

***Synthesis of
mid-term evaluations of
LEADER+ programmes***

Final Report

Commissioned by:
European Commission, DG AGRI

***Synthesis of mid-term evaluations of
LEADER+ programmes***

Final Report

Commissioned by:
European Commission, DG AGRI

Project team: Bernd Schuh (ÖIR)
Herta Tödting-Schönhofer (ÖIR)
Hannes Wimmer (ÖIR)
Robert Lukesch (ÖAR)
Jean-Pierre Vercruysse (AEIDL)
Seamus O'Grady (ÖIR)

National experts:	<i>Austria:</i>	Bernd Schuh, Hannes Wimmer
	<i>Belgium (Flanders), The Netherlands:</i>	Margot Van Soetendael
	<i>Belgium (Wallonia), Luxembourg:</i>	Jean Pierre Vercruysse, Elisabeth Helming
	<i>Denmark, Sweden:</i>	Ulla Herlitz
	<i>Finland:</i>	Torsti Hyyryläinen
	<i>France:</i>	Jean-Pierre Vercruysse
	<i>Germany:</i>	Otmar Seibert, Manfred Geissendörfer
	<i>Greece:</i>	Sophia Efstratoglou
	<i>Italy:</i>	Carlo Ricci, Maura Montironi
	<i>Ireland:</i>	Seamus O'Grady
	<i>Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom:</i>	Paul Soto
	<i>United Kingdom:</i>	John Grieve

This study has been financed by the Commission of the European Communities. The conclusions, recommendations and opinions presented in this report reflect the opinion of the consultant and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Commission.

ÖIR-Managementdienste GmbH
A-1010 Wien, Franz-Josefs-Kai 27
Tel.: +43 1 533 87 47, Fax: +43 1 533 87 47-66, e-mail: fm@oir.at | www.oirfm.at

Vienna, November 2006 / ANr. A 2936.10 (100026)

Executive Summary

1. Introduction – Setting the Frame

Main features of the LEADER+ programmes

LEADER is a Community Initiative for rural development, which started in 1991 with LEADER I. It continued with LEADER II (1994 – 1999) and is now in its third phase LEADER+ (2000 – 2006). **LEADER+**¹ has been designed to help rural actors, considering the long-term potential of their local region. Encouraging the implementation of integrated, high quality and original strategies for sustainable development, it has a strong focus on partnership and networks promoting the exchange of experience. A total of € 5,046.5 m for the period 2000-2006 was committed, of which € 2,105.1 m funded by the EAGGF Guidance section and the remainder by public and private contributions. LEADER+ is structured around three actions (1) **Support for integrated territorial development strategies of a pilot nature**, (2) **Support for cooperation between rural territories**, (3) **Networking**.

The LEADER+ method encourages rural actors to realise development strategies characterised by a set of specific principles, which distinguish them from the approach to rural development that is normally followed in mainstream Rural Development programmes funded from the European Agriculture Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF). These specific LEADER+ features, which are mentioned in the Commission Notice to the Member States regarding LEADER+, consist of the *bottom-up and area based approach, partnership, integrated and sustainable pilot development strategies around specific themes, inter-territorial and transnational co-operation and networking*.

Scope and methodology of the study

Regulation 445/2002, Art. 57(1) requires the European Commission to prepare a Community-level summary upon receipt of the individual mid-term evaluation reports. To this end, this synthesis analyses the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and efficiency of LEADER+ programmes as reflected in national/regional Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) reports and other documents during the LEADER+ Midterm Evaluations reference period (2000-2003). The synthesis particularly examines the conditions for a successful application of the LEADER method in rural development activities and the extent to which it offers an added value compared to traditional (top-down) implementation modes of rural development programmes. It identifies examples of good practice in this respect. Furthermore, the synthesis examines the application and appropriateness of the current evaluation system as described by Regulation 1260/99 and the related Guidelines for the evaluation of LEADER+ programmes.

The synthesis was carried out over 8 months starting on November 30th 2005. The Transnational Project Team was organized in two subgroups: a core team², setting the scope of the analysis (i.e. developing the working tools for information collection) and synthesising the results at European level and the geographical experts, gathering and synthesising data at national and regional levels.

¹ LEADER+, as a Community Initiative, is governed by the Structural Funds Regulation 1260/99. Furthermore, the Notice of 14 April 2000 from the Commission to the Member States lays down Guidelines for the Community Initiative for Rural Development (LEADER+) [Official Journal C 139 of 18.05.2000]. It also sets out the technical arrangements for preparing, presenting and selecting programmes under the LEADER+ Initiative and for managing, controlling, monitoring and evaluating them.

² Bernd Schuh, Hannes Wimmer (ÖIR); Robert Lukesch; Seamus O'Grady; Jean Pierre Vercruysse

The core team provided a number of tools for quantitative and qualitative investigations:

- **Tool 1:** Assessment grid to collect general information on each of the programmes as provided in the MTE reports and their updates:
- **Tool 2:** Assessment grid to collect detailed information on each of the evaluation questions per programme as provided in the MTE reports and their updates:
- Formats for 23 **Case Studies** on selected programmes, which provided a methodological frame for conducting focus groups and the collection of additional information in order to fill the data gaps.

The national/regional mid-term evaluation reports and the updates of these reports were the primary sources of this European synthesis, complemented by other documents from national and European sources.

2. Main evaluation findings

Based on the identified intervention logic of the programme, the evaluators investigated into the relationship between the 49 evaluation questions, and identified 14 “cardinal” questions, which allowed specific conclusions on key components of the LEADER programme. This permitted to reduce the overall complexity of this meta-evaluation while ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the MTE reports.

All the “common evaluation questions” (i.e. questions included in the Commission guidelines for the mid-term evaluation of LEADER+ and addressed in all MTE) and the “further evaluation questions” (i.e. questions specific to this synthesis evaluation) were answered. The main conclusions for each of the five evaluation themes are presented below.

2.1 Conclusions on Theme 1: Implementation of the LEADER method

Theme 1 provides an overview of mainly three aspects:

- a) The implementation of the programme at administrative level
- b) The implementation of the specific features of LEADER by the managing authorities and by the local action groups
- c) The learning effects from previous LEADER phases

a) The implementation of the programme at administrative level

LEADER+ is a complex programme and requires complex management solutions.

The LEADER+ initiative is implemented in two steps:

- establishing the framework for selecting the local action plans and the LEADER areas;
- implementing the local action plans.

The two steps approach generally entails a **certain delay in programme implementation on the ground compared to mainstream programmes**. This also implies that **the mid term evaluations covered a phase which was mainly used for preparatory and structuring tasks**.

Almost all of the MTE reports pointed out that **previous experience with LEADER implementation** helped the administration of the managing authority to accelerate the start. This could especially be shown in countries where both experienced and new regions are dealing with LEADER+ (e.g. Netherlands).

The application of the specific LEADER features (e.g. bottom-up approach, area-based approach) also slows down the uptake of the programmes. In this respect, case study reports showed that different programmes are working on different maturity levels in some regions (e.g. in Germany and Italy). Countries with a national programme and a stronger concentration of competencies (which must not be mixed up with centralism) tend to have an advantage in this respect (Austria, Finland). Slow take-up of the LEADER programme could also be the result of limited human resources (e.g. for regions dealing with several Community programmes).

Despite the widening of the initiative to all rural areas, there did not seem to be any particular initiative to **attract new areas**. Most administrations put an emphasis on **creating equitable conditions for all eligible areas**. We find broad information campaigns and a second round of LAG selection among these measures.

LEADER is quite visible in the wider context of rural policy.

In most countries and regions where LEADER+ is implemented, **the initiative has a distinctive profile** and is given a specific role in the development of rural areas. LEADER provides many demonstrative examples for genuine rural development projects, specifically where mainstream rural policy is defined from a mainly agricultural point of view.

b) The implementation of the specific features of LEADER by the managing authorities and the local action group

LEADER requires good programme management and a bit more.

Deficiencies in programme management tend to have more detrimental effect on LEADER than other programmes **simply because of its complexity**. The MTE reports repeatedly list these deficiencies: (i) excessive bureaucracy; (ii) difficult relationships between managing and other involved authorities on one side and LAGs and project promoters on the other; (iii) problems with raising co-funding; (iv) delays in financing; and (v) insufficient autonomy of the LAG. The consequence of these deficiencies has been a loss of management efficiency (e.g. too much time spent on bureaucracy rather than mobilising and animating) and in due course disappointment of the local actors. While these conclusions tend to reflect the opinion of the LAGs (as well as shortages in administrative staff, as pointed out in several MTE reports), the need for the European Commission to define clear management rules for the administration of public money is acknowledged.

The LEADER approach

- requires the involvement of local people,
- seeks to use transparent selection procedures for local projects in the framework of a shared perspective of the future of the area,
- targets specific beneficiaries like women, young people or other less favoured groups,
- asks for a strategy formulated around a priority theme, trying at the same time to integrate different sectors and to foster innovation, all being enacted and carried out by a local partnership formed of people, who might never have worked together before.

This list of requirements might explain that **the features cannot be implemented in a mechanical way; moreover they need to be combined to produce the full added value of the initiative**. The MTE reports signify that there is something like the “spirit” or “culture” of LEADER which allows to deal with the inherent complexity in a better way than mainstream rural development programmes could accomplish: **this LEADER “spirit” is shared by key stakeholders, and conveyed by frequent interactions and exchanges between these stakeholders at administrative and local level**. This observation holds true for the majority of programmes and – like in previous LEADER periods – builds the backbone of positive results of LEADER implementation in general. Unfortunately the MTE of the LEADER+ programme can hardly come up with a detailed description of

what this “LEADER-spirit” consists of. This is due to the difficulties to capture something process-oriented and interactive like a “spirit” or perspective through standard evaluation methods.

The LEADER spirit shines through many single statements and facts which are to be found in several case studies (and sometimes even in the MTE reports).³

The selection of LAG was more an examination than a competition.

In many cases, the competition between local action groups was not a real one: **the process was more an “examination” than a “competition”** in the strict sense of the word. This can be explained by the budgets pre-established at programme level and the political will to serve all parts of rural areas and stakeholders.

Besides that, **the methods used to judge the quality of the local programmes submitted for funding** (consultation process, respect of minority point of views, use of participatory approaches, selection mechanisms and criteria for projects...) are often not documented, hence not evaluable.

The bottom-up feature has played a role in the selection of LAGs and programme implementation.

In general, the **bottom-up approach** has been taken into account in the selection of LAGs and in further phases of programme implementation (although to different extent), and this meant a clear improvement vis-à-vis the LEADER II period. Still this approach, which clearly distinguishes LEADER from mainstream rural development programmes, does not seem to have been fully exploited in most regions. In Portugal for instance the selection criteria for LAGs contained requirements concerning territory, partnership and strategy of rural development, but there was no reference to feeling of identity, bottom-up approach, innovation of the strategy, cooperation or networking. Other centrally organised programmes (e.g. Greece) could improve their regional/local stakeholder involvement in all phases of the programme implementation.

Bottom-up has a twofold dimension: (i) the relationships between the local actors and the LAG; (ii) the relationships between the LAG and the managing authority. The way to conduct interactions and participatory processes in one tier is usually similar to the one conducted in the other tier.

Good bottom-up does not need less, but rather another style of top-down: enabling and encouraging instead of command and control. This requires more competence of more actors involved at both (LAG and administrative) levels than is the case in most of the programmes. If the LAG is left without support from top-down, it may be overwhelmed by the weight of new responsibilities (e.g. being obliged to search for national co-funding on its own).

A good example of possible co-existence of “bottom-up” and “top-down” is the English programme, where guidelines issued at the start of the programme by the managing authority are updated and discussed with LAGs on a regular basis. This helps to reduce the “top-down” and “bottom up” tension between the LAGs (who have to operate on the ground) and the administration (who is responsible at European level).

There are examples (e.g. la Rioja – Spain, several programmes in Germany) of **paternalistic implementation**, where the administration is the main actor and the LAGs rather approve projects which are discussed between the individual promoter and the responsible desk officer. This governance style may produce good results in the short term, but fails to contribute anything to the social and organisational capital in the area.

³ “The success of a programme is the “intangible” part, but this is not measured in the evaluation. With the evaluation of “intangible aspects” it would be possible to know if a territory “breathes” the LEADER philosophy. This is the most important point that should be measured, although it is recognised that it is very difficult.” (Director of Rural Development in the Andalusia region of Spain)

The local partnership has opened new perspectives for local governance.

The concept of the **local partnership** has been taken into account in the selection of LAG, although **the balanced representation of interests** was usually not monitored after the initial assessment. The interests represented in the local partnership should reflect the situation of the respective area, based on a sound diagnosis of the needs of different parts of the population, and a balanced representation of interests cannot be achieved in the longer term by a mechanical respect of percentages.

Local action groups, specifically new ones, did not have enough resources (time) to design their pilot strategies according to the needs of local people.

Ideally, the **pilot strategy** has to be based on a thorough assessment of the area, of all parts of the population and their distinctive needs. For many LAGs (especially new ones) the time frame to set up this strategy in a broad consultation process was too tight in addition to their lack of capacities and resources. **Already existing LAGs were clearly advantaged** in this respect, which does not mean that their plans were necessarily better than those of the newcomers.

The heterogeneous picture of the “pilot” dimension of the strategy provided by the MTE reports is partly explained by the problems that actors were facing when dealing with this issue in concrete terms. The term embraced concepts such as “innovation”, “multi-sectoral integration” and the “priority themes”, which might be interpreted in contradiction to each other, depending on the context. **There should have been better guidance and better examples of good practice provided** in order to help rural actors to take these dimensions into account in a comprehensive and effective manner. Article 61 of Council Regulation 1698/2005 is much clearer and more concise in this respect than the Commission Notice on the LEADER+ guidelines (14/4/2000).

Cooperation and networking need time to grow and to bear fruits.

Cooperation and networking can mean three different things, which sometimes made the interpretation of the related documentation in the MTE reports difficult:

- They are operational principles and as such part of the LEADER approach
- They are measures endowed with respective budgets (action 2 and 3)
- They are standard practices of any development activity, regardless of being eligible for funding or not.

The MTE reports and case studies point out that there is certainly more exchange and even cooperation between LAGs and partnerships beyond the LEADER programme than being documented and explicitly formulated in terms of eligible actions or projects.

Although little activity did happen in terms of cooperation and networking as eligible actions within the reference period, the factors facilitating cooperation have been:

- Previous experiences in LEADER
- Commitment of (both local and administrative) actors to cooperation and networking
- Proximity and similarity of culture, mentalities, geographical features etc.
- Overall maturity of the programme

Networking may be both the seedbed for and the outcome of cooperation, but the evidence of the direct link of cooperation as a consequence of networking is not very robust. This is – of course – connected to the reference period, which did not really allow for intensive networking activities. Either the national networks were established rather late (which triggered the emergence of quite successful informal networks), or the time for intensifying external relations was too short.

Lack of time and interest, local actors' fears of getting bootlegged, overly bureaucratic procedures and the absence of technical support are mentioned in the MTE reports as **factors of hindrance for cooperation**.

c) The learning effects from previous LEADER phases

Experience pays.

The MTE reports confirm a **strong relationship between experience in previous LEADER phases and effective programme implementation** without really defining the nature of the experience and where impact can be anticipated. Our impression from various MTE reports and case study statements is that the essence of this experience lies in the value of experienced personnel which produces a dividend specifically in programme design, the design of local action plans, a quicker start-up, etc. Inversely, there is little data to show if inexperience caused difficulties or indeed if new ideas emerged where new people with little previous experience of LEADER+ were involved.

There is no systematic knowledge accumulation and transfer from one LEADER phase to another.

It is difficult to identify and describe common patterns of learning between the LEADER phases, either among the programming authorities or between the LAGs: **the transfer of lessons seems to be mostly left to chance** as very few instruments or tools seem to have been used to promote it on purpose.

The **national networks** have developed case studies and established data bases of good practices. However, these are mainly data banks and little work seems to have been done on conceptual and methodological aspects, e.g. on the nature of pilot strategies, on how to involve women and young people in local development etc.

All in all, the occasional events and meetings facilitated by the networks have fostered personal exchanges which eventually led to mutual learning and the transfer of concepts and approaches.

2.2 Conclusions on Theme 2: Specific Actions

Theme 2 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Behavioural changes resulting from LEADER implementation
- b) Dissemination and transfer of successful practices resulting from LEADER implementation

a) Behavioural changes as a result of LEADER+ implementation

LEADER represents a new approach to integrated rural development.

We consider behavioural changes and changes in interaction patterns as the core value added of the LEADER approach. **Behavioural and interactional changes shape the human, social, organisational and economic capital of the area;** and this sequence is not chosen at random. The degree to which this added value has been produced is determined by the extent to which the specific features of the LEADER approach, particularly the area-based, bottom-up and the partnership approach have been implemented.

Assessing behavioural changes requires specific methods of observation, and these methods have not been applied within the MTE. Thus we draw our conclusions mainly from the stakeholders' and evaluators' own impressions. Many questions on the impact of the programme in this early stage are answered referring to the social processes and new forms of cooperation which emerged. This is understandable, because the setting up of a local partnership and the elaboration of a joint strategy have mobilised potentials in the area which otherwise would not have been addressed.

The question is how lasting these behavioural changes are. In any event, the LEADER approach seems to actuate **a new form of local governance through indirect steering**. Some local stakeholders see the initiative **as a new approach to integrated development and as an instrument to support the self-governing forces of rural micro-regions**.

The implementation of the area-based and bottom-up approach have generated positive results, except in rural-urban relationships.

Although the need for accountability and control rules for the management of LEADER programmes is accepted, the practical experience shows that a more process-oriented control regime would better support local governance than rather rigid “management by objectives” in the form of quantitative rules. Another possibility would be the establishment of “contingency rules” (i.e. rules adapted to the different geographical and socio-economic environments).

A specific issue of this kind is the **numerical threshold of 100,000 inhabitants** per LAG. Even if this prescription was well-known in advance, for many LAGs (e.g. in more densely populated German areas), **it hindered the attempt to create coherent LEADER territories by excluding rural towns** which are important market places and social networking hubs. The threshold was criticised in some MTE reports as it hampers the support for building up value added chains and marketing initiatives in more diversified and urbanised rural areas. It is anyway acknowledged that derogations to the 10.000 – 100.000 inhabitants rule were possible within LEADER+ to permit creating coherent LEADER territories including, where relevant, more densely populated areas, and that around 15% of the LAGs have benefited of this derogation (status in 2005 and not in the reference period though).

Rural-urban relationships have rarely been chosen as thematic priorities by programme authorities, except in some Western European regions (Wallonie, England), where the outcomes cannot be assessed yet.

The bottom-up approach seemed to contribute to promote complementarity between actors in rural development. Again, the willingness and capacity of local actors to actively go for complementarity with other local actors depends on the **experience and maturity** of the LEADER community in the area, hence from learning effects over time.

Concerning the pilot strategies, LEADER+ proved to be very flexible.

For implementing the integrated pilot strategies, the scope of measures and eligibility conditions were in general assessed as broad enough. MTE reports show an extremely wide range of possibilities: from a very narrow programme focus (e.g. information technologies in Euskadi and rural tourism in Northern Ireland) up to a wide range of programme orientation (specifically in regions where the administration keeps its strong role in project selection, e.g. Greece or some programmes in Germany). Some strategies were formulated so widely that any eligible project was welcome. This might be a good approach in incipient phases in some areas – in order to support new stakeholders and to foster newly formed partnerships – but this is not sustainable in the long term.

LEADER+ is seen by many stakeholders as filling a gap left by all other programmes, specifically concerning small scale projects, and beneficiaries who would not have benefited from any other support otherwise. Some uttered complaints that the chosen priority theme would have overly restricted the scope of eligible actions, or that agricultural activities were excluded from funding (Ireland, Spain).

Concerning the **European priority themes** (which were in some cases complemented by national or regional priority themes), they were only seen as helpful in a few cases. They were too prescriptive as to instigate creative thinking, and too unspecific as to provide concrete guidance. Although it is still too early for final judgements on the concept of priority themes, **the general idea of articulated priorities for rural development seems, to some extent, to contradict the area-based and bottom-up approach**.

Difficulties, reported in the MTE reports, originate less from the specific LEADER features and rather from generic aspects of programme implementation, such as (i) excessive bureaucratic requirements for application, accounting and reporting that absorb the time of LAG staff; (ii) financing conditions unattractive to potential private investors (e.g. late payment of co-financing, no capital expenditures applicable under LEADER) or less favoured parts of the population – somewhat in contradiction to the principle of innovation; (iii) delays in decision-making leading to the loss of projects. As mentioned above these points reflect the opinion of LAGs, rather than, for instance, managing authorities.

b) Dissemination and transfer of successful practices resulting from LEADER implementation

It is too early to assess the benefits of cooperation and networking in terms of dissemination and transfer.

Cooperation projects should generate retroactive booster effects on the local strategy. It is too early to assess if this is actually the case in LEADER+. Nevertheless we dare to give a prudent “yes” because many local actors appreciate cooperation projects for their potential **to attain a critical mass** (for research, development, marketing and promotion, training and education etc.). By pooling their strengths, rural areas can overcome a number of constraints rooted in distance and smallness, and achieve otherwise inaccessible results, provided that the social and organisational capital of the area is prepared for such an endeavour.

This judgement is underpinned by the **visible preference for short-distance inter-territorial cooperation** specifically in this early phase. Although the cooperation budgets had to be downgraded considerably due to under use (e.g. in France), the attitude towards cooperation is positive and there are strong signs that action 2 will be much better used in the second half of the programming period. The assessment of the benefits of cooperation for rural development strategies can only be made in the ex-post evaluation.

Delays in starting cooperation projects lie in the nature of the activity, but the **delays in establishing the formal National Networks** were home-grown fruits of administrative deficiencies. Their late start reduced their potential effectiveness. In the MTE reports, their role is seen as very diverse, in some countries as passive and remote (working rather as information pool), in others as delivering (working as real pivotal agents, who actively barter information and know how).

Among the network services, the **LAGs appreciate being brought into contact with knowledge providers** (universities, research bodies, other networks such as the ones for local agenda 21, gender issues, territorial cooperation, social inclusion and so on). They also appreciate demand-oriented training (financial management is a hot theme). Finally, they appreciate it if the network provides space for LAGs to co-develop new approaches and instruments (like the “innovative workshops” of the Austrian network). **Not only LAGs, but also the managing authorities benefit from the Networks’ contact possibilities, information and advisory services.**

Dissemination and transfer need continuity.

Dissemination and know-how transfer is seen as a core element of most programmes. This flow of information is conducted in two ways:

- “Formal”: through cooperation and networking as intended under the LEADER Actions 2 and 3.
- “Informal”: through various contacts and exchanges of information by actors at regional and programme level (which accounts at least for 50% of the know how transfer among the LAGs).

In general **stakeholders bestow high value on networking.** It is seen as a positive and important activity which ensures the transfer of information, good practices and know-how. There is some evidence that networking has been very actively followed by the LAGs (Spain – Asturias, Castilla-Leon, Wallonia), and seen as a good tool for partner search (Spain – La Rioja, Germany – Bayern).

MTE reports could hardly reflect the aspects of dissemination and know-how transfer through cooperation and networking due to the limited reference period. Nevertheless in some countries (Ireland, Finland, Austria) there are indications that the LEADER approach is gaining credibility as seedbed for integrated rural development by information transfer to other rural stakeholders. Some questions remain as to what is disseminated or transferred – it may be that there is more a sharing of experiences than an actual transfer of skills. In this context, the temporal nature of LAGs (and personnel working on LEADER+ programmes) comes into question as knowledge transfer is from person to person. This is especially true in the situation where the formal networks were slow in being established.

Dissemination and transfer of successful cooperation projects seem already appearing in more mature environments of local governance. The requirements for good territorial cooperation are high; human resources have to be made available, they have to be capable of adopting a patient and empathic approach with respect to cultural differences, to overcome language barriers, and to negotiate the terms for cooperation agreements and contracts etc.

At a similar pace as it develops within the LEADER community, the willingness and the capacity to cooperate and to spread know-how **across the borders of LEADER and beyond the EU** will have to grow slowly, certainly encouraged by incentives, but more by intrinsic motivation.

2.3 Conclusions on Theme 3: Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the overall objectives of the Structural Funds

Theme 3 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Impact on environment
- b) Impact on priority target beneficiaries

a) Impact on environment

The main impact on the environment happens in people's minds

LEADER+ does not have an explicit mission in respect of the environment, but it is deemed to contribute to sustainable development which comprises environmental protection and improvement. There are indications that nature protection and environmental improvement play a role on the implementation and impact of the LEADER programme, as many LEADER areas operate close to protected zones trying to embody win-win situations in their pilot strategies (e.g. through organic food chains). Furthermore, **the notion of innovation in local action plans is often linked to environmental benefits**, e.g. through the sustainable use of endogenous resources. As a consequence, in most programmes a considerable share of projects seem to include an environmental aspect or to put a focus on environmental awareness or qualification. Environmental NGOs or authorities are even represented in the board or in work groups of many LAGs.

Although the collected data do not allow any assessment of the impact of all these elements, we anticipate that the most tangible effects will be produced by the increase in environmental awareness and knowledge and by the emergence of new relationships between stakeholders, working together to realise the integrated pilot strategy – as is already anticipated for those programmes which started relatively early and therefore have provided preliminary indications.

b) Impact on priority target beneficiaries

LEADER+ seems to contribute to gender equity, to a degree which can hardly be assessed at this stage.

Although there is broad formal compliance to take up **priority target beneficiaries, women and young people**, into programmes and local action plans, this does not automatically lead to concrete

activities. This might depend on the characteristics of the respective area (in some countries such as Finland women participate more than men in the development process and as beneficiaries), but it can also be the consequence of negligence.

There are indications that LEADER has the potential to respond to women's needs and to promote women as stakeholders in rural development. The share of female project promoters mostly ranges between 20% and 50%. This may have to do with the focus on small scale activities, with the inclusion and reward of voluntary work, with the bottom-up approach, or with a combination of all of them (and other influence factors). In countries where female participation in LEADER is high (such as Finland), women actively participate in order to promote strategies reflecting their needs.

Women are much better represented among the technical staff than in the decision-making bodies of the LAGs which are still male-dominated in most areas (female share in technical staff is up to 70%; female representation in LAG decision-making bodies about 30% on average).

The strategies of regional programmes and LAGs exhibit two main avenues towards gender equity: firstly that of **positive discrimination**, explicitly addressing women as a priority target group. Secondly, **the gender-sensitive design** of the approach and the development strategies (e.g. through a better design of training and education measures).

Young people are not sufficiently addressed by LEADER (with some exceptions).

Most actions targeted at the young generation were directed towards the creation of jobs and corresponding training. However, investments in the social and cultural environment of the area seem to generate more visible effects on the attractiveness of the area for young people. **Both, investments in the territory, and the factual employment opportunities are indispensable.** The representation of young people or at least young people's associations in the LAG board improved, according to some evaluators, the quality and acceptance of the corresponding actions. However, physical and continuous involvement of young people in decision-making bodies is really rare and there is also some disorientation about how involving them. **Many rural stakeholders feel the connectedness between the issue of youth and the viability and sustainability of their area.** Thus we can expect a stronger uptake of that theme in the future.

In brief, many stakeholders feel that LEADER+ does not respond to the needs and specificities of the priority target groups, particularly young people. At the same time, they are reticent towards new or enforced thematic prescriptions as this is considered **weakening the area-based approach** according to which the local action group should base its pilot strategy on a thorough assessment of the real needs of all parts of the local population. Be that as it may, problems of exclusion, the issue of migration and minority populations, as well as the phenomena accompanying peri-urbanisation (rurbanisation) will gain more and more importance.

A well implemented LEADER approach spares further prescriptions on target beneficiaries

We conclude that **the LEADER approach is in itself a sufficient means to address the needs of specific groups** as it potentially provides the right instruments for territorial diagnosis, animation, participation and project generation. Some LEADER programmes (such as the Finnish, the Dutch and German ones) pointed out that *"LAGs should analyse their own areas still more precisely and select the target groups on that basis"* (Case Study Finland). For that reason, in Austria, Italy and France, not only women and young people, but also other social groups, such as elderly people and minorities have been seen as potential target groups and the respective MTE reports point out that it should be the responsibility of the single programme/LAG to finally select their specific set of target beneficiaries. In addition, LAGs may manage other programmes in their area in a complementary manner.

2.4 Conclusions on Theme 4: Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the specific objectives of LEADER+

Theme 4 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Impact on rural territories
- b) Impact on governance

a) Impact on rural territories

LEADER allows local actors to walk before they run

The effects of LEADER+ can be perceived more easily at micro level: the character of projects funded allows a quite realistic picture of the particular strength of LEADER+ to knock on new developments (hitherto unseen in the respective territory) to create jobs in small scale operations and to promote new products and services, hence contributing to the enhancement of the local web of economic and public services. Unfortunately, the success stories at micro level do not provide a sufficient basis for extrapolating them on the effects on the rural areas in general.

However, the **character of these success stories** seems to have an encouraging effect on local actors to do more for local development. The sum of little positive experiences at micro level (i.e. between local people) may **become a measurable effect at regional level** (i.e. the LEADER programme or the region) by a simple aggregation of positive interactions and experiences. This aggregative effect may be too delicate to be captured by traditional ways of measuring impact alone (e.g. through “jobs created”, “change of GDP/capita”) but can be “seen” in the positive image of the area and in the organisational capacity of local groups – which will call for a more qualitative assessment of the effects at regional level.

Thus, the question if LEADER+ is able to generate change and tangible improvements in rural areas can be answered with a prudent “yes”. The particular strength of LEADER is its ability to act as a pathfinder for mainstream programmes, but it can also be used to fill demand niches otherwise neglected by mainstream programmes.

Coming home by taking off

Another question relates to **the ability of LEADER to trigger a more efficient use of endogenous resources**. From the logical point of view, the area-based and bottom-up principles point in that direction, although it is not clear at the outset how these principles can be operationalised in the context of local pilot strategies. Examples at micro-level show that the strategy may contribute to a more efficient use of endogenous (physical, human, environmental) resources in two ways:

- (i) **by backward bonding:** if the focus is lent from the past: historical or traditional features (feasts, culinary recipes, architectural design, craftsmanship...), from landscape and nature etc. In this perspective the resources locally available are perceived in a new light. The community uses these resources to turn them into assets but in a way that neither destroys their unique character nor undermines their value for future use;
- (ii) **by forward bonding:** if the focus is lent from a common vision of the future which aligns local actors for a common purpose. In this perspective, they pool their resources and start to use their available resources more efficiently through cooperative agreements.

Excellent pilot strategies interweave backward and forward bonding. Still – alas – due to the short period of implementation, impacts of this type could not be assessed in MTE at a broader territorial level, nor related employment effects, and therefore this success factor for pilot strategies of combining backward and forward bonding is a prudent assumption by the evaluators.

b) Impact on governance

Both merging and mainstreaming of LEADER with respect to wider rural policy, as well as local customization may produce excellent results.

Rural stakeholders see positive examples for synergies and complementarities between LEADER and mainstream programmes, but they hesitate in bringing them forward as “good practice”. In other words – those cases, which were identified as positive examples for synergies and complementarities between LEADER and mainstream programmes in the MTE reports and case studies (e.g. Ireland, Andalucia – Spain, Finland) were seen as the outcome of the specific administrative/bureaucratic national/regional context rather than something specifically designed for LEADER. Structural changes in those countries indicate that LEADER is producing considerable leverage effects if combined with mainstream programmes in a wise way. There is evidence that LEADER has identified and exploited synergies with other EU policies and programmes, specifically contributing to **improving the quality of life, much less so concerning employment or economic growth.**

Synergies showed up in those cases where the policy competencies and decision-making power were grouped around problem fields (e.g. rural development including all economic sectors) rather than still following the traditional bureaucratic logic of policy fields (economic policy vs. agriculture policy).

The embedding of LEADER into wider rural policy may appear in three forms, and each of them may exhibit excellent results if certain conditions are met (the programmes mentioned in brackets have been identified as good representations of different ways of embedding LEADER in rural development):

- **Strategic merging** (Austria, Vlaanderen, Baden-Württemberg): LEADER can be designed as a pathfinder, incubator or niche specialist for designated areas of intervention. In this role it may exert a leverage effect on rural development if follow-up support from mainstream programmes is ensured. The initiative can develop a distinct profile and image and raise the attention of new project promoters according to its genuine purpose of a laboratory for innovative rural development. The conditions of excellence in the case of strategic merging are: (i) effective communication and interaction among stakeholders and in LEADER areas; (ii) efficient inter-administrative coordination at national and regional level; (iii) good technical assistance for project applicants.
- **Full mainstreaming** (Andalucía, Finland, Ireland): LEADER can be included into rural policy as its paradigmatic core component, shaping other mainstream rural and local development measures according to its pattern. In the study on mainstreaming LEADER, the authors coined the term “strong” or even “full mainstreaming”⁴. The conditions of excellence in the case of full mainstreaming are: (i) a commonly shared and comprehensive rural policy strategy under one umbrella; (ii) coordination at programme level to avoid overlaps between LEADER and LEADER-like mainstream measures.
- **Local customization** (Greece, Northern Ireland, Portugal): Even in the (regrettable) absence of strong coordination at higher levels of decision-making, local action groups may be able to act as local development agencies packaging the flows of funds into their area to the best of the potential beneficiaries. The conditions of excellence in the case of local customization are: (i) High autonomy of LAGs connected with enabling and encouraging top-down support; (ii) A trustful and cooperative climate at local level to make inter-institutional coordination possible and effective; (iii) a well endowed and skilled technical staff incorporating social and economic skills at LAG level.

⁴ ÖIR (2004): “Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes”, p.18ff

Mainstreaming or “backstreaming”?

Certainly, the positive results of previous LEADER programmes are one of the major factors furthering its embedding into wider rural policies. However, in countries or regions where a “top-down” mentality prevails, the LEADER approach is not recognised to the same extent in rural development policy. In these regions, rural stakeholders see the integration of LEADER into the Rural Development Programmes with mixed feelings: on one hand the stakeholders welcome the better endowment and the prominent place of LEADER in rural development, on the other hand they express fears that the linkage could work as a “**backstreaming**” of LEADER, in the sense that it gets instrumentalised for mono-sectoral measures or projects, with little or no structural impact on the rural area.

2.5 Conclusions on Theme 5: Financing, management and evaluation of the programme

Theme 5 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Influence of administrative arrangements on programme impact
- b) Monitoring and evaluation

a) Influence of administrative arrangements on programme impact

Concerning the impact of actual arrangements for managing, financing and administering the programme on its overall effectiveness, it is surely too early for judgements. **The information in the MTE reports and in the case studies has tended to concentrate on issues such as bureaucracy, relationships between managing authorities and LAGs, financing, and insufficient autonomy at LAG level that undermines the “bottom up” approach.**

More fundamental management issues at LAG level, such as structures, management systems, planning and control were not highlighted in the MTE reports nor in the case studies. Responses to the evaluation questions did not refer at all to the role of the board of directors in programme management.

Positive management arrangements normally resulted from decentralisation, granting of autonomy and the appointment of some kind of co-ordinators. Programmes with fewer problems in management terms also seemed to have established good working structures and relationships between LAGs and the managing authorities.

As was said above, many local stakeholders see the degree of autonomy of the LAG in project selection as a crucial factor for smooth and simplified programme implementation. This points to the global grant and “quasi” global grant⁵ systems of programme delivery as a good choice. However, the shift of responsibility has a price:

- **More bottom-up does not mean less top-down;** it may even require more top-down, only a different style: encouraging and enabling instead of command and control. This requires a corresponding understanding and competence at the level of administrations and of local actors.
- **A global grant or “quasi” global grant system of delivery is only fully operational if all the public funds are concentrated in one package.** If just the European co-funding is decentralised and the LAG has to run for the national co-funding for each project, the gain in flexibility is annihilated (there are examples of this kind in the MTE reports – e.g. France). Global grants require well coordinated management of financial flows at national and regional level.

⁵ I.e. those cases of global grants which are not fully decentralized but distributed via an intermediate public body – e.g. like in Austria via the provinces.

b) Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are cornerstones of LEADER+ and if carried out in a structured way should inform the planning process for future programmes as well as allowing corrective action to be taken where necessary with current programmes.

There is no indication from MTE reports that ex-ante evaluations led to noticeable changes in the programmes.

The initiative of the Commission to pre-establish a set of common evaluation questions with related judgement criteria was seen as a well-meant attempt to improve the knowledge base and the conditions of institutional learning across Europe. However, this attempt was somewhat hampered by (i) the full application of CEQs at mid term stage which does not seem the adequate moment for this exhaustive exercise, specifically concerning the questions relating to impact; (ii) the sheer number and sometimes elusiveness of CEQs; (iii) the lack of a harmonized system of observation.

Concerning (external and self-) evaluations at LAG level, there is growing conscience of the importance and benefits of evaluations and most LAGs had plans for some sort of evaluation exercise. **The analysis finds that (i) the evaluation activities are largely unstructured; (ii) there is surprisingly little co-ordination or co-operation between LAGs in the area of evaluation; (iii) national networks do not play a prominent role, except in assisting self-evaluations in some LAGs.**

An issue calling for further deliberation is how the LAGs could use the results of self-assessment more efficiently and extensively in their work so that they would have genuine guiding effects. **Self-assessment in most cases seems to be a one-off operation,** and systematic analysis of experience and the resulting corrective actions and learning are suffering from lack of time as the focus is on starting new projects.

3. The recommendations based upon these findings

3.1 Recommendations regarding Theme 1: Implementation of the LEADER method

- The managing authorities should ensure fair and equitable conditions for all potential applicants in all types of rural areas through appropriate measures in the pre-selection phase: broad communication, technical assistance, facilitation of partnership building and area delimitation, capacity building of local actors and administrative officials.
- The visibility and distinctiveness of LEADER should be ensured by giving it a clear role in wider rural policy by the Member States (with the necessary coordination at higher level of decision-making) and by giving guidance to the LAGs for communicating the distinctive features of the LEADER initiative.
- The description of the LEADER axis in the RD programme should include the methods to be used for selecting the LAG and the way in which the competition between areas is going to be organised.
- During the pre-selection phase, sufficient resources (in the form of eligible funds) should be reserved by both the Commission and the Member States for qualification, information and communication for LAGs in preparing, setting up and implementing their needs-based local strategy. This is specifically valid for new candidate LAGs in new programming regions and countries.
- After selection, the LAGs should be granted a high level of financial and administrative autonomy provided they ensure (apart from their obligation in terms of balanced representation of interests in their decision-making bodies and work groups and participative approach at local level) the application of clear and transparent criteria for the selection of projects and an explicit

strategy with a corresponding budget line dedicated to the mobilisation and animation of local actors in the local action plan

- The implementation of the “50% non-public partners” rule should be monitored all along the life cycle of the local partnership. Examples of good practice in this respect, such as the tripartite approach as practiced in Finland and Sweden⁶, should be disseminated.
- The budgets dedicated for cooperation projects (according to Art. 65 of Reg. 1695/05) should be exempted from the n+2 rule, and their trans-national component should be supported by the European rural development network. The authors are well aware that this recommendation contradicts existing legal provisions but the issue is an important one all the same.
- Networking should get started as soon as possible – which would mean much earlier than in LEADER+ – at both European and regional/national level. There are good signs that with the help of the European LEADER observatory network and the Rural Development Network the necessary support could be provided for the Member States.
- There is a need to work on the lessons of LEADER+, to develop instruments and tools for the capitalisation on experiences and to codify successful practices at local, regional/national and European level – it might need an initiative by the European Commission to call for such a study.

3.2 Recommendations regarding Theme 2: Specific Actions

- A strict numerical threshold concerning the number of inhabitants per LEADER area should be abolished. The requirement of a relevant, consistent and viable area-based pilot strategy offers sufficient criteria for avoiding the approval of too small or too large areas.
- The scope of eligible projects should be kept as wide as possible in content, but at the same time be referenced with precise and clear quality criteria.
- Small project funds (comparable to the Small Project Funds in INTERREG) for innovative actions should be established at local level, the approval of which should be oriented on criteria such as innovation and potential positive effects, and be based on selection procedures less stringent than the usual ones.
- Priority themes should, if ever, be set at programme level by the Member States.
- Continuous assisted and documented self-evaluation of LAGs and local strategy implementation should become a lived and practiced standard in LEADER⁷, as this is an appropriate way to monitor behavioural changes and changing interaction patterns in the area. The regional networks should be assigned in assisting the LAGs in this respect.
- The support and encouragement for cooperation should be maintained through creating attractive fora for exchange (e.g. trouble shooting platforms, market places for ideas or good practice either virtual (via internet platforms) or real (via fairs and real “market places”), motivational work and enabling measures (by the provision of simplified tools for application, accounting and reporting).
- The networking devices need to be in place at a much earlier stage. In addition to their current role in the “management of flows”, under which we understand ...
 - Generating, channelling and managing information,
 - bringing people and institutions together,
 - collecting and storing case studies and project descriptions on good practice,
 - fostering new cooperation projects,They should play a key role in the “management of stocks” under which we understand ...
 - creating spaces for common reflection on excellent practices in diverse thematic fields, horizontal issues and methodological approaches,

⁶ A tripartite partnership is composed of 1/3 public, 1/3 private and 1/3 civic sector, sometimes with rotating memberships.

⁷ Right now self evaluations are already compulsory under LEADER+, but the practical experience shows that they are still not common procedure in many programmes.

- extract the generic lessons from these practices, codify and disseminate them to the whole LEADER community and beyond,
- systematically link up to other European networking bodies and institutions and embark on common projects (URBACT, INTERACT, ESPON, EURADA, Council of Regions etc.),
- feed the acquired knowledge on good governance for local development into a consistent quality management system which can be used by LAGs and programme administrations for strategic controlling,
- relaunch the innovative side of LEADER by inviting local actors, regional and national stakeholders and other experts in “laboratory groups” in order to elaborate on new themes and approaches and to disseminate their results in European seminars.

3.3 Recommendations regarding Theme 3: Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the overall objectives of the Structural Funds

- Natura 2000 payments as well as the introduction of new forestry environmental payments in the rural development programmes of the next period provide a new opportunity, which should be taken up by LEADER stakeholders. Axis 2 and axis 4 measures could be combined in order to create win-win situations in and around protected areas. Nature parks and biosphere reserves provide excellent opportunities for the realisation of integrative and sustainable LEADER strategies.
- In regions with notorious problems of exclusion (long term unemployed, minorities, immigrants etc.), inclusive strategies or at least measures should be made mandatory for applicant LAGs in order to get selected. But these thematic prescriptions or restrictions should be made at programme level, taking into account the real needs of rural areas.
- The issue of priority target beneficiaries requires a specific effort to identify, to reflect, to codify and to disseminate good practice examples, specifically concerning the involvement of young people.
- The presence or representation of women and young people in decision-making boards should be a selection criterion for LAGs, and this also requires their representation in the jury responsible for this selection.

3.4 Recommendations regarding Theme 4: Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the specific objectives of LEADER+

- Concerning impact assessment, we refer to the ex-post evaluation. The Commission should carry out specific case studies and comparative analysis to get comprehensive outcomes on the issue of efficient use of resources under the LEADER+ programme.
- The potentials of the LEADER approach should be more and better communicated specifically to those countries which will start to implement it in the next programming period. This information is of specific importance now, in the programming phase, when the budgets are allocated and the rules are established. If the different possibilities and forms in which mainstreaming has occurred in the EU15 are better known, the programme makers in the New Member States will have more options to decide in which way they would use the opportunity offered by the LEADER axis.

3.5 Recommendations regarding Theme 5: Financing, management and evaluation of the programme

- The global grant or “quasi” global grant system is an appropriate pattern for LEADER implementation. Both the national/regional government and the local governance system should be prepared for it through adequate capacity and trust building measures, as well as a sound coordination of financial flows, specifically through packaging public co-funding.

- There is a need to come to a harmonized set of common indicators at European level regardless of the additional monitoring and evaluation needs at national and regional level. The first step was made by setting out the CEQ, but there is a second step to be made:
 - Pre-establishing generic indicators relating to each CEQ which can be adapted to the respective conditions without losing the overall comparability and aggregability.
 - Indicating the ways or mechanisms by which these indicators should be monitored.
 - Substantially reducing the number of CEQs: this would probably boost the readiness of national and regional administrations to comply with the framework and to generate additional indicators to satisfy their specific information needs.
 - The framework of CEQ, judgement criteria and indicators should be set up by a consultative work group involving actors from all levels concerned (local actors, regional/national administrations/networks/EC). The CEQs should reflect a shared vision of the intervention logic, which consequently leads to a “harmonization” of these indicators among each other.⁸ Models like the balanced scorecard for local and regional development such as the one created in a LEADER work group under the guidance of the National Network in Austria, could help to generate the internal coherence of the indicator system.
- The use by LAGs of a mix of external evaluation and assisted self-evaluation should be designed and put in the programme. National/regional networks may help the managing authority in operationalising this accompanying device.
- Learning needs to be systematically embedded in the programme implementation itself: Reflexivity⁹ should become a new LEADER feature. Reflexivity means that learning should be embedded at all programme levels by paying attention to the benefits and needs of those acting at that level. Therefore different methods and means of learning should be applied. This would mean that on the programme level and above (EU Commission and Managing Authorities) a result oriented learning should be applied (via standard evaluation and monitoring). The local/regional level would call for self-induced learning methods (such as self evaluation, supervision).

⁸ It is however noted that for the next programming period the European Commission has developed within the "Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework" a limited number of common indicators to be applied to rural development programmes, including the LEADER axis.

⁹ It is an explicit operational principle of the German Federal pilot initiative Regionen Aktiv (a national LEADER-like measure involving 18 pilot areas).

Résumé

1. Introduction – Contexte

Principales caractéristiques des programmes LEADER+

LEADER est une initiative communautaire de développement rural qui fut lancée en 1991 (LEADER I). Elle a été poursuivie avec LEADER II (1994 – 1999) et est aujourd'hui entrée dans sa troisième phase, LEADER+ (2000 – 2006). **LEADER+**¹ a été conçu pour aider les acteurs du monde rural à prendre conscience des possibilités à long terme qu'offre leur territoire. Elle encourage la mise en œuvre de stratégies originales, intégrées, de grande qualité, pour le développement durable, et fait une large place au partenariat et aux réseaux favorisant les échanges d'expériences. Au total, 5.046,5 millions d'euros auront été dépensés pour la période 2000-2006, dont 2.105,1 millions d'euros à la charge de la section orientation du FEOGA, le reste provenant de contributions publiques et privées. LEADER+ s'articule autour de trois volets : (1) **soutien à des stratégies territoriales de développement rural intégré, de caractère pilote**; (2) **soutien à des coopérations interterritoriales et transnationales** ; (3) **mise en réseau**.

La méthode LEADER+ encourage les acteurs du monde rural à concrétiser des stratégies de développement caractérisées par un ensemble de principes spécifiques, qui les distinguent de l'approche du développement rural normalement suivie dans les programmes de développement rural du « mainstream » financés par le FEOGA. Ces spécificités de LEADER+, mentionnées dans la Communication de la Commission aux États membres relative à LEADER+, sont : *une approche ascendante et territoriale, le partenariat, des stratégies pilotes de développement durable et intégré centrées sur des thèmes spécifiques, une coopération inter-territoriale et transnationale et des mises en réseaux*.

Portée et méthodologie de l'étude

Dans son article 57(1), le Règlement 445/2002 exige que la Commission européenne rédige une synthèse au niveau communautaire dès réception des divers rapports d'évaluation à mi-parcours. À cette fin, la présente synthèse analyse la pertinence, la cohérence, l'efficacité et l'efficience des programmes LEADER+ sur la base des rapports nationaux/régionaux d'évaluation à mi-parcours et d'autres documents relatifs à la période de référence (2000-2003) des évaluations à mi-parcours (EMP) de LEADER+. Cette synthèse examine en particulier les conditions nécessaires à une application couronnée de succès de la méthode LEADER dans les activités de développement rural, ainsi que la valeur ajoutée offerte par cette méthode par rapport à des modes de mise en œuvre (descendants) plus traditionnels pour les programmes de développement rural. Elle identifie des exemples de bonnes pratiques à cet égard. De plus, cette synthèse examine l'application et la pertinence du système actuel d'évaluation tel que décrit dans le Règlement 1260/99 et dans les Orientations pour l'évaluation des programmes LEADER+ qui le complètent.

Cette synthèse a été effectuée sur une période de 8 mois à compter du 30 novembre 2005. L'équipe transnationale de projet a été divisée en deux sous-groupes : une équipe principale² d'une part fixant le cadre de l'analyse (c.-à-d. élaborant les outils de travail nécessaires à la récolte des informations) et synthétisant les résultats au niveau européen; et des experts géographiques d'autre part, recueillant et synthétisant les données aux niveaux national et régional.

¹ LEADER+ est une initiative communautaire et est donc régie par le Règlement 1260/99 relatif aux Fonds structurels. En outre, la Communication de la Commission aux États membres, du 14 avril 2000, fixe les orientations pour l'initiative communautaire concernant le développement rural (LEADER+) [Journal Officiel C 139 du 18.05.2000]. Elle stipule aussi les modalités techniques de préparation, présentation et sélection des programmes dans le cadre de l'initiative LEADER+ ainsi que les dispositions relatives à la gestion, au contrôle, au suivi et à l'évaluation de ces programmes.

² Bernd Schuh, Hannes Wimmer (ÖIR); Robert Lukesch; Seamus O'Grady; Jean Pierre Verduyts (AEIDL)

L'équipe principale a fourni plusieurs outils d'analyse quantitative et qualitative :

- **Outil 1** : grille d'évaluation destinée à recueillir, pour chacun des programmes, des informations générales fournies dans les rapports EMP et leurs mises à jour ;
- **Outil 2** : grille d'évaluation destinée à recueillir, pour chaque programme, des informations détaillées sur chacune des questions évaluatives à partir des données fournies dans les rapports EMP et dans leurs mises à jour ;
- Des modèles pour les 23 **Études de cas** portant sur des programmes sélectionnés ont fourni un cadre méthodologique permettant de tenir des groupes de discussion et de recueillir les informations supplémentaires nécessaires pour combler les lacunes dans les données.

Les rapports nationaux/régionaux d'évaluation à mi-parcours et les mises à jour de ces rapports ont été les principales sources de renseignements pour cette synthèse européenne, qui s'est en outre appuyée sur des documents complémentaires aux niveaux national et européen.

2. Principaux résultats de l'évaluation

Sur la base de la logique d'intervention du programme, les évaluateurs ont étudié les interrelations entre les 49 questions évaluatives et ont repéré 14 questions « cardinales », qui ont permis de tirer des conclusions spécifiques sur des éléments clés du programme LEADER. Cette technique a permis de réduire la complexité générale de cette méta-évaluation tout en garantissant une analyse complète des EMP.

Une réponse a été apportée pour toutes les « Questions Evaluatives Communes » (QEC, c.-à-d. les questions incluses dans les Orientations de la Commission pour l'évaluation à mi-parcours de LEADER+ et abordées dans toutes les EMP) et à toutes les « Questions Evaluatives Spécifiques » (QES, c.-à-d. des questions propres à cette évaluation de synthèse). Les principales conclusions portant sur chacun des cinq thèmes de l'évaluation sont présentées ci-dessous.

2.1 Conclusions sur le Thème 1 : Mise en œuvre de la méthode LEADER

Le premier thème offre une vue générale sur trois aspects principaux:

- a) La mise en œuvre du programme au niveau administratif
- b) La mise en œuvre des spécificités de LEADER par les autorités de gestion et par les groupes d'action locale
- c) Les leçons tirées des phases précédentes de LEADER

a) La mise en œuvre du programme au niveau administratif

LEADER+ est un programme complexe qui requiert des méthodes de gestion complexes.

La mise en œuvre de l'initiative LEADER+ se fait en deux étapes :

- détermination du cadre de sélection des plans d'action locale et des territoires LEADER ;
- mise en œuvre des plans d'action locale.

L'approche en deux étapes de LEADER entraîne généralement **un certain retard dans la mise en œuvre du programme sur le terrain par rapport à des programmes traditionnels**. Dès lors, **l'évaluation à mi-parcours a couvert une phase principalement utilisée à des tâches de préparation et de structuration**.

Presque tous les rapports EMP ont signalé qu'**une expérience préalable de la mise en œuvre de LEADER** a permis aux services administratifs de l'autorité de gestion d'accélérer le démarrage. Ceci

était surtout évident dans des pays où des régions expérimentées et des régions nouvelles gèrent des programmes LEADER+ (par ex. les Pays-Bas).

