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Evaluation of development in rural areas

Focus Group Report

16 July 2009

L'AGRICOLTURA A BENEFICIO DI TUTTI



“Evaluation of development in rural areas”

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Premise

On July 16, 2009, a focus group was held in Rome on “Evaluation of Development in Rural Areas”, which brought together regional policy makers and evaluators to initiate debate by pooling the experience and views of different actors involved in planning, implementation and evaluation of development in rural areas.

The meeting was part of broader planning of organisation activities that the National Rural Network, and specifically the “Monitoring and Evaluation Task Force”, seeks to create to encourage the adoption of a “culture of evaluation” among administrations in charge of Rural Development Programmes, as well as dialogue and sharing with evaluation experts.

The basic idea is to create a “community of practice and learning” that involves the participation of experts from the National Rural Network and the world of research, the National Evaluation System, the regions (represented by both administrations involved in local development policies and regional units for evaluation and audit of public investments), to address issues relating to evaluation during specific focus group sessions and analyse specific themes such as the evaluation of local development policies in rural areas.

In this specific case, the idea of creating a focus group on **evaluation of development in rural areas** began as a result of the Round Table “Evaluation and development of rural areas: what experiences, what approaches, what methods of evaluation?” held in Cagliari on 26 March 2009 as part of the Annual AIV (Italian Evaluation Association) Congress. The meeting was designed to stimulate discussion and take a broader path in defining possible approaches and evaluation methods on this complex subject of research.

In line with the aforementioned experience, the need identified and shared within the Network is to promote joint and expanded reflection on the theme of evaluating the effects of development policies in rural areas, which will simultaneously promote the best definition of specific evaluation mandates by the administrations concerned.

In this regard, the focus group organised by the National Rural Network has sought to define a possible evaluation mandate, by reflecting on “**What is implied by evaluation of the development of a rural area?**” and stimulating discussion to identify the key elements to be considered when undertaking evaluation of the development of a rural area.

The implications obviously concern the identification of “**What affects the development of an area**”, the definition of “**What is the identity of the area under investigation**”, and furthermore the identification of “**What are the most relevant dimensions of development** to the survey and what are the specific themes that represent them”.

These questions form the focus group's path of reflection, the results of which have been translated into this synthesis, which is accompanied by a series of further questions (see boxes) of methodology, useful for building evaluation surveys if the evaluation criteria proposed here are assumed.

1. Policies relevant to the purposes of the evaluation survey

The first issue raised during the focus group was to understand the policies relevant to defining an evaluation mandate, as they affect the development of a rural area. In this sense, indeed, in order to proceed to the definition of such an evaluation mandate, it first seemed necessary to define the political framework within which development measures have been enacted, and determine which of them can be considered most relevant to the purposes of the survey (the definition of so-called evaluation “objects”).

The reflection of the working group led to a primary element of consideration, which concerns identifying various **instruments of policy implementation**, which are even more numerous than the policies themselves, and which seem to play an important role in promoting the development of rural areas and therefore must fall within the objects of the evaluation mandate.

Indeed it is no accident that, for each policy, a specific instrument of implementation has also been identified, examples of which include: Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Rural Development Programmes, environmental policy and area landscape/protection plans; business policy and investments in research and innovation/district plans, social and health policies to benefit the public and education/quality of life services.

The large number of policies and policy instruments that can determine the object of the evaluation mandate can be summarized in **three areas that are particularly relevant to the development of rural areas: the environment** (environmental policies, environmental sustainability, urban and landscape planning, environmental protection plans and mountain plans), **competitiveness** (research and innovation, business policies) and finally **quality of life** (social and health policies, education, gender policies, health plan).

From these themes, then, further reflection on what should be the themes of the policies that drive the development of rural areas has led to the identification of two main areas of intervention: **socio-economic development** and the **environment**.

