QUALITY ASSESSMENT FORM

Title of the evaluation: Synthesis of ex ante evaluations of Rural Development Programmes

DG/Unit: DG AGRI, Unit L4

- Official(s) managing the evaluation: Guido Castellano .

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Assessment carried out by:

- Steering group

Date of the Quality Assessment 16/01/2009

(1) RELEVANCE

Does the evaluation respond to information needs, in particular as expressed in the terms of references?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
			X		

Arguments for scoring:

The evaluation report provides a comprehensive summary of the ex ante evaluation reports of rural development programmes. In addition to the ex ante evaluation reports, other relevant information sources (National Strategy Plans, Strategic Environmental Assessment reports, rural development programmes) were fully screened in view of covering the information needs as referred to in the terms of reference.

The scope of the evaluation (period of time, geographical areas, beneficiaries etc.) as specified in the terms of reference is well covered. The evaluation report provides useful hints for improving the programming, management, monitoring and evaluation of rural development programmes, both at Member States and Community level. Examples of good practices are identified in this respect.

The evaluation report provides a wide-ranging overview of relevant trends in the EU rural areas, including the provision of data sets. As regards the latter, the numerous annexes to the evaluation report make available a useful and complete inventory of the different rural development programmes (e.g. in terms of common and programme-specific indicators, choice of measures etc.), thus representing a useful tool for the starting of the ongoing evaluation system. Overall, the main objective of the synthesis of providing a thorough stocktaking of EU rural development programmes at the beginning of the programming period has been achieved.

(2) APPROPRIATE DESIGN

Is the design of the evaluation adequate for obtaining the results needed to answer the evaluation questions?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
			X		

Arguments for scoring:

One of the major challenges of the synthesis was linked to the inherent complexity of dealing with a substantial number of information sources, with a varying level of quality and homogeneity. In this respect, the set of tools provided by the contractor to overcome this problem (e.g. synthesis grids, guidelines for the geographical experts, methodology for clustering the different programme areas, etc.) is considered as good and coherent with the evaluation needs and requests.

The applied methods are clearly described, and the information sources and analysis tools that have been used, are adequate for covering the evaluation themes and topics.

(3) RELIABLE DATA

Are the data collected adequate for their intended use and has their reliability been ascertained?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
			X		

Arguments for scoring:

Available secondary data are well identified and comprehensively exploited. Primary data that were necessary to cover theme 7 were collected through interviews and questionnaires; the content of the latter was proposed within the first deliverables and validated by the steering group. Where relevant, the limitations of the collected primary data and/or of the existing secondary data (e.g. in terms of available impact indicators and target levels) are explained, and qualitative considerations are used to complement the analysis. Expert judgments have usefully backed the interpretation of the different data sources.

(4) SOUND ANALYSIS

Are data systematically analysed to answer evaluation questions and cover other information needs in a valid manner?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
			X		

Arguments for scoring:

Given the specificities of this synthesis evaluation, this criterion has to be linked to the analysis of the evaluation themes and topics. In this respect, the analysis has been based on appropriate techniques that have permitted to extrapolate a comprehensive set of relevant findings from a large number of information sources.

Available data have been critically interpreted, and – where necessary – qualitative considerations have well supported the analysis. The analysis of the expected results of rural development programmes is negatively influenced by the existing weaknesses of the programmes in terms of identification of target levels as well as the establishment and quantification of indicators. However, the consultant has made use of available data to the most possible extent.

Where relevant, the limitations of the analysis are clearly presented.

(5) CREDIBLE FINDINGS

Do findings follow logically from and are they justified by, the data/information analysis and interpretations based on pre-established criteria and rationale?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
			X		

Arguments for scoring:

The findings are credible, supported by adequate evidence, and do follow logically from the analysis. Judgments are prudently expressed in those cases where the information basis was not sufficient for solidly underpinning them (e.g. level of correspondence between identified needs and selected measures).

The final report provides a very broad range of useful findings with respect to the key aspects of programming, monitoring and evaluation of rural development programmes. Critical remarks about some aspects of the programming and evaluation systems are generally accompanied by examples of good practices; thus the report represents a useful tool for a critical reflection about the Community framework and its implementation, in view of their possible improvement both at EU and Member States level. A selective reading of the report by the competent authorities in the Member States can also facilitate the preparation of their respective mid-term evaluations, in particular by providing interesting hints for the analysis of those aspects of the programmes most in need of revision.

(6) VALID CONCLUSIONS

Are the conclusions non-biased and fully based on findings?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
		X			

Arguments for scoring:

The most relevant conclusions stemming from the findings are included in the report. They are not biased by partisan considerations and satisfactorily cover the evaluation themes, although a better balance between the different topics could have been ensured (e.g. conclusions about governance issues are extensively reported, less so the conclusions concerning the expected results of rural development programmes). Overall, the steering group considers that the conclusions do not fully reflect the richness of the findings provided. For example, one can regret that the findings of the analysis around cluster groups are only marginally referred to in the conclusions chapter. The quality of this latter chapter is variable: for example, the "rationale" of the monitoring and evaluation system is not described with the same level of preciseness as done in the respective chapters of the main report. Overall, the quality of the conclusions is considered to have been negatively affected by the repeated delays in the revision of the last deliverables, which left only a limited time for compiling the conclusions in a consistent and clear manner.

(7) HELPFUL RECOMMENDATIONS

Are areas needing improvements identified in coherence with the conclusions? Are the suggested options realistic and impartial?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
		X			

Arguments for scoring:

The recommendations stem logically from the findings and the conclusions, are fair and unbiased, and provide plausible options for improvements. Recommendations are linked to the different aspects of programming and implementation of rural development programmes and generally provide clear guidance for applying them. Some of the recommendations included in the conclusions chapter are not fully in line with the respective recommendations included in the main text (e.g. recommendations on theme 3, "measures"). As for the conclusions, the repeated delays in the revision of the last deliverables have negatively affected the quality of the recommendations.

(8) CLARITY

Is the report well structured, balanced and written in an understandable manner?

SCORING	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
		X			

Arguments for scoring:

The report is well structured. The synoptic tables added at the end of each evaluation theme allow for an easy understanding of the main issues covered within these themes.

The clarity of the text varies across the different chapters. Overall, the report is written in a sufficiently clear and understandable language. The policy evaluated (in particular as regards the newly introduced framework and strategic approach to programming) is only satisfactorily developed, while the applied methodology is clearly described. Some inaccuracies in the text reflect the relatively lack of time for the revision of the final text following the compilation of the draft final report.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT
OF THE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Is the overall quality of the report adequate, in particular:

- Does the evaluation fulfil the contractual conditions? **YES**

- Are the findings and conclusions of the report reliable, and are there any specific limitations to their validity and completeness? **Findings and conclusions of the report are reliable; no major limitations to their validity and completeness have been detected.**

- Is the information in the report potentially useful for designing intervention, setting priorities, allocating resources or improving interventions? **YES**

Overall, the quality of the report is assessed as: **good**

Given the contextual and contractual constraints encountered:

- What lessons can be learned from the evaluation process?
Synthesis evaluations of such a high number of programmes require a regular follow-up and support, during the whole evaluation project, by the EC officials involved in the negotiations of the programmes and in charge of the follow-up of their implementation.