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**EVALUATING RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY –
STAKEHOLDERS’ VIEWS ON THE CMEF**

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EVALUATING RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY – STAKEHOLDERS' VIEWS ON THE CMEF

Abstract

With the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) a guidance document for evaluation of rural development policy has been published by the European Commission. The CMEF defines the requirements on monitoring and evaluation and specifies a limited number of quantitative common indicators applicable to each programme. While in general the introduction of the CMEF is considered as being a helpful tool for carrying out evaluation, substantial criticism has been expressed regarding the suggested methodological approach and the provided set of impact indicators. Based on qualitative analyses, this article focuses on contributing to a better understanding of the evaluation process in order to learn from stakeholder perceptions and draw conclusions on how evaluation of rural development policy can be improved.

Keywords

Rural Development, Evaluation, CMEF, Qualitative Analysis, Stakeholder Perceptions

JEL

Z000 (Other special topics: General, Covers general studies about selected topics not covered under the A-R categories)

1. Introduction

With the creation of one single European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD, Council Reg. 1698/2005), rural development (RD) has become an autonomous policy package within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). As a result, rural development strategies have to be formulated on the European as well as on the Member State and regional level, and evaluating rural development programmes has become a legal requirement.

Article 84 of the EAFRD outlines a main purpose of evaluation, i.e. to inform the policy process if programme objectives have been achieved. The impact of the programmes shall be assessed reflecting both the strategic guidelines of the Community provided for in Art. 9 and objectives as stated in the rural development programmes. Evaluations shall take into account the rural development problems specific to the Member States and regions concerned. In line with EU requirements sustainable development and environmental impacts are to be considered as well. Programme evaluation is one element of the knowledge infrastructure of the political administrative system. Leeuw (2004) states 'that the ultimate reason for promoting impact evaluation is to learn about' what works and what doesn't and why and thus contribute to the effectiveness of (future) development interventions'. Evaluation aims to inform decision makers about the consequences of their policies and to serve as a key mechanism to improve the quality of regulation (Tscherning et al., 2008; Jacob et al., 2008). As it constitutes an element of reflexivity in the policy process, it forms a link among the implementation of policies, the agenda setting and the policy (re-) formulation (Laschewski & Schmidt, 2008).

A second objective of evaluations is to justify and control spending of public money. With a current budget of 96.2 billion Euro¹, the EAFRD has become a significant element of EU-level expenditure. This has resulted in EU- and Member-State-level policy makers becoming more interested in understanding the impacts of EAFRD expenditure on European rural areas.

The regulation (EC) 1698/2005 obliges all Member States (MS) of the European Union to carry out monitoring as well as to establish a system of ongoing evaluation for each rural development programme (Art. 86), taking the results of the ex-ante evaluation as a starting point. In 2010, ongoing evaluation is supposed to take the form of a separate mid-term evaluation report. The mid-term

¹ Including additional funds made available through the Health Check and the European Economic Recovery Package.

evaluation shall propose measures to improve the quality of programmes and their implementation. In 2015, ongoing evaluation shall take the form of a separate ex-post evaluation report. Mid-term and ex-post evaluations shall be carried out against the objectives of the programme and draw lessons concerning rural development policy. Ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluations shall be carried out by independent evaluators (Art. 84/4 of Council Reg. 1698/2005).

As a guidance document for evaluation the 'Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework' (CMEF) has been published (CEC, 2006), pursuing an indicator approach. The CMEF defines the requirements on monitoring and evaluation and specifies a limited number of quantitative common indicators applicable to each programme. Since these are not able to capture all effects of programme activity, in particular for national priorities and site-specific measures, Member States are asked to develop additional indicators within the programmes. Although this approach is more strategic and consistent than earlier evaluation approaches, significant issues still remain.