The first concerns interventions aimed at **improving the socio-economic dimension** in rural areas, which are related to aspects of solving problems and combating discrimination (gender policies, immigration, legal status, undeclared work and combating depopulation), those related to the improvement of evaluability of services for rural areas (welfare, health plan, services for rural communities, health services, education), and finally to the development of local human capital (education and growth of local skills). The development issues relating to the economic dimension converge on two main areas: the **territory** as an expression of local identities and thus a factor of attractiveness (villages and infrastructure) and **enterprise** (agricultural businesses, renewable energy and business services, diversification of business activities and access to research).

The **environment** is another area of policy intervention and policy instruments relevant to the development of a rural area. In this sense, the **defence of the territory** in terms of protection, prevention and resolution of risks and respect for the environment (protected areas, fire, legal issues, compliance, hydro-geological risk and waste) is the set of issues most frequently mentioned in analysis, and further investigation must be made about how they may be evaluated. But the environment also becomes relevant for development from the standpoint of **exploiting resources found therein**, resources meaning the ability to foster endogenous potential (landscape, awareness of environmental issues, relationship between territory and environment), and thus the need to evaluate these aspects of potential and of actual development.

Seemingly outside the overall picture is participants' identification of more specific issues, such as **compliance** and **service objectives of the NSF**, which may reflect the need to evaluate the effects of development in relation to specific regulatory requirements affecting specific policies, but which can nonetheless be considered within the sphere of other development themes¹.

As outlined by participants in the Focus Group, the mapping of policies and policy instruments, and the dimensions of development under investigation, seem to draw a scenario in which the **integrated territorial approach** best expresses the growth of a territory and is therefore the area within which to focus the evaluation mandate. There seems to be an indication by participants of a wide variety of interventions related to integrated territorial planning (district/area plans, protection plans and urban planning and landscape plans).

A further element to consider in defining the evaluation mandate, which emerged during the Focus Group, is the matter of **governance** (governance, local governance and policy integration). This also appears to accompany transversally the aforementioned issues deemed relevant to the development of rural areas, indicating that what really counts is not only the individual program or individual policies, or even the individual policy instruments implemented, but rather the contribution of the respective mechanisms for defining and implementing: governance, indeed.

The need to investigate the level of integration among regional policies (horizontal governance), rather than the ability to express and enhance their cultural and environmental attractions, or to use the land as a resource, seems to represent the need for knowledge, for the evaluation mandate, regarding **how policies are applied** at the territorial level (vertical governance).

¹ In particular, the service objectives of the National Strategic Framework include: Raising the skills of students and the learning capacity of the population, Increasing personal care services by alleviating family expenses to increase women's participation in the labour market, Protecting and improving environmental quality in relation to the system of municipal waste management, Protecting and improving the quality of the environment in relation to integrated water service.

Finally, two elements of investigation, perhaps surprisingly, do not seem to have emerged in the analysis of the Focus Group. The first is the **financial burden of policies** on a territory, which apparently does not represent a defining criterion of policies' importance for the development of a rural area. The second is the importance of policy **cooperation** among territories (LEADER/territorial cooperation).

To what extent and at what levels of governance has integration been achieved between policies, actors and delivery mechanisms?

How has integrated territorial planning affected the area's development?

