate and indirect effects).

4. Methodological aspects of the mid term evaluation reports

This (meta) evaluative study intends to focus on the model and on the procedures used by evaluators (and not on the results of the evaluations). We must, therefore, define a methodological framework of reference from which we can find the (meta) criteria for analyses (Bustelo, 2003: 386). Regarding the model used, that is the Common Evaluation Questionnaire, we refer to the works of Guba and Lincoln (1989), Midmore (1997) and Stame (2001). The analysis of the procedural aspects derives from the documents of the MEANS series (1999) of the European Commission and The Guide (2003) of the Tavistock Institute. These documents propose a classification of the evaluative process in four phases⁴ (Tavistock Institute, 2003: 120) and for every phase they show the applicable evaluative procedures. This classification has been used to identify the procedures adopted in the mid term evaluation of RDPs. The (meta) evaluative criteria have, therefore, been created around the evaluative model and the procedures used in the four phases of the evaluation (Diez, 2002).

4.1 The evaluative model

The evaluative model proposed by the European Commission is the result of a large organisational and methodological effort and is certainly a great improvement on what had been created during the period 1994-1999 for evaluating programmes. It is, however, possible to select at least two aspects worthy of comment, the first of a general character, the second methodological. The inclusion of the evaluative model in the regulations has imposed on those responsible for the management of RDPs a serious consideration of the evaluation of the programmes, but on the other hand, it has strongly conditioned the “objects” of the evaluation, its objectives, the models and even the investigative instruments.

Regarding questions of a methodological nature, it seems only right to look at how the proposed evaluative model fits in with respect to the above methodological debate. Reho, in a very recent publication (Reho, 2006: 22) says that “In an attempt to interpret the orientation of the Commission, while underlining the progressive move in time from an approach aimed at accountability to an approach aimed at learning, many people maintain that the EU documents give out conflicting messages. A reading of the Regulations shows the importance of accountability above all else: the Commission asks the member states to report on how the funds have been spent”.

With respect to the four definitions of Guba and Lincoln (1989) the model could be placed between the second and third definition: the role of the evaluators is to describe what has or has not functioned with respect to the given objectives, but, in a certain sense, can also express judgements on the objectives themselves⁵ (although in a limited and strongly conditioned form). Also with regard to Midmore’s classification (1997) it is clear that a great effort has been made to consider the effects of the programme on communities (social accounting), at least in some of the questions of a horizontal nature in the questionnaire. Finally, with respect to Stame’s work (2001) it is difficult to see the real

⁴ The four phases are: planning and structuring of evaluation, obtaining data, analysing information, constructing evaluative judgements. The first phase consists of planning the evaluation defining the evaluative problems (the objects), the relative criteria and indicators. The second phase regards the investigation: use of primary and secondary sources. The third phase looks at the reorganisation of the information gathered in order to hypothesize first judgements and verify the hypotheses. The last phase regards the definition of the final evaluative judgements.

⁵ Obviously in this context the term “objectives” means not only the system of RDP objectives to be evaluated (global, specific and operative), but also the sequence of questions – criteria – indicators that makes up the CEQ.

meaning of standard in the community evaluative model. Returning to Reho's thoughts (Reho, 2006: 22-23) we can see how "In general the Commission tends towards an evaluation of effectiveness, comparing objectives represented on a sliding scale: the general objectives contain various intermediate objectives, each of which can be narrowed down to specific objectives, with specific operational actions while the efficiency evaluation analyses the relationship between input, output and results in the background is the comparison of results obtained/obtainable by the programme with the initial demand, with the needs expressed by the social-economic context (external effectiveness)". It would therefore seem that one can ascribe these evaluations, with a certain caution, to what Stame (2001) defines as an "experimental positivist" approach.

In brief, we can assert that the CEQ structure uses a "traditional" approach to the evaluation of programmes, based on the quantification and measurement of implementation, results and impact. The CEQ refers to programme theory, meaning the idea that one can obtain a change, implemented through a programme, by providing resources and activities (ISFOL, 2002: 17). The evaluative model verifies the implementation. It is substantially "goal-oriented", since it is based on an audit of the reaching of the objectives given by the programme.

4.2. The procedures

The main connection between reflections on the evaluative model and analysis of the procedures adopted can be found in the way in which the contents of the evaluation reports have been planned and structured (Table 1). The causal chain model (of the hypotheses) that links input to output and from which the questions, criteria and indicators proposed by the CEQ derive, comes from the "Logic model", which is the procedure used in all the evaluation reports (except those of Umbria) to identify the evaluative questions of the reports.

The other procedure used (with the exception of the evaluative reports of Piedmont and Umbria) looks at the conditions of evaluability (Evaluability assessment). That is to say the analysis of the availability and usability of the monitoring system for the evaluation, and above all the identification of questions, criteria or indicators of the CEQ for which it would not have been possible to give an answer (with the necessary justifications required by the community document for the inability or impossibility to reply to a certain question).

If on the one hand it seems right to remember that the use of the (CEQ) model is mainly made compulsory through the community regulations, it is clear that the 14 evaluators have used little variation in their procedures. In particular, those instruments that are furthest from the outlined evaluative approach (consultation with the stakeholders to expand the objects of the evaluation or the "Formative development evaluation") have not been used. In 10 regions, however, the managing authorities and the evaluators have agreed on a specific list of questions that differ from those in the CEQ, with very varied levels of extension⁶.

⁶ In particular, there are specific questions in the evaluation reports of Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Tuscany, Sardinia, Valle d'Aosta and Veneto, even though the requests of the managing authorities show a tendency to consider the evaluation of rural development as sectorial, not considering the integration of the various initiatives for the development of the territory.

Table 1. Procedures for planning and structuring the evaluation of the regional evaluation reports

Evaluation report Region Autonomous Province	Concept or issue mapping	Stakeholder consultation	Evaluability assessment	Logic models	Formative developmental evaluation
Abruzzo			X	X	
Emilia R.			X	X	
Friuli V.G.			X	X	
Lazio			X	X	
Liguria			X	X	
Lombardy			X	X	
Marches			X	X	
Piedmont				X	
Toscana			X	X	
Umbria					
Valle d' Aosta			X	X	
Veneto			X	X	
Prov. A. di Bolzano			X	X	
Prov. A. di Trento			X	X	

Source: our elaboration based on The Guide structure

The analyses of the mid term evaluation reports regarding the procedures adopted for gathering data and obtaining information (Table 2) generally show a sufficient diversification in the instruments used: in 10 cases between 5 and 6 procedures were used while in just two cases very few means were used to gain information. The number of procedures used, however, is not very meaningful. It is more interesting to analyse which procedures were used and to do what.

Clearly in almost all the reports administrative data were used, that is data from the monitoring system. Secondary sources were used mainly for two reasons. In the first place to verify (eventual) variations in the socio-economic context, for example through the use of databases (Istat or regional). Secondly to identify control groups in order to estimate the “net” effect of a certain measure (in particular in the RDP evaluation reports of Emilia and Friuli). For example the database of the FADN is used to evaluate effectiveness and efficiency through “counterfactual comparison”.

In almost all the reports (except those of the RDP of Piedmont) questionnaires are used for carrying out surveys on the recipients of the intervention. In the reports that try to evaluate the “net” effects of the intervention these surveys are carried out on a sample of the recipients. These questionnaires are generally for gathering quantitative and qualitative data on the intervention that has been funded and impressions on the progress of the measure. Little attention is generally paid to the selection of the sample, except in a few cases (evaluative RDP reports of Marches and Emilia).

Also data gathering based on stakeholder interviews is used in nearly all reports (except the RDPs of Abruzzo and Liguria). We should, however, specify that by stakeholders we mean those responsible for the measure and the managing authorities, in other words those responsible for the administration of the programme. Interviews are rarely used to discover what other categories of stakeholders think about the programme. Only in the Umbrian RDP evaluation report are sector experts, territorial experts and local administrators interviewed. There is no evidence of involvement of members of other social groups (consumers, citizens etc.), nor that through interviews so-called “triangulations” have been carried out for a cross-verification of the results.

In nine evaluation reports focus groups were used, usually to “enrich the quantitative data with qualitative aspects for example the causes that have influenced the appearance of certain phenomena, the perception of the degree of usefulness of the RDP beyond the perceived quantitative

effects” (RDP evaluation report of Marche). The focus groups were usually created involving the recipients of aid and representatives of trade or business associations. In the same reports the procedure of the “panel of experts” is shown, used for the same reasons: “for the answer to some of the complex questions we use methods of “structured comparison between experts” (RDP evaluation report of Lazio and Veneto). It would seem that the focus group and the panel of experts are basically inter-changeable procedures. As is known, the case study is a system for acquiring detailed and complete information on a certain phenomenon within its specific context, to understand complex interactions and processes. In seven evaluation reports the use of case study is explicitly mentioned, to investigate the implementation of complex projects, in particular for initiatives included in Art. 33 of Reg. EC 1257/99.

Also in this phase of the evaluation process there are interesting aspects in the procedures that do not appear in the reports. In fact there is an absence of procedures based on structured questionnaires given to a statistically representative sample of stakeholders to obtain information for elaboration using inferential statistic instruments (a typical positivist – experimental approach procedure). The procedure defined as “Priority evaluation”, based essentially on techniques of demand function estimates or identification of preferences has not been considered, not even in those areas (agro-environmental measures) where this is considered more suitable (Bartolini et al., 2005). In the same way, more qualitative investigative procedures, such as participating observation techniques, are not part of the “tool box” used by the evaluators.

Table 2. Procedures for gathering data and information in the regional evaluation reports

Evaluation reports Region Autonomous Prov.	Social surveys	Beneficiary surveys	Stakeholder interviews	Priority evaluation	Focus groups	Case studies	Participatory approaches & methods	Use of secondary source data	Use of administrative data	Observational techniques
Abruzzo		X							X	
Emilia R.		X	X		X	X		X	X	
Friuli V.G.		X	X		X			X	X	
Lazio		X	X		X	X		X	X	
Liguria		X								
Lombardy		X	X			X		X	X	
Marches		X	X		X	X		X	X	
Piedmont			X					X	X	
Toscana		X	X			X		X	X	
Umbria			X		X			X	X	
Valle d’ Aosta		X	X		X	X		X	X	
Veneto		X	X		X	X		X	X	
Prov. A. di Bolzano		X	X		X			X	X	
Prov. A. di Trento		X	X		X			X	X	

Source: our elaboration based on The Guide structure

To effect analysis of the information gathered and to help reach the initial evaluative judgements Tavistock Institute in The Guide (2003) considers input output analysis, econometric models, regression analyses, experimental and quasi-experimental approaches and Delphi survey (Table 3). GIS has been added, as indicated in the MEANS series (1999).

The first five procedures were not used in any evaluation report. No estimates were made of impacts using econometric models or analyses of the relations between variables through regressions. Only in six evaluation reports was a GIS used as an aid in analysing some aspects linked to the implementation of certain measures, in order to superimpose inferable information from monitoring on information layers available from regional cartography, or to proceed to georeference of the elementary data or, at least, to verify in what territorial contexts there had been a greater concentration of measures. Finally, in only one evaluation report was cluster analysis used to evaluate the presence of homogeneous groups by type of question in the analysis of agro-environmental interventions.

Table 3. Procedures for analysing the information in regional evaluation reports

Evaluation report Region Autonomous Prov.	Input/output analysis	Econometric models	Regression analysis	Experimental and quasi-experimental approaches	Delphi survey	GIS
Abruzzo						
Emilia R.						X
Friuli V.G.						X / Cluster
Lazio						
Liguria						
Lombardy						X
Marches						
Piedmont						
Toscana						X
Umbria						
Valle d' Aosta						X
Veneto						X
Prov. A. di Bolzano						
Prov. A. di Trento						

Source: our elaboration on The Guide structure

In the majority of the mid term evaluative reports there is no provision for procedures to help formulate evaluative judgements (Table 4). That of the Marches is the only one that tries to apply a multicriteria analysis to: “compare the various results found in the different measures forming the Plan giving a score to the various significant aspects of the programme implementation, with the final objective of reaching a synthetic judgement on the level of efficiency reached” (RDP evaluation report of Marches). As regards the complex evaluation of the net effects of parts of the programme we would like to underline the work carried out in the evaluation report of Emilia Romagna where some indicators were calculated both on representative samples of the recipients and non-recipients (“counterfactual situation”), in an attempt to filter the sample data from exogenous influences due, for example, to the economic cycle or to external shocks (RDP evaluation report of Emilia, Appendix D). Finally, in the evaluation reports of Lombardy and Marches there are some considerations on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities for men and women through the evaluation of the impact of gender on the programme. These are evaluative judgements on the adequacy of the strategy and the type of activity in the RDP with respect to the question of gender that emerged through the use of the VISPO model.

Table 4. Procedures for formulating judgements on the regional evaluation reports

Evaluation reports Region Autonomous Prov.	Cost-benefit analysis	Bench marking	Cost effectiveness analysis	Economic impact assessment	Gender impact assessment	Environmental impact assessment	Strategic environmental assessment	Multi-criteria analysis	Expert panels
Abruzzo									
Emilia R.				X					
Friuli V.G.									
Lazio									
Liguria									
Lombardy					X				
Marches					X			X	
Piedmont									
Toscana									
Umbria									
Valle d' Aosta									
Veneto									
Prov. A. di Bolzano									
Prov. A. di Trento									

Source: our elaboration on The Guide structure

5. Conclusions

In this (meta) evaluative analysis we have looked at basically two questions related to some contents of the mid term evaluation reports of RDPs made in Italian regions outside Ob. 1. The first looks at the community system of evaluation and its effects on the evaluative model adopted in the mid term evaluation reports. The second looks at the evaluative procedures used.

The evaluative system of the European Commission has doubtless had a great influence both on the structure of the evaluative reports and on the way in which mid term evaluation of rural development policy has been organised and managed in various regional contexts. The majority of the evaluation activities concentrate on the CEQ. In many cases to answer the questions within it, in others (Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Tuscany, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto) also to answer specific evaluative questions on subjects decided by administrations.

From the analysis of the evaluative procedures emerge, on the whole, a limited attention to detail in the description of the procedures used and an inadequate analysis of the quality of the evaluative judgements. In the most frequent situation, in fact, the evaluators have sufficiently identified the type of instrument to use to structure the evaluation (although within the context of the whole approach discussed), have carried out an adequate gathering of data and information, but have provided neither for the use of procedures for analysing the information, nor for the formulation of judgements (this aspect could also raise doubts about the soundness of conclusions).

A lack of clarity in the procedures, if not a real methodological weakness, implies the need to improve the quality of evaluations at the level of methods of analysis. There appears to be a need to reflect on how to improve the means of evaluation with complex "objects" such as the evaluation of a RDP. Although there are not many specific discussions on this subject, literature doubtless has theoretical and procedural indications on the more general theme of programme evaluation. The MEANS series

(1999) can be a starting point. In it, for example, some recommendations are introduced on assembling various evaluative procedures (MEANS, 1999, vol. 3: 225). The choice is guided by the answers to some questions, the main one being: “Are the procedures appropriate for the phases in which they are being used?”. It is clearly not our intention to maintain a position (like that expressed in MEANS) in which it is not clearly underlined that “it is necessary to be able to use all the range of approaches, to be able to combine methods and instruments” (Stame, 2001: 39), particularly in evaluation of programmes that aim to implement a policy like that (multidimensional) of rural development; knowing full well that the quality of an evaluation does not depend exclusively on the methods or on the procedures used but on the way these are used to produce useful and useable information (judgements).

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