While a lot of studies have concentrated on indicators and their improvement (e.g. Frederiksen & Kristensen, 2008; ENRD, 2009), this article focuses on contributing to a better understanding of the evaluation process. The underlying questions therefore are: who are the stakeholders involved in evaluation, what is their interest in evaluation, what is the context in which evaluation is carried out and how do stakeholders perceive the CMEF and the set-up of evaluation. Thus, it becomes possible to learn from stakeholder perceptions and draw conclusions on how evaluation of rural development policy can be improved.

2. Methodology

Research on the subject was carried out in the frame of the EU-funded project Assessing the Impact of Rural Development Policies (RuDI). The project aims at improving the understanding of processes and structures underlying the formulation, implementation and impacts of European rural development policies. Analyses within the project are structured along the concept of the policy cycle, which suggests for analytical reasons that the policy process can be divided in different phases which evolve one after the other and finally lead to a restart of the policy process (Jann & Wegrich, 2003). Based on the analysis of RD policy design and delivery as well as the identification of resulting expenditure patterns and their comparison with policy priorities, the remaining part of the policy cycle, evaluation of rural development, was examined more closely.

Information was gathered both at EU as well as Member State and regional level, and consists of secondary as well as primary data. Secondary data comprise official documents (rural development programmes, EU documents) and relevant literature. In addition, semi-structured interviews with 26 evaluation experts from different Member States were conducted. Interviews, desk study and qualitative analyses were carried out parallel so that an iterative process of constructing hypotheses, validation and reformulation was assured. Thus, analysis allowed for processuality and circularity of research (cp. Flick et al., 2005).

The selection of experts with their specific fields of experience ensured a balance between the different RD fields and the four EAFRD axes. The interviewees can be separated into two groups regarding their involvement in evaluation: The first and larger group (group I) comprises researchers both from university institutes and federal/national research institutes, private consultants or senior advisers. Most of them are responsible for evaluations within the current funding period. The second group (group II) includes programme managers or related officials from the ministries of agriculture who are directly involved in evaluation of the current RDPs. Some of the experts are additionally engaged in work for DG Agriculture and Rural Development, as e.g. in the expert committee on evaluation or have participated in the development of the CMEF framework. Experts come from the EU15, termed in the following as 'old' Member States (oMS), as well as 'new' Member States (nMS) which comprise the ten Central and Eastern European Countries as well as Cyprus and Malta.

3. Stakeholders and their interests in evaluation

Evaluation is carried out within a certain institutional environment under certain structural and financial conditions. Diverse stakeholders with a varying degree of knowledge on evaluation and evaluation methodology as well as a varying views on usefulness of evaluation results act within these circumstances and at the same time construct and shape them. The most actively involved stakeholders are the ministries or responsible agencies as well as independent evaluators. Within the process of

formal assessment of impacts, interviewees ascribe an important role to the administration, especially the higher levels like managing authorities which are mostly the relevant ministries who are steering the evaluation process, while both higher and lower administration levels use information resulting from it. Another big group of stakeholders is subsumed under the heading 'economic and social partners'. They are represented in monitoring committees and comprise e.g. representatives of the beneficiaries, national NGOs, gender equality commissioners, church representatives. The committee is provided with evaluation reports and endeavours to see if the programmes perform well and to generate ideas for enhancing the way in which the programmes are being delivered. Most of the interviewees stress, that economic and social partners should gain more weight in the process of evaluation than just being part of the monitoring committee. Especially local and non-professional stakeholders and beneficiaries, who currently mainly serve as an information base, should play an active role in the frame of an evaluation process and gain knowledge from the results: 'I believe that their opinion and presence is more useful in order to make better conclusions. [...] Their input should be used according to the bottom-up approach from the beginning of planning.' (expert of group I, OMS). In addition, interest in the programmes might be increased by getting involved in the planning of schemes and seeing the benefits of actions which have been carried out.

As regards interest and motivation for carrying out or participating in the process of assessment of impacts differences between stakeholders can be detected. Most of the interviewees agree that the European Commission is a stakeholder with extensive and continuing interest in evaluation. Results are frequently and systematically used, most of all in order to be able to account for the programme but as well to adjust or improve programme conditions and requirements². At national level the main user of evaluation is the ministry of agriculture (or comparable contracting institution). The driving force behind evaluation in the administrative authorities seems to be twofold: They conduct assessment of impacts to meet legal programme requirements, as well as to be able to answer to domestic policy regulations. Administrative authorities apparently have a main interest in controlling that money allocated was not mis-spent.

Interviewees have the feeling that results of evaluations are not, or will not be used as much as they could, ideally. Experts adduce several possible reasons for a potentially low use of evaluation results (cf. section on context below), e.g. a difficult relationship between evaluators and the Managing Authority or problems of timing. Another obstacle to making use of the assessment of impacts, is the vast amount of information which is produced in the process of evaluation, and the low readability of reports. Beside these aspects, experts hint on a lack of culture of evaluation in both old Member States and new Member States. Interviewees regard the countries' political history as one reason for the absence or the low development of an evaluation culture:

'It should also be important for the decision makers to know the importance of the whole monitoring and evaluation, but there is no culture and common understanding on this issue available in Eastern European countries. There was no control where the public money went and how it was used, and what its real impact was. So it is very hard to settle and agree upon a reasonable culture of monitoring and evaluation.' (expert of group I, nMS)

'A well established culture of evaluation is in Italy growing but in comparison to other countries, it is not so developed yet. Mainly thanks to the European policies evaluative processes have been introduced in our country.' (expert of group I, oMS)

This goes along with the findings of Jacob et al. (2008) as well as assumptions of some interviewees that generally beside formal assessment of impacts there is also a continuous informal assessment of impacts going on both in Eastern and Western European countries: Those who are involved in delivering programmes and overseeing their delivery discuss between themselves about impacts as well as potential improvements or adjustments of programmes and have therewith established parallel, alternative routines of policy formulation. The 'official' evaluation is then mainly or merely carried out for accountability purposes. Another reason for a potentially low interest in impact assessment might be, that in some countries, e.g. in the Netherlands, EU funding is regarded as merely being an additional financial instrument, because RDPs are strongly incorporated in prevailing national and, increasingly, provincial rural policy frameworks.

² This finding is supported by a statement of Leo Maier, Head of the Evaluation Unit at DG Agriculture and Rural Development, at a conference in Berlin (International Green Week, January 2010). He pointed out that DG Agri often resorted to evaluation reports when planning forward and expressed his appreciation of these reports.

4. The CMEF

The Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CEC, 2006) sets the formal frame for evaluation of rural development. It follows an indicator approach suggesting a chain of causality between programme measures on the one hand and expected effects, on the other. The intervention logic follows the idea of hierarchically assorted objectives and measures. The underlying assumption is that the effect of each measure as well as of the whole programme can thus be detected (ECORYS, 2005).

The EAFRD explicitly aims at three thematic objectives, i.e. improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry; improving the environment and the countryside; and improving the quality of life in rural areas as well as encouraging diversification of economic activity. In addition, a fourth methodological objective is the mainstreaming of Leader as a bottom-up approach to integrated local rural development. The four objectives are used to group the 44 different RD measures into four ‘axes’. As an example, table 1 shows the intervention logic of axis 1.

