

Synthesis Report: Review of the assessment of impacts of Rural Development Programmes

Assessing the impact of rural development policies (incl. Leader)

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Abbreviations

AEIDL	European Association for Information on Local Development
CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
DG Agri	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
DiD	Difference in Difference
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (Reg. No 1698/2005)
EENRD	European Evaluation Network for Rural Development
ESP	Economic and Social Partners
Leader	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale
MA	Managing Authority
MoA	Ministry of Agriculture
nMS	New Member States (Central and East European Countries, CEEC10, plus Cyprus and Malta) (EU12)
oMS	Old Member States (EU15)
PA	Paying Agency
RDP	Rural Development Programme
RuDI	FP 7 research project: Assessing the impacts of Rural Development policies (incl. Leader)
SAPARD	Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development
WP	Work package within the RuDI project

1 Introduction

With the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) based on Council Regulation (EC) 1698/2005, the European Commission and Agricultural Council are supporting a more strategic and objective-led approach to Rural Development Policy for the period 2007-13. Rural development has become an autonomous policy package. 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.

The **RuDI** project aims to improve the understanding of the processes and structures underlying the formulation, implementation and impacts of European rural development policies. It examines priority setting, design, targeting and delivery as well as evaluation processes of the 2007-13 programming period. The project addresses the question of how best to assess the impact of rural development policies at all relevant levels and across the diversity of rural Europe.

1.1 Work package 6 in the RuDI context

In the RuDI project, work packages 2 to 5 carefully examine processes, factors and actors in policy design and implementation. The resulting expenditure patterns are identified and compared with policy priorities as they are expressed in national Rural Development Programmes. Work package 6 provides knowledge on the remaining part of the policy cycle, evaluation. It is concerned with critically reviewing the assessment of impacts as it is foreseen in the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) (CEC 2006).

Information was gathered both at EU as well as Member State and regional level by desk top research and qualitative interviews (Figure 1).

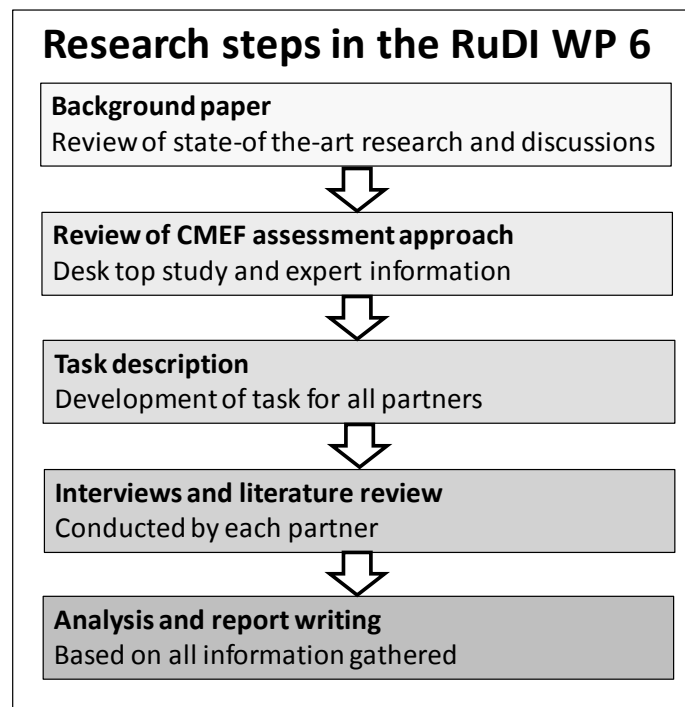


Figure 1: Steps which have been taken in the process of WP 6 research

The political economy of the assessment, in terms of timing, stakeholder involvement etc. was surveyed. Furthermore, the assessment of impacts against rural development objectives was analysed, both in terms of operationalised objectives which are underlying the formulation of Rural Development Programmes, and wider Rural Development Policy objectives which are not yet directly reflected in the EAFRD. Possible contradictions inherent in the framework were identified and gaps and weaknesses (e.g. the low function of the framework in terms of institutional learning) were detected. The interplay of the impact indicators which were suggested in the frame of the CMEF (CEC 2006) as well as the additional indicators which were suggested by the Member States were analysed regarding their ability and strength to indicate impacts of the Rural Development Programmes. First ideas on an assessment of impacts going beyond the CMEF were collected within interviews with evaluators, research and ministry representatives in the Member States and gave an idea for further research within the case studies (WP 7 and 8).

1.2 Terminology

There is a certain inconsistency in terminology used related to the assessment of impacts. Therefore some background on terminology should be provided here. The definition of terms related to the different hierarchical levels of policy effects as well as the terms related to evaluation of impacts will be given in this section.

The EVALSED glossary defines evaluation as the ‘judgement on the value of a (usually) public intervention [...]. The judgement usually concerns the needs which have to be met by the intervention, and the effects produced by it’ (EVALSED 2009). Evaluation examines efficiency and effectiveness of the programme, and tries to identify the ways in which policies have brought about impacts. On this basis plausible recommendations for policy improvements are derived.

While OECD defines impact as long term effects produced by an intervention, the EC financial regulation uses the term generally to describe effects of an intervention on society. The CMEF terminology is in line with OECD definitions as regards the definition of impacts as well as the idea of a three step hierarchy of intervention, ranging from output indicators to impact indicators, but differs on the medium level: while OECD uses ‘outcome’ for this level, the CMEF speaks of ‘results’. OECD, however, refers to the term ‘result’ as a superior one for all outputs, outcomes and impacts, while the EC uses ‘effects’ as an overall term (table 1). The EU CMEF terminology is applied in this paper.

Table 1: Terminology of key concepts of the intervention logic compared

Level	EU (EuropeAid, CMEF)		OECD		EC Financial Regulation	
1	Output	Effect	Output	Results	Output	
2	Result		Outcome		Result	Impact
3	Impact		Impact		Outcome	

Source: EuropeAid Glossary

The assessment of impacts is a core activity of evaluation. According to the CMEF guidance document an assessment of impacts is ‘the extent to which a programme has achieved its strategy objectives’ (CEC 2006, p.7). The glossary of the CMEF (guidance note N) defines ‘impacts’ as ‘effects of an intervention lasting in medium or long term. Some impacts appear indirectly, (e.g. turnover generated for the suppliers of assisted firms). Others can be observed at the macro-economic or macro-social level (e.g. improvements in an assisted area’s image) and are referred to as global impacts. Impacts may be positive or negative, expected or

unexpected'. As a synonym for 'assessment of impacts' also the term 'impact evaluation' is used in this report. Besides the above described assessment of impacts, there is also the term 'Impact Assessment'. While in development evaluation it is the generic term used for ex-post impact evaluation, in EU terminology it is used in relation to ex-ante policy assessment. In this sense impact Assessment is a prior analysis and judgement of whether a proposed programme is likely to succeed in meeting its objectives and targets. In 2005 Impact Assessment Guidelines for all DGs were published, which describe the procedure and analytical steps for ex-ante Impact Assessment (CEC 2005). Impact Assessment will not be looked at in the frame of the RuDI project, which is instead concerned with the assessment of impacts in rural development.

1.3 Structure of the report

While chapter 1 has introduced WP 6 to the reader chapter 2 comprises the core piece of the report showing the results of analysing the current assessment of impacts. First, relevant sections of the RDPs as well as ex-ante evaluations were analysed (section 2.1). To fill the identified gaps in knowledge, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 evaluation experts from different Members States (cf. section 2.1.3 for a detailed description of selection of experts). Under consideration of official documents as well as evaluation literature, the interviews were analysed regarding the political economy of the assessment of impacts (section 2.2). In addition they served as a basis for a critical review of current impact evaluation in the frame of the CMEF (section. 2.3). The results are concluded in chapter 3.

2 Assessment of impacts

Since the year 2000 all measures of the second pillar have to be evaluated. With the creation of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD, regulation (EC) 1698/2005) rural development became an autonomous policy package. As a result, rural development strategies had to be formulated on the European as well as on the Member State and regional level (Laschewski & Schmidt 2008). Evaluating Rural Development Programmes became a legal requirement. The regulation (EC) 1698/2005 obliges all of the Member States (MS) 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. With the introduction of ongoing evaluation a new system has been established which shall allow for continuous feedback through annual reporting and may be able to support a foresighted steering of the programme. Article 84 (2) of Council Regulation 1698/2005 stipulates that

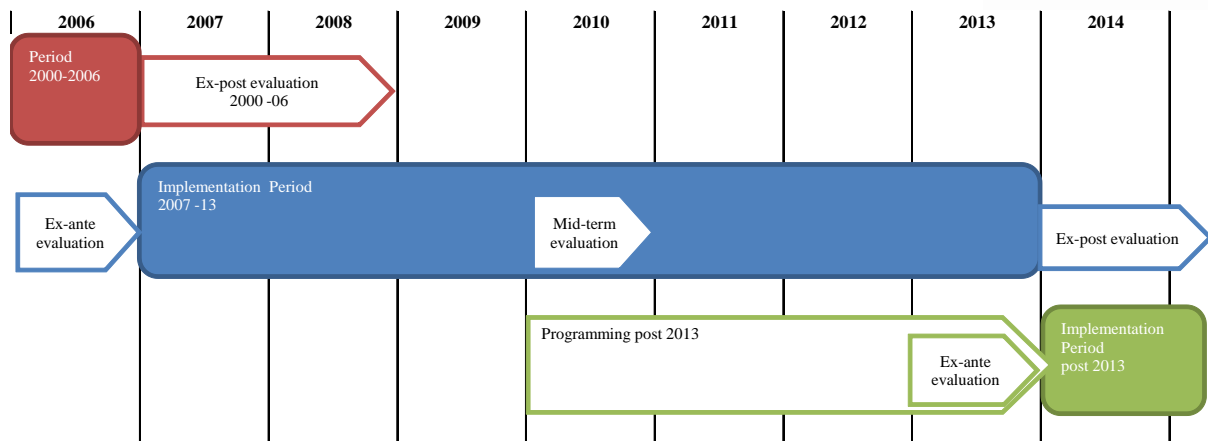
‘Evaluations shall aim to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of Rural Development Programmes. They shall assess the impact of the programmes as regards the strategic guidelines of the Community provided for in Art. 9 and the rural development problems specific to the Member States and regions concerned, taking into account sustainable development requirements and environmental impact, meeting the requirements of relevant Community legislation.’

Article 86 of Council Regulation 1698/2005 specifies the management and the functions of evaluation. In 2010, ongoing evaluation is supposed to take the form of a separate mid-term evaluation report. The mid-term 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:

‘The mid-term and ex post evaluations shall examine the degree of utilisation of resources, the effectiveness and efficiency of the programming of the EAFRD, its socioeconomic impact and its impact on the Community priorities. They shall cover the goals of the programme and aim to draw lessons concerning Rural Development Policy. They shall identify the factors which contributed to the success or failure of the programmes’ implementation, including as regards sustainability, and identify best practice.’

Ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluations are to be carried out by independent evaluators (Art. 84/4 of Council Reg. 1698/2005). As guidance document the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) has been published (CEC 2006). It describes monitoring and evaluation requirements in a systematic manner and adapted to a number of new requirements in the RD regulation (CEC 2006:5).

Evaluation at programme level is carried out before a programme is implemented (ex ante), in the middle of the program (mid-term) and after the program 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.



Source: own illustration after CMEF

Figure 2: Timing of RD policy cycle phases and evaluation in the 2007-13 funding period

2.1 Assessment of impacts in the Member States

This chapter summarizes current knowledge on the assessment of impacts in the MS, as available in official documents of the current funding period¹. Each Rural Development Programme contains a section on monitoring and evaluation. As a first step towards reviewing the assessment of impacts in different MS, fifteen of these sections were compared with one another. Additionally, the results of the ex-ante evaluations were taken into account in order to learn more about the assessment of impacts in the current funding period. The resulting gaps in knowledge on impact evaluation will be depicted and serve as the starting point for further analysing the assessment of impacts (cf. chapters 2.2 and 2.3).

2.1.1 Monitoring and evaluation in the Rural Development Programmes

In the main texts of the RDPs most of the sections on monitoring and evaluation are kept rather short and have similarities in their content. All MS have already or intend to set up a system of ongoing evaluation in accordance with Art. 86. The ongoing evaluation will serve as a basis for mid-term and ex-post evaluation. Furthermore most of the MS point out, that monitoring data will be helpful to carry out evaluations. In some RDPs it is stressed that computerized systems will be used in order to improve data collection and systematization and provide evaluators with a solid data base (e.g. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Cyprus, Malta). However, most of the passages do not further specify which kind of data they intend to collect and utilize for the assessment of impacts. The English RDP contains the most elaborated passage on data:

‘Impact indicators will be determined at the evaluation stage, using input, output and result information but also other tools and wider sources of data to build up a picture of the net impact of the programme on its wider strategic objectives. The collection of quantitative monitoring data against the indicators is an important input into evaluating the effectiveness of a measure. However, they should not be used in isolation: the quantitative data need to be interpreted flexibly, alongside qualitative assessments, taking account of the specific circumstances of the Programme.’

The RDP of Greece contains a different view on data as the Greek RuDI team analysis shows:

¹ Documents available before October 2009 were included.

‘The data that are required for the calculation of indicators during the implementation of the program are collected at project and measure level; they are added at axis level and finally at program level. The Managing Authority transmits to the Monitoring Committee data from the monitoring system, which is mainly related to centralised economic data and information with regard to the output and result indicators. The Integrated Information System will be used for the collection of reliable financial and statistical data about all projects that are financed by the program. The evaluation examines the results and the impacts of the program - valuing the effectiveness, the efficiency and the relevance of measures - and it contributes in the design and the reorientation of policies. For this purpose, the evaluation depends on data and information that are collected in the monitoring process, which implies that monitoring and evaluation activities are always interrelated.’

Though not explicitly stated, the other MS will approach data collection similarly to the two above described approaches. However, the two statements reveal the different view on use and sufficiency of indicators. While the Greek RDP shows a strong reliance on quantitative data, the English RDP stresses the importance of gathering additional qualitative data. The need for further, often qualitative surveys, which go beyond a mere indicator approach is also stressed in the RDPs of Austria, Malta, Czech Republic, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Denmark and Sweden. The RDPs of Wales, Hungary, Flanders, Wallonia, Luxembourg and Cyprus do not contain any expression of the need to undertake further surveys (e.g. qualitative assessments).