L'application des spécificités de LEADER (notamment l'approche ascendante et territoriale) ralentit aussi l'exécution des programmes. À cet égard, des études de cas ont montré que, dans certaines régions (par ex. en Allemagne et en Italie), les programmes ne sont pas au même niveau de maturité. Les pays ayant un programme national et une plus grande concentration des compétences (Autriche, Finlande) (qu'il ne faut pas confondre avec du centralisme) semblent avantagés sur ce point. Une lenteur de l'exécution du programme LEADER peut aussi résulter du manque de ressources humaines (par ex. dans les régions gérant plusieurs programmes communautaires).

Malgré l'élargissement de l'initiative à toutes les zones rurales, il ne semble pas y avoir eu d'effort particulier pour **attirer de nouvelles zones**. La plupart des administrations ont mis l'accent sur **la création de conditions équitables pour toutes les zones éligibles**, par exemple via de larges campagnes d'information et/ou un deuxième tour de sélection de GAL.

LEADER est très visible dans le contexte plus large de la politique rurale.

Dans la plupart des pays et régions où LEADER+ est mis en œuvre, **cette initiative a un profil propre** et joue un rôle spécifique dans le développement des zones rurales. LEADER offre de nombreux exemples tangibles de véritables projets de développement rural, surtout là où la politique rurale du « mainstream » est définie d'un point de vue essentiellement agricole.

b) La mise en œuvre des spécificités de LEADER par les autorités de gestion et par les groupes d'action locale

LEADER requiert plus qu'une bonne capacité de gestion de programmes.

De par sa complexité, les lacunes de gestion semble avoir un impact plus marqué sur LEADER que sur d'autres programmes. Les rapports EMP énumèrent régulièrement ces lacunes : (1°) organisation trop bureaucratique ; (2°) relations difficiles entre, d'une part, les autorités de gestion et les autres administrations, et, d'autre part, les GAL et les porteurs de projets; (3°) problèmes liés à la mobilisation des cofinancements ; (4°) retards dans les paiements; (5°) autonomie insuffisante du GAL. Ces lacunes entraînent une perte d'efficacité (par ex. trop de temps est passé à des activités administratives au détriment de la mobilisation et de l'animation) et provoquent à terme la déception des acteurs locaux. Alors que ces conclusions reflètent plutôt l'opinion des GAL (ainsi que les manques de personnel administratif, signalés dans plusieurs rapports EMP), elles relèvent aussi de la nécessité pour la Commission européenne de définir des règles claires pour la gestion des fonds public.

L'approche LEADER :

- requiert la participation de la population locale,
- fait appel à des procédures transparentes de sélection des projets locaux qui reflètent une vision partagée de l'avenir du territoire;
- cible des bénéficiaires spécifiques tels que les femmes, les jeunes ou d'autres groupes défavorisés ;
- demande la formulation d'une stratégie centrée sur un thème prioritaire, qui tente dans le même temps d'intégrer différents secteurs, tout en favorisant l'innovation et mise en œuvre par un partenariat local constitué de personnes qui n'ont peut-être jamais collaboré auparavant.

Cette liste d'exigences pourrait expliquer pourquoi **ces caractéristiques ne peuvent être mises en œuvre de façon mécanique ; de plus, leur effet doit être combiné afin de réaliser la pleine valeur ajoutée de l'initiative**. Les EMP laissent entendre qu'il existerait quelque chose que l'on pourrait qualifier d'« esprit » ou de « culture » LEADER ; cet « esprit » permettrait de mieux gérer la complexité que les programmes traditionnels de développement rural. L'« **esprit** » **LEADER est**

partagé par les intervenants principaux et est diffusé grâce à des interactions et échanges fréquents entre ces intervenants tant au niveau administratif qu'au niveau local. Cette remarque est valable pour la majorité des programmes. Comme pour les périodes LEADER précédentes cet « esprit » constitue la clef pour obtenir des résultats positifs lors de la mise en œuvre de LEADER. Malheureusement, les EMP du programme LEADER+ ne parviennent guère à donner une description précise de ce qui forge cet « esprit LEADER ». Il est en effet difficile de cerner à l'aide de méthodes d'évaluation standardisées une chose aussi interactive et axée sur les processus qu'un « esprit » ou une approche.

L'« esprit » LEADER apparaît dans de nombreux éléments et dans des déclarations que l'on retrouve dans plusieurs études de cas (et parfois même dans les rapports EMP)³ ;

La sélection du GAL relève plus de l'examen que du concours .

Dans bien des cas, la compétition entre groupes d'action locale n'a pas été effective: **le processus de sélection tenait plus de l'« examen » que du « concours »** au sens strict du terme. Ceci peut s'expliquer par le fait que les budgets étaient préétablis au niveau du programme et par une volonté politique de servir toutes les zones rurales et tous les intervenants.

Par ailleurs, **les méthodes utilisées pour juger de la qualité des programmes locaux soumis à un financement** (processus de consultation, respect des points de vue minoritaires, utilisation d'approches participatives, présentation de mécanismes et critères de sélection des projets, etc. .) ne sont le plus souvent pas documentées et ne sont donc pas évaluables.

L'approche ascendante a joué un rôle dans la sélection des GAL et dans la mise en œuvre des programmes.

En général, il a été tenu compte de **l'approche ascendante** dans la sélection des GAL et (à un degré différent) dans les phases de la mise en œuvre des programmes. Ceci est une nette amélioration par rapport à la période LEADER II. Néanmoins, cette approche, qui distingue nettement LEADER des programmes de développement rural traditionnels (« mainstreamed »), ne semble pas avoir été pleinement exploitée dans la plupart des régions. Au Portugal, par exemple, les critères de sélection des GAL comportaient des exigences relatives au territoire, au partenariat et à la stratégie de développement rural mais ne prenaient pas en compte le sentiment d'identité, l'approche ascendante, le caractère innovant de la stratégie, la coopération ou la mise en réseau. D'autres programmes à organisation centralisée (par ex. en Grèce) pourraient améliorer la participation des intervenants régionaux/locaux à toutes les phases de la mise en œuvre du programme .

L'approche ascendante comporte une double dimension : (1°) les relations entre les acteurs locaux et le GAL ; (2°) les relations entre le GAL et l'autorité de gestion. La façon de gérer les interactions et le processus de participation à un niveau est généralement similaire à la gestion appliquée à un autre niveau.

Une bonne approche ascendante ne nécessite pas une réduction mais une refonte de l'action descendante : il s'agit d'autonomiser et d'encourager au lieu de commander et de contrôler. À cette fin, la plupart des programmes devraient renforcer la compétence d'un plus grand nombre d'intervenants actifs aux deux niveaux (GAL et administratif). Si le GAL est laissé sans soutien d'en haut, il pourrait se sentir submergé par le poids de ses nouvelles responsabilités (par ex. être contraint de rechercher seul un cofinancement national).

Le programme anglais offre un bon exemple de coexistence possible des approches ascendante et descendante : les orientations publiées en début de programme par l'autorité de gestion sont régulièrement mises à jour et discutées avec les GAL. Cette méthode permet de réduire la tension

³ *Le succès d'un programme est la partie « intangible », mais elle ne peut être mesurée par une évaluation. Une évaluation des « aspects intangibles » pourrait indiquer si un territoire « respire » la philosophie LEADER. Voici le point le plus important à mesurer même si cela s'avère très difficile ». (Directeur du développement rural de la région Andalousie, Espagne)*

entre les aspects « ascendant » et « descendant » de la relation entre les GAL (qui doivent opérer sur le terrain) et l'administration (responsable au niveau européen).

Il existe des exemples (par ex. la Rioja (Espagne), plusieurs programmes en Allemagne) de **mise en œuvre paternaliste**, où l'administration est le principal acteur et les GAL se limitent plutôt à approuver des projets discutés entre le porteur et l'agent administratif chargé du dossier. Si ce style de gouvernance peut produire de bons résultats à court terme, il ne contribue en rien au capital social et organisationnel du territoire.

Le partenariat local a ouvert de nouvelles perspectives de gouvernance locale.

Il a été tenu compte du concept de **partenariat local** dans la sélection des GAL, bien que **la représentation équilibrée des intérêts** n'ait généralement pas été contrôlée après l'évaluation initiale. Les intérêts représentés dans le partenariat local devraient refléter la situation du territoire concerné sur la base d'une évaluation sérieuse des besoins des différentes composantes de la population. Une représentation équilibrée des intérêts ne peut être atteinte à long terme par un respect automatique de pourcentages.

Les groupes d'action locale, surtout les nouveaux, n'ont pas eu assez de ressources (temps) pour concevoir leurs stratégies pilotes en fonction des besoins de la population locale.

En principe, la **stratégie pilote** doit reposer sur une évaluation complète de la zone, de toutes les composantes de la population et de leurs besoins respectifs. Outre le manque de capacités et de ressources, beaucoup de GAL (surtout les nouveaux) se sont trouvés confrontés à un calendrier trop serré pour élaborer cette stratégie à partir d'un large processus de consultation. **Les GAL existants étaient clairement avantagés** à cet égard, ce qui ne signifie pas que leurs plans aient été nécessairement meilleurs que ceux des nouveaux venus.

Le panorama hétérogène de cette dimension « pilote » de la stratégie que brossent les rapports EMP s'explique en partie par les problèmes auxquels se sont heurtés les acteurs lorsqu'ils ont abordé cette question de façon concrète. Le terme couvrait des concepts tels que « l'innovation », « l'intégration multisectorielle » et « les thèmes prioritaires », dont les interprétations pouvaient se révéler antinomiques selon les contextes. **Il aurait fallu donner de meilleures lignes directrices et des exemples de bonnes pratiques** pour aider les acteurs ruraux à tenir compte de ces dimensions de façon globale et efficace. L'article 61 du Règlement 1698/2005 du Conseil est beaucoup plus clair et concis à cet égard que la Communication de la Commission sur les orientations pour LEADER+ (14/4/2000).

Coopération et mise en réseau ont besoin de temps pour porter leurs fruits.

La coopération et la mise en réseau peuvent prendre trois acceptions différentes, ce qui a parfois compliqué le travail d'interprétation des renseignements y afférents donnés dans les rapports EMP :

- il s'agit de principes opérationnels qui, à ce titre, font partie de l'approche LEADER ;
- il s'agit de mesures dotées de budgets spécifiques (action 2 et 3) ;
- il s'agit de pratiques standard de toute activité de développement, indépendamment de tout critère d'éligibilité pour un financement.

D'après les EMP et les études de cas, les échanges et même la coopération entre GAL et partenariats au-delà du programme LEADER sont certainement plus nombreux de ce qui est explicitement prévu en termes d'actions ou de projets éligibles.

Bien que la période de référence compte peu d'actions éligibles portant sur la coopération et la mise en réseau, les facteurs facilitant la coopération ont été :

- des expériences précédentes de LEADER;

- l'engagement des acteurs (tant locaux qu'administratifs) à la coopération et à la création de réseaux ;
- la proximité et la similitude des cultures, mentalités, caractéristiques géographiques, etc.
- la maturité générale du programme

La mise en réseau peut être à la fois le terreau et le fruit de la coopération mais il n'existe guère de preuves permettant de dire que la coopération soit un produit direct d'une mise en réseau. Cette remarque est, bien entendu, liée à la période de référence, qui ne permettait pas réellement d'activités intenses de mise en réseau. Soit les réseaux nationaux ont été créés assez tardivement (ce qui a suscité l'émergence de réseaux informels assez fructueux) ou le temps a manqué pour intensifier les relations extérieures.

Le manque de temps et d'intérêt, les craintes d'acteurs locaux de se faire doubler, des procédures excessivement bureaucratiques et l'absence de soutien technique ont été cités dans les EMP comme **facteurs ayant entravé la coopération**.

c) Les leçons tirées de phases précédentes de LEADER

L'expérience paie.

Les EMP confirment **une forte relation entre l'expérience de phases précédentes de LEADER et la mise en œuvre efficace du programme**, sans réellement définir la nature de l'expérience ni le type d'incidence auquel on peut s'attendre. À la lumière de divers rapports EMP et des déclarations des études de cas, il nous semble que l'essence de cette expérience réside dans la valeur du personnel expérimenté, qui permet de dégager un avantage surtout en termes de conception du programme, de conception des plans d'action locale, d'accélération du démarrage, etc. À l'inverse, il existe peu de données permettant d'affirmer que l'inexpérience ait causé des difficultés, voire que de nouvelles idées aient germé là où de nouveaux acteurs ayant peu d'expérience de LEADER+ ont pris part au programme.

Il n'existe aucun mécanisme systématique d'accumulation ou de transfert de connaissances d'une phase LEADER à l'autre.

Il est difficile d'identifier et de décrire des modèles communs d'apprentissage entre les phases LEADER, que ce soit parmi les autorités de programmation ou les GAL : **le transfert de connaissances semble être essentiellement livré au hasard** car très peu d'instruments ou d'outils semblent avoir été utilisés pour le promouvoir à dessein.

Les **réseaux nationaux** ont élaboré des études de cas et créé des bases de données de bonnes pratiques. Toutefois, il s'agit essentiellement de banques de données et peu de travail semble avoir été consacré aux aspects conceptuels et méthodologiques, par ex. la nature des stratégies pilotes ou la manière d'associer les femmes et les jeunes au développement local, etc.

Dans l'ensemble, les événements et réunions ponctuels facilités par les réseaux ont favorisé les échanges personnels, ce qui a fini par permettre des échanges de connaissances et d'expériences et le transfert de concepts et d'approches.

2.2 Conclusions sur le Thème 2 : Actions spécifiques

Le Thème 2 brosse un panorama de principalement deux aspects :

- a) les changements de comportement résultant de la mise en œuvre de LEADER
- b) la diffusion et le transfert de pratiques fructueuses résultant de la mise en œuvre de LEADER

a) Changements de comportement résultant de la mise en œuvre de LEADER+

LEADER représente une nouvelle approche du développement rural intégré.

Nous considérons les changements comportementaux et les changements de modes d'interaction comme la principale valeur ajoutée de l'approche LEADER. **Les changements de comportement et d'interaction façonnent le capital humain, social, organisationnel et économique du territoire** et cette séquence n'a pas été choisie au hasard. La grandeur de la valeur ajoutée produite est fonction de la mesure dans laquelle les spécificités de l'approche LEADER (surtout la territorialité, l'approche ascendante et le partenariat) ont été mises en œuvre.

L'évaluation des changements de comportement requiert des méthodes spécifiques d'observation et ces méthodes n'ont pas été appliquées dans les EMP. Nous tirons donc nos conclusions principalement des impressions personnelles des intervenants et des évaluateurs. De nombreuses questions sur l'impact du programme à ce stade précoce reçoivent une réponse sur la base des processus sociaux et des nouvelles formes de coopération qui ont vu le jour. C'est compréhensible dans la mesure où la création d'un partenariat local et l'élaboration d'une stratégie conjointe doivent avoir mobilisé des potentiels du territoire qui n'auraient pas été exploités dans d'autres circonstances.

Le tout est de savoir si ces changements de comportement sont de nature durable. Quoi qu'il en soit l'approche LEADER semble déclencher **une nouvelle forme de gouvernance locale par le biais d'un pilotage indirect**. Certains acteurs locaux perçoivent cette initiative **comme une nouvelle approche du développement intégré et comme un instrument de soutien aux forces autonomes des micro-régions rurales**.

La mise en œuvre de l'approche territoriale et ascendante a généré des résultats positifs sauf dans les relations entre milieux urbains et ruraux.

Bien qu'il soit admis que la gestion des programmes LEADER nécessite des obligations en termes d'apurement de comptes et des règles de contrôle, l'expérience pratique révèle qu'un système de contrôle plus axé sur les processus soutiendrait mieux la gouvernance locale que le système assez rigide de « gestion par objectifs » sous la forme de règles quantitatives. Une autre possibilité serait d'instaurer des « règles de contingence » (c.-à-d. des règles adaptées aux différents environnements géographiques et socio-économiques).

Un exemple spécifique de ce type est le **chiffre plafond de 100.000 habitants** par GAL. Ce prescrit, même s'il était bien connu d'avance, pour de nombreux GAL (par ex. dans les zones à plus forte densité de population de l'Allemagne), **il a entravé la tentative de créer des territoires LEADER cohérents en excluant des villes rurales** jouant un rôle important en tant que marchés et pivots de réseaux sociaux. Ce plafond a été critiqué dans certaines EMP car il empêche tout soutien pour développer des chaînes de valeur ajoutée et des initiatives de commercialisation dans des zones rurales plus diversifiées et urbanisées. On reconnaît néanmoins que des dérogations à la règle des 10.000 – 100.000 habitants étaient possibles dans le cadre de LEADER+ pour permettre de créer des territoires LEADER cohérents comprenant, le cas échéant, des zones à plus forte densité de population et qu'environ 15% des GAL ont bénéficié de cette dérogation (chiffres de 2005 mais ne concernant pas la période de référence).

Les relations entre villes et campagnes ont rarement été choisies comme priorité thématique par les autorités en charge des programmes, sauf dans certaines régions d'Europe occidentale (Wallonie, Angleterre), où les résultats ne peuvent encore être évalués à ce jour.

L'approche ascendante semble avoir contribué à promouvoir la complémentarité entre acteurs du développement rural. Une fois encore, la volonté et la capacité des acteurs locaux à s'engager activement dans la voie de la complémentarité avec d'autres acteurs locaux dépend de **l'expérience et de la maturité** de la communauté LEADER de la région, et donc des leçons tirées au fil du temps.

En ce qui concerne les stratégies pilotes, LEADER+ s'est avéré très souple.

Pour la mise en œuvre de stratégies pilotes intégrées, la portée des mesures et les conditions d'éligibilité ont, dans l'ensemble, été jugées suffisamment larges. Les rapports EMP révèlent une gamme de possibilités très étendue : depuis un axe thématique très étroit (par ex. les technologies de l'information en Euskadi et le tourisme rural en Irlande du Nord) jusqu'à une orientation large (en particulier dans les régions où l'administration maintient un rôle important dans la sélection des projets, notamment en Grèce et dans certains programmes d'Allemagne). Certaines stratégies ont été formulées en termes si vagues que tout projet éligible pouvait être accepté. Cette approche est peut-être bonne pour les phases d'amorçage dans certaines zones – pour soutenir de nouveaux intervenants et encourager des partenariats tout récents – mais elle n'est pas soutenable à long terme.

LEADER+ est perçu par de nombreux intervenants comme une initiative qui comble un vide laissé par tous les autres programmes, surtout pour les petits projets et les personnes qui n'auraient bénéficié d'aucun autre soutien. Certains se sont plaints de la restriction excessive de la portée des actions éligibles que le choix du thème prioritaire aurait imposée, et du fait que les activités agricoles étaient exclues du financement (Irlande, Espagne).

En ce qui concerne les **thèmes prioritaires européens** (qui ont parfois été complétés par des thèmes prioritaires nationaux ou régionaux), il n'ont été jugés utiles que dans quelques cas. Ils étaient trop prescriptifs pour susciter une réflexion créative et trop vagues pour donner une orientation concrète. Bien qu'il soit encore trop tôt pour émettre des jugements définitifs sur le concept des thèmes prioritaires, **l'idée générale d'énoncer des priorités pour le développement rural semble, dans une certaine mesure, contredire l'approche territoriale et ascendante.**

Les difficultés rapportées dans les EMP découlent moins des spécificités de LEADER que d'aspects génériques de la mise en œuvre des programmes, tels que (1°) les exigences administratives excessives pour l'introduction des demandes, la comptabilité et les obligations redditionnelles, très chronophages pour le personnel des GAL ; (2°) les conditions financières peu attrayantes pour les investisseurs privés potentiels (par ex paiement tardif du cofinancement, exclusion des dépenses en capital dans le cadre de LEADER) ou pour les couches défavorisées de la population, ce qui va un peu à l'encontre du principe de l'innovation ; (3°) les retards dans le processus décisionnel qui ont entraîné la perte de projets. Comme nous l'avons mentionné ci-dessus, ces remarques reflètent l'opinion des GAL plutôt que celle des autorités de gestion.

b) Diffusion et transfert de pratiques fructueuses résultant de la mise en œuvre de LEADER

Il est trop tôt pour évaluer les avantages de la coopération et de la mise en réseau en termes de diffusion et de transfert.

Les projets de coopération devraient générer des effets stimulants rétroactifs sur la stratégie locale. Il est trop tôt pour juger si c'est réellement le cas avec LEADER+. Néanmoins, nous prenons le risque d'avancer un « oui » prudent parce que de nombreux acteurs locaux apprécient les projets de coopération pour leur potentialité d'**atteindre une masse critique** (pour la recherche, le développement, la commercialisation et la promotion, la formation et l'éducation, etc.). En joignant leurs forces, les zones rurales peuvent surmonter plusieurs contraintes inhérentes à la distance et à la petitesse et elles atteignent des résultats inaccessibles dans d'autres circonstances, à condition que le capital tant social qu'organisationnel de la zone soit prêt à fournir un tel effort.

Ce jugement est sous-tendu par **la préférence manifeste accordée aux coopérations entre territoires proches**, surtout à ce stade précoce. Bien que les budgets de coopération aient été réduits considérablement vu leur sous-utilisation (par ex. en France), l'attitude vis-à-vis de la coopération est positive et des signes forts permettent d'ores et déjà d'affirmer que l'action 2 sera bien mieux utilisée au cours de la deuxième partie de cette période de programmation. L'évaluation des

avantages de la coopération pour les stratégies de développement rural ne pourra se faire qu'au stade de l'évaluation ex-post.

Des retards dans le démarrage des projets de coopération sont inhérents à l'activité mais **les retards dans la mise en place de réseaux nationaux formels** ont été les produits directs des déficiences administratives. Leur démarrage tardif a réduit leur efficacité potentielle. La perception de leur rôle varie fort d'une EMP à l'autre, certains pays les considérant comme passifs et distants (fonctionnant plutôt comme banques d'informations), d'autres, comme actifs (fonctionnant comme de réels agents pivots qui transmettent activement les informations et les savoir-faire).

Parmi les services de réseaux, **les GAL apprécient être mis en contact avec des fournisseurs de connaissances** (universités, instituts de recherche, autres réseaux tels que ceux de l'Agenda 21 local, les questions de genre, la coopération territoriale, l'inclusion sociale, etc.). Ils apprécient aussi la formation axée sur la demande (la gestion financière est un thème fort demandé). Enfin, ils apprécient que le réseau fournisse un espace permettant aux GAL d'élaborer conjointement des approches et instruments nouveaux (comme les « ateliers de l'innovation » du réseau autrichien). **Non seulement les GAL, mais aussi les autorités de gestion bénéficient des possibilités de contact ainsi que des services de conseil et d'information des réseaux.**

La diffusion et le transfert doivent s'envisager dans la continuité.

La diffusion et le transfert de savoir-faire sont considérés comme des éléments clés de la plupart des programmes. Ce flux d'informations est canalisé selon deux axes :

- « formel » : par la coopération et la mise en réseau prévues par les Actions 2 et 3 de LEADER.
- « informel » : par divers contacts et échanges d'informations entrepris par les acteurs au niveau régional et au niveau du programme (axe qui compte pour au moins 50% des transferts de savoir-faire entre GAL).

En général, **les intervenants accordent beaucoup de valeur à la mise en réseau.** Ils la perçoivent comme une activité positive et importante, qui garantit le transfert d'informations, de bonnes pratiques et de savoir-faire. Selon les informations disponibles, des mises en réseau ont été pratiquées très activement par les GAL (Espagne – Asturies, Castilla-Leon ; Wallonie) et considérées comme un bon outil de recherche de partenaires (Espagne – La Rioja ; Allemagne – Bavière).

Les rapports EMP n'ont guère pu illustrer les aspects de la diffusion et du transfert de savoir-faire par la coopération et la mise en réseau en raison de la brièveté de la période de référence. Néanmoins, dans certains pays (Irlande, Finlande, Autriche), il semble que l'approche LEADER gagne en crédibilité comme terreau de développement rural intégré par le transfert d'informations à d'autres intervenants ruraux. Certaines questions demeurent quant aux contenus diffusés ou transférés : il se pourrait qu'il s'agisse plus d'un partage d'expériences que d'un réel transfert de compétences. Dans ce contexte, il convient de soulever la question de la nature temporaire des GAL (et du personnel travaillant dans le cadre des programmes LEADER+) car les transferts de connaissances se font de personne à personne. C'est surtout le cas lorsque les réseaux formels ont été lents à se mettre en place.

La diffusion et le transfert de projets de coopération fructueux semblent déjà visibles dans des environnements où la gouvernance locale est plus développée. Les exigences de bonne coopération territoriale sont élevées ; les ressources humaines ont été mises à disposition ; ce personnel doit être capable d'adopter une approche patiente et empathique vis-à-vis des différences culturelles, de surmonter les obstacles linguistiques, de négocier les conditions des accords et contrats de coopération, etc.

À mesure qu'elles se développent au sein de la communauté LEADER, la volonté et la capacité de coopérer et de diffuser les savoir-faire **par-delà les frontières de LEADER et de l'UE** devront croître lentement, certes avec l'aide de mesures incitatives mais surtout par motivation intrinsèque.

2.3 Conclusions sur le Thème 3 : Impact du programme sur le territoire par rapport aux objectifs généraux des Fonds structurels

Le Thème 3 brosse un panorama de principalement deux aspects :

- a) Impact sur l'environnement
- b) Impact sur les bénéficiaires cibles prioritaires

a) Impact sur l'environnement

Le principal impact sur l'environnement se produit dans l'esprit des gens

LEADER+ n'a pas de mission explicite relative à l'environnement mais on considère qu'il contribue au développement durable, qui couvre la protection et l'amélioration de l'environnement. Il semble que la protection de la nature et l'amélioration de l'environnement jouent un rôle dans la mise en œuvre et l'impact du programme LEADER car de nombreux territoires LEADER opèrent à proximité de zones protégées, tentant de concrétiser dans leurs stratégies pilotes des situations bénéfiques aux deux parties (par ex. par des chaînes d'alimentation organique). De plus, **dans les plans d'action locale, la notion d'innovation est souvent liée à des avantages environnementaux**, par ex. par l'utilisation durable de ressources endogènes. Par conséquent, dans la plupart des programmes, une part considérable des projets semble inclure un aspect environnemental ou mettre l'accent sur une prise de conscience ou des critères environnementaux. Les ONG ou les autorités s'occupant d'environnement sont même représentées dans le conseil ou les groupes de travail de nombreux GAL.

Bien que les données recueillies ne permettent pas d'émettre un jugement sur l'impact de tous ces éléments, nous prévoyons que les effets les plus tangibles proviendront d'une meilleure prise de conscience et d'une meilleure connaissance des questions environnementales ainsi que de l'émergence de nouvelles relations entre intervenants, collaborant pour concrétiser la stratégie pilote intégrée, comme on le prévoit déjà pour les programmes qui ont débuté relativement tôt et ont dès lors déjà fourni des indications préliminaires.

b) Impact sur les bénéficiaires cibles prioritaires

LEADER+ semble contribuer à l'égalité des genres dans une mesure qui ne peut guère être évaluée à ce stade.

Bien que l'on note dans l'ensemble un large respect formel de l'exigence d'inclure **des bénéficiaires cibles prioritaires (les femmes et les jeunes)** dans les programmes et plans d'action locale, ce point ne génère pas automatiquement des activités concrètes. Cela peut dépendre des caractéristiques relatives au territoire concerné (dans certains pays comme la Finlande, les femmes participent plus que les hommes au processus de développement et comme bénéficiaires), mais peut aussi résulter d'une certaine négligence. Il semble que LEADER puisse répondre aux besoins des femmes et promouvoir les femmes en tant qu'acteurs du développement rural. La part des porteurs féminins de projets oscille dans la plupart des cas entre 20% et 50%. Ce fait peut être attribué à la priorité accordée aux activités à petite échelle, à l'inclusion et à la récompense du travail volontaire, à l'approche ascendante, ou à une combinaison de tous ces facteurs (et à d'autres facteurs d'influence). Dans les pays où la participation féminine à LEADER est élevée (comme en Finlande), les femmes participent activement afin de promouvoir des stratégies qui reflètent leurs besoins.

Les femmes sont beaucoup mieux représentées parmi le personnel technique que dans les organes décisionnels des GAL, qui restent majoritairement masculins dans la plupart des territoires (la part des femmes dans le personnel technique atteint les 70% alors que la représentation des femmes dans les organes décisionnels des GAL avoisine en moyenne les 30%).

Les stratégies des programmes régionaux et des GAL illustrent deux grandes voies vers l'égalité des genres : tout d'abord celle de la **discrimination positive**, qui considère explicitement les femmes

comme un groupe cible prioritaire ; ensuite, **la conception sensible au genre** de l'approche et des stratégies de développement (par ex. par une meilleure conception des mesures de formation et d'éducation).

Les jeunes ne sont pas suffisamment pris en compte par LEADER (à quelques exceptions près).

La plupart des actions ciblant les jeunes générations ont visé la création d'emplois et les formations correspondantes. Toutefois, les investissements dans l'environnement social et culturel du territoire semblent générer plus d'effets visibles sur l'attractivité de la région pour les jeunes. **Tant les investissements dans le territoire que les opportunités concrètes d'emploi sont indispensables.** La représentation des jeunes ou tout au moins des associations de jeunes dans les conseils des GAL a, d'après certains évaluateurs, amélioré la qualité et l'acceptation des actions concernées. Toutefois, l'implication physique et continue des jeunes dans les organes décisionnels est vraiment rare et les gens ne savent pas trop comment associer les jeunes aux activités. **De nombreux intervenants du monde rural sentent le lien entre la problématique des jeunes et la viabilité et la durabilité de leur territoire.** Nous pouvons donc nous attendre à un renforcement de l'intérêt pour ce thème à l'avenir.

En résumé, de nombreux intervenants estiment que LEADER+ ne répond pas aux besoins et spécificités des groupes cibles prioritaires, surtout des jeunes. Dans le même temps, ils sont réticents à l'idée de se voir imposer de nouveaux prescrits thématiques car, selon eux, une telle évolution **affaiblirait l'approche territoriale** selon laquelle c'est le groupe d'action locale qui devrait baser sa stratégie pilote sur une évaluation complète des besoins réels de toutes les composantes de la population locale. Quoi qu'il en soit, les problématiques de l'exclusion, des migrations et des minorités, ainsi que les phénomènes qui accompagnent la péri-urbanisation (rurbanisation) vont s'intensifier.

Une bonne mise en œuvre de l'approche LEADER rend inutile tout nouveau prescrit concernant les bénéficiaires cibles

Nous concluons que **l'approche LEADER est en soi un moyen suffisant pour répondre aux besoins de groupes spécifiques** car elle recèle le potentiel d'offrir les instruments adéquats pour le diagnostic territorial, l'animation, la participation et l'élaboration de projets. Certains programmes LEADER (tels que les programmes finlandais, néerlandais et allemands) ont signalé que « *les GAL devraient analyser leurs propres territoires avec encore plus de précision et sélectionner les groupes cibles sur cette base* » (Étude de cas de la Finlande). C'est ainsi qu'en Autriche, Italie et France, ce ne sont pas seulement les femmes et les jeunes mais aussi d'autres groupes sociaux, tels que les personnes âgées et les minorités, qui ont été perçus comme des groupes cibles potentiels et les rapports EMP concernés avancent que c'est uniquement au programme/GAL que devrait revenir la responsabilité de la sélection finale de son groupe spécifique de bénéficiaires cibles. En outre, les GAL peuvent gérer d'autres programmes sur leur territoire de façon complémentaire.

2.4 Conclusions sur le Thème 4 : Impact du programme sur le territoire par rapport aux objectifs spécifiques de LEADER+

Le Thème 4 brosse un panorama de principalement deux aspects :

- a) Impact sur les territoires ruraux
- b) Impact sur la gouvernance

a) Impact sur les territoires ruraux

LEADER permet aux acteurs locaux d'apprendre à marcher avant de courir

Les effets de LEADER+ sont plus visibles au niveau local : le type de projets financés permet d'obtenir une idée assez réaliste de la capacité spécifique de LEADER+ de déclencher des évolutions

nouvelles (jusqu'à présent inconnues dans le territoire concerné) en vue de créer des emplois dans de petites entreprises et de promouvoir de nouveaux produits et services, ce qui contribue à améliorer le maillage local de services économiques et publics. Malheureusement, les succès au niveau local n'offrent pas une base suffisante pour permettre une extrapolation des effets à l'échelle des zones rurales en général.

Néanmoins, **la nature de ces succès** semble encourager les acteurs locaux à œuvrer davantage au développement local. La somme des petites expériences positives au niveau local (c.-à-d. entre habitants locaux) peut **devenir un effet mesurable au niveau régional** (c.-à-d. du programme LEADER ou de la région) par simple agrégation des interactions et expériences positives. Il se peut que cet effet d'agrégation soit trop ténu pour être mis en évidence par les seules techniques traditionnelles d'analyse d'impact (par ex. par « le nombre d'emplois créés », « l'évolution du PIB/habitant) mais qu'il puisse être « perçu » dans l'image positive du territoire et dans la capacité organisationnelle des groupes locaux, ce qui exigera une évaluation plus qualitative des effets au niveau régional.

Dès lors, nous pouvons répondre par un « oui » prudent à la question de savoir si LEADER+ peut générer des changements et des améliorations tangibles dans les zones rurales. La force particulière de LEADER réside dans sa capacité à jouer un rôle d'éclaireur pour les programmes traditionnels mais LEADER permet aussi de combler des niches de demande habituellement négligées par les programmes traditionnels.

Retrouver ses racines en prenant son envol

Une autre question porte sur **la capacité de LEADER à susciter une utilisation plus efficiente des ressources endogènes**. Logiquement, les principes de territorialité et d'approche ascendante vont dans ce sens mais, d'entrée de jeu, on ne voit pas clairement comment concrétiser ces principes dans le contexte des stratégies pilotes locales. Des exemples locaux montrent que la stratégie peut contribuer à une utilisation plus efficiente des ressources endogènes (physiques, humaines, environnementales) de deux façons différentes :

- (i) **par liaison amont** : si l'appui est pris dans le passé : caractéristiques historiques ou traditionnelles (fêtes, recettes de cuisine, conceptions architecturales, artisanat, ...), paysagères et naturelles, etc. Dans cette optique, les ressources disponibles à l'échelon local sont perçues sous un nouveau jour. La communauté utilise ces ressources pour les transformer en atouts mais d'une manière qui ne détruit pas leur caractère exceptionnel ni ne sape leur valeur pour un usage futur;
- (ii) **par liaison aval** : si la stratégie s'appuie sur une vision commune de l'avenir qui rallie les acteurs locaux autour d'un objectif commun. Dans cette optique, les acteurs rassemblent leurs ressources et commencent à utiliser les moyens disponibles de façon plus efficiente par le biais d'accords de coopération.

Les excellentes stratégies pilotes mêlent liaison amont et aval. Malheureusement, vu la brièveté de la période de mise en œuvre, les impacts de ce type, pas plus que leurs effets sur l'emploi, n'ont pu être évalués dans les EMP à un large niveau territorial. Dès lors, l'idée que la combinaison des liaisons amont et aval puisse être un facteur de succès pour les stratégies pilotes relève d'une hypothèse prudente des évaluateurs.

b) Impact sur la gouvernance

La fusion et l'intégration de LEADER dans une vaste politique rurale ainsi que l'adaptation aux circonstances locales peuvent donner d'excellents résultats.

Les intervenants ruraux voient des exemples positifs de synergies et de complémentarités entre LEADER et les programmes traditionnels mais ils hésitent à les présenter comme « bonnes pratiques ». En d'autres termes, lorsque les rapports EMP et les études de cas (par ex. Irlande, Andalousie – Espagne, Finlande) ont identifié des exemples positifs de synergies et de

complémentarités entre LEADER et les programmes traditionnels, ils les ont considérés comme le fruit d'un contexte régional/national, administratif/bureaucratique spécifique plutôt que comme des cas taillés sur mesure pour LEADER. Les changements structurels dans ces pays indiquent que LEADER produit d'énormes effets de levier s'il est judicieusement combiné avec des programmes traditionnels. D'après les informations disponibles, LEADER a identifié et exploité des synergies avec d'autres politiques et programmes de l'UE, surtout ceux qui contribuent à **améliorer la qualité de la vie, et moins ceux qui concernent l'emploi ou la croissance économique.**

Des synergies sont apparues là où les compétences en matière de politiques et le pouvoir décisionnel étaient groupés autour de problématiques (par ex. le développement rural incluant tous les secteurs économiques) plutôt que répartis selon la logique bureaucratique traditionnelle par domaine de politique (la politique économique par rapport à la politique agricole).

L'ancrage de LEADER dans une vaste politique rurale peut revêtir trois formes, chacune pouvant donner d'excellents résultats si certaines conditions sont respectées (les programmes mentionnés entre parenthèses sont considérés comme de bonnes illustrations des différents modes d'ancrage de LEADER dans le développement rural) :

- **Fusion stratégique** (Autriche, Flandre, Baden-Württemberg) : LEADER peut être conçu comme un éclaireur, un incubateur ou un spécialiste de niche pour des domaines spécifiques d'intervention. Dans ce rôle, il peut exercer un effet de levier sur le développement rural si un soutien en matière de suivi est assuré par des programmes traditionnels. L'initiative peut développer un profil et une image distincts et attirer l'attention de nouveaux porteurs de projets en fonction de son objectif véritable de laboratoire de développement rural novateur. Les conditions d'excellence de la fusion stratégique sont : (1°) une communication et une interaction efficaces entre intervenants et dans les territoires LEADER ; (2°) une coordination inter-administrative efficace aux niveaux national et régional ; (3°) une bonne assistance technique aux candidates.
- **Intégration totale** (Andalousie, Finlande, Irlande) : LEADER peut être inclus dans la politique rurale en tant que composante principale type, qui adapte à son approche d'autres mesures de développement local et rural, plus traditionnelles. Dans l'étude sur l'intégration (mainstreaming) de LEADER, les auteurs ont inventé les expressions « strong mainstreaming » (intégration forte) ou « full mainstreaming » (intégration totale)⁴. Les conditions d'excellence de l'intégration totale sont : (1°) une stratégie de politique rurale globale et partagée, placée sous l'autorité d'un seul organe ; (2°) une coordination au niveau des programmes pour éviter des chevauchements entre LEADER et des mesures traditionnelles similaires à LEADER.
- **Adaptation aux circonstances locales** (Grèce, Irlande du Nord, Portugal) : Même en l'absence (regrettable) d'une forte coordination à des échelons décisionnels supérieurs, des groupes d'action locale peuvent être à même d'agir en tant qu'agences de développement local répartissant les flux de fonds sur leur territoire pour servir au mieux les bénéficiaires potentiels. Les conditions d'excellence de l'adaptation aux circonstances locales sont : (1°) un fort degré d'autonomie des GAL couplé à un soutien descendant visant à encourager et autonomiser ; (2°) un climat de coopération et de confiance au niveau local pour rendre la coordination inter-institutionnelle possible et efficace ; (3°) un important personnel technique qualifié intégrant les compétences sociales et économiques au niveau du GAL.

Mainstreaming (Intégration) ou « backstreaming » (retour en arrière)

Certes les résultats positifs de programmes LEADER précédents sont un des principaux facteurs favorisant l'ancrage dans des politiques rurales générales. Cependant, dans des pays ou des régions où prédomine une optique « descendante », l'approche LEADER n'est pas reconnue de la même manière dans la politique de développement rural. Dans ces régions, les intervenants ruraux ont un avis mitigé au sujet de l'intégration de LEADER dans les programmes de développement rural : d'une part, ils se félicitent d'un meilleur financement et de l'importance accordée à LEADER dans le

⁴ ÖIR (2004): "Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes", p.18ff

développement rural mais, d'autre part, ils craignent que le lien n'induisse un « **retour en arrière** » (backstreaming) en ce sens que LEADER serait instrumentalisé pour soutenir des mesures ou des projets mono-sectoriels n'ayant guère, voire pas d'impact structurel sur la zone rurale.

2.5 Conclusions sur le Thème 5 : Financement, gestion et évaluation du programme

Le Thème 5 brosse un panorama de principalement deux aspects :

- a) Influence des arrangements administratifs sur l'impact du programme
- b) Suivi et évaluation

a) Influence des arrangements administratifs sur l'impact du programme

Il est à coup sûr trop tôt pour juger si les arrangements concrets en matière de gestion, financement et administration du programme ont un impact sur l'efficacité générale de celui-ci. **Les informations données dans les EMP et dans les études de cas tendent à se concentrer sur des aspects tels que la bureaucratie, les relations entre autorités de gestion et GAL, le financement et l'autonomie insuffisante des GAL qui sape l'approche « ascendante ».**

Des aspects de gestion plus fondamentaux au niveau des GAL, tels que les structures, les systèmes de gestion, la planification et le contrôle, n'ont pas été abordés dans les EMP ni dans les études de cas. Les réponses aux questions évaluatives ne font nullement mention du rôle du conseil d'administration dans la gestion du programme.

Des arrangements de gestion positifs découlent normalement d'une décentralisation, de l'octroi de l'autonomie et de la désignation d'une forme de coordinateur. Les programmes présentant le moins de problèmes de gestion semblaient aussi avoir mis en place de bonnes structures de fonctionnement et de bonnes relations entre GAL et autorités de gestion.

Comme nous l'avons évoqué ci-dessus, de nombreux intervenants locaux considèrent que le degré d'autonomie du GAL dans la sélection des projets est un facteur crucial de mise en œuvre simplifiée et aisée du programme. Dès lors, les systèmes de subvention globale et « quasi » globale⁵ sembleraient être le bon choix pour la mise en œuvre des programmes. Toutefois, le glissement des responsabilités a un prix :

- **Un renforcement de l'axe ascendant n'implique pas un affaiblissement de l'axe descendant;** il pourrait même requérir plus d'interventions descendantes, bien que sous une autre forme : il s'agirait d'encourager et d'autonomiser au lieu de commander et de contrôler. Cette modification exige compréhension et compétences adéquates au niveau des administrations et des acteurs locaux.
- **Un système de subvention globale ou « quasi » globale pour la mise en œuvre ne sera pleinement opérationnel que si tous les fonds publics sont concentrés dans une seule enveloppe.** Si seul le cofinancement européen est décentralisé et que le GAL doit rechercher le cofinancement national pour chaque projet, le gain de souplesse est réduit à néant (il existe des exemples de ce type dans les EMP, notamment en France). Les subventions globales exigent une gestion bien coordonnée des flux financiers aux niveaux national et régional.

b) Suivi et évaluation

Le suivi et l'évaluation sont des pierres angulaires de LEADER+ et s'ils sont exécutés de façon structurée, ils devraient renseigner sur le processus de planification des programmes futurs ainsi que permettre de prendre, le cas échéant, des mesures correctrices pour les programmes en cours.

⁵ Il s'agit de subventions globales qui ne sont pas totalement décentralisées mais distribuées via un organe public intermédiaire, comme c'est le cas en Autriche via les Länder.

Rien dans les EMP ne permet de dire que les évaluations ex-ante aient induit des changements perceptibles dans les programmes.

L'initiative de la Commission de pré-déterminer un ensemble de questions évaluatives communes assorties de critères de jugement a été considérée comme une tentative bien intentionnée d'améliorer la base de connaissances et les conditions permettant aux institutions de tirer des leçons des expériences à travers toute l'Europe. Toutefois, cette tentative a été quelque peu entravée par (1°) la pleine application des QEC à mi-parcours, un moment qui ne semble pas opportun pour cet exercice exhaustif, surtout en ce qui concerne les questions portant sur l'impact; (2°) le nombre élevé et parfois l'imprécision des QEC; (3°) l'absence de système harmonisé d'observation.

Quant aux évaluations (externes et auto-évaluations) au niveau des GAL, on note une sensibilisation croissante à leur importance et leurs avantages et la plupart des GAL prévoient l'une ou l'autre forme d'évaluation. **L'analyse constate (1°) que les activités d'évaluation sont en grande partie non structurées ; (2°) qu'il n'existe que très peu de coordination ou de coopération entre GAL dans le domaine de l'évaluation ; (3°) que les réseaux nationaux ne jouent pas un rôle majeur sauf quand il s'agit d'apporter une aide aux auto-évaluations dans certains GAL.**

Il convient aussi d'étudier en profondeur comment les GAL pourraient utiliser les résultats de leurs auto-évaluations de façon plus efficiente et extensive dans leur travail afin que ces évaluations puissent vraiment leur servir de guide. **Dans la plupart des cas, les auto-évaluations semblent être des exercices ponctuels** et l'analyse systématique de l'expérience ainsi que les mesures correctrices et les leçons qui en découlent pâtissent du manque de temps, toute l'énergie étant consacrée au démarrage de nouveaux projets.

3. Recommandations basées sur ces constats

3.1 Recommandations concernant le Thème 1 : Mise en œuvre de la méthode LEADER

- Les autorités de gestion devraient garantir des conditions équitables et justes pour tous les demandeurs potentiels dans tous les types de zones rurales grâce à l'application de mesures appropriées à la phase de pré-sélection : communication large, assistance technique, facilitation de la constitution de partenariats et de la délimitation des territoires, développement des capacités des intervenants locaux et des responsables au sein de l'administration.
- Il faudrait garantir la visibilité et la spécificité de LEADER en lui octroyant un rôle bien défini dans la politique rurale générale des États membres (et en assurant la coordination nécessaire à un échelon décisionnel supérieur) ainsi qu'en donnant des conseils aux GAL pour la communication des spécificités de l'initiative LEADER.
- La description de l'axe LEADER dans le programme de développement rural devrait mentionner les méthodes à utiliser pour sélectionner le GAL et la façon dont le concours entre territoires sera organisé.
- Pendant la phase de pré-sélection, des ressources suffisantes (sous la forme de fonds éligibles) devraient être réservées tant par la Commission que par les États membres pour fournir aux GAL les qualifications, informations et communications nécessaires à la préparation, à la création et à la mise en œuvre de leur stratégie locale basée sur les besoins. Cet aspect revêt une importance particulière pour les nouveaux candidats GAL dans de nouveaux pays et régions de programmation.
- Après la sélection, il faudrait accorder aux GAL un haut degré d'autonomie financière et administrative à condition que ces GAL assurent (outre leurs obligations en termes de représentation équilibrée des intérêts dans les organes décisionnels et groupes de travail et outre l'approche participative au niveau local) l'application de critères clairs et transparents de sélection des projets une stratégie explicite assortie d'une ligne budgétaire appropriée, consacrée à la mobilisation des énergies et à l'animation des intervenants locaux dans le cadre du plan d'action locale. [REVOIR FORMATTAGE]

- La mise en œuvre de la règle de « 50% de partenaires non publics » devrait faire l'objet d'un suivi tout au long du cycle de vie du partenariat local. Des exemples de bonnes pratiques en cette matière, tels que l'approche tripartite pratiquée en Finlande et en Suède⁶, devraient être diffusés.
- Les budgets alloués aux projets de coopération (conformément à l'art. 65 du Règ. 1695/05) devraient être exemptés de la règle n+2 et leur composante transnationale devrait être soutenue par le réseau de développement rural européen. Les auteurs sont bien conscients que cette recommandation contredit les dispositions juridiques existantes mais cette question n'en reste pas moins importante.
- La mise en réseau devrait être lancée le plus vite possible, c'est-à-dire beaucoup plus tôt que dans LEADER+, tant au niveau européen qu'au niveau régional/national. Le réseau de l'Observatoire européen des territoires ruraux créé dans le cadre de LEADER et le Réseau de développement rural devraient, semble-t-il, pouvoir offrir le soutien nécessaire aux États membres.
- Il convient de tirer les leçons de LEADER+, de créer des instruments et des outils pour tirer parti des expériences et codifier les bonnes pratiques aux niveaux local, régional/national et européen. La Commission européenne devrait peut-être prendre l'initiative de commander une étude sur ces points.

3.2 Recommandations concernant le Thème 2 : Actions spécifiques

- Un plafonnement du nombre d'habitants par territoire LEADER devrait être aboli. L'exigence d'une stratégie pilote territoriale, viable, cohérente et pertinente offre des critères suffisants pour éviter d'approuver des territoires trop petits ou trop grands.
- L'ampleur des projets éligibles devrait rester la plus large possible au niveau du contenu mais être assortie de critères de qualité clairs et précis.
- Il faudrait créer au niveau local un fonds pour de petits projets novateurs (comparable au Fonds des petits projets d'INTERREG), projets dont l'approbation reposerait sur des critères tels que l'innovation et les effets positifs potentiels ainsi que sur des procédures de sélection moins strictes que d'habitude.
- Les thèmes prioritaires devraient, pour autant qu'ils soient maintenus, être fixés au niveau des programmes par les États membres.
- Une auto-évaluation continue, assistée et documentée des GAL et de la mise en œuvre de la stratégie locale devraient devenir une norme vivante et courante de LEADER⁷ car c'est une manière appropriée de surveiller les changements de comportements et l'évolution des modes d'interaction sur le territoire. Les réseaux régionaux devraient avoir pour mission d'aider les GAL à cet égard.
- Le soutien et l'encouragement de la coopération devraient être entretenus par la création de forums d'échanges attrayants (par ex. plates-formes de résolution de problèmes, lieux d'échanges d'idées ou de bonnes pratiques soit virtuels (via des plates-formes Internet) ou réels (via des foires et de réels « marchés »), un travail sur les motivations et des mesures d'autonomisation (par la fourniture d'outils simplifiés de dépôt de demandes, de comptabilité et de reddition de comptes).
- Les mécanismes de mise en réseau doivent être installés beaucoup plus tôt. Outre leur rôle actuel de « gestion des flux », par lequel nous entendons...
 - la création, la canalisation et la gestion des informations,
 - le rapprochement entre personnes et institutions,

⁶ Un partenariat tripartite associe secteurs public, privé et associatif, participant chacun pour un tiers, parfois à tour de rôle. Un taux de rotation élevé des membres des conseils des GAL devrait être un objectif pour la prochaine période de programmation.

⁷ Déjà maintenant, les auto-évaluations sont obligatoires dans le cadre de LEADER+, mais les expériences pratiques ont montré qu'elles ne font toujours pas partie des procédures courantes dans de nombreux programmes.

- la récolte et le stockage d'études de cas et de descriptions de projets relatives aux bonnes pratiques,
- l'encouragement de nouveaux projets de coopération,

ils devraient jouer un rôle majeur dans la « gestion des stocks » ; nous voulons dire par là qu'ils devraient...

- créer des espaces de réflexion commune sur les bonnes pratiques dans divers domaines thématiques, questions horizontales et approches méthodologiques,
- tirer des leçons générales de ces pratiques, les codifier et les diffuser à l'ensemble de la communauté LEADER et en dehors de celle-ci,
- établir systématiquement des liens avec d'autres organes et institutions européens de mise en réseau et participer à des projets communs (URBACT, INTERACT, ESPON, EURADA, Comité des régions, etc.),
- introduire les connaissances acquises en matière de bonne gouvernance du développement local dans un système cohérent de gestion de la qualité qui puisse être utilisé par les GAL et les administrations des programmes à des fins de contrôle stratégique,
- relancer le côté novateur de LEADER en invitant les acteurs locaux, les intervenants régionaux et nationaux et d'autres experts à participer à des « groupes laboratoires » afin d'élaborer de nouveaux thèmes et approches et de diffuser leurs résultats dans des séminaires européens.

3.3 Recommandations concernant le Thème 3 : Impact du programme sur le territoire par rapport aux objectifs généraux des Fonds structurels

- Les paiements Natura 2000 ainsi que l'introduction des nouveaux paiements des services environnementaux forestiers dans les programmes de développement rural de la prochaine période offrent une nouvelle opportunité, qui devrait être saisie par les intervenants LEADER. Les mesures de l'axe 2 et de l'axe 4 pourraient être combinées pour créer des situations avantageuses pour tous dans et autour des zones protégées. Les parcs naturels et les réserves de biosphère offrent d'excellentes occasions de concrétiser des stratégies LEADER durables et globales.
- Dans les régions présentant des problèmes notoires d'exclusion (chômeurs de longue durée, minorités, immigrants, etc.), des stratégies ou tout au moins des mesures inclusives devraient figurer au rang des critères impératifs de sélection des candidats GAL. Ces prescrits ou restrictions thématiques devraient être introduits au niveau des programmes, en tenant compte des besoins réels des zones rurales.
- La question des bénéficiaires cibles prioritaires requiert un effort spécifique pour identifier, illustrer, codifier et diffuser les exemples de bonnes pratiques, surtout en ce qui concerne la participation des jeunes.
- La présence ou la représentation des femmes et des jeunes dans les conseils décisionnels devrait être un critère de sélection des GAL, ce qui requiert aussi une représentation de ces groupes dans les jurys chargés de la sélection.

