



# Synthesis of Mid-Term Evaluations of Rural Development Programmes 2007–2013

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**ÖAR**

Regionalberatung GmbH



 UNIVERSITY OF  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

**ECORYS** 



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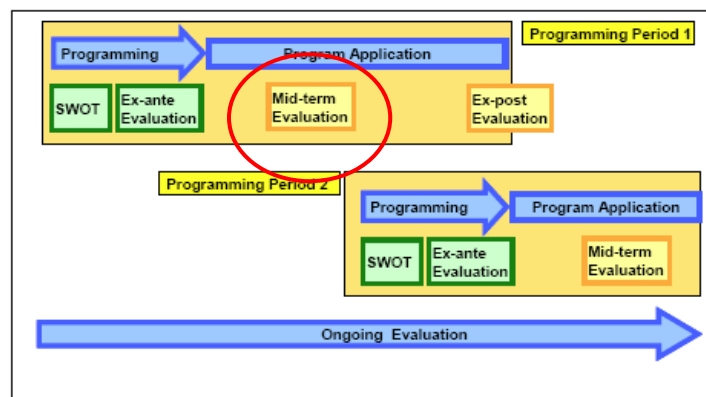
Agriculture  
and Rural  
Development

## Mid Term Evaluations – what are they and why are they important?

The Mid Term Evaluations (MTEs) are an important tool for the European Commission as well as the Member States to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) at the midway milestone of each programming period. The MTEs for the current funding period 2007–2013 were completed by the Member States in 2010 and generally covered the period up to the end of 2009.

The evaluations are based on the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) and its common indicator system, developed in cooperation between the Commission and the Member States. The MTEs for the 2007–2013 programming period cover the 88 national and regional Rural Development Programmes and 4 Network Programmes.

The mid-term evaluation as element of the whole EAFRD evaluation system



Source: CMEF, Guidance note B – Evaluation guidelines

The MTEs create a feedback mechanism and a platform for reflection, providing Member States with the information required to create flexible and well-targeted programmes that are in line

with Community priorities and meet the needs of the programme areas. More generally, the overall goal is to maximise the benefit from EAFRD funding in Rural Development.

## The Synthesis of Mid Term Evaluation Reports – what is it and how was it done?

This synthesis report summarizes and analyses the MTEs of the Programmes, creating an overview of the Rural Development implementation progress across the EU and commenting on the strengths and limitations of the monitoring and evaluation framework.

The work was carried out by Österreichisches Institut für Raumplanung ÖIR, in association with ÖAR Regional-

beratung GmbH, Polish Academy of Science, ECORYS Nederland BV and University of Gloucestershire during the year 2012. Various sources of information were consulted in combination with the MTE reports and tools tailored specifically for the purpose of the Synthesis of the MTEs, requiring analysis of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data, were developed and applied.

The findings are organised across 7 themes (implementation, impacts, complementarity, delivery systems, monitoring and evaluation, networks and conclusions and recommendations) in

order to ensure the accessibility of the results and to render them useful for future programme planning and policy development.