It is to question, however, if the absence of a statement in the RDP means that MS do not pay attention to or do not regard a certain aspect as important. The sections rather reveal that most of the MS are in the early stages of developing an evaluation system. Though the old MS (like e.g. Austria and Wales) have the advantage of being able to draw on experiences and knowledge gained within the former funding period, all of the MS are confronted with the challenge to meet the requirements of the CMEF and integrate these into their own approaches to the assessment of impacts. The RDPs therefore contain only limited or no information on chosen evaluation approaches in the MS. Neither do the passages on monitoring and evaluation specify certain indicators or their quantification.

2.1.2 Monitoring and evaluation in the ex-ante evaluations

As the information on monitoring and evaluation is rather limited in the respective RDP section, it is promising to examine the ex-ante evaluations which have been carried out in the MS in order to learn more about the assessment of impacts in the current funding period. Commissioned by DG Agri the ex-ante evaluations of all of the 96 RDPs have been analysed and synthesized into a report by Metis (Vienna) in association with the European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL, Brussels). However, due to the early point in time when ex-ante evaluations are carried out, the ex-ante evaluators describe and assess both the established monitoring and evaluation systems and the proposed systems for collecting, storing and processing monitoring data to a limited extent only.

According to the ex-ante evaluations most of the MS were able to improve the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of programmes through lessons learned from the former funding period. However, there is little information on the ways through which these lessons have been incorporated into the current programmes (or on which lessons have not been taken into account) (Metis & AEIDL 2008:124).

Generally, the systems have been developed to an extent necessary to reflect the requirements of the EU framework for monitoring and evaluation of Rural Development Programmes. Based on the (limited) available information the authors of the synthesis report state:

‘Examples were found of more innovative approaches where systems are developed in a way to exploit synergies with already existing regional information systems, or to cover efficiently monitoring requirements of different funds and/or of different intervention levels (national, regional etc.). Monitoring indicators were generally established following the requirements of the Handbook to the CMEF, although not all programmes have exhaustively quantified them. Their inclusion in structured tables annexed to the programmes and/or ex ante evaluation reports would make their analysis and aggregation easier. Problems have been experienced in the establishment of programme specific indicators, in particular as regards axis 2.’

The common indicators were not always considered as appropriate by evaluators and some of them indicated that the logical chains are often tenuous. In addition, common indicators do not always appear to be suitable for measuring the contribution to both programme objectives and EU priorities for Rural Development. At the same time, particularly Managing Authorities emphasised the enormous commitment of personnel and administrative resources needed when implementing the CMEF requirements, which they felt to be a burden.

In terms of the assessment of impacts the EU common baseline and impact indicators have been applied in the programmes to a varying level of completeness and homogeneity. The authors of the synthesis report point out that generally, problems have been experienced in quantifying target levels for the seven impact indicators. It turned out to be of particular difficulty to aggregate the effects of the measures in a bottom up way in order to determine impacts at programme level. Furthermore, it was obviously difficult to detect trade-off effects resulting from the interaction of different measures. As a result, many programmes have omitted to quantify some indicators (or subcategories) or have quantified indicators in a way that differs from EU common measurement. In a number of cases qualitative data has been provided. The authors of the synthesis report conclude:

‘[...] the different methodologies followed for the quantification of the indicators (when this has been done) makes their aggregation at European level difficult. In this respect, as part of the development of the Handbook to the CMEF, we suggest to explore possible ways of promoting commonly shared qualitative approaches for the assessment of impacts’ (Metis & AEIDL 2008:IV, 161 ff.).

Metis and AEIDL have interviewed or sent questionnaires to evaluators, Managing Authorities and members of the monitoring committees in the Member States in order to learn more about the preparation and implementation of an ongoing evaluation system which serves as a basis for mid-term and ex-post evaluation. Generally, the respondents regarded ongoing evaluation as a useful instrument to improve the quality of programme evaluation. Furthermore they pointed out, that substantial effort has been made to implement an ongoing evaluation system. Critical points mentioned are lack of information on certain indicators and difficulties of quantifying them as well as the heavy investment of resources. In addition, different stakeholders stress the need for more practical methodological advice.

The authors of the above mentioned synthesis report asked the stakeholders to depict their views on revision of the monitoring and evaluation system, i.e. the CMEF requirements, acknowledging that MS find themselves at the very beginning of the evaluation process. They identified a great demand for a simplification of the requirements in terms of ‘downsizing the

whole system by using less indicators and giving more room to Member States specific needs’ (Metis & AEIDL 2008:205).

2.1.3 Analysis of the assessment of impacts in the frame of the RuDI project

The analysis of relevant sections on monitoring and evaluation in the RDPs as well as the results of the ex-ante synthesis reveal a further need for knowledge on the current assessment of impacts and its strengths and weaknesses. This report aims at filling some of the existing knowledge gaps. It is based on a survey which was carried out in the frame of WP 6 of the RuDI project. As strategy and methodology of the mid-term evaluations have not been finished yet, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 evaluation experts from different Member States. RuDI project team members were asked to propose evaluation experts from their country/countries of expertise and name their field of expertise in Rural Development. Ensuring a balance between the different RD fields and the four EAFRD axes, the work package leaders selected 26 evaluation experts out of the long list.

Most of the experts have long years of expertise in Rural Development work. The interviewees can be separated into two groups regarding their involvement in evaluation: The first and larger group (group I), comprising 23 interviewees, has been working on evaluation as researchers both from university institutes and federal/national research institutes, as private consultants or as senior advisers. Most of them have at least worked once as an evaluator within a team or as coordinator of an evaluation team, some of them are responsible for evaluations within the current funding period – either as a whole or focused on evaluation of measures within one axis. The second group (group II) consists of three programme managers or related officials from the ministries of agriculture and is directly involved in evaluation of the current RDPs. Some of the experts are additionally engaged in work for DG Agri, as e.g. in the expert committee on evaluation or have participated in the development of the CMEF framework.

Eighteen experts come from the EU15, termed in the following as ‘old’ Member States (oMS), eight are from new Member States (nMS, also referred to as EU12) which comprise the ten Central and Eastern European Countries as well as Cyprus and Malta. Although these countries participate for the first time in a complete RDP funding period, interviewees from the nMS who belong to the first group of experts stress, that they already have quite some experience in evaluation because most of them have been engaged in evaluation before, e.g. in evaluation of the SAPARD programme. On the other side, some interviewees hint on the fact, that in the new MS they need to familiarise themselves with the (new) evaluation system provided by DG Agri:

‘In CZ, we have no experience with mid-term evaluation (not done till today) and we can only try on ex-post evaluation (straight without any link to / help information from mid-term). There is not enough experience with this policy instrument and we all learn to use it – both on evaluator side and on ministry side’ (expert of group I, nMS).

In the light of the challenge that the introduction of the CMEF placed to all Member States there is an interest to see if there are similar views on the process of assessment of impacts in all Member States and if evaluators and Managing Authorities encounter similar problems or if there are differences between new and old Member States.

As guidance document for the interview process, RuDI partners were provided with a questionnaire, which can be found in the annex. The survey concentrated on

- the political economy of assessment,
- use of the CMEF indicators and connected problems,
- selection of additional indicators,
- assessment against the axes' objectives and wider objectives of the EU.

The following sections will summarise the results of the survey.

2.2 Political economy of the assessment of impacts

The assessment of impacts is carried out within a certain institutional environment under certain structural and financial conditions. Stakeholders of the assessment of impacts act within these circumstances and at the same time construct and shape them. This section describes main stakeholders in the assessment of impacts with their interests. Based on experts' views, the structural and institutional conditions and circumstances for the assessment of impacts are depicted and mutual influences between stakeholders and context are reflected.

2.2.1 Stakeholders and their interests

The assessment of impacts is of concern to a variety of stakeholders as the analysis shows. The most actively involved stakeholders are independent evaluators, who conduct mid-term and ex-post evaluations, as well as in-house teams of the ministries or responsible agencies, who carry out ongoing evaluations and will tend to be institutionally separate from those persons who actually implement the programmes. Within the process of formal assessment of impacts, interviewees ascribe an important role to the administration, especially the higher levels like Managing Authorities and ministries who are steering the evaluation process, while both higher and lower administration levels use information resulting from it, as the Flemish example shows:

‘The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is the contracting authority. They wrote the bid together with the Flemish Land Agency as a core agency in the process. The other agencies are involved through that they have to do parts of the evaluation for the measures they were responsible for. [...] Lower levels of government such as provinces and municipalities contribute with information to the assessment of impacts. They are interested in the result but do not have a say or task in setting it up’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Another large group of stakeholders is subsumed under the heading ‘economic and social partners’ (ESP). They are represented in the monitoring committee and comprise e.g. representatives of the beneficiaries, national NGOs, gender equality commissioners, church representatives. As part of the monitoring committee they are provided with the reports of the ongoing evaluation. The committee is assigned to examine 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. Furthermore, 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:

‘Stakeholders are as well particular applicants of selected measures, but only as information source – they are provided with questionnaires or structured interviews focused on mapping impact of particular measures on their own condition, e.g. impact of investment on farm turnover’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘A bottom-up approach should be followed at the public level. There are social partners participating in this process and I believe that their opinion and presence is more useful in order to make better conclusions. Societal partners can also be economic stakeholders and non-for-profit stakeholders taking into account local partnership. This is also the case at regional level. Their input should be used according to the bottom-up approach from the beginning of planning. However, I don’t know whether this is applicable, though we support that we are following bottom-up approach. In consultations, it is not enough just to state that we follow this approach. It is a difficult process’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘The institutional actors have a central role and influence assessment of impacts, but it would be important that the other institutions or bodies listed above had it as well. In Italy they actually don’t have such a role in the process of impact assessment’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘It is also important to remember the beneficiaries – if the farmers themselves don't feel they are doing something really worthwhile, by getting involved in schemes and seeing the benefits of what they have been doing, then they might lose interest’ (expert of group I, oMS).

While most of the experts agree that non-professionals and/or local stakeholders should become more involved in the process of evaluation and its governance (and not only at the time of the dissemination of results), one expert suggests, that as a first step of more stakeholder involvement, it would be important that stakeholders are attentively identified at the outset. At the same time, the question arises of whether stakeholders are actually willing to get involved in the evaluation process. This issue is discussed controversially by the interviewees. On the one hand evaluators observe that stakeholders are quite active and want to be involved and that evaluators easily get them to participate in meetings and discussions. On the other hand some experts state that non-governmental stakeholders and partners like representatives of beneficiaries of RD support, interest groups of various aspects of RD policy, show no or only little interest in assessment of impacts. They seem to be rather interested in expenditure volume, (financial) participation in the programme and programme implementation (e.g. which measures are eligible, which selection criteria apply).

In order to learn more about the actual interest of stakeholders in the assessment of impacts, experts were asked which specific interests in the assessment of impacts different stakeholders actually have, including their motivation for carrying out or participating in the process of assessment of impacts and how the results of the assessment of impacts are currently used. Most of the interviewees agree that the European Commission is a stakeholder with extensive and continuing interest in the assessment of impacts. 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. As regards the administrative authorities the driving force behind the assessment of impacts seems to be

² This finding is supported by a statement of Leo Maier, Head of the Evaluation Unit at DG Agri, 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.

twofold: The Managing Authority does assessment of impacts to meet legal programme requirements, as well as to be able to answer to domestic policy regulations. Both administrative authorities as well as the Monitoring Committee apparently have a main interest in controlling that money allocated was not misspent. Some experts differentiate in this context between Managing Authority and Paying Agency, stating that the Managing Authority might have an ambition in finding policy impacts, while the Paying Agency was interested primarily (or solely) in the efficiency of indicators concentrating on financial (output) indicators; the main interest of the Paying Agency was efficiency of expenditure and absorption of funds.

Generally, administrative authorities have an interest

‘[...] to do something with the recommendations, to see how measures perform, to see which measures have most effects and to learn from the recommendations for improvement’ (expert of group I, oMS).

This view on use and interest in the results of impact assessment is supported by several statements. However, interviewees have the feeling that results of evaluations are not, or will not be used as much as they could, ideally:

‘The information from the assessment of impacts is not really used. Impact assessment is done just to meet the requirements of the EU, the results of it are not disseminated, whereas it is publicly accessible’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘The decision makers are still not aware of the importance of a good monitoring and evaluation system’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘If the results of the assessment are positive then the politics tries to use these results in an appropriate way’ (expert of group II, oMS).

‘They are not so interested in evaluation results as they could if those are showing the programme in “bad light” as it means they have to change something’ (expert of group I, nMS).

Experts adduce several possible reasons for a potentially low use of evaluation results, e.g. a difficult relationship between evaluators and the Managing Authority or problems of timing. Both of these aspects will be discussed in more detail in a separate section below. Another obstacle to making use out of the assessment of impacts, which lowers the interest in the assessment of impacts is the vast amount of information which is produced in the process of evaluation:

‘We generate more information than we use. Part of the problem is timing, and part of the problem is the fact that it is easy to issue people with instructions to record things, but it is not always so easy to find the time to analyse and make sense of what you have recorded, after the event. So there is a political push to show that we are delivering, when we are spending public money, but I know for a fact that quite a lot of that doesn't get used in any proper evaluation in the longer term’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Additionally, some experts regard the low readability of reports as part of the problem and suggest seeking for a better reporting format.

‘Sometimes, despite the good intentions, the daily workload in the public administrations hinders the actual use of evaluations, which are often written very extensively so that policy makers do not read them. Non technical syntheses are also often not useful. It would be useful to find new common format for reports to increase usability’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Others observe that with the introduction of the EAFRD and the CMEF there was the tendency towards a communication process to further develop methods for monitoring and evaluation. ‘They even set up the helpdesk in order to delve deeper into some topics’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Beside these aspects, experts hint on a lack of culture of evaluation³ 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 and IA have been introduced in our country’ (expert of group I, oMS).

This is affirmed by 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 taking place both in Eastern and Western European countries: Those who are involved in delivering programmes and overseeing their delivery discuss among themselves the observed impacts as well as potential improvements or adjustments of programmes and have therewith established parallel, alternative routines of policy formulation. The ‘official’ assessment of impacts is then mainly or merely carried out for accounting purposes:

‘But my impression is, that in the end the results only have a limited input and that programme development is mainly influenced by political decisions and only to very small extent thematic considerations’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘Viewed realistically, evaluation doesn’t really induce change. Sometimes it backs up ideas of change which are already circulating in the Managing Authority’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘To illustrate this: changes to the current RDP are being planned and discussed without utilisation of the findings of the on-going evaluation’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘Politicians and policy discourse seeks a base for the justification of funds, in particular with regard to the amount and distribution of it’ (expert of group II, oMS).