3.4 Recommandations concernant le Thème 4 : Impact du programme sur le territoire par rapport aux objectifs spécifiques de LEADER+

- Pour l'évaluation d'impact, nous renvoyons à l'évaluation ex-post. La Commission devrait effectuer des études de cas et des analyses comparatives spécifiques afin d'obtenir des résultats globaux sur l'utilisation efficace des ressources dans le cadre du programme LEADER+.
- Il faudrait intensifier et améliorer la communication des potentiels de l'approche LEADER surtout dans les pays qui vont commencer à mettre le programme en œuvre au cours de la prochaine période de programmation. Ces informations revêtent une importance spécifique en cette phase d'allocation des budgets et de fixation des règles. Une meilleure connaissance des différentes

possibilités et formes d'intégration utilisées dans les Quinze donnerait aux auteurs de programmes des nouveaux États membres plus de choix quant à la manière d'exploiter les occasions offertes par l'axe LEADER.

3.5 Recommandations concernant le Thème 5 : Financement, gestion et évaluation du programme

- Le système de subvention globale ou « quasi » globale est un modèle approprié pour la mise en œuvre de LEADER. Tant le gouvernement national/régional que le système de gouvernance locale devraient y être préparés par des mesures adéquates de développement des capacités et de la confiance, ainsi que par une bonne coordination des flux financiers, surtout par le biais de structures de cofinancement public.
- Il faut parvenir à un ensemble harmonisé d'indicateurs communs au niveau européen, quels que soient les besoins supplémentaires de suivi et d'évaluation aux niveaux national et régional. Le premier pas dans cette voie a été franchi par la formulation des QEC mais une deuxième étape s'impose :
 - il faut pré-établir pour chaque QEC des indicateurs génériques, susceptibles d'être adaptés aux circonstances respectives sans perdre leur comparabilité générale ni leur possibilité d'être totalisés.
 - il faut mentionner les moyens ou les mécanismes permettant de surveiller ces indicateurs.
 - Il faut nettement réduire le nombre de QEC : ainsi, les administrations nationales et régionales seraient sans doute plus enclines à respecter le cadre et à générer des indicateurs supplémentaires en vue de répondre à leurs besoins d'informations spécifiques.
 - Le cadre des QEC, des critères de jugement et des indicateurs devrait être élaboré par un groupe de travail consultatif auquel participeraient des intervenants de tous les niveaux concernés (acteurs locaux, administrations régionales/nationales/réseaux/CE). Les QEC devraient refléter une vision partagée de la logique d'intervention, qui mènerait à une « harmonisation » de ces indicateurs entre eux⁸. Des modèles comme le tableau de bord équilibré pour le développement local et régional, tel que celui qui fut créé par un groupe de travail LEADER sous l'égide du Réseau national autrichien, pourraient contribuer à générer la cohérence interne du système d'indicateurs.
- L'utilisation par les GAL d'un mélange d'évaluations externes et d'auto-évaluations assistées devrait être définie et intégrée dans le programme. Les réseaux nationaux/régionaux peuvent aider l'autorité de gestion à rendre cet instrument d'accompagnement opérationnel.
- Les leçons tirées doivent être systématiquement incorporées dans la mise en œuvre même du programme : la réflexivité⁹ devrait devenir une nouvelle caractéristique LEADER. Ce concept signifie qu'à tous les niveaux du programme, il faudrait incorporer les leçons tirées de l'expérience, en veillant aux avantages que peuvent en tirer ceux qui agissent à ce niveau ainsi qu'à leurs besoins. Il faudrait donc appliquer divers moyens et méthodes d'apprentissage. Ainsi, au niveau du programme et au-dessus de ce niveau (Commission européenne et autorités de gestion), un apprentissage axé sur les résultats devrait être appliqué (via une évaluation et un suivi standard). Le niveau local/régional exigerait des méthodes d'apprentissage volontaires (telles que l'auto-évaluation, la supervision).

⁸ Cependant, pour la prochaine période de programmation, on a constaté que la Commission Européenne a mis au point un nombre limité d'indicateurs génériques dans le « Cadre commun du suivi et de l'évaluation » qui s'appliquent aux programmes de développement rural, y compris l'axe LEADER.

⁹ Elle constitue un principe opérationnel explicite de l'initiative pilote de la République fédérale d'Allemagne *Regionen Aktiv* (une mesure nationale de type LEADER associant 18 territoires pilotes).

Kurzfassung

1. Einführung – Die Rahmenbedingungen

Hauptmerkmale des LEADER+ Programmes

LEADER ist eine Gemeinschaftsinitiative für ländliche Entwicklung, die im Jahre 1991 mit LEADER I ins Leben gerufen wurde. Es folgte LEADER II (1994 – 1999) und mit LEADER+ (2000 – 2006) befindet sich das Programm in der dritten Phase. **LEADER+¹** wurde entwickelt, um ländliche Akteure unter Bedachtnahme auf das langfristige Potential der betroffenen Regionen zu unterstützen. Zur Förderung der Durchführung integrierter, qualitativ hochwertiger und grundlegender Strategien zur nachhaltigen Entwicklung setzt das Programm auf partnerschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Vernetzung zum gegenseitigen Erfahrungsaustausch. Insgesamt wurden dafür EUR 5.046,5 Millionen für den Zeitraum 2000 bis 2006 aufgebracht, wobei EUR 2.105,1 Millionen vom EAGFL „Ausrichtungsteil“ und der Restbetrag durch die Mitgliedsländer bzw. private Geldgeber finanziert wurden. LEADER+ ist in drei Bereiche strukturiert (1) **Unterstützung von Strategien zu einer integrierten territorialen Entwicklung mit Pilotcharakter**, (2) **Unterstützung von Kooperationen zwischen ländlichen Gebieten**, (3) **Networking**.

Die LEADER+ Methode ermutigt ländliche Akteure zur Durchführung von Entwicklungsstrategien, die durch ein Set bestimmter Spezifika charakterisiert sind. Durch diese unterscheiden sie sich von jenen Ansätzen zur ländlichen Entwicklung, die üblicherweise bei herkömmlichen, vom Europäischen Ausrichtungs- und Garantiefonds für die Landwirtschaft (EAGFL) geförderten Regionalentwicklungsprogrammen, angewendet werden. Diese LEADER+ Spezifika, welche in der Mitteilung der Kommission zu LEADER+ an die Mitgliedstaaten aufgezählt werden, umfassen das *Bottom-up Prinzip*, das *territoriale Prinzip*, das *partnerschaftliche Prinzip*, *integrierte und nachhaltige Entwicklungsstrategien mit Pilotcharakter im Bereich spezifischer Themen*, *interterritoriale und transnationale Zusammenarbeit und Networking*.

Umfang und Methodik der Studie

Im Sinne der Verordnung 445/2002, Art. 57(1) ist die Europäische Kommission verpflichtet, nach Erhalt der individuellen Halbzeit-Bewertungsberichte eine Zusammenfassung auf Gemeinschaftsebene vorzulegen. Zu diesem Zweck analysiert die vorliegende Synthese die Relevanz, Kohärenz, Effektivität und Effizienz von LEADER+ Programmen aufbauend auf der Vorgehensweise in nationalen/regionalen Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten und anderen Dokumenten, die auf die Referenzperiode der LEADER+ Halbzeitevaluierung (2000-2003) Bezug nehmen. Die Synthese untersucht im Besonderen die Voraussetzungen für eine erfolgreiche Anwendung der LEADER Methode auf ländliche Entwicklungsaktivitäten sowie deren Potential, Mehrwert im Vergleich zu traditionellen (top-down) Implementierungsarten ländlicher Entwicklungsprogramme zu schaffen. Diesbezüglich liefert der Bericht u.a. „Good-Practice“-Beispiele. Darüber hinaus untersucht die Synthese die Anwendung und Anwendbarkeit der bisher angewandten Evaluierungsmethode, welche in der EU-Verordnung 1260/99 und den zugehörigen „Richtlinien für die Evaluierung von LEADER+ Programmen“ beschrieben wird.

Die Synthese wurde über einen Zeitraum von acht Monaten, beginnend am 30. November 2005, durchgeführt. Das transnationale Projektteam war in zwei Untergruppen organisiert: ein Kernteam², welches den Umfang der Analyse festlegte (d.h. Entwicklung der Instrumente zur Datengewinnung und Zusammenführung der Ergebnisse auf europäischem Level) und die geographischen Experten, welche das Sammeln und Zusammenführen der Daten auf nationalem und regionalem Level organi-

¹ LEADER+ wird als Gemeinschaftsinitiative durch die Strukturfondverordnung 1260/99 geregelt. Darüber hinaus legt die von der Kommission an die Mitgliedstaaten gerichtete Mitteilung vom 14. April 2000 Richtlinien für die ländliche Entwicklung der Gemeinschaft (LEADER+) fest. [ABI C 139 vom 18.05.2000]. Die Mitteilung schreibt ferner technische Maßnahmen zur Durchführung, Vorbereitung und Auswahl von Programmen unter LEADER+ vor und geht auf Methoden für deren Management, Controlling, Überwachung und Evaluierung ein.

² Bernd Schuh, Hannes Wimmer (ÖIR); Robert Lukesch; Seamus O’Grady; Jean Pierre Vercruysee

sierten. Das Kernteam erstellte einige Instrumente (Tools) für qualitative und quantitative Untersuchungen:

- **Tool 1:** Bewertungsraster, um allgemeine Informationen zu jedem Programm zu liefern, wie sie in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten und deren Updates verfügbar sind.
- **Tool 2:** Bewertungsraster, um detaillierte Informationen zu jeder der Beurteilungsfragen pro Programm zu liefern, wie sie in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten und deren Updates verfügbar sind.
- Die Aufbereitung von 23 **Fallstudien** zu ausgewählten Programmen bildete den methodischen Rahmen zur Durchführung von Fokusgruppen und zur zusätzlichen Datenbeschaffung bei Datenlücken.

Die nationalen/regionalen Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte und deren Updates waren die Primärquellen dieser europäischen Synthese, die um weitere Dokumente aus nationalen und europäischen Quellen ergänzt wurde.

2. Die wichtigsten Evaluierungsergebnisse

Basierend auf der hinter den Programmen stehenden Interventionslogik, untersuchten die Evaluatoren die Beziehung zwischen den 49 Evaluierungsfragen und 14 identifizierten „Kardinalfragen“, welche spezifische Schlussfolgerungen zu Schlüsselbereichen des LEADER-Programms ermöglichten. Diese Vorgehensweise ermöglichte die Reduktion der Gesamtkomplexität dieser Meta-Studie bei gleichzeitiger Gewährleistung einer umfangreichen Analyse der Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte.

Alle gemeinsamen Evaluierungsfragen („common evaluation questions“ – CEQ) (d.h. Fragen, die in der LEADER+ Richtlinie der Kommission für Halbzeitevaluierungen und in allen Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten behandelt werden) und die weiterführenden Evaluationsfragen („further evaluation questions“ – FEQ) (d.h. spezielle Fragen zu dieser Meta-Studie) wurden beantwortet. Die bedeutendsten Schlussfolgerungen für jede der fünf Evaluierungsthemen werden nachstehend präsentiert.

2.1 Schlussfolgerungen zu Thema 1: Umsetzung der LEADER Methode

Thema 1 gibt einen Überblick über drei Aspekte:

- a) Die Umsetzung des Programms auf Verwaltungsebene
- b) Die Umsetzung der LEADER Spezifika durch die programmverantwortlichen Stellen und lokale Aktionsgruppen (LAG)
- c) Die Lerneffekte aus früheren LEADER Phasen

a) Die Umsetzung des Programms auf Verwaltungsebene

LEADER+ ist ein komplexes Programm und erfordert komplexe Managementlösungen.

Die LEADER+ Initiative wird in zwei Schritten umgesetzt:

- Festlegung von Rahmenbedingungen zur Auswahl von lokalen Aktionsplänen und LEADER Gebieten;
- Umsetzung der lokalen Aktionspläne.

Der „2 Stufen-Ansatz“ führt generell **im Vergleich zu „Mainstream“ Programmen zu einem gewissen Verzug bei der Programmumsetzung vor Ort.** Dies lässt auch darauf schließen, dass sich die **Halbzeitevaluierung auf eine Phase erstreckte, in der hauptsächlich Vorbereitungs- und Strukturierungsmaßnahmen stattgefunden haben.**

Beinahe alle Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte betonten, dass **frühere Erfahrungen mit LEADER Umsetzungen** der Verwaltung der programmverantwortlichen Stellen eine beschleunigte Startphase ermöglichten. Dies konnte vor allem in jenen Ländern festgestellt werden, in denen sich sowohl erfahrene als auch neue Regionen an LEADER+ beteiligten (z.B. Holland).

Die Anwendung der LEADER Spezifika (z.B. Bottom-up Prinzip, territoriales Prinzip) verlangsamt auch den Start der Programme. In dieser Hinsicht zeigten Fallstudienberichte, dass sich unterschiedliche Programme in einigen Regionen in unterschiedlichen Reifestadien befinden (z.B. in Deutschland und Italien). Länder mit einem nationalen Programm und einer starken Konzentration der Kompetenzen (was nicht mit Zentralismus verwechselt werden darf) konnten folglich eher Vorteile generieren (Österreich, Finnland). Der zögerliche Beginn von LEADER Programmen könnte ebenso das Ergebnis von limitierten Ressourcen an Humankapital sein (z.B. in Regionen, die mehrere Gemeinschaftsprogramme durchführen).

Trotz der Verbreitung der Initiative in allen ländlichen Regionen scheint es lediglich einen begrenzten Trend zu geben **neue Gebiete anzusprechen**. Die meisten Verwaltungsbehörden konzentrierten sich auf **die Schaffung ausgewogener Bedingungen in allen förderfähigen Regionen**. Zu diesen Maßnahmen zählen wir breit angelegte Informationskampagnen und eine zweite Runde von LAG Auswahlverfahren.

LEADER ist gut sichtbar im Kontext der Regionalpolitik.

In den meisten Ländern und Regionen, in denen LEADER+ umgesetzt wird, hat die **Initiative eine klare Ausgestaltung** und nimmt eine besondere Rolle in der Entwicklung ländlicher Regionen ein. LEADER liefert viele veranschaulichende Beispiele für ursächliche ländliche Entwicklungsprojekte; besonders dort, wo herkömmliche ländliche Entwicklungspolitik hauptsächlich vom landwirtschaftlichen Blickwinkel betrachtet wird.

b) Die Umsetzung der LEADER Spezifika durch die programmverantwortlichen Stellen und lokale Aktionsgruppen

LEADER erfordert ein gutes Programm-Management und ein wenig mehr.

Defizite im Bereich des Programm-Managements führen aufgrund der hohen Komplexität von LEADER-Programmen eher zu negativen Effekten als bei anderen Programmen. Die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte führen wiederholt folgende Unzulänglichkeiten an: (i) überhöhte Bürokratie; (ii) komplizierte Beziehungen einerseits zwischen Regierungsbehörden und anderen involvierten Behörden und andererseits zwischen LAGs und Projektförderern; (iii) Probleme bei der gemeinsamen Mittelbeschaffung; (iv) Verzögerungen bei der Finanzierung; und (v) mangelnde Autonomie der LAG. Die Folge dieser Mängel war ein Effizienzverlust des Managements (z.B. wurde zu viel Zeit in Bürokratie gesteckt, anstatt in Mobilisierung und Anreizschaffung zu investieren) und folglich Enttäuschung der lokalen Akteure. Während diese Schlussfolgerungen eher die Meinung der LAGs reflektieren (sowie Engpässe bei Verwaltungsmitarbeitern, wie in einigen Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten betont wurde), wird die Notwendigkeit zur Schaffung klarer Managementregeln für die Verwaltung von öffentlichen Mitteln durch die Europäische Kommission anerkannt.

Der LEADER-Ansatz:

- erfordert das Engagement der Menschen vor Ort,
- trachtet danach, transparente Auswahlverfahren für lokale Projekte im Rahmen einer gemeinsamen Zukunftsperspektive der Region anzuwenden,
- zielt auf bestimmte Begünstigte wie Frauen, junge Menschen oder andere benachteiligte Gruppen ab,
- verlangt eine Strategie, die um ein Schwerpunktthema gruppiert wird, versucht dabei gleichzeitig, unterschiedliche Sektoren mit einzubeziehen und fördert Innovation, wobei lokale Partner-

schaften mit der Planung und Durchführung betraut sind, welche aus Menschen bestehen, die auf diese Weise noch nie zusammengearbeitet haben.

Dieses Anforderungsprofil dürfte eine Erklärung dafür liefern, warum **die Spezifika nicht bloß auf mechanische Weise umgesetzt werden können; vielmehr müssen diese kombiniert werden, um den vollen Mehrwert aus der Initiative zu generieren.** Die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte deuten gewissermaßen auf eine Art „Spirit“ oder „Kultur“ von LEADER hin, welche eine leichtere Handhabung der systembedingten Komplexität ermöglicht als herkömmliche ländliche Entwicklungsprogramme: **der Gedanke eines LEADER „Spirit“ wird von entscheidenden Stakeholdern geteilt und durch häufig stattfindenden Interaktionen von diesen Stakeholdern auf administrative- und lokale Ebene weiter transportiert.** Diese Beobachtung wurde bei der Mehrheit der Programme gemacht. In ihr liegt generell – wie schon in vorhergehenden LEADER Perioden – die Grundlage für positive Resultate bei der LEADER Umsetzung. Unglücklicherweise kann die Halbzeitbewertung von LEADER+ Programmen kaum Aufschluss über das Wesen dieses „LEADER-Spirit“ liefern. Traditionelle Bewertungsverfahren können nur schwer etwas so prozessabhängiges und interaktives wie einen „Spirit“ oder ein „Mind-set“ erfassen.

Der „LEADER spirit“ schimmert durch viele, voneinander unabhängige Statements und Fakten durch, welche in einigen Fallstudien beobachtet werden können (und manchmal sogar in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten).³

Die Auswahl von LAGs war mehr eine Überprüfung als ein Wettbewerb.

In vielen Fällen des Auswahlverfahrens von LAGs fand keine wirkliche Konkurrenz zwischen lokalen Aktionsgruppen statt: **der Prozess war vielmehr eine „Prüfung“ als ein „Wettbewerb“.** Dies ergab sich aus der Betrachtung der im Vorfeld auf Programmebene erstellten Budgets und dem politischen Willen, alle Beteiligten im ländlichen Raum sowie alle Stakeholder zu fördern. Darüber hinaus fehlte es in den vorhandenen Informationsquellen oftmals an der Dokumentation jener **Methoden, welche zur qualitativen Beurteilung der zu Förderzwecken eingereichten lokalen Programme angewendet wurden** (Beratungsprozess, Berücksichtigung der Meinung von Minderheiten, Mitspracherechte, Auswahlmechanismen und Kriterien für Projekte ...), was sie für diese Synthese nicht evaluierbar machte.

Das Bottom-up-Kriterium war bei der Auswahl von LAGs und der Umsetzung von Programmen wesentlich.

Generell wurde das **Bottom-up Prinzip** bei der Auswahl von LAGs und in weiterer Folge bei der Programmumsetzung (jedoch in unterschiedlichem Ausmaß) berücksichtigt, was eine deutliche Verbesserung im Vergleich zur LEADER II Periode darstellte. Dieser Umstand, wodurch sich LEADER deutlich von herkömmlichen ländlichen Entwicklungsprogrammen unterscheidet, ist jedoch noch nicht in allen Regionen in seinem vollen Potential ausgeschöpft. In Portugal beinhalteten die Auswahlkriterien für LAGs zum Beispiel Anforderungen in Bezug auf das Territorium, die Partnerschaft und die Strategie für ländliche Entwicklung. Hingegen wurden regionales Identitätsgefühl, Bottom-up Zugang, Neuartigkeit der Strategie, Kooperation und Networking nicht betrachtet. Andere zentral organisierte Programme (z.B. in Griechenland) konnten hingegen das Engagement regionaler/lokaler Stakeholder über alle Phasen der Programmverwirklichung hinweg verbessern.

Bottom-up hat zwei Dimensionen: (i) die Beziehung zwischen lokalen Akteuren und der LAG; (ii) die Beziehungen zwischen der LAG und der programmverantwortlichen Stelle. Interaktionen und Mitwirkungsprozesse sind in beiden Bereichen üblicherweise ähnlich ausgerichtet.

³ *Der „immaterielle“ Bestandteil des Programms macht dessen Erfolg aus. Aber dieser Umstand wird in der Evaluierung nicht gemessen. Im Rahmen einer Evaluierung „immaterieller Aspekte“ wäre es möglich, festzustellen, ob ein Gebiet die LEADER Philosophie „lebt“. Darauf sollte das Hauptaugenmerk einer Messung gelegt werden, obwohl die Schwierigkeit einer solchen Messung unbestritten ist“.* (Direktor der Ländlichen Entwicklung in Andalusien, Spanien)

Funktionierendes bottom-up geht nicht einher mit weniger top-down, sondern vielmehr mit einem neuartigen Stil von top-down: Ermöglichen und Fördern statt Befehlen und Kontrollieren. Dies erfordert eine breiter angelegte Kompetenz mehrere Akteure auf beiden Ebenen (LAG und Verwaltungsbehörde) als derzeit bei den meisten Programmen vorhanden ist. Wenn der LAG die Unterstützung von oben fehlt, könnte diese unter dem Gewicht neuer Verantwortungen erdrückt werden (z.B. durch die Verpflichtung, selbständig neue Wege der gemeinsamen nationalen Mittelaufbringung zu erschließen).

Ein gutes Beispiel für eine funktionierende Koexistenz von „bottom-up“ und „top-down“ liefert das englische Programm. Bei Programmbeginn werden von der Regierungsbehörde Richtlinien erlassen, die in regelmäßigen Abständen nach Absprache mit den LAGs diskutiert und auf den neuesten Stand gebracht werden. Dies trägt dazu bei, Spannungen zwischen „top-down“ and „bottom up“-Zugängen – dementsprechend zwischen den LAGs (welche vor Ort agieren müssen) und der programmverantwortlichen Stelle (welche auf europäischem Niveau verantwortlich ist) – zu reduzieren.

Ebenso können Beispiele **patriarchalischer Umsetzung** angeführt werden (z.B. Rioja, Spanien; mehrere Programme in Deutschland). Bei dieser nimmt die programmverantwortliche Stelle die Hauptrolle ein, wohingegen die LAGs bloß Projekte annehmen, auf die sich individuelle Förderer und verantwortliche Beamte einigen konnten. Der Governance-Stil mag zwar kurzfristig gesehen gute Ergebnisse liefern, auf lange Sicht verabsäumt dieser aber, zum Aufbau eines sozialen und organisatorischen Grundstocks einer Region beizutragen.

Die lokale Partnerschaft konnte neue Perspektiven lokaler Governance eröffnen.

Das Prinzip der **lokalen Partnerschaft** wurde bei der Auswahl von LAGs berücksichtigt, obwohl **eine ausgeglichene Vertretung der lokalen Interessen** nach einer Erstüberprüfung gewöhnlich nicht weiter überprüft wurde. Die in der lokalen Partnerschaft vertretenen Interessen sollten auf Basis einer fundierten Überprüfung der Bedürfnisse unterschiedlicher Bevölkerungsschichten die tatsächliche Situation in der jeweiligen Region reflektieren. Denn eine ausgeglichene Interessenvertretung kann auf lange Sicht nicht durch ein Festhalten an starren prozentualen Vertretungsverteilungen erreicht werden.

Lokale Aktionsgruppen, besonders neu gegründete, hatten nicht genug Ressourcen (Zeit) zur Verfügung, um ihre neuen Strategien entsprechend der Bedürfnisse der Menschen vor Ort entwickeln zu können.

Idealerweise sollte die **Pilotstrategie** auf einer umfangreichen Beurteilung der Region und all ihrer durch unterschiedliche Bedürfnisse charakterisierten Bevölkerungsschichten basieren. Der Zeitrahmen zur Entwicklung einer Strategie im Laufe eines breit angelegten Beratungsprozesses war für viele LAGs (besonders neu gegründete) zu eng bemessen. Dieser wurde durch den Mangel an Kapazitäten und Ressourcen noch verkürzt. **Länger existierende LAGs waren hier klar im Vorteil**, was jedoch nicht notwendigerweise darauf hindeutet, dass ihre Strategie-Pläne immer besser als jene von Newcomern waren.

Die in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten festgestellte heterogene Ausprägung des „Pilot-Charakters“ der Strategie kann teilweise mit den Problemen erklärt werden, mit welchen sich die Akteure bei der konkreten Inangriffnahme der Strategieentwicklung konfrontiert sahen. Der Ausdruck „Pilot-Charakter“ umfasst Konzepte wie „Innovation“, „multisektorale Integration“ und „Schwerpunkthemen“, die je nach Kontext widersprüchlich interpretiert werden könnten. Um ländliche Akteure bei der umfassenden und effektiven Berücksichtigung dieser Konzepte behilflich zu sein, wäre sowohl eine **bessere Führung als auch die Bereitstellung von Good-Practice-Beispielen notwendig gewesen**. Artikel 61 der Ratsverordnung 1698/2005 ist diesbezüglich viel klarer und konkreter als die Mitteilung der Kommission zu den LEADER+ Richtlinien (14/4/2000).

Kooperationen und Networking müssen langsam aufgebaut werden um Erfolg zu haben.

Die Begriffe Kooperation und Networking können drei unterschiedliche Bedeutungen haben, wodurch sich die Interpretation der diesbezüglich in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten gelieferten Darstellungen schwierig gestaltete:

- Sie sind operationelle Grundsätze und dem gemäß Teil des LEADER-Programmansatzes
- Sie sind mit einem bestimmten Budget ausgestattete Maßnahmen (Action 2 und 3)
- Sie sind gängige Praxis von Entwicklungsarbeit in den LAGs, unabhängig davon, ob diese förderungswürdig sind oder nicht.

Die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte und Fallstudien kommen zu dem Ergebnis, dass Kooperation und Erfahrungsaustausch zwischen LAGs und Partnerschaften natürlich über das LEADER Programm hinaus stattfinden, jedoch im Rahmen von nicht geförderten Projekten und Aktionen nicht dokumentiert werden.

Obwohl aufgrund der generellen Förderungswürdigkeit von Kooperationen und Networking ein gewisser Aufwärtstrend im Betrachtungszeitraum festgestellt werden konnte, trugen vor allem folgende Faktoren zu einer verstärkten Kooperation bei:

- Frühere Erfahrungen mit LEADER
- Engagement der Akteure (lokal und Verwaltung)
- Örtliche Nähe und Ähnlichkeit der Kultur, Mentalität, geographische Gegebenheiten usw.
- Genereller Reifegrad des Programms

Networking kann Kooperationen sowohl bedingen als auch deren Ergebnis sein. Ein positiver Zusammenhang zwischen Kooperationen als Folge von Networking kann aber nicht bewiesen werden. Dies gilt jedoch unter Bedachtnahme auf den Referenzzeitraum, der intensive Networking-Aktivitäten nicht möglich machte. Entweder wurden Netzwerke auf nationaler Ebene sehr spät aufgebaut (was die Entstehung ziemlich erfolgreicher informeller Netzwerke bedingte), oder der Zeitmangel veriterte eine Intensivierung der Außenbeziehungen.

Mangel an Zeit und Interesse, die Angst lokaler Akteure, ausgenutzt zu werden, bürokratische Prozesse und die fehlende technische Unterstützung werden in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten als **Faktoren, welche Kooperationen behindern**, genannt.

c) Die Lerneffekte aus früheren LEADER-Phasen

Erfahrung macht sich bezahlt.

Die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte bestätigten einen **starken Zusammenhang zwischen Erfahrungen aus früheren LEADER-Phasen und der Effektivität von Programmumsetzungen**, ohne jedoch die Art der Erfahrungen genauer zu definieren oder deren Einflusskraft vorherzusagen. Nach eingehender Auseinandersetzung mit mehreren Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten und Fallstudien liegt der ausschlaggebende Kern der Erfahrung unserer Meinung nach in erfahrene Humankapital, das seine Dividende besonders beim Programmaufbau und Design lokaler Aktionspläne ausschüttet, einen rascheren Einstieg ermöglicht, usw. Im Gegensatz dazu fehlt es aber an Daten, um einschätzen zu können, ob Schwierigkeiten mit einem Mangel an Erfahrung in Zusammenhang stehen oder ob neuartige Ideen auch von im Umgang mit LEADER+ unerfahrenen Beteiligten herrühren.

Eine systematische Wissensansammlung bzw. einen geordneten Wissenstransfer von einer LEADER-Phase zur nächsten gibt es nicht.

Lerneffekte zwischen den LEADER-Phasen sind sehr schwer zu identifizieren bzw. zu beschreiben, Dies gilt sowohl bei Betrachtung der programmverantwortlichen Stellen als auch der LAGs: **der Erfahrungstransfer scheint meist dem Zufall überlassen**, da sehr wenige Instrumente zu diesem Zweck eingesetzt wurden.

Im Rahmen nationaler Netzwerke konnten Fallstudien und „Good.Practice“-Datenbanken entwickelt werden. Diese sind jedoch hauptsächlich Datenbanken, bei deren Entwicklung wenig Zeit für konzept-bezogene und methodologische Aspekte aufgewendet wurde, z.B. auf die Ausprägungen einer Pilotstrategie, wie Frauen und Jugend in die örtliche Entwicklung mit einbezogen werden können, usw.

Zusammenfassend förderten die durch bestehende Netzwerke leichter zustande kommenden und von Zeit zu Zeit abgehaltenen Events und Meetings den persönlichen Austausch, was folglich zu gegenseitigem Lernen und Wissensaustauschen in Bezug auf Konzepte und Ansätze führte.

2.2 Schlussfolgerungen zur Thema 2: Spezifische Aktionen

Thema 2 liefert einen Überblick über zwei Aspekte:

- a) Verhaltensänderungen auf Grund der Umsetzung von LEADER
- b) Verbreitung und Transfer erfolgreicher Praktiken auf Grund der Umsetzung von LEADER

a) Änderungen in den Verhaltensmustern als Ergebnis der LEADER+ Umsetzung

LEADER stellt einen neuen Zugang zur ganzheitlichen ländlichen Entwicklung dar.

Wir sehen in geänderten Verhaltensmustern und Interaktionen den wesentlichsten Mehrwert, den der LEADER Zugang liefern kann. **Veränderungen in Verhaltensmustern und Interaktionen formen das menschliche, soziale, organisatorische und wirtschaftliche Kapital einer Region neu;** und diese Reihenfolge wurde nicht zufällig gewählt. Die Höhe des Mehrwerts hängt vom Implementierungsgrad der LEADER Spezifika ab, wobei im Besonderen die territoriale, die Bottom-up und die Partnerschaftskomponente maßgeblich sind.

Um Änderungen in Verhaltensmustern feststellen zu können, bedarf es spezieller Untersuchungsmethoden; diese wurden im Rahmen der Halbzeitbewertung nicht angewendet. Daher leiten wir unsere Schlussfolgerungen hauptsächlich aus den Eindrücken der Stakeholder und Evaluatoren ab. Auf Grund der frühen Phase in der Laufzeit der Programme, gingen viele Evaluationsfragen, die auf den Impact des Programms abzielten, auf die Betrachtung sozialer Prozesse und neu entstandener Kooperationsprozesse ein. Dies ist verständlich, da die Gründung lokaler Partnerschaften und die Entwicklung einer gemeinsamen Strategie in einer Region Potentiale freigesetzt haben sollten, welche ansonsten nicht betrachtet worden wären.

Die entscheidende Frage liegt in der Dauerhaftigkeit der Verhaltensänderungen. Jedenfalls scheint der LEADER Ansatz durch seinen **indirekten Lenkungsmechanismus eine neue Form der lokalen Governance** zu initiieren. Manche lokalen Stakeholder betrachten die Initiative **als einen neuen Ansatz für integrierte Entwicklung und als ein Instrument zur Stärkung der Selbstregulierungsfähigkeit von ländlichen Kleinregionen.**

Durch die Umsetzung sowohl des territorialen als auch des Bottom-up Prinzips konnten positive Ergebnisse – außer bei Land-Stadt-Beziehungen – erzielt werden.

Obwohl das Abstecken von Verantwortlichkeiten und die Festlegung von Kontrollregeln für das reibungslose Funktionieren von LEADER Programmen als notwendig erachtet werden, würde ein prozessorientiertes Kontrollregime die lokale Governance besser unterstützen als ein starres, auf quantitativen Regeln basierendes „Management by objectives“. Eine andere Möglichkeit wäre die Entwick-

lung von „contingency rules“ (d.h. Regeln, die an die jeweiligen geographischen und sozioökonomischen Gegebenheiten angepasst sind).

Einen speziellen Fall (für derart starre Regeln) stellt der **Grenzwert von 100.000 Einwohnern** pro LAG dar. Auch wenn dieser Grenzwert bereits im Vorhinein bekannt war, so behinderte dieser in vielen LAGs (z.B. in dichter besiedelten Gegenden in Deutschland) durch den **Ausschluss ländlicher Städte** – welche wichtige Märkte und Anschlussstellen für soziale Netzwerke darstellen – **den Versuch, LEADER Gebiete entsprechend den Programmanforderungen aufzubauen**. Der Grenzwert wurde in einigen Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten kritisiert, weil er dem Aufbau von Wertschöpfungsketten und Marketinginitiativen in ländlichen Städten entgegenwirkt. Ausnahmen der 10.000 bis 100.000 Einwohner-Regel waren jedoch innerhalb von LEADER+ möglich und akzeptiert, um den Aufbau kohärenter LEADER Gebiete auch in dichter besiedelten Gegenden zu ermöglichen. Ungefähr 15% der LAGs konnten von dieser Ausnahmeregelung Gebrauch machen (diese Zahl entspricht allerdings dem Stand 2005 und beschreibt somit nicht den Betrachtungszeitraum).

Land-Stadt Beziehungen wurden von den Programmbehörden eher selten als thematischer Schwerpunkt angesehen. Nur in einigen westeuropäischen Regionen (Wallonien, England) widmete man sich dem Aspekt. Die Auswirkungen können dort jedoch noch nicht festgestellt werden.

Der Bottom-up Ansatz schien die Komplementarität zwischen den Parteien der ländlichen Entwicklung zu fördern. Die Bereitschaft und Fähigkeit der Akteure zum aktiven Wissensaustausch hängt wiederum von **Erfahrung und Entwicklungsstand** einer LEADER Gemeinde in einer Region ab. Somit sind wiederum längerfristige Lerneffekte entscheidend.

In Bezug auf die Pilotstrategien erwies sich LEADER+ als sehr flexibel.

Um integrierte Pilotstrategien umzusetzen, wurde der Rahmen für Maßnahmen und Förderungsbedingungen generell auf breiter Basis festgelegt. Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte weisen eine sehr umfangreiche Maßnahmenkette auf: von einem sehr engen Programmfokus (z.B. IT in Euskadi und ländlicher Tourismus in Nordirland) bis zu einer breit angelegten Programmorientierung (besonders in jenen Gegenden, in welchen die Verwaltung eine führende Rolle bei der Projektauswahl einnimmt, z.B. in Deutschland). Einige Strategien wurden dermaßen flexibel gestaltet, dass jedes förderungswürdig erscheinende Projekt angenommen wurde. In Gegenden, die sich in einem frühen Entwicklungsstadium befinden, mag dies ein guter Ansatz sein, um neue Stakeholder zu unterstützen und neu geformte Partnerschaften zu fördern, auf lange Sicht entbehrt dieser Ansatz jedoch jeglicher Nachhaltigkeit.

LEADER+ gewährleistet in den Augen vieler Stakeholder die Förderung jener Projekte, welche im Rahmen anderer Programme keine Berücksichtigung finden. Speziell genannt werden klein angelegte Projekte und Begünstigte, denen es ansonsten an jeglicher Unterstützung gefehlt hätte. Andere wiederum beschwerten sich über die eng ausgelegte Zielsetzung, die den Umfang förderungswürdiger Projekte stark begrenzt bzw. landwirtschaftliche Projekte von einer Förderung ausschließen würde (Irland, Spanien).

Die **europäischen Schwerpunktthemen** (welche in einigen Fällen durch nationale oder regionale Schwerpunktthemen ergänzt wurden) wurden nur in einigen wenigen Fällen als hilfreich erachtet. Sie wären zu detailliert, um kreatives Denken anzuregen, jedoch zu ungenau, um eine konkrete Steuerungswirkung zu gewährleisten. Obwohl endgültige Aussagen über das Konzept der Leit motive zu diesem frühen Zeitpunkt noch nicht getätigt werden können, **scheint der zur Debatte stehende Gedanke zur Festlegung von Schwerpunktthemen für ländliche Entwicklung in gewissem Maße dem territorialen und dem Bottom-up Prinzip entgegenzuwirken**.

Wie in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten angeführt, führten weniger die LEADER Spezifika, sondern allgemeine Gegebenheiten bei der Programmumsetzung zu Schwierigkeiten wie z.B. (i) zeitraubende überhöhte bürokratische Anforderungen in Bezug auf Bewerbung, Kostenaufstellung, Berichterstattung; (ii) ein für potentielle Privatinvestoren und weniger begünstigte Bevölkerungsschichten ungünstiges Finanzierungsumfeld (z.B. zu späte Zahlungen bei Kofinanzierungen, die fehlende Möglichkeit Infrastrukturkosten unter LEADER fördern zu lassen), das dem Innovationsgedanken gewissermaßen

entgegensteht; (iii) Verzögerungen im Entscheidungsprozess, die zur Ablehnung von Projekten führten. Wie bereits oben erwähnt entsprechen die angeführten Kritikpunkte der Meinung der LAGs und nicht zum Beispiel jener der Managing Authorities.

b) Verbreitung und Transfer erfolgreicher Praktiken als Ergebnis der LEADER Umsetzung

In diesem frühen Stadium können die aus Kooperationen und Networking generierten Benefits in Bezug auf Verbreitung und Transfer noch nicht festgestellt werden.

Kooperationsprojekte dürften positive Rückkoppelungseffekte auf die lokale Strategie haben. Zum jetzigen Zeitpunkt kann der Wahrheitsgehalt dieser Aussage für LEADER+ noch nicht überprüft werden. Nichtsdestotrotz beantworten wir die aufgestellte Hypothese mit einem vorsichtigen „Ja“: Viele der lokalen Akteure räumen dem in Kooperationsprojekten ruhenden Potential, eine **kritische Masse** (für Forschung, Entwicklung, Marketing, Promotion, Training und Ausbildung, usw.) **anzuziehen**, einen hohen Stellenwert ein. Durch die Konzentration ihrer Stärken können ländliche Gebiete eine Vielzahl der durch Distanz und Größe ausgelösten Hindernisse überwinden und bisher nie möglich gewesene Erfolge erzielen, sofern ein entsprechendes Sozialkapital und Organisationskapital in der Region vorhanden ist.

Diese Einschätzung wird durch eine in dieser frühen Phase besonders **auffällige Präferenz für interregionale, über kurze Entfernungen laufende Kooperationen** untermauert. Obwohl das für Kooperationen zur Verfügung stehende Budget aufgrund zu geringer Auslastung beträchtlich gekürzt werden musste (z.B. in Frankreich), ist die Grundeinstellung zu Kooperationen eine positive. Es gibt starke Anzeichen dafür, dass Aktion 2 in der zweiten Hälfte der Programmlaufzeit verstärkt in Anspruch genommen werden wird. Die aus Kooperationen resultierenden Vorteile für die ländlichen Entwicklungsstrategien können nur im Rahmen einer Ex-post Beurteilung festgestellt werden.

Verzögerungen in der Projektanlaufphase von Kooperationen liegen in der Natur der Sache, aber die bei der **Entwicklung formaler Nationaler Netzwerke aufgetretenen Verzögerungen** waren die Folge hausgemachter Verwaltungsdefizite. Der zu späte Start führte zu einem Effektivitätsverlust. In den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten wird die Rolle von Nationalen Netzwerken sehr unterschiedlich betrachtet: In manchen Ländern nehmen sie eine passive Nebenrolle ein (eher als Informationspool dienend), in anderen eine produktive (als Achse für einen aktiven Informationsaustausch und Know-how-Transfer).

Unter den von Netzwerken gebotenen Serviceleistungen wird **die erleichterte Kontaktaufnahme mit Wissenszentren** (Universitäten, Forschungseinrichtungen, andere Netzwerke wie jene für Lokale Agenda 21, Gender Themen, regionale Kooperationen, soziale Integration usw.) **von LAGs** besonders geschätzt. Ebenso wird nachfrageorientiertes Training gelobt (so ist beispielsweise Finanzmanagement besonders gefragt). Schließlich wird der von Netzwerken zur Verfügung gestellte Rahmen, der LAGs die gemeinsame Entwicklung von neuen Ansätzen und Instrumenten ermöglicht, betont (wie z.B. die „Innovations-Workshops“ des österreichischen Netzwerks). **Nicht nur die LAGs, auch die Managing Authorities ziehen Vorteile aus den von Netzwerken angebotenen Kontaktmöglichkeiten, Informationen und Beratungsleistungen.**

Verbreitung und Transfer von Wissen benötigen Kontinuität.

Verbreitung und Transfer von Know-how gelten als Kernelemente der meisten Programme. Der Informationsfluss wird auf zwei Wegen bewerkstelligt:

- „Formal“: durch Kooperation und Networking wie in den LEADER Aktionen 2 und 3 beabsichtigt.
- „Informal“: durch diverse Kontakte und Informationsaustausche zwischen Akteuren auf regionalem Level und auf Programmebene (50% des Know-how-Transfers zwischen LAGs finden auf diesem Wege statt).

Generell messen **Stakeholder dem Networking einen hohen Wert bei**. Es stellt eine positive und wichtige Maßnahme zur Gewährleistung des Austausches von Informationen, Good Practices und

Know-how dar. Die LAGs haben nachweislich aktives Networking betrieben (Spanien – Asturien, Castilla-Leon, Wallonien) und sehen es als effektive Maßnahme zur Partnersuche an (Spanien – La Rioja, Deutschland – Bayern).

Aufgrund des kurzen Referenzzeitraumes konnten die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte die mit Kooperationen und Networking in Zusammenhang stehenden Aspekte der Verbreitung und des Know-how-Transfers kaum beleuchten. Nichtsdestotrotz konnte in einigen Ländern (Irland, Finnland, Österreich) festgestellt werden, dass der auf Informationsaustausch zwischen Stakeholdern basierende LEADER Ansatz als Ausgangspunkt für eine integrierte ländliche Entwicklung an Glaubwürdigkeit gewinnt. Nicht ganz geklärt ist jedoch, was verbreitet bzw. transferiert wird – es kann sich eher um einen Erfahrungsaustausch als um einen Austausch von Fähigkeiten handeln. Diesbezüglich kommt der zeitlich begrenzten Natur von LAGs (und dem mit LEADER+ Programmen betrauten Personal) Bedeutung zu, da Wissen persönlich, von einer Person an die andere, weitergegeben wird. Dies gilt insbesondere in jenen Situationen, in denen formale Netzwerke nur langsam aufgebaut wurden.

Die Verbreitung und der Transfer von erfolgreichen Kooperationsprojekten scheinen verstärkt in jenen Regionen stattzufinden, in denen lokale Governance einen höheren Entwicklungsstand aufweist. Die Anforderungen, welche an eine gute territoriale Zusammenarbeit gestellt werden, sind enorm: Humanressourcen müssen zur Verfügung stehen. Diese müssen in der Lage sein, einen ausgereiften und auf Kulturunterschiede Bedacht nehmenden Ansatz zu entwickeln, Sprachbarrieren zu überwinden und Kooperationsbedingungen vertraglich festzulegen, usw.

Ähnlich dem Entwicklungsprozess innerhalb der LEADER Gemeinschaft erfordern **über LEADER- und EU-Grenzen hinaus reichende** Kooperationen und Wissenstransfers einen langsamen Aufbau der Kooperationsbereitschaft und –fähigkeit, der durch Anreizsysteme, vielmehr aber durch innere Motivation gefördert werden sollte.

2.3 Schlussfolgerungen zu Thema 3: Programmauswirkungen auf ein Gebiet unter Berücksichtigung der Oberziele von Strukturfonds

Thema 3 liefert einen Überblick über zwei Aspekte:

- a) Umweltauswirkungen
- b) Auswirkungen auf spezielle Zielgruppen

a) Umweltauswirkungen

Der größte Umwelteinfluss findet im Denken der Menschen statt.

LEADER+ verfolgt in Bezug auf Umweltthematiken kein konkretes Ziel. Dennoch soll es einen Beitrag zu einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung liefern, was Umweltschutz und Umweltqualitätsverbesserung mit einschließt. Es zeigt sich, dass Umweltschutz und Umweltentlastungen im Rahmen der Durchführung und für die Wirksamkeit von LEADER Programmen eine wesentliche Rolle einnehmen. Viele LEADER Regionen grenzen an Naturschutzgebiete an und versuchen, bei der Entwicklung einer Pilotstrategie Win-win-Situationen zu kreieren (z.B. durch Nahrungsmittelketten im Bereich der biologischen Landwirtschaft). Oftmals **wird das Hauptaugenmerk bei Innovationen in lokalen Aktionsplänen auf mögliche Vorteile für die Umwelt gelenkt**, z.B. durch nachhaltige Verwendung endogener Ressourcen. Folglich scheint eine beträchtliche Zahl von Projekten Umweltaspekte zu berücksichtigen oder Wert auf „environmental awareness“ zu legen. Umwelt – NGOs oder Behörden sind sogar im Vorstand oder in Arbeitsgruppen vieler LAGs vertreten.

Obwohl die gesammelten Daten keine Bemessung der Einflussnahme all dieser Faktoren erlauben, nehmen wir an, dass ein erhöhtes Maß an „environmental awareness“ und Wissen sowie das Entstehen neuer Beziehungen zwischen Stakeholdern, die gemeinsam an der Verwirklichung einer umfassenden Pilotstrategie arbeiten, die sichtbarsten Auswirkungen mit sich bringen werden – wie dies auch für jene Programme angenommen wird, die relativ früh zu laufen begonnen haben und somit erste Hinweise liefern konnten.

b) Auswirkungen auf spezielle Zielgruppen

LEADER+ scheint zur Gleichberechtigung beizutragen, wobei jedoch das Ausmaß zum jetzigen Stand der Dinge noch nicht festgestellt werden kann.

Obwohl die Verankerung von **speziellen Zielgruppen, Frauen und Jugend** in Programmen und lokalen Aktionsplänen generell formal durchgeführt wird, geht dies nicht notwendigerweise mit konkreten Maßnahmen einher. Dies dürfte durch die Gegebenheiten in der jeweiligen Region bedingt sein (in manchen Ländern zum Beispiel wie Finnland nehmen mehr Frauen als Männer am Entwicklungsprozess teil und treten als Begünstigte auf), könnte aber auch eine Folge von Nachlässigkeit darstellen.

Es gibt Hinweise, dass LEADER das Potential aufweist, auf die Bedürfnisse von Frauen einzugehen und diese als Stakeholder im Bereich der ländlichen Entwicklung zu unterstützen. Der Anteil weiblicher Projektinitiatoren liegt üblicherweise zwischen 20% und 50%. Die Ursache dafür könnte in der Schwerpunktsetzung auf klein angelegte Maßnahmen, der Berücksichtigung und Entlohnung ehrenamtlicher Arbeit, dem Bottom-up Ansatz oder einer Kombination all dieser Faktoren (und sonstiger Einflussfaktoren) liegen. In Ländern, in denen die Frauenbeteiligung an LEADER hoch ist (wie z.B. in Finnland), nehmen Frauen aktiv teil, um bedarfsgerechte Strategien zu fördern.

Frauen sind stärker in der technischen Umsetzung als in entscheidungsführenden Einrichtungen der LAGs vertreten. Letztere werden in den meisten Gebieten immer noch von Männern dominiert. (Frauenanteil technische Hilfe: bis zu 70%; Frauenanteil bei Entscheidungsträgern: durchschnittlich rund 30%).

Um Gleichberechtigung zu erlangen, zeigen die von Regionalprogrammen und LAGs verfolgten Strategien zwei Herangehensweisen: erstens die **positive Diskriminierung** in der Art, dass Frauen explizit als Hauptzielgruppe genannt werden, und zweitens, **das geschlechterspezifische Design** von den Programmen und Entwicklungsstrategien (z.B. durch einen besseren Aufbau von Trainings- und Ausbildungsmaßnahmen).

Junge Menschen werden von LEADER nicht ausreichend angesprochen (mit einigen Ausnahmen).

Die meisten der an junge Menschen gerichteten Aktionen standen in direktem Zusammenhang mit der Schaffung von Arbeitsplätzen und entsprechender Ausbildung. Jedoch scheint die von jungen Leuten empfundene Attraktivität einer Region vielmehr durch Investitionen in das soziale und kulturelle Umfeld gesteigert werden zu können. **Beide Maßnahmen, sowohl Investitionen in das Gebiet selbst als auch die Schaffung von Jobmöglichkeiten, sind unentbehrlich.** Die Repräsentanz junger Leute oder „junger“ Vereine im LAG Vorstand verbesserte nach Meinung einiger Evaluatoren die Qualität und Akzeptanz entsprechender Maßnahmen. Jedoch findet die tatsächliche und ständige Aufnahme junger Menschen in entscheidungsführende Einrichtungen selten statt. Oft ist unklar, wie die Eingliederung erfolgen soll. **Vielen ländlichen Stakeholdern ist die Verknüpfung zwischen Jugendbelangen und der Lebensfähigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit ihrer Region bewusst.** Daher schließen wir auf eine zukünftig stärkere Berücksichtigung dieser Problematik.

Zusammenfassend sind viele Stakeholder der Ansicht, dass LEADER+ nicht auf die Bedürfnisse und Besonderheiten der Hauptzielgruppen, insbesondere jener junger Menschen, eingeht. Gleichzeitig sind sie in Bezug auf neue oder strengere thematische Vorgaben zurückhaltend, da dies als eine **Schwächung des territorialen Prinzips** empfunden wird, welches den LAGs ja vorschreibt, ihre Pilotstrategie auf Basis einer umfangreichen Einschätzung der tatsächlichen Bedürfnisse aller Bevölkerungsgruppen zu erstellen. Wie dem auch sei, Probleme aus fehlender Integration, die Belange von Minderheiten und Immigranten ebenso wie die Begleiterscheinungen von Re-Urbanisierung werden immer mehr an Bedeutung gewinnen.

Eine umfangreiche Umsetzung des LEADER Ansatzes macht weitere Vorgaben in Bezug auf die Hauptbegünstigten überflüssig.

Wir kommen zu dem Ergebnis, dass **der LEADER Ansatz an sich eine ausreichende Maßnahme darstellt, um auf die Bedürfnisse spezifischer Gruppen einzugehen**, da er die richtigen Instrumente für Gebietsbetrachtungen, Anreizschaffung, Teilnahme und Projektentwicklung potentiell zur Verfügung stellt. Einige LEADER Programme (wie z.B. finnische, holländische oder deutsche) betonten, dass „LAGs ihre eigenen Gebiete immer präziser analysieren und die Zielgruppen auf Basis dieser Analyse auswählen sollten“ (Fallstudie Finnland). Aufgrund dessen wurden in Österreich, Italien und Frankreich nicht nur Frauen und junge Menschen, sondern auch andere soziale Gruppen wie ältere Menschen und Minderheiten als potentielle Zielgruppen identifiziert. Die jeweiligen Halbzeit-evaluierungsberichte betonten, dass die endgültige Auswahl der Zielgruppengliederung in der Verantwortlichkeit des jeweiligen Programms/der jeweiligen LAG liegen sollte. Ebenso mögen LAGs auch andere in ihrer Region laufende Programme, welche eine Ergänzung im Bezug auf Zielgruppen bieten können, managen.

2.4 Schlussfolgerungen zur Thema 4: Programmauswirkungen auf das Gebiet in Hinblick auf die von LEADER+ verfolgten Ziele

Thema 4 gibt einen Überblick über zwei Aspekte:

- a) Auswirkungen auf ländliche Gebiete
- b) Auswirkungen auf die Governance

a) Auswirkungen auf ländliche Gebiete

LEADER ermöglicht lokalen Akteuren, gehen zu lernen, bevor sie laufen müssen.