## The 7 themes – what have we learned?

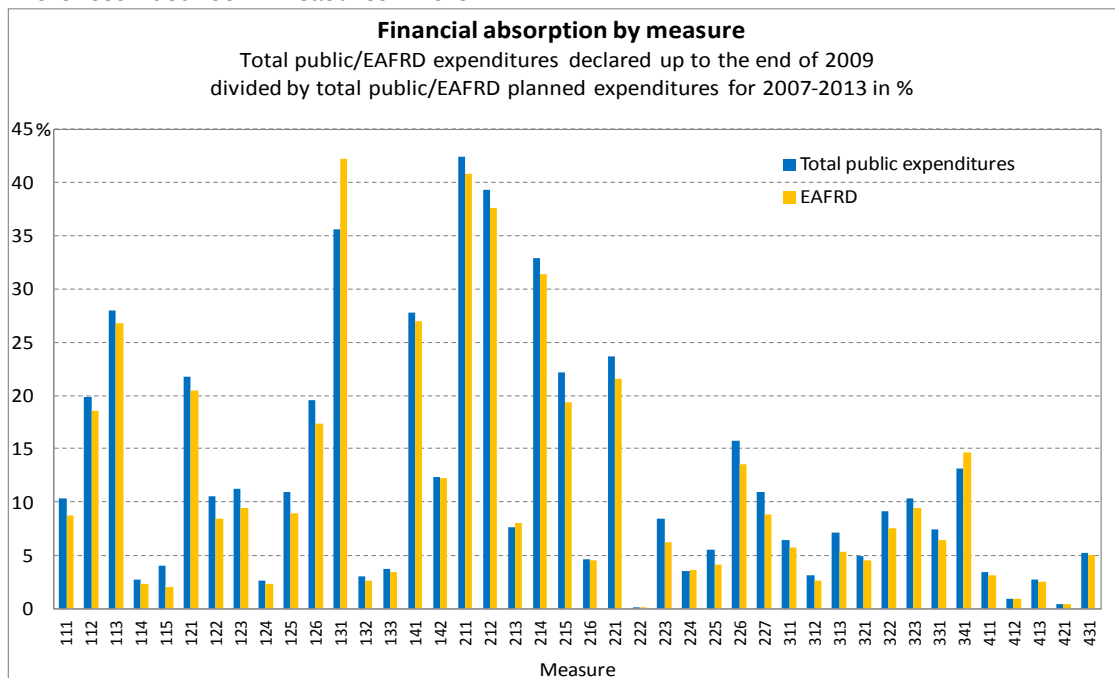
### 1. Implementation

Under this theme, the progress of the programmes with respect to their financial execution was analysed. Main findings show:

- Overall, RDP expenditure for the period remains well below planned levels with an EU-average of around 20% of financial absorption, and clear differences between the Member States.
- The uptake has been rather slow, with smooth implementation reported for relatively few measures. Substantial differences between measures were

observed with financial absorption rates between 5% and 40%.

- Measures with a lower level of technical requirements and most continuity from the last period are generally more advanced in their implementation, among them the Least Favoured Areas (LFA) measure and Natura 2000.
- LEADER measures are lagging behind in financial implementation, as delimitation of areas and selection procedures have been cumbersome.



Source: RDIS Annual Financial Implementation (2010): European Agricultural Funds for Rural Development EAFRD. Financial Implementation report 2009. 88 programmes included.

## 2. Impacts

Impacts were assessed on the basis of the impact indicators included in CMEF, which cover economic, environmental and social/quality of life indicators. The focus in the MTEs was mainly on measuring economic impacts.

The results show:

- In terms of economic impacts, roughly two thirds of the reports state a positive impact on growth and employment creation. Labour productivity outcomes were mixed between positive and negative developments.
- Positive environmental impacts were inferred in some reports (based on Axis 2) but the impacts of RDPs on the environment are rarely quantified.
- Quality of life measures were valued highly in rural communities but proved difficult to assess. Future investment in better analytical methods would be necessary.
- Assessments properly contextualised by reference to baseline trends or

other external information were identified as good practices for using economic indicators. However, overall few convincing methods for assessing impacts were found in the MTEs, which makes it difficult to use the reports as a reservoir for specific best practices.

In general, the short implementation time of the programmes at the time of the MTEs has made a reliable identification and quantification of impacts difficult.



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## 3. Complementarity



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Complementarity is defined as the lack of contradictions between actions and no duplicate funding of the same actions in different support instruments and programmes. MTE reports show:

- coordination between actions is usually carried out by subcommittees or

advisory boards within ministries of agriculture.

- Actual levels of complementarity were difficult to assess due to lack of data and different methods employed by evaluators.
- The assessment of coordination varies strongly between MTEs, ranging from "significant" to "very low".

A stronger emphasis on the importance of collecting regional and local data could support a more robust discussion of complementarity and enable targeted feedback in the future.