In that case there is only a limited interest in using the results of impact assessment as contribution to policy learning, e.g. in order to assure the outflow of funds and prevent a loss of funds:

³ The institutionalisation of evaluation is based not only structural arrangements but also on a culture of evaluation, which comprises e.g. a commitment to learning lessons and improvement; avoidance of a blame-culture which discourages learning; a commitment of policy makers to evidence based policies in the broadest sense, a commitment to excellence; high standards and continuous improvement; consideration of evaluation as one element in a general move towards transparency and multiple accountabilities to citizens and communities as well as to Ministers and parliament; a commitment of government and the public sector to continuous adaptation to becoming a learning organisation (EVALSED 2009).

‘At the end of the programming period, information is used for the next period planning. If we are somewhere in the middle we have to make changes and adoptions when possible. For instance, if we have two measures and there is no interest for one of them, we can make adjustments based on input and monetary indicators. We transfer funds from that measure to the most demanded measure. In some cases, the implementation institutions apply for funds increase in a particular measure. We take it under consideration and if we realize that there is another measure that is almost inactive and we are about to lose EU funds, we examine appropriate changes and adoptions in order to transfer funds from the almost inactive measure to the other one which is most popular’ (expert of group II, oMS).

Most of the experts of group I and group II agree that in their countries of expertise the main user of the assessment of impacts is the ministry of agriculture (or comparable contracting institution) – some experts consider the ministry of agriculture as the only user:

‘Currently information from evaluation is not used by other institutions than Ministry of Agriculture. Other institutions like NGOs, specialized institutions etc. can express their opinions to published ex-post evaluation, but till today there is no history of it in CZ’ (expert of group II, nMS).

‘Farmer associations and local groups, let’s face it, make little use of the information. Unless you prepare a presentation and present to a group of interested people’ (expert of group I, oMS).

In some countries other stakeholders, like farmers’ associations or environmental NGOs are explicitly mentioned by experts as users of the results of impact assessment. Their actual interest in the results of evaluation is described by experts as driven by strategic reasons, i.e. using the results to argue their point and to suggest recommendations - which sometimes go along with a rather selective use of the results. For their purpose output and result indicators are often of more interest than the more long-term oriented impact indicators, so that the actual interest in the assessment of impacts is rather low. 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.

Based on the experts’ statements on stakeholders and their interests in and use of the impact evaluation results one can draw the conclusion that the critical success factor is that all institutions and stakeholders see the need for an assessment of impacts and its potential and benefits, e.g. improvements of programmes which can be induced by it.

2.2.2 Context

Stakeholders of the assessment of impacts act within a particular context, i.e. under certain conditions and circumstances, which builds the frame for their actions but at the same time is constructed and shaped by them. Thus, it is crucial to scrutinize the context, in terms of how it is perceived by stakeholders. We therefore asked the experts to describe cooperation between administration and evaluators and to reflect on shortcomings of the current process of assessment of impacts. WP 2 findings reveal that a truly open, engaged and consultative process of policy design is difficult and costly to achieve, when there are time constraints, lack of trust between stakeholders and/or limited capacity for effective dialogue. Based on these findings we explicitly asked for experts’ perspectives on timeframe and point in time of the assessment of impacts as well as the relationship between evaluators and contracting

authorities and what experts regard as necessary competencies on both sides. Pretesting hinted at financial resources of impact assessment being of concern as well when asking for the context, so we included specific questions on money into the questionnaire.

Financial constraints

The costs of evaluation are part of the overall RDP budget and accounted for under Technical Assistance. Within the budget for monitoring and evaluation, most of the Member States do not state an explicit amount of money for the assessment of impacts, which harbours the danger of neglecting the assessment of impact as the following example indicates:

‘In Austria there is no budget fragmentation, so it is difficult to answer whether there is enough budget for the assessment of impacts. The lack of allocation of funds for the assessment of impacts has even more severe in that there is no ‘formal’ budget available for this task and very often assessment of impacts is ‘forgotten’ and seen with very little priority in the discussion about addressing the effects of the programme’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Accordingly, there were only some evaluators which referred explicitly to the assessment of impacts, when they were asked if money was a constraining factor for the impact evaluation. Most of the experts referred to monitoring and evaluation in general as they see general problems in regard to financial aspects.

Two thirds of the experts did not regard money as a constraining factor in regard to the assessment of impacts. However, most of the interviewees stated 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 and subject to policy learning, as one government representative (group II) states: ‘Till today there is not appropriate monitoring system but it is improving according to identified needs’. The interviews indicate that evaluators from both new MS and EU 15 encounter the problem of having sometimes not enough information on particular issues. However, experts who are more experienced in evaluation seem to have become familiar with the problem and have developed strategies on how to deal with it:

‘In summary, yes, the limited budget leads to the fact that we have to restrict ourselves. But in the end, it is like in every research project: You have a certain budget, so you need to set priorities. Therefore, the first thing we had to sort out with the contracting agencies was that we have to set priorities. So we follow their interests and carry out a deeper analysis in this area, and the rest we do at a minimum level. Of course, you can always do more having more resources. But in general, I think we have a good financial frame’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘The critical is a planning of time – to keep enough time for real evaluation of data, eventually ad hoc research. Since there are a lot of new requirements for data and the monitoring system does not operate totally right, there is a need to collect a lot data ad hoc for evaluation. Critical is not to spend too much time by collecting data (interviews, questionnaires...) but save time for good evaluation of these data (or data available)’ (expert of group I, nMS).

In this respect, clear agreements between evaluators and the contracting agency seem to be one major success factor in the assessment of impacts. This is illustrated by an example from the new Member States where evaluators and the Ministry of Agriculture had disagreed on

how to deal with a lack of data, which is expressed in the following statement of a government representative (group II):

‘From this period the Ministry of Agriculture has still unclear questions as following: Who is responsible for primary data collection in the case when secondary data coming from monitoring system are not available (who is guilty)? Who should pay costs of such additional data collection (ad hoc surveys, interviews...)? When it is considered that evaluator breaks the contract rules if he refuses to provide evaluation of same indicators / questions due to lack of data?’ (expert of group II, nMS)

Experts differ on the general question if more money actually leads to better quality of evaluation results. On the one hand experts see a clear interrelation between quality of evaluation and financial resources, and some even report examples of policy learning in this respect:

‘In general, quality of evaluation and level of its detail depends on financial sources. For example if there is not enough money data collection can be realized only with help of non-professional agencies (like e.g. students), some of surveys could be cancelled and the whole report is simplified as much as possible’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘The budget for ex-post evaluation of PRV (2004-06) was around 300 ths. EUR. Within the mid-term evaluation of SAPARD the budget was higher and evaluator at that time was able to use a professional agency for data collection and processing. It was more expensive but results had higher quality (kept statistical rules and were better focused) and mainly the collection was done in much shorter time’ (expert of group II, nMS).

‘During the current period enough funds are available for assessment of impacts, which are primarily based on the technical assistance part of the programme. But in the last programme there were severe financial constraints, because of the fact that the evaluations and assessment of impacts were esteemed less important and attributed to national financing source. The financing has improved significantly in comparison to the last RDP period’ (expert of group II, oMS).

On the other hand the following example illustrates that spending more money doesn’t necessarily lead to more satisfying evaluation results:

‘Budget for ex-post evaluation of HRDP was around 4 mil CZK. Evaluation of SAPARD was around 11 mil CZK (due to foreign evaluator from Italy); whereas results in terms of quality of evaluation are comparable or rather better now’ (expert of group II, nMS).

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:

‘I suspect that too much time and effort is spent on recording things that don't get used, and that too little time and effort is spent on getting things into a form in which evaluators can use it’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘Finance is not the issue, it’s about making sure the way IAs are done best capture rural development impacts and engage the full range of stakeholders’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘Evaluations are about making value judgements, whether these are based on quantitative or qualitative data. It is a question of finding 'smarter' ways of having

confidence in what may be quite qualitative evaluative judgements, because you haven't got the resources to quantitatively measure everything. Valuations need to be useful and to generate meaningful results within the lifetime of a particular programme. It is therefore important to make sure evaluations are ongoing, where possible, and generate useful data' (expert of group I, oMS).

In conclusion, one success factor of assessment of impacts is to use available data efficiently resorting to quantitative as well as qualitative approaches.

Relationship between representatives of the administration and evaluators

Communication has already been pointed out as a success factor for the assessment of impacts. The basis for a good communication is a trustful and open relationship between administration officials and evaluators, which has already been indicated by the results of WP2 as well. As regards the process of evaluation, evaluators encounter the difficulty

'[...] to cover the span between being critical as is an integral part of evaluation and not annoying the ministries as they are the contracting body. So you have to find a kind of constructive criticism. In my experience criticism is important and the officials know themselves that things can be improved and therefore are open to criticism, but it has to be constructive and connected with suggestions for improvement' (expert of group I, oMS).

This is even harder if evaluators have to operate within an environment of entrenched sides, as the following example shows:

'Moreover the design of axis II was the most conflicted issue because there were different opinions between MoA and environmentalists. And this also influenced the evaluation process: There were conflicts between MoA and us due to our suggestions to accept recommendations from environmentalists' side, e.g. to give them financial support to carry out monitoring' (expert of group I, nMS).

Accordingly, experts of both interviewed groups stated that a good personal relationship between the Managing Authority and the evaluator is considered as elementary.

'The collaboration is crucially influenced by personal relations' (expert of group II, oMS).

'Establishing truly functioning relationship between MA and the evaluator is a demanding task. It would imply a daily contact evaluator-MA, with the evaluator continuously asking for feedback, info, etc. This is also difficult to manage considering the daily heavy workload of MA' (expert of group I, oMS).

The relationship is not only determined by regular contact. Other determinants are the tendering process, the Managing Authority's view on evaluation and if there is institutional learning.

Though experts stress that a common working experience may influence the relationship between evaluators and people from the Managing Authority positively, all of the evaluators have to go through a tendering process. Contracting of evaluators for mid-term evaluation was still running in some of the Member States when the interviews were carried out. Accordingly there were quite some uncertainties:

'The most important shortcomings are that there is a lack of decisions, on the setting up of the compulsory continuous monitoring and evaluation system, so no one knows, who will do it, when, for how much money, in which kind' (expert of group I, nMS).

Especially evaluators in the new Member States feel that they would have benefitted from an early involvement in the process of evaluation as there is less experience with evaluation of RDPs in these countries and at the same time a lot of questions and problems have yet to be solved.

Evaluators can never be certain if they will win the tender, and some of them have the impression that the main criterion for selection of the evaluator is the price, rather than their experience or the proposed evaluation design. Whether main selection criteria or not, interviews indicate that Member States are in favour of employing experienced evaluators, because they may draw from knowledge gathered within former funding periods or evaluation in other countries, which may be fruitful for the current process of evaluation. The downside may be that evaluators are using ‘blue prints’:

‘The second issue is who is doing it – it tends to be a core set of evaluators who apply standardised methodologies’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘Greater is the so called ‘copy/paste’ assessment practice; some evaluators simply utilise and partly adapt reports from other evaluation; by doing so, they can outbid competitors with lower prices, but the quality of assessment of impacts is low’ (expert of group I, nMS).

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.

‘Evaluation is often only thought about when it comes to doing it, so data may not always be completely as evaluators would like or need it’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘If the information exists, nobody has actually collated it, or analysed it to a point where it becomes immediately useful to evaluators, and therefore the job of collecting it may be more than the resources that are available to evaluators’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘And then, there is the problem of data availability: My colleagues are checking if we can use data produced in the frame of the obligation to record fertilizer use. However, there are severe concerns in regard with data protection. But on the other hand, we can’t go to the farms and ask them if we can measure again, because there are already measurements existing’ (expert of group I, oMS).

In addition, problems with obtaining data from the Paying Agency are reported. Especially evaluators from the New Member States seem to encounter problems in this respect:

‘There is a problem concerning the availability of monitoring data, because hardly any monitoring data are available, for example creation/maintenance of labour, the change in added value, dead weight, the change in costs and revenues of supported beneficiaries etc.. So the evaluators have to struggle with getting the relevant data. Baseline data from Central Statistical Office is more or less available. The problem is by the Paying Agency, because it takes the people from the monitoring and charges them with other subjects, so the capacities are restructured and that is the main reason why the monitoring database is not filled. All other things seem to be more important for the institution than to take care of the data base. There is some problem with the knowledge of people at PA on monitoring and evaluation. Also there is a time problem, because it is hard to do an evaluation within only 3 or 4 months, without any data, so the quality of

the assessment of impacts is not guaranteed because of the poor resource base' (expert of group I, nMS).

'Problem is that evaluator does not know exactly what type of data are available in their system and it can occur situation when SZIF (Paying Agency) answers that such data are not available however they are in system but under different name / title or some more complicated algorithms to get such data should be used' (expert of group I, nMS).

The high fluctuation of personnel at different RD levels is another important factor influencing evaluation. First, the permanent change in personnel hinders the establishment of trustful relationships between stakeholders. Secondly, institutional learning and capacity building is hampered by fluctuation:

'Systems which have a permanent personal fluctuation are not able to learn. And you notice that, that there are new stakeholders at all levels and at the same time new regulations and conditions. So they are not better positioned than in the last funding period, I'd say. [...] So there is a lot of superstructure, which is deterrent, diverting and costs a lot of time and resources' (expert of group I, oMS).

At the same time, provided there are no major changes within the personnel, interviews show that there is some form of institutional learning within the responsible authorities, in terms of attempting to improve data collection, preparation and storage. These efforts will contribute to an improved collaboration between programming authorities and evaluators.

'The trick is to make sure that record-keeping becomes part and parcel of the whole process of scheme management. To some extent this can be done through effective IT systems, so that it can then be made available in a usable form subsequently for evaluations. This is still not well done, but each iteration of programmes sees some improvement. In this process, the burden is still largely within the public administration' (expert of group I, oMS).

