

***Synthesis of Ex Ante Evaluations of  
Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013***

***Synthetic summary***

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## **SYNTHETIC SUMMARY**

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This synthesis of the 94 ex evaluations of rural development programmes has been carried out by a team of core experts supported by geographical experts over the period January 2008 to December 2008. The **objective** of this synthesis is to provide a stocktaking of the rural development programmes across the EU and to include the provision of data sets, the identification of European trends, and the investigation about the extent to which the needs of rural areas in the Member States are pertinently covered by rural development measures.

Concerning the **approaches to ex-ante evaluations**, in general these were carried out in an accompanying way, following an interactive and iterative process between evaluators and programming authorities, and this very intensive coordination process led to improvements of the quality of programmes. The recommendations issued by the evaluators seem to have been taken into account in the formulation of the programmes, although the lack of formal reporting about this process makes it not always possible to identify whether this was the case.

The findings derived from **theme 1 (the SWOT analysis and needs assessment)** show that Member States have devoted considerable efforts in the development of their strategies, which are based on a thorough assessment of needs of their respective programme areas. In many cases we have observed that the identified needs, driving forces and causes of disparities do not play the expected prominent role in the definition of the strategies. We have also noticed a lack of common understanding concerning the terms "needs", "driving forces" and "causes of disparities".

As for **theme 2 (policy objectives)**, we have observed that, while the programmes reflect the objectives of the rural development policy referred to in Council Regulation 1698/2005, they tend to do so in a rather unspecific manner. In addition, the identified objectives are usually not translated into quantified target levels and their link to the outcomes of the SWOT analysis is generally weak. Most ex ante evaluations state that there is a high level of coherence between the objectives of the programmes and those of the National Strategy Plans, although the funding allocations among different axis do not always appear well balanced with respect to the priorities of the national strategies.

Concerning **theme 3 (measures)** the ex ante evaluations provide a lot of relevant information on the lessons learned from previous programming periods. The most recurrent topics concern: improving coherence and complementarity between different policies and interventions, setting clear strategic priorities and reaching significant concentrations of funds for each of them, increasing flexibility of funding through simplification and reduction of transaction costs, strengthening bottom-up based strategies, and improving the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating programmes.

As regards **theme 4 (impacts)**, the expected economic, social and environmental impacts of the programmes are generally seen by the ex ante evaluators as positive and coherent with the rural development problems identified in the respective regions. Positive combined effects of different measures on relevant issues (e.g. biodiversity or the social capital of rural areas) are frequently reported. Problems have been generally experienced in quantifying target levels for the seven impact indicators.

In **theme 5 (added value of Community involvement)** we have observed that the principle of subsidiarity and proportionality has been generally carefully considered, in particular in those Member States that implement regional programmes. However, in some cases the lack of operational details makes it difficult to understand how these two concepts are expected to be applied in practice.

In **theme 6 (monitoring and evaluation)** we have concluded that the established monitoring and evaluation systems and – even more – the proposed systems for collecting, storing and processing monitoring data are described and assessed by the ex ante evaluators only to a limited extent. Within the programmes, these systems are generally developed to the extent necessary to reflect the requirements of the EU framework for monitoring and evaluation of rural development programmes.

The information on **theme 7 (ongoing evaluation system)** was collated through questionnaires and interviews with evaluators, managing authorities and members of the monitoring committees in the Member States and shows that ongoing evaluation is generally seen as a useful instrument to improve the quality of programme evaluation, and that substantial efforts have been made to implement it.

Overall, the **new “Objective-led” approach** to programming seems to have been adopted by the Member States, although it has not yet been fully absorbed by all Member States, nor by all the evaluators. Despite this progress, improvements remain to be made on the logical sequence SWOT – Rationale – Objectives – Measures, and on the way objectives are defined. As for the key underlying question of this synthesis – i.e. “the level of correspondence between measures included in rural development programmes and the identified needs of European rural areas” we have observed that substantial efforts have been made in the Member States to identify needs, and that these have been carefully considered in the programming phase. However, mainly due to the described gaps in the quantification of indicators and target levels, we cannot firmly conclude on the extent to which the measures included in the programmes have represented the *best* choice for addressing the needs of the European rural areas. In this respect, mainly based on qualitative information and on expert judgements, we consider that there is still room for improvements, in particular as regards the definition of clear priorities for action and their (justified) link to concrete measures. The mid-term in 2010 will be an opportunity to deepen the analysis of these issues.