## 4. Delivery Systems

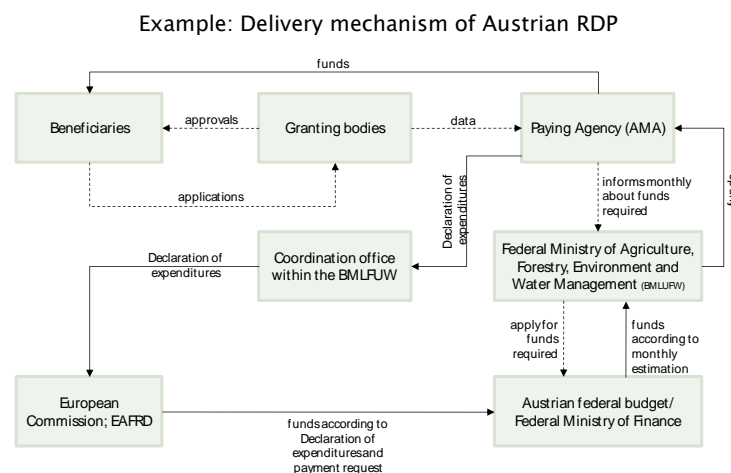
The analysis of delivery systems was not a formal requirement for the MTEs but 74% of the reports provided such an analysis. This indicates the high relevance assigned to delivery systems in terms of the successful implementation of programmes.

The analysis was mostly approached from a "delivery burden" perspective (e.g. administrative burdens – quoted by 72% of MTEs) while success factors were seldom mentioned.

Creating better approaches to overcoming administrative burdens in the

future may be possible by requiring neutral and factual descriptions of delivery systems that clearly outline the responsibilities of all relevant actors. This would help in:

- Identifying gaps and overlaps in functions
- Encouraging a better accountability mechanisms within programmes
- Delineating a clearer division of labour between the different levels of management.



Source: consultant's own figure

## 5. Monitoring and Evaluation

A well-functioning monitoring and evaluation system allows for timely detection of over- and underperforming programmes and for making targeted adjustments on time. The synthesis looked at various aspects of monitoring and evaluation of the RDPs:

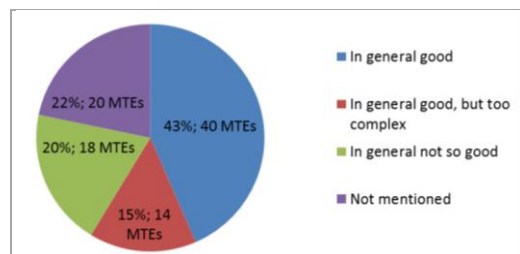
- Overall functioning of the system
- Performance of different types of indicators
- Recommendations for the future CMEF

The MTEs assess the monitoring and evaluation system as good overall (58%) and as ensuring a relevant set of data. However, the system is often criticised for being too complex.

Data gaps seem to be the most important problem, with a majority of MTEs having to collect additional data to complete gaps for the report. Surprisingly, despite a standard set of baseline indicators in the RDPs, relative-

ly few MTEs make sufficient use of these data.

Overall assessment of the monitoring and evaluation systems



Source: based on information collected for MTE synthesis, 2012.

Findings on output indicators:

- High level of availability and quality of quantitative information
- On average 38% of the target values were achieved, with differences between axis 1 (30%), 2 (40%) and 3 (20%)
- LEADER measures are included in all programmes but just 80% of the MTEs report on the indicators. LEADER met 20% of the targets at the time of the mid-term evaluations.

Findings on result indicators:

- 60% of the MTEs make a reference to result indicators but only 30% report on targets as well as achieved values

## 6. Networks

National Rural Networks (NRNs) provide a link between rural stakeholders and regional, national, and European administrations. Given the variety of NRNs throughout the Member States, evaluators employed a broad range of measures for their analysis. Due to this diversity, clear patterns, or problems and challenges, in implementing the NRNs could not be identified.

Among the impacts of NRNs identified in the MTEs were:

- Achievements vary greatly between individual measures (maximum 118%, minimum 6%)
- Average achievements vary between axes: axis 1 (24%), axis 2 (90%) and axis 3 (48%)
- Overachievements occur mainly in axis 2
- A late start of implementation has led to an overall low level of achievements.

Recommendations for possible revisions for the future period were mentioned in almost half of the MTEs. They include:

- Further guidance for the calculation and aggregation of indicators (improving target setting and accuracy of calculations) to strengthen the database of indicators
- Introduction of a user-friendly platform for regular updating and interpretation of all available data
- Need for simplification, e.g. by reducing the total number of evaluation questions
- More flexibility with respect to the use of the common indicators.