'Every time around there are attempts by the programming authorities, or those involved in monitoring and evaluation, to try and put in place better devices for tracking and analysing the data that are generated on an ongoing basis, so that when evaluators come along they have the material ready to hand' (expert of group I, oMS).

These first steps towards a better data base for monitoring and evaluation may be supported by involving evaluators in an early stage of planning, so that there is a common agreement on necessary and useful data to be collected.

Some experts, however, do not believe in simply improving the relationship between the two parties. Instead, they postulate a totally new setup of the evaluation system and demand e.g. to integrate beneficiaries.

'Unless the whole system will be restructured, the impacts will be disappointing regarding the program aims. The Local Action Groups that are the most reliable in this process know how the work should be carried out, learned through their experience and, after all, I think they should be given more attention' (expert of group I, oMS).

'The farmers themselves would be in a much better position to make some kind of record about their own experiences within the scheme. Also, perhaps the advisers they work with on a regular basis. But at the moment, there is no way to capture this amount of information. There have been discussions in the past about getting beneficiaries involved in monitoring the impact of their money – obviously there are issues of bias to be dealt with, but this should be possible and has the potential to deliver good quality

data. But it must be done in such a way that it is not simply another burden of record-keeping for the beneficiary/farmer' (expert of group I, oMS).

'Data collection is critical, because the need of collecting information both "after" AND "before" the treatment is highly underestimated! The best thing would be if each beneficiary had a sort of business plan at the start, and keep record of all the interventions implemented and funds received. By this way "before" data could be improved and the impact better assessed' (expert of group I, oMS).

Timing of ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluations

As scientific literature on evaluation in the frame of the CMEF points out, timing is another important context factor for the assessment of impacts in the frame of the CMEF (Dwyer et al. 2008, Laschewski & Schmidt 2008). Ideally, a cycle of learning would be initiated by all three stages of evaluations, for each of which deadlines are set out in legislation. Yet, 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 (cf. Figure 2). The timing of *ex-post* evaluations inevitably means that their findings and recommendations do not feed into the design of 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. This is illustrated by the following statement:

'It is a problem of timing here, if the actors involved in the planning of the programme were to have the opportunity to use information from the assessment of impacts then the present programme should not have been planned before they had the information from the ex-post evaluation of the last programme. Actually the ex-post evaluation of the former programme was only just completed in 2008, while the present programme was conceived in 2006. To what extent information from previous assessments have been used in the construction of the present programme is not clear. If you look at the measures included in the present programme they are basically the same as the measures included in the previous programme even though the ex-post evaluation of the 2000-2006 programme revealed that the efficiency of some of these measures could be doubted. Hopefully the actors involved will be able to use information from the ex-post evaluation of the 2000-2006 programme in the planning of the next programme that starts in 2013' (expert of group I, oMS).

The interest of Member States in doing a thorough *ex-post* evaluation may significantly reduce, particularly if the regulations concerning new programmes have changed and therefore the comparability of performance between programming periods is not straightforward. In addition, experts observe that for beneficiaries it is sometimes hard to recall relevant information as time has passed:

'The main problem is that when impact assessment is made at the end of the programme the memory of the participants can be a bit blurry. Some of them might have received support years ago' (expert of group I, oMS).

Dwyer et al. (2008) draw the conclusion that ex-ante and mid-term evaluations gain more importance as information source on the way to improve the performance of policy interventions. Especially statements from experts of the new Member States corroborate this assumption:

'Results are not adequately utilised. To the greatest extent, this can be attributed to the timing of the evaluation; only ex-ante and, to some extent, mid-term evaluation results

provide realistic potential to assist policy planners and stakeholders’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘The use depends on the type of evaluation; the most direct and tangible impacts are linked with ex-ante evaluation. Mid-term evaluation is also relevant in terms of policy implementation improvements; their findings may facilitate implementation of measures. Ex-post evaluations have virtually no impact on policy improvements due to their timing’ (expert of group I, nMS).

At the same time, however, there are several problems connected to the timing of ex-ante and mid-term evaluations, which hamper their use as well. Experts hint at the fact that results of the ex-ante evaluations are of low influence because household decisions have already been made earlier:

‘Thinking of the ex-ante evaluation of the new programme, it didn’t have an influence on the new programme – except some cosmetic corrections maybe –because the decision on the household, which is crucial, has already been made way earlier. Our update with recommendations arrived, when they could partly be taken into the programme, but that depended very much on the scientific officer, if they use the results strategically, i.e. sending them duly endorsed to their superiors. That requires them being-open for evaluation in the first place. So you have to come up with the results at the right time, so that they have an influence on the political level’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Concerning mid-term evaluation some experts point to the fact 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. Additionally there are practical reasons which make it hard to carry out an evaluation after less than 3 years in the period of operation of the programme, e.g. unanticipated external events which may disrupt the timetable or an incomplete set of baseline data.

‘Until 2010 the most MS will be occupied with the acquisition of data and at the same time an impact assessment should be done. This scenario is not really realistic and feasible in most Member States’ (expert of group II, oMS).

Furthermore, there may be other obligations and deadlines to be met within the national context, which absorb time and energy of those who are responsible but do not lead to synergies as they are not interlinked, which is illustrated by an example from the UK:

‘There is the obligation that comes from the regulations, and also from within domestic policy, for policies to be evaluated periodically. The internal system that used to operate in England/possibly UK, is that if the Treasury provided funding for something – policy initiative or legislation – there was a requirement for an evaluation within five years of the issuing of a new Statutory Instrument, or other piece of legislation. In addition, there would also be a three yearly payment review, if you are talking about funding schemes, to make sure the payments were appropriate given market changes since the launch. On top of that, the National Audit Office does periodic audits of different areas of government activity and it has a rolling programme that moves around various spheres of activity. Then, in addition to that at a European level you have the obligation to formally monitor and evaluate at particular points in the programme's lifetime. Ex-ante-, mid-term, ex-post. As far as I am aware, none of these various evaluations are joined up: the UK timetable is fixed from the date of the launch of the statutory instruments; the European one is fixed from the date of the programme; and the NAO one is random’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Some experts suggest postponing mid-term or advancing ex-post evaluation or having it carried out at measure specific points in time:

‘There remains the question, which weight the impact indicators will have in 2010, and the assumption that surely in 2015 their role will be a bigger one than 2010. If the impact indicators already would be carried out during the last part of the current programme period then there would be another initial situation for the next programming period. This would serve as a basis which could be developed and operated in a different way’ (expert of group II, oMS).

‘Mid-term evaluation in 2010 is too early as the programmes have just started or are just about to start, depending on how well prepared they are implemented. But there should have been enough funding in 2010 to be able to evaluate. The problem is the ex-post-evaluation in 2015, which doesn’t have any value for the Managing Authority. The EU wants it as an accountability report. The Managing Authorities do not have an interest, because in 2014 the new funding period begins, so there is little use of the ex-post evaluation for the formulation of the new policy. Maybe 2011/2012 would be a better date to carry out an intensive evaluation, in order to inform the policy formulation. [...] This shift from 2015 to 2012 would be helpful for the Managing Authority, but the EU needs a report for accounting at the end of the funding period’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘Concerning the programme itself, the best timing of evaluation would be measure-specific. While it takes three or four years until investment incentives have an impact, other measures have an immediate impact. So if you take the measures, which need the most time before an impact can be detected, as the least common denominator, you need three or four years before you can evaluate. Which means that mid-term evaluation comes too early and 2012 would maybe be a more sensible point in time’ (expert of group I, oMS).

The analysis of stakeholders and their context allows drawing first conclusions on success factors for evaluation. The following sections deal with the assessment of impacts in terms of use of CMEF impact indicators and additional indicators and assessment of impacts against EU and wider policy objectives. These analyses will further the knowledge on success factors for evaluation which will be presented in chapter 3.

2.3 Critical review of current impact evaluation in the frame of the CMEF

Programme evaluation is one element of the knowledge infrastructure of the political administrative system. It aims to inform decision makers about the consequences of their policies and to serve as a key mechanism to improve the quality of regulation and to integrate different policy objectives (CEC 2005, 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). Ideally, evaluation facilitates institutional learning in terms of adding additional knowledge to the institution by giving feedback to the institution about the overall effectiveness and ways to improve it. Thus evaluation has to be carried out against the set objectives.

The EU Commission follows an indicator-based approach for the evaluation of rural development. The requirements for evaluation are defined in the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF). Within the framework a limited number of common

indicators applicable to each programme is specified. Member States are asked to develop additional indicators within the programmes – in accordance with the general principles governing the use of indicators in the CMEF – because the suggested common indicators are not able to capture all effects of programme activity, in particular for national priorities and site-specific measures (CEC 2006).

The underlying concept of indicator-based approaches is the existence of a logical framework suggesting a chain of causality between programme measures and expected effects. The intervention logic follows the idea of hierarchically assorted objectives and measures, assuming that adding up detected measure effects allows an assessment of impacts of the whole programme. The measurement of effects follows a hierarchy as well, as there is a distinction between output, result and impact indicators. While output indicators give information on goods and services produced, result indicators refer to the direct and immediate effects. Impact indicators 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). Impact indicators reflect the EU strategic objectives as well as the derived programme objectives and are therefore key elements within the process of evaluation (ECORYS 2005, CEC 2006).

The following section (2.3.1) therefore depicts the objectives, related measures and suggested common indicators. The selection of additional indicators in Member States will be described in section 2.3.4. Against the background of the presented objectives and indicators evaluators have to carry out their work. Section gives an overview on general methodological problems in current evaluation while section 2.3.3 analysis the CMEF indicators against the set RD objective.

2.3.1 EAFRD objectives, related measures and common CMEF indicators

The EAFRD contributes to three major objectives, i.e. improving

- the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry;
- the environment and the countryside;
- the quality of life and the management of economic activity in rural areas.

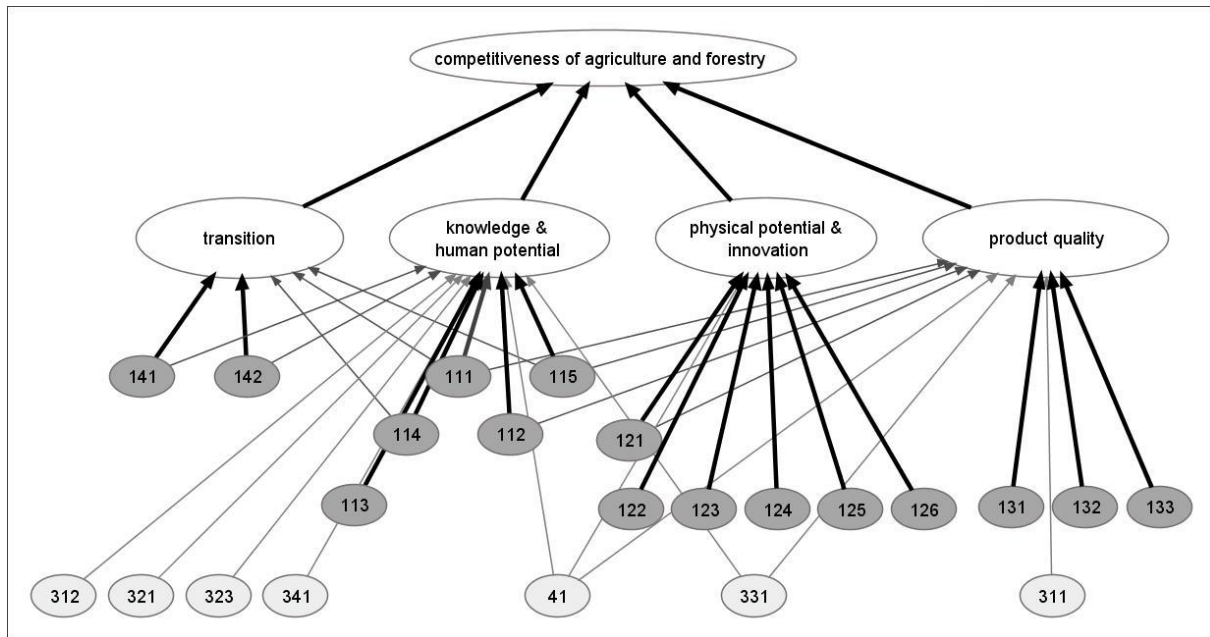
The three objectives have been translated into three axes, which are defined as ‘a coherent group of measures with specific goals resulting directly from their implementation and contributing to one or more of the objectives set out in Article 4’ (EC 2009:URL). The Leader approach, which was integrated into the EAFRD is considered as a fourth cross-cutting axis. Table 2 shows the overall objective of axis 1, the four related sub-objectives and the officially attributed measures (EC 2009:URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D).

Table 2: Hierarchy of axis 1 objectives

Overall objective	Sub-objective	Related measures
<i>To improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector</i>	<i>promoting knowledge and improving human potential</i>	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)
	<i>restructuring and developing physical potential</i>	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)
	<i>improving the quality of production and products</i>	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)
	<i>Facilitating transition in new Member States</i>	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)

Source: EC 2009:URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D

Besides the measures officially attributed to the sub-objectives (cf. EC 2009:URL) there are other measures which contribute to the axis 1 objectives but have their origin within other axes as Figure 3 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).



Source: own illustration after CMEF

Figure 3: Extended intervention logic of axis 1⁴

In order to assess the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes against this objective, the CMEF suggests two indicators (cf. Table 6):

- **Economic growth**, to be measured in net additional value added expressed in PPS
- **Labour productivity**, measured in change in Gross Value Added per Full Time Equivalent (GVA/FTE)

The overall objective of axis 2 is depicted in Table 3, the four related sub-objectives and the officially attributed measures (EC 2009:URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D).

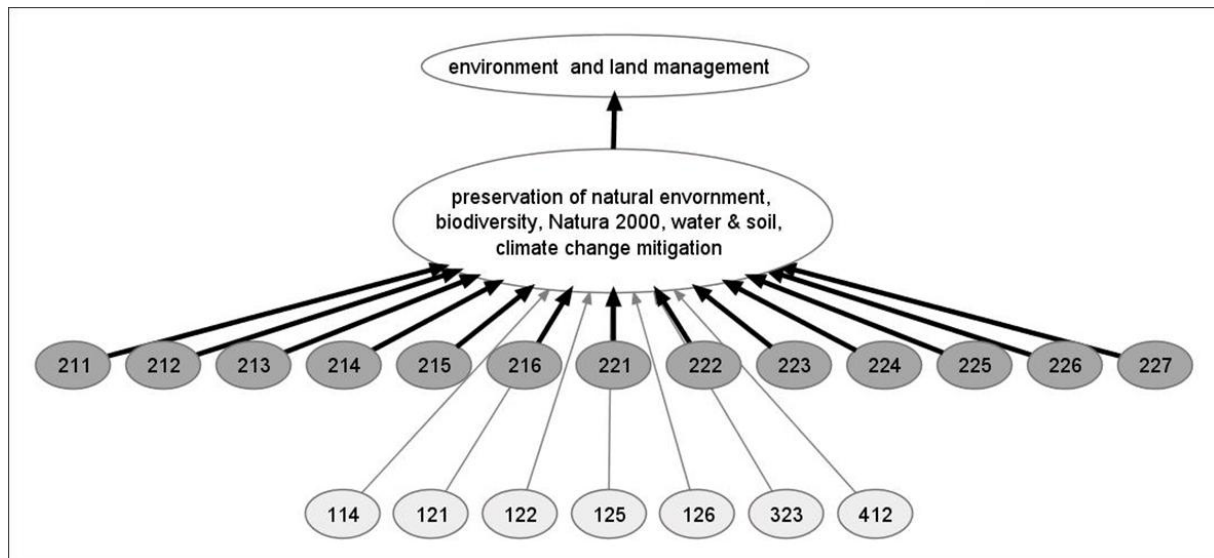
⁴ Additional impact chains of programmes have been included based on expert judgement. Strong black arrows visualise the intervention logic as described in the CMEF. Measures described under the specific axis are depicted by a dark grey symbol mentioning the measure code. According to expert judgement, 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 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 CMEF guidelines.

Table 3: Hierarchy of axis 2 objectives

Overall objective	Sub-objective	Related measures
<i>To improve the the environment and the countryside</i>	<i>To increase sustainable management of agricultural land by encouraging farmers and forest holders to employ methods of land use compatible with the need to preserve the natural environment and landscape and protect and improve natural resources through the protection of biodiversity, Natura 2000 site management, the protection of water and soil, climate change mitigation</i>	support for mountain regions with natural handicaps and other disadvantaged areas (M211, 212), NATURA 2000 payments (M213,224) and for agri-environmental or forest-environmental payments (M214, M225), animal welfare payments (M215); support for non-productive investments linked to the achievement of agri- or forest-environmental commitments or the achievement of other agri-environmental objectives (M216, 227), improving forestry resources with an environmental objective (support for the first afforestation of agricultural land (M221) and non-agricultural land (M223), establishment of agroforestry systems (M222) or restoring forestry potential and preventing natural disasters (M226))
	<i>To contribute to the continued use of agricultural land, maintaining the countryside, maintenance and promotion of sustainable farming systems</i>	support for less favoured mountain regions (M211) and other less favoured areas (other than mountains) (M212)

Source: EC 2009: URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D

Besides the measures officially attributed to the sub-objectives (cf. EC 2009:URL, CEC 2006 Guidance note D) there are other measures which may contribute to the axis 2 objectives but have their origin within other axes as Figure 3: Extended intervention logic of axis 1 Figure 3 illustrates. These comprise measures as use by farmers and forest holders of advisory services (M114), farm modernisation (M121), improving the economic value of the forest (M122), improving and developing infrastructure related to the development and adaptation of agriculture and forestry (M125), restoring agricultural potential damaged by natural disasters and introducing appropriate prevention actions (M126), conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage (M323), and development of local strategies for environment/land management (M412).



Source: own illustration after CMEF

Figure 4: Extended Intervention logic of axis 2⁵.

In order to assess the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes against this objective, the CMEF suggests four indicators (cf. Table 6)

- **Reversing biodiversity decline:** Change in trend in biodiversity decline as measured by farmland bird species population
- **Maintenance of high nature value farming and forestry areas:** Measured by changes in high nature value areas
- **Improvement in water quality:** Measured by changes in gross nutrient balance
- **Contribution to combating climate change:** Measured by increase in production of renewable energy.

⁵ 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 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 CMEF guidelines.

Table 4 shows the overall objective of axis 3, the three related sub-objectives and the officially attributed measures (EC 2009:URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D).

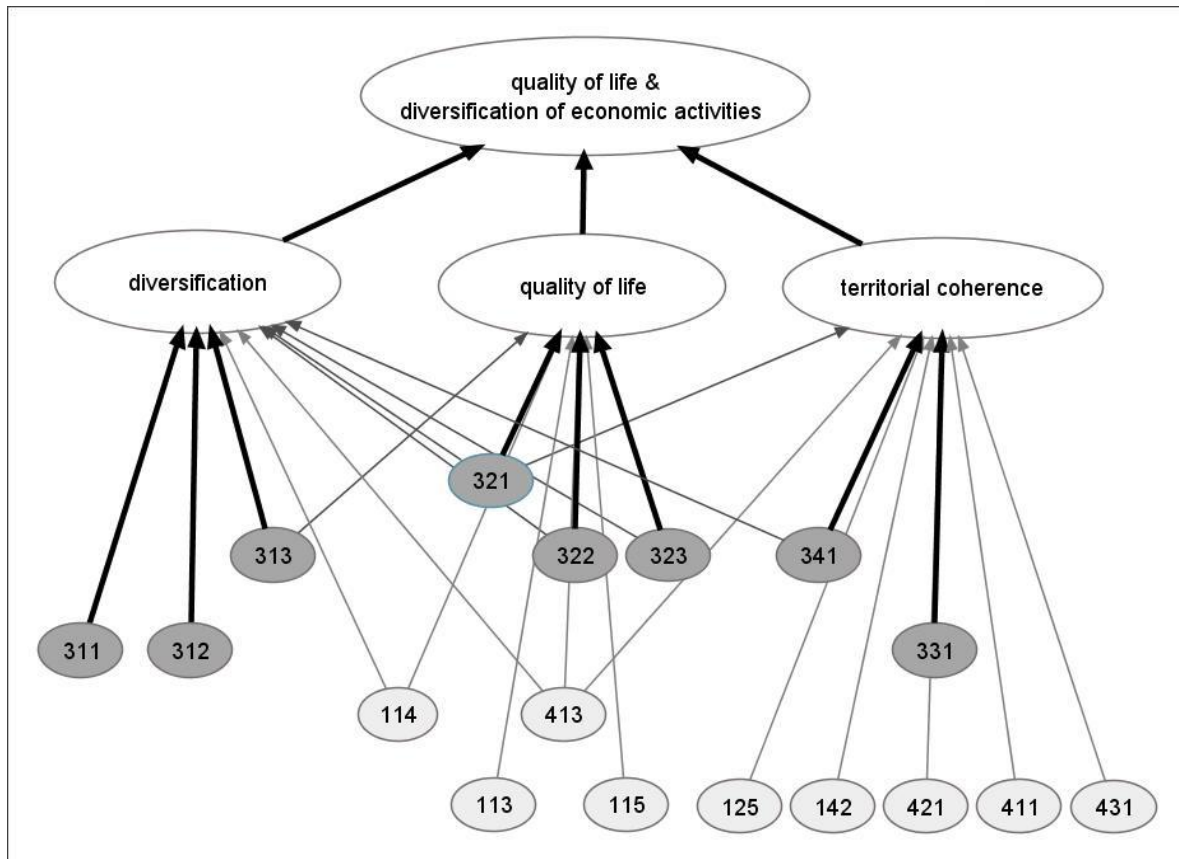
Table 4: Hierarchy of axis 3 objectives

Overall objective	Sub-objective	Related measures
<i>To improve the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy</i>	<i>To diversify the rural economy</i>	diversification towards non-agricultural activities (M311), support for the establishment and development of micro-businesses (M312), promotion of tourism (M313) and the protection, development and management of the natural heritage that contributes to sustainable economic development (M323);
	<i>To improve the quality of life in rural areas</i>	improving the quality of life in rural areas, with particular focus on renovating and developing villages (M322) and preserving and making the best use of the rural heritage (M323)
	<i>To reinforce territorial coherence and synergies</i>	training and information for economic actors operating in the fields covered by axis 3 (M331), acquiring skills and running activities in order to prepare and implement the local development strategy (M341)

Source: EC 2009: URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D

Besides the measures officially attributed to the sub-objectives (cf. EC 2009:URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D) there are other measures which contribute to the axis 3 objectives but have their origin within other axes as Source: own illustration after CMEF

Figure 5 illustrates. These comprise measures as early retirement of farmers and farm workers (M113), use by farmers and forest holders of advisory services (M114), animal welfare payments (M115), improving and developing infrastructure related to the development and adaptation of agriculture and forestry (M 125), setting up of producer groups (M142), developing local development strategies regarding competitiveness (M411), transnational and inter-regional cooperation (M421) and running the local action group, skills acquisition and animation (M431).



Source: own illustration after CMEF

Figure 5: Extended Intervention logic of axis 3 ⁶

In order to assess the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes against this objective, the CMEF suggests one indicator (cf. Table 6):

- **Employment creation**, to be measured in net additional Full Time Equivalent jobs created

Axis 4 is cross-cutting the other axes.

Table 5 shows the related sub-objective and the officially attributed measures (CEC 2006 Guidance Note D).

⁶ 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 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 CMEF guidelines.

Table 5: Hierarchy of axis 4 objectives

Overall objective	Sub-objective	Related measures
<i>Leader</i>	<i>To implement the Leader approach in mainstream rural development programming</i>	Developing local strategies (M41) regarding competitiveness (M411), environment and land management (M412) and quality of life (M413); establishment and support of transitional and inter-regional cooperation (M421), running the local action group, skills acquisition and animation (M431).

Source: EC 2009: URL, CEC 2006 Guidance Note D

As the mainstreaming of the Leader approach is a cross-cutting issue there is a strong interrelation with measures of the other axes. The actual connection of Leader related measures and other measures depends on the design of the individual national strategy resp. Rural Development Programme.

In order to assess the impacts of the Rural Development Programmes against this objective, the CMEF (Guidance Note E) suggests the following indicators (cf. Table 6):

- **Economic growth**, to be measured in net additional value added expressed in PPS (for measures 41)
- **Employment creation**, to be measured in net additional Full Time Equivalent jobs created (for measure 41 and 421)

The CMEF guidance note E gives information on the contribution of each measure towards the suggested Common Impact Indicators, except for measure 215, 331, 341 and 431 (Table 6).

Table 6: Impact indicators related to measures according to the CMEF Guidance note E

Measure code	Economic growth	Employment creation	Labour productivity	Reversing biodiversity decline	Maintenance of HNV areas	Improvement in water quality	Combating climate change	No impact indicator suggested
111	X		X					
112			X					
113			X					
114			X					
115			X					
121	X		X					
122	X		X					
123	X		X					
124	X		X					
125	X		X					
126			X					
131	X		X					
132	X		X					
133	X		X					
141	X		X					
142	X		X					
211				X	X			
212				X	X			
213				X	X	X		
214				X	X	X	X	
215								X
216				X	X	X	X	
221				X	X	X	X	
222				X	X	X	X	
223					X	X	X	
224					X	X	X	
225					X	X	X	
226					X	X	X	
227					X	X	X	
311	X	X						
312	X	X						
313	X	X						
321	X	X						
322	X	X						
323	X							
331								X
341								X
41	X	X						
411								
412								X
413								X
421		X						

2.3.2 CMEF and the assessment of impacts: General methodological issues

The CMEF is build up as a hierarchical framework suggesting a chain of causality between the programme measures on the one hand and the expected effects, on the other hand; i.e. the intervention logic follows the idea of hierarchically assorted objectives and measures. The interviewed experts therefore regard the introduction of the CMEF as a helpful tool for carrying out evaluation because it has led to a clearer and more workable monitoring and evaluation system and provides guidance:

‘All EU guidelines of assessment of impacts are really helpful, the new CMEF guideline as well as the previous one, and particularly for a country, who just started in this kind of activity’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘The whole assessment of impacts process departs from a workable monitoring system, identification of relevant indicators and quantified targets. This has been improved with the introduction of CMEF’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘Assessment of impacts was always a part of the whole evaluation. But now, in the ongoing period, the focus is much clearer and assessment of impacts is straightforward termed through the CMEF impact indicators’ (expert of group I, oMS).

This is supported by the results of the SWOT analysis carried out by the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (EENRD) in December 2008, which showed that evaluators and Managing Authorities feel that the context of evaluation of the Rural Development Programmes has improved significantly from 2007, because there are clear policy objectives, a results oriented approach and a simplified system for delivering the EU Rural Development Policy (EENRD 2008).

Having said that considerable criticism remains: Figure 3: Extended intervention logic of axis 1, Figure 4 and Figure 5 illustrate that there are cross-axis relations between objectives and measures. This constitutes 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. These emerge at individual beneficiary level, as well as at broader local or regional level. In order to capture these less obvious and less tangible effects results cannot be just summed up as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. According to experts, it depends very much on the willingness of officials if these **synergies** are actually captured:

‘It’s not captured well at the moment, but again it comes down to wanting to capture these synergies in the first place. Again it’s how impacts are recorded and for what purpose’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘It can be captured if from the start you know (as evaluator and programme manager) that this is the kind of thing that you want to see or capture. If you want to capture the synergies between measures it can be taken into account but only if that is the motivation when undertaking the assessment of impacts’ (expert of group I, oMS).

While some experts feel that ‘not overlapping’ seems to be regarded as more important than ‘synergy’ between measures and stress that programmes are not necessarily set up to foster the use of synergies (e.g. combining measures), other experts are convinced that there are synergies and state that they already endeavour to assess different kinds of mutual influences. There is an agreement that most of these effects can only be assessed within case studies at the local level, e.g. interviewing beneficiaries what kind of support they received and what they feel is the impact. Some experts have already made assumptions on the interplay of certain measures in the ex-ante assessments and will then in later assessments test their

hypotheses. A synergy matrix is suggested as another (useful) qualitative approach for detecting synergies between measures. If sufficient micro data are available synergies might be quantified by a regression analysis, but quantification of synergies is generally considered as difficult. A lot of interviewees stress that moving beyond the measure and axes based evaluation approach to a more thematic or territorial approach would better allow detecting synergies.

