Synthesis of Rural Development Programmes (RDP) ex-post evaluations of period 2007-2013

Evaluation Executive Summary EN

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report provides a synthesis and an analysis of the ex-post evaluations of the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) for the period 2007-2013 submitted by the Managing Authorities of the Member States. The analysis focusses on the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance and EU added value of the 2007-2013 RDPs.

The analysis and evaluation conclusions have been drawn based on the following elements of the report:

1. The synthesis of the replies to the common set of evaluation questions in the ex-post reports of the Member States. Fourteen questions were programme-related. The remaining questions concerned the individual measures of Axis I, Axis II, Axis III and Axis IV (LEADER).
2. The globalised (EU level) answers to the full set of common evaluation questions, based on the information synthesised in the previous step (step 1).
3. The answers to the evaluative questions, related to effectiveness, causal analysis, efficiency, coherence, relevance and EU added value answered based on the analysis conducted in previous steps (steps 1 and 2).

2. METHODOLOGY APPLIED

Step 1: Carrying out the synthesis

Verification of the inputs and reporting on them
Member States provided data from the ex-post evaluation reports and the RDP annual implementation reports. This data has been verified and screened to ensure completeness, based on the level of information (e.g. length, structure or language), and subsequently logged into a database. This process has been applied to all forms of inputs, to establish a baseline on the available data and its limitations before proceeding with the evaluation.

Synthesising of information based on reviewed inputs
Steps undertaken for the synthesis included:

1. Preparation of a reporting template: Country experts were mobilised to extract the key information provided in the 91 ex-post evaluation reports. In order to ensure consistent and in-depth reporting of the required information, a reporting system was developed, along with a corresponding guideline. This allowed experts to provide factual information as contained in the ex-post evaluation reports;
2. Validation of the information: All the answers provided by the country experts in the template have been checked for completeness and clarity and were further analysed;
3. Compilation of information on the contribution of the RDP to its overall objectives (i.e. competitiveness, environmental situation, quality of life and diversification).

Step 2: Develop a methodology for answering the programme-, measure- and LEADER-related questions
The developed methodology relies on the inputs from the ex-post evaluation reports and annual implementation reports. The database of answers was the starting point and main source of both quantitative and qualitative information. The three following judgment criteria were developed for the conclusions of the programme-, measure- and LEADER-related questions:

- Extent of the contribution of the RDPs to the specific objective: The extent is assessed based on the percentage of reports that provided a positive conclusion over those that provided a conclusion on the contribution;

- Plausibility: The plausibility is assessed based on the share of ex-post evaluation reports which provided a clear answer to that specific question;
- Certainty of the quantitative assessment (for programme-related questions only): Determines the completeness of the quantitative data provided on the impact, output and result indicators.

Step 3: Develop a methodology for answering the synthesis questions
The synthesis questions address the overarching aspects of effectiveness, causality, efficiency, coherence, relevance and added value of the RDPs. The methodology builds on the programme-, measure- and LEADER-related questions and on other inputs provided in the annual implementation reports. A separate methodology has been developed for each synthesis question in order to provide appropriate answer categories for each one.

3. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Compiling and synthesising the information from the ex-post evaluation reports posed a number of limitations:

- Quality of the evaluation reports was not uniform. Some of the reports provided substantial analyses with well-argued examples, while other reports lacked clear reasoning and presented conclusions without substantiation;
- Collecting input from various persons resulted in varying levels of detail and quality of answers provided. The study team checked the answers provided by the experts to minimise inaccuracies and inconsistencies. However, in some cases these could not be fully avoided;
- The synthesis concerned ex-post evaluation reports produced both at level of regions and Member States. Therefore, when aggregating values, the distinctions between regions of different sizes or the distinction between regions and Member States could not be observed. In addition, each region or Member State had different priorities and targets and diverse levels of economic development;
- Providing quantification whenever possible was important throughout the synthesis: in the programme- and measure-related questions, as well as in the synthesis questions. Output, result and impact indicators were used to validate and test the findings of the qualitative analysis. However, data values were often incomplete, not plausible or lacking; which limited the process of validating and testing.
- To address the lack and inaccuracy of data in the ex-post evaluation reports, data from the annual implementation reports was used. However, the latter also contained some inaccuracies;
- There were also inconsistencies between annual implementation reports and the ex-post evaluation reports, with reference to the indicator values used;
- Targets were often adjusted during the programme implementation that made the use of target indicators unreliable for benchmarking.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions based on the programme-related questions
There was a shortcoming of quantitative and qualitative data for most of the programme-related questions, as it was sometimes missing or inaccurate. It is important to consider these aspects when reading the following conclusions. The plausibility criterion was met in 10 out of 14 programme-related questions and based on the analysis; we can categorize the 10 programme-related questions according to the extent of RDP contribution that they have recorded. In particular, we can observe that:

1. The only domain, in which the extent of RDP contribution was considered high, was water quality (SQ8). Contribution was assessed as medium with regards to growth of the rural economy (SQ1), employment creation (SQ2), promotion competitiveness (SQ5), introduction of innovative approaches (SQ10),

protection and enhancement of natural resources and landscape (SQ3). The synthesis also suggests that the technical assistance contributed to achieving the RDP objectives to a medium extent (SQ13). Regarding the supply of renewable energy (SQ4), the majority of reports found that the RDP had a positive contribution, but the extent of such contribution could not be clearly determined for 42 % of the reports;

2. Less positive results were recorded with respect to climate change mitigation and adaptation (SQ7), and the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy (SQ9);
3. Overall, we can observe that the areas in which the RDP produced more positive effects are those which have been part of the CAP and for which relevant indicator recordings have been developed and applied for a longer time. This is the case for interventions to boost competitiveness and innovation, but also for water quality and other environmental provisions such as the protection and enhancement of the natural resources. Interventions to improve quality of life and diversification are more recent and probably meaningful changes will only be observable in the longer term. In addition, we can observe that the questions with a limited RDP contribution also referred to changes that are more difficult to measure. This is the case for quality of life, local governance and climate mitigation and adaptation.
4. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, even if in some cases the impact of RDP was considered limited, it often played an important mitigation role. This is the case in the growth of the rural economy, for which RPD mitigated the effects of the economic recession, as well as for employment, as it helped avoiding the loss of further jobs. The same is true for biodiversity, where RDP helped avoiding further deterioration of natural resources and the landscape.

Conclusions based on the measures-related questions

Given the judgment criteria developed to answer measure-related questions, there are two types of criteria that could be used to compare the measures and evaluate the overall performance of an Axis:

1. The extent of their intended contribution to the set objective(s);
2. The plausibility of the assessment with which we can draw strong conclusions on this contribution.

Axis I – Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector

The measures that contributed to competitiveness to a great extent in the regions or Member States where they were implemented, are:

112 Setting up of young farmers;
113 Early retirement of farmers and farm workers;
121 Modernisation of agricultural holdings;
123 Adding value to agricultural and forestry products;
125 Infrastructure related to the development and adaptation of agriculture and forestry.

The positive contributions in all these measures were attributed to the introduction of new or better products, new technologies, increases in production and labour efficiency and reduced costs of production (through for examples, better infrastructure for transport or better water management systems). The measures focused on modernisation and innovative procedures were both the easiest to measure (with higher plausibility ratings) as well as those that most directly affected competitiveness (with contributions of a greater extent).

A few measures ranked high in plausibility but did not have a high extent of contribution to competitiveness. This refers particularly to M115 and M126, on setting up of advisory services and restoring production potential damaged by natural disasters. These measures showed a lower contribution to competitiveness, based on a high level of plausibility. Overall, there was a positive correlation between the extent of the contribution and the level of expenditure.

The measures for which a contribution to competitiveness was not measured to a plausible extent were focused primarily on topics such as adaptation to stricter legislation, support for compliance with standards and promotion of compliance to statutory requirements. It is important to keep in mind that the judgment criteria does not point towards the inefficiencies of these measures, but rather towards the difficulties in capturing their importance or full effect. Synergies between measures were also difficult to capture in the evaluations and thus in the synthesis. The indirect effects most frequently reported under Axis I were improvements to the environment, improvements in farmer skills and increased in quality of life.

Axis II – Improving the environment and the countryside
The measures that greatly contributed to the environmental situation where they were implemented are:

M211 Payments to farmers in areas with handicaps, mountain areas;
M214 Agri-environment payments;
M226 Restoring forestry potential and introducing prevention actions;
M227 Non-productive investments.