2. Identifying the area to be surveyed

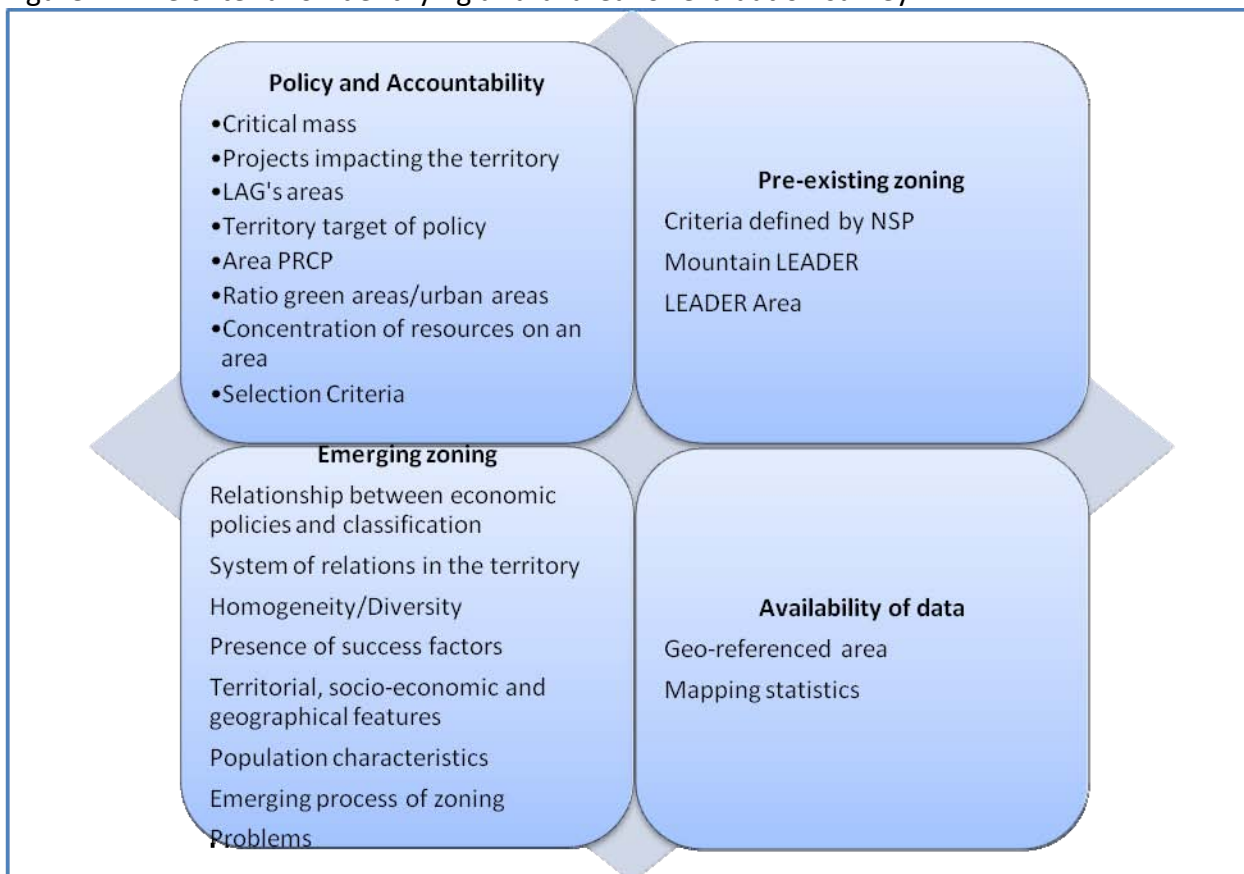
With these questions, "How to identify the area covered by the evaluation survey?" and consequently "What criteria can be used to identify the area covered by the definition of the evaluation mandate?", the second topic addressed during the Focus Group was introduced. The identification of an area under evaluation, in fact, implies the choice of circumscribing criteria.

In this sense, a strong link emerged between the objective of evaluation (and subsequent evaluation questions) and the choice of criteria that can best reveal cognitive needs.

Therefore the **purpose of evaluation** affects the choice of criteria: the evaluation surveys within the framework of fulfilment of rules and regulations in reference to policies tends to lead to choices of clearly pre-defined zoning criteria (pre-existing zoning); while in other cases, criteria for defining areas are more instrumental to the client's need to use survey results to define policies and plan measures (emerging zoning). Another zoning criterion is circumscribing the area based on the availability of mapping data and statistics; a criterion more determined by feasibility (practicability) of an evaluation survey and at the same time limiting in the choice of defining the survey area. Finally, zoning choices can be traced to a client's specific "political" or "administrative" need to investigate the effects of a policy or development generated by a series of investments in the specific area, or by the concentration of resources on certain local actors who have invested in the development of the area; as well as a need for accountability of the investments made in the area (policy and accountability).

These, then, are the identification criteria that emerged during the Focus Group and deemed useful in identifying a rural area to be evaluated.

Figure 1 - The criteria for identifying a rural area for evaluation survey



Pre-existing zoning

Relying on the official classification of areas, such as those provided by the National Strategic Plan in the context of rural development policies or by the OECD, may be an option to simplify the determination of the evaluation mandate, but it is also a choice driven by the objective of accountability of the impact of measures in the specific area.

The choice of pre-existing zoning can involve surveys circumscribed by a **LEADER** area, or more specifically the **mountain LEADER**, or the Rural Development Programme, whose criteria have been defined at the **National Strategic Plan (NSP)** level.

The decision to use a policy of official zoning can also be an opportunity to “validate” it: the implementation of policies on a determined area (eg LEADER) is itself a function of “pre-existing zoning”, and the evaluation survey may respond to a specific objective of analysis of the development path in the area based on the **relationship among economic policies** which affect it and its classification.

How has pre-existing zoning of policies affected the development of the rural area?

Does pre-defined zoning successfully reflect the specific characteristics of the area?

Emerging zoning

Pre-existing zoning often responds to sector strategies (NSP) or trade-offs (zoning defined at Community level) and therefore may not be consistent with the objective of the evaluation survey, which is intended to meet the more detailed cognitive needs of the client, associated with territory, or more transversal surveys with regard to the individual sector (evaluation of development of a rural area).

The “non-choice” of a pre-defined zoning criterion can also be instrumental to the need of the regional authority to experiment with new zoning criteria or otherwise better meet the evaluation client's information needs or highlight the inadequacies of such criteria.

But the classification of areas to be surveyed may also emerge spontaneously: the finding of specific phenomena of development, or the **presence of success factors** of certain interventions on a particular area, may lead the client to express a need for knowledge, insight and evaluation of causes. In this sense, the evaluation mandate may be limited to an area covered by various types of official zoning, but characterized by the presence of common success factors of development interventions, or even **specific geographical, environmental or socio-economic features**.

On the other hand, the choice of a rural area in which there is a **system of relationships with one or more urban areas** can be instrumental to the definition of an evaluation mandate to analyse that system's impact on the development of the specific rural area.

The **presence of common problems** in a certain area can be a further zoning criterion for the area, and thus becomes a subject for investigation.

The identification and circumscription of an area that involves **elements of homogeneity or diversity** in vectors or in the effects of development, beyond official zoning classifications, may also be a choice consistent with the objective of the evaluation mandate to dissolve schemes, and test their coherence with the characteristics of the areas themselves, rather than define new classifications or analyse development paths in areas that could be aggregated differently.

What specific information about the area is lost in the adopted zoning method? And how is it relevant to fulfilling the information requirements of local authorities?

To what extent is zoning responsive/coherent to the development needs of the area?

Availability of monitoring data and statistical mapping

The evaluation system is based on the availability of monitoring data (secondary) and the collection of primary data by the evaluator.

Where monitoring data are not available or are inadequate, and these limitations cannot be overcome by direct survey by the evaluator - usually for reasons of limited time or lack of financial resources invested in the evaluation - the client may decide to limit the survey to areas for which data, statistical information and maps are available.

Has the implemented information system “supported” processes of decision-making and evaluation?

Policy and accountability

In policy terms, the criteria for identification of the area to be evaluated may be motivated primarily by the client’s need to show the developmental effects produced by the investment choices made for the specific area.

In this sense, a LEADER area or an area circumscribed by a Municipal Development Plan may become subjects of survey as targets for a specific policy instrument, to analyse its effects in terms of development.

Otherwise, the need for accountability can guide the client’s choice in defining the area to be evaluated on the basis of allocation of financial resources to specific local development actors (Local Action Groups) or to specific areas (LEADER).

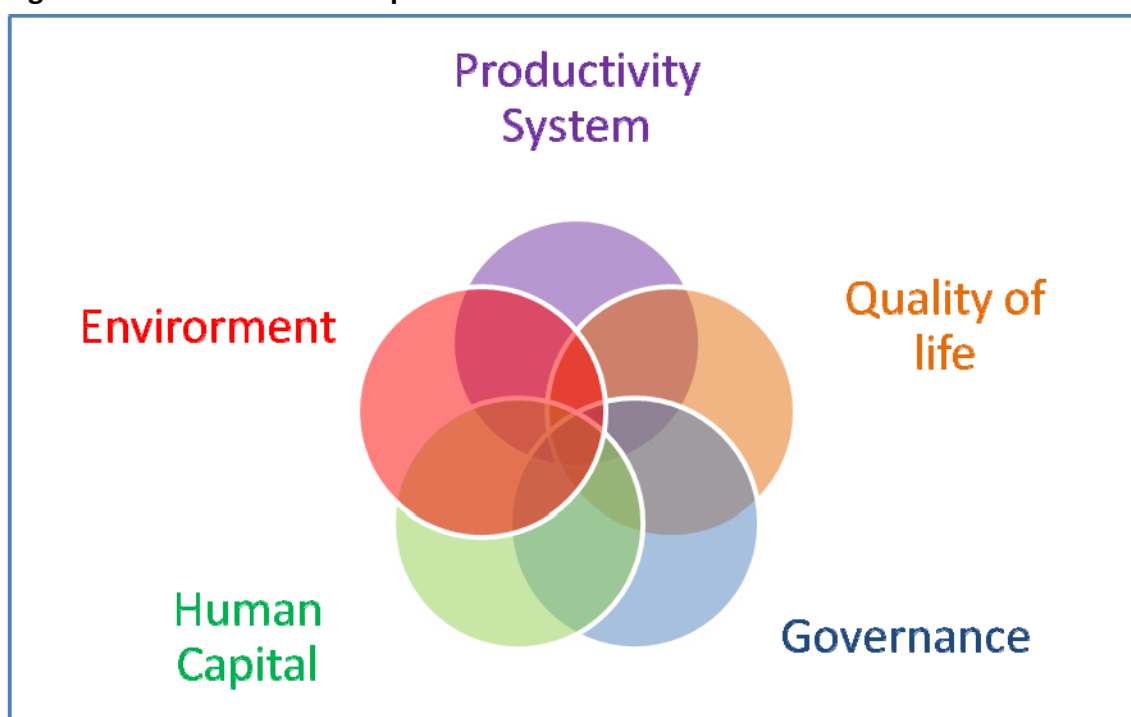
Similarly, the concentration of resources or interventions/projects in a particular area may also represent criteria of zoning, which is instrumental to the need for client accountability: the evaluation survey is aimed, in this case, at taking into account and justifying the programming choices made, showing their effects on development.

3. The dimensions of development and issues relevant to the evaluation survey

The Focus Group's process of reflection and comparison has continued focusing on the development dimensions considered relevant. The main effort was to express the dimensions of development and identify issues/variables on which policies have an effect (and which drive change in the processes of development in a rural area). In particular, five dimensions of development have been identified which could help to define the subject of the evaluator's survey (and help to measure the effects on it):

- production system;
- environment;
- human capital;
- quality of life;
- governance.

Figure 2 - The scale of development in rural areas



Regarding these, the themes/variables on which to evaluate the effects of interventions are many, and an obvious aspect that emerged from the discussion is their transversality. It is often found, in fact, that themes overlap among dimensions, rather than pertaining exclusively to obvious categories. In this sense, the issues placed under analysis are closely integrated and complementary.

Where, for example, within the “production system” we speak of the need to evaluate the effects on the competitiveness of **local production, innovation** and investments in **R & D**, we must consider that these variables are also closely linked to the question of “human capital”. Or, as for **specialised training, educational level**, the presence of **young people**, etc. that integrate or should be integrated within “human capital”, they also belong under “quality of life”. The same applies for **conciliation services**, reported under “production system” as well as “human capital” and “quality of life”. They should be evaluated in relation to the variables of improvement in the rate of **depopulation** of the area and **accessibility**. Very close to conciliation services is the evaluation of **gender** issues and **equal opportunity** in the broad sense (immigrants, disabled, young people, etc.), variables that affect both the “production system” and “human capital”. In particular, it is important to evaluate the contribution made by **women**, which often is not apparent either in terms of numbers (activity rates lower than those of men throughout Italy) or representation in key production sectors.