Managing Authorities and evaluators struggle with the requirements for the assessment of impacts as the conducted interviews show. One challenge is to measure both the **micro level and the macro level effects** and disentangle these effects from other influencing factors. Evaluators suggest different approaches, ranging from statistical and econometrical methods to system dynamic modelling. However, it was stressed that it was difficult to reasonably use the economic accounts for agriculture as statistical methodology for a small scope. Some suggested to aggregate macro-level analyses and combine these with case studies; others opt for building judgment on micro-level data. In addition, some experts advocate territory based evaluation across funds to detect impacts at macro-level.

In addition the **establishment of the counterfactual**, i.e. calculating the changes that would have occurred without the specific programme intervention, is rather difficult. Establishing control groups in order to assess the impacts of the Farm Investment Support Measure (FIS) on dairy farms in Old Member States is a good example: the ‘non-participants’ used as control group include farms which have received FIS-support in one of the previous programming periods, which means that they actually have been participants. If a farm has constructed a stable with FIS in 2001 it can surely not serve as a reliable control for another FIS-supported farm which has carried out an investment into dairy housing in 2010. ‘The results achieved with this distorted reference are neither plausible (high rate of deadweight) nor meaningful’ (expert of group I, oMS). Difference-in-Difference (DiD) method is often mentioned as a way to carry out a counterfactual assessment of impacts.

Netting out the effects of the programme by capturing deadweight and displacement effects was reported a rather difficult task:

‘It is very difficult to determine the net effect of impacts. For the result level it is possible to determine causalities and in terms of impacts, it is possible to determine the gross impact resulting from the interplay of different influences, but to really isolate the net effect of the programme is difficult’ (expert of group I, oMS).

The CMEF guidelines foresee to detect **unexpected effects** and give reasons for why a certain measure or a part of the programme has not delivered the expected results and impacts. Most of the experts stated that it was not possible to capture unexpected impacts within the current evaluation procedure. However, some experts conducted interviews and additional surveys and thus were able to detect unexpected impacts at the micro level:

‘Information on negative and unexpected impacts can only be captured by collecting primary data through surveys with final recipients or interviews with key informants’ (expert of group I, nMS).

Regression analyses were also considered as a promising possibility to provide information on unexpected impacts – given the condition that there are sufficient data on the micro level which is not always the case. Some experts point out that a prerequisite for quantifying negative impacts is to know that these exist which was mainly captured in case studies or baseline data, or was based on expert knowledge. 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:

‘There are other impacts that won’t be measured because they haven’t thought about them – questions like, what are we trying to do with policy in relation to rural development and the living countryside? These kinds of things depend heavily on the Managing Authority wanting to capture wider (beyond CMEF) impacts and the skill of the evaluators to innovate and change what they do to capture them, moving beyond number crunching and data capture’ (expert of group I, oMS).

The CMEF is often perceived as too narrow and demanding, thus distracting evaluators and Managing Authorities from capturing the specific impacts of their Rural Development Programme:

‘There is a risk that the resources available for the evaluation of RDPs are misused because CMEF is extremely prescriptive but in some cases too rigid and schematic to allow a real understanding of impacts, thus leading to spend too much effort on tasks scarcely relevant to an effective evaluation’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘The critical shortcoming is the nature of the indicators used in assessments of impacts – the aim is to quantify and standardise. The second issue is who is doing it – it tends to be a core set of evaluators who apply standardised methodologies. This limits the range of impacts captured and offers a narrow assessment of policy impacts. The CMEF indicators serve a purpose, but they may not reflect the true or most important (non quantifiable) impacts of a particular scheme or instrument. Evaluators need to be encouraged to move beyond their blueprints for assessment of impacts’ (expert of group I, oMS).

‘There is too much of a focus within the discipline of evaluation and assessment of impacts upon common indicators and common methods - number crunching and a move towards standardising everything. If everyone is doing the same thing, there is some kind of logic to that. But ideally, every evaluation has a specific purpose in relation to the scheme/policy/circumstances being evaluated. There is no particular reason why an evaluation of one scheme should necessarily use the same set of indicators as an evaluation of another scheme. Each scheme is different, and needs to be sensitive to the context in which it operates. So if you standardise, there is a danger you may end up with things that are not very meaningful. In terms of the seven CMEF indicators, for example, there are agri-environment schemes throughout Europe that have perfectly legitimate aims, that do not necessarily correspond with the chosen indicators. So in other words, just because a scheme does not appear to do well according to these CMEF indicators, does not mean that it is not achieving its primary goals, or is being ineffective. You [may be] measuring an impact against objectives which may not be the main objectives of the schemes you are looking at’ (expert of group I, oMS).

The above mentioned criticism goes along with the results of the SWOT analysis of the EENRD in December 2008, which were complemented and verified by Needs Assessments within national Focus Groups (EENRD 2008). Based on the results, the EENRD in its role as facilitator of exchanging knowledge on approaches and methodologies as well as providing information to the evaluation community decided to further support MS in the mid-term evaluation and its preparation by recommendations and provision of best practice examples. Two thematic working groups were established which had 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 were to be provided, the first one 'Guidance Document on the HNV indicators' has been published in the end of 2008; guidance documents on quality of life and Leader are supposed to follow (first draft has been published in May 2010).

Therefore, the next section (2.3.3), which gives a short overview on critical issues in relation to the assessment of impacts against the axes' objectives, is kept rather short in order to avoid doubling of EENRD work.

2.3.3 Critical review of CMEF indicators against RD objectives

Impact indicators reflect the EU strategic objectives as well as the derived programme and priority objectives and are therefore key elements within the process of evaluation. They refer to the medium-term and long-term benefits of a programme and are supposed to be expressed in 'net' terms (cf. section 2.3.2). The CMEF guidance note D gives an overview of the (hierarchically assorted) objectives, sub-objectives and related measures (cf. section 2.3.1) against which evaluators have to carry out their assessments.

Three indicators, **economic growth, labour productivity and employment creation**, are suggested for measuring the axis 1 objective 'to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector' and axis 3 objective 'to improve quality of life in rural areas and encourage the diversification of economic activities'. The three common impact indicators are interrelated and some experts state that due to this interrelation the indicators require applying a coherent methodological approach.

Interviews show that evaluators currently use different methods in order to assess the impact as e.g. trendline analysis, regression analysis, use of input-output models, microeconomic extrapolation, using counterfactual situation as comparison e.g. established through difference-in difference (DiD) method. In addition, especially regarding axis 3 evaluation, some evaluators resorted to in-depth interviews and case studies. One evaluator reported the use of forecasting models like REMI (at least for ex-ante assessment).

Evaluators point out, however, that they encounter considerable problems. First of all there is the general problem of data availability, especially for the new Member States (cf. section 2.2.2). Regression analyses e.g. depend highly on the existence of sufficient data on the micro level which is not always the case. In addition the establishment of the counterfactual is rather difficult (cf. section 2.3.2). Further problems are the aggregation of effects to macro level as well as establishing causal-effects relationships.

The impact indicators which are suggested in the CMEF (Annex 3 J) show a strong emphasis on environmental impacts as four out of the seven suggested indicators are supposed to measure the environmental impact of the programme: **Reversing biodiversity decline, maintenance of high nature value farming and forestry areas, improvement in water quality and contribution to combating climate change**. Still even these four suggested indicators are not able to cover all of the environmental impacts the EAFRD is aiming at, for instance, soil conservation or preservation of scenic beauty are not covered.

Evaluators are confronted with immense problems regarding the use of these indicators for assessing the impacts against the objectives. The indicator 'improvement of water quality' 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. The indicator 'contribution to combating climate change' is measured by increase in production of renewable energy, which is not considered as adequate measurement either. 'Reversing biodiversity decline' is measured by the farmland bird indicator. Obviously,

decline of biodiversity is not only to be reversed in farmland which means that additional indicators need to be developed which apply for other habitats. In addition, extent and quality of decline of endangered species cannot be indicated by farmland bird populations only. Regarding the High Nature Value indicator which is measured through changes in high nature value areas, a guidance document has been published in the beginning of the year 2009 (EENRD 2009b) by the European Evaluation Network. It suggests approaching this indicator by developing several sub-indicators (quantitative and qualitative) and by conducting local case-studies and surveys in addition. Evaluators consider this document as helpful, however, two years have passed in which necessary field work for data collection might not have been carried out due to uncertainties about what to measure (cf. Bormann et al. 2009:35).

Generally, experts stress that it is very difficult to establish causal changes due to lack of process knowledge as well as lack of adequate data:

‘Applied science on causal links between farm practices and response of environment is practically missing in Estonia’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘And even in Länder like Niedersachsen, which carry out an own long-term monitoring in the frame of their priority programmes, even they have difficulties to depict causalities accurately’ (expert of group I, oMS).

One evaluator mentions the Land Rheinland-Pfalz in Germany where a good data basis exists which allows measuring impacts of the agri-environmental measures:

‘In Rheinland-Pfalz, there are test farms, which participate in the AEM scheme and there are test farms which do not participate. Concerning the use of pesticides e.g. we are therefore able to compare nutrient input balances and pesticide-input in order to assess the net-effects. Rheinland-Pfalz is exemplary in that respect and has spent a good amount of money additionally to the evaluation that we carry. It would be desirable to have the same data basis in other Länder’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Some experts stress that currently they are analysing only area-related measures against the objective ‘to improve the environment and the countryside’. However, they hint on the fact that other measures which have an impact in this respect e.g. investment measures should be taken into account as well.

Experts therefore call for thematic studies which should be carried out and should analyse more deeply certain areas and should not be time-bound. In addition, they state that regional, more site-specific approaches are needed because country wide indicators are often not suitable.

Cross-cutting to the objectives of the three axes, the **Leader approach** is supposed to be mainstreamed. Employment creation has been suggested as a common indicator. Beside the above stated problems, evaluating Leader reflects some additional problems of the CMEF which have not been mentioned so far.

When being asked to describe how the assessment of impacts regarding Leader is carried out in their country of expertise, evaluation experts stated:

‘For Leader, it tends to be all about documentation – reports, programme budget reports, etc. Evaluators will answer questions like: how the money has been managed, what it was spent on, proportions spent on different initiatives/projects, etc. They will also typically interview a sample or % of Leader companies, including board members and managers, as well as agencies that have links with Leader companies. Also site visits to some of the projects/enterprises that have received monies from the LAG’ (expert of group I, oMS).

While this approach is similar in most countries experts criticize that it is not adequate to really capture the impacts:

‘This misses the wider point about what Leader is all about. Instead it sees LAGs as another type of funding agency, which is a mistake [...] it is this issue of seeing what you know rather than knowing what you see. So evaluators (as instructed) tend to look for tangible impacts, like number of projects supported, jobs generated and so on that they are familiar with and know how to measure. These are important indicators but they are not evaluating the wider impacts of Leader – its ethos, connections to local groups, impacts of deepening local democracy, etc’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Objectives outside the scope of ‘conventional’ RD measures’ are hardly covered in the assessment of impacts. According to experts Leader may contribute to increasing the quality of local governance and democracy, improving participation of stakeholders in policy processes and integrating different stakeholders at national level. It can lead to an improved multi-level coordination and can have a positive influence on partnership arrangements. Leader may strengthen territorial coherence and encourage endogenous development. All of these potential impacts cannot be captured within current assessment procedures.

The same applies for other axes. Experts state that, e.g. a farm may contribute positively to environmental objectives, but that may not be reflected within the currently used impact indicators.

2.3.4 Selection of additional indicators in the Member States

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 recommends the development of Programme Specific Indicators. According to Article 81(2) of Council Regulation 1698/2005 ‘each Rural Development Programme shall specify a limited number of additional indicators specific to that programme.’ The CMEF guidance note recommends Member States to provide additional indicators

- ‘when a common baseline indicator does not cover the specific characteristics of the programme area;
- when an additional objective or national priority defined in the National Strategy Plan or the programme is not covered by an impact indicator;
- when common impact indicators are not detailed or specific enough to reflect the wider benefits of a measure, or where a common impact indicator does not exist for a measure. This is particularly important where measures are highly site-specific, for example in agri-environment. Appropriate measure-specific impact indicators should be developed.’

The ex-ante synthesis report, carried out by Metis and AEIDL (2008), shows that out of 94 Rural Development Programmes 51 include programme-specific impact indicators. Nearly half of these programmes, 23 in number, apply programme-specific indicators, which relate to the common impact indicators, i.e. they chose a different way of measuring impacts either by introducing sub-measurements or replacing the common indicator. In the Austrian RDP e.g. six indicators have been introduced for assessing the impact of measure 221 ‘First afforestation of agriculture land.’

Twenty-eight programmes apply additional indicators, which offer new aspects or present another focus related to the axis. Out of those 28 programmes, 16 programmes have added to their set of indicators new ones which refer to the wider rural development, i.e. axis 3. In this regard, aspects such as quality of life, rural tourism or life-long learning are mentioned most often in the programmes. Two programmes refer to axis 4. Most of all 51 programmes provide programme-specific indicators which mainly address job creation and development, but also environmental aspects which focus on axis 1 and axis 2 aspects (Metis & AEIDL 2008).

The analysis shows that in spite of considerable criticism which has been expressed in regard to the CMEF impact indicators (see also section 2.3.1, 2.3.2 and 2.3.3) nearly half of the Rural Development Programmes do not contain programme-specific indicators and only 28 of the RDPs apply additional indicators to fill the identified gaps. This is not simply explained by the fact that Member States were in 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 analysis which means additional effort in terms of time and money. Therefore, some Member States have been reluctant in choosing additional indicators, which is reflected in the two following statements:

‘Impact assessment is provided only based on proposed common indicators (CMEF). Although other indicators will be useful or needed, due to time and financial limits no additional indicators were implemented in SK’ (expert of group I, nMS).

‘For sure other (more detailed) indicators are necessary to be added. These were not recommended and main reason was low interest of MoA. Evaluation is still not political priority and the next election period is too short - 4 years - to force politics to consider a longer period’ (expert of group I, nMS).

If additional indicators have been selected they often reflect specific needs within the Member States – just as is intended by the Commission. For example, the RDP of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Germany contains five additional impact measurements, two of which refer to tourism which is supposed to contribute to a diversification of economic activities (‘additional number of overnight-stays’, ‘increase of GVA due to tourism’). As Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is confronted with the problem of depopulation, another programme-specific impact indicator is the ‘stabilisation of number of inhabitants’.

The example shows that choosing additional indicators may be helpful to better detect impacts of the Rural Development Programme. Best practice examples of selected additional indicators might be of great support to Member States, which have been reluctant so far in selecting programme specific indicators. Additionally, it would be desirable if the selected additional indicators would be carefully analysed as there may be suggestions, which would be suitable to serve as an additional common indicator in the next programming period. Examples for meaningful additional indicators might be e.g.: Carbon sequestration or share of deadwood. These would lead to additional conclusions on the impact and thus might improve programme steering as well as serve as a sound basis for accounting.

2.3.5 Evaluating Rural Development Programmes against wider objectives

The strategic objective ‘to take into account EU level strategies (3.5)’ voices the requirement of an integrated review not only of EAFRD objectives but also other relevant strategies such as Lisbon or the Sustainable Development Strategy. Both the Lisbon strategy and the Sustainable Development Strategy are overarching aims of the European Commission. These

are already mentioned as ‘horizontal objectives’ of European RD policy, in which it is formulated that RD policy should ‘accompany and complement the market and income support policies’ of the CAP, and ‘thus contribute to the achievement of that policy’s objectives as laid down in the Treaty’. Furthermore, it is required that RD policy ‘should also take into account the general objectives for economic and social cohesion policy set out in the Treaty and contribute to their achievement, while integrating other major policy priorities as spelled out in the conclusions of the Lisbon and Göteborg European Councils for competitiveness and sustainable development’. Looking beyond the European Union and its regulatory structure, there are additional perspectives on RD and further suggestions on what to strive for in order to advance RD which are often explicitly or implicitly taken up in and/or interweaved with the defined horizontal objectives. Experts were therefore asked if these wider objectives are taken into account when assessing the impacts of a set of measures and a programme; and if so what kind of approaches they consider as useful.

Improved Governance

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 multiplicity of stakeholders entails the existence of multiple values and perceptions. In order to achieve more and better co-ordination across and within levels of government OECD specifies the following objectives:

- Regarding horizontal coordination at local level, objectives are to overcome the sectoral in favour of an integrated policy approach, as well as to involve private partners and to achieve the appropriate geographical scale.
- The goal referring to vertical coordination across government levels is to encourage local actors to participate in the design and implementation of place-based policies for rural development. An associated evaluation- and monitoring-related goal is to ensure that place-based policies are effective and improved over time.

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)’. By integrating the Leader approach into the scope of the EAFRD within the current funding period positive impacts in terms of improved governance are expected.

In the interviews most experts agree that the RDP has an influence on governance. It was often stated that the principle of partnership has been emphasised in the EAFRD (in comparison to the former funding period): Economic and social partners get more involved in the programming process and they participate in monitoring committees. However, for some countries it was stated that certain groups still had a (more) powerful say when it came to final decisions than others. Apart from that, especially interviewees from the nMS stated that the RDP has had a positive influence on partnership arrangements:

‘Also the compulsory monitoring committee on the Rural Development Programmes is a good example for multi-level coordination, because the decisions concerning the programmes have to be discussed on in a wide public, it has to be transparent. It is been a great step in partnership building in Hungary (expert of group I, nMS).

Especially Leader is considered as having a positive impact on governance. Experts state that Leader contributed to

- improving the quality of local governance and deepening the democracy as different stakeholders are brought together within projects and/or LAGs,
- supporting and stabilizing partnership arrangements,
- improving multi-level coordination as it requires exchange of knowledge and cooperation from local to national level.

At the same time experts hint on the drawbacks the mainstreaming of Leader may also have: While the area of implementation has been enlarged and more Leader-regions have been chosen, i.e. there are more regions which have LAGs and cooperation between public and private stakeholders, there are relatively little possibilities of funding of private stakeholders. At the same time national co-funding has now to be executed via the payment agency, which makes funding procedures of projects more complicated and thus is a disincentive to stakeholders. As a consequence, it becomes harder to mobilise participants and to keep them committed over a longer period.

Partnership agreements other than Leader are often difficult to implement. Some experts generally question if the positive characteristics which are attributed to governance (transparency, cooperative decision processes etc.) actually really apply to the EAFRD. They point out, however, that it is quite hard to detect impacts in relation to this objective. 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.

There are several suggestions of interviewees how to measure the impact of RDP against the objective 'improved governance'. Participants in partnership and their degree of participation should be assessed qualitatively and as some interviewees state, quantitatively as well. A first step is collecting factual information on the process of participation, e.g. number of participants, information on who is participating and how that may change over time, number and kind of meetings, etc. Secondly, interviews are suggested: Economic and social partners should be asked to judge the process of participation and their influence in the meetings of the committee as well as to reflect on the success of their suggestions and ideas (which issues have they raised, what has actually been implemented/taken into account when programming?). This step implies keeping record of meetings, opinions, suggestions etc. and trying to track them back into the programmes. Concerning partnership arrangements in the frame of Leader, interviews in the LAGs are suggested as well as with key persons who are not directly involved in LAGs and compare their views on the process of participation. In order to get a more adequate picture of the general and specific impacts of an RDP in terms of contribution to governance challenges it is important to contextualize in rural policy settings. In case there is a broad knowledge of the local context it might even be considered to carry out quantitative institutional and network analyses.

Establishing the counterfactual is stressed as a major problem. Comparing Leader territories to non-Leader territories, for instance, is highly problematic because there are too many different influencing aspects. Instead, a counterfactual analysis could be implemented in temporal terms, trying to understand to what extent the change between the ex-ante and the ex-post situation can be attributed as caused by Leader. However, neither RDPs nor ex-ante evaluations include a description of the ex-ante situation in terms of governance in Leader territories, as it is not prescribed in evaluation guidelines. In order to compare, specific and case-sensitive indicators would have to be found as it is not possible to generalise.

Lisbon and Göteborg Objectives

In the European Union there is a constant striving for a refinement of policies in order to adapt to new challenges and/or new strategies. Ideally, policy reforms lead to a more consistent policy, maximise synergies and minimise contradictions between and within policy areas. Two major strategies have been developed in the recent past, i.e. the Sustainable Development Strategy which has been developed in Göteborg in 2001 and the Lisbon Strategy which has been developed in 2000 and relaunched in 2005. These are reflected in the strategic guidelines which ‘[...] aim at the integration of major policy priorities as spelt out in the conclusions of the Lisbon and Göteborg European Councils.’ (Council Decision 2006/144/EC, Annex). It is stated that the new programming period provides a ‘unique opportunity to refocus support from the new EAFRD on growth, jobs and sustainability. In this respect, it is fully in line with the Declaration on the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development and the renewed Lisbon Action Programme which seeks to target resources at making Europe a more attractive place in which to invest and work, promoting knowledge and innovation for growth and creating more and better jobs’ (ibid.).

The national strategy plans and chapter 10 of the RDPs reflect the Community priorities and their contribution to the Lisbon and Göteborg objectives. As the assessment of impacts is carried out against the set objectives, the Lisbon and Göteborg objectives should be paid attention to in evaluation. However, most of the experts state that there is no analysis going beyond the general statements in chapter 10, 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 aims at stimulating growth and creating more and better jobs, while making the economy greener and more innovative. Though these countries do well as 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. Most of the experts state that current evaluation structures, like e.g. different evaluation guidelines for EU programmes, lack of willingness of Managing Authorities to share budget etc., prevent a common monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, especially experts from nMS observed that Managing Authorities are still struggling with managing CMEF requirements, and doubt that there is further room to think about improvements and additional indicators or methods to improve evaluation regarding the wider objectives.

Moreover, the current set-up and programming of RDPs itself (cf. WP 2 and WP3) is not contributing to the Lisbon and Göteborg as much as it could, ideally. Decisions on measures and funding remain top-down and intransparent, as even in those Member States where the RDP has to pass parliament, these are often just waved through, as the politicians ‘often prefer to leave EU funding to their administrative levels, because they consider it as too complex’ (expert of group I, oMS). Furthermore, some expert argue that the ‘pick and mix’ of measures prevents a common Europe-wide focus on employment and growth in rural areas as well as sustainable development. Additionally, experts of countries where RDP budget is low (cf. WP 4) do not consider the RDP as a main driver for political reform.

Territorial cohesion

Consisting of 27 Member States with a total of 495 million inhabitants the European Union comprises a broad diversity of regions going along with distinct economic and social disparities. Therefore, one declared objective of the European Sustainable Development Strategy is to achieve social equity and cohesion. In Rural Development Policy, territorial cohesion is reflected in the policy objective ‘to improve quality of life in rural areas and encourage the diversification of economic activities’, and the two related sub-objectives ‘to improve the quality of life in rural areas’ and ‘to reinforce territorial coherence and synergies⁷’. The strategic guideline 3.2 states ‘promoting territorial balance’ as an explicit RD objective:

‘Rural development programmes can make a vital contribution to the attractiveness of rural areas. They can also help ensure that in a competitive, knowledge-based economy, a sustainable balance between urban and rural areas is maintained. In combination with other programme axes, land management measures can make a positive contribution to the spatial distribution of economic activity and territorial cohesion.’

In addition, consistency with other EU policies, in particular in the fields of cohesion and environment is to be ensured (Council Decision 2006/144/EC, Annex).

There are different views on the contribution of the RDP to the objective. Some experts state that it was an important tool in reducing disparities between urban and rural regions. Others add that especially axes 3 and 4 have the potential to reduce disparities as they are concerned with diversification of incomes and increasing quality of life in rural areas. On the other hand it is observed that RDP may also increase disparities, especially in regard to measures with a long agricultural tradition like investment support or land consolidation. These measures are often implemented horizontally and advantage larger farm holdings/favoured areas.

‘Because Pillar 2 comes from DG Agri, it has never had a specific cohesion brief, but there have been commitments made that the CAP should contribute to cohesion objectives. However, it clearly doesn't. Indeed, it tends to give more money to the best off and less money to the worst off, because it relates to productivity’ (expert of group I, oMS).

Furthermore, co-funding regulations emphasize disparities as they often keep poorer beneficiaries (especially local communities) from application. The impact of RDPs on the objective could be increased by improved selection criteria and a more vertical design of measures. In addition, RDPs should contain a more explicit notion of territorial cohesion or refer to the objective at all.

The statements support findings of Shucksmith et al. (2005), who conclude in their study on the territorial impact of CAP that ‘expenditure under the RDR [Rural Development Regulation, note from authors] does not appear to support cohesion objectives’ (Shucksmith et al. 2005:189).

As regards assessment of impacts there are no statements that evaluation is explicitly carried out against the objective and there are only few suggestions how impacts could be detected: A rather simple approach would be a comparison of incomes between favoured and less favoured regions before and after the implementation of measures. Some experts suggest to

⁷ In the document (CMEF guidance note d) the sub-objective is ‘to reinforce territorial coherence and synergies’. This is obviously a mistake, as ‘coherence’ would make no sense in this respect. Instead, the term ‘cohesion’ is probably meant.

widen the approach in that input of money and characteristics like unemployment, GDP etc. should be compared between regions. A comparison of RD expenditure and economic/structural indicators was applied in Shucksmith et al. (2005) as well. The use of econometric models and economic growth models, based on economic structure of countries and regions was reported as promising by one expert.

Diversity of rural regions

The EU is characterized by a broad diversity of rural areas, comprising a variety of communities, cultures, environments and economies. 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.

In the frame of the EAFRD, experts consider especially axis 3 and axis 4 as relevant in the context of preserving or enhancing rural diversity. Measures within these axes often target at increasing endogenous potential and therewith address the diversity of regions. A bottom-up way of implementation may as well contribute to preserving or enhancing rural diversity. In terms of spending however, though there has been a shift by several Member States towards Human Capital, Local Capital and Wider Rural Development (cf. results of WP 4/5) experts still detect a strong focus of agriculture within many Rural Development Programmes. They raise the concern that too little budget is spent for measures within axes 3 and 4 in order to stimulate endogenous potential, diversification of rural economies and enhancing quality of life. In addition, it is argued that especially the objective of preserving and enhancing diversity of rural regions calls for an integrated and flexible approach, in order to allow applicants to make use of the fund according to their specific needs. Though the current EAFRD procedure gives a certain freedom to Member States to tailor their RDPs to specific regional needs, the current financing and control system restricts them in applying more innovative and experimental approaches:

‘And don’t forget that the European Court of Auditors puts pressure on DG Agri, because they want these Déclaration d’Assurance for the second pillar. Which would mean a threshold of error level of two percent. And the whole Integrated Administration and Control System has to be applied. Which is simply not possible, least of all for innovative, experimental approaches’ (expert of group I, oMS).

A recent communication of the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the Court of Auditors suggests to raise the threshold of error level up to 5% (COM (2010) 261 final). If the proposal is put into practice it might give more room for more flexible and innovative approaches in the future.

In general it is stated that there are no explicit strategies as regards improving rural diversity which makes it hard to carry out an evaluation against the objective. On the other hand evaluators point out that evaluation itself captures the diversity along the way when evaluating measures and projects in different regions. They stress that a future challenge is to make intelligent and efficient use of this existing information.

According to interviewed experts the assessment of impacts against the objective requires a place-based, territorial approach in order to make conclusions on preservation or enhancement of rural diversity. Some experts suggest analysing the impacts quantitatively, comparing the absorption of money by regions with local/regional indicators of development. This would

encompass indicators such as increase of visit rate, number of investments, benefitting people, etc. Another suggestion is to carry out case-studies and analyse the coherence of objectives and the design of policies with respect to local needs to understand whether the former really fit the latter. On this basis locally-specific indicators could be applied, which should not be compared at EU level, however, as it may lead to distortions. Analysing the concepts of LAGs has also been suggested following questions like: Do they put special emphasis on certain objectives? Have they initiated projects which activate endogenous potential?

3 Key findings and conclusion

The RuDI project addresses the question of how best to assess the impact of rural development policies at all relevant levels and across the diversity of rural Europe. RuDI work packages 2 to 5 carefully examined processes, factors and actors in policy design and implementation. Work package 6 provides knowledge on the remaining part of the policy cycle, evaluation, reviewing current RD evaluation processes in the European Member States. 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, 2009a, 2009b). 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 benefit of evaluation more clearly on all political levels. Such a culture of evaluation would probably lead to an improved use of evaluation results and therewith increased interest in the results of evaluation and better appreciation of evaluation (i.e. creating awareness that evaluation is not only carried out for accountancy purposes but also for institutional learning). A culture of evaluation would as well affect data collection positively: Record-keeping would not be felt as yet another burden and data would better meet evaluators' needs.
- Generally, **more and early stakeholder involvement** would be useful in order to upgrade the understanding of evaluation and increase interest and motivation to actively participate in the process. The early involvement of stakeholders would allow for reflection of the different interests in evaluation results, so that evaluation could be better designed to meet the different requirements. Also in terms of data availability it should be considered to have stakeholders involved in data provision.
- **A good (personal) relationship between the Managing Authority and the evaluator** is crucial. The relationship can 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. There should be a constant and reciprocal flow of information between the evaluator and the Managing Authority, which builds on mutual trust (e.g. in order to obtain sensitive data and information).
- **A well-conceived methodological approach** is important in order to come to valuable results. In this context, capacity and professionalism of evaluators and their counterparts at the Managing Authority are often referred to as success factors. Clear evaluation questions should be identified responding to specific interests on part of programme managers, EU Commission and – if they are involved more in the future – social and economic partners.
- In order to increase the use of evaluation results a **good readability of reports** is important and can be summarized with the formula 'Write as much as necessary but as little as possible, in the simplest way'. Currently, reports will always have to cover the

span between being voluminous (as they have to meet all the requirements and serve accountancy purposes), and being condensed enough to be well received and influential in institutional learning processes. It might be even helpful to establish a working group of EU and government officials as well as evaluators and economic and social partners 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. The establishment of the help desk and the evaluation network approach has already been a first step in that direction. Furthermore, results of evaluations should be communicated to the wider public (in a more easy to read way).
- **In addition the establishment** of learning arenas might be helpful. These might lead to better information and education of all stakeholders involved. 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.

In general, experts regard the introduction of the **CMEF** as a helpful tool for carrying out evaluation because it has led to a clearer and more workable monitoring and evaluation system and it provides guidance. However, **substantial criticism** has been expressed regarding the suggested methodological approach and the suggested set of impact indicators. Experts statements show that although common indicators have been introduced there are still many different ways how the actual assessment can be carried out (cf. 2.3.2, 2.3.3). Experts from the Managing Authorities would therefore appreciate a more compulsory methodological approach, while evaluators point out that methods have to be chosen context-specific and can't be mandatory.

When quantifying the impacts in order to draw conclusions on the impacts of the overall programme, mutual influences between different measures leading to synergies as well as constraints have rarely been focused on. These cross-axis relations between objectives and measures emerge at individual beneficiary level, as well as at broader local or regional level. In order to capture these less obvious and less tangible effects results cannot be just summed up as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. An assessment of these synergies is difficult. Some experts add that it depends very much on the willingness of officials if these synergies are actually captured.

Managing Authorities and evaluators struggle with the requirements for the assessment of impacts as the conducted interviews show. One challenge is to measure both the micro level and the macro level effects and disentangle these effects from other influencing factors. Evaluators suggest different approaches, ranging from statistical and econometrical methods to system dynamic modelling.

In addition the establishment of the counterfactual, i.e. calculating the changes that would have occurred without the specific programme intervention, netting out the effects of the programme by capturing deadweight and displacement effects and detecting unexpected effects is rather difficult.

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 often perceived as too narrow and demanding, thus distracting evaluators and Managing Authorities from capturing the specific impacts of their Rural Development Programme.

Three indicators, **economic growth, labour productivity and employment creation** are interrelated and some experts state that due to this interrelation the indicators require applying a coherent methodological approach. Evaluators point out, however, that they encounter considerable problems. First of all there is the general problem of data availability, especially for the new Member States (cf. section 2.2.2). Regression analyses e.g. depend highly on the existence of sufficient data on the micro level which is not always the case. In addition the establishment of the counterfactual is rather difficult (cf. section 2.3.2). Further problems are the aggregation of effects to macro level as well as establishing causal-effects relationships.

The impact indicators which are suggested in the CMEF (Annex 3 J) show a strong emphasis on environmental impacts as four out of the seven suggested indicators are supposed to measure the environmental impact of the programme: **Reversing biodiversity decline, maintenance of high nature value farming and forestry areas, improvement in water quality and contribution to combating climate change**. Still even these four suggested indicators are not able to cover all of the environmental impacts the EAFRD is aiming at, for instance, soil conservation or preservation of scenic beauty are not covered. In addition, most of the suggested ways to measure impacts are not considered as appropriate. The Guidance Document on HNV was welcomed by evaluators but they point out that two years have passed in which necessary field work for data collection might not have been carried out due to uncertainties about what to measure. As in axis 1, evaluators state that it was difficult to establish causal changes due to lack of process knowledge as well as lack of adequate data. Some experts stress that currently they are analysing only area-related measures against the objective 'to improve the environment and the countryside'. However, they hint on the fact that other measures which have an impact in this respect e.g. investment measures should be taken into account as well.

Experts therefore **call for thematic studies** which should be carried out and should analyse more deeply certain areas and should not be time-bound. In addition, they state that regional, more site-specific approaches are needed because country wide indicators are often not suitable.

In terms of **Leader**, experts state that current assessment is not able to capture its benefits as often its objectives are outside the scope of 'conventional' RD measures'. Some experts point out the same applies for other axes, as their maybe good performing beneficiaries and interventions whose (positive) impact will not be detected through current assessment of impacts.

In spite of all the criticism which has been expressed in regard to the CMEF impact indicators only half of the Member States and regions have made use of the possibility to develop **additional indicators**. Nearly half of the Rural Developments do not contain programme-specific indicators and only 28 of the RDPs apply additional indicators to fill the identified gaps. Interviews indicate that a major reason for Member States being so reluctant in choosing

additional indicators is a lack of resources and commitment: Additional indicators often require additional data and analysis which means additional effort in terms of time and money.

If additional indicators have been selected they often reflect specific needs within the Member States and turn out to be helpful to better detect impacts of the Rural Development Programme. Best practice examples of selected additional indicators might be of great support to Member States, which have been reluctant so far in selecting programme specific indicators. Additionally, it would be desirable if the selected additional indicators would be carefully analysed as there may be suggestions, which would be suitable to serve as an additional common indicator in the next programming period. These would lead to additional conclusions on the impact and thus might improve programme steering as well as serve as a sound basis for accounting.

Four **wider objectives** have been analysed which are explicitly or implicitly taken up in and/or interweaved with the defined horizontal objectives. These are improved governance, Lisbon and Göteborg objectives, territorial cohesion and preservation of rural diversity. It was analysed if these wider objectives are taken into account when assessing the impacts of a set of measures and a programme. First (ideas on) approaches were collected.

In the interviews most experts agree that the RDP has an influence on **governance**. It was often stated that the principle of partnership has been emphasised in the EAFRD. Especially Leader is considered as having a positive impact on governance. At the same time experts hint on the drawbacks the mainstreaming of Leader may also have, which make it harder to mobilise participants and to keep them committed over a longer period (enlarged LAG-areas and increased number of Leader-regions but relatively little possibilities of funding of private stakeholder, national co-funding has to be executed via the payment agency, which makes funding procedures of projects more complicated). Partnership agreements other than Leader are often difficult to implement. 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. Several suggestions of interviewees how to measure the impact of RDP against the objective 'improved governance' were collected (cf. 2.3.5).

As regards **Lisbon and Göteborg objectives**, interviewed experts state that there is no analysis going beyond general statements (in chapter 10 of the RDP), 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. However, current evaluation structures, like e.g. different evaluation guidelines for EU programmes, lack of willingness of Managing Authorities to share budget etc., prevent a common monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, especially experts from nMS hint on the fact that Managing Authorities are still struggling with managing CMEF requirements and doubt if there is further room to think about improvements and additional indicators or methods to improve evaluation regarding the wider objectives. Moreover, the current set-up and programming of RDPs itself (cf. WP 2 and WP3) is not contributing to the Lisbon and Göteborg as much as it could, ideally. Decisions on measures and funding remain top-down and intransparent. Furthermore, some expert argue that the 'pick and mix' of measures prevents a common Europe-wide focus on employment and growth in rural areas as well as sustainable development.

There are different views on the contribution of the RDP to **territorial cohesion**. Some experts state that it was an important tool in reducing disparities between urban and rural regions. Others add that especially axes 3 and 4 have the potential to reduce disparities as they are concerned with diversification of incomes and increasing quality of life in rural areas. On the other hand it is observed that RDP may also increase disparities, especially in regard to measures with a long agricultural tradition like investment support or land consolidation. These measures are often implemented horizontally and advantage larger farm holdings/favoured areas. Furthermore, co-funding regulations emphasize disparities as they often keep poorer beneficiaries (especially local communities) from application. The impact of RDPs on the objective could be increased by improved selection criteria and a more vertical design of measures. In addition, RDPs should contain a more explicit notion of territorial cohesion or refer to the objective at all. As regards assessment of impacts there are no statements that evaluation is explicitly carried out against the objective and there are only few suggestions how impacts could be detected.

In the frame of the EAFRD, experts consider especially axis 3 and axis 4 as relevant in the context of preserving or enhancing **rural diversity**. Measures within these axes often target at increasing endogenous potential and therewith address the diversity of regions. A bottom-up way of implementation may as well contribute to preserving or enhancing rural diversity. In terms of spending, however, experts still detect a strong focus of agriculture within many Rural Development Programmes (see also WP 4/5). They raise the concern that too little budget is spent in order to stimulate endogenous potential, diversification of rural economies and enhancing quality of life. In addition, it is argued that especially the objective of preserving and enhancing diversity of rural regions calls for an integrated and flexible approach, in order to allow applicants to make use of the fund according to their specific needs. Though the current EAFRD procedure gives a certain freedom to Member States to tailor their RDPs to specific regional needs, the current financing and control system restricts them in applying more innovative and experimental approaches⁸.

In general it is stated that there are no explicit strategies as regards improving rural diversity which makes it hard to carry out an evaluation against the objective. According to interviewed experts the assessment of impacts against the objective requires a place-based, territorial approach in order to make conclusions on preservation or enhancement of rural diversity (cf. 2.3.5).

⁸ A recent communication of the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the Court of Auditors suggests to raise the threshold of error level up to 5% (COM (2010) 261 final). If the proposal is put into practice it might give more room for more flexible and innovative approaches in the future.

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Annex

Questionnaire and Reporting Format

For each question of the questionnaire: Please summarize the core statement(s) in bullet point form. If you have any comments, please write them separately below each core statement.

Note in advance, if possible:

Interviewee Name, Institution, Address and telephone number / email contact.

Interviewee Job Title

Date of interview

Background information

Profile of interviewee:

- a) Job description (brief) and length of time involved in RD work and particular role in evaluation
- b) How are you involved in rural development Impact Assessment? Do you have any special field of expertise within the frame of RD?

Institutional characteristics (only relevant where the institution has a direct role in/concern for RD Impact Assessment):

- c) What type of institution is this? (e.g., public, private, semi-state partnership, stakeholder representative, etc.)
- d) What is the aim of the institution, briefly?

Part 1 Political economy of evaluation

1. What is to your understanding the role of Impact Assessments in evaluation?

Stakeholders

2. Who are the main stakeholders of Impact Assessment of Rural Development Programmes and policies at the different levels (national, regional, local) in the countries you are an expert in? Please name the most important ones (not names but institutions, e.g. Leader groups, ministries etc. – not only evaluators!).
 - 2.1. What are their interests in IA? Are they actively involved in IA or are they influencing the process of IA (from identification of need, definition of terms of references, tendering, selection of contractor, identification of IA criteria, data collection, analysis, evaluative judgement, IA evaluation)
 - 2.2. How is information from Impact Assessment currently used by the different actors (e.g. used for the improvement of the next planning)? Please describe your experiences with regard to the past and present funding period.
 - 2.3. How would you describe the cooperation of administration and evaluators? Which factors regarding cooperation have potential influence on IA (e.g. reluctance, personal relations, common visions etc.)? Could you name certain success factors?

3. Are there other potential stakeholders which so far are not accessing or using IA information? Please name them! What could be their use of IA information?

Shortcomings

4. To your understanding, what are the most critical issues of impact assessment (looking at the whole process and not at content related issues)?

Timing

5. Is the timing (ex-ante, mid-term, ex-post) of evaluations appropriate? Does the timing of evaluations hamper Impact Assessments? What would be the best point in time to carry out an Impact Assessment? Is there enough time for completing an evaluation procedure appropriately or it is made under time pressure? And how long can an evaluation take?

Financial constraints

6. Do you see any financial constraints in regard to Impact Assessment?

Competencies

7. What are key competencies and capacities for impact assessment at the funding authority's level (national or regional ministries)? Where do you see shortcomings in capacities?
8. What are core competencies and capacities for impact assessment for evaluators? Where do you see shortcomings?

Part 2 Capturing the impacts of RDPs

9. How is impact in regard to the objective assessed? Please describe the used methodology.
10. Where do you see shortcomings of IA in regard to this objective?
11. Are different approaches applied for assessing "micro impacts" and "macro impacts" (micro= impacts on direct beneficiaries and indirect beneficiaries; farmers, business owners, rural inhabitants. macro= impacts on regions or at national level)? How could you overcome the difficulty to loose information when aggregating information at a higher level?
12. Are negative impacts also captured? How?
13. How can unexpected impacts be assessed?
14. Do you see further impacts of RDPs in regard to this objective which cannot be directly linked to a certain measure?
15. In regard to this objective, how can mutual influence/synergies between measures (be it positive or negative) be taken into account?
16. In regard to this objective, how can mutual influence/synergies between axes (be it positive or negative) be taken into account?

Part 3 Capturing those impacts of RDPs which are not explicitly translated into measures

Governance

17. Which influence of RD programmes exists concerning this objective? Please describe the influence for all of the above mentioned governance related objectives.
18. How can the influence be detected?

19. It is often claimed that RDPs still remain the “decision of the few”. Is there a way how to assess participation and acceptance of policy design and outcomes?

Political Reform

20. Is there an analysis of current policy objectives (as set in the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs, the Sustainable Development strategy, etc.) as a basis for assessing if the RDP also contributes to these objectives?

21. Do you see a way how influence can be detected?

Territorial coherence

22. Which influence of RD policy exists concerning this objective? Please describe the influence for all of the above mentioned objectives.

23. How can the influence be detected?

Diversity of rural regions

24. Which influence of RD policy exists concerning this objective? Please describe the influence for all of the above mentioned objectives.

25. How can the influence be detected?

26. Do you have any further comments on Impact Assessment in Rural Development?