These measures were particularly effective in improving the environmental situation where agricultural and forestry activities were considering natural conservation. This was particularly the case in the promotion of biodiversity and protection against soil erosion. Several of these measures highlighted the complementarity between the multi-faceted goals. Results were found for both the increase in agricultural area under these initiatives as well as the effectiveness in improving and maintain high value natural agricultural areas.

More specifically, M226, focussing on forestry, was also found to have a strong contribution to environmental protection. This happened through the prevention of fires, improved water quality and flood mediation. As in the agricultural channels, soil erosion prevention was also significantly mentioned. Likewise, reports on M227 found that forest health improvement and increased forest stability towards hazard was one of the most important contributions.

No notable contribution to improving the environmental situation was assessed for some measures. Improving the environmental situation was in part not the main aspect of some of these measures (e.g. animal welfare). Furthermore, the environmental effects were attributed to underlying regulatory law and its instruments (e.g. regulations and restrictions of EU Directives 92/43/EEC, 2009/147/EC, 2000/60/EC)[1] and not to the measures. In these cases, payments under the respective measures were often regarded as compensation payments for these mandatory management restrictions. In addition, due to the very low implementation of some measures, there was often not enough data and information available to ensure a reasonable and meaningful evaluation of their impact on the environment.

The indirect effects most frequently reported under Axis II were higher employment, more diversification, increased quality of life and improved land management. Since these

[1] Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora; Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds; Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy.

indirect effects refer directly to the objectives of the other axes, it makes a good case for highlighting the complementarity in the programme measures across the different axes.

Axis III – The quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy
The measures that contributed to economic diversification and quality of life to a great extent are:
M321 Basic services for the economy and rural population;
M322 Village renewal and development;
M323 Conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage.

The measures with the greatest extent of contribution to diversification and quality of life did so through the provision of public services in the form of day-care, schools, community facilities as well as health, but also in technical infrastructure, such as telecommunications. Secondly, social dimensions such as participating in local development and creating a local identity were also mentioned as important channels in these three measures, albeit to a lesser extent. M323 in particular was effective through the channels of tourism, cultural heritage and natural rural heritage.

M313 (Encouragement of tourism activities) is one of the two measures with the highest assessment plausibility of all Axis III measures. M313 was assessed as contributing to diversification to a limited extent, e.g. through the development and planning of new tourist offers.

A few measures ranked high in plausibility but did not have a high extent of contribution to competitiveness. This refers particularly to M311 and M313, which aimed at the diversification into non-agricultural activities and the encouragement of tourism activities, respectively. These measures can be viewed as plausibly having a lower contribution to competitiveness. Overall, there was a very strong positive correlation between the extent of the measures' contribution to competitiveness and the expenditure on the measures.

The measures for which a contribution to diversification and quality of life were not measured to a great and plausible extent were measures focused on training and information and supporting skill acquisition. The ex-post evaluation reports explained that measures themselves did improve professional skills but that the increase in skills was seen as having an indirect contribution to diversification that materialises in the longer term.

The indirect effects most frequently reported under Axis III were improved environmental conditions, higher competitiveness of the regions, increased employment and better technical infrastructure. Again, as the two most-mentioned additional effects to the measures under Axis III related directly to the objectives of Axis I and Axis II, we can positively conclude on the complementarity of the axes.

Difficulties to measure the extent of contribution
While the previous conclusions are built on the measures for which we can say with certainty that there was a positive contribution to the intended objective, this does not mean that those with a lower extent of contribution or lower plausibility were ineffective initiatives that did not contribute. To the contrary, as can be seen in the individual measures' contributions, in most cases they reflect an ex-post evaluation report's lack of a conclusion on contribution rather than a report's assessment of no or a low contribution. Furthermore, the extent of contribution is correlated to the ease of measuring this contribution. In addition, there is a strong relation between measurability and the time a measure has been implemented, as the process has already been streamlined and the measuring techniques and approaches have been defined more clearly.

Conclusions based on LEADER-related questions
With the caveat of some limitations due to an insufficient data basis, the following conclusions were drawn based on the qualitative information available:

Measure 41[2] has contributed to enhancing the employment situation to a limited extent, and to diversification to a medium extent (SQ42). The LAGs have contributed to achieving the objectives of the local strategy and the RDP to a medium extent (SQ43). Likewise, the implementation of the LEADER approach was achieved to a medium extent (SQ44). The same assessment applies to the contribution of the LEADER approach to improving local governance (SQ45).

As a general issue, the quantifiable indicators were not able to capture the specific characteristics and objectives of the LEADER approach, e.g. improving local governance. Instead, a qualitative approach is necessary to capture such effects. Moreover, in order to make findings comparable, a clear definition of central LEADER aspects such as participation or local governance, together with criteria that allow for a qualitative description of such aspects should be provided

Among the limitations regarding the data basis, at times it was not clear whether measures from other RDP axes (especially Axis III) that were programmed under LEADER were reported under Axis IV (or e.g. under Axis III) in the evaluation reports. This caused inconsistency as some evaluators answered the "old" evaluation questions, while others referred to the "new" ones.

Conclusions based on the synthesis questions
The synthesis questions are addressing the overarching aspects of effectiveness, causality, efficiency, coherence, relevance and added value of the RDPs.

Effectiveness: The extent of achievement of the four objectives differs. Objective 1) Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector was achieved to a moderate extent. Objective 2) Improving the environment and the countryside was assessed by looking at achievements in climate change mitigation and water management (achieved to a high extent) and at the protection of natural resources and landscape (achieved to a moderate extent). Objective 3) Improving quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy, has been achieved to a more limited extent although the latter proves to be more difficult to measure and may produce less direct and measurable effects in the short term. Finally, for objective 4) Building local capacity for employment and diversification, it was found that LAGs contributed to a limited extent to achieving the objectives of the local strategy and the RDPs, while the RDPs have contributed to a medium extent to building local capacities for employment and diversification through LEADER.

Causality: Given the data available, it is hard to provide meaningful conclusions on the cause-effect relationship or the extent to which a change in the programme area is due to the intervention. However, it can be observed that the RDPs have been particularly successful in encouraging investments in skills building and training and in promoting competitiveness. However, this has not resulted in the creation of more jobs or innovation. The synthesis also found that the RDPs have been successful in preserving the environment, and produced positive effects in all the domains considered under the areas for successful land management.

Efficiency: There is no satisfying approach to assess the proportionality of costs to the benefits achieved based on the data available. Overall, 62 % of reports provide some sort of judgment regarding the efficiency of resources allocated to the RDPs. Taking into consideration the limitations of the data, the calculation of costs per result achieved is a mere approximation to get a general overview of ranges and averages within Member States and across indicators. However, reports provided some general findings on the main

[2] In several RDPs, LEADER measures were jointly programmed. This concerned especially Measures 411, 412, and 413, which were often also jointly evaluated. As a result, in this report their contribution to employment and diversification is reported on at an aggregated level only (M41).

factors limiting efficiency. These refer to inappropriate regulatory framework as well as to the way programmes and measures are designed. Some reports also raised shortcomings concerning the steering structure of the RDP, including the lack of staff and its insufficient availability, and the low expenditure rates on some of the measures. Often the causes and effects of these issues are interrelated.

Coherence: The outcomes of the RDPs are overall consistent with the four Rural Development objectives/priorities (improving competitiveness, environment, quality of life and building local capacity for employment and diversification) to a limited to moderate extent.
The consistency of RDP projects with other funding from the first pillar of the CAP and other EU interventions has been evaluated in the ex-ante assessments. Due to the very limited information available, a conclusive answer to this question could not be provided.

Relevance: Overall, RDPs have contributed to addressing the social, economic and environmental needs in the programme area to a moderate extent, with some differences depending on the specific set of needs. It should be considered that this judgment is based on a set of EU-wide needs that are neither defined in sufficient detail to allow clearly relating all of them to individual measures, nor ranked according to priorities.

More specifically, when it comes to the social needs, RDPs were moderately relevant (in terms of contribution) within the area of basic services and physical infrastructures and had little relevance for demographic change. Regarding economic needs, RDPs were moderately relevant in the area of value chains, added value and integration between sectors. For the environmental needs, RDPs were moderately relevant for all three dimensions: natural resources / nature protection, sustainable practices and biodiversity, ecological structures, habitats.

EU added value: The quality of reflection upon the question of EU added value is not sufficient in the ex-post evaluation reports nor is the information derived from the relevant Synthesis Questions. Based on the overall judgments on the three criteria (effectiveness in achieving objectives, coherence with EU priorities and complementarity with other instruments, and subsidiarity), it has to be concluded that EAFRD funding via the RDPs ensured EU added value to a medium and variable extent. The judgment varies per criteria.

Conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation process

Indicators and targets

The ex-post evaluations on the 2007-2013 funding period were the first ones completed using the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), and adjustments to the framework were made during the programming period. Thus, we understand the limitations in the calculation and use of indicators. There are several aspects however, that seem to need continuous attention:
The Managing Authorities supplied the Evaluators with output, result and impact indicator values. There was no or very limited information presented in the ex-post evaluation reports on how these have been calculated or what the information basis for the calculation was. The basis and approaches for the calculations vary substantially, so it is not suitable to aggregate the values. Adding to lack of clarity, in some cases, indicator values were reported under an indicator category different from the one foreseen by the CMEF. Data Entries were difficult to distinguish between the data that was not provided and the empty cells as both were marked as “0”.

Recommendation: A good balance needs to be found between the use of programme-specific indicators, and indicators that are able to be aggregated and to inform EU-level policy makers. The provision of metadata should be enforced through compliance with scientific standards. As an example of good practice found in some ex-post evaluation reports, we recommend making the provision of overview tables containing all output and result indicators compulsory for all measures per axis. Steps should be taken to ensure the setting of realistic targets. Changes in the targets during the course of the programming period need to be made explicit, along with a record of the timing and reason of these changes.

Recommendation: A qualitative approach is necessary to capture the LEADER effects. In order to make findings comparable, a clear definition for central LEADER aspects such as participation or local governance should be provided, together with criteria that allow for a qualitative description of such aspects. These should be translated into result indicators to enable quantification of effects of LEADER.

Timing of evaluation
As ex-post evaluation reports had to be completed 2 years after the end of the funding period, evaluators could often not make use of the latest values of output and result indicators. These reports were not made available with sufficient time to be included in the evaluation. In addition, the question still arises of whether the impact indicators would already show effects after such a short period of completion.

Recommendation: Evaluation requirements and design should take into account the variable time lag between an intervention expressed in achieved output and results, and the attributable impacts. Ex-post evaluations should focus on the achieved outputs and results, while specific thematic evaluations are necessary to identify the medium and long-term impacts of the programmes.

Definition of terms or concepts
For some terms or concepts covered in the evaluation questions there was no clear definition provided. "Quality of life", "restructuring the dairy sector", "beneficiary" and "other effects" are examples of words, phrases that had different meanings in different contexts in the ex-post evaluations.

Recommendation: Member States should, at an early stage, define criteria that enable them to measure the contribution to the aspects that will be evaluated. This will make it easier to provide comparisons with similar or identical criteria.

Reporting structures
We found that reporting structures varied substantially between the reports. A major concern was the change in the set of evaluation questions used during the funding period. Sometimes there were no clear and concise answers to questions provided which resulted in many reports appearing far too long, with unnecessary information in the answers.

Recommendation: A maximum page number (e.g. 200p) and a more descriptive structure of what was required should be implemented so when answering evaluation questions, there should be a requirement to provide a clear answer, or add further information in a separate box.

Evaluation design
The developed and answered evaluation questions did not always support the assessment of the Better Regulation requirements, i.e. the need to assess the Efficiency, Effectiveness, Coherence, Relevance and EU Added Value in all evaluations. Besides that, the reports' structures are foremost developed to cater to the information requirements of the European Commission. In Member States/regions with a more integrated/national view on RDP implementation (e.g. in Denmark) and where this is also used in the structure of the evaluation report, it is difficult to display information in the common EU format.

Recommendation: The assessment of the Better Regulation requirements should be enabled through the design of relevant evaluation questions and approaches. In the evaluation requirements there should be sufficient room left for evaluation priorities and structure to cater to the needs of the Member States/regions. It is instead suggested to limit predefined approaches and structures for those evaluation questions and information needs that are relevant for EU-level policy information. For these questions, however, the approach on how to judge these questions should be unified.

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