- the exchange and distribution of best practices/experience
- the enhancement of the capacities of actors/partnerships
- raising awareness on RDPs
- improving and supporting networking and cooperation.

Expectations of what an NRN is supposed to do seem to be quite similar throughout Europe, but what they are supposed to achieve in terms of results and impacts is not as clearly defined.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations contained in the MTEs provide a summary of the problematic aspects of programme implementation. Many evaluators concentrated on assessing the individual measures, whereas a general assessment of the RDPs' rate of achievement on overall objectives would have been more useful. An effort on the side of the Commission to draw up clear, obligatory guidelines for evaluators could help standardize the process to produce comparable results.

91% of the MTEs provide conclusions and recommendations. Issues that are frequently mentioned include:

- There are delays in the implementation of the RDPs.
- Revisions are needed in particular with respect to budget reallocations: 76% of MTEs recommend such revisions.
- The inefficiencies in delivery systems need to be addressed.



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- Concerning the functioning of the axis, LEADER is the most often criticised axis.
- In order to improve the coherence of actions with strategic objectives, there are proposals for elimination of the 3 axis structure of RDPs.
- The timing of the MTEs has been too early to come to a well founded assessment of RDP performance.

### Lessons for the future – where to go from here?

Timing of MTEs:

The MTEs seem to have been carried out at too early a stage in the life cycle of the programmes, at a moment where too little data was available to come to a reliable overall assessment on RDP impacts and performance. This does not discredit the importance of the MTEs, which clearly are relevant as an "early warning tool" for problems in programme implementation. However, it suggests that some adjustments could be envisaged to maximise the usefulness of this type of evaluation.

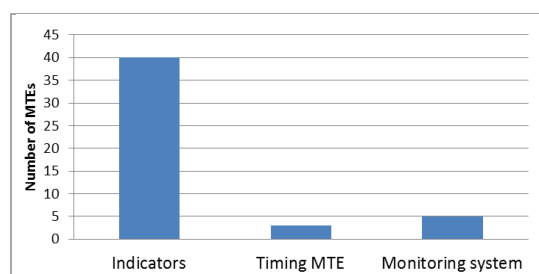
Three possible approaches are:

- Shifting MTEs to a later time and allowing some flexibility when programme authorities believe critical mass has been achieved
- Ensuring that RDPs start with fewer delays and safeguarding early and overlapping programming processes
- Changing the character of the MTEs to be oriented rather towards monitoring the "how" of programme implementation than the "what" of programme impacts, i.e. putting more focus on analysing delivery mechanisms and execution at the early stage of the implementation cycle.

The Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework:

Regarding the CMEF, the system of common indicators has shown weaknesses. There are too many indicators to be effectively covered by the MTEs, especially with the addition of programme specific indicators at the regional/national level tailored to particular projects. A simplification and slimming down of the common indicator set would improve the general acceptance of the framework.

Type of recommendations for possible revision of the RDPs



Source: MTE synthesis, 2012

It is recommended to concentrate on a limited and well-defined set of common indicators and further reduce the risk of misinterpretation or wrong aggregation of indicators by providing improved guidance on their calculation and use.

Design and implementation of the future EAFRD:

In terms of absorption and capacity to reach beneficiaries, the way how the programme is implemented and operated is important for its performance. Therefore, Managing Authorities are a crucial factor for successful implementation – strengthening the training of staff and sufficient staffing of Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies is necessary.

The selection of measures to be retained is an important question. In general a concentration of RDPs on a more limited number of measures seems to be desirable. The cost-effectiveness ratio of some measures should be examined for their return on investment. However, it will be necessary to observe the full programming period in order to judge which measures may be dropped altogether.

The fact that LEADER has been mainstreamed into the RDP has been regarded as a success at the outset of the programming period. However, but upon closer look, the seven LEADER principles (especially the area based approach and the bottom-up approach) were not well incorporated in RDPs and the implementation of LEADER proved to be slow at the time the MTEs were carried out.