The variables of **land/environment**, understood both in terms of sustainable management of the environment and its enhancement, cut across the five dimensions of development. The “production system” includes **territorial vocations** which represent a **competitive advantage**, development of potential of the areas’ attractions, and **tourism**, all relevant variables for “quality of life” where areas for survey include **cultural heritage** and **free time** services. In the same way, these issues are relevant for “environment”, where the most important variables that have emerged are economic exploitation, land use, developing the potential attractiveness of the environment, the degree of depopulation of rural areas (also linked to “quality of life”), and the enhancement of the **landscape**.

The variables regarding “governance”, particularly local, also cut across all dimensions considered. The potential **synergies** between local resources and policies and instruments are particularly dependent on the capabilities and ways in which different bodies (institutions, civil society, business etc.) relate and are organised in the territory, also creating new forms of partnership projects that are much closer to the territory and more participatory. The many variables included in governance are therefore key issues to be evaluated, to understand the extent to which processes of local development triggered by policies have achieved their goals.

Another element of the survey concerns how policies deal with certain themes and how issues are actually involved in a range of various policies that interact, or may interact, to improve the planning of interventions.

The following are the themes/variables identified for each of the dimensions of development.

The first dimension regards development of the “production system”. In this context, the effects under investigation that can best express its development could be the following:

- the development of products that reflect local traditions;
- the tools available for the exploitation of resources and the transfer of development: best practices;
- the territorial vocations that represent competitive advantage;
- the development of potential of local attractions;
- the development of tourism in the territories;
- the composition of production (to decide what it should be and whether the policies are strong enough to have an effect);
- the presence of conciliation services;
- the presence of security/family debt services (where does residents’ income come from);
- the degree to which gender issues and equal opportunities are addressed;
- the quality of statistical data on production;
- investments in R & D
- the degree of competitiveness of the local production system.

The second dimension refers to the “environment”, understood in terms of sustainable management of the environment and of land-value. In environmental terms, the effects to be surveyed could be the following:

- the economic exploitation of the environment;
- land use;
- developing the potential attractiveness of the environment;
- environmental effects of policies, even non-dedicated ones, which have crossover impacts;
- the effects of depopulation of rural areas;
- enhancement of the landscape.

The third dimension concerns the development of human capital. With regard to this area, the effects to be surveyed could be the following:

- territorial vocation in terms of skills;
- the level of education;
- the degree of integration of education (training) with respect to civil society and the production system;
- strengthening of the culture;
- the presence of Local Action Groups;
- the presence of conciliation services;
- the presence of social inclusion services (what they do and how many);
- the demographic balance (strengths, migration, etc.).

Under the “quality of life”, the effects to be surveyed could be the following (*in general responding to the question “what do people require when moving to a rural area?”*).

- accessibility of the area/distance from services;
- cultural heritage;

-
- improvement in the rate of depopulation of the area;
 - the presence and level of recreational facilities;
 - the presence and level of social services;
 - the degree of marginality of the area (including economic);
 - the presence and extent of information services;
 - free-time services.

The fifth dimension is “governance”, i.e. the overall effects on institutions, organisation and local relationships that can be observed as a result of a process of development. With regard to governance, the issues on which to evaluate development in rural areas could be the following:

- development of synergies among different policy instruments;
- a comparison between implementation of policies and programs among areas (even from different countries);
- the degree of decentralization of functions (how it has worked, in what areas);
- the overlap between institutions in a rural area, and among local development functions (“crowded governance”);
- actions of institutional cooperation and among bodies in rural areas;
- improving the organisational capacity of governance institutions;
- improving the organisational capacity of the area (networks, partnerships);
- improving planning capacity in marginal areas;
- the degree of representation of local governance bodies;
- the effectiveness and efficiency of negotiated planning (negotiation as opposed to competition-based);
- reduction of transaction costs among institutions, local authorities and civil society
- capacity of the area to be opened to international cooperation.



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