Die Auswirkungen von LEADER+ können auf Mikroebene am einfachsten wahrgenommen werden: aus der Charakteristik der geförderten Projekte lässt sich ein sehr realistisches Bild über die besonderen Stärken von LEADER+ ableiten, neue Entwicklungen auszulösen (an denen es in einem Gebiet bislang mangelte), neue Jobs in klein angelegten Projekten zu schaffen und neue Produkte und Dienstleistungen zu fördern und so zur Erweiterung des lokalen Angebots von privaten und öffentlichen Leistungen beizutragen. Unglücklicherweise stellen die Erfolge auf Mikroebene keine ausreichende Basis dar, um aus ihnen auf die Gesamteffekte in einem Gebiet schließen zu können.

Jedoch scheint das **Charakteristikum der bisherigen Erfolge** eine förderliche Wirkung auf die Entwicklungstätigkeit lokaler Akteure zu haben. Die Summe dieser für sich betrachtet kaum ins Gewicht fallenden positiven Erfahrungen auf Mikroebene (z.B. zwischen Menschen vor Ort) könnte durch simple Aggregation positiver Zusammenkünfte und Erfahrungen **einen messbaren Effekt auf regionaler Ebene darstellen** (d.h. auf LEADER Programmebene oder für die Region). Dieser Aggregationseffekt mag zu wenig ausgeprägt sein, um alleine über traditionelle Impact-Messmethoden erfasst werden zu können (z.B. durch „geschaffene Jobs“, „Veränderung BIP/Kopf „). Dennoch „zeigt“ er sich im positiven Image einer Region sowie in der organisatorischen Leistungsfähigkeit lokaler Gruppen – was eine qualitativere Messung der Effekte auf regionaler Ebene notwendig macht.

Folglich kann die Frage, ob im Rahmen von LEADER+ Veränderungen und sichtbare Verbesserungen in ländlichen Regionen herbeigeführt werden können, mit einem vorsichtigen „Ja“ beantwortet werden. Die besondere Stärke von LEADER liegt in seiner Funktion als Wegweiser für herkömmliche Programme, aber auch in seiner Eignung, Nachfragerücken, die von herkömmlichen Programmen vernachlässigt werden, zu füllen.

Coming home by taking off (die Rückkehr zu den Wurzeln durch Horizontserweiterung)

Eine andere Fragestellung bezieht sich auf **das LEADER innewohnende Potential, eine effizientere Umgangsweise mit endogenen Ressourcen zu initiieren.** Vom logischen Standpunkt betrachtet, deuten das territoriale sowie das Bottom-up Prinzip darauf hin, obwohl anfangs nicht klar

ist, wie diese Grundsätze im Zusammenhang mit lokalen Pilotstrategien erfasst werden können. Beispiele auf Mikroebene zeigen, dass die Strategie zu einem effizienteren Gebrauch endogener (physischer, Human-, Umwelt-) Ressourcen auf zweierlei Arten beitragen kann:

- (i) **durch backward bonding (in die Vergangenheit gerichtete Anknüpfung):** wenn der Fokus auf der Vergangenheit liegt: historische oder traditionelle Merkmale (Feiertage, Kochrezepte, architektonisches Design, Handwerkskunst...) der Landschaft und der Natur, usw. Durch diesen Zugang werden die lokal zur Verfügung stehenden Ressourcen in einem neuen Licht betrachtet. Die Gemeinde/Gemeinschaft verwendet die Ressourcen, um sie in Vermögenswerte umzuwandeln, ohne jedoch ihren einzigartigen Charakter oder ihren Wert für zukünftige Verwendungsarten zu gefährden;
- (ii) **durch forward bonding (in die Zukunft gerichtete Anknüpfung):** wenn der Fokus auf eine gemeinsame Sicht der Zukunft gerichtet ist, wobei sich lokale Akteure für einen gemeinsamen Zweck aufeinander abstimmen. Im Rahmen dieses Zugangs konzentrieren sie ihre Ressourcen und beginnen, die vorhandenen Ressourcen durch kooperative Vereinbarungen effizienter zu nutzen.

Hervorragende Pilotstrategien vereinen backward und forward bonding. Leider konnten aber aufgrund des kurzen Umsetzungszeitraumes diesbezügliche Auswirkungen auf breiter, regionaler Ebene und Beschäftigungseffekte in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten nicht gemessen werden. Daher bleibt der in der Kombination von backward und forward bonding liegende Erfolgswert einer Pilotstrategie eine vorsichtige Annahme der Evaluatoren.

b) Auswirkungen auf Governance

Sowohl die Fusion als auch das Mainstreaming von LEADER mit ländlicher Strukturpolitik im weiteren Sinn sowie die lokale Anpassung können zu hervorragenden Ergebnissen beitragen.

Ländlichen Stakeholdern sind positive Synergieeffekte und Ergänzungspotentiale zwischen LEADER und Mainstream Programmen bewusst, sie zögern aber, diese als „Good Practice“ – anzusehen. In anderen Worten – jene Fälle von positiven Beispielen für Synergien und Ergänzungen zwischen LEADER und Mainstream Programmen, die in den Halbzeitevaluierungsberichten und Fallstudien (z.B. Irland, Andalusien – Spanien, Finnland) genannt wurden, wurden einem speziellen administrativen/bürokratischen nationalen/regionalen Umfeld und nicht LEADER selbst zugeschrieben. Strukturunterschiede in diesen Ländern weisen auf eine enorme Hebelwirkung von LEADER hin; vorausgesetzt, es ist auf sinnvolle Weise mit Mainstream Programmen verknüpft. Erwiesenermaßen hat LEADER Synergiepotentiale mit anderen EU-Politikbereichen und Programmen erkannt und ausgeschöpft, was insbesondere zu einer **Verbesserung der Lebensqualität als zu Beschäftigung oder Wirtschaftswachstum beigetragen hat.**

Synergieeffekte traten in jenen Fällen auf, in denen die politische Verantwortlichkeit und die Entscheidungsmacht nach Problembereichen (z.B. Landschaftsentwicklung unter Einschließung aller Wirtschaftssektoren) und nicht entsprechend der traditionellen bürokratischen Logik der Politikbereiche (Wirtschaftspolitik vs. Agrarpolitik) verteilt wurden.

Die Einbettung von LEADER in die ländliche Strukturpolitik im weiteren Sinne kann auf drei Arten erfolgen. Jede einzelne kann zu hervorragenden Ergebnissen führen, sofern bestimmte Voraussetzungen erfüllt sind (die in Klammer angeführten Programme wurden als repräsentative Beispiele für unterschiedliche Arten der LEADER Einbettung in die ländliche Entwicklung identifiziert):

- **Strategic merging (strategische Fusion)** (Österreich, Flandern, Baden-Württemberg): LEADER kann als Wegweiser, Initiator oder Nischenspezialist für bestimmte Einflussgebiete konzipiert werden. Auf diese Weise kann es eine Hebelwirkung auf die ländliche Entwicklung ausüben, sofern die ständige Unterstützung durch Mainstream Programme gewährleistet ist. Die Initiative kann ein ausgeprägtes Profil und Image entwickeln und entsprechend ihrer generellen Zweckbestimmung als Geburtsstätte für innovative ländliche Entwicklung die Aufmerksamkeit neuer Projektförderer erwecken. Die Erfolgsbedingungen im Fall von „Strategic Merging“ sind: (i)

effektive Kommunikation und Interaktion zwischen Stakeholdern und in LEADER Gebieten; (ii) effiziente interadministrative Koordination auf nationaler und regionaler Ebene; (iii) gute technische Unterstützung der Projektwerber.

- **Full mainstreaming (vollständiges Mainstreaming)** (Andalusien, Finnland, Irland): LEADER kann als paradigmatische Kernkomponente in die ländliche Strukturpolitik eingebettet werden und andere Mainstream-Maßnahmen im Bereich der ländlichen- und Regionalentwicklung nach seinem Vorbild formen. Im Laufe der Studie über Mainstreaming von LEADER kreierten die Autoren den Begriff „strong“ oder „full mainstreaming“⁴. Die Erfolgsfaktoren im Fall von „Full Mainstreaming“ sind: (i) eine gemeinsame und umfassende Strategie zur ländlichen Strukturpolitik; (ii) Koordination auf Programmebene um Überschneidungen zwischen LEADER und LEADER-ähnlichen Mainstream-Maßnahmen zu vermeiden.
- **Local customization (lokale Anpassung)** (Griechenland, Nordirland, Portugal): Auch wenn eine starke Koordinierung in höheren Entscheidungsebenen (bedauerlicherweise) fehlt, können lokale Aktionsgruppen in der Lage sein, als lokale Entwicklungsagenturen aufzutreten und Finanzflüsse in ihrer Region den (dadurch) am meisten Begünstigten zufließen zu lassen. Die Erfolgsfaktoren im Fall von „local customization“ sind: (i) Hohe Autonomie von LAGs verbunden mit der Ermöglichung und Förderung von Top-down Support; (ii) ein auf lokaler Ebene vertrauenswürdiges und kooperatives Klima, um interinstitutionelle Koordination möglich und effektiv zu machen; (iii) gut ausgestattetes und qualifiziertes technisches Personal, das über soziale und ökonomische Fähigkeiten auf LAG Ebene verfügt.

Mainstreaming oder „backstreaming“?

Sicherlich stellen die mit früheren LEADER Programmen erreichten positiven Ergebnisse ein Hauptargument für die weitere Einbettung in allgemeine ländliche Strukturpolitiken dar. In Ländern oder Regionen, in denen jedoch eine „top-down“ Mentalität vorherrscht, ist der LEADER Ansatz in ländlichen Entwicklungsprogrammen nicht im selben Ausmaß verbreitet. In diesen Regionen stehen ländliche Stakeholder der Integration von LEADER in ländliche Entwicklungsprogramme skeptisch gegenüber: einerseits begrüßen diese die bessere Ausstattung und den in der Regionalentwicklung hohen Stellenwert von LEADER, andererseits fürchten sie, dass die Verknüpfung in eine Art „**backstreaming**“ von LEADER mündet, indem es auf Maßnahmen oder Projekte für (nur) einzelne Sektoren angewendet wird, ohne wesentliche Struktureffekte in der gesamten Region entfalten zu können.

2.5 Schlussfolgerungen zu Thema 5: Finanzierung, Management und Evaluierung des Programms

Thema 5 gibt einen Überblick über zwei Hauptaspekte:

- a) Einfluss administrativer Vereinbarungen auf den Programmerfolg
- b) Beobachtung und Evaluierung

a) Einfluss administrativer Vereinbarungen auf den Programmerfolg

Um Aussagen darüber tätigen zu können, wie sich getroffene Vereinbarungen im Bereich Management, Finanzierung und Verwaltung auf die Gesamteffektivität des Programms auswirken, ist es definitiv zu früh. **Die in den Halbeizevaluierungsberichten und Fallstudien erarbeitete Information konzentrierte sich tendenziell auf Belange wie Bürokratie, Beziehungen zwischen Managing Authorities und LAGs, Finanzierung und unzureichende Autonomie auf LAG Ebene, welche den Bottom-up Zugang verwässern.**

Grundsätzliche Managementfragen auf LAG Ebene wie z.B. Strukturen, Managementsysteme, Planung und Kontrolle wurden weder in Halbeizevaluierungsberichten noch in den

⁴ ÖIR (2004): „Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes“, p. 18ff

Fallstudien erläutert. Bei der Beantwortung der Evaluierungsfragen wurde auf die vom Vorstand des Programmmanagements eingenommene Rolle in keiner Weise Bezug genommen.

Dezentralisation, die Einräumung von Autonomie und die Ernennung von Koordinatoren führten zu positiven Managemententscheidungen.

In Programmen mit weniger managementbezogenen Problemen schienen gute Arbeitsstrukturen und Beziehungen zwischen LAGs und Management Authorities aufgebaut worden zu sein.

Wie oben erwähnt, sieht eine Vielzahl der lokalen Stakeholder im Autonomiegrad, welcher der LAG bei der Projektauswahl gewährt wird, einen wesentlichen Faktor für eine reibungslose und verhältnismäßig einfache Programmumsetzung. Man scheint gut beraten zu sein, bei der Programmfinanzierung auf „global grant“ und „quasi“ global grant⁵ Finanzierungssysteme zu setzen. Jedoch hat der Wechsel in der Verantwortlichkeit seinen Preis:

- **Mehr Bottom-up bedeutet nicht weniger Top-down;** es kann sogar mehr top-down erforderlich machen, nur in einer unterschiedlichen Ausprägung: Ermöglichen und Fördern statt Befehlen und Kontrollieren. Dies macht sowohl auf Verwaltungsebene als auch auf Ebene der lokalen Akteuer ein entsprechendes Verständnis und Kompetenz notwendig.
- **Ein „global grant“ oder „quasi“ global grant System zur Mittelbeschaffung kann nur dann betrieben werden, wenn alle öffentlichen Mittel an einer Stelle konzentriert werden.** Wenn die Kofinanzierung nur auf europäischer Ebene dezentral organisiert ist, die LAG aber die Kofinanzierung für jedes Projekt übernehmen muss, wird jeglicher Flexibilitätsgewinn vernichtet (die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte weisen Beispiele dafür auf – z.B. Frankreich). „Global grants“ funktionieren nur durch ein auf nationaler und regionaler Ebene gut koordiniertes Management der Finanzströme.

b) Monitoring und Evaluierung

Monitoring und Evaluierung stellen die Eckpfeiler von LEADER+ dar. Durch eine strukturierte Vorgehensweise sollen Daten für den Planungsprozess zukünftiger Programme geliefert werden sowie die Notwendigkeit für ein Gegenlenken bei bereits laufenden Programmen festgestellt werden können.

Die Halbzeitevaluierungsberichte weisen nicht darauf hin, dass ex-ante durchgeführte Evaluierungen zu merklichen Programmveränderungen geführt haben.

Die auf Initiative der Kommission im Vorfeld festgelegte Reihe von üblichen Evaluierungsfragen und relevanten Beurteilungskriterien wurde als gut gemeinter Versuch empfunden, den Wissensgrundstock und die Bedingungen für institutionelles Lernen innerhalb Europas zu fördern. Dieser Versuch wurde jedoch durch folgende Faktoren teilweise behindert: (i) die volle Anwendung aller CEQs zur Halbzeit, welche aufgrund des enormen Aufwands in diesem Stadium nicht angemessen erscheint, insbesondere in Bezug auf Fragen zu den Auswirkungen; (ii) die bloße Vielzahl und teilweise unklare Ausformulierung der CEQs; (iii) das Fehlen eines einheitlichen Monitoringsystems.

(Externe und Selbst-)Evaluierungen auf LAG Ebene erfreuen sich eines steigenden Bewusstseins über deren Wichtigkeit und Vorzüge. Die meisten LAGs planten, eine wie auch immer ausgestaltete Evaluierung durchzuführen. **Die Analyse zeigt, dass (i) Evaluierungen meist unstrukturiert durchgeführt werden; (ii) zwischen den LAGs überraschenderweise in Zusammenhang mit Evaluierungen wenig Koordination oder Kooperation statt findet; (iii) nationale Netzwerke – außer in ihrer Unterstützungsfunktion bei Selbstevaluierungen in einigen Gebieten – keine übergeordnete Stellung einnehmen.**

⁵ Dies steht für jene Fälle von „global grants“, welche nicht vollständig dezentral organisiert sind, sondern über eine zwischengeschaltene öffentliche Institution verteilt werden– z.B. in Österreich über die Länder.

Weitere Überlegungen sind dahingehend angebracht, wie Bewertungsergebnisse als „Selbsttests“ auf effizientere und umfangreichere Art und Weise in die Arbeit der LAGs eingebunden werden könnten, um ihnen eine Lenkungsfunktion zu vermitteln. **Die Selbstbeurteilung scheint in den meisten Fällen eine einmalige Angelegenheit zu sein**, und systematische Analysen der bisherigen Erfahrungen sowie entsprechende Korrekturmaßnahmen und Lernprozesse leiden aufgrund des auf neue Projekte gerichteten Fokus unter mangelnder Berücksichtigung.

3. Die auf den Ergebnissen basierenden Empfehlungen

3.1 Empfehlungen zu Thema 1: Umsetzung der LEADER Methode

- Die Managing Authorities sollten durch angemessene Maßnahmen in der Vorauswahlphase für faire und gerechte Bedingungen für alle potentiellen Bewerber aus allen ländlichen Gegenden Sorge tragen: breit angelegte Kommunikation, technische Unterstützung, Erleichterungen bei der Bildung von Partnerschaften sowie bei Gebietsabgrenzungen, „capacity building“ lokaler Akteure und Verwaltungsbeamter.
- Zur Erhaltung der Präsenz und Besonderheit von LEADER sollten die Mitgliedstaaten dem Programm eine klar definierte Rolle in der ländlichen Strukturpolitik im weiteren Sinne zuteil werden lassen (mit notwendiger Koordination auf der höheren Entscheidungsebene). Ebenso sollten die LAGs Anweisungen erhalten, um die Kommunikation der LEADER-Spezifika zu gewährleisten.
- Die Beschreibung der LEADER Achse in den RD Programmen sollte die entsprechenden Methoden zur LAG-Auswahl beinhalten sowie auf Organisationsstrukturen für regionale Wettbewerbsverfahren eingehen.
- Im Laufe der Vorauswahlphase sollten sowohl von der Kommission als auch von den Mitgliedstaaten ausreichende Ressourcen (in Form beantragbarer Geldmittel) zur Bewerbung, Information und Kommunikation von LAGs bereitgestellt werden, um diese bei der Vorbereitung, Entwicklung und Durchführung ihrer bedarfsorientierten lokalen Strategie zu unterstützen. Dies gilt insbesondere für neu teilnehmende LAGs in neu in das Programm aufgenommenen Regionen und Ländern.
- Nach erfolgter Auswahl sollte den LAGs ein hoher Grad an finanzieller und administrativer Autonomie gewährt werden, jedoch nur bei (neben ihrer Verpflichtung zu einer ausgeglichenen Interessenvertretung in Entscheidungsorganen und Arbeitsgruppen sowie zum partizipativen Ansatz auf lokaler Ebene) der Anwendung klar definierter und transparenter Kriterien im Projektauswahlprozess und einer expliziten Strategie, die über einen zur Mobilisierung und Animierung lokaler Akteure in lokalen Aktionsplänen geeigneten Budgetrahmen verfügt
- Die Umsetzung der „50% nicht-öffentliche Partner“-Regel sollte über die gesamte Laufzeit von lokalen Partnerschaften überwacht werden. Im Hinblick darauf sollten „Good-Practice“-Beispiele wie der „Tripartite“- oder Drei-Parteien-Ansatz, der in Finnland und Schweden⁶ praktiziert wird, in Umlauf gebracht werden.
- Die für Kooperationsprojekte (gemäß Art. 65 der Reg. 1695/05) bestimmten Budgets sollten von der n+2 Regelung ausgenommen werden. Ebenso sollte deren transnationale Komponente vom Europäischen Netzwerk für ländliche Entwicklung unterstützt werden. Die Autoren sind sich der Tatsache bewusst, dass diese Empfehlung derzeitigen Gesetzesregelungen zuwider läuft, nichtsdestotrotz ist der vorgebrachte Punkt von großer Wichtigkeit.
- Networking sollte zum frühest möglichen Zeitpunkt initiiert werden – somit deutlich früher als für LEADER+. Dies gilt sowohl auf europäischer als auch auf regionaler/nationaler Ebene. Die Chancen stehen gut, dass das europäische LEADER Observatory Network sowie das Rural Development Network den Mitgliedstaaten die notwendige Unterstützung gewähren können.

⁶ Ein „tripartite partnership“ wird aus drei Teilen – 1/3 öffentlich, 1/3 privat und 1/3 zivil-gesellschaftlich – gebildet, wobei die Mitgliedschaft teilweise wechseln kann. In den Zielsetzungen für die nächste Programmperiode sollte ein schnellerer Mitglieder-Wechsel in LAG Vorständen enthalten sein.

- Es ist notwendig, die Erfahrungen aus LEADER+ aufzuarbeiten, Instrumente und Tools zur Nutzbarmachung von Erfahrungen zu entwickeln und erfolgreiche Strategien auf lokaler, regionaler/nationaler und europäischer Ebene systematisch zu erfassen – ein von der Europäischen Kommission erteilter Auftrag für eine derartige Studie könnte notwendig werden.

3.2 Empfehlungen zu Thema 2: Spezifische Aktionen

- Ein strenger zahlenmäßiger Schwellenwert in Bezug auf die Einwohnerzahl pro LEADER Region sollte abgeschafft werden. Das Erfordernis einer entsprechenden, schlüssigen und lebensfähigen gebietsbezogenen Pilotstrategie legt ausreichende Kriterien fest, um die Aufnahme zu kleiner oder zu großer Gebiete zu vereiteln.
- Der Umfang förderfähiger Projekte sollte so breit wie möglich gehalten werden, jedoch gleichzeitig auf präzisen und klaren Qualitätskriterien basieren.
- Zur Förderung innovativer Maßnahmen auf lokaler Ebene sollten Kleinprojekt-Fonds (vergleichbar mit den Small Project Funds in INTERREG) aufgebaut werden, wobei sich die Vergabe nach Kriterien wie Innovation und dem Potential für positive Effekte richten sollte. Ferner sollte die Vergabe auf Auswahlprozessen basieren, die im Vergleich zu üblicherweise angewandten Prozessen weniger strikt sind.
- Vorrangige Zielsetzungen sollten – falls überhaupt – auf Programmebene von den Mitgliedstaaten festgelegt werden.
- Eine ständig unterstützte und dokumentierte LAG-Selbstevaluierung sowie die Strategieumsetzung auf lokaler Ebene sollten ein gelebter und praktizierter Standard bei LEADER⁷ werden, da dies die Beobachtung von in einer Region auftretenden Änderungen in Verhaltens- und Umfangsformen ermöglicht. Regionale Netzwerke sollten beauftragt werden, die LAGs dabei zu unterstützen.
- Kooperationen sollten durch die Bildung attraktiver, dem Wissensaustausch dienender Foren weiterhin gefördert und unterstützt werden (z.B. Problembehandlungsplattformen, virtuelle (über Internetplattformen) oder reale (über Messen und „echte“ Märkte) Märkte für Ideen oder „Good Practice“, Motivationsarbeit und fördernde Maßnahmen (durch die Bereitstellung einfach handhabbarer Werkzeuge für Bewerbung, Abrechnungen, Berichterstattung).
- Netzwerke müssen viel früher verfügbar sein. Zusätzlich zu ihrer derzeitigen Rolle im „Management von Flussgrößen“, das für unsere Zwecke folgende Tätigkeiten umfasst:
 - Das Sammeln, Konzentrieren und Managen von Informationen,
 - Das Zusammenführen von Menschen und Institutionen,
 - Das Sammeln und Speichern von Fallstudien und Good-Practice-Projektbeschreibungen,
 - Das Fördern neuer Kooperationsprojekte,

Sie sollten auch im „Management von Fixgrößen“ eine Schlüsselrolle einnehmen, was für unsere Zwecke folgende Tätigkeiten umfasst:

- Das Schaffen von Raum zur allgemeinen Reflexion funktionierender Praktiken in unterschiedlichen Bereichen, horizontalen Belangen und methodologischen Zugängen,
- Das Ableiten allgemein gültiger Schlüsse aus diesen Praktiken, deren systematische Erfassung und Verbreitung in der LEADER Gemeinschaft und darüber hinaus,
- Die systematische Verknüpfung mit anderen europäischen Networking-Institutionen und die Umsetzung gemeinsamer Projekte (URBACT, INTERACT, ESPON, EURADA, Council of Regions etc.),
- Die Verwaltung eines Qualitätsmanagement-Systems, das LAGs und Verwaltungsbehörden das erworbene Wissen über erfolgreich geleitete Entwicklungsprojekte für Zwecke des strategischen Controlling zugänglich macht,

⁷ Derzeit sind Selbst-Evaluierungen unter LEADER+ bereits verpflichtend – trotzdem zeigt die Erfahrung, dass sie in vielen Programmen noch immer keine gängige Praxis darstellen.

- Die Wiederbelebung der innovativen Seite von LEADER durch die Bildung von Experimentiergruppen oder „laboratory groups“, die sich aus lokalen Akteuren, regionalen und nationalen Stakeholdern und anderen Experten zusammensetzen. Diese können neue Ziele und Zugänge entwickeln sowie ihre Ergebnisse in europäischen Seminaren veröffentlichen.

3.3 Empfehlungen zu Thema 3: Territoriale Programmauswirkungen unter Berücksichtigung der übergeordneten Strukturfondsziele

- Die Zahlungen im Rahmen von Natura 2000 ebenso wie die Einführung neuer Forstwirtschaftsförderungen in ländlichen Entwicklungsprogrammen der kommenden Periode stellen eine neue Chance dar, die von LEADER Stakeholdern wahrgenommen werden sollten. In Kombination könnten Achse-2- und Achse-4-Maßnahmen win-win-Situationen in und um Schutzgebiete herbeiführen. Naturparks und Biosphärenreservate sorgen für ausgezeichnete Rahmenbedingungen für die Realisierung von ganzheitlichen und nachhaltigen LEADER Strategien.
- In Regionen, in denen offenkundige Ausgrenzungsprobleme (Langzeitarbeitslosigkeit, Minderheiten, Immigranten, usw.), vorherrschen, sollten Integrationsstrategien oder zumindest Maßnahmen von sich bewerbenden LAGs verpflichtend verfolgt werden müssen, um ausgewählt werden zu können. Jedoch sollten diese thematischen Vorschreibungen und Beschränkungen auf Programmlevel, unter Berücksichtigung der realen Bedürfnisse ländlicher Gebiete, erfolgen.
- Die Klärung der Frage der hauptbegünstigten Zielpersonen bringt einen enormen Aufwand mit sich. Good-practice-Beispiele müssen identifiziert, reflektiert, systematisch strukturiert und der Öffentlichkeit zugänglich gemacht werden, was sich besonders in Bezug auf die Einbeziehung junger Menschen schwierig gestaltet.
- Der Anteil der in Entscheidungsorganen vertretenen Frauen und jungen Menschen sollte ein Auswahlkriterium für LAGs sein, was deren Repräsentanz auch in der für die Auswahl verantwortlichen Jury erforderlich macht.

3.4 Empfehlungen zu Thema 4: Territoriale Programmauswirkungen in Hinblick auf die von LEADER+ verfolgten Ziele

- Zur Bemessung der Auswirkungen verweisen wir auf die ex-post Bewertung. Die Kommission sollte spezifische Fallstudien und Vergleichsanalysen durchführen, um umfassende Ergebnisse in Zusammenhang mit der effizienten Ressourcenverwendung im Rahmen von LEADER+ Programmen zu erhalten.
- Die dem LEADER-Zugang innewohnenden Potentiale sollten mehr und besser kommuniziert werden. Dies gilt insbesondere in jenen Ländern, die in der nächsten Programmperiode mit dessen Umsetzung beginnen. Diese Information ist zum jetzigen Zeitpunkt besonders entscheidend, da in dieser Programmphase die Budgets verteilt und Regeln erstellt werden. Wenn die unterschiedlichen Möglichkeiten und Formen, in denen das Mainstreaming in den EU15 vorstatten ging, besser bekannt sind, werden die Programmgestalter der neuen Mitgliedstaaten mehrere Möglichkeiten haben, zu entscheiden, wie sie die von der LEADER Achse angebotenen Chancen verwerten möchten.

3.5 Empfehlungen zu Thema 5: Finanzierung, Management und Evaluierung des Programms

- Das „global grant“ oder „quasi“ global grant System ist eine wirksame Art der LEADER-Umsetzung. Sowohl die nationale/regionale Regierung als auch lokale Regierungssysteme sollten durch geeignete kapazitäts- und vertrauensbildende Maßnahmen sowie durch eine angemessene Koordination von Finanzströmen – insbesondere durch die Konzentration öffentlicher Kofinanzierungen – auf dieses System vorbereitet werden.
- Zusätzlich und unabhängig zu Überwachungs- und Evaluierungserfordernissen auf nationaler und regionaler Ebene besteht Bedarf nach einer vereinheitlichten Auswahl gebräuchlicher Indi-

katoren auf europäischer Ebene. Der erste Schritt wurde mit der Festlegung der CEQ bewerkstelligt, jedoch fehlt ein weiterer Schritt:

- Die vorherige Aufstellung allgemeiner Indikatoren für jede einzelne CEQ, welche nach vorherrschenden Gegebenheiten adaptiert werden können, ohne dadurch an Vergleichbarkeit und Aggregationsfähigkeit einzubüßen.
 - Angaben über Wege und Methoden zum Monitoring der Indikatoren.
 - Eine beträchtliche Reduktion der Anzahl von CEQs: dies würde möglicherweise die Bereitschaft nationaler und regionaler Verwaltungen erhöhen, sich an das Regelwerk zu halten und zusätzliche Indikatoren zu entwickeln, um ihre speziellen Informationsbedürfnisse zu befriedigen.
 - Das Regelwerk zu CEQ, Beurteilungskriterien und Indikatoren sollte durch eine beratende Arbeitsgruppe aufgestellt werden. Diese sollte aus Akteuren aller betroffenen Ebenen bestehen (lokale Akteure, regionale/nationale Verwaltungen/Netzwerke/EC). Die CEQs sollten eine gemeinsame Sichtweise des Interventionsgedankens reflektieren, was folglich zur „Harmonisierung“ dieser Indikatoren untereinander beiträgt.⁸ Die interne Kohärenz dieses Indikatorensatzes kann durch Modelle wie jenes der Balanced Scorecard für lokale und Regionalentwicklung bewerkstelligt werden. Dabei sei auf das in Österreich unter der Leitung des National Networks von einer LEADER Arbeitsgruppe entwickelte Modell verwiesen.
- Die von LAGs verwendeten, unterschiedlichsten externen Evaluierungen und unterstützten Selbstevaluierungen sollten in strukturierter Form in das Programm aufgenommen werden. Nationale/regionale Netzwerke können der Managing Authority bei der Umsetzung dieses Hilfsmittels helfen.
 - Lerneffekte müssen systematisch in die Programmumsetzung eingebettet werden: Reflexivität⁹ sollte ein neues LEADER Spezifikum werden. Reflexivität bedeutet, dass Lerneffekte auf allen Programmebenen Berücksichtigung finden sollten. Dies soll unter Bedachtnahme auf Vorteile und Bedürfnisse der auf der jeweiligen Ebene handelnden Akteure bewerkstelligt werden. Deshalb sollten unterschiedliche Lernmethoden und –mittel angewendet werden. Dies würde bedeuten, dass auf Programmebene und darüber (EU-Kommission und Managing Authorities) ein ergebnisorientiertes Lernen zur Anwendung kommen sollte (gegenüber Standardbewertungen und Überwachung). Auf lokaler/regionaler Ebene wären selbstinduzierte Lernmethoden gefragt (wie z.B. Selbstevaluierung, Kontrolle).

⁸ Es wird vor allem darauf hingewiesen, dass die Europäische Union für die nächste Programmperiode innerhalb des „Gemeinsamen Monitoring- und Evaluierungsrahmens“ eine eingeschränkte Anzahl von gemeinsamen Indikatoren entwickelt hat, die bei ländlichen Entwicklungsprogrammen, einschließlich der LEADER-Achse, anzuwenden sind.

⁹ Es stellt einen ausdrücklichen, operationalen Grundsatz in der deutschen Bundes-Pilotinitiative Regionen Aktiv dar (eine LEADER-ähnliche Maßnahme auf nationaler Ebene, welche 18 Pilotgebiete umfasst).

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	I
Résumé	XIX
Kurzfassung	XXXVII
I. INTRODUCTION	7
1. Short history of LEADER	11
1.1 History and characteristics of the LEADER initiative in the framework of the rural development policy of the EU	11
1.2 Looking forward: 2007 – 2013	16
1.3 LEADER and the challenges for rural Europe	18
2. Overview of the programme in the reference period	23
3. Overall progress in physical and financial terms across LEADER+ programmes	25
II. METHODOLOGY	31
1. A model for the intervention logic of LEADER	35
1.1 The intervention logic of LEADER+ – Systemic approach	35
1.1.1 The zip function of development programmes	35
1.1.2 Relations of objects and impacts in the programming cycle	36
1.1.3 The LEADER method and its influence on collective behaviour	38
1.1.4 The evaluation framework for the synthesis of the mid-term evaluations of LEADER+	40
1.2 A model for the intervention logic of LEADER – Elaboration for the three LEADER+ actions	43
1.3 The concept of behavioural changes	44
1.4 The intervention logic and the evaluation questions including the identification of cardinal questions	47
1.4.1 Identifying cardinal questions allowing key conclusions on the different components of the model of the intervention logic and constructing a set of related key hypotheses for the cardinal questions	48
III. EVALUATION QUESTIONS	51
1. Sources of information and tools	53
1.1 Information sources	53
2. Evaluation Methods and Quantitative Findings on the Evaluation Questions	56

3.	Detailed Answers to the Evaluation Questions	60
3.1	Responses to Theme 1: Implementation of the LEADER+ method	60
C11	To what extent have the specificities of the LEADER+ method been taken into account in selection of the LAGs?	60
C12	In which way have the specificities of the LEADER+ method been applied in other phases of programme implementation?	62
C13	To what extent and in which manner have the specificities of the LEADER+ method been taken into account for the realisation of the operational activities on the LAGs (from elaboration to implementation)?	66
C14	To what extent have approaches and activities supported under LEADER+ been differentiated from those under other Rural Development and structural programmes operated in the area?	69
F1	To what extent has the principle of balanced representation of local interests in the LAGs been respected in the selection of LAGs and in the development and implementation of local strategies?	72
F2a	Has the delimitation of LEADER territories created problems in view of the rural-urban interaction?	74
F2b	Is there evidence that the effectiveness of LEADER+ programmes could have been increased with changes in the delimitation of territories?	75
F3	To what extent did the validation of the programme's ex-ante evaluation in the national/regional mid-term evaluations identify the need for a revision of the programme strategies and approaches?	76
F4	Can examples be identified where a 'learning effect' from previous phases of LEADER has influenced or changed the way the LEADER method was applied in the LEADER+ programmes? Can trends in this respect be observed?	76
3.2	Responses to Theme 2: Action specific Evaluation Questions	79
C211	To what extent has LEADER+ helped improve the organisational capacity of rural communities and the participation of rural actors in the development process?	79
C212	To what extent has LEADER+ promoted and developed complementarity between actors in rural development at the local level through a bottom up approach and an integrated pilot strategy?	82
C213	To what extent have the selected priority themes contributed to ensure a truly integrated and focused development strategy at LAG level?	85
C214	To what extent have the pilot strategies had an impact over the territory?	86
C221	To what extent has LEADER+ encouraged the transfer of information, good practices and know-how in the field of rural development through co-operation?	88
C222	In what measure has LEADER+ contributed to the realisation of development projects through co-operation between territories?	89
C223a	To what extent have co-operation activities gone beyond the LEADER+ programme?	90
C223b	To what extent did networking take place with partners outside the EU15?	90
F5a	What type of co-operation was predominant: inter-territorial within one Member State or transnational and what were the expectations of LAGs for the co-operation?	91
F5b	What are the particular benefits of each form of co-operation for the Rural Development strategies?	92
F6	What factors positively or negatively affect the up-take of co-operation activities by LAGs?	92

	C231	To what extent has LEADER+ encouraged the transfer of information, good practices and know-how in the field of rural development through networking?	94
	C232	In what measure has networking facilitated co-operation between rural territories?	95
3.3		Responses to Theme 3: Question relating to the Impact of the LEADER+ Programme	96
	C31	To what extent has the LEADER+ programme contributed to protect the environment in the beneficiary areas (including Nature 2000 areas)?	96
	C32a	What has been the LEADER+ programme contribution in order to improve the situation of women in the beneficiary areas?	98
	C32b	What has been the LEADER+ programme contribution in order to improve the situation of young people in beneficiary areas?	99
	C33	To what extent has LEADER+ helped explore new ways of improving socio-economic viability and the quality of life in the beneficiary rural areas?	101
	F7	Is there evidence resulting from LEADER+ programmes showing that a need exists to broaden the key target groups for future programmes beyond women and young people, e.g. to older people/newcomers/minorities in rural areas?	103
	F8	Are the existing LEADER+ actions, themes, and measures (e.g. scope, level of public funding and co-financing rates) sufficiently comprehensive and flexible to meet the different contexts and needs of rural areas?	104
	F9	Is there evidence that the inclusion of LEADER programmes in wider development strategies at national/regional level has increased the programmes' effectiveness?	106
	F10	Are there examples of good practice with a view to an optimal exploitation of synergies and complementarities between LEADER and other EU policies and programmes promoting growth, improved quality of life, and employment, in particular with the other Community initiatives?	107
3.4		Responses to Theme 4: Questions relating to the Impact on the Territory as regards the Specific Objectives of LEADER+	108
	C41	To what extent has the LEADER+ programme contributed to promote and disseminate new integrated approaches to rural development through the application of specific features, notably through the pilot character of the strategies, co-operation and networking?	108
	C42a	To what extent has the LEADER+ contributed to a more efficient use of endogenous resources (physical, human, environmental) in rural areas?	110
	C42b	Has the more efficient use of endogenous resources had an effect on local employment rates and if yes, how has this been measured?	113
	C43	To what extent has the programme completed, influenced or reinforced mainstream rural development policy in the target area through the LEADER+ method?	114
3.5		Responses to Theme 5: Management, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes	115
	C51a	What arrangements have been made in order to bring in new LAGs and areas?	115
	C51b	Concerning the LAGs having already participated in LEADER I and/or LEADER II, how did they benefit from their experience, especially in order to maximise the added value of the specificities?	117
	F11	Is there evidence that there are ways to simplify eligibility conditions improve access to the programme and allow beneficiaries greater flexibility?	118
	C52	To what extent have the present arrangements for management and financing set up by the authorities, the administrations and the local partners helped maximise the impact of the programme? To what extent have they hindered	

	this impact? Could alternative financing mechanisms be considered in addition to grant aid (e.g. low interest loans and revolving funds)?	120
C53	To what extent have the present arrangements for management and financing at all levels facilitated the implementation of the LEADER+ method and each of its specific features?	122
F12	Is it possible to identify common patterns and examples of particularly successful practice regarding the organisation and activities of the national Networks for LEADER+ programmes in different Member States also in view of the Rural Network for Rural Development envisaged for the 2007-2013 programming period?	124
C54	What if any, evaluation activities have been carried out at LAG level? (Permanent or periodical self-evaluation, specific studies, data collection for evaluation etc.) In which LAGs and which type of activity? To what extent have the results of these evaluations been taken into account when the programme mid-term evaluation was carried out?	126
F13	Are current monitoring and evaluation systems sufficiently harmonized with each other and are they adapted to represent an efficient and effective use of public funds? Do they fully cover the extent of activities taking place in LEADER+ programmes in Member States?	128
F14	Have programme authorities identified programme-specific evaluation questions going beyond the questions in the Commission's Guidelines? If yes, what are the important results?	130
F15	What has been the role of national networks in evaluations? Can examples of good practice be identified?	130
F16	Which, if any, indicators used by programme evaluators could also serve as Common Indicators at European level for each of the common evaluation questions listed in the Commission's Guidelines? For which evaluation questions, if any, were no useful indicators found by programme evaluators and were no answers provided?	131
IV.	GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	134
1.	In place of a synthesis: thoughts on some key outcomes	136
2.	Conclusions and recommendations along the five programme themes	140
	Bibliography	160
	Annex A	
	Glossary of key terms referred to in the evaluation questions or judgement criteria	162
	Annex B	
	From the intervention logic to the cardinal questions – inter-linkages of the evaluation questions	166
1.	Identifying relationships between the questions of each of the five categories	166
2.	Modelling the relationships between all the 49 questions against the background of the intervention logic	169

Tables and Figures

Table 1:	List of geographical experts	9
Table 2:	Overview on the evolving LEADER initiative	19
Table 3:	Development of Programme approval of LEADER+	23
Table 4:	Development of LAG Selection in LEADER+	23
Table 5:	LEADER+ MTE Report finalised	24
Table 6:	The LEADER principles and behavioural changes in rural areas	46
Table 7:	LEADER management on the Member State level – specifics of the Managing Authorities (MA)	71
Figure 1:	Schedule of synthesis work	8
Figure 2:	Applied Evaluation Methods in LEADER+ Mid-Term-Evaluations*	24
Figure 3:	Action 1-4 – Programmed versus realised expenditures	26
Figure 4:	Number of LAGs selected under LEADER+	27
Figure 5:	Action 1 – Number of projects	28
Figure 6:	Action 2 – Inter-Territorial-Projects	29
Figure 7:	The LEADER programme: Where two contexts meet	36
Figure 8:	Relations between objectives and impacts in the programming cycle	37
Figure 9:	Top down and bottom up processes connected in a learning cycle	38
Figure 10:	The intervention path: The three actions and the specificities of LEADER	39
Figure 11:	The impact path: Behavioural changes as primary results	40
Figure 12:	Evaluation framework for the synthesis of the mid-term evaluations of LEADER+	41
Figure 13:	Relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency in the evaluation framework	42
Figure 14:	The intervention logic of LEADER: Main stages and components	43
Figure 15:	The four domains of behavioural change	47
Figure 16:	Thirteen cardinal questions related to the intervention logic	48
Figure 17:	The chain of hypotheses addressed by the cardinal questions	50
Figure 18a:	Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions: Category 1: Implementation of the LEADER method	166
Figure 18b:	Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions: Category 2: The three actions of LEADER+	167
Figure 18c:	Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions: Category 3: The impact of LEADER+ programmes	167
Figure 18d:	Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions: Category 4: Financing and management of programmes	168
Figure 18e:	Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions: Category 5: Monitoring and Evaluation	168
Figure 19:	The evaluation questions related to the intervention logic of LEADER	169
Figure 20:	The evaluation questions related to each other	170

I. INTRODUCTION

This report is the final output of an 8 months synthesis exercise which tries to depicted a situation of the community initiative LEADER+ for the period between the beginning of the programme in 2000 and it's midterm evaluations in 2003.

The purpose of the synthesis is to summarise and analyse past and present experience with regard to the implementation and results of the LEADER+ programmes for rural development. Specifically the effects and the performance of LEADER+ programs all over Europe should be analysed as reflected in-national-regional midterm evaluation reports and other documents.

Main aspects of the synthesis works have therefore been:

The synthesis:

- had to rely on midterm evaluation reports and additional sources of information (i.e. primarily secondary data),
- had to refer to the midterm evaluation period 2000-2003 only,
- had to follow the logic of LEADER+ midterm evaluations as laid down in the Guidelines for LEADER+ program evaluations (EC Document IV/43503/02-REV. 1) – i.e. the logic of finding answers to a list of predefined evaluation questions had to be kept up.

In order fulfil these aims the synthesis followed a four step approach in order to arrive at a final result:

Structuring

This step comprises to draft a model of the intervention logic for the three LEADER+ actions, how the LEADER specificities are implemented through these actions, and what their expected impacts are in relation to the objectives of the Community Initiative as laid out in the Commission Notice to Member States. Furthermore to provide a historic overview of the LEADER Community Initiative since its inception in 1992, including major changes in the regulatory framework and the implementing rules. Finally to define the key terms and elaborate judgement criteria and indicators for all evaluation questions (Common Evaluation Questions and Further Evaluation Questions).

Observing

This step included the identification of information sources needed to tackle each evaluation question, the development of tools needed for the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the national/regional evaluation reports. Then the collection of information and overall assessment of the evaluation system for LEADER+ had to be conducted and compiled per evaluation question.

Analysing

This task consisted of the carrying out of a full analysis of LEADER+ programmes and their contribution to the objectives of the policy, based on all information sources utilized. Furthermore answers to all evaluation questions had to be elaborated.

Judging

- Finally this step comprised the conducting of judgement on the policy studied, in the form of general conclusions and recommendations, covering the Community Initiative LEADER+ as a whole, and lessons to be learnt from past implementation of LEADER in the context of Rural Development policy. The judgement had to be based on the analysis, with regard to the judgement criteria defined in the structuring phase. The limits and validity of the judgement had to be specified.

The following figure provides an overview of the schedule of the tasks within the overall frame work of the synthesis. Furthermore a detailed structure of the single faces in the form of work packages is provided and the division of work for the elaborations of these tasks is stated.

Figure 1: **Schedule of synthesis work**

Phase	Work packages	Methodology	Report	Tool		
1. Structuring	1.1 Model of Intervention Logic of Leader	Conceptualisation	First Interim Report	Tool1: First assessment grid for MTE		
	1.2 Historic overview of Leader CI since 1992	Drafting				
	1.3 Key terms, criteria and indicators for all evaluation questions	Development of key terms for each evaluation question				
2. Observing	2.1 Identification of information sources	1. Update of MTE 2. Target group for interviews 3. Documentation				
	2.2 Tool development	Development of a set of 3 tools including reporting formats				
	2.3 Review of national and regional evaluation reports	Working with tool 1				
	2.4 Indicators					
	2.5 Programme specific evaluation questions					
	2.6 CEQ on Monitoring and evaluation					
2.7 Review of evaluation reports	2.8 Preliminary analysis of the CEQ and FEQ	Working with tool 2			Second Interim Report	Tool2: Detailed assessment grid for MTE
	2.9 Identification of further information needs	Working with tool 3				
	2.10 Information collection		Tool3: Guideline for gathering add. info			
3. Analysing	3.1 Full analysis of the Leader+ programmes	Draft final Report				
	3.2 Full analysis of the monitoring and evaluation system					
4. Judging	4.1 Conclusions and recommendations					
	4.2 Executive summary					
	4.3 Power point presentation					
FINAL REPORT						

	by core team
	by geographical experts
	partly by geograph. experts and partly by core team

The synthesis work was conducted by multinational project team. This team was organised in two groups – a **core team** and a team of **geographical experts**.

The core team was responsible for the overall conduct of the study, has designed the methodology, drafted the tools, analysed the information from the individual MTE and synthesised the results. It consisted of the following members:

- **Herta Tödling-Schönhofer** (ÖIR)
- **Bernd Schuh** (team leader, ÖIR)
- **Robert Lukesch** (ÖIR-expert)
- **Jean-Pierre Vercruyse** (AEIDL).
- **Seamus O’Grady**.

The **geographical experts** were in charge of the reviews of the MTE and the collection of additional information.

Table 1: **List of geographical experts**

Countries	Responsible expert
AT	Hannes Wimmer
BE/Vlaanderen	Margot van Soetendael
BE/Wallonie, LU	Jean-Pierre Vercruyse,
DE	Otmar Seibert
DK	Ulla Herlitz
ES	Paul Soto
FI	Torsti Hyryläinen
FR	Jean-Pierre Vercruyse
IE	Seamus O’Grady
IT	Carlo Ricci
GR	Sophia Efstratoglou
NL	Margot van Soetendael
PT, ES, UK	Paul Soto
SE	Ulla Herlitz
UK	John Grieve

This report is in general structured along these steps mentioned above and covers in detail the following chapters:

Chapter I provides a short history of LEADER and gives an overview of the programme in the reference period in terms of financial input and physical output and states some findings on the evaluation details of the Mid-Term-Evaluation (MTE) Reports.

Chapter II explains the methodology used within this study starting with a model of the intervention logic of LEADER. Then the methodological tools used for the gathering of information are explained in detail.

Chapter III builds the core of this synthesis study and provides the answers to all evaluation questions in detail.

Chapter IV finally offers general conclusions and recommendations derived from all the evaluation questions

1. Short history of LEADER¹

1.1 History and characteristics of the LEADER initiative in the framework of the rural development policy of the EU

Rural development policy has had a long process of evolution since the establishment of the Community. Despite the fact that it can be traced back to the Treaty of Rome, it became a policy on its own right with the publication of the European Commission's Communication 'The Future of Rural Society' and the different evolutions that followed.

Key dates in the development of the rural development policy:

- 1988: Reform of Structural Funds and 'The Future of Rural Society';
- 1991: Launch of the LEADER I Initiative: first experience of the approach in 217 areas
- 1992: MacSharry CAP reform;
- 1994: Launch of LEADER II : the approach is extended to 1,000 rural areas
- 1996: First European Conference on Rural Development in Cork;
- 1999: Agenda 2000 and the Rural Development Regulation;
- 2001: Launch of LEADER+: the approach is deepened and extended to all rural areas
- 2003: Second European Conference on Rural Development in Salzburg;
- 2004: Commission proposal on rural development policy 2007-2013.
- 2007: LEADER becomes part of mainstream policy

I. Commission Communication on "The Future of Rural Society"

The accession to the European Community of Greece in 1981, and of Spain and Portugal in 1986 caused a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between agriculture and rural development. Each of these countries had a large farming population and a clear need for investment in its rural areas. Thus it became apparent that the modernisation of agriculture in Southern Europe would need to be accompanied by large-scale investment in infrastructure, services, and non-agricultural sources of rural employment.

In 1988, the **European Commission** presented its **communication on 'The Future of Rural Society'**. This formed the basis for many of the initiatives which have subsequently followed. It recognised rural development as being a legitimate EU policy area in its own right, and from 1989, all EU Agriculture Commissioners from Ray MacSharry onwards have officially had responsibility for 'rural development' as well as for 'agriculture'.

¹ The sections on the History of Rural and Agricultural Policy within this chapter are quoted from European Commission (2005): Synthesis of Rural Development Mid-term Evaluations; submitted by Agra CEAS Consulting, Brussels; <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/>

In this 1988 Communication, the Commission expressed its belief that rural development policy:

“must be geared to local requirements and initiatives, particularly at the level of small and medium-sized enterprises, and must place particular emphasis on making the most of local potential”.

The European Union’s agricultural structures policy began to be shifted away from enhancing productivity to improvements in the quality of agricultural output, and establishing new markets for agricultural products. This paved the way for another form of intervention in rural areas, which will be experimented for the first time with the LEADER Initiative.

LEADER I: first European-wide experience with local development in rural areas

Started in 1991, the Community Initiative LEADER pursued a new, small-scale approach to rural development in lagging areas (Objective 1), in areas facing structural difficulties (Objective 5b) with relatively limited financial resources. LEADER was designed to revitalise these areas and to complement the existing European structural funds and national or regional development programmes.

The experimental approach proposed by the European Commission rests on three elementary principles:

- Elaborating and implementing a “local action plan” in rural areas between 5,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. This plan defines a limited number of strategic development axes and corresponding measures, which have to be put in action within a period of three years (1991 – 1993).
- The local action plan is designed and implemented by a local partnership as the final beneficiary of the initiative;
- Multi-sectorality and systematic interlinking of development actions embedded in an overall vision and strategy²;

II. The MacSharry reforms

The first major reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to focus specifically on rural development issues was the 1992 Mac Sharry reform. This reform included a marked reduction in supported prices for grains, oilseeds and beef in order to bring Common prices closer to world market prices ; equally, the Mac Sharry reform introduced direct payments to arable and beef farmers in order to compensate for these price cuts. In addition, the reform introduced obligatory set-aside to reduce the over-production of arable crops as well as a newly named set of enhanced ‘accompanying measures’ that were meant to accompany market measure.

In 1993, the objectives of structural policy were modified and Objective 5 was reworded as promoting rural development by speeding up the adjustment of agricultural structures in the framework of the reform of the CAP and facilitating the development and structural adjustment of rural areas. This is an important shift of emphasis: no longer is the reform of the CAP seen as an end in itself but rather as a means of achieving a wider goal for the rural sector as a whole.

² Hence the acronym: LEADER = Liaison Entre Actions du Développement de l’Économie Rural

LEADER II is launched, to broaden the experience to 1,000 rural areas

With LEADER II, the Commission decided to use a decentralised approach in partnership with the Member States. Innovative measures by public and private actors were stimulated at local level, joint learning and networking was an important asset. The second stage introduced four more elements:

- the insertion of the initiative into the programming logic of Structural Funds;
- the programme responsibility at national or regional level – according to the Member States' decision;
- the LEADER II Observatory as the anchor point of European-wide networking and capacity building;
- trans-national co-operation as a regular programme component.

102 Operational Programmes have been set up at national and regional level. LEADER II was implemented by 909 LAGs and 90 so-called other collective bodies, a construct which was dropped by the end of the period.

