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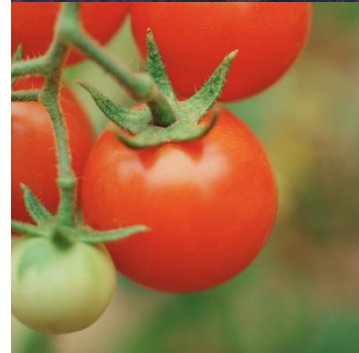
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Synthesis of Mid-Term Evaluations of Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013

Final Report · Synthetic Summary

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This summary contains the key findings and recommendations of the Synthesis of Mid-Term Evaluations (MTEs) of the 92 national, regional and network Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) 2007-2013, funded under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) of the European Commission. The aim of this study was to assess and summarise the results and impacts achieved so far by the RDPs and to evaluate the monitoring and evaluation framework's relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency including its strengths and weaknesses for future policy design.

Overall, the RDP measures and programmes achieved well below planned expenditure for the period. Uptake has been rather slow, with smooth implementation reported in relatively few measures. Those with less technical requirements and most continuity from the last period were the quickest to be implemented. Modifications were made in the majority of programs, or measures dropped. Most of the changes observed have been financial, i.e. budget shifts.

Economic, Environmental and Social/Quality-of-life impacts were assessed, however a large proportion of MTEs conclude that it is too early to judge overall impact. In terms of economic impacts, roughly two thirds of the reports state a net positive impact on growth and employment creation. However, calculation methods were not always found to be sound. Quality-of-life and environmental impacts were generally not convincingly assessed and the future CMEF could invest more into methods to gain more effective information on these topics. While some promising examples for assessment of impacts could be extracted from the MTEs, overall it was not possible to use the MTEs as a reservoir for best practices in evaluation of impacts to the desired extent.

Delivery systems at EU level and programme level were not an item in the MTE guidelines to be considered, however in a majority of cases evaluators judged them worthy of an extra mention, which indicates the high relevance assigned to them in terms of the successful implementation of programmes. Mostly, delivery systems were analysed from a "delivery burden" perspective while success factors were seldom mentioned.

The MTEs assess the monitoring and evaluation system as good overall and as ensuring a relevant set of data in general. However, the system is often regarded as too complex. Data gaps seem to be the most important problem in the system, with the majority of MTEs having to collect additional data. Despite a standard set of baseline indicators in the RDPs, references to these indicators were not updated accordingly in the MTEs, or the indicators were not included in the reports.

In terms of the indicators analysed, output indicators displayed a high level of availability and quality of quantitative information. On average 38% of the target values were achieved with differences between the axes (axis 1 on average 30%, axis 2 on average 40%, axis 3 divergent and LEADER below anticipated numbers at 20%).

Only about 30% of the reports report on both target and achieved values for result indicators. Achievements vary greatly between indicators and axes (axis 1: 24%, axis 2: 90% and axis 3: 48%). Overachievement of targets occurred mainly in axis 2. Difficulties were met in the aggregation of result indicators due to various methods of calculations used in the MTEs.

Recommendations on the future monitoring and evaluation system address mainly the need for further guidance for the calculation and aggregation of indicators and the need for simplification (e.g. a reduction in the number of evaluation questions). In particular for the impact indicators, more flexibility in the use of common indicators is suggested.

The evaluation of NRN performance was handled with versatile methods in the MTEs. Impacts of NRNs identified were the exchange and distribution of best practices/experience, the enhancement of the capacities of actors/partnerships, raising awareness on RDPs and improving and supporting networking and cooperation.

The majority of MTEs assesses rural development policy positively in general. 91% of the MTEs provide conclusions and recommendations, but the approaches are very heterogeneous. The issues most often addressed concern implementation (e.g. causes for delays), budget allocation (76% of the MTEs envisage revisions in budget allocations), delivery issues (recommendations for solving the inefficiencies in delivery systems), assessments how the axes worked (with the LEADER axis most often mentioned as not working well), complementarities and external factors (e.g. factors constraining the development of complementarities with other funds), coherence of actions with strategic objectives (some advocating reduction in the number of measures and elimination of the 3 axes structure) and timing (MTEs widely complain that the mid-term evaluation exercise has been conducted too early).

An effort on the side of the Commission to draw up clear, obligatory guidelines for evaluators to follow when drafting conclusions and recommendations could help standardize the process to produce comparable results.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Often there was insufficient data to make effective judgements early on in the life cycle of the programme. On the other hand, MTEs can be a beneficial 'early-warning tool' for taking up counter measures. Possible solutions to this issue are to shift the MTE to a later point in the programme (however this could pose a problem for synthesis when reports are produced at different times), ensuring that RDPs start with fewer delays by starting them within the ongoing programming period, and changing the character of the MTEs with a focus towards delivery mechanisms and implementation rather than on outcomes and results.

Delivery mechanisms should be included as an integral element of consideration in the next programming period. Greater attention to delivery systems would shift away from reporting problems as 'administrative burdens', and allow compulsory analysis and assessment of delivery mechanisms in the MTEs in a standardized and structured way.

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.

Additionally, the CMEF **creates the impression of a shared base of information and overall comparability of the performance of the RDPs**, while in reality there is often limited common understanding of the definition and meaning of the indicators across the board, leading to

different interpretations and skewing the results once aggregated and compared at the EU level. It would be beneficial to separate a limited and well established set of common indicators which can be aggregated from programme specific indicators which do not allow for such an aggregation.

The **assessment of impacts** has caused the most problems, in particular the challenges of data availability, level of assessment of impacts, and aggregation onto the EU scale. Shortcomings in the **assessment of the baseline indicators** were found; they need to be periodically updated and their importance as a basis and element of counterfactual impact assessment stressed.

In terms of absorption and capacity to reach beneficiaries, the way how the programme is implemented and operated reflects on its success. The **Managing Authorities are crucial for successful programme implementation** – strengthening the training of staff and ensuring sufficient capacity of Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies are of importance here. For the purpose of the MTEs, better planning of evaluations and preparatory activities would help to improve the quality of results.

The **selection of measures to be retained** is an important question – a more limited number of measures seems to be desirable, and the cost effectiveness ratio of some measures should be examined for return on investment, however proceeding with caution as it will be necessary to observe the full programming period in order to judge whether measures should 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, but upon closer look the LEADER principles were not well incorporated in RDPs and LEADER lags behind in implementation.