| Overall objective | Sub-objective | Related measures |
|--|---|---|
| To improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector | promoting knowledge and improving human potential | vocational training and information actions (M111), schemes promoting the establishment of young farmers and the structural adaptation of their holdings (M112), early retirement for farmers and agricultural workers who decide to cease agricultural activities (M113), to establishment and use of advisory services, farm relief and farm management support services (M114,115) |
| | restructuring and developing physical potential | modernisation of agricultural and forestry holdings and the improvement of their commercial performance (M121), improving the economic value of the forest (M122), adding value to primary agricultural and forestry production (M123), improving and developing infrastructure related to the development (M125) and adaptation of agriculture and forestry and restoring agricultural production potential damaged by natural disasters and introducing appropriate prevention schemes (M126) |
| | improving the quality of production and products | assisting farmers in adapting to the (demanding) rules laid down in EU legislation (M131), encouraging farmers to participate in schemes that promote quality food and that give consumers assurances of the quality of a product or production method (M132), providing added value to primary products and boosting trade opportunities (M123), supporting producer groups in their information and promotion activities for products covered by food quality schemes (M133) |
| | Facilitating transition in new Member States | aid for semi-subsistence holdings undergoing restructuring (M141), aid for the establishment of producer groups and aid for agricultural holdings undergoing restructuring, including diversification into non-agricultural activities (M142) |

Table 1: The overall objective of axis 1, the four related sub-objectives and the officially attributed measures (CEC, 2006)

Besides the measures officially attributed to the sub-objectives (cp. EC, 2009) there are other measures which contribute to the axis 1 objectives but have their origin within other axes as figure 1 illustrates. These comprise measures as diversification into non-agricultural activities (M311); support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises (M312); conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage (M323); training and information for economic actors operating in the fields covered by axis 3 (M331); and skills acquisition and animation with a view to preparing and implementing a local development strategy (M341) as well as local development strategies (M41) (figure 1).

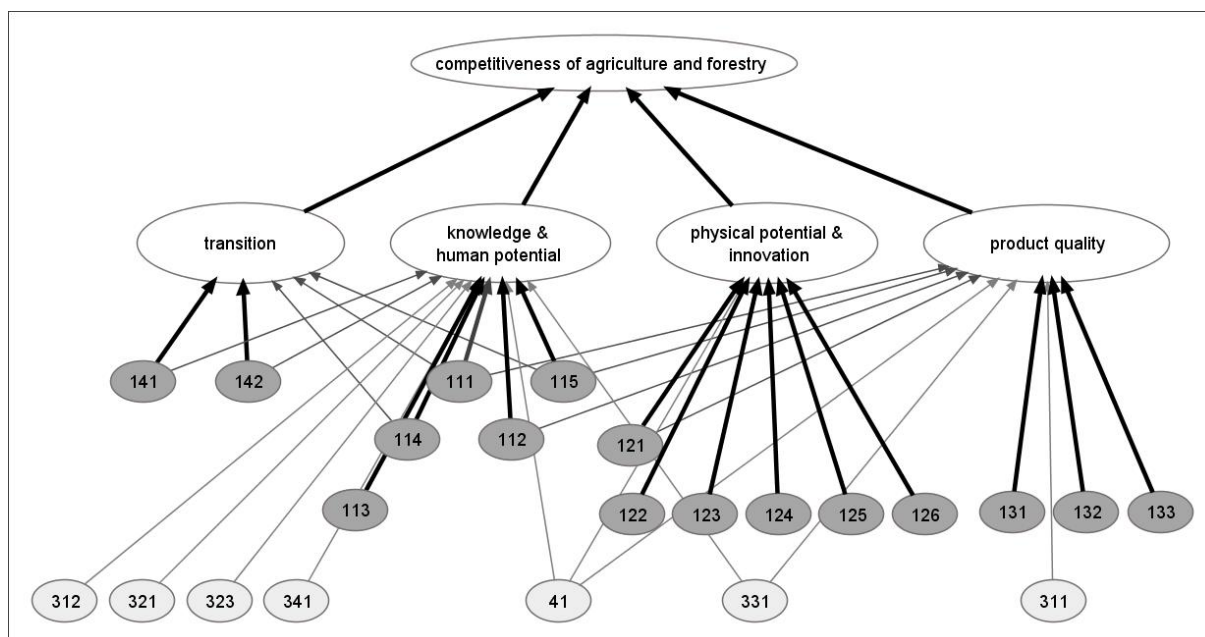


Figure 1: Intervention logic of axis 1; as described in Annex 2 E – measure fiches of the CMEF. Additional impact chains of programmes have been included based on expert judgement. Strong black arrows visualise the intervention logic as described in the CMEF. Measures described under the specific axis are depicted by a dark grey symbol mentioning the measure code. According to expert judgement, measures attributed to different axis and objectives also contribute to other objectives. They are depicted through light grey symbols at the bottom of the figure. Thin arrows show linkages of measures that according to light grey symbols contribute to a certain objective but are not as such mentioned in the intervention logic. The vertical position of the measure symbol shows the (theoretical) importance of a measure based on the number of objectives it contributes to. Source: Own illustration, based on CEC, 2006.

In order to assess the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes against the objectives, the CMEF suggests seven impact indicators, which refer to the medium-term and long-term benefits of a programme. They are supposed to be expressed in “net” terms, which means subtracting effects that cannot be attributed to the intervention (e.g. double counting, deadweight), and taking into account indirect effects (displacement and multipliers). Often, impacts of RDPs can be attributed to various aspects, which precludes capturing them by the application of one indicator. In addition there may be regional characteristics which require an additional sort of measurement. Therefore, the CMEF suggests Member States to develop Programme Specific Indicators (Art. 81(2) of Council Reg. 1698/2005). However, the analysis of ex-ante evaluations shows that in spite of considerable criticism which has been expressed in regard to the CMEF impact indicators, nearly half of the 94 Rural Development Programmes do not contain programme-specific indicators and only 28 of the RDPs apply additional indicators to fill the identified gaps (Metis & AEIDL, 2008). This is not simply explained by the fact that Member States were in an early stage of setting up their evaluation system. In the interviews experts point out that Member States face the problem, that additional indicators often require additional data and analyses which means additional effort in terms of time and money. Therefore, some Member States have been reluctant in choosing additional indicators.

In general, the interviewed experts regard the introduction of the CMEF as a helpful tool for carrying out evaluation providing a clearer and more workable monitoring and evaluation system and guidance. However, considerable criticism remains: The indicators show a strong emphasis on environmental and economic impacts while no common social indicators have been suggested so far. In addition, some of the suggested quantifications are not considered as adequate. The indicator ‘improvement of water quality’, for instance, is measured by changes in gross nutrient balance.

Experts argue that while the gross nutrient balance provides information on the cause-side it is not sufficient for assessing the actual impacts (cf. Luetz & Felici, 2009). Furthermore, figure 1 illustrates that there are cross-axis relations between objectives and measures, constituting one of the major problems of the current CMEF approach to evaluation: Measures can contribute to several objectives and there may be mutual influences between different measures leading to synergies as well as constraints at the different political levels. These less obvious and less tangible effects can hardly be captured in the frame of current evaluation design. A further challenge is to measure both the micro level and the macro level effects and disentangle these effects from other influencing factors, as well as establishing the counterfactual, i.e. calculating the changes that would have occurred without the specific programme intervention. This applies especially to measures with a longer funding tradition e.g. Farm Investment Support Measure (FIS), where often “non-participants” used as control group may include farms which have received FIS-support in one of the previous programming periods, which means that they actually have been participants. ‘The results achieved with this distorted reference are neither plausible nor meaningful’ (expert of group I, oMS). Netting out the effects of the programme by capturing deadweight and displacement effects and detecting unexpected effects, as required in the CMEF, remains a difficult task. Most of the experts stated that it was not possible to capture unexpected impacts within the current evaluation procedure. Generally, interviews showed a strong option for resorting to qualitative methods in order to capture negative impacts. Most of the experts agree that in general the CMEF is not sufficient to capture all of the occurring impacts, or at least the most important ones. Experts argue that evaluation designs have to move beyond the CMEF in order to be able to do so. The CMEF is perceived as too narrow and demanding, thus distracting evaluators and managing authorities from capturing the specific impacts of their Rural Development Programme.

As there has been a lot of criticism in regard to indicators, the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (EENRD) under the responsibility of DG Agriculture and Rural Development has established thematic working groups which have the task to contribute to a review of indicators in terms of finding methodological ways to narrow the attribution gap, ensure better intervention logic, and disentangle the effects of multiple intervening factors. Guidance documents on indicators including best practice examples are provided, the first one ‘Guidance Document on the HNV indicators’ has been published in the end of 2008 (EENRD, 2009; EENRD, 2010). However, there are further issues beyond indicators which are connected with the CMEF and should be taken into account in order to improve evaluation, as will be shown in the next section.

4.1 Context of evaluation

Stakeholders of the assessment of impacts act within a particular context, i.e. under certain conditions and circumstances (e.g. resources, timing, etc.), which builds the frame for their actions but at the same time is constructed and shaped by them. Therefore context of evaluation has to be taken into account as well in order to broaden the understanding of evaluation processes.

Two thirds of the experts did not regard money as a constraining factor in regard to evaluation. However, most of the interviewees hinted on the fact that there is an interrelation between financial resources and lack of data: Evaluators are very much depending on the existence of relevant data in order to carry out an assessment of impacts, which means that if data availability is low and they have to collect data themselves, evaluators are indeed lacking resources. Especially in the new Member States data availability is still a problem. Lack of information forces evaluators from both nMS and EU 15 to focus evaluation on certain aspects. In this respect, clear agreements between evaluators and the contracting agency are necessary to avoid dissatisfaction with outcomes. It was often stated that evaluation results would have the potential to lead to more satisfying results if data availability was increased.

Another factor which determines the collaboration of evaluators and representatives of the programme administration is that often representatives in public administration at national level or below tend to see record-keeping as yet another burden which is imposed on them by the European Commission. Thus, data may be collected which are not useful to evaluators, or they simply may not be accessible to evaluators. At this, the high fluctuation of personnel at different RD levels is influencing evaluation as well: Provided there are no major changes within the personnel interviews

show that there is some form of institutional learning in terms of attempting to improve data collection, preparation and storage.

In the frame of the analysis communication turned out to be a crucial factor for evaluation. The basis for a good communication is a trustful and open relationship between administration officials and evaluators. Evaluators encounter the difficulty to cover the span between being critical as integral part of evaluation and not annoying the ministries as the contracting body. Constructive criticism connected with suggestions for improvement has been reported as successful way of dealing with this challenge. Experts of both interviewed groups stated that a good personal relationship between the Managing Authority and the evaluator was elementary.

As scientific literature on evaluation in the frame of the CMEF already indicated, timing is another important context factor for the assessment of impacts in the frame of the CMEF (Dwyer et al., 2008; Laschewski & Schmidt, 2008). Evaluation at programme level is carried out before a programme is implemented (ex ante), in the middle of the programme (mid-term) and after the programme has been terminated (ex post) (Art. 85, Art. 86 of Council Reg. 1698/2005). Figure 2 illustrates the policy cycle phases for the ongoing Rural Development implementation period.

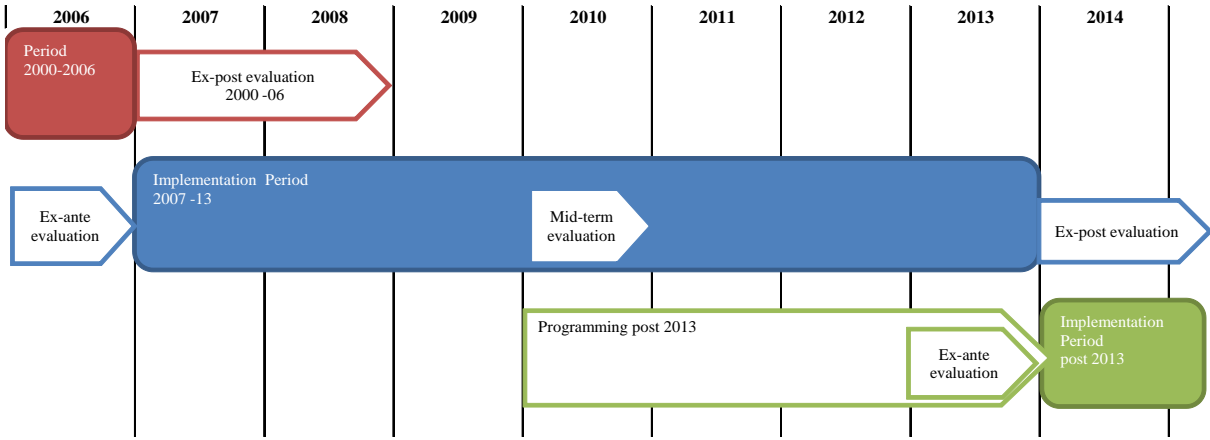


Figure 2: Timing of RD policy cycle phases and evaluation. Source: own illustration after CMEF (CEC, 2006).

Ideally, a cycle of learning would come from all three stages of evaluation, for each of which deadlines are set out in legislation. However, as programming periods run consecutively without a break, the planning and agreement of a new programme are meant to take place while the existing programme is still running (cp. fig. 2). The timing of *ex-post* evaluations inevitably means that their findings and recommendations do not feed into the current programming period, neither do *ex-post* evaluations enable other Member States to learn from each others' RDP experiences before developing the new programme. At the same time, experts hint at the fact that results of the *ex-ante* evaluations are of low influence because household decisions have already been made earlier. Concerning mid-term evaluation some experts point out that impacts of some measures can only be perceived in the long run, which means that mid-term evaluation may simply be too early to gather meaningful information on performance.

4.2 The CMEF and wider RD objectives

The strategic objective 'to take into account other EU level strategies (3.5)' (Council Decision 2006/144/EC) voices the requirement of an integrated review not only of EAFRD objectives but also other relevant strategies. Therefore these wider objectives which are explicitly or implicitly taken up in and/or interweaved with the defined horizontal objectives should also be reflected on in current evaluation. On the example of three wider objectives (improved governance, implementation of Lisbon and Göteborg objectives, preservation of rural diversity) it was analysed if wider objectives are taken into account.

OECD (2006) states, that there is a shift in policy towards a "new rural paradigm" which concerns not only changes in the policy focus but also adjustments to the governance structure. A

cross-cutting and multi-level governance approach is considered outdated more traditional hierarchical administrative structures as these are not adequate to meet the emerging challenges. Governance is defined as a complex system of continuous negotiation among nested governmental and non-governmental actors at various political levels. The EU strategic guidelines state as an overall objective of the EAFRD ‘to contribute to the horizontal priority of improving governance and mobilising the endogenous development potential of rural areas (3.4)’ (Council decision 2006/144/EC). Experts point out that it is quite hard to detect impacts in relation to improved governance. According to some interviewees, current RD assessment methods tend to give little attention to relevant aspects other than agriculture-related ones, and they stress that there should be a decision on European level to assess these aspects, too.

The national strategy plans and chapter 10 of the RDPs reflect the Community priorities and their contribution to the Lisbon and Göteborg objectives. Interviewed experts state, however, that there is no analysis going beyond general statements, whether the RDP has an influence in respect to these wider objectives. They point out that a place-based, territorial approach is needed in order to be able to assess these impacts, as there are additional EU, national, regional and sometimes local programmes, plans and strategies, which contribute to the Lisbon and Göteborg objectives. If not taking a cross-fund view, evaluation against these objectives may be biased: Some countries have set different priorities in each of the programmes, so that the RDP, for instance, contributes to nature conservation and sustainable development, whereas the ERDF programme aims at stimulating growth and creating more and better jobs. Though these countries may do well as a whole, the result of the RDP ex-ante evaluation is, however, that the Lisbon objectives have not been taken sufficiently into account. The example illustrates that a cross-fund, territory-based evaluation would have the potential to improve evaluation results.

In 2003, within the conclusions of the Salzburg Conference “Planting seeds for rural futures – building a policy that can deliver our ambitions”, preserving the diversity of Europe’s countryside was declared as an objective of rural development policy. However, neither in Council Reg. 1698/2005 nor in the strategic guidelines for rural development there is an explicit reflection on the objective. It is merely stressed that there is a diversity of rural areas and that farming plays a multifunctional role in the richness and diversity of landscapes. Accordingly, there are no explicit strategies as regards improving rural diversity which makes it hard to carry out an evaluation against the objective.

5. Conclusion

Evaluation serves two objectives, i.e. accountability and institutional learning. A lot of work is currently done on improving the CMEF in terms of guidance documents on indicators which have been elaborated by thematic working groups (EENRD, 2008; ENRD, 2009). Thus, the current set-up of evaluation will eventually have the potential to contribute to accountability purposes. Institutional learning, however, seems to be neglected so far: Ideally, evaluation provides information to better steer projects, programmes, and strategies within their given, dynamic settings to maximize effectiveness and sustainability. In this regard, evaluation of impacts would be an integral part of results-based decision making and management. The analysis shows, that this is often not the case in the Member States so far. In order to increase the potential of current RD evaluation to better contribute to institutional learning, we identified several success factors:

- Establish a culture of evaluation in the MS, which would imply communicating objectives and benefits of evaluation more clearly on all political levels, thus increasing interest in the results of evaluation and better appreciation of evaluation.
- More and early stakeholder involvement would allow for reflection of the different interests in evaluation results, so that evaluation could be better designed to meet the different requirements.
- The relationship between Managing Authority and evaluators could be improved by clear agreements on tasks and roles, regular contact, early involvement of evaluators in the planning of evaluation and a genuine interest in evaluation on the side of the Managing Authority.
- In order to increase the use of evaluation results a good readability of reports is important: Currently, reports will always have to cover the span between being voluminous in order to

meet the requirements and being condensed enough to be well received and influential in institutional learning processes. EU and government officials as well as evaluators and economic and social partners should work together in order to develop a better reporting format which meets the different needs.

- It should be considered to complement report-delivery with the establishment of new communication processes between the different stakeholders at the different political levels to further develop methods for monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, results of evaluations should be communicated to the wider public (in a more easy to read way).
- The establishment of “learning arenas” might be helpful: Exchange of good and bad practice examples and experiences which have been gained concerning evaluation of the programmes in the different Member States would be of special interest – not only in written form but also in the frame of workshops, conferences etc.
- Regarding the financial context it is important to use financial resources to increase data availability and then make use of available data efficiently resorting to both quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- In terms of good timing of evaluation, the introduction of ongoing evaluation may already have improved the problem of timing (not possible to judge at this stage of the programming period). However, timing remains to be an issue especially concerning mid-term and ex-post evaluation. Postponing mid-term evaluation was suggested as one possible solution by interviewees.

Due to the limited data available and the evidently limited resources to overcome the problem, some experts stress that evaluation needs to become more efficient in terms of finding the best way to make use out of the data and suggest to trust in qualitative assessments of impact in addition to quantitative approaches. Furthermore, it was stressed that a lot of impacts can only be assessed within case studies at the local level. Experts argue that moving beyond the measure and axes based evaluation approach to a more thematic or territorial approach would better allow detecting synergies. Site-specific approaches are needed because country wide indicators are often not suitable. In addition, some experts advocate territory based evaluation across funds to detect impacts at macro-level. In order to enhance the understanding of RD processes thematic studies should be carried out, which are not time-bound and analyse more deeply certain issues and processes. A territorial approach to evaluation might also facilitate the evaluation of wider RD objectives which are explicitly or implicitly taken up in and/or interweaved with the defined horizontal objectives and should be paid attention to if the evaluation is to contribute to an improvement of rural development policy.

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