III. First European Conference on Rural Development, Cork

The first European Conference on Rural Development was held in November 1996 in Cork, Ireland. It served as an opportunity for a large variety of stakeholders to discuss and provide input to the future of rural development policy. The conference concluded with a 10-point declaration, which contributed to the design of LEADER+

- Rural preference – i.e. sustainable rural development must be put to the top of the agenda of the European Union;
- Integrated approach – rural development policy must be based on an integrated approach, multi-disciplinary in concept, and multi-sectoral in application, with a clear territorial dimension;
- Diversification – rural development must provide support for diversification of economic and social activity in order to promote the development of viable rural communities;
- Sustainability – rural development policy must be sustainable;
- Subsidiarity – given the diversity of the Union's rural areas, rural development policy must follow the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. must be as decentralised as possible and based on partnership and co-operation between all levels concerned (local, regional, national and European);
- Simplification – rural development legislation has to be simplified, in order to increase coherence between various rural development measures and subsidiarity in decision-making, to decentralise policy implementation and enhance overall flexibility;
- Programming – the application of rural development programmes must be based on coherent and transparent procedures, and integrated into one single programme for rural development for each region;
- Finance – the use of local financial resources, financial engineering in rural credit techniques and greater participation by the banking sector and other fiscal intermediaries must be encouraged;
- Management – management assistance to regional and local governments and community-based groups must be increased; and,

- Evaluation and research – monitoring, evaluation and beneficiary assessment have to be reinforced.

IV. Agenda 2000 reform

Agreed in March 1999 in Berlin, Germany, the Agenda 2000 package reformed the CAP, the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund, introduced two financial pre-accession instruments (ISPA and SAPARD) in order to prepare for enlargement and provided for a new financial framework for the period 2000-06.

The reform brought funding for rural development predominantly within the ambit of the EAGGF-Guarantee Section, partly for ease of administration, but also partly as a kind of political statement making clear that rural development and agri-environmental schemes were seen as being an integral part of the mainstream CAP. In addition, the reform increased the financial resources available for rural development. Agenda 2000 also introduced the 'CAP Pillar 1 and 2' concept, which comprises traditional market measures and price support under 'Pillar I' and rural development and agri-environmental measures under 'Pillar II'.

LEADER+ is launched to deepen and mainstream the approach

The third stage, the present community initiative LEADER³, has been designed to encourage the implementation of integrated, high quality and original strategies for sustainable development. It has a strong focus on partnership and networks promoting the exchange of experience. A total of € 5,046.5 m for the period 2000-2006 is foreseen to be spent, of which € 2,105.1 m will be funded by the EAGGF Guidance section and the remainder by public and private contributions.

As its name implies, LEADER+ incorporates further improvements, namely the following four characteristics:

- the methodological principle of "innovation" got amalgamated with the regulative principle of "sustainability" – following the orientation of the Amsterdam Treaty – aiming at encouraging more ambitious "pilot" strategies for integrated rural development;
- all rural areas within the EU are, in principle, eligible under LEADER+;
- the introduction of priority themes of particular interest at European level around which Local Action Groups should focus their development strategies;
- eligibility criteria for the partnership structure limiting the participation of public actors at 50% in the decision making bodies;
- an increased emphasis on co-operation between rural areas – including the possibility to support joint rural development projects between LEADER groups and similar structures within the same Member State;

LEADER+ continues to play its role as a laboratory aiming at encouraging the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development and at complementing other rural

³ LEADER+, as a Community Initiative, is governed by the Structural Funds Regulation 1260/99. Furthermore, the Notice of 14 April 2000 from the Commission to the Member States lays down Guidelines for the Community Initiative for Rural Development (LEADER+) [Official Journal C 139 of 18.05.2000]. It also sets out the technical arrangements for preparing, presenting and selecting programmes under the LEADER+ Initiative and for managing, controlling, monitoring and evaluating them.

development programmes by encouraging those involved in rural communities to conceive and implement integrated and innovative development strategies.

LEADER+ is structured around three actions, in addition to technical assistance:

- Action 1: Support for integrated territorial development strategies of a pilot nature based on a bottom-up approach;
- Action 2: Support for cooperation between rural territories;
- Action 3: Networking. The national networks disseminate information from the European and national level to the LAGs and act as a forum for information exchange on experience and know-how. They also assist in local and trans-national cooperation. The European network is facilitated by the European LEADER+ contact point.

Whilst the guidelines stress the need for an integrated approach, they suggest that the development strategies must be focussed around one of the following four themes:

- the use of new know-how and new technologies to make the products and services of rural areas more competitive;
- improving the quality of life in rural areas;
- adding value to local products, in particular by facilitating access to markets for small production units via collective actions;
- making the best use of natural and cultural resources.

Member States may propose additional themes in the light of their particular situation.

Increased emphasis (like in all structural funds programmes) has been put on monitoring of the delivery of programme outputs (i.e., goods or services financed and accomplished by the programme) to the intended beneficiaries thanks to the inputs (i.e., financial and administrative means mobilised). It is a continuous process, carried out during the execution of the programme, with the intention of correcting any deviation from operational objectives and of improving programme performance. The Commission has drawn up and agreed with Member States a series of common indicators for monitoring rural development programming for the period 2000-2006. LEADER+ Evaluation (EC Document VI/43503/02-Rev.1) explicitly refers to these principles as laid down in the introduction chapter of the common evaluation strategy. Evaluation has also been strengthened in the ongoing period, with the requirement for an ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluation of each programme. These evaluation studies are designed to provide a basis for sound programming, improving and adjusting programmes at the mid-term stage, to plan an appropriate follow-up and to inform the public or the budgetary authorities about the effects and the value of the public intervention.

73 Operational Programmes have been approved for LEADER+, setting the frame for 893 LEADER Action Groups in the EU15. New Member States had the possibility to dedicate parts of the Rural Development Programme budgets to a LEADER-like measure; this option was actually chosen by Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, and Poland.

The LEADER approach had become synonym with rural development excellence in many Member States, and these started to develop national policies on the line of the LEADER approach, but utilising other sources of funding. This trend had already started in the LEADER II period (POMO in Finland, PRODER in Spain, etc), but was widened in the new programming period.

V. Second European Conference on Rural Development in Salzburg

The 2nd European Conference on Rural Development⁴ was held in Salzburg, Austria in November 2003. It provided a platform for a wide range of rural stakeholders to debate how they see current Community rural development policy for the period 2000-06 and what they consider are the priorities for the future development of the policy in the next programming period from 2007 onwards in a wider EU. The results of the conference served as a basis for developing rural development policy post-2006. The main recommendations were as follows:

- Bring EU rural development measures under a single fund from 2007 onwards;
- Give Member States (and regions) more flexibility to decide on how their funds are allocated; and
- Put greater emphasis on the rural economy, i.e. measures going beyond the agriculture.

In the conclusions to the Salzburg Conference, the following was said concerning the continuation of the LEADER initiative:

“Rural development policy should be implemented in partnership between public and private organisations and civil society in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

To respond effectively to local and regional needs, a full dialogue between rural stakeholders in the drawing up and subsequent implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes is needed. Future policy must mainstream EU support for rural areas through bottom-up local partnerships by building on the lessons learnt from the LEADER approach. Scope must be left for exploring new and innovative approaches at local level.”⁵

1.2 Looking forward: 2007 – 2013

Since 2000, rural development has become the “second pillar” of the Common Agricultural Policy, supported by two instruments, the Rural Development Programmes (according to regulation 1257/1999) and LEADER+. The strategy to supplement the market-oriented policy by a more territorial based approach is underpinned by the objectives to promote a multifunctional agriculture, to follow a multi-sectoral and integrated approach to the rural economy, and to offer flexible aids for rural development.

The CAP reform steps from June 2003 and April 2004 aimed – among others – at further strengthening rural development by transferring funds from the first pillar (market and income support) to the second pillar (rural development) through modulation. At the same time, the scope of the rural development policy was expanded in order to respond to growing public concern on food quality, environmental protection and animal welfare. A number of new measures were added accordingly.

This reform reflects the new realities and challenges such as globalisation of world trade, consumer-led quality requirements and EU enlargement. These changes not only affect agriculture but also local economies in rural areas. The future of the agricultural sector is closely linked to a balanced development of rural areas, which account for 80% of the European territory.

⁴ “Planting seeds for rural future – rural policy perspectives for a wider Europe”

⁵ MEMO/03/236 (EC DG AGRI): Conclusions of Second European Conference on Rural Development in Salzburg (“Planting seeds for rural futures – building a policy that can deliver our ambitions”). Bruxelles, 21 November 2003.

The Community dimension in this relationship is therefore clear:

- agricultural and rural policy have an important role to play in supporting the EU aims of economic and social cohesion;
- rural development policy needs to place agriculture in a broader context that also takes into account the protection of the rural environment, the quality of produced food, and the attractiveness of rural areas to young farmers and new residents.

On 5 July 2005 the European Commission issued a proposal of **EU strategic guidelines for rural development**, which were then adopted by the Council on 20 February 2006. The guidelines set out the strategic approach to be followed by Member States for the preparation of their Rural Development programmes for the period 2007 – 2013. Since the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, Rural Development is playing an increasingly important role in helping rural areas to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Rural areas make up 92 percent of the territory of the enlarged EU and the new regulation broadens the possibilities to use Rural Development funding to boost growth and create jobs in rural areas – in line with the Lisbon Strategy – and to improve sustainability, in line with the Göteborg sustainability goals.

Council Regulation 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 “on support for rural development by the European Agriculture Rural Development Fund (EARDF)”, lays down the operational framework for transforming the new orientation into programmes.

The new policy has three major objectives:

- Increasing the competitiveness of the agricultural sector through support for restructuring,
- Enhancing the environment and countryside through support for land management
- Strengthening the quality of life in rural areas and promoting diversification of economic activities through measures targeting the farm sector and other rural actors.

The new legal framework will improve the implementation and governance of EU rural development programmes as follows:

- all existing measures will be regrouped under a single funding and programming instrument, the European Agriculture Rural Development Fund (EARDF);
- the EU strategy for rural development will serve as the basis for the national strategies and programmes. This strategy will ensure better focus on EU priorities, and will improve complementarity with other EU policies (e.g. cohesion and environment);
- reinforced monitoring, evaluation and reporting will ensure more transparency and accountability for the use of EU money;
- less detailed rules and eligibility conditions will leave more freedom to the Member States on how they wish to implement their programmes;
- a strengthened bottom-up approach will better tune rural development programmes to local needs;
- the division of responsibilities between Member States and the Commission will be better defined.

On the basis of the outcomes of the summit of December 15th to 16th 2005, during which the EU budget for 2007 – 2013 has been decided upon, the Council Decision 2006/493/EC of 19/06/2006 fixed the EU funding for rural development for the upcoming period at € 69.75 bn⁶ (9.9 bn per year on average) .

The measures of the EAFRD regulation, dealing with the second pillar of agricultural policy, are structured along four axes:

- Axis 1: Improving competitiveness of farming and forestry (min. 10% of the EAFRD total contribution)
- Axis 2: Environment and land management (min. 25% of the EAFRD total contribution)
- Axis 3: Improving quality of life and diversification (min. 10% of the EAFRD total contribution)

A fourth implementation axis (LEADER) mainstreams the local development strategies that were previously financed under the LEADER initiative through a bottom up approach.

According to article 17 (2) of Council regulation 1698/2005, 5% at least of the EAFRD total contribution to the programme shall be reserved for axis 4. For the ten new Member States the minimum Community financial contribution of 5% for axis 4 may be phased in over the programming period in such a way that on average at least 2.5% of the EAFRD total contribution is reserved for axis 4.

So the LEADER model can be applied on a wider scale by those Member States wishing to do so, while for the EU as a whole continuation and consolidation of the LEADER approach will be safeguarded.

1.3 LEADER and the challenges for rural Europe

Since 1991, the LEADER initiative moved from an experimental edge of structural funds programming to the core of rural development programming at European, national, regional and micro-regional level. Programme shaping and co-ordination has passed from the European to the national respectively regional level, according to the principle of subsidiarity.

Similar and complementary programmes have been designed by Member States, thus inspiring programme shaping at European level with new insights and ideas. This has been shown in the study on “Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes”⁷.

Table 2 gives a rough overview on the evolution of the initiative from its beginnings to nowadays.

⁶ This figure does not take into consideration the amounts resulting from financial modulation as provided for in article 12(2) of regulation EC No 1290/2005. The Commission decision 2006/636/EC of 12/09/2006 fixing the annual breakdown by Member State of the amount for Community support to rural development for the period 2007 – 2013 makes reference to a global amount for supporting rural development (including modulation) of € 77,66 billion.

⁷ ÖIR-Managementdienste GmbH (2004): Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes, commissioned by DG Agriculture, Unit G4

Table 2: **Overview on the evolving LEADER initiative**

Programme	Period	Elementary principles	Areas involved	EU Budget ⁸	EU funds involved
LEADER I	1991 – 1993	Elaboration and implementation of a “business plan” or “local action plan” (LAP) in rural areas between 5,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. This plan defines a limited number of strategic development axes and corresponding measures. Constitutive elements are the principle of multi-sectorality and systematic interlinking of development actions embedded in an overall vision and strategy, as well as the creation of a local partnership called LEADER action group (LAG) as the implementing structure at local level. Co-funding of these plans by the Commission was provided as global grants with the participation of the three structural funds. The initiative is supported by a European network coordinator situated in Bruxelles.	Lagging areas (Obj. 1, 5b) in EU12 217 LAGs	ECU 390 m ECU 130 m/a ECU 1.8 m/LAG ECU 0.6 m/LAG per year	EAGGF, ERDF, ESF
LEADER II	1994 (1995 for AT, FI, SE) – 1999	The principle of innovation becomes explicit. It is now required to draw up regional or national programmes into which the LAGs’ business plans are supposed to fit. LAGs are supposed to operate in areas between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. In addition to LAGs, so-called “other collective bodies” (OCBs) with a thematic focus are eligible as beneficiaries. The four eligible measures are: a) acquisition of competences, (b) rural innovation programmes, (c) trans-national co-operation, and (d) networking. In support of measure (d) the European LEADER Observatory is established by the EC in April 1995, and by national networking bodies co-financed by the EC.	Lagging areas (Obj. 1, 5b, 6) in EU15 102 programmes, 906 LAGs and 92 OCBs	ECU 1,795 bn ECU 299 m/a ECU 1.80 m/LAG resp. OCB ECU 0.30 m/LAG resp. OCB per year	EAGGF, ERDF, ESF
LEADER+	2000 – 2006	The initiative continues its role as a laboratory for new approaches complementing the mainstream rural development programmes. The principle of “innovation” gets amalgamated with the principle of “sustainability” in order to achieve more ambitious integrated, but thematically focused pilot strategies (action 1). The public actors should be limited at 50% in decision making bodies of the LAGs, OCBs are no longer eligible. There is an increased emphasis on inter-regional and trans-national co-operation between rural areas (action 2). Networking (action 3) is supported by the LEADER+ contact point in Bruxelles and by national networking bodies co-financed by the EC. According to the LEADER Observatory Network there are 893 LAGs in the EU15. LEADER+ is not applicable in the 10 new Member States, although an analogous measure can be funded under SAPARD, if the Member State decides so. Apart from the possibility to use the SAPARD funds, New Member States can also apply LEADER+ as a specific measure within their Objective 1 programmes.	All rural areas in EU15 893 LAGs	€ 2,105 bn € 300.7 m € 2.36 m/LAG € 0.34 m/LAG per year	EAGGF
LEADER as the fourth axis of RDP	2007 – 2013	The initiative continues to support multi-sectoral, area-based local development strategies, put in place by private-public partnerships following an innovative and bottom-up approach, including inter-territorial co-operation and networking. It will be integrated into the mainstream rural development programmes as their fourth horizontal axis (with a minimum amount of 5% of the EARDF total contribution to the programme, roughly equivalent to an overall funding of at least 3,46 billion euros for the whole period) into which may be included measures from axis 1 (improving competitiveness of farming and forestry), axis 2 (environment and land management) and axis 3 (improving quality of life and diversification). The population threshold (10,000 to 100,000 inhabitants) is going to be maintained, but handled more flexibly. A European Network for Rural Development and National rural networks will be funded.	All rural areas in EU25 (27 from 01/01/2007)	€ 3.46 bn (0.49 per year) for an unknown number of LAGs	EAFRD

⁸ Information for LEADER I and II is taken from the Ex-post evaluation of LEADER II.

The synthesis of the mid-term evaluations of LEADER+ has a hinge function. Looking back on the first half of the last period as a distinct community initiative, it directly feeds into the final drafting of the next programming period, during which LEADER will be inserted into the mainstream rural development programme as an integral and compulsory part. The LEADER programme is both supposed to maintain its pilot character and to smoothly fit into the array of the other measures, not only of the other rural development measures, but also of structural funds and national programmes.

It has both to open new possibilities for all types of rural areas, whose diversity has considerably increased after the accession of 10 new Member States. It also has to comply to the standards of programme implementation in the way of avoiding overly complex administrative handling.

It has to address existing challenges, e.g. by identifying new products and distribution channels in order to create added value in rural areas, but also to answer and even to anticipate new challenges in the field of environment protection, the use of new technologies and, in some extremely poverty-ridden areas of new Member States, the mere survival of rural communities.

In the new architecture of the EU cohesion policy the EARDF is part of agricultural policy and not of the structural funds instruments ERDF, ESF and Cohesion Fund. Therefore co-ordination and complementarity will have to be achieved at national/regional level. For coordination of the different activities of ESF, ERDF and Cohesion funds in the three priorities, National Strategy Plans need to be developed by the Member States. Similarly, based on the EU strategic guidelines for rural development, each Member State shall prepare its rural development national strategy plan constituting the reference framework for the preparation of the rural development programmes.

The presidency's conclusion of the European Council (March 22nd and 23rd 2005) has announced a relaunch of the Lisbon Strategy, in order to "re-focus priorities in growth and employment, renew Europe's basis for competitiveness and increase growth, productivity and social inclusion simultaneously, placing the main emphasis on knowledge, innovation and human capital."⁹ In respect to the Lisbon agenda, the Commissioner for Agriculture pointed out that local LEADER initiatives would provide an important source of income and employment in rural areas.¹⁰

A similar synergy can be identified in the field of good local and regional governance.

The European Commission established its own concept of governance in the White Paper on European Governance¹¹, in which the term "European governance" refers to the rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised at European level. The paper identifies five principles that underpin good governance. These are: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Each principle is important for establishing more democratic governance, and applies to all levels of government – global, European, national, regional and local. In the context of LEADER, especially the promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion, the inclusion of regional and local self-government and the support of participatory democracy is highly relevant.

⁹ Council of the European Union (2005): Presidency Conclusions, Brussels March 23, 2005, 7619/05

¹⁰ Fischer Boel, Mariann (2005): Rural development and the Lisbon Strategy, SPEECH/05/22
Member of the European Commission responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development

¹¹ CEC (Commission of the European Communities) (2001a), European Governance: A White Paper, COM (2001) 428, Brussels, 25.07.2001

The LEADER principles: area- and partnership-based, participatory rural development implementing innovative and sustainable pilot strategies and using inter-territorial co-operation and networking as instruments for generative learning and dissemination, are essential ingredients for building new forms of territorial governance. The idea of a collective actor emerges more clearly: it is able to mobilise and to act, in order to develop local territorial development, to define original forms of organisation of the local population and “to take control of the future of their area”¹².

Thus, the synthesis of the mid-term evaluations of LEADER+ has to consider its pilot function in pushing the rather sector-oriented agricultural policy of the second pillar further towards a genuinely trans-sectoral territorial approach.

Resuming, the (re-)construction of the LEADER intervention logic has to be understood in the light of three policy contexts:

- the potential of LEADER for a wider set of measures within rural development,
- the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment and
- the concept of good governance as laid down in the European White Paper.

¹² University of Valencia (2004): Governance of territorial and urban policies – from EU to local level, First Interim Report; ESPON Project 2.3.2, Submitted by University of Valencia, Lead Partner for ESPON 2.3.2

2. Overview of the programme in the reference period

Based on the information available in the LEADER+ Midterm Reports and the LEADER monitoring data collected by the Commission the following chapter provides an overview on the LEADER+ programmes in the reference period.

An analysis of the LEADER+ Programmes in the EU-Member States shows, that in the first half of 2001 only 4 programmes (the national programmes in Austria, Finland and two regional programmes in Spain) were approved. The major number of approvals took place in the 2nd half of the year 2001 (51 programmes). While in the beginning of 2002 the majority of Spanish and Italian Programmes had been already approved, while the majority of the German LEADER+ programmes was approved during this very year. Until February 2002 two thirds of the programmes were approved. The last programmes approved after that date, were mainly the missing Italian and some German programmes.

Table 3: **Development of Programme approval of LEADER+**

Date of Approval	Programmes
2001 (1st half year)	4
2001 (2nd half year)	51
2002	17
2003	1

This delay in the take-off of the LEADER+ programmes caused also some backlog in the selection of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the respective LEADER+ programmes. In 18 programmes the 1st selection of LAGs took place in 2001, while the Netherlands North Programme was the first programme which approved LAGs already in June 2000. However, the overall majority (38 programmes) began to selected its first LAGs in 2002. Still at the beginning of 2003 not all programmes had succeeded in selecting Local Action Groups: Several Italian Programmes (Calabria, Sardegna, Lazio, Molise, Basilicata) but also Flanders, Wales, Saarland and Thüringen (Germany) approved their LAGs in 2003. In the Italian Programmes Abruzzo, Campania, Puglia, Sicilia (Italy) this selection took place only in 2004.

Table 4: **Development of LAG Selection in LEADER+**

Date of 1st LAG Selection	Programmes¹³
before 31.12.2001	17
2002	39
2003	9
2004	4
n.a.	1

Regarding the finalisation of the Mid-Term-Evaluations it is evident, that the given deadline (31.12.2003) could be kept by most of the LEADER+ programmes: 71 programmes finalized the MTE

¹³ The total number of programmes is 70 in this case – as the national programmes of Italy, Germany and Spain did not select any LAGs

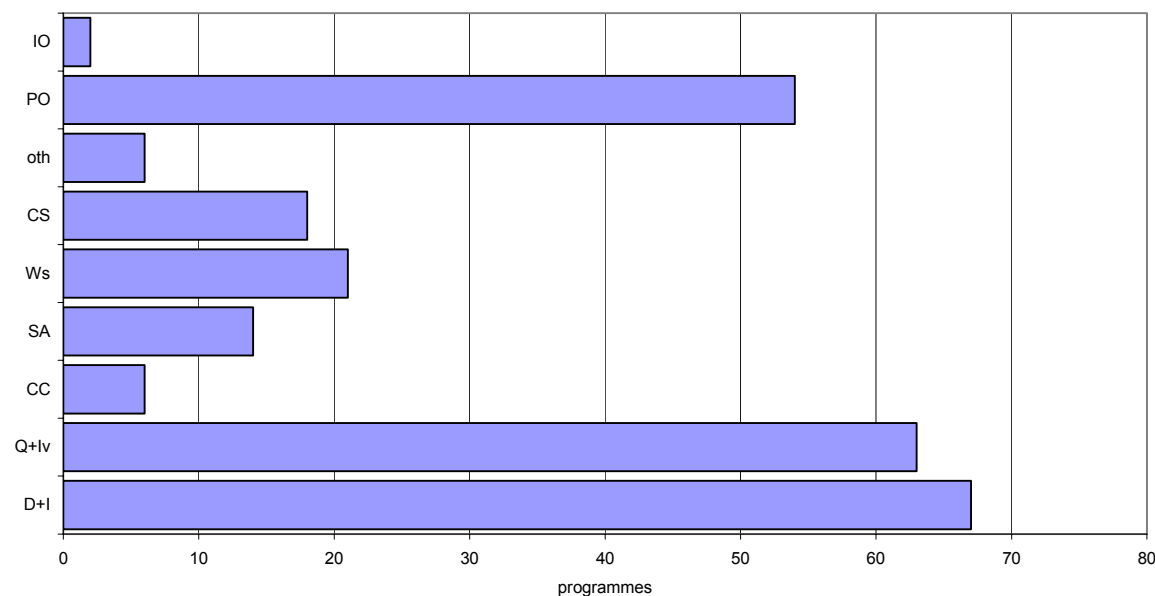
before 31.12.2003. Against the background of the analysis of the programme-approval and the first LAG-selections however, it is important to emphasize that most of the LEADER+ programmes cover a rather limited operative phase in their reports.

Table 5: **LEADER+ MTE Report finalised**

Month	Programmes
Jan. 03	1
Jun. 03	1
Sep. 03	2
Oct. 03	6
Nov. 03	15
Dec. 03	46
Jan. 04	2

The most applied methods in LEADER+ Mid-Term-Evaluations harmonize to a great extent: Most evaluators relied on the analysis of data and indicators; followed by more qualitative methods such as questionnaires and stakeholder interviews. A third pillar of the LEADER+ Mid-Term-Evaluations consists in the strong focus on the implementation process. Case studies, workshops, self-assessments and focus groups are only used in a minority of programmes (less than 20 programmes). More complex methods such as questionnaires and interviews with control groups and impact-assessments are even less frequent.

Figure 2: **Applied Evaluation Methods in LEADER+ Mid-Term-Evaluations***



- IO Focus is on impacts
 - PO Strong focus of MTE is on process of implementation
 - oth Others
 - CS Case study
 - Ws Workshops, Focus groups
 - SA inclusion of results of self-assessment of LAG
 - CC questionnaires, interviews with control group
 - Q+iv questionnaires, interviews with stakeholder, project owners
 - D+I analysis of data and indicators
- 5 of 73 programmes n.a.

*) As the MTE used several evaluation methods, the values do not sum up to the total of programmes.

3. Overall progress in physical and financial terms across LEADER+ programmes

This chapter provides a synthesis of the overall progress expressed in

- financial input data
- and physical key figures (outputs)

across all 73 LEADER+ programmes until 2003.

The data source for both financial as well as physical figures is the European Commission, Directorate-General for agriculture, rural development monitoring data system CAP-IDI. These data were cross-checked, corrected and improved to the extent possible with information provided by the LEADER+ Mid-Term-Reports and the updates.

These inputs and outputs were differentiated by LEADER actions, whereas a further differentiation in measures have not been feasible due to problems of data-availability in the majority of LEADER-programme regions.

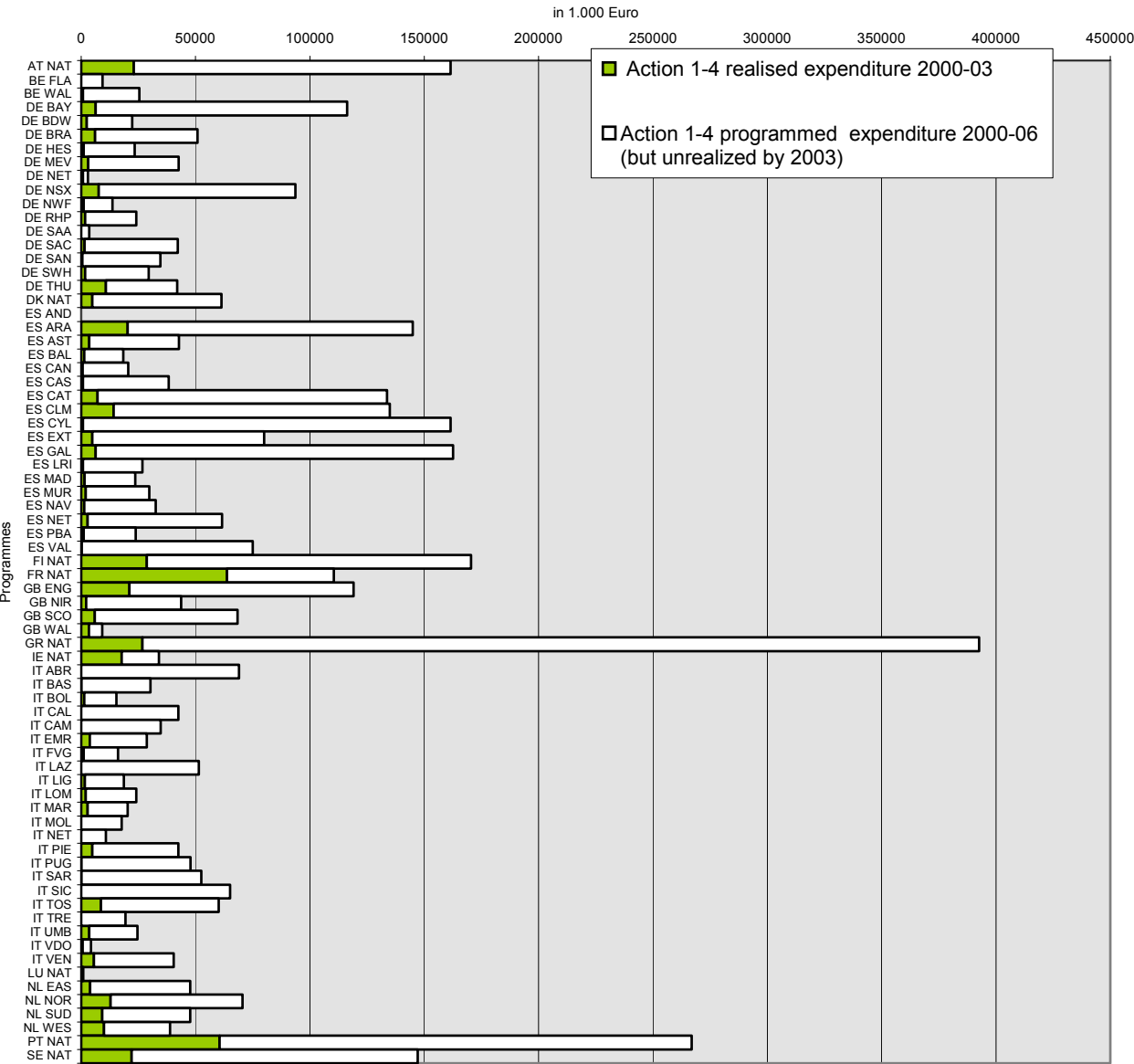
In the following, the above mentioned input and output-data are related to each other, in order to give an overview on the progress in financial and physical terms within the LEADER+ Programmes.

Generally A ranking of the total programmed expenditure between 2000-2006 shows, that the national programmes of Greece and Portugal are by far the biggest. They are followed by the Finnish national programme and by the regional programmes of Galicia, and Castilla Leon. Generally larger agricultural and Mediterranean countries have got the biggest volumes (France, Greece, Portugal). Also the programmes in Spanish regions (Andalucia, Castilla Leon, Castilla La Mancha etc.) have programme volumes that come close or even exceed larger national LEADER+ programmes. The programmes of Luxembourg, German Network, Saarland, Valle d'Aosta, Wales and Flanders are those with the smallest programmed expenditure between 2000 and 2006.

When looking at the reference period between 2000 and 2003 the following picture could be observed: In absolute values, the **total realised expenditure** of the programmes France and Portugal are by far the highest: The respective total amount (above € 60 m) is more than twice as high as the third biggest programme (Finland). England and Aragon are the two regional LEADER+ programmes with the highest realised expenditure by 2003. The average realised expenditure between 2000 and 2003 is € 6,428,000 per programme. More than two thirds of the programmes have realised expenditures below € 10 m (see figure 3).

The largest rate of realised expenditure is to be found in the national LEADER+ programmes of France (57.7%), Ireland (52.3%), Luxembourg (45.7%) and Wales (36.5%). The average rate of realised expenditure of all programmes is 10.9% and indicates that the overall majority of programmes shows very low rates: more than half of all LEADER+ programmes have a rate of realised expenditure below 10%. (see figures 3)

Figure 3: **Action 1-4 – Programmed versus realised expenditures**



The absolute number of **selected Local Action Groups (LAGs)** in France (140) was twice as high as in the programme with the 2nd largest number of selected LAGs: i.e. Austria (56). Portugal (52), Bavaria (45) and Greece (40) were following suit. While the average number of selected LAGs was 12, nearly two third of the programmes had selected less than 10 Local Action Groups. In total up to 2003 the LEADER+ programmes had selected 848 Local Action Groups (see figure 4).

Figure 4: **Number of LAGs selected under LEADER+**

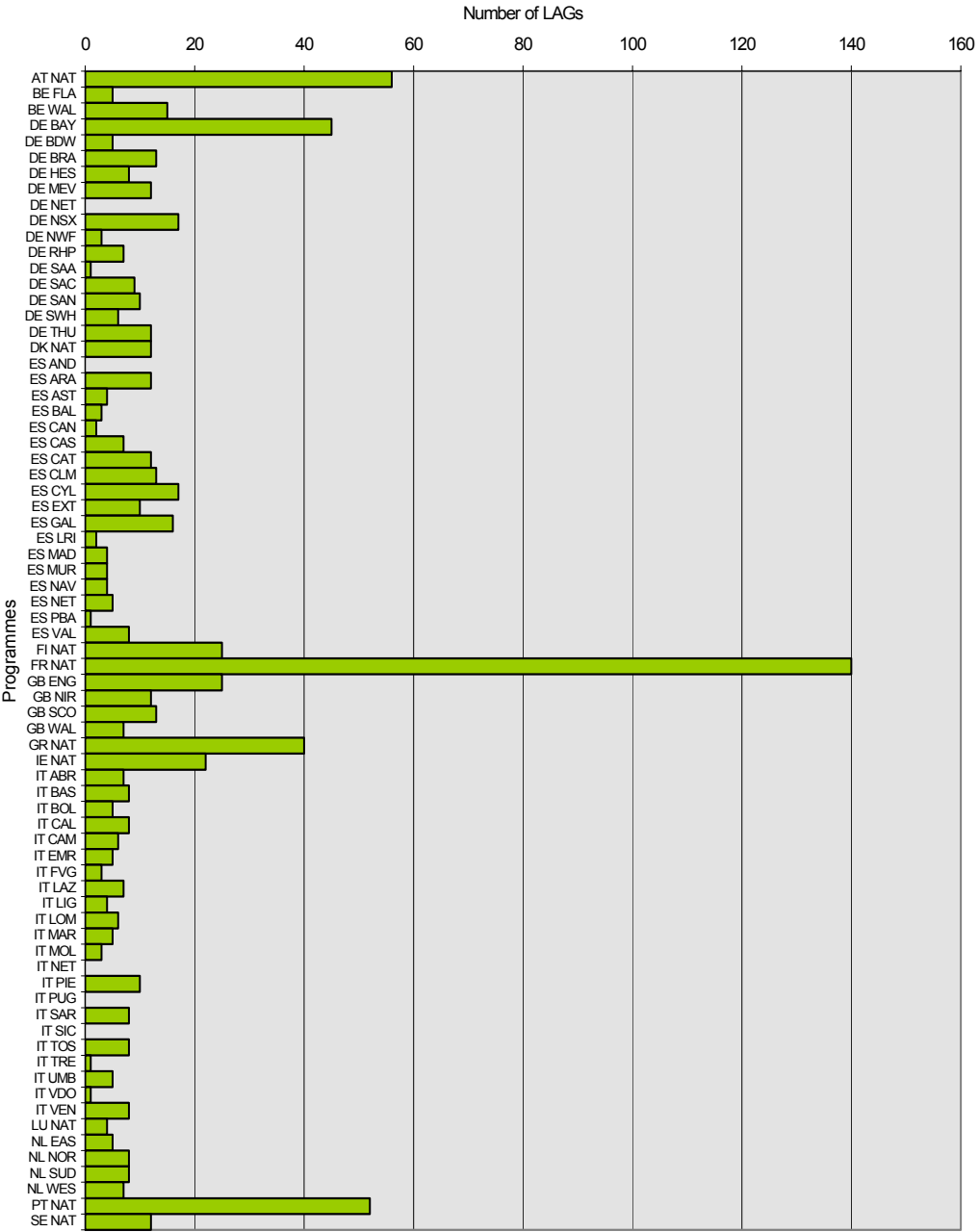
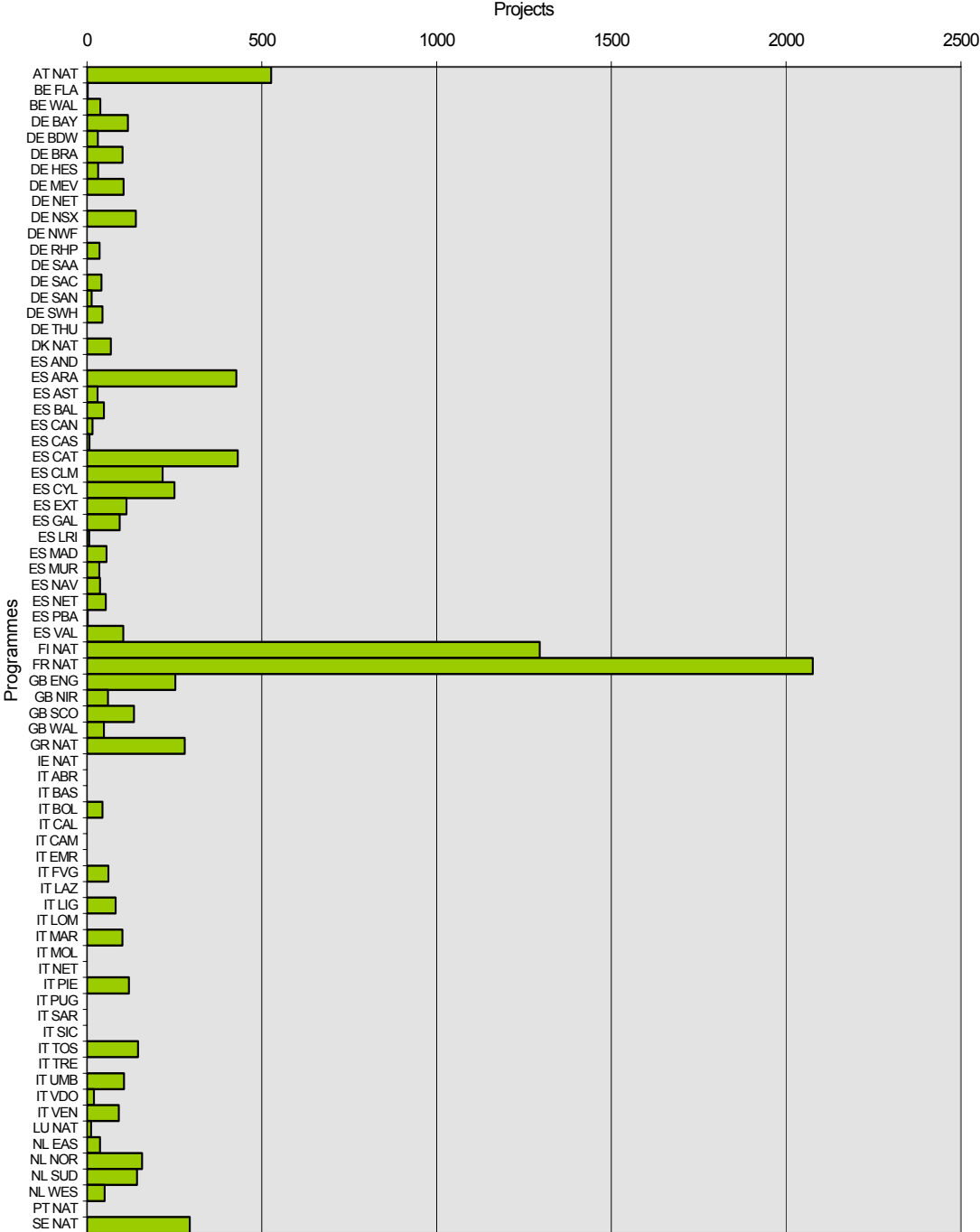


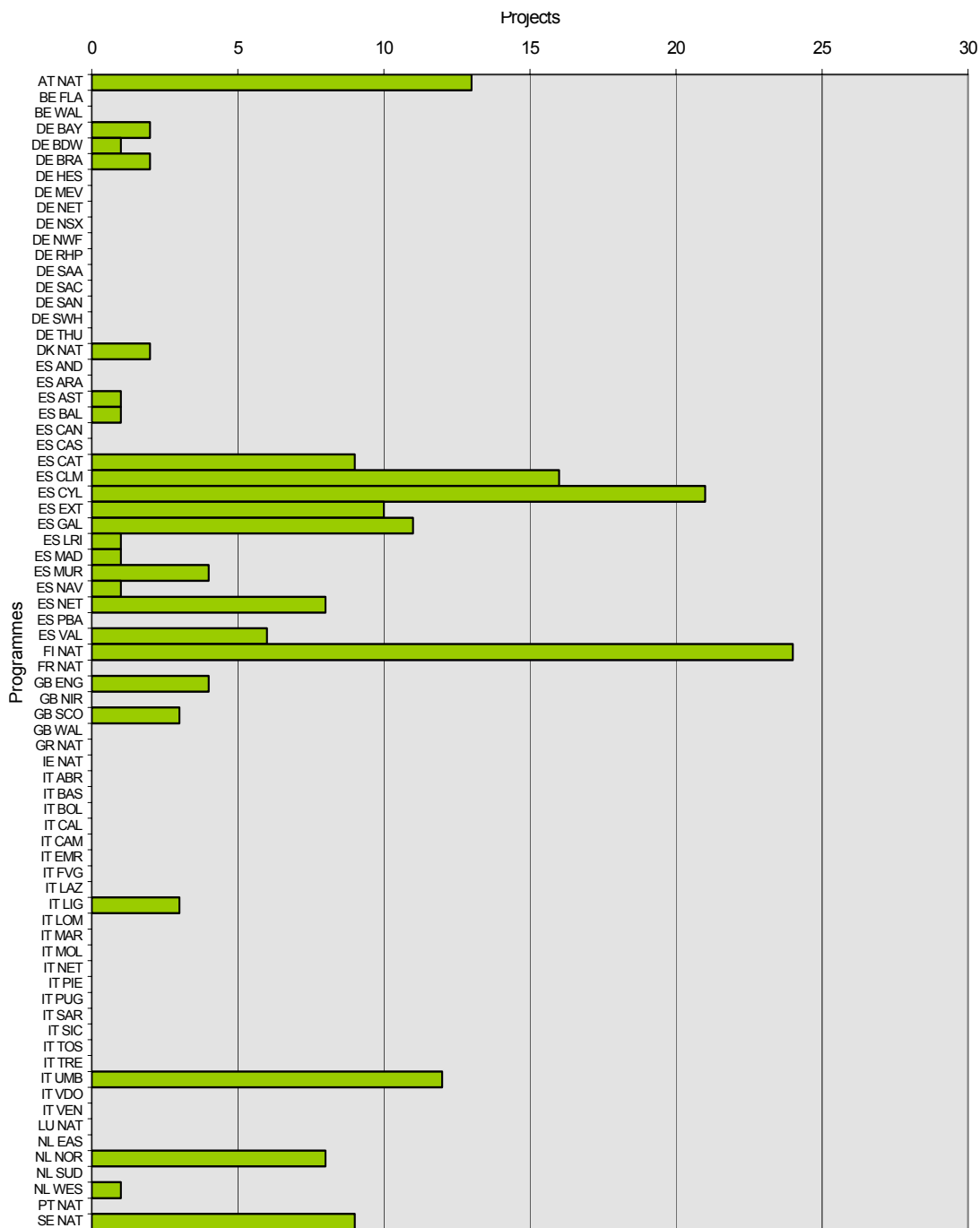
Figure 5 shows that generally the highest amount of projects (8833) has been realised in action 1 (integrated territorial rural developments strategies of pilot nature) within the period 2000-2003. France (2076) and Finland (1295) showed by far the best performance. Then follows a group of programmes with project numbers between 600 and 250: i.e. Austria, Aragon (Spain), Catalunya (Spain), Greece, Sweden. However almost a third (20) of the total of 73 programmes did not carry out any projects within actions 1 during the reference period.

Figure 5: **Action 1 – Number of projects**



Between 2000 and 2003 in total 178 **inter-territorial projects** (Action 2) had been established. Among the 26 programmes, which had been active in this action, Finland’s LEADER+ programme has established most inter-territorial projects. It is however followed closely by Spanish Programmes (Castilla Leon, Castilla La Mancha, Galicia, Cataluna) and by Austria as well as by Umbria. Nearly two thirds of all LEADER+ Programmes however, had not established inter-territorial projects by 2003 (see figure 6).

Figure 6: **Action 2 – Inter-Territorial-Projects**



In total **42 transnational projects** (Action 3) have been established in all LEADER+ programmes by 2003. Among the 12 programmes who took actions in this field, Finland and the North of Netherlands had established most transnational projects (9). England, Scotland, Liguria and Umbria had still more than three projects, whereas the great majority of programmes had no transnational project by 2003.

What becomes quite clear from these facts and figures is the expected bias in the Mid-Term Evaluations, that in many cases they had only few implemented activities and few outputs or results to report on. Consequently it had to be expected that a number of evaluation questions may not have been answered in most natural/regional evaluation reports. The methodology used within these synthesis therefore had to take these shortcomings of available experience into consideration in order to come up with sufficiently sound judgements on the whole programme.

II. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the synthesis is to summarize and analyse past and present experience with regard to the implementation and results of LEADER+ programmes for Rural Development.

The following chapter tries to elaborate in detail how the project team dealt with the challenges deriving from the fulfilment of this task. The difficulties which were to be faced could be listed as follows:

- Come up with a complete picture of a programme which did not show even half of its planned performance within the reference period.
- Not to present biased results only representing information on those programmes which did show performance in the period 2000-2003, thus neglecting experiences and results of late-starting programmes or catch-up effects of poorly performing programmes in the beginning.
- Not to “invent” information which did not happen in the reference period or bias the synthesis work by including facts from outside the reference period – well knowing by now (i.e. by mid 2006) that LEADER+ has shown an exponential increase in performance since 2003.
- Stick to the strict frame of the 49 evaluation questions as stipulated in the guidelines for LEADER+ evaluations.

The evaluation design, methodology and activities have been planned to face these challenges. They have followed the sequence of structuring (task 1), observing (task 2), analysing (task 3) and judging (task 4). The Project Team has used a mix of methodological approaches in parallel, which has been especially important, first in order to validate the information gathered by various sources and second to fill information gaps.

- **Structuring** of the synthesis work.
 - An overview of the coverage of the CEQ and FEQ, and the quality of the MTE reports,
 - Development of key terms, criteria and indicators for each evaluation question including synthesis indicators and the elaboration of a concept for tackling the FEQ),
 - Collection of additional documents and literature.
- **Observing**
 - Development of tools for the analysis of national, regional and network MTE studies
 - Review, compilation and analysis of national, regional and network MTE-reports and assessment of further information need
 - Additional information collection in the regions/Member states (reflective interviews and individual interviews)
 - Validation of information used
 - Collection and mapping of indicators

Compilation, aggregation and the **analysis** has been performed by a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, by structuring the information according to individual CEQ and FEQ as well as by analysing cross references between the individual questions.

Starting point for our methodology was the exercise of finding a common understanding of the programme and its intervention logic. By this step the project team intended to decrease the overall complexity of the synthesis object. The aim was to structure and somehow prioritise the set of evaluation questions. The reason for that was the need to meet the challenges listed above especially normalising/calibrating information over time. The priority of evaluation questions will then allow for a hierarchy which will lead to judgement on the whole programme dealing with pivotal points of the LEADER Programme and will allow for information gaps in fields with less priority and still arrive at an overall picture of LEADER+ performance. This approach is comparable with the painting technique pointillism where only crucial dots are set by the painter himself and the full picture is composed in the head of the viewer.

After having set the frame for the synthesis work by defining an intervention logic for LEADER+ Programmes, the next task was to collect systematically the information available, which would allow for the reaching of the final aim of the study – i.e. to find answers to all evaluation questions as stipulated in the Guidelines. To this end the project team had to develop tools needed for the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the national-regional evaluation reports.

Assessment Grid – Tool 1

This first assessment grid has been elaborated to collect the following basic information on the MTE reports:

- General Information on the MTE report: description, dates (e.g. programme approval, selection of LAGs) and financial figures (e.g. programme volume, operations approved within the reference period) of the single programmes as well as a general assessment of the evaluation method.
- Completeness of the Common Evaluation Questions in the MTE reports
- Use of the judgement criteria within the mid term evaluations
- Additional and/or modified judgement criteria used within the mid term evaluations
- Indicators used within the mid term evaluations
- First rough quality assessment of the criteria and indicators used
- Collection of the country specific evaluation questions their related judgement criteria and indicators and first rough quality assessment of the criteria and indicators used
- Collection of additional information sources which could become useful for filling in data gaps or in-depth analysis
- Collection of best practice examples (as far as mentioned in the MTE reports) – in order to Figure
 - ...the learning effects of LEADER from previous periods,
 - ...the synergies with other EU programmes and policies,
 - ...successful examples of organisation and networking activities
 - ...successful examples of networks playing a role in the evaluation of the programmes

Detailed Assessment Grid – Tool 2

Tool 2 has been developed with the aim to collect more indebts information providing all the necessary information to summarize the answers of all the evaluation questions covered in the MTE reports.

Case Study Reports (Tool 3)

The aim of this tool has been

- ...to fill missing information gaps (especially in the Cardinal research questions and FEQs)
- ...to give “striking cases for lessons about success and/or difficulties” within LEADER+ programmes

1. A model for the intervention logic of LEADER

1.1 The intervention logic of LEADER+ – Systemic approach

This section leads along the path of constructing the intervention logic of the community initiative LEADER+. It builds on five conceptual pre-suppositions:

1. Each development programme fulfils a zip function between at least two contexts: that of governance and that of the socio-economic system targeted by the programme.
2. Objectives and impacts are clearly related in the programming cycle.
3. The specificities of the LEADER method influences key aspects of collective behaviour.
4. The evaluation questions can be related with each other and to the intervention model in a consistent way.
5. There is a way to identify a reduced set of cardinal questions to explore key hypotheses for the assessment of the whole programme.

Whereas the last two bullet points relate to the evaluation questions as stipulated in the Commission Guidelines for the LEADER+ Programme Evaluations (EC Document VI/43503/02-Rev.1) which will be dealt with in the following chapters.

1.1.1 The zip function of development programmes

A development programme is conceived and implemented in the overlapping zone of two layers of context:

- the governance context
- the targeted socio-economic system

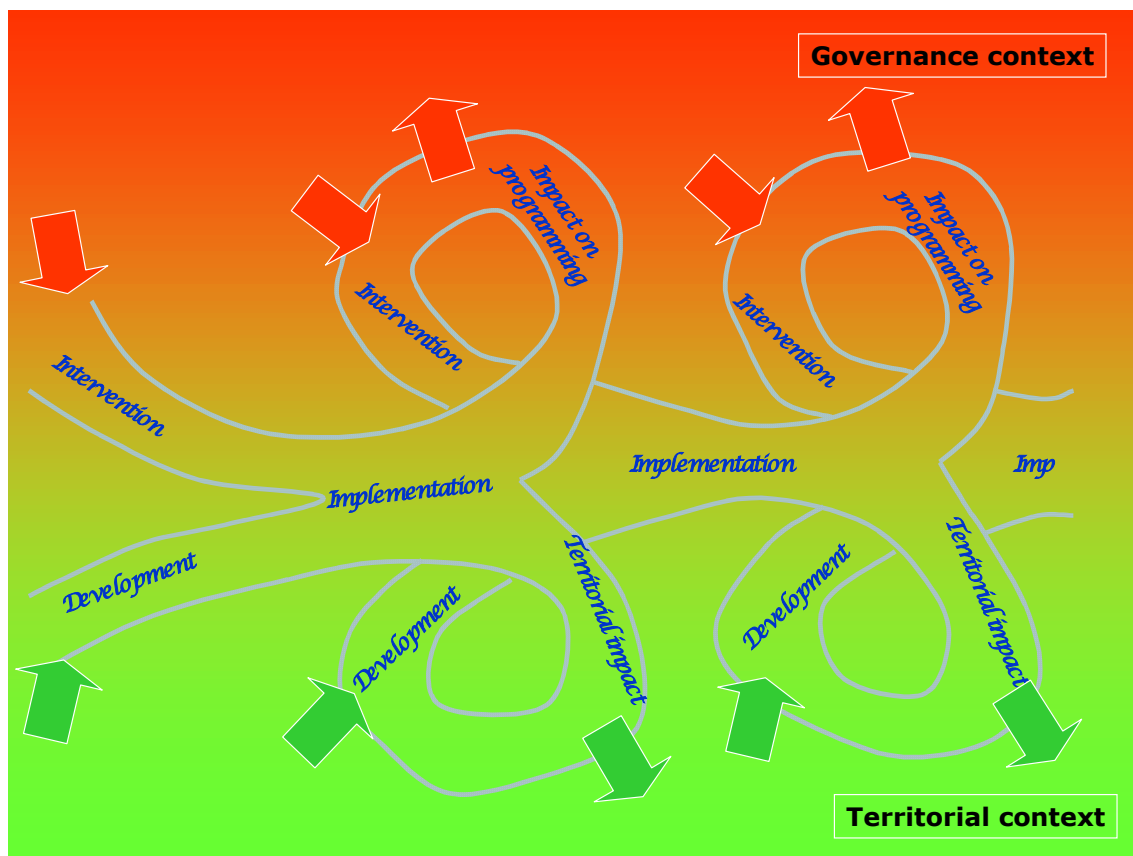
Following this model, LEADER+ creates structural ties between

- The economic, financial, but specifically territorial governance in Member States and regions
- The socio-economic reality in rural areas of the EU.

Seen from the “top-down perspective”, the initiative comes into existence as a “purposeful and targeted intervention” into rural areas in order to achieve more socio-economic cohesion across Europe. Seen from the “bottom-up perspective”, the initiative is an exogenous support for the rural actors’ self-organised and self-organising endeavours for achieving a better social and economic situation. The programme zips together a “policy soft ware” to the fascinating and confusing multiplicity of life expressions in rural Europe.

Figure 7 depicts the flow of programming cycles according to the described zip function between the governance context (red) and the territorial context (green). The flow implicitly introduces a third context: that of time.

Figure 7: **The LEADER programme: Where two contexts meet**



1.1.2 Relations of objects and impacts in the programming cycle

The guidelines for the LEADER+ evaluation¹⁴ provided by the EC have constituted the basis for the national, regional and network reports and thus – complemented by additional questions – also the analysis and synthesis for this study. They follow the scheme of a “classical” evaluation of Structural Funds programmes’ intervention logic, defining the relations between objectives and impacts. Results and impacts are related to the objectives, derived from the needs identified in a sector or a region. Such needs relate to the socio-economic problems the programme should respond to. The inputs are financial or administrative resources. Through programme activities they produce the outputs and achieve the operational objectives. Results are the immediate impacts of the programme, intermediate or global impacts respond to the overall objectives¹⁵.

Figure 8 shows the relations between objectives and impacts, highlighting the relevance of the two contexts by the colours green (territorial context) and red (governance context). It is important to note that “governance context” does not mean “local governance” (e.g. local communities and municipalities) which should be categorised under “territorial context” in this case. Here “governance context” refers to the norms, rules, institutions and operations by which public support programmes intervene in a rural area from outside, i.e. from the regional, national and/or EU level.

¹⁴ EC (2002): Guidelines for the evaluation of LEADER+ programmes, European Commission, DG Agriculture, Document VI/43503/02/Rev.1

¹⁵ p 36f. of the Evaluation Guidelines.

The needs of rural areas, or (more precisely) what is perceived as their needs, are the starting point of a virtual cycle. They are specific to rural areas, therefore coloured in full green. The governance system prepares an intervention in response to these needs, based on overall objectives, in harmony with general development aims expressed at EU and Member States' level. These objectives are borne from the governance context, therefore in full red. Specific and operational objectives are formulated by specifying the overall objectives, and by translating them into activities and measures meeting the needs of rural areas. In the course of implementation, the governance-borne input stimulates local input (local finance, voluntary work etc.). Projects are put in place, constituting the direct output of the intervention. The results can be measured at the “bottom-end” of the “top-down” intervention, strongly influenced by the specificities of the rural area, but still attributable to a specific measure (therefore coloured green with a tinge of red). Finally, impacts are predominantly influenced by local effect chains and a lot of other influences from inside and outside the area. They are particular to the area and therefore coloured in green. Thus the cycle is closed.

Figure 8: **Relations between objectives and impacts in the programming cycle**

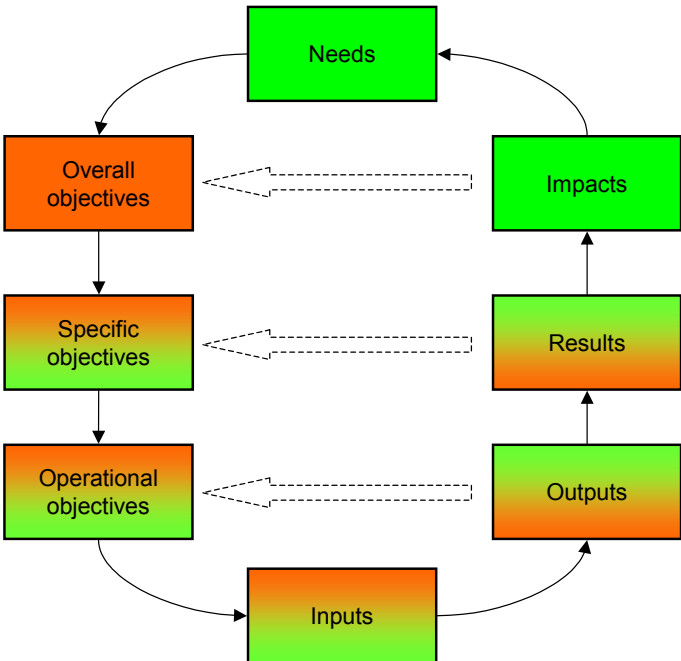
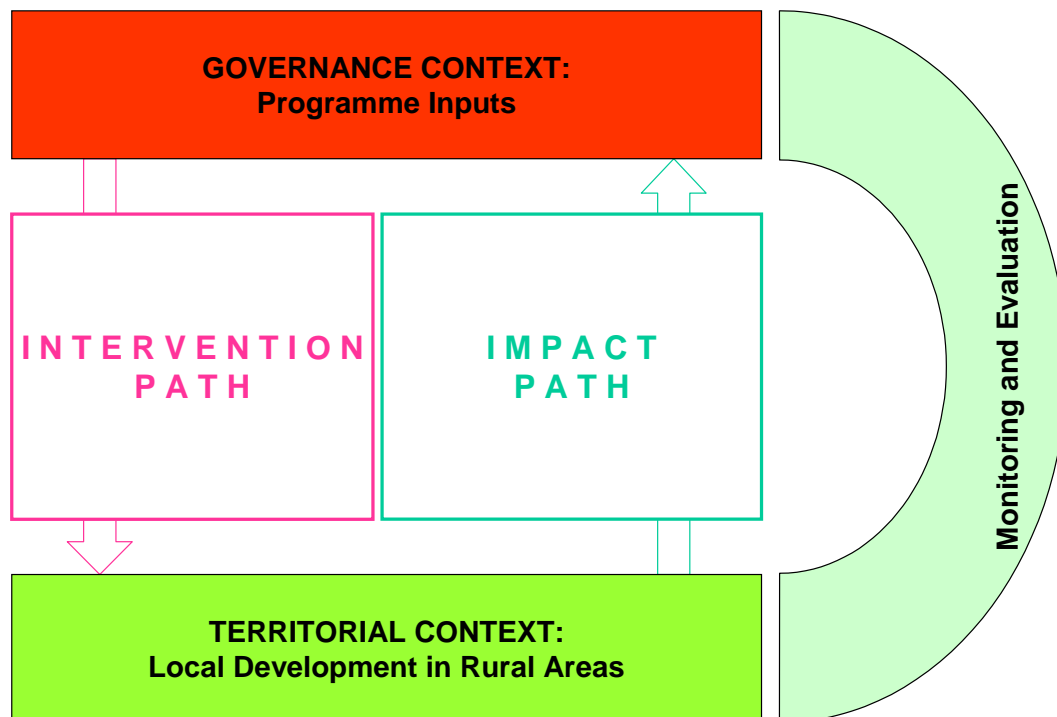


Figure 9 exhibits two counter current paths, the intervention path (stimulus) and the impact path (response), which are connected by the instruments of monitoring and evaluation in the learning cycle straddling two or more programming cycles (see Figure 2). Figure 4 shows this relationship in a horseshoe shaped design.

Figure 9: **Top down and bottom up processes connected in a learning cycle**



1.1.3 The LEADER method and its influence on collective behaviour

In addition to the classical concept of evaluation depicted above, the LEADER initiative requires a particular evaluation approach, as a great part of its supposed effectiveness lies in what is called the “LEADER method”. It can be defined as the combined application of a number of operational principles, which are epitomized as the “specific features of LEADER” in the literature¹⁶:

- desirable ways to act (area-based, bottom-up, partnership-oriented, sector-integrating),
- generalisations of desirable activities: inter-territorial and trans-national co-operation, networking,
- a regulative idea: sustainability.

The operational principles of the LEADER method provide orientations on HOW to act, rather than a vision of WHAT to achieve. This is not false modesty. To the contrary, it is based on the presumptions that

- only the change of behaviour and interaction patterns stabilises economic and social change in the long run;
- the operational principles of the LEADER method introduce alternative patterns of interaction which may be assimilated and become new individual and collective behaviours and routines;
- the possible effects of technological, organisational and other types of innovation are upgraded and consolidated by behavioural changes induced by the LEADER method.

¹⁶ Assessing the added value of the LEADER approach. Rural innovation – Dossier of the European LEADER II Observatory Nr 4 – AEIDL, June 1999.

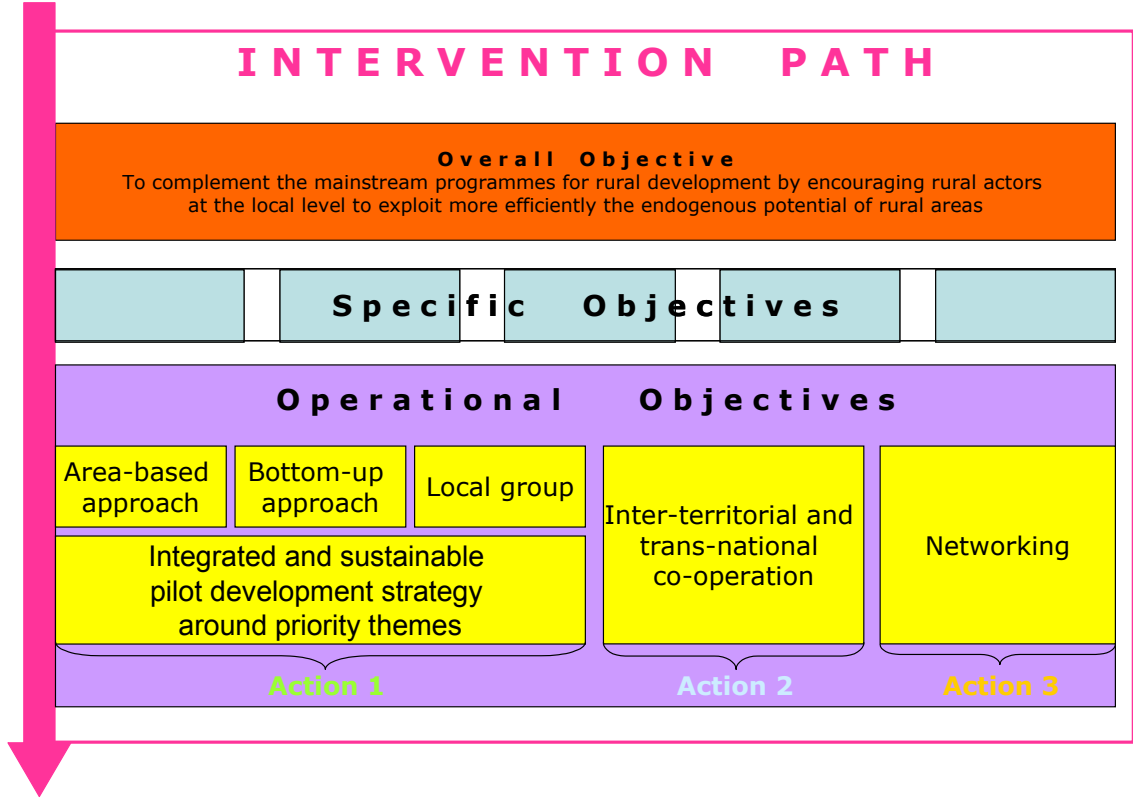
This presumption (i.e. the change of behaviour as basis for economic and social change in the long run), for which there is some empirical evidence¹⁷, is called the “added value of the LEADER method”.

This means that – apart from the programme objectives – there are behavioural objectives which should be achieved by implementing the LEADER method. These achievements require, as was said above, a specific evaluation approach. We presume that they can be assessed by exploring behavioural changes of relevant partners:

- the beneficiaries (project owners)
- the territorial partnership (LAG and related structures, e.g. regional networks)
- the implementing administration (national/regional authorities in Member States) and related intermediate structures, e.g. national networks.

Figure 10 shows the intervention path, the three actions of the LEADER programme and their relationship to the specificities of the LEADER method.

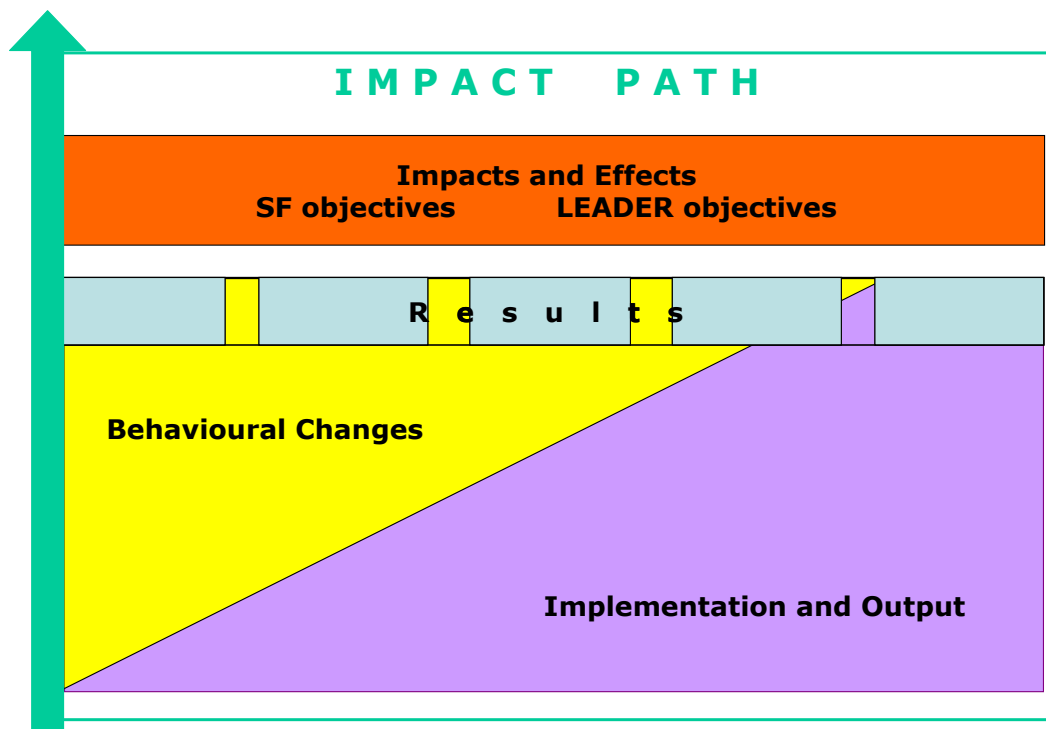
Figure 10: **The intervention path: The three actions and the specificities of LEADER**



Accordingly, the impact path shows the behavioural changes as expected components of implementation as well as of results.

¹⁷ For example see volume 3 (Case Studies) of the Final Report of the Ex-post Evaluation of the Community Initiative LEADER II (EC DG AGR I 2003).

Figure 11: **The impact path: Behavioural changes as primary results**



The observation and evaluation of interaction processes bears the advantage that this can be done from the very outset of the operations. Implementing the LEADER method means changing behaviour, and this can be also regarded as a direct output or – if the change can be deemed as a lasting one – as a result of the programme. However, the blurred distinction between implementation, output and results also bears the disadvantage that the assessment always remains somewhat hypothetical. “Objective” evidence is rare to get, but this does not mean that there is no evidence at all. The best way to assess the achievement of behavioural objectives is – again – an interactive process of dialogue-oriented evaluation or of (assisted or non-assisted) self-evaluation focusing on phenomena relating to the human, organisational, social and economic capital of the area. This will be explained in more detail in chapter II.1.3

1.1.4 The evaluation framework for the synthesis of the mid-term evaluations of LEADER+

The “common and further evaluation questions” prescribed by the terms of reference for this synthesis evaluation relate to the following elements of the programme cycle:

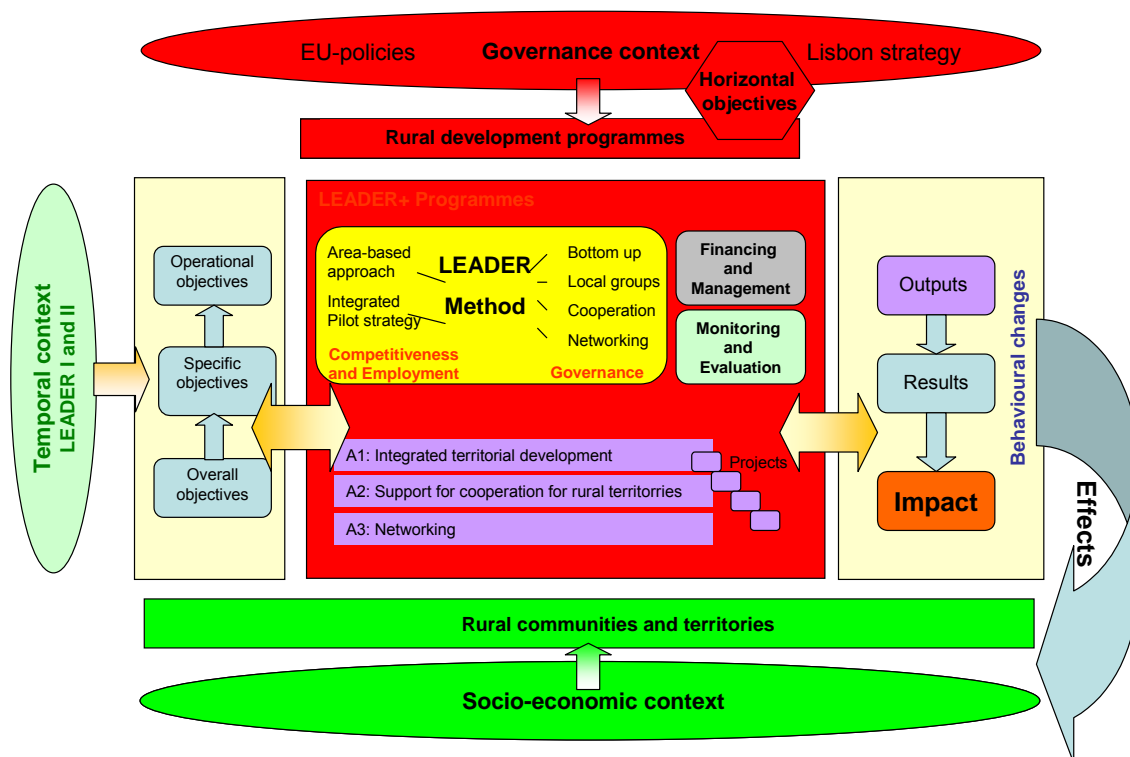
- Governance, territorial and temporal context
- Implementation and output
- Results
- Intermediate impact and global impact (effects)

Effects are influencing all categories of context. Therefore – at least – three kinds of effects can be explored:

- What are the effects of the initiative on the socio-economic and sustainable development of rural areas – to be seen in relation to the Lisbon objectives?
- What are the effects on governance?
- What learning took place at individual, group, organisational and institutional levels?

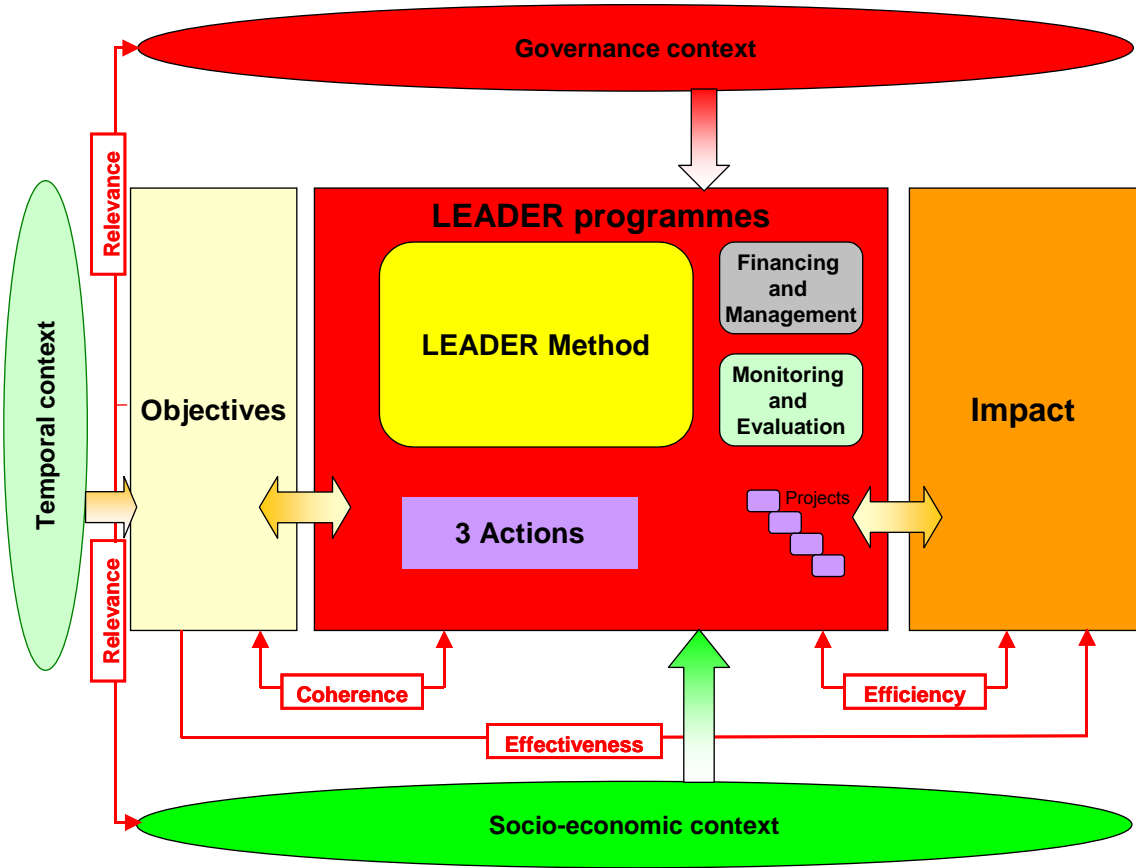
The hitherto presented conceptual elements allow to construct a comprehensive evaluation framework for this study. Building on the premises presented above, the model shown in Figure 12 serves as the basic template for analysing and synthesising the 31 evaluation questions over the 73 programmes.

Figure 12: **Evaluation framework for the synthesis of the mid-term evaluations of LEADER+**



The general evaluation questions on relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency can be shown as relations between various elements within this framework, as shown in Figure 13:

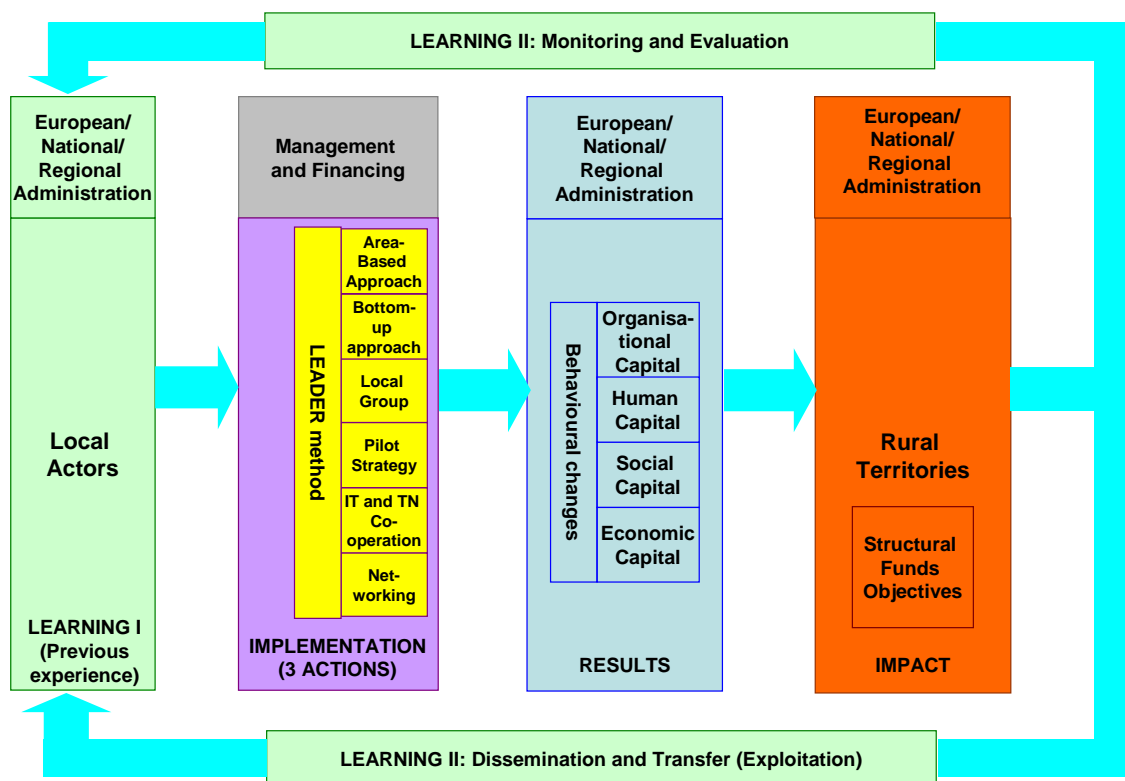
Figure 13: **Relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency in the evaluation framework**



1.2 A model for the intervention logic of LEADER – Elaboration for the three LEADER+ actions

The evaluation framework is, and has to be, isomorphic to the construct of the intervention logic governing this study. For reasons of clearness, we design the model in a less complex and linearised format, as shows Figure 14.

Figure 14: **The intervention logic of LEADER: Main stages and components**



The model consists of five stages (following a logical path from left to right):

- **Learning I (green):** The influence of previous experience
- **Implementation including output (violet/grey):** The implementation is embodied in the three actions of LEADER+. The specificities of **the LEADER method (yellow)** are integral part, something like a “genetic code” of the LEADER implementation.
- **Results (blue):** Apart from “classical” results engendered by development project we see behavioural changes as essential results of LEADER.
- **Impact (orange):** The impact concerns intermediate and long term changes in rural territories. Changes concerning the horizontal Structural Funds Objectives (environment, employment, gender, youth) are included.
- **Learning II:** a) at governance level: Monitoring and Evaluation; b) at territorial level: the exploitation of experiences and results, an important factor of sustainability.

The model also follows a vertical logic: On the top end we place governance, administration and management issues. On the bottom end, with considerable larger space, we place the socio-economic context of rural territories:

- **Learning I (green):** The top end is marked by institutional learning, whereas the bottom end is marked by collective and individual learning of local actors and network partners.
- **Implementation including output (violet/grey/yellow):** Management and Financing (grey) is distinguished from the implementation of strategies and projects (violet), and the implementation of operational principles (yellow).
- **Results (blue):** The top end concerns improvements in programme administration as a result of institutional learning processes. The bottom end concerns the intended and unintended results of development projects and behavioural changes of relevant actors.
- **Impact (orange):** The top end concerns interactions with and influences on mainstream rural and regional development programmes. The bottom end concerns the intermediate and long term impact on rural territories.
- **Learning II (green):** The top end concerns the horizontal tasks of monitoring and evaluation as the formal instruments of documentation, controlling and institutional learning. The bottom end is marked by dissemination and transfer of experiences within and between rural areas, as well as among institutional actors.

1.3 The concept of behavioural changes

In the “result” stage shown in Figure 8 we propose four different domains in which behavioural changes express themselves: organisational, human, social and economic capital.

The concept of behavioural change is derived from an actor-focused evaluation method called “outcome mapping”:

“Outcomes are defined as changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities, or actions of the people, groups, organizations with whom a program works directly. These outcomes are logically linked to a program’s activities, although they are not necessarily directly caused by them. These changes are aimed at contributing to specific aspects of human and ecological well-being by providing partners with new tools, techniques, and resources to contribute to the development process. Boundary partners are those individuals, groups, and organisations with whom the program interacts directly and with whom the program anticipates opportunities for influence. Most activities will involve multiple outcomes because they have multiple boundary partners.”¹⁸

The term *boundary* is quite illustrative as it epitomizes the “zip” function of the LEADER programme knitting together the contexts of governance and rural territories. The boundary partners in the LEADER programme can be identified, as we have previously done, as the national/regional programme administrations, the local groups (and related partnerships) and, last but not least, the project owners.

¹⁸ Earl S., Carden F., Smutylo T.: Outcome Mapping. Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs. IDRC Ottawa, 2001, p. 1.

According to pre-supposition nr. 3 (see the introduction into sub-chapter 1.4 and sub-chapter 1.4.3), the operational principles of LEADER take effect on collective behaviour. Table 6 introduces the four domains (of “capital”) in which these changes supposedly occur:

- **Organisational Capital:** The social actors are supposed to gain more ability to structure themselves for different purposes and in different ways: The local group, the carrier system for the pilot strategy, serves as a crystallisation point, from which pre-existing partnerships and networks get vital impulses, and from which new forms of co-operations spring off. Organisational capital is the result of **structuring effects**, mainly due to the operational principles “local group” and “networking”.
- **Human Capital:** The UNESCO¹⁹ defines it as a synonym for “people and their ability to be economically productive.” Education, training, and health care can help increase human capital. It is mostly referred to by the term “capacity building”, but it is also present in any action encouraging innovation and entrepreneurial risk-taking. Human capital is the result of **qualifying effects**, mainly due to the operational principles “area-based” and “bottom-up”.
- **Social Capital:** It can be defined as the degree to which a community or society collaborates and cooperates (through such mechanisms as networks, shared trust, norms and values) to achieve mutual benefits.²⁰ Social capital is an important prerequisite for organisational capital. Bottom-up participatory development processes, co-operation and networking can be seen as investments in the social capital of a territory. Social capital is the result of **integrating effects**, mainly due to the operational principles “bottom-up”, “local group”, “pilot strategy”, “co-operation” and “networking”.
- **Economic Capital:** The thematically focused integrative pilot strategies are aimed at generating new value added from hitherto dormant local potentials. It is finally the domain which helps to stabilise the achievements in the other domains in the long run. Economic capital is the result of **dynamising effects**, mainly due to the operational principles “area-based” and “pilot strategy”.

Table 6 provides some examples of the possible ways how the specific features of the LEADER principles (left column) emphasize the four types of local capital through stimulating specific types of collective behaviour.

¹⁹ Glossary of the World Bank Group (www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/modules/glossary.htm)

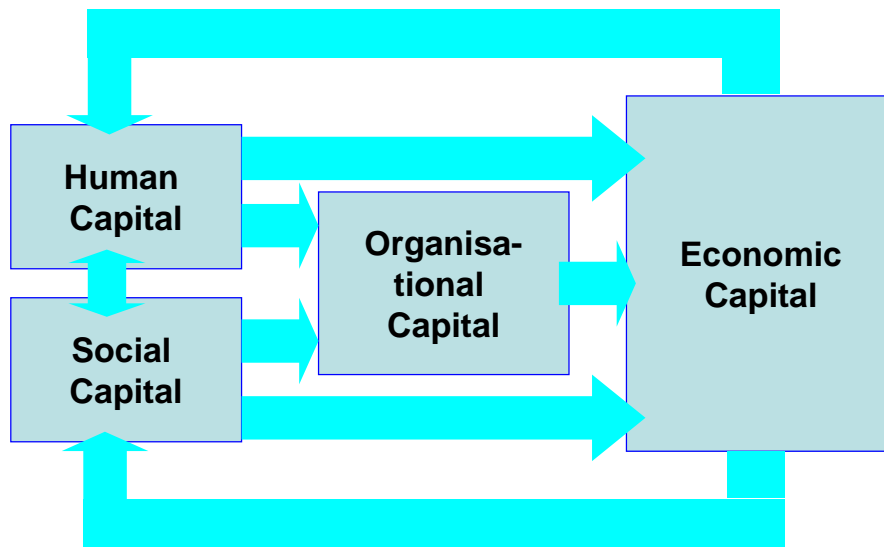
²⁰ Putnam, Robert D.: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster Publishing, 2000.

Table 6: **The LEADER principles and behavioural changes in rural areas**

<i>emphasizing</i> →	Organizational	Human	Social	Economic
	<i>Capital through</i>			
Area-based approach	Re-vitalising traditional forms of self-organisation.	Using local identity as a driving force for mind shifts in favour of development; Making local knowledge and skills explicit; Customizing technological and organizational innovation stimulated from outside;	Re-valuing the position of social groups (minorities, new rurals...) by a shift of perception of their role in local development.	Making dormant local resources visible and turn them into assets; Emphasizing the unique features and properties of the area for marketing strategies.
Bottom-up approach	Introducing new forms of self-organisation; Using local initiatives for collective learning and dissemination of innovative approaches.	Building on local capacities and skills; Enabling more people to articulate themselves; Stimulating new forms of expression and a climate of change.	Enabling more people to participate in the social and economic life; Integrate marginalized parts of the population in a forward perspective; Stimulating communication on issues of common interest; Building trust amongst stakeholders.	Foster entrepreneurial spirit by mitigating risk-taking and by encouraging innovative start-ups
Local group	Building a carrier structure for the implementation of common programmes and projects; Constituting a model for other partnerships for various purposes; Serving as a local hub for networking across boundaries.	Serving as a learning opportunity and as a demonstration field for co-operative behaviour.	Creating an arena of negotiation and consensus-building on common issues; Strengthening the local capacity of negotiation and proposition and the ability to take over responsibilities in the context of decentralised policy making and implementation.	Enabling cross-sectoral integrative strategies through forging synergetic links between otherwise unconnected subsystems (sectors, institutions, actors...).
Integrated and sustainable pilot strategies around specific themes	Concentrating forces based on the uniqueness of territorial features.	Deepening existing and acquiring new competences in specific fields of activity.	Exerting a pull effect on local actors to bundle their forces for a common purpose; Keeping young and qualified people in the area; Bringing in new partners (e.g. for research & development, co-production etc.) from abroad.	Intensifying local added value chains; Encouraging temporary and/or lasting coalitions for entrepreneurial start-ups; Building on local strengths to create landmarks of success.
Co-operation	Learning to manage complexity in inter-regional and trans-national partnerships	Serving as a learning opportunity and as a demonstration field for co-operative behaviour in inter-cultural partnerships.	Stimulating learning in specific thematic fields; Contributing to understand and to work in different cultural, political etc. contexts.	Exploring complementarities and new markets in other rural areas.
Networking	Strengthening local ties and attachment to place; Transcending traditional and hierarchical barriers; Building links and channels of knowledge sharing and transfer; Introducing new styles of local governance; Opening minds towards a global perspective.	Opening paths for peer learning and knowledge transfer.	Learning to communicate in different "languages".	Joining forces in the framework of larger economic clusters; Linking up with services and support structures at the cutting edge.

The relationships between the four domains can be depicted as shown in Figure 15:

Figure 15: **The four domains of behavioural change**



Consequently, the assessment of behavioural changes will be undertaken as an exploration of phenomena having occurred in the four domains (represented by the questions F2a, F5b, F12, C211, C212, C213 and C222, as shown in Figure 16).

1.4 The intervention logic and the evaluation questions including the identification of cardinal questions

First we prepared the ground for a more detailed design of the intervention logic along the 39 evaluation questions (for a detailed overview see Annex B), which are in reality 49, because some of them have to be treated as two questions.

The questions are structured in five categories:

- Implementation of the LEADER+ method: This category coincides with the yellow box in our intervention model;
- Questions relating to the three actions of LEADER+: This category coincides with the violet box in our intervention model;
- Questions relating to the Impact of the LEADER+ Programmes: This category coincides with the orange box in our intervention model;
- Questions relating to the financing and management of the programmes: This category coincides with the grey box in our intervention model.
- Questions relating to the Monitoring and Evaluation of the programmes: This category *partly* coincides with the green box in our intervention model.

This process is divided into 3 steps:

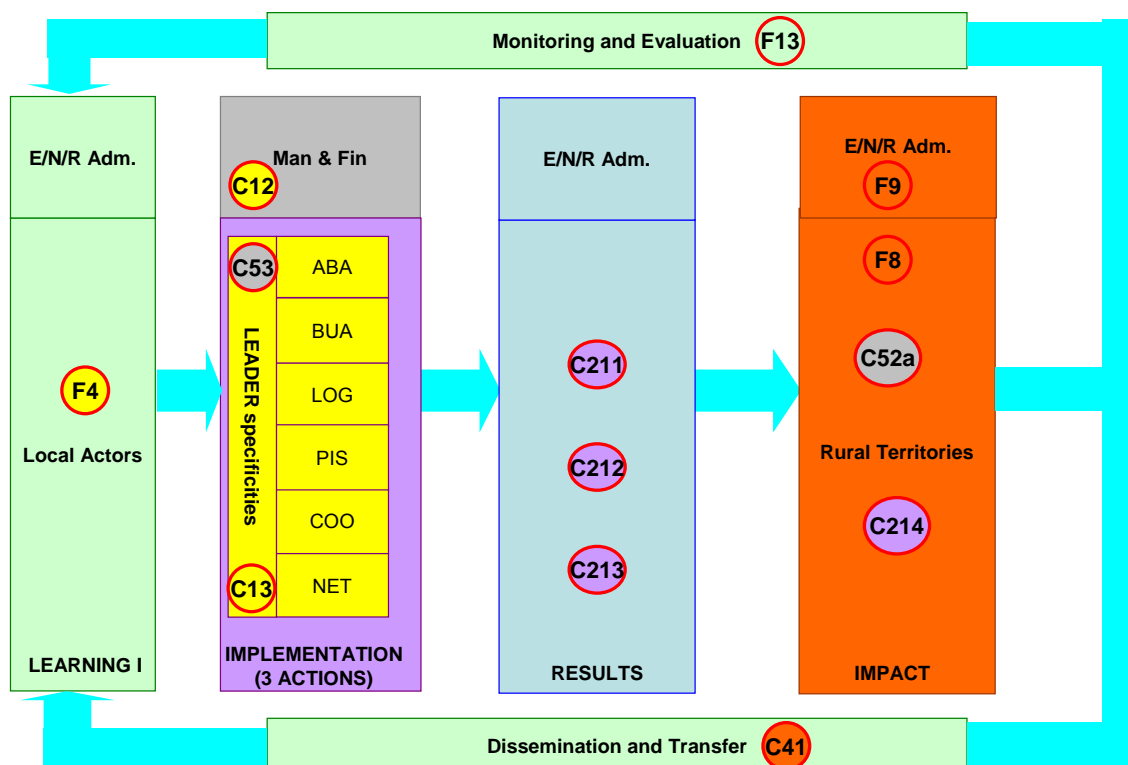
- Identifying relationships between the questions of each of the five categories;
- modelling the relationships between all the 49 questions against the background of the intervention logic;
- identifying cardinal questions allowing key conclusions on the different components of the model of the intervention logic and constructing a set of related key hypotheses for the cardinal questions.

As a result we arrived at thirteen cardinal questions related to the intervention logic.

1.4.1 Identifying cardinal questions allowing key conclusions on the different components of the model of the intervention logic and constructing a set of related key hypotheses for the cardinal questions

Exploring the relationships between the questions and the scope of content which is addressed by the questions, some of them can be identified as more comprehensive than others. In search for a balanced representation of the different components of the model of the intervention logic, we picked a set of 13 questions (slightly more than 1/4) as “cardinal questions” allowing key conclusions on the different components. They are shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16: **Thirteen cardinal questions related to the intervention logic**

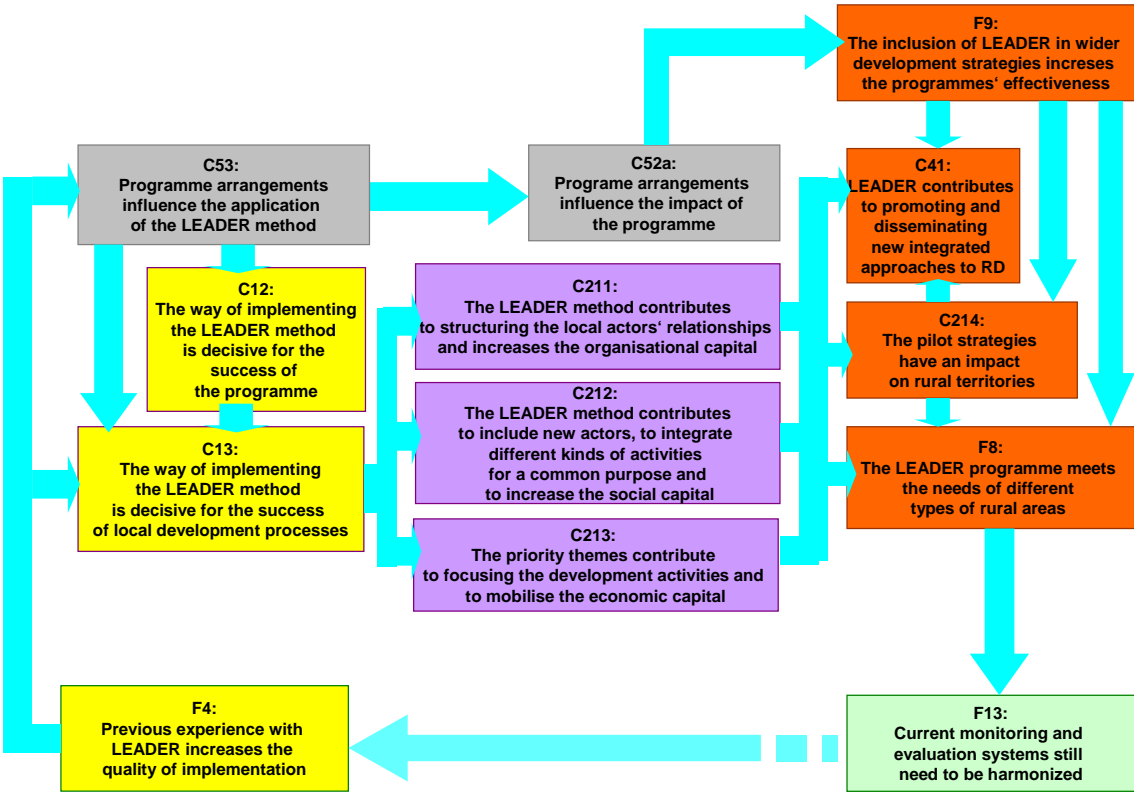


The cardinal questions relate to the components of the intervention model in the following way:

- **F4** allows access to the temporal context: Individual, collective and institutional learning as an influence factor on the quality of programme implementation.
- **C12** explores the extent to which the LEADER method has been respected by the programme administrations, apart from the selection of LAGs (C11).
- **C13** explores the extent to which the local groups and relevant local actors have respected the LEADER method in their activities.
- **C53** explores the influence of administrative arrangements and processes on the extent to which the LEADER method has been implemented.
- **C211** addresses possible behavioural changes in the domain of organisational and human capital, mainly due to the operational principles “local group”, “bottom-up” and “networking”.
- **C212** addresses possible behavioural changes in the domain of social capital, mainly due to the operational principles “area-based”, “bottom-up” and “pilot strategy”.
- **C213** addresses possible behavioural changes in the domain of social and economic capital, mainly due to the operational principles “area-based”, “local group” and “pilot strategy”.
- **C214** addresses the territorial impact of the implemented pilot strategies.
- **C52a** explores the influence of the administrative arrangements and processes on the territorial impact.
- **F8** is a comprehensive assessment of the programme content concerning its relevance to the needs of rural areas.
- **F9** explores the degree to which LEADER has been integrated in mainstream rural policy in the different Member States and the specific effects this integration may have triggered.
- **C41** explores the extent to which LEADER has contributed to collective learning processes through dissemination and transfer, notably due to the operational principles “pilot strategy”, “inter-territorial co-operation” and “networking”.
- **F13** assesses the degree of harmonisation and consistency of the different systems of monitoring and evaluation.

Finally we make explicit which underlying hypotheses are addressed by the cardinal questions. As Figure 17 shows, these hypotheses do not only cover all the components of the model of the intervention logic, they also show a requisite consistency in relation to each other.

Figure 17: The chain of hypotheses addressed by the cardinal questions



III. EVALUATION QUESTIONS

1. Sources of information and tools

1.1 Information sources

In order to meet the purpose of this study – i.e. to summarize and analyse past and present experiences with regard to the implementation and results of LEADER+ programmes for Rural Development – the first task after structuring the programme and the evaluation has been to collect possible information sources.

The ultimate source of information for this synthesis has been the Mid-Term Evaluation Reports (MTE reports) which refer to the reference period 2000 – 2003. Moreover the Guidelines for the Evaluation of LEADER+ programmes (EC document VI/43503/02-Rev.1) sought to ensure that a common standard of quality for the evaluations should have been obtained and therefore a certain level of aggregation over all LEADER+ programmes should be possible. The MTE reports of all 73 LEADER+ programmes have been provided by the Commission.

However a first assessment of the MTE reports showed that within the reference period LEADER+ activities in the single programmes started rather sluggishly and unevenly, as already pointed out in the evaluation terms of reference: *“it is expected that a number of evaluation reports at national/regional level did not address all Common Evaluation Questions or did not address them in detail. Different indicators and judgement criteria for the Common Evaluation Questions have been used in different contexts, and results have not been susceptible to an easy synthesis. Moreover, for all Member States the adoption of LEADER+ programmes happened only in the course of the years 2001 (55 programmes) and 2002 (17 programmes), while LAGs in many programmes were only selected in 2002 or 2003. Therefore, in a number of programmes there were few implemented activities and few outputs or results that the mid-term evaluations could report on. Consequently, a number of Common Evaluation Questions relating to results and impacts may not have been answered in most national/regional reports.”* (Terms of Reference of the LEADER+MTE-Synthesis-Evaluation) Therefore it became soon enough apparent that the use of the MTE reports as single source of information will not lead to satisfying results.

In this respect the Commission insisted on the need to collect additional information at all levels of programme implementation to fill the gaps: *“This synthesis must be based on information contained in the national/regional reports, including qualitative assessments from these reports, or on additional information collected at all levels of programme implementation, e.g. from stakeholders, beneficiaries, managing authorities, and/or directly from the authors of the national/regional mid-term evaluation reports”* (Terms of Reference of the LEADER+MTE-Synthesis-Evaluation). The project team tried to collect those possible information sources in two ways:

- Information sources to be listed by the country experts dealing with the analysis of the single MTE reports and thus offering a good insight in the country specific information sources available.
- Information sources named by the EU desk officers for the specific countries as collected in the course of a fact finding mission to DG Agriculture early this year.

According to these groups the major additional sources of information were the MTE updates for all the LEADER+ programmes. These updates were made available by the Commission for all of the programmes and have drawn a richer picture of the activities in the single programmes as more time has been elapsing since the kick offs of the single programmes. However it has to be taken into

consideration that this information often covers a period (mostly 2000 – 2004) which is longer than the reference period, and that therefore it was not always possible to extrapolate the specific information related to the 2000 – 2003 reference period..

A second source of information has been the representatives and administrative staff of LEADER+ in the single countries (on LAG level as well as the national contact points and network units), the LEADER+ observatory and DG Agriculture. Finally the authors of the MTE reports and the MTE updates have also been consulted in some cases.

The EU desk officers listed pretty much the same sources of information as relevant.

This information was gathered by using the three tools described above. The next two steps in order to complete the synthesis of LEADER+ programme results have been

- Analysing
- Judging

The following chapter presents the results of these analytical steps per Evaluation Question. Basically the following information will be provided for each Question:

- Short answer to the Evaluation Question
- Interpretation and comprehension of the key terms of the evaluation question
- Indication of the judgement criteria allowing to answer the question
- Validity of the quantitative and qualitative information used
- Description of the evaluation methods used and an indication of their limitations
- Detailed description of the reasoning followed in the analysis, indicating in particular the underlying hypotheses and validity limits.

In order to keep this section readable, the project team has decided to shift some general information from the single answer of the Evaluation Question to the introduction of this chapter, which also includes a short paragraph on the Evaluation methods and the validity/reliability and fulfilment of the evaluation questions and judgement criteria used. The definitions of key terms used in the evaluation questions and judgement criteria are presented in the form of a glossary (Annex A).

The answers to each of the evaluation questions are then presented and structured in the following way:

- Brief overall answer and scope of the question
- specific answers ordered by judgement criteria
- conclusions and recommendations
- Key terms (if any are deemed to be relevant)

N.b.: It has to be noted that these answers to the evaluation questions are the amalgamated results of the elaboration of hard facts collected through the methodological tools described in chapter II, and their judgement and interpretations by the authors of this. When possible, the name of the programmes where the empirical findings and best practice examples referred to in the answers stems from are explicitly mentioned. If no programme is mentioned, the information referred to in the text represents either a general

fact deriving from several programmes, or the judgement/analysis result of the author based upon their expertise and overall knowledge of all the information sources used within this study

2. Evaluation Methods and Quantitative Findings on the Evaluation Questions

The following chapter contains information deriving from **Tool 2** (Questionnaire), with precise indications of the **degree of fulfilment** for each evaluation question and the **reliability of judgement** for each criterion.

Reliability of judgement

This rating expresses the country expert's own estimation of the extent to which the respective information is reality-proof. The reliability of judgement relates to each criterion within each evaluation question. These ratings allow assessing, across all countries, the reliability of information according to each question.

Title	Explanation
Code	numbered Criterion according to ToR
Reliability in %	average reliability over of all 73 LEADER+ programmes (excluding those with n.a.)
Scoring Class	classifies the average reliability in %: < 50 low 50-60 modest 60-70 medium 70-80 high > 80 very high
min	lowest value in country expert's estimation of reliability of judgement
max	highest value in country expert's estimation of reliability of judgement
n.a.	% of programmes without responses (of 73 programmes in total)
<i>Average over all reliability</i>	<i>gives the average values calculated over all criteria</i>

The reliability of judgement criteria showed a very heterogeneous picture over all programmes while only one judgement criterion showed a very high reliability scoring (i.e. new areas have been included in the programme as compared to the previous programming period). There are several judgement criteria showing rather low reliability scores (mostly referring to evaluation questions dealing with cooperation/networking or the impact of the LEADER programmes). Overall the average reliability of all criteria has been of 66,5%, which corresponds to a medium to modest performance. There is no clear cut pattern as for which group of criteria seems to show more reliability than others. If any regularity could be identified then the judgement criteria within the evaluation questions of theme 2 (Action Specific Questions), and theme 3 (Questions on the Impact of LEADER+) seemed to show a lower performance in terms of reliability compared to the rest of the evaluation questions (and their respective judgement criteria).

What seems quite striking is the huge range of judgement provided by the national experts to the single judgement criterion. It ranges from a non response rate of 5% for the first two evaluation criteria (dealing with the extent to which the specifics of the LEADER+ method have been taken into account when selecting the LAGs – Evaluation Question C11) up to rate of 75% of non answers to the question dealing with the predominant type of cooperation carried out within the programme (evaluation question F5a).

Degree of fulfilment

Again, this rating expresses the country expert's own estimation of the extent to which the achievements of expected results have attained the optimum level as formulated in the aims, objectives, quality requirements etc. of the single LEADER programmes. The degree of fulfilment integrates two components:

- The country expert's own opinion on the extent to which the benefits intended by the programme have been or are going to be created, according to the available information.
- The overall estimation of the reliability of the available information.

The degree of fulfilment **relates to each evaluation question** (summing up its criteria).

Title	Explanation
Code	numbered Evaluation question according to ToR
Fulfilment in %	average degree of fulfilment over of all 73 LEADER+ programmes (excluding those with n.a.)
Scoring Class	classifies the average degree of fulfilment in %: < 40 low 40-50 modest 50-65 medium 65-75 high > 75 very high
min	lowest value in country expert's estimation of degree of fulfilment
max	highest value in country expert's estimation of degree of fulfilment
n.a.	% of programmes without responses (of 73 programmes in total)
<i>Average over all fulfilment</i>	<i>the average values of fulfilment calculated over all evaluation questions</i>

As specified, the degree of fulfilment has been measured on the level of the single evaluation question and again the variation of scoring is rather high. However, the amount of evaluation questions with a very high fulfilment score are significantly higher than the amount of highly scored reliability judgement criteria. The highest scoring in terms of fulfilment has been achieved for evaluation question C1.1 (dealing with the extent to which the specifics of the LEADER+ method have been taken into account when selecting the LAGs).

Overall the evaluation questions for theme 1 (implementation of the LEADER+ method) seemed to show the best performance in terms of fulfilment. This does not come as a surprise as the phase of implementation was generally completed for almost all LEADER Programmes at a time of the Mid-Term-Evaluation. For the same reason, questions dealing with the actions and the impact of the programme showed the lowest fulfilment rates. This general trend is also reflected in the degree of scoring attributed by the single country experts, showing that generally impact and effect related evaluation questions were judged corresponding to a comparable low level of fulfilment (down to 18% in the case of evaluation question C5.2 dealing with arrangements for management and financing set-up by the authorities, the administrations and the local partners).

The two ratings (reliability of judgement and degree of fulfilment) represent the only data set which can be raised across all countries and which allows a total coverage of the 73 programmes. Consequently, even if there is almost no information available on a certain evaluation question, the country expert may have some knowledge on this issue.

These ratings allowed creating a set of numeric values, which were aggregated and statistically processed across all countries. The processing produced patterns which were further examined in depth by looking at the content behind these patterns.

Evaluation Methods used

Another information which has been collected on the level of evaluation questions has been the method of evaluation used to answer each specific question. The following evaluation methods were mentioned in general:

- Monitoring
- Interview
- Focus Group
- Case Study
- Other (e.g. reports to the Monitoring Committee, programme documentation, LAGs self-evaluation and activity reports)

There is a rather remarkable dominance of the two evaluation methods monitoring and interviews which are by far the most frequently used ways to come up with information to answer the single evaluation questions. Only some times (e.g. for the evaluation questions on theme 1 – implementation of the LEADER method) the other evaluation methods – like programme documentation, LAGs self-evaluation and activity reports showed a significant use.

3. Detailed Answers to the Evaluation Questions

3.1 Responses to Theme 1: Implementation of the LEADER+ method

C11 To what extent have the specificities of the LEADER+ method been taken into account in selection of the LAGs?

The selection of the LAGs takes place at the beginning of the programme and has a major impact on the quality of the implementation of the LEADER programme. The delivery of the method and the impacts of the realised investments are very dependent on this choice. A good selection system is therefore an important key for the success of LEADER+ at local level.

Some key issues are underlined in the evaluations with reference to the pre-selection period: the way the programme has been developed (involving stakeholders and potential beneficiaries or not) and the information and technical assistance provided to potential beneficiaries are important factors influencing the delivery of the LEADER approach.

The criteria on the area-based approach, the bottom-up approach and the pilot strategy are in general taken into account for the selection of the LAG. Criteria going beyond the LEADER specific features were often applied (*Bavaria, Aragon, Castilla-Leon, Cantabria, Greece, England, ...*), assessing more classical questions such as management capacity or financial plans. The different features do not always have the same weight in the selection, and a system of scoring was sometimes in place, to give more importance to the area-based and bottom-up approach and less to innovation and focused strategies (*Cataluna, The Netherlands East and North*).

In the context of LEADER it is important to select the best programmes in order to fulfil the „laboratory“ function of the programme, and to keep a reasonable level of concentration of the (limited) financial means. However, the competition between the LAG is not always evident (all areas applying received a share of the budget in many regions). *Andalucia* provides an interesting example for the integrative and support function of LEADER in the regions: LEADER-like structures (PRODER) are covering most of the rural areas of the region. The same areas and groups were eligible for LEADER which concentrated on the most innovative actions. Only 22 areas amongst the 50 PRODER benefited also from LEADER. The development strategies of the LAGs had to demonstrate that they can lead to sustainable development and that the actions planned are new in comparison with previous practice in this area. Thus LEADER supported and improved the role of existing rural development programmes by emphasising and encouraging the specific features of sustainable development and innovation in the areas.

The selection does not need to distribute at once the complete budget available. Two selection phases are sometimes organised (*France, Wallonia, ...*) in order to give the less organised areas a chance to prepare a good application in a bottom-up fashion (this takes time). In *France*, the LAGs were given a chance to access more funding at mid-term, on the basis of an evaluation of the work undertaken so far.

Judgement criteria

According to the official literature, the specific features in the LEADER+ method are: the area-based and bottom-up approaches, the pilot nature of the strategy, the local partnership, the networking and the cooperation. The judgement criteria are focusing on the three first features of the LEADER approach, since the others can only be assessed when the LAGs are in place and not at the selection

stage covered by this question. The original judgement criteria of the EC guidelines have therefore been revised as follows:

Has the area-based approach been translated into selection criteria and has it been consequently adopted?

This is a fundamental building block of the LEADER approach: all actions funded by the LAG will be undertaken on a specific area, which has been defined very precisely at the beginning. The area does not necessarily correspond to classical administrative boundaries, but its definition should be based on a sense of belonging of the local population. The area should not be too large in order to preserve the “local” dimension of LEADER, but it should present a certain level of critical mass. For the first time, LEADER areas could be located outside the “objective” areas of the Structural Funds. This introduced the possibility to include a wider typology of areas. Urban areas and towns were in principle excluded from the eligible areas, in view of concentrating the (limited) resources on the rural areas. This created some difficulties in areas where the urban and the rural fabrics are strongly interwoven.

Few problems were reported with the application of this principle. In some regions, the managing authorities restricted the areas that could apply (“Comunita Montana” were excluded in *Basilicata*, whilst they are in charge of other local development procedures), imposed a maximum of one LAG per Province (*Flanders*) or for the whole Region (*Pais Vasco, Trento*). In *The Netherlands (South and West)*, no area answered the call for proposals and the Provincial authorities had to take over the organisation of the LAGs. In *Denmark*, the authorities wanted to limit the number of LAGs to 10, but this had to be extended to 12 since the most deprived areas (islands) would have been excluded.

Has the bottom-up approach been translated into selection criteria and has it been consequently adopted?

The second criterion explores the extent to which the local population and stakeholders have been associated to the key choices made for the strategy. LEADER is different in this respect to more traditional policies which are defined in a top-down fashion and do not take into account the local needs.

In general, this criterion seems to have been taken into account. Potential beneficiaries have in some cases developed their strategies via a participatory approach: self-organisation among rural areas has been necessary for the delimitation of the LEADER areas and the elaboration of the local development strategy (*Extremadura, Austria*). In some cases however, some features have not been taken into account. In *Portugal*, the selection criteria contained requirements concerning territory, partnership and strategy of rural development, but there was no reference to feeling of identity, bottom-up approach, innovation of the strategy, cooperation or networking.

Has the requirement for a pilot strategy based on an integrative topic been translated into selection criteria and has it been consequently adopted?

The local programme should have defined (in a bottom-up fashion) a strategy presented in the application for funding. The selection procedure should assess the quality of this strategy, its fit with the local conditions, the link between the ambitions and the financial means available, the capacity of the applicant to raise the necessary co-funding, etc. In particular, the choice of a priority theme on the list (in some case expanded by the managing authorities) should reflect the main direction of the strategy.

The presence of a pilot strategy in the application was apparently always assessed at the selection stage. The way the choice of an integrative topic has been operated is not often assessed in the evaluations, although the use of participatory methods is sometimes put forward.

Summary and Outlook

In general, the area-based and the bottom-up approach, as well as the requirements for the local partnership have been taken into account in the selection of LAG, although there was not a real competition in many cases.

The selection of the LAG is the first step of programme implementation after the approval of the (regional/national) programme. The methods used to assess the **quality of the local programmes** submitted for funding (quality of the local consultation process, respect of minority point of views, use of participatory approaches, ...) are often not documented in the programmes nor the evaluations and can not be evaluated. The LEADER+ programme is supposed to have a "laboratory" function through which the authorities in charge of rural development (at local, regional, national and European level) can experiment new approaches and new ideas. If LEADER has to fulfil this function, it is very important that the best local projects are selected.

Key issues related to the selection procedures of the LAGs include the composition of the selection committee, the set of criteria utilised and the scoring system put into place, the existing capacity of applicants, the information on LEADER made available and the existence of some restrictions on the eligible areas or type of beneficiaries.

Recommendation: The LEADER regional/national programmes should include a detailed description of the methods (information campaign, selection criteria, utilisation of independent experts, etc.) that will be used for selecting the LAG. This description must highlight the way in which the competition between areas is going to be enforced. The effective application of these methods should be assessed by the Monitoring Committee after the completion of the selection process.

Key terms

- Area-based approach
- Bottom-up approach
- Pilot nature of the strategy

C12 In which way have the specificities of the LEADER+ method been applied in other phases of programme implementation?

The implementation of the LEADER features makes the difference to other rural development programmes. These operational principles are more effective if they are applied together, and a successful programme usually shows a large extent of implementation of most of the LEADER features.

The area-based and bottom-up approaches as well as the local partnership were in general well implemented features, although there are some discussions on the way the local partnership is managed and on its level of independence towards the programming authorities. The implementation of the pilot strategy is met with mixed results: the use of the priority theme is usually well received, but (like in LEADER II) the innovative dimension of the actions remains difficult to guarantee. The networking is considered as useful, although it came in often very late. Cooperation is an area where little action has taken place.

The evaluative question addresses a fundamental issue in the LEADER programme: the way the specific features of the initiative are implemented in the running of the LAGs. This is largely influenced

by the administrative set-up, but it is also largely up to the LAGs to actively enforce the LEADER principles.

The judgement criteria look at each of the six specific features in turn. Yet, it must be kept in mind that these are **acting together** (see the model for the intervention logic). The definition of the area will influence the critical mass of projects available locally. The bottom-up approach will be implemented differently according to the type of local partnership in place. The innovative dimension of the pilot strategy will be stimulated by the administrative set-up and the former experience with local development. The uptake of cooperation activities will be influenced by the administrative organisation and by the stage of progress of the local project. Networking will focus on different aspects according to the advancement of the strategy.

Judgement criteria

The judgement criteria cover all 6 features, as they are all relevant in the phase of the running of the LAGs, even if the “Area-based approach” has already been largely implemented at an early stage. The original judgement criteria of the EC guidelines have therefore been developed as follows:

Have the programme authorities promoted the area-based approach at all stages of the implementation of the programme (decision-making, assistance, dissemination of information, evaluation...)?

The area-based approach has been established at the selection stage and is nearly never modified in the running of the programme. It is too early to assess the impact of territorial design on the local project (FEQ 2 should provide some insight in this question).

The area-based approach was mostly promoted at the selection of the LAGs stage. Little further comments were made on this issue as regards the implementation phase.

Have the programme authorities promoted the bottom-up approach at all stages of the implementation of the programme (decision-making, assistance, dissemination of information, evaluation...)?

The bottom-up approach can be seen at two levels:

- *Between the administration and the LAGs*, since the definition of the implementation rules can be negotiated up to a certain extent between these two bodies. In *England*, the managing authority issued guidelines at the start of the programme; these guidelines are updated with the help of discussions held with LAGs on a regular basis.
- *Between the LAG and the local population*: a key question is the amount of time that the technical team has to undertake “animation” activities and not only administrative tasks. In *Extremadura*, the Regional Government feels that it can only create the framework for participation but whether it actually happens depends on the groups. Another key issue is the level of information directed by the LAGs towards the local population. This issue was discussed largely in the Spanish evaluations (*Extremadura, Madrid, Asturias, Castilla-Leon, La Rioja,..*) and less in the other Member States. In *Lombardia*, a collaborative approach was systematically enforced by the LAGs, and many collaborations are on-going, with the objective to enforce the complementarity among operators (tourist operators, local authorities, voluntary associations and civil defence in a project) or between areas (for example between 3 Mountain Communities for the definition of the interventions).

A key issue is the availability of human resources: if the time of the technical team is mostly taken up by administrative tasks, there are not enough resources left for the local animation work.

Have the programme authorities promoted the partnership approach at all stages of the implementation of the programme (decision-making, assistance, dissemination of information, evaluation...)?

The local partnership is clearly perceived as a key innovation of the LEADER programme in most Member States. The mixing of private and public partners in a body empowered with the capacity to select local projects for funding is in most cases very new for the areas where LEADER is active. Despite the positive opinion of the stakeholders on this feature, it would be important to assess its efficiency in comparison with areas where this approach is not implemented.

The efficiency of the approach is very much depending on the management model chosen at programme level (global grant or not, access to co-funding, level of controls, etc.): the allocation of a global grant in particular seems the most advanced level of devolution, but it raises many questions related to control and accountability and generates difficulties in accessing co-funding. Two extremes are the application of a global grant as in *France* (the LAG is free to choose the projects that it wants to support without interference from any other decision-making level) and the model chosen in *Wallonia*, where each measure has to be approved by the relevant administration at the regional level. The **influence of the administrations** in the decisions made by the LAGs is sometimes considered as very high (*Sachsen-Anhalt, Niedersachsen, The Netherlands* (all regions), *Cantabria,...*).

The “50% of private partners” rule seems always formally enforced, but can be biased by power relations within the partnership. Further, the composition of the partnership is not always the same as the actual participation in decision-making meetings (*England*). In *France*, a “double quota” system is in place to enforce the 50% rule all along the life of the Initiative.

The utilisation of transparent criteria for the selection of the supported actions is a good practice that gives credibility to the role of the local partnership. They can be transparent and established by the LAG (*Flanders*) or largely influenced by the programme authority (*Northern Ireland*).

Has the programme authority promoted the requirement for a pilot strategy based on an integrative topic at all stages of the implementation of the programme (decision-making, assistance, dissemination of information, evaluation...)?

The pilot strategy is composed of several elements, which should lead the choice of actions supported by the LAGs. The innovative dimension is one of these, but seems to have been in some cases not as prominent as in LEADER II, where it was explicitly promoted at European level. The transferability of the actions is a second component, following the definition provided by the LEADER+ regulation. However, there is very little mention of it in the material used in this meta-evaluation. The utilisation of a “priority theme” to help focus the strategy is a third component, new in the framework of LEADER+. It is largely implemented (maybe even too rigidly) and is in general well perceived by the LAGs and the administrations. The last component is the integrative nature of the strategy, which is supposed to prevent the spreading of limited resources over many unrelated projects and seems to have been understood rather well.

The requirement for a pilot strategy does not seem to have brought in as much innovation as could be expected, although it is still a bit early in 2006 to elaborate a judgement on this question. The application of the innovation criteria is still an area of difficulties (*Wallonia, Bavaria, Portugal, Pais Vasco*). The role played by the administrations and the power of co-funding bodies have sometimes acted as filters leaving out some innovative ideas when these do not fit well with their traditional administrative roles (*Wallonia*). However, in *Pais Vasco*, it is the administration that forced the LAG to select innovative (and risky) projects. In *Portugal*, the focus was on improving the governance of rural areas, an objective competing for funding with the search for innovation: with too limited resources, LEADER+ can not pursue both objectives at the same time.

Has support for international and trans-territorial co-operation been taken into account of in the services (terms of reference) of the networking unit and in support activities from the programme administration?

There is not much to say on the cooperation possibility offered to the LAGs since little activity is noticeable in this field. The cooperation measure seems in general late in nearly all Member States and many difficulties are reported. The LAGs are more advanced when the rate of implementation of the local project (Action 1) is satisfactory (*Sweden, Finland*). When it is not the case, the LAGs and the administrations have given priority to the commitment of Action 1 funding to local project, in order to avoid the threat of the n+2 rule.

Has the networking unit been promoted at programme level

Networking is an important feature of LEADER since the first phase of the Initiative. It started late in most Member States and at European level. In general, networking is seen by the LAGs as very important (*Wallonia, Pais Vasco, Madrid, Baleares, Andalucia*), but the activities proposed are competing for the time of the technical teams with the local projects and cooperation projects. This might lower the uptake of networking opportunities by the LAGs, especially if these are concentrated on the last years of the implementation of the Initiative.

Despite the late start, networking is active everywhere in 2005-2006 (it was nearly never the case in 2003). In several countries, informal networks of LAGs are also operating, providing complementary services (lobbying, representation, ..) to those of the official network.

The efficiency of the networking arrangements are depending on the solution adopted by the Member State: specific programme at national level and promotion of regional networking (*Spain, France*), national networking only (*Italy, Germany*) or regional networking with a loose national coordination (*Belgium*).

Summary and Outlook

The LEADER approach is in general highly appreciated by its participants on the regional and national level and considered as an opportunity for rural areas. Yet, it raises some problems and difficulties as it does not correspond to the more traditional stream of policies: It requires the involvement of the local population, seeks to utilise transparent and effective selection procedures for local projects, targets specific beneficiaries, sets the stakes for pilot strategies around priority themes focusing on multisectoral integration and innovation, enacted by a local partnership of people, who might never have worked together before. This list of requirements might explain that the features can not be implemented in a mechanical way, at least not sustainably. To operationalise the LEADER approach requires a certain "spirit" shared by key stakeholders. This is not an esoteric explanation. It relates to learning: incremental learning takes place, if somebody acquires skills and knowledge through appropriate experiences and trainings. This does not require a change in attitudes or intrinsic motivational factors. But learning may also happen in qualitative leaps, for instance if somebody has an experience which brings him or her in connection to his or her own values. This kind of learning may happen through a visit to a place, where something that this person always wanted to realise has been actually realised. It may happen through the interaction within a group whose members discover that they have a common purpose, and that together they are strong enough to make it true. This is also not romanticism. Commitment is an ability which can be learned, certainly from good examples (role models). The history of transfer of know-how between LEADER areas is mainly a history of modelling perspectives, attitudes and approaches from one person to another.

In practice our findings have shown that especially the bottom-up approach and the partnership approach, if applied successfully, accounted for this learning experience the most. Still there have not

been many concrete findings in the MTE reports which specifically refer to this growing of the “LEADER spirit”, but these conclusions are derived from reading between the lines of the focus groups’ results (Tool 3).

Recommendations

LAGs should be granted a high level of financial and administrative autonomy provided they ensure (apart from their obligation in terms of balanced representation of interests in their decision making bodies and work groups and participative approach at local level)

- the application of clear and transparent criteria for the selection of projects and
- an explicit strategy with a corresponding budget line dedicated to the mobilisation and animation of local actors in the local action plan

The implementation of the “50% non-public partners” rule should be monitored all along the life cycle of the local partnership. Examples of good practice in this respect, such as the tripartite approach as practiced in Finland and Sweden²¹, should be disseminated.

It is good to prescribe a multisectoral and innovative strategy, and it would be still better to provide early advisory support already to potential LAGs in preparing and setting up such strategies.

As the primary conveyor of learning and of the “LEADER spirit”, networking should get started as soon as possible at both European and regional/national level. A deadline must be established so that national and European authorities are obliged to implement this feature in a reasonable delay. The existing deadline for the 2007-2013 generation of programmes (31/12/2008) seems by far too distant from the start of the programming period.

Cooperation projects definitely need more time to incubate than “ordinary” projects. They should be exempted from the n+2 rule.

Key terms

- The partnership approach
- Cooperation between rural areas
- Networking

C13 To what extent and in which manner have the specificities of the LEADER+ method been taken into account for the realisation of the operational activities on the LAGs (from elaboration to implementation)?

The information presented here should be seen as complementing the information presented in C11 and C12, with a focus towards the single operational actions carried out within each programme (the LAG in LEADER+).

Two specific questions are addressed in this section: the strategies utilised to enforce an equality of opportunities between all sectors of the society and the utilisation of the priority topic to focus the strategy.

²¹ A tripartite partnership is composed of 1/3 public, 1/3 private and 1/3 civic sector, sometimes with rotating memberships. A faster turnover in the membership of the LAG boards should be an objective in the next programme period. The ministry is particularly insistent on third-sector representation on these boards; if there is no tripartite structure, there will be no funding.

Judgement criteria

The judgement criteria cover two aspects of the implementation of the LEADER+ method at the local level: the decision-making process (who decides on the actions selected, how is it done?) and the integration of the strategy around a priority topic. These two factors are pretty much under the control of the LAGs (little external influence from the administration can be noted here) and play a key role for the success of the initiative.

Is inclusion of new actors and participative decision-making promoted in LAGs?

The equality of opportunities at the local level depends on a number of factors: provision of information to the general public, animation at local level which will help potential projects holders to come forward with eligible propositions, composition of the selection board and the type of tools that are utilised for the selection of the actions (transparency of the selection criteria). All these factors are depending on the LAG capacity to undertake an inclusive strategy. Related to this issue is the targeting of the actions on young people and/or women, two categories of the public on which the action of the LAGs should be focused.

The utilisation of **information tools**, more or less sophisticated, is a basic requirement to make LEADER known to a wide public and open the possibility for involvement in the local action. The level of information disseminated by the LAGs differs widely. In *The Netherlands (East)*, some LAGs make use of local networking to reach new potential beneficiaries and spread out information on what LEADER is doing in the area, whilst other LAGs are limiting information to the project selection. In *England*, a range of inclusive awareness raising activities has been pursued to encourage a bottom-up approach. In *Wallonia*, most LAGs have implemented information tools such as folders or information meetings to inform the local population about the opportunities offered by the programme. In *Trento, Umbria an Lombardia*, the LAG realised a communication plan and undertook a lot of informative participative activities.

A second key is the **“animation” work** undertaken by the technical team with the support of the LAG representatives and often involving thematic committees composed of specialised technicians. Many LAGs (*Cataluna, Aragon, Madrid, Veneto, France*) complain that bureaucracy and administrative work is reducing the time of work in the field and follow-up of the projects. An important lesson (*Andalucia, Castilla-Leon, Luxembourg, Portugal*) here is that the nature of the animation work changes along the time: it is important at the beginning to reach the widest public possible, but at a later stage, the animation focuses more on technical issues. The evolving nature of the animation should be taken into account in the design of the technical team and in the organisation structure of the LAG.

The 50% rule for the **composition of the selection board** is usually followed, but this does not automatically mean that it is representative of the area. In *Baleares* the characteristics of the different islands have to be taken into account, but there is an insufficient turnover in the board. In *Extremadura* and in *Saarland*, it is felt that there are differences in practice between the composition of the LAGs on paper and the reality of the representation in the decision making process. In *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Niedersachsen*, the lack of presence of entrepreneurs in the Board is considered as a problem. In *England*, the local partnership working has contributed to the success of LAGs in a number of ways. It has enabled the gathering of perspectives from a number of different sectors and organisations within the area, helped combine local knowledge and has drawn on the breadth of experience through the wide range of partners. It has built in support, involvement, resources and expertise into areas and allowed LAGs to think more widely and more as a group. In *Bavaria*, and in *Schleswig-Holstein* some participants consider the “mass-participation” to be old-fashioned and not well functioning any more.

The issue of **inclusion** is not a technical question, but it has to be addressed at the level of the strategy. In *England*, LEADER+ is seen by some communities as the first time they have had involvement in designing a funding stream at strategy level. In particular, the definition and use of selection criteria for the actions supported is an essential tool for inclusion as it helps monitoring the types of public involved. In *Wallonia*, the LAGs did not establish a selection committee, and the Board members make decisions on projects. In *Andalucía*, all decisions are adopted on the basis of a consensus. In *The Netherlands (West)* the paying organ receives also project proposals.

Young people and women are two targets that were designated as priorities in the European LEADER+ regulation. These are said to be difficult to reach (especially young people who have their own networks and activities) and are not necessarily appropriate targets for the local conditions. It would be preferable to require an “inclusive strategy”, leaving the definition of priority target publics to the local partnership (there was a large opposition to the top-down definition of who should be included). In *Wallonia*, women and young people have not been specifically targeted in most cases. In *Luxembourg*, it remains difficult to find ways of a sustainable participation of youth organisations. In *Andalucía*, the participation of women and young people is modest, although the LAGs have made a great effort to involve them. Similarly, in *Extremadura*, the LAGs have put into practice projects developed a variety of initiatives to increase the participation of these target beneficiaries.

Do the LAGs build their pilot strategies around a general integrative topic emphasising the specificity of their area?

The utilisation of the thematic approach is underpinned by the integrative topic selected. Here again, it is very much up to the LAG to decide how much this approach should be put forward when implementing the strategy.

The utilisation of a general integrative topic emphasising the specificity of their area is a specific requirement of the EU guidelines for the implementation of LEADER+. The level of implementation of this principle is very variable: in some case a very general theme (“improving the quality of life”) has been chosen deliberately in order to keep the choice of projects as open as possible (indeed, very few projects would NOT contribute to the objective of improving the quality of life); in other cases, the integrative topic has been used systematically to keep a strategic direction and avoid spreading the limited funding over too many unrelated projects. To achieve this, a more precise theme was sometimes defined (ranging from the rather general “welcoming new people” in *France*, to very focused strategies around the stone cutting sector in a LAG in *Wallonia*). However, the utilisation of the integrative topic is rarely seen as a source for innovation. In *Hessen*, all LAG build their strategies around area specific themes, but only approximately 50% of projects were focussed on this integrative topic. In *Schleswig-Holstein*, the LAGs are all different in the organisation of their priority strategy.

Summary and Outlook

The work of the technical staff of the LAG is crucial to help local people to gain the capacity to develop their own projects and to become project promoters. The path from the idea to the action is often too spiny for the weakest part of the population, and the local strategy must address this challenge.

There will be no equal opportunities, even if espoused in the local action plan, if there is not an operational strategy established in this respect. This strategy must be based on a thorough assessment of the area, of all parts of the population and their distinctive needs.

Women and young are not always taken into consideration as priority beneficiaries. This might depend on the characteristics of the respective area, or be the consequence of negligence. Yet, as it applies in the case of the “pilot” dimension of the strategy, there should be better guidance and the provision of examples of good practice in order to help rural actors to take this dimension into account in an

effective manner. The networks could play a key role here (and some national networking units have been active in this respect), but at European level the topic has not been taken up.

Recommendations

All LAGs should employ a managing staff embodying a broad range of social and economic skills. The time for volunteers-only LAGs is definitely over. Sufficient resources should be mobilised in order to maintain, qualify and occasionally complement this staff with external support.

The European Observatory and the national networks should undertake the analysis of specific actions carried out by the LAGs to address the specific needs of women and young people. Seminars on this topic should be organised for the LAGs and a methodological guidance publication should be made available (at European and/or national level), in a similar fashion to what existed in LEADER II.

Key terms

- General integrative topic emphasising the specificity of their area
- Target Public

C14 To what extent have approaches and activities supported under LEADER+ been differentiated from those under other Rural Development and structural programmes operated in the area?

The differentiation of the actions is mostly important when there are different possibilities to achieve the same aim in matter of rural development. When it is the case, there should be a mechanism to allow the verification of this differentiation and adjust the interventions accordingly. This is a role for the administrations in charge of the different procedures and falls beyond the scope of the LAGs.

The range of rural development interventions in a region does not normally follow the same objectives: different interventions have different scopes or priorities, do not support the same type of beneficiaries or actions, are implemented by different administrations, etc.

Judgement criteria

The second criterion from the original set of EC criteria was amended in order to reflect the information that is available in the evaluation reports.

Are the actions selected for funding integrated in the programme/LAG strategy and differentiated from non-funded actions in the same area?

In many Member States, the LEADER approach has been used to support rural development programmes funded by other means than LEADER²²: PRODER in *Spain*, Pays in *France*, POMO in *Finland*, National LEADER in *Ireland*, etc. In general, the “mainstream copies” of LEADER are used to provide support in rural areas where there is no LEADER group. In that case, there is no problem of overlap and no need to seek complementarity.

When several programmes cover similar objectives in the same area, they do not necessarily fund the same type of action or usually exclude some sectors. In *Wallonia*, *Abruzzo*, *Sicilia*, the actions funded under LEADER must be immaterial. In *The Netherlands* (all regions), small-scale projects are only

²² This has been analysed in details in the study undertaken by DG Agriculture on “mainstreaming” and the conclusions from this study will not be repeated here.

funded by LEADER+. In *France* the agricultural sector is excluded from LEADER. In *Scotland*, actions are focused on community interest, as other programmes cover economic interests.

Further, not all programmes deal with the same priorities. In *Cataluna*, the LEADER+ Programme is focused on diversification of the economies in rural areas, while the Rural Development Programme is orientated to the agricultural sector. In *The Netherlands* (all regions), some of the programme themes are only present in LEADER+ and not in other rural development programmes. In *Pais Vasco*, no other programme deals with the priority theme selected by the region (Information Technology in rural areas).

Another form of complementarity is utilised in *Wallonia, France, Austria*, where LEADER supports preparatory actions (feasibility studies, etc.), whilst the actual implementation of some of the projects takes place in the context of different programmes.

Are the decision-making committees of different programmes operating in the same area harmonising their respective selection strategies for assuring clear and fast decisions?

Coordination issues are a global question in the implementation of the Structural Funds. It is often poorly addressed because different actors and administrations are in charge of the different procedures. This was one of the reasons for the simplification of the framework of intervention in rural areas in the 2007-2013 period.

This coordination issue can not be left the responsibility of the local actors. It is the role of the administrations in charge of the programmes to establish complementarities between interventions. In *Extremadura*, the lack of a common strategy at regional level for rural development causes duplication. In *Piemonte*, the programme authority promoted the creation of an Agency for mountain areas to favour integration and synergy among LEADER+, INTERREG, the Regional Development Plan and other programmes operating in mountain areas. In *Northern Ireland*, the exclusive focus of the programme on micro-business is specifically aimed at ensuring complementarity with the rest of the NI Rural Development Programme.

Summary and Outlook

The “mainstreaming” of the LEADER approach into rural development, structural funds or other programmes has usually taken place in regions in which the LEADER programme itself is not operating. In some countries LEADER and LEADER-like mainstream measures overlap (e.g. Austria, Vlaanderen, Baden-Württemberg). In these cases some coordination mechanisms would be needed, although they are not always in place (e.g. in some provinces of Austria, where LEADER operates rather as competitor to Regional Development Agencies). In some regions, the LAGs act as local development agencies directing the project promoters towards the most appropriate funding scheme (e.g. Greece, Northern Ireland, Portugal); if this specific form of mainstreaming through local customisation takes place, the LEADER programme can concentrate itself on the early stages of project development.

The harmonisation of strategies is an important issue, but it can only be achieved at a territorial scale higher than the LEADER area, at regional or national level. This strategic integration can be observed in some regions and Member States, but it is far from being the general rule.

Recommendations

The coordination of European and national funding should be a priority at these programme levels of decision making and could be enforced by a better coordination of the programming procedures in the European Commission and in the member states. Although we are perfectly aware that the EU

Council Regulation No. 1083/2006 states that coordination of EU policies on the national level is a compulsory issue, the experiences so far have shown that a symbiotic application of these policies on the regional scale is often poorly applied. Thus Council Regulation No. 1083/2006²³ is a first important step into the right direction but definitely needs to be practiced on the regional and local scale more effectively. This could be easily seen in the case of LEADER where synergies showed up in those cases where the policy competencies and decision making power were grouped around problem fields (e.g. rural development including all economic sectors) rather than still following the traditional bureaucratic logic of policy fields (economic policy vs. agriculture policy)²⁴.

The visibility and distinctiveness of LEADER should be ensured by giving it a clear role in wider rural policy by the Member States (with the necessary coordination at higher level of decision making) and by giving guidance to the LAGs for communicating the distinctive features of the LEADER initiative.

LEADER should get an explicit strategic role in the whole concert of measures. This is foreseen by the new regulation, although the programming process should clearly support this strategic role. The people involved in this process may not be aware of the full range of possibilities offered by LEADER.

In this context, the following table represents a first suggestion of the role that Managing Authorities (MA) can play in different administrative contexts (federal and centrally managed Member States), and with respect to the different possible ways of mainstreaming LEADER into rural development programmes. While each of the suggested possible management approaches has its own advantages and disadvantages, in any case Managing Authorities have the difficult task to find an acceptable balance between the control function that they have to provide, and the need to ensure to the LAGs the sufficient freedom to produce innovative and creative results.

Table 7: **LEADER management on the Member State level – specifics of the Managing Authorities (MA)**

LEADER as... organisation of LEADER programme	incubator/ pathfinder	niche specialist	beating heart of mainstream policies	structuring programme delivery at local level
federal system	MA with a "long leash" for the LAGs in terms of self definition, self organisation	central MA (only fulfilling control tasks) + decentralized sub-MA in the regions as close as possible to the LAGs trying to bundle the niche strategies of the single LAGs into a bigger strategic picture	central MA (only fulfilling control tasks) + decentralized sub-MA in the regions as close as possible to the LAGs	controlling central MA (see before) + decentralized sub-MA which show high coordinative power/ LAGs with play double/ triple roles in RD
central system	MA with a "long leash" for the LAGs in terms of self definition, self organisation	central MA trying to bundle the niche strategies of the single LAGs into a bigger strategic picture	central MA (ministry) with staff positions (regionally organised)	MA positioned in a core administrative body with high coordinative power + see before

²³ The role of the instruments providing aid for rural development, namely the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development pursuant to Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EARDF) (5), and for the fisheries sector, namely a European Fisheries Fund (EFF), should be specified. Those instruments should be integrated into the instruments under the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy and coordinated with those under the cohesion policy.

²⁴ Still this phenomenon holds true for any bundle of policy measures which thematically has to bridge political competence fields.

Local co-ordination should be enabled by appropriate resources for information and training of technical staff and the provision of advisory services in reach of the local population. The LAG should not compete with other local services in this respect, but channel the demand to the best indicated service point.

Key terms

- Strategic role of LEADER
- Complementarity between actors/Complementarity of actions

F1 To what extent has the principle of balanced representation of local interests in the LAGs been respected in the selection of LAGs and in the development and implementation of local strategies?

Elements of answers are already given in CEQs 11, 12 and 13.

The LEADER+ regulation has established a fundamental rule whereby the private sector must hold at least 50% of voting power in the decision-making body of the LAG. This rule is enforced at the selection of the LAG, as these must explain in their application how they are going to comply with this obligation. The idea beyond this rule is that the public sector is traditionally in charge of the development of rural areas and that it would be useful to have a structural representation of private actors. This is supposed to bring in new dynamism and innovation. The concept of PPP (Public Private Partnerships) is well spread (and very fashionable) in the sphere of economic and social interventions.

The 50% rule is however not sufficient to challenge established balances of power and guarantee a “balanced” representation of interests.

Judgement criteria

Has the balanced representation of actors been translated into selection criteria and been consequently adopted?

For the selection of the LAG, there is in general a “mechanical” respect of the EU rule that is limiting the participation of public bodies to less than 50%, but this does not mean that the LAGs have a “balanced” representation of local interest. Social groups not represented vary widely between regions (women, young people, associations, farmers, handicraft sector, etc.).

Often, one particular group has an excessive weight in the decision-making (the administrations and the local authorities are often pointed at in this respect). The public sector takes a large place in the delivery of the programme, especially since co-funding contribution coming from the local authorities gives them more power (*Wallonia*). Sometimes, the management team members are part of these public entities and the LAG’s offices are located inside the buildings of the public bodies. In that cases, there might be an identification of the LAGs with these public entities (*Cataluna*)

Do the LAGs ensure a balanced representation of actors and interests in the partnership and in their development strategies?

In the implementation phase, it seems that it is important to have a system in place to monitor the application of the 50% rule all along the life of the project. In general, there seem to be a good involvement of the private sector in the delivery of the programme (project’s holders). Yet, the public sector seems to keep an important position, either via the provision of co-funding or due to the relative

weakness of the private sector. Unbalanced partnership or unbalanced power relations in the LAG can lead to an inappropriate set of projects selected, often at the advantage of the institution belonging to the public sector. The composition of LAGs is often unbalanced and the institutional sector dominates (*Veneto, Extremadura*). Women and (above all) young people are underrepresented (many programmes, including *Pais Vasco, Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, Netherlands East and North, ...*).

The partnership is not a static feature, and it evolves all along the life of the programme. Partners active one day might not be interested any longer after a while; there are many circumstances that can have a lasting impact on the way the partnership will evolve along the time. It is therefore important to foresee tools allowing the assessment of the value of the partnership approach through its key deliveries, which should all contribute to the sustainable development of the rural area that it covers.

One further problem is the lack of legitimacy in sense of democracy: the members are “elected” from the partners themselves and not from the people as in normal elections where you have candidates etc. This is an important question if LEADER-partnership-method will be mainstreamed in other rural development programmes with a much greater budget (*Denmark*).

In *Finland*, it was underlined that the most important thing is that partnership and the tripartite structure should function smoothly. A tripartite partnership is composed of 1/3 public, 1/3 private and 1/3 civic sector, sometimes with rotating memberships. A faster turnover in the membership of the LAG boards should be an objective in the next programme period. The ministry is particularly insistent on third-sector representation on these boards; if there is no tripartite structure, there will be no funding.

In *Sweden*, a case study of the 3 partnership method was carried out in four LAGs. There was a noticeable enthusiasm for that method. It was important and contributed to the local rural development. The partnerships created within LEADER+ were more dynamic, mobilising and important than many other partnerships created at local or regional level during the past years.

Summary and Outlook

The balanced representation of interests can not be achieved in a sustainable way by a mechanical respect of percentages. It should reflect the situation of the respective area, based on a sound diagnosis of the needs of different parts of the population.

The issue of legitimacy has also been raised: since the LAGs are not composed of elected people, so how can they take decisions on the allocation of public funds? A definitive solution to this question has not been found as yet. Maybe the fact that there is no definitive solution is already a part of the solution: the legitimacy of local partnerships is not based on their origin, but on their output. As long as the output is considered acceptable by the local people, the local partnership is legitimized. Thus the consideration of balanced representation should not be seen as a surrogate for a democratic legitimation (which it cannot be), but rather as a process indicator, which can be assessed at any moment (whereas the output requires too much time for quick appraisals).

Recommendations

The rule of balanced representation of interests should be implemented against the background of the socio-economic characteristics of the area, and this should be reflected in the decision-making procedures.

The tripartite approach as practiced in Scandinavian countries (FI, SE) can be considered as a good practice in this respect.

Key terms

- Balanced representation of local interests

F2a Has the delimitation of LEADER territories created problems in view of the rural-urban interaction?

LEADER+ can for the first times include areas that do not belong to “objective areas” like in LEADER I and II. This has led to the inclusion of rural areas that are closer to urban centres. These rural areas are therefore under pressure from people working in the cities and looking for nice accommodation and amenities. This is at the same time a new threat for these areas but also an opportunity worth exploring.

Judgement criteria

Has the delimitation of territories excluded innovative funding opportunities with regard to rural-urban interaction?

The relation between rural and urban areas is more and more perceived as an important issue, but there are little ideas on how this issue should be tackled. It seems to be more in highly densely populated countries (*Belgium, The Netherlands, England*) that this is perceived as an issue. There is a consensus that small towns should not be excluded from the area of intervention simply to respect the population threshold: this is seen as very artificial and making little sense. The pressure of urban commuters is a growing concern for some areas, which want to develop strategies to tackle it.

The population limits for a LAG have led to the exclusion of urban centres in many LAG areas, and few LAGs are in a position where the urban – rural relationships are perceived as an issue. Many other questions seem more important at this stage for the people in charge of the development strategy. This is a natural tendency as most of the people involved in LEADER are rural people and see the world from that point of view. In the future, it might be useful for a LEADER group to assess better the expectation of urban dwellers, so that they can also develop strategies aiming at attracting them.

In *Wallonia*, the LAGs that selected that priority theme are working on issues such as the opportunities opened by this type of closeness, the specific problems that arise such as the rising cost of housing, the specific needs of the new population (services, child care, etc.). The LAGs have undertaken studies that should provide interesting insight into this type of linkage. In *France*, the Managing Authority accepted in some cases to integrate the urban part in order to keep rural – urban interactions as regards the existence of an “Urban Pays”. In *Emilia-Romagna*, some LAGs are located very close to urban areas, and this is considered strength because of the proximity of a wide market

A specific issue of this kind is the **numerical threshold of 100,000 inhabitants** per LAG. Even if this prescription was well-known in advance, for many LAGs (e.g. in more densely populated German areas), **it hindered the attempt to create coherent LEADER territories by excluding rural towns** which are important market places and social networking hubs. The threshold was criticised in some MTE reports as it hampers the support for building up value added chains and marketing initiatives in more diversified and urbanised rural areas. It is anyway acknowledged that derogations to the 10.000 – 100.000 inhabitants rule were possible within LEADER+ to permit creating coherent LEADER territories including, where relevant, more densely populated areas, and that around 15% of the LAGs have benefited of this derogation (status in 2005 and not in the reference period though).

F2b Is there evidence that the effectiveness of LEADER+ programmes could have been increased with changes in the delimitation of territories?

This is an impact-related question, which can not be properly answered in the context of this meta-evaluation. Only a very limited amount of information is available, and no proper analysis can be undertaken on this basis.

Judgement criteria

Is there is evidence that the delimitation of territories did not follow the area-based approach in terms of local identities?

From the information available, it seems that in general, the definition of the areas has followed the sense of local identities, although it does not necessarily correspond to an established administrative area. There is a lively debate on the question of enlarging or not the size of the areas covered by a LAG. It would provide economies of scale and critical mass, but it would make it more difficult to implement the bottom-up approach and the local animation.

In *Wallonia*, in some cases, it was felt that some areas should have been defined on the ancient delimitation of Communes, which comes from a longer historical perspective than the new “merged” communes. In *Extremadura*, there is evidence that the delimitation of the territories is a difficult task, where the territory is not always homogeneous and areas with common history that fulfil LEADER specificities are sometimes hard to find. In *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern*, rural actors with the help of rural district administration delimit LEADER areas. The very low population density led to the prerequisite of building LAG with “critical mass”.

Summary and Outlook

Although derogations were possible (see F2a), the threshold of 100,000 inhabitants generally led to the exclusion of rural towns and periurban rural areas. That means that important local markets and networking hubs could not participate in the partnership-based process of strategy building and project generation. This enforced limitation is a specific hindrance to economic strategies of building up value-added chains, development of local brands, medium and long distance distribution channels etc., in short to a more advanced partnerships operating in diversified rural areas.

Although in some more densely populated areas of Western Europe rural-urban interaction was chosen as a priority topic (*Wallonia*), conclusions on the outcomes can not be drawn as yet.

Recommendation

The eligibility criterion of a minimum and maximum number of inhabitants should be abolished. The quality and feasibility of the local strategy and its expectable contribution to the development of the rural area should prevail numerical limitations.

This question should be studied in more detail in the ex-post evaluation, specifically focusing on those regions where rural-urban interactions have been made priority themes.

Key terms

- Rural-urban interaction

F3 To what extent did the validation of the programme’s ex-ante evaluation in the national/regional mid-term evaluations identify the need for a revision of the programme strategies and approaches?

LEADER is deemed sufficiently flexible to take contextual changes into account. This is in fact one of the strongest points of the initiative, due to the area-based and the bottom-up approaches. LEADER is in direct contact with local evolutions and has many tools for adapting.

The general conclusion from MTE reports is that the programme does not need to be changed, even if the situation presented in the SWOT might have evolved (this is true in dozens of programmes, including Wallonia, Abruzzo, Portugal, Andalucia, Baleares, Pais Vasco, Sweden, England, Scotland, Flanders, Denmark, Hessen, Brandenburg, etc.)

Judgement criteria

Did the validation of the ex-ante evaluation led to a revision of the programme strategies and approaches?

Two programmes (*Niedersachsen, Netherlands, all regions*) mention the fall of public funds as a possible source of problems: the fall in co-funding might require some adaptation of the original plans.

There are two cases where the LEADER programme had to be urgently adapted in order to focus resources to address the consequences of an unexpected disaster (many interventions were concerned, not just LEADER): forest fires in *Portugal* and the sinking of the “Prestige” near the coasts of *Galicia*.

Summary and Outlook

There are no cases reported where the ex ante evaluation has led to a deep modification of the original strategy.

Key terms

- Ex-ante evaluation

F4 Can examples be identified where a ‘learning effect’ from previous phases of LEADER has influenced or changed the way the LEADER method was applied in the LEADER+ programmes? Can trends in this respect be observed?

In many MTE reports and updates, there are examples that a “learning” effect has taken place. However, it is very difficult to observe any trend in these, beyond the fact that continuity of staff (in LAGs, administration or networking unit) is crucial in this respect (*Wallonia, Aragon, Scotland, England,...*).

There is no evidence of the existence of instruments that were used for extracting the lessons from one stage and implementing them in the next one (evaluations, good practices, etc.). However, there are instances of lessons learnt from previous programming periods which are applied in LEADER+ programmes.

Judgement criteria

Had the learning effect from previous phases of LEADER a positive influence on the way the programme administration handled the implementation of LEADER+?

At the level of the authorities in charge of LEADER, there are many examples of lessons taken from LEADER I and II that were utilised when designing the LEADER+ programme. This applies to the definition of the areas, the degree of decision-making power devolved to the LAGs, better arrangements for financial management, including co-funding or the mainstreaming of the approach to other rural areas.

Some examples can be pointed at in the following areas:

The governance of the programme was revised. The choice of one national programme instead of several regional was made in *France and Austria*; in *Flanders*, sub-regional authorities (Provinces) were given an increased role for the programme implementation; in *Wallonia*, the regional authorities asked the LAG to be themselves the operator of the all the actions; in *France*, the use of “global grants” was decided in order to push the LAGs to be more responsible and efficient during implementation

Mainstreaming took place, either via the creation of other (non-LEADER) action groups following the same principles (*many countries*), or via the application of those principles to other territorial policies (*Flanders*)

Co-funding arrangements: in *Wallonia*, a system was set-up for providing a guaranteed co-funding for the actions (some operators in LEADER II had major financial problems due to late payment).

Support systems: In *Wallonia* and in *Lombardia*, the programming authorities set-up a support system to help the LAGs with some of their obligations (accounting, evaluation, etc.).

Had the learning effect from previous phases of LEADER a positive influence on the way the LAGs implemented their pilot strategies?

At the level of the LAGs, there are also many examples of lessons presented by the groups. It is clear that lessons can be better utilised when there is continuity of the LEADER intervention if an area and a LAG. Even if the definition of the area or the composition of the partnership is modified, the former existence of an action group provides a basis for further work.

Lessons applied were mostly looking for a better utilisation of the specific features of LEADER:

Coordination of interventions: better integration with the other local programmes (*Basilicata*)

Partnership development: better use of the local partnership (cultural growth and more reactivity to the needs), development of the vertical partnership (*Basilicata*)

The bottom-up approach: was applied to transfer the LEADER philosophy to local actors and population (*Friuli Venezia Giulia, Liguria*); establishment of “know how” in the implementation of the projects within a partnership and constitution of partnership networks (*Portugal*); promoting motivation of the population, improving representation in LAGS, designing selection criteria, working in an integrated programme without bureaucratic hurdles (*Castilla la Mancha*); in *Extremadura*, some innovation programmes in LEADER II have promoted more participation in their elaboration, they have therefore been more suitable to local needs, more accepted and recognised by the community; in *Bolzano*, only 2 of 5 LAGs have benefited from LEADER II experience. In these cases the benefits are: better local actors organisation, capacity in developing integrative projects and identification of the local actors with the territory; in one of the LAGs in *Asturias*, the bottom-up approach was encouraged in the elaboration through a well structured methodology: the LAG carried out information rounds and

thematic workshops on tourism, the environment, the food sector and culture. In this way the local populations received information and there were mechanism for the collection of proposals

Area-based approach: There is a better territorial adjustment of the areas of intervention, because some municipalities have joined an area with which they shared more traditional links than the ones in the previous programmes. (*Extremadura*)

Cooperation: the LEADER II experience has positive effects on co-operation, since the proposed projects are all related to LEADER II projects (*Emilia-Romagna*)

Summary and Outlook

The transfer of lessons seems to be mostly left to chance, as very few instruments or tools seem to have been utilised to promote it. Beyond the occasional visit of a civil servant or a LAG manager to a peer in another region or Member State, there is not much capitalisation of lessons going on.

The national networks have developed case studies and established data bases of good practices. However, these are mainly passive resources and little seems to be done on more conceptual and methodological aspects, e.g. what is a “pilot strategy”, how to involve women and young people into local development etc. But it is clear that the occasional gatherings facilitated by the networks have fostered the kind of personal exchange which eventually leads to learning and to the transfer of concepts and approaches.

Therefore it is difficult to identify and describe common patterns of learning, neither among the programming authorities nor between the LAGs.

Lessons in tourism, adding value to local products, support for sustainable agriculture, support for welcoming new population, etc. might be get lost if there is no instrument to organise their transfer to other people, other contexts, and for future users in general.

Recommendations

There is a need to develop some specific instruments and tools for the capitalisation of experience and the codification of successful practices at local, regional/national and European level. General lessons (implementation of the LEADER method) and thematic lessons should be identified in the form of good practices. More conceptual lessons should be drawn and made available in the form of technical dossiers covering key thematic areas. This is a mission that should be handed over to the European Observatory and the national networks. The existing output by the before mentioned authorities is generally limited to the mere presentation of “good practices” without a higher level of analysis (what work or didn’t, why, in which framework, etc.)

Key terms

- Learning-effect

3.2 Responses to Theme 2: Action specific Evaluation Questions

C211 To what extent has LEADER+ helped improve the organisational capacity of rural communities and the participation of rural actors in the development process?

In general it is early to assess the issues referred to in this question (only roughly one quarter of the programmed expenditures in Action 1 have been spent within the reference period), but the MTE reports still provide quite a lot of information, and the updates even more, as they are seen as key outcomes of the application of the LEADER method. Still it has to be noted that the results presented here are consequently biased by this lack of empirical evidence.

The LEADER principles – area based approach and bottom-up approach have certainly lead to positive effects.

This cardinal evaluation question deals at the same time with the accumulation of human and social capital, as well as with the building of organisational capital.

Behavioural changes, changes in interaction patterns and learning effects are to be seen as the intended core value added of LEADER. Thus the assessment of the improvement of both organisational and human capital is of crucial importance. The degree to which this added value has been produced is determined by the way in which the specific features of the LEADER approach have been implemented, most prominently by the area-based, bottom-up and partnership approach which operate on the structural pre-conditions for sustainable rural development.

Behavioural and interactional changes can not be measured by simply counting the output (e.g. number of interactions, participants in meetings). This would not reflect the qualitative aspect of behavioural change. Moreover often the phenomenon of behavioural change, which can be at least observed over time, does not by itself allow drawing conclusions on corresponding changes in attitudes and deeper motivations of rural actors. The only way to monitor these changes is a well documented process of continuous self-evaluation of the local partnership or the wider network of local actors, accompanied by external facilitators. As a matter of fact, the evaluation reports hardly had access to such resources, as this kind of practice is still marginal, specifically in the early phase to which the mid-term evaluation refers.

Judgement criteria

Has the area-based approach contributed to a better identification of rural actors with the territory?

The **area based approach** has definitely fulfilled its tasks – i.e. to increase the identification with the territory. Facilitating factors in this respect have been experiences in former LEADER periods (Finland) – in the sense that identification with a territory (region) need time to develop and grow. Another crucial issue seemed to be a sensible delimitation of the LEADER region itself – i.e. the more common and traditional identification links with a region existed before, the more likely the success of the area based approach will be. In other words existing administrative or historic borders helped to identify LAG delimitations (see e.g. Germany – Schleswig Holstein and Belgium – Flanders).

Has the bottom-up approach encouraged the participation of local actors in favour of local development?

In terms of the **bottom-up approach** the LEADER method has been of great importance. Hundreds of people have taken part in each LAG area, including large numbers of new actors, people who would

not otherwise have participated in such activities. This Figure seems to hold widely true all over the programmes. As factors positively influencing this process the creation of win-win situations have been mentioned: people having the impression that their activity is honoured, economic value added (e.g. by the promotion of local products), involvement of a broad variety of local actors (especially those economic sectors not directly concerned with agriculture). The difficulties are to be identified in a trade-off between a wide participation and activating of people and the efficiency and fast decision making within the regions. In some cases this has led to the de facto decision making by political actors, while in some cases this disadvantage has been accepted. Generally speaking decision making and organisational issues in LAGs have widely been concentrated in small groups of highly motivated group members – thus a real "bottom-up" approach of purely democratic empowerment and decision making has not been possible.

Have the LAGs provided appropriate mechanisms for participation, awareness raising and organisation of local actors in favour of rural development (events, meetings, media)?

Mechanisms for participation, awareness raising and organisation of local actors – again the experiences from former LEADER periods had a positive correlation with the amount and creativity of mechanisms for increasing participation, awareness raising and organisation. The range of mechanisms though stayed in a rather traditional framework – i.e. a dominance of information and communication, techniques for extending the participation of local actors such as thematic working groups, "animation" of local people so as to facilitate the emergence of projects, work on the identity of the local area. Still LEADER is seen as the only programme, which explicitly promotes better cooperation and organisation at the regional and local level. It therefore has a "unique" position among funding programmes. All this activity has some results: creation of associations, business networks, co-operatives, etc thus improving the regional identity, which becomes a tool for promoting the area. Difficulties in this aspect stem from either tiring effects of too many traditional activation methods without being able to attract new stakeholders/groups to participate. In other words – high activity levels in terms of mechanisms for participation, awareness raising and organisation of local actors do not guarantee success of LEADER as long as the mix of actors within the strategy for an integrated rural development does not cover a sufficient band width.

Are the LAGs endowed with a sufficient number of qualified staff?

The **sufficient number of qualified staff** provides another sound basis for the improvement of the organisational capacity of rural communities. Although staff members of LAGs are usually highly motivated and efforts have been made to further qualify these people, the number in full time employment equivalents has been generally seen as too low. Especially the organisational/ coordination tasks on the LAG level are apparently underestimated in terms of sufficient staffing.

Have the LAGs provided appropriate mechanisms for qualification and capacity building among rural actors?

Appropriate mechanisms for qualification and capacity building among rural actors is seen as important and some programmes (Italy-Lombardia, Castilla la Mancha, Sachsen) have fed resources into this task. Still the experiences are far too little that a general trend could be identified.

Is the allocation of tasks and responsibilities between the partners (programme authorities – LAGs – members of the LAGs) clear and transparent?

In terms of a **clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities between the partners** there is not very much information available yet. The only clear message is that this issue is important for the smooth operation of the programmes/projects. Still in some LAGs a lack of professionalism in

programme/project management is still to be found which has led to dissatisfying results. Professional management and well defined distribution of tasks and responsibilities (on all levels) is therefore an important prerequisite.

Are the LAGs regularly reflecting and evolving their partnership and networking structure using adequate facilitation methods?

This issue has been not covered at all within the MTE reports or any other sources of information available. It seems that regular self-reflecting is not deemed to be necessary. Another interpretation would be that such processes are rather time consuming and will call for more experiences through the evolvement of the programme. Thus this aspect will be covered by the end of the programming period.

Summary and Outlook

As mentioned above the evaluation question deals at the same time with the accumulation of human and social capital, as well as with the building of organisational capital. These changes have been hardly captured as their measurement in the physical meaning of the word (i.e. by simply counting the output [e.g. number of interactions, participants in meetings]) is hardly possible and the evaluation reports did not have access to such resources.

In any case, there is at least some evidence that the setting up of a local partnership and the requirement to present a commonly agreed local action plan may have mobilised potentials in the area which otherwise would not even have been awakened. The LEADER approach points into the direction of governance through indirect steering, setting the regulatory frame consisting of a rather reduced set of rules. This frame determines the criteria for getting rewarded or not in a competition of programmes or projects. This form of governance is specifically recommended in the literature for developing social systems, in which no single actor has the power to intervene in a way that produces a targeted outcome. It can be regarded as an instrument to support the self-governing forces of the micro-region.

Recommendations

During the pre-selection phase, sufficient resources (in the form of eligible funds) should be reserved by both the Commission and the Member States for qualification, information and communication for LAGs in preparing, setting up and implementing their need-based local strategy. This is specifically valid for new candidate LAGs in new programming regions and countries

The local strategy should include an explicit part of how the LAG intends to organise the participation process and to include wider parts of the population into the diagnosis and strategy building, as well as in project generation and accompaniment (e.g. in thematic work groups).

Assisted and accompanied self-evaluation of local partnerships should become a lived and actually practiced part of the standard implementation of LEADER programmes (as already intended in the programme); the regional/networks can play a role in this respect.

Key terms

- Vertical partnership
- Area-based and bottom-up approach

C212 To what extent has LEADER+ promoted and developed complementarity between actors in rural development at the local level through a bottom up approach and an integrated pilot strategy?

This evaluation question tries to find out whether the bottom-up approach and the integrated pilot strategies contribute to promote complementarity between actors in rural development. This does not only mean that local actors should be brought together in order to complement each others' abilities, but also to change their interaction patterns towards more cooperative behaviour, not only within, but also beyond the LEADER programme, for the sake of the overall aim of integrated development of their area. Like evaluation question 211 this behavioural change is considered as being determined by specific features of the LEADER approach.

Little evidence is given at this level: it is still too early to have empirical evidence on impact. The information is rather patchy and only examples may be provided. Moreover the major problem was the definition of the term "complementarity". "Complementarity between actors in rural development" can take many forms and be defined in different ways: integration between sectors, funding issues, complementarity with mainstream, cooperation between the managing authorities of different EU-funded/nationally funded development programmes.

Generally actors in LEADER tend to be concentrated on their own problems in the first place – i.e. complementarity comes along with maturity and the success of the LAGs in the regions. If such an embedding is to be found, the cooperation with sectors, partners outside the strategy will be sought for. Another factor mentioned in the context of complementarity is not really linked to the local level and the bottom-up approach but to the programme Managing Authorities. If national regional administrations, which are handling EU funded programmes, work together cooperation across the borders of programmes is more likely. In many cases though – the sector dominance of policies produces unnecessary competitive thinking among actors of rural development and thus prevents complementarity.

There is some evidence that voluntary work has been generated within the region and that municipalities have started cooperating. Still the cooperation of the latter is rather established with other partners than other municipalities (e.g. sectoral representation bodies).

Judgement criteria

Do Rural actors co-operate inside and outside the framework of the strategy?

Generally LEADER has been seen by actors involved as too small a programme to establish cooperation outside its own strategies and to promote complementarity with other programmes. *'There has been a lot of 'dancing round the maypole' rural development, rather than real rural development'* (statement at the focus group meeting for the England LEADER programme), in the sense of big economic or social gains. If LEADER wants to take the opportunity to become a vehicle to mobilize and trigger other funds and take a wider responsibility in rural development it needs a wider capacity (in terms of people and money) engaged with and supported at regional and national levels to do that (England).

Mainly two types of cooperation inside and outside the LEADER programme were observed:

- Cooperation in policy terms – bridging different sectoral policies in rural development (e.g. Equal, INTERREG, national rural development programmes) (Greece, Wales); but also in the form of activating actors/representatives of these different sector policies (chamber of commerce, tourism board – Italy – Lombardia)

- Cooperation in socio-economic terms – bringing in economic sectors to contribute to rural development goals (e.g. tourism, agriculture) (Wallonia, Italy – Umbria, France, Spain – Extremadura)

Facilitating factors for the success of these initiatives were the following:

- Previous experiences in LEADER – the more experienced the LAGs have been, the easier they established linkages to other programmes (Wales)
- Actors within LEADER (both on LAG level and MA level) – the higher the engagement of these actors was, the better complementarity was achieved. Another facilitating factor has also been the useful delimitation and homogeneity of the territory. (Spain Extremadura, Austria)

The following examples give an indication of positive and negative aspects of cooperation activities as shown by the MTE reports:

Positive aspects: The LEADER programme strengthened the complementarity between local actors in rural development, **since the LAGs extended their roles and responsibilities as development agents under mainstreaming rural development** (Greece). According to the LAGs the LEADER+ programme promoted complementarity between actors in rural development at local level: local operators operated in a strategic vision considering very important the integration of single financed interventions. They started to consider the areas as a system where all the activities were interconnected. (Italy – Umbria)

Negative aspects: Although there has been quite some cooperation activity inside the strategy – There is no information about their cooperation outside this framework (Germany – Bayern). Sector policies were strictly followed – thus no real common strategy in rural development could be observed (Germany – Schleswig – Holstein). The actors representing these sector policies were not willing to cooperate (regional management – in some cases in Austria).

Has there been voluntary work generated within the region during programme implementation

In comparison with mainstream programmes the amount of voluntary work conducted on a regional and local level is quite astonishing. Still information on these activities is mostly to be found under other headings within the evaluation activities (e.g. like under evaluation question C12). Especially in the context of the application of the bottom up approach or the activation and participation of local actors some evidence is shown:

- The Swedish tripartite²⁵ approach (for an explanation see evaluation question F1) was said to be most crucial for success or failure of the Swedish LAGs.
- Voluntary work was mobilised in Denmark.

Still there is hardly “hard” evidence in a broad sense that voluntary work has been generated. Only some examples are given (Germany – Bayern; Finland) but merely this evidence is provided “between the lines” of the MTE reports or the case study reports.

Has during programme implementation the co-operation between and participation of municipalities increased?

Municipalities cooperate rather rarely within LEADER. There are just some examples to be found: Germany, Italy – Calabria. More often municipalities cooperate with other partners (e.g. associations,

²⁵ By which is meant the equitable participation of public, private and civic actors

interest groups) (Germany – Bayern, Schleswig-Holstein). But in those cases the development is a positive one.

Generally the involvement of municipalities is hindered by the delimitation of LEADER areas, which explicitly exclude cities. Those municipalities, which could more likely afford to carry out cooperation with LEADER actors – i.e. the bigger ones with more administrative staff – are rather excluded by administrative/bureaucratic barriers.

Are the assisted activities complementary as regards objectives and implementation ?

There is little evidence for this criterion to be found – just some pieces and bits point towards a homogeneity of objectives and implementation (Italy – Umbria, France). On the other hand there is a little evidence for the contrary – i.e. only piecemeal negative examples are to be found: Spain – Castilla Leon: (“...insufficient the degree of complementarity of rural actors. The main reason is the **individualism of rural actors**, and also the administrative burdens.”) *Austria*.

Summary and Outlook

The conclusions for this question mainly represent the stakeholders’ own impressions.

In cases where administrative interventions overruled the local stakeholders’ aspirations, the latter seem to have been discouraged. This was for instance observed in cases of top-down area delimitation due – for instance – to the numerical maximum threshold of 100,000 inhabitants, excluding rural towns which would be the most likely ones to produce complementarities with the rural surroundings. This supports the conclusion that the rules of the game have to provide a clear space of LAG autonomy and responsibility in order to guarantee, with higher probability, the intended outcomes of LEADER. As pointed out above – it should also be mentioned that derogations to the 10.000 – 100.000 inhabitants rule were possible within LEADER+, and that around 15% of the LAGs have benefited of this derogation (status by 2005 and not in the reference period though). The purpose of derogations was, to create coherent LEADER territories including, where relevant, more densely populated areas.

Another important lesson to be learnt is that the willingness and capacity of local actors to actively go for complementarity with other local actors depends on the experience and maturity of the LEADER community within an area, hence from learning effects over time.

Recommendations

Presuming that a competent implementation of the bottom-up approach and a need-based participatory elaboration of the pilot strategy lead to the intended alignment of local actors coming from different sectors, the major challenge is to provide technical support for LAGs during the competition phase and to call for the required resources (e.g. information means, staffing) in the local action plan.

Key terms

- Complementarity between actors/Complementarity of actions

C213 To what extent have the selected priority themes contributed to ensure a truly integrated and focused development strategy at LAG level?

There is quite a heterogeneous picture when answering this question. The high range of scoring in the fulfilment rate of this evaluation question (from 0-90%) underlines this fact.

This cardinal evaluation question deals with the required focusing of the programmes and the local action plans around specific priority themes. Implicitly the question explores the extent to which the priority themes may have contributed to generate economic added value. However, only in a few cases the enforced introduction of priority themes was seen as a helpful requirement. It was rather seen as an unnecessary aspect of top-down planning. They were too prescriptive as to instigate creative thinking, and they were too unspecific as to provide concrete guidance.

Judgement criteria

Are the assisted activities effectively articulated around the priority themes

On the one side there is the feeling that the priority theme is a bad idea, deeply contradicting the “bottom-up” principle. For LAGs set up in previous programming periods, it could be in contradiction with the work done so far; for a new one, it comes too early and could bias the local work. Many regions have allowed the LAG to select more than one theme (or even all of them), which limits the interest of this tool. In the case of a newly established LAG, the priority theme is a limiting factor and does not allow an adjustment of the strategy as the local work is developing: new project ideas can not be taken on board, new partners can not be included, etc.

Lastly, it may come in conflict with the n+2 rule, which forces the LAGs to move fast with project selection. At the same time flexibility in the strategy is often needed in order to include all project holders. Priority themes are then seen as restrictive and limiting the possible development paths of the programme, which may slow down the working processes in the LAGs thus causing difficulties to comply with the n+2 constraint. The way around is that priority themes are either adapted throughout the programme or drafted in a very general sense so that hardly any guidance for a truly integrated and focused development strategy is ensured or they are taken as rough guidelines without real restrictive power for project selection.

On the other side there are enough examples to be found, where the priority themes are seen as an effective tool to provide guidance towards integrated and focused development. Mainly the members of the LAGs and political representatives engaged in the LAGs prefer these thematic guidance in order to pin down major orientations. Moreover it helps to group people and gives more visibility to the actions.

So generally the priority themes did contribute to ensure focused development, but the attribute “focused” was rather seen as burden and not widely applied.

Summary and Outlook

Concerning the **European priority themes** (which were in some cases complemented by national or regional priority themes), they were only in a few cases seen as helpful. They were too prescriptive as to instigate creative thinking, and they were too unspecific as to provide concrete guidance. Although it is still too early for final judgements on the concept of priority themes, **the general idea of articulated priorities for rural development seems, to some extent, to contradict the area-based and bottom-up approach.** They may be justified here and there at programming level, but should be handled with care.

Recommendations

The concept of priority themes should be reconsidered. First of all they should not be predefined at European, but at programme level.

If the programme authorities opt for priority themes, they should provide real guidelines and strategic orientations: some LEADER actors would feel comfortable with that, although the thematic restriction would exclude some aspects of rural development.

In our view, the most sustainable solution would be to simply drop them and leave the formulation of priority themes to the local diagnosis and the strategy building process at local level.

Key terms

- Priority theme

C214 To what extent have the pilot strategies had an impact over the territory?

This evaluation question explores the impact of a core element of the LEADER approach ("the pilot strategy") on the territorial situation. It is strongly related to the questions F8 and F9 – both dealing with the embedding of LEADER in overall rural development strategies and the flexibility of LEADER to meet the different contexts and needs of rural areas.

Answers to this evaluation question were very heterogeneous, due to a lack of clarity in the used terminology. According to the Glossary of the Evaluation Guidelines, the key term of the question ("Pilot Strategy") refers to "**new means**" (roughly translated by innovation) as compared to previous practice in the area. A second important issue is the **transferability** aspect of these new measures to other areas. However, none of these aspects are covered by the judgement criteria put forward in the Guidelines.

A further problem has been that it was very difficult to establish a causal connection between "pilot strategy" and its possible impact. Besides that, nearly all MTE reports state that it is too early to see any impact.

When looking at the issue of innovation, which is implicit in the term "pilot" and the requirements that LEADER should act as a "laboratory" for rural development, the few statements on the issue were covering the following aspects:

- Innovation is interpreted in terms of structure – i.e. LEADER itself prepares the ground for innovative behaviour in the rural areas – by encouraging cooperation, bottom-up acting, etc.
- Innovation is in some cases also seen as having new project ideas developed or, in a traditional sense having new technologies implemented in the area. – Still then it is pointed out that impacts will only be measurable at the end of the programming period.

The transferability issue is hardly covered – and if so it is understood as transferability of measures within the programme among LAGs – i.e. "good practice".

Judgement criteria

Has Socio-economic and environmental perception of and identification with the territory amongst rural actors improved through the implementation of the strategies?

Have rural actors embarked on planned and (also) on previously unforeseen activities?

It is not possible to specifically deal with clear cut answers to those judgement criteria, for the reasons given above.

Do rural actors feel more identified with the territory?

This last criterion has not been used within our information collection as the issue of identification with the territory is already covered under question 211 (first criterion). The methodological flaw in this duplication of criteria asking for the same effect is that by applying the method of LEADER synthesis (i.e. gathering of secondary information) the two causes for a better identification with the area can not possibly be separated.

Summary and Outlook

The influence of the “pilot strategy” can not be assessed separately from the impact of the LEADER approach as a whole (including networking, cooperation, and the new forms of local governance engendered by the partnership principle), and therefore an explicit answer to the question is not possible.

The question has been translated into judgement criteria which explore changes in behaviour, attitude and interaction patterns, all elements for which it is too early to draw conclusions.

Recommendations

The assessment of the judgement criteria related to this question should be made in the ex-post stage. To be precise, the surveys which are necessary to get data on these criteria (e.g. if the local actors feel more identified with their area), should be undertaken already in the last phase of the programming period, e.g. as specific studies in the course of on-going evaluations.

Moreover, the question is too general and should be better clarified in operational terms, in particular by introducing a distinction between material effects of the pilot strategy (e.g. the innovative nature of the actions, which seems to have been showed in the everyday practice of some regions) and other “soft impacts” relating to human, social and organisational capital of the area (e.g. the strengthening of the identification with the territory).

Key terms

- Pilot nature of the strategy

C221 To what extent has LEADER+ encouraged the transfer of information, good practices and know-how in the field of rural development through co-operation?

This evaluation question deals with Action 2 of the LEADER+ programme and tries to find out how far cooperation projects have encouraged the transfer of information, good practices and know how.

When looking at the allocation of funds within Action 2 in the reference period, it becomes quite clear that hardly any answer to the questions connected to cooperation could be provided. Not even a quarter of funds envisaged in this action had been spent within the reference period 2000 – 2003, and only a limited number of projects were started (a maximum of 24 in Finland). Within these projects, activities were mainly focused on very preliminary contacts and exchanges, with very little action in terms of concrete co-operation activities.

Judgement criteria

Have partners, rural actors and the population in general obtained useful information and know-how for their own development activities through LEADER+ cooperation mechanisms?

In those cases where activity has been going on the experience has been positive. First good know-how transfers have been observed (again correlating strongly with the maturity of the LAGs). Generally the extent of transfer of information, good practices and know-how could not be measured at that time and will be measurable only after the programming period with some time lag.

Summary and Outlook

As good cooperation actually depends from the experience of local actors, this effect seems to take place in more mature environments of local governance. The requirements for good territorial cooperation are high and additional resources have to be committed for networking. Human resources have to be made available, capable to adopt a patient and empathic approach in respect to cultural differences, to overcome language barriers, and to negotiate the terms for cooperation agreements and contracts etc.

Last but not least, cooperation is hampered by anxiety. Inexperienced local actors are more inward oriented as they are afraid that competitors might take the good ideas from them. This happens indeed, but it takes some time to understand that, in the last consequence, openness produces more dividends than isolation.

Recommendations

The support and encouragement for cooperation should be maintained, through creating attractive fora for exchange (e.g. trouble shooting platforms, market places for ideas or good practice either virtual (via internet platforms) or real (via fairs and real "market places"), motivational work and enabling measures (by the provision of simplified tools for application, accounting and reporting).

The major benefit from these tools for the actors in the LAGs may be seen in creating the subjective feeling that there is an added value in cooperation like the gaining of experiences and personal contacts and not just another source of funding.

Key terms

- Transfer of information, good practices and know-how

C222 In what measure has LEADER+ contributed to the realisation of development projects through co-operation between territories?

This evaluation question provides information on the extent to which LEADER has contributed to generate multi-area projects with a knock-on effect on each partner's own territory.

The same as for evaluation question 221 holds true: there has been far too little activity within the reference period to answer this question in a comprehensive way. Hardly any projects were initiated at the end of 2003, and very few by the update. The MTE reports and updates contain feelings and theoretical considerations, but little useful information.

However, there is some preliminary evidence that cooperation between territories is indeed facilitating the realisation of projects. Again, the previous experience from LEADER II seemed to facilitate the start of such projects, which leads to the logical conclusion that in the course of the implementation of LEADER+ (probably towards the end of the programming period) Action 2 activities will rise considerably.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that there is no evidence that the above-mentioned projects would have been launched even without territorial cooperation.

Judgement criteria

Have Projects been launched that would not or could not have been implemented without co-operation between territories?

There is too little evidence on this criterion from the information sources available to give a clear cut answer at this time.

Were Projects developed in cooperation relevant for the needs of the territory covered by the programme?

This second judgement criterion has not been covered within the collection of data related to Tool 2 in light of the early stage of implementation of co-operation projects (see above).

Summary and Outlook

One of the stronger motivational factors to embark on cooperation projects is the wish to attain a "critical mass": rural areas often only have a limited stock of resources which does not enable them to solve certain problems or to take advantage of some of their potentials just on their own. In contrast, by pooling their strengths, these areas can overcome the constraints thus achieving results otherwise inaccessible.

Recommendations

The impacts of cooperation activities should be explored in a separate study, towards the end of the programming period, when a sufficient number of cooperation projects can be exploited. The reason for recommending a specific study which goes beyond the scope of the ex-post evaluation could be found in the need to apply a more qualitative research design in order to detect the benefits deriving from cooperation between territories.

C223a To what extent have co-operation activities gone beyond the LEADER+ programme?

There is almost no information on this issue. Few examples show that co-operation activities are going on between LAGs and “mainstream” equivalent bodies, such as PRODER in Spain or “*Regionen Aktiv*” in Germany. Some MTE reports state that co-operation is already difficult between LAGs, it would be even more difficult with areas which do not benefit from the same funding (and LEADER is one of the only source of funding for co-operation projects).

Again there is too little information available on this issues that the single judgement criteria could be appropriately dealt with.

C223b To what extent did networking take place with partners outside the EU15?

Two LAGs within the LEADER programme of Madrid established contact with Chile, and one LAG in the same programme with Poland. Contacts exist between Flevoland (Netherlands West) and Hungary. Austria and Bavaria have contacts with Switzerland, which are also fostered by INTERREG III activities.

Apart from these examples, there is no evidence of regular networking with partners in the New member states or outside the EU within the reference period,

Summary and Outlook

In the LEADER context, the terms cooperation and networking integrate three aspects:

- They are operational principles and as such part of the LEADER approach
- They are measures with respective budgets (action 2 and 3)
- They are actions regardless of being eligible for funding or not. They are standard practices of any development activity.

The MTE reports and case studies point out there is certainly more exchange and even cooperation between LAGs and partnerships beyond the LEADER programme and even beyond the EU15 than being documented and explicitly formulated in terms of eligible actions or projects.

But in general, the reports tend to deal with the three aspects of cooperation and networking in one, so that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between cooperation and networking activities in general and the respective actions.

However, within the reference period little activity did happen in terms of cooperation and networking as eligible actions. The factors facilitating cooperation at that early stage of the programme have been:

- Previous experiences in LEADER – the more experienced the LAGs have been , the easier they established linkages to other programmes
- Commitment of (both local and administrative) actors to cooperation and networking is strongly related to their commitment to the LEADER approach and to local development in general. Cooperation and networking are “advanced” practices of LEADER.
- Another furthering factor is similarity (of culture, mentalities, geographical features etc.) and closeness between the territories involved.

Key terms

- Cooperation between rural areas
- Networking

F5a What type of co-operation was predominant: inter-territorial within one Member State or transnational and what were the expectations of LAGs for the co-operation?

This evaluation question tries to reveal the dominant type of cooperation in the context of LEADER and furthermore what the main drivers are for LAGs to embark on territorial cooperation.

As mentioned before the physical output in terms of networks has been very low within the reference period. Therefore information provided in the different sources used often includes developments up till the year 2005.

Judgement criteria

Was the dominant type of co-operation: Inter-territorial within the member state, Transnational, No co-operation project as yet?

In general terms it seems that LAGs carry out inter-territorial co-operation more often than trans-national cooperation. The reasons are to be found in the higher effort to establish trans-national co-operations and the lack of EU support to do so. As in other cases previous experiences with LEADER had a positive effect on the up taking of co-operations (especially on the trans-national level).

If there were co-operation projects: Was the main expectation in respect to co-operation: Economic benefits, Solidarity links, Knowledge benefits, Cultural links, Lobbyism, Create a new organisation, other?

In terms of expectations the LAGs generally think that cooperation is an important aspect of LEADER and the overall attitude towards the establishment of co-operations by LAGs is rather positive. The learning experience, and the establishment of cultural links are the predominant expectations, together with a joining of efforts and the combination of skills. Still the obstacles imposed by higher personal engagement and barriers like the language are preventing LAG members to actively seek more trans-national co-operations.

From the additional information gathered (MTE updates and case studies) it could be seen that by 2005 in the majority of programmes the activity level in terms of both interregional as well as trans-national cooperation has increased.

F5b What are the particular benefits of each form of co-operation for the Rural Development strategies?

There has hardly been any information on the particular benefits from cooperation for the development strategies. The main reason may be found in the low performance of this action and thus in the lack of experience.

Summary and Outlook

The limited results so far achieved underpin the assumption that cooperation is an action which needs time to grow and develop and is determined by experience and knowledge embedded in the local partnership. All in all, expectations seem to point into the direction that cooperation will be much better used in the second half of the programming period. An overall positive attitude towards cooperation seems to prevail.

The assessment of benefits for rural development strategies can not be made at this stage and should be therefore addressed during the ex-post evaluation.

Recommendations

The support and encouragement for cooperation should be maintained, through creating attractive fora for exchange, motivational work and enabling measures (by the provision of simplified tools for application, accounting and reporting).

But this support should not be demanding in a sense that the managing authority urges the LAGs to generate cooperation projects just to clear the available budget. The support should be much more subtle, aim at awakening people's curiosity (e.g. establishment of "market places" for ideas/good practice either virtual or real), take away fears, creating attractive opportunities for getting together (grandfathering of successful LAGs/LEADER buddy networks²⁶, trouble shooting platforms), providing easy tools for communicating and partner search (e.g. internet platforms) etc.

Key terms

- Inter-territorial cooperation (within the Member State) and transnational cooperation between rural areas
- Rural development strategy

F6 What factors positively or negatively affect the up-take of co-operation activities by LAGs?

This evaluation question seeks to reveal the main factors furthering or hindering the uptake of cooperation activities.

The MTE reports and the updates do not present a comparable picture of the administrative set-up for cooperation: decision-making on project selection (pre-allocation to the LAG or centralised selection?), calendar (some programme closed the selection of cooperation projects at the end of 2005, others are opened until 2008), funding levels, eligible actions (can they be outside the priority theme or not?),

²⁶ I.e. bringing together experienced LAGs with inexperienced ones all over Europe with the aim of mutual learning (in the form of previous experiences from the one side and fresh, innovative ideas from the other side).

existence of pre-development funding, etc. Without this framework it is difficult to understand what the LAGs see as main positive or negative factors.

Judgement criteria

Up-take of co-operation is positively affected by, Up-take of co-operation is negatively affected by?

On the positive side, the following factors are identified: the technical assistance provided by the networks, the experience and contacts deriving from the LEADER II experience, , a geographical central position.

On the negative side, the range is broader, which can explain why this activity is not picking up: lack of European networking and political message, late start of LEADER+, bureaucracy and lack of clear rules, the need for human resources, language skills, lack of local interest and difficulties in finding co-funding, perception that these projects are rather risky in terms of not producing a measurable outcome, fragile, prone to failure, and pressure from the n+2 rule that forces a focus on the implementation of Action 1. In all, it might be that the “time for cooperation” does not come before the securing of the local work and partnership.

Summary and Outlook

As furthering factors for the uptake of cooperation activities, MTE reports generally refer to local actors' experience, technical support from the networks and availability of time. Mentioned hindering factors are lack of time and interest, sometimes fears of local actors of failure and the risk of not meeting the n+2 rule, overly bureaucratic application and funding procedures, lack of technical support and conflicts at the level of the local group.

Recommendations

The LEADER programme management (on EU as well as on programme level) is called for a more flexible approach when dealing with cooperation projects. This comprises the following:

- The budgets dedicated for cooperation projects (according to Art. 65 of Reg. 1695/05) should be exempted from the n+2 rule, and their trans-national component should be supported by the European rural development network. The authors are well aware that this recommendation is contradicting to existing legal provisions – still the issue is an important one all the same.
- advising LAGs actively that cooperation activities should not been undertaken before the securing of the local work and partnership
- providing good practice examples of successful cooperation up-taking and management

The specific conditions in terms of risk and time frame should be taken into consideration.

Key terms

- Inter-territorial cooperation (within the Member State) and transnational cooperation between rural areas

C231 To what extent has LEADER+ encouraged the transfer of information, good practices and know-how in the field of rural development through networking?

A lot of networking seems to be going on, especially at the level of LAGs technical teams. They use the opportunities provided by the national networks funded under the Action 3 of the programmes, but also regional networks, informal networks (set-up to represent the LAGs interest), thematic networks. Although the amount of activity in this field seemed quite encouraging, there have been opinions in the MTE reports that networking at EU level is coming in late and being inappropriate. LAGs use the networks to exchange technical information, to identify partners, to gain new skills, to promote their actions, etc. The main problem is rather the lack of time to become familiar with the large offer of networking opportunities.

Judgement criteria

Have partners, rural actors and the population in general obtained useful information and know-how for their own development activities through LEADER+ cooperation mechanisms?

A lot of positive examples of networking activities throughout the programmes have been listed (Austria, Germany-Brandenburg, Spain-Asturias, Northern Ireland)

Through their contact with the LEADER+ network LAG managers have been facilitated to: (England)

1. Share best practice in terms of projects and processes
2. Solve problems
3. Network with other LAGs
4. Find partners for co-operative activity

Another issue of the networks have been the training of staff (Germany – Mecklenburg-Vorpommern)

As methods used for supporting networking, classical tools such as web sites, magazines, and data bases of projects were mainly used.

Summary and Outlook

As already noted it is difficult to distinguish between cooperation and networking as a development activity and as an eligible measure (action 2 and 3). Therefore some results mentioned in the MTE reports may not be clearly attributed to formal networking activities.

However, experience shows that networking is a rewarding activity, although it is a time consuming task for LAGs which they have to take into account for LAG management. In general, networking has been seen as a positive and important activity which ensures the transfer of information, good practices and know-how. However, networking takes some time to generate tangible benefits and should therefore be thoroughly assessed in the ex-post evaluation

Key terms

- Networking

C232 In what measure has networking facilitated co-operation between rural territories?

This evaluation question tries to explore the cause-effect relations between networking under action 3 and cooperation under action 2. Networking may be the seedbed for cooperation, because it provides spaces for finding partners and for co-generating new ideas. Networking (as a development activity in general) may also be the outcome of a cooperation project which provides access to new partners and continues to grow beyond the realm of the LEADER universe. Examples for both cause-effect relationships are numerous.

Networking has supported cooperation between territories. The overall impression from the information provided in the MTE reports, updates and case studies is very positive. Still the evidence which has been found may be misleading to some extent. When looking at the figures of the reference period, not even a third of the envisaged expenditures have been spent. Thus information on the experiences could either refer to activities later on or provide only first snap-shots.

Judgement criteria

Has partner finding been encouraged and facilitated through the networking instruments of LEADER+?

There is good evidence that networking has been very actively followed by the LAGs (Spain – Asturias, Castilla-Leon, Wallonia). Networking has been seen as a good tool for partner search (Spain – La Rioja, Germany – Bayern).

Has networking encouraged the establishment of informal networks between rural actors?

The establishment of informal networks has been rather a negative side-effect of the lack of national networking support or the late uptake of such activities (e.g. Sweden, Greece).

Apart from that the size of the programmes/countries seems to correlate positively with the establishment of informal networks. The special situation of a small country with a small programme (Luxembourg, Austria) produces a special informal networking culture. The LEADER managers are continuously in contact and they meet frequently whenever an event about rural development takes place. Consequently they exchange experiences and transfer know-how and information without an formal organisation. Some of them know each other since LEADERI others joined the group in LEADER+.

Have the networking instruments of LEADER+ facilitated implementation of cooperation activities?

There are overall **positive experiences** to be found on this criterion:

Networking has facilitated the cooperation of LEADER initiatives with other rural development programmes (Spain – Asturias, Castilla la Mancha). Additional information meetings (between the networking office or authorities on program level) for special tasks: e.g. cooperation, exhibitions, one times per year the program management organize a symposium (with changing themes) (Germany – Sachsen).

Still there are also some **negative experiences** to be found:

There is a high level of confusion on who does what (there are many actors involved in networking) and it must be stated that cooperation has not benefited from networking very much (Wallonia). The

networking – like any other activity in LEADER – depends on the engagement of single persons; if such an engagement is missing (or hindered) then the networking activities suffer (Luxembourg).

Summary and Outlook

Evidence upon the immediacy of cooperation as a consequence of networking is not very robust. This is – of course – connected to the reference period, which did not really allow for intensive networking activities. Either the national networks have been established rather late (which has triggered the emergence of quite successful “do-it-yourself” networks on an informal basis), or the time for intensifying external relations has been too short.

Key terms

- Networking

3.3 Responses to Theme 3: Question relating to the Impact of the LEADER+ Programme

C31 To what extent has the LEADER+ programme contributed to protect the environment in the beneficiary areas (including Nature 2000 areas)?

The evaluation question explores the impact of the three actions of LEADER+ on the environment as one of the horizontal aims of European Structural Funds. LEADER+ does not have an explicit mission in this respect, but it is deemed to contribute to sustainable development which comprises environmental protection and improvement.

In spite of little evidence at this time, a look on the type of actions funded indicate that LEADER+ contributes to protecting the environment in the beneficiary areas, although (i) in many cases not to the extent as it is proclaimed in the strategies, and (ii) more indirectly than through targeted action.

Environment is considered as a key theme in the perspective of sustainable development of rural areas. However, what plays a prominent role in outspoken strategies, does not necessarily translate itself into projects with tangible outcomes. Even if a large part of LAGs includes protected zones, projects directly aiming at nature protection or making direct reference to Natura 2000 are rare; on the other hand, there are numerous integrated projects enhancing natural resources, renewable energies, cultural landscape and environment-friendly production methods.

The lack of implementation capacity for environment-focused projects may originate from the absence of environmental partners in the LAG board, from local conflicts opposing local people to environmental regulations, from the lack of expertise and competence at local level and the lack of support for animation and mobilisation from the programme administration.

Judgement criteria

The combination of supported activities focusing on development/production and/or on the environment generates positive environmental effects.

Preliminary observations let expect that the combination of supported activities focusing on development/production and/or on the environment generates positive environmental effects, although less than espoused in programme documents. Direct reference to Natura 2000 is not a frequent phenomenon, although strategic references to environmental improvement are nearly ubiquitous

(Balears, Vlaanderen). Environmental education and awareness raising are frequent topics in LEADER programmes (Finland).

Natural resources are enhanced by key activities in the beneficiary areas.

LEADER+ does contribute to enhance natural resources in the beneficiary areas. Greening of production methods has been a frequent topic in LEADER programmes; in some Italian regions, each project undergoes an environmental evaluation before approval (Bolzano). Environmental authorities are involved in the decision-making process (Emilia-Romagna), although sometimes not without conflicts (Castilla-León).

Summary and Outlook

We presume that

- the coincidence of a clear commitment to environmental protection in the territorial strategy,
- the occurrence of environment-related criteria in programme and project selection,
- the existence of sensitive areas or specific environmental challenges within or near the LEADER+ territory,
- the representation of environmental NGOs or authorities in the LAG boards and work groups,
- a considerable number of environment-related projects and
- a high level of awareness and corresponding expectations towards environmental effects among stakeholders

represent strong pointers towards potential environment effects.

However, the collected data gave only partial hints, mostly exhibiting slightly positive tendencies. It is too early to take a clear standpoint in this respect; however, even in the long term external influence factors would make it difficult to really assess the environmental effects of such a small intervention. Therefore we think that the most tangible effects will be probably produced by the increase in intellectual capital, in the level of environmental awareness among local actors and in the emergence of new relationships which reflect the integration of the environmental theme into stakeholders' deliberations upon the future of their territory.

Recommendations

The introduction of Natura 2000 payments as well as the new coming forestry environmental payments in the rural development programmes of the next period provide a new opportunity, which should be taken up by LEADER stakeholders. Due to this higher importance of nature protection and related payments in the rural development programmes of the next period, the LEADER axis should take up the challenge of creating win-win situations in or around protected areas. In many countries, nature parks and biosphere reserves provide excellent opportunities for the realisation of an integrative and sustainable LEADER strategy encompassing all three other axes of the RD programme.

C32a What has been the LEADER+ programme contribution in order to improve the situation of women in the beneficiary areas?

The evaluation question explores the impact of the three actions of LEADER+ on gender equity as one of the horizontal aims of European Structural Funds and an explicit aim of LEADER+.

The contribution of LEADER+ to improving the situation of women varies from region to region and from LAG to LAG. The active participation of women in rural development, specifically their representation in the management staff is still on the rise. Actions targeted towards women mostly focus (i) on the social needs (child care, elderly care, local transport...) of women and (ii) on female entrepreneurship and employment.

The efforts lead to varying results, which are also difficult to monitor. The share of female project promoters mostly ranges between 20% and 50%. The reported cases show some positive impact, although in some areas there could be much more done according to the existing demand. Monitoring gender aspects is still a methodological challenge, as counting attendance shares will not provide the full Figure.

Judgement criteria

The judgement criteria of the EC guidelines have been applied and complemented in the survey. It seemed specifically important to distinguish between the strategic (local group) and operational (management staff) level of decision-making. This distinction turned out to be relevant, as women are far better represented in the management staff than in LAG boards.

Gender profile of population benefiting from assistance contributes towards maintaining/promoting a balanced population structure and equal opportunities.

Women are addressed by LEADER+ more clearly than in mainstream programmes, but facing the existing contextual influence factors it is not possible to say at this moment, if the gender profile of beneficiaries contributes towards maintaining/promoting a balanced population structure. The statements range from a rather weak consideration of women's needs (Austria, Denmark), to appreciable efforts with little impact (Vlaanderen), to tangible effects (Baden-Württemberg), and a situation in which the "gender-neutral" culture creates positive effects by itself (Finland).

Needs of women in rural areas are taken account of in the selection of activities.

Needs of women are taken account of in the selection of activities in both programmes and projects – although more in the latter than in the former. The option to enhance female entrepreneurship was explicitly chosen by Greece and Ireland, with more visible effects in the latter than in the former. Within Spain, the share of female project promoters ranges from 20% (Canarias) to 50% (Cataluña).

Women are represented appropriately in the local group.

Women are represented appropriately in the operating staff, less so in the decision making bodies, such as the LAG board. In Austria, gender aspects are mainstreamed at all institutional levels, but the presence on women on LAG boards is still not balanced. In England, their presence in LAG decision making bodies ranges from 0% (Fens Leap) to 60% (Herfordshire). In Saarland and Valencia, there are LAGs with no women participating in the decision making bodies.

Women are represented appropriately in the local management staff.

Women are represented appropriately in the operating staff. In many LAGs all over Europe, female staff members constitute the majority. For instance, in Cataluña, 70% of staff is female.

Summary and Outlook

The available data mainly confirm the conclusions of the LEADER II evaluation: LEADER has a specific ability to respond to women's needs and to promote women as stakeholders in rural development. This may have to do with the focus on small scale activities, with the inclusion and reward of voluntary work, with the bottom-up approach, or with a combination of all of them (and other influence factors).

It can be expected that the strong representation of women in the technical staff of LAGs will soon be followed by a stronger representation in the decision-making bodies of the LAG (and of the administration), which is still unbalanced in most European rural areas.

The strategies of regional programmes and LAGs exhibit two main avenues towards gender equity: firstly that of positive discrimination, explicitly addressing women as a priority target group. Secondly, the design of the approach and the development strategies in a way that intrinsically generates a balanced gender profile of beneficiaries. The right choice or mix of these approaches depends on the appraisal of the socio-economic and cultural context. In general, local actors did not appreciate stark prescriptions in terms of content, target beneficiaries etc., as they prefer to design their actions on the basis of a thorough assessment of their area's needs.

Recommendations

At programme level, the presence of women in decision making bodies should be regarded as a selection criterion for applicant LAGs. This should be assessed in a qualitative manner and not by numerical thresholds, in order not to prepare the ground for demonstrative mechanical compliance. This approach requires an adequate representation of women already in the jury for the selection of LAGs.

Key terms

- Priority target beneficiaries

C32b What has been the LEADER+ programme contribution in order to improve the situation of young people in beneficiary areas?

The evaluation question explores the impact of the three actions of LEADER+ on the youth and on the age profile as one of the horizontal aims of European Structural Funds and an explicit aim of LEADER+.

The contribution of LEADER+ to improving the situation of young people is still more difficult to assess than for women. Although the theme is stressed with less emphasis than the gender issue, there is priority given to young people in many programmes, as well as in selection criteria for projects and, less so, for LAGs. The main focus is on employment and professional training. Apart from some shining examples (e.g. in both Belgian programmes, positive impact is reported in this respect, in Aragón, 71% of the newly created jobs are taken by people under 40 years, a thematic network between rural areas (NorTic) in Luxembourg promotes the use of communication technologies in primary schools, other projects create jobs, provide trainings and new services for young people), the

direct impact on job creation seems to be rather weak; however much has been undertaken to make rural spaces more attractive for young people by investments in leisure infrastructure and cultural activities.

The implementation of projects targeted at young people is partly hampered by their lack of capital and access to loans, and their mobility (e.g. for higher education). All in all a lot is done for the youth, less is done by them, and their participation in decision-making bodies is absolutely scarce.

Judgement criteria

Share of young people benefiting from assistance contributes towards maintaining/promoting a balanced population structure.

There is no clear indication that the age profile of beneficiaries would contribute towards maintaining/promoting a balanced population structure.

The general uptake is deemed relatively low (Portugal), but in some countries the theme is addressed at a strategic level (Euskadi, Murcia, Emilia-Romagna, France), with lower effects than hoped for (Denmark, Greece).

There seems to be a lack of experience in how to address the youth. Sometimes it is very difficult to gain valuable information upon the theme (Thüringen, Scotland). Some evaluators say the theme should become more predominant in the future (Rheinland-Pfalz).

Needs of young people in rural areas are taken account of in the selection of activities.

In many regions the needs of young people are taken account of in the selection of activities. In Aragón, the topic has been taken into account in the selection of LAGs. In a number of Spanish regions like Canarias, Madrid, Murcia and Euskadi, and in 27 LAGs of Bavaria, the theme was a selection criterion for projects, in Emilia-Romagna this topic is considered as a priority in calls for tender. In other areas it rather depended on LAG managers and representatives on the LAG board, if projects were carried out aiming at meeting the needs of young people (Austria).

Incentives (job, training, services...) are provided for young people to stay in rural areas.

There are incentives provided for young people to stay in rural areas, such as training, cultural and leisure activities, but to a lesser extent opportunities for participation in decision making bodies. Investments in a lively and attractive social and cultural environment are at least as important as job creation. Some LAGs have explicitly met the challenge of outmigration of the youth (Denmark). There are some interesting examples of strong involvement of young people in local development (Valencia, Sweden).

Summary and Outlook

Whereas most actions were directed towards the creation of jobs and corresponding training, investments in the social and cultural environment of the area seem to have a more visible effect on the apparent attractiveness of the area and therefore on the individual decision of young people to stay or to go. Both, the subjective domain which is addressed by investments in the image of the territory, and the factual opportunities to contribute and to get employed are indispensable. Evaluators observed that if young people's associations are represented at the LAG, activities targeted at the young generation get more profile, although these representatives don't necessarily have to be young people themselves. However, it is a strong signal of openness and commitment to the issue, if young people (which in this case means: under 20 years old) have seat and vote on the LAG board; but this is still a very rare phenomenon.

Many rural stakeholders feel the connectedness between the issue and the viability and sustainability of their area. Thus we can expect a stronger uptake of that theme in the future. It will however be much more important to enable and to encourage the youth for self-organised and self-determined action than to undertake activities on their behalf.

Recommendations

The issue requires a specific effort to identify, to reflect, to codify and to disseminate good practice examples as already done by the LEADER Observatory network for LAG good practices in general.

The presence of young people in decision making boards should be a selection criterion for LAGs, and this also requires their representation in the jury responsible for this selection.

Key terms

- Priority target beneficiaries

C33 To what extent has LEADER+ helped explore new ways of improving socio-economic viability and the quality of life in the beneficiary rural areas?

The evaluation question explores the aggregate impact of the three actions of LEADER+ on the socio-economic viability and quality of life in rural areas.

There are two main roads used in order to achieve socio-economic viability and quality of life: (i) concentrate on soft location factors, cultural heritage and activities, research, education and experimental starting phases of new activities; (ii) invest in economic diversification, which means new businesses and services or upgrading existing businesses in order to hit the threshold of competitiveness, sometimes to the detriment of the innovativeness of the action.

The choice of the “quality of life” priority does not indicate the direction taken by the LAGs in their individual strategies, as economic investments are obviously seen as instruments to attain this goal. The diversity of approaches chosen reflects the diversity of socio-economic and governance contexts in rural areas and it also reflects the apparent flexibility of the LEADER approach (see question F8).

The direct effects (on jobs, demography etc.) are surely marginal, the effects on local beliefs and mindsets are considered more important, but their real leverage effect can certainly not be assessed in a short period of time.

Judgement criteria

It can be expected that new, sustainable sources of income are being created.

New income has been created, although it is too early to say if the source of this income is always sustainable. This effect is more tangible and measurable in the short term, where LEADER is still used for productive and material investments (Greece, Spain).

It can be expected that new/better services, adapted to the needs of local populations, are being created or developed.

New and better services, adapted to the needs of local people, have been created or developed. This effect was particularly mentioned by MTE evaluators (Balears, Vlaanderen, Denmark). Many projects have focused on service facilities in new forms.

It can be expected that the beneficiary areas are getting more attractive for residents and non-residents and the cultural heritage is going to be enhanced.

Although it is difficult to provide a comprehensive picture at this stage, the beneficiary areas have obviously benefited, due to the enhancement of local identity, cultural heritage, offers for tourism and leisure, local amenities and small scale actions attractive for residents and non-residents. On some regions, this effect is among the most prominent ones (Austria, La Rioja, Schleswig-Holstein).

The demographic situation in the assisted areas has improved in terms of age distribution or depopulation.

Due to the small scale and short term of the programme there is no way to construe a direct link between LEADER+ activities and an improvement of the demographic situation in the assisted areas in terms of age distribution or depopulation. There is a “wait and see” attitude among evaluators, but many see it impossible to attribute such effects to a small scale development programme such as LEADER+ (England, Netherlands, Schleswig-Holstein).

It can be expected that local economies are going to be more diversified and consolidated.

In spite of the small scale there is a contribution to local economies in terms of diversification and consolidation. As a result of the immaterial nature of LEADER+ investments, the measurable impacts to diversity of local economies are often deemed rather little (Schleswig-Holstein), but the judgment of certain MTE evaluators (Finland) and many local actors (Portugal) point into the direction that LEADER+ does contribute to the diversification and viability of local economies.

It can be expected that quality, sustainable job opportunities are going to be created or maintained in the beneficiary areas.

Quality, sustainable job opportunities have been created or maintained in beneficiary areas, although the overall effect is limited due to the small scale, and not easy to assess due to the focus on immaterial investments. Most of the new jobs have been created in new niches and hitherto unexplored types of activities (Sweden), but in some regions the expectations were higher than the results (Austria), although it is too early to make an assessment (Denmark).

New, improved local products are more competitive.

The new and improved products which conquer a new market niche contribute to the competitiveness of the area, but sunk costs should always be taken into consideration due to the innovative and experimental character of LEADER+ activities. Many regions put a strong focus on innovative product generation (Austria), but still the impact on the area's competitiveness in quantitative terms is seen as marginal due to the small scale character of LEADER+ (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern).

Summary and Outlook

The effects of LEADER+ on socio-economic viability and quality of life can be perceived more easily at micro level: the character of projects funded allows to give a quite realistic figure upon the particular strength of LEADER+ to knock on new developments, hitherto unseen in the respective territory, to create jobs in small scale operations and to bring forth new products and services, hence to contribute to an improvement of the local web of economic and public services.

Unfortunately, the success stories at micro level do not provide a sufficient basis for extrapolating these effects on the rural area as a whole. But there seems to be an emblematic character of these effects at micro level, which operates as lever to the conscience of the rural population and

encourages more actors to do more in respect to local development. Resumingly: whereas the translation of “hard” effects at micro level to “hard” effects at local or regional level is not feasible, the “hard” effects at micro level may generate “hard” effects at local or regional level via the leverage of “soft” effects in the minds of people, in the image of the area, and in the organisational capacity of local groups.

F7 Is there evidence resulting from LEADER+ programmes showing that a need exists to broaden the key target groups for future programmes beyond women and young people, e.g. to older people/newcomers/minorities in rural areas?

The evaluation question explores a particular aspect of the other questions relating to priority target beneficiaries (see also our answer to questions C32 and C33).

There seems to be no need to broaden target groups for future programmes, as (i) neither women nor youth are yet served in a sufficient manner; (ii) the LAG is the decision point for such orientation, but a reference at programme level would be helpful as a ‘political backing’ to overcome possible barriers at local level.

LEADER is seen as a good opportunity to include the specific needs of social groups into a coherent local development strategy. There are some examples showing that some regions or rather LAGs have taken specific action to integrate minorities, to serve older people’s needs or to focus on long term unemployed etc. on the basis of the local appraisal of strengths and weaknesses. However, there are mentions that the needs of elderly people should be better served. Newcomers, specifically immigrants, are considered as an important resource, but also as an important challenge for integration in a growing part of rural Europe, hence as a future task for rural development in the framework of LEADER.

Judgement criteria

The question itself was taken as the only criterion by the evaluators.

There is evidence emerging about the need to include more key target groups into the programme.

Although some groups appeared to be neglected, as LEADER+ is rarely directed towards specific social groups in the area., many rural actors confirmed that LEADER should not dilute its area-based approach by targeting specific groups of beneficiaries (Vlaanderen, Finland). Too many prerequisites for local strategies could even hamper the local commitment (Sweden). The competitiveness of rural areas is certainly strengthened by inclusive strategies, but it is not so much the programme than the LAG which is the hinge joint for designing targeted action for specific groups, following a thorough assessment of the needs of all particular groups of local people. Only in rare cases immigrants were involved in LEADER+ projects (e.g. La Rioja, or a co-operation project between Luxembourg and Portugal (LAG Pro Basto). The need to find a way to include migrant people in local strategies was certainly expressed, although the question is how to do this (Ireland).

Summary and Outlook

Overall, there was some reticence among interviewees in respect to the “dilution” of the area-based approach. It was confirmed that LEADER+ has interesting features for people with specific needs through its small scale character, the bottom-up and partnership approach, the focus on innovative

practices and so on. It is also evident that LAGs (e.g. in Greece or Portugal, see F10) do well in combining their local strategies with other programmes explicitly focusing on the area's social and human capital (such as EQUAL). These complementarities are still not exploited to their full potential.

However, it is also true that LEADER+ does not even respond to the desired degree to the needs and specificities of the declared target groups (women and young people), and that overly bureaucratic practices reverse some of the potential beneficiary effects of LEADER to less favoured people (e.g. in Germany, see F8).

We conclude that the LEADER approach is a sufficient means to address the needs of specific groups – certainly not the most deprived ones! – if it were applied in the right way, i.e. with the right instruments of territorial diagnosis, animation, participation and project generation.

Recommendations

LAGs may operate in addition in other programmes in their area in a complementary manner (e.g. in structural funds activities). No further designation of target beneficiaries is needed or desirable.

Key terms

- Priority target beneficiaries

F8 Are the existing LEADER+ actions, themes, and measures (e.g. scope, level of public funding and co-financing rates) sufficiently comprehensive and flexible to meet the different contexts and needs of rural areas?

This cardinal question explores the capacity of LEADER+ to generate change and tangible improvements in rural areas. It can be regarded as a direct conclusion of the answer given to the cardinal question C214 exploring the impact of the pilot strategy, the core process of LEADER+. Herein lies the clue to the appropriateness, practicability and possibly still unexploited potentials of the LEADER approach.

In general, the programme is considered as flexible and comprehensive enough to meet the rural areas' needs through (i) providing a wide scope of activities reaching beyond other programmes; and (ii) enabling mechanisms and instruments for local development co-ordination, networking and accompaniment for project promoters. Specifically the latter ensures sustainability and real adaptation to the local needs.

Although the actions, themes and measures can be sufficiently customised, there are several factors reducing the flexibility and comprehensiveness of LEADER+: (i) the requisite private co-financing rates sometimes seen as too high for private promoters and municipalities; (ii) the timely restriction by the n+2 rule which does not allow equitable participation and animation in deprived areas or amongst disadvantaged groups; (iii) in spite of starting delays, it has also been observed that once the process is unleashed, the demand exceeds the available funds; (iv) there are numerous complaints about the duration of administrative processes and the involvement of too many authorities in the decision-making process, and also some about supplementary rules limiting the possible benefits of the programme.

Judgement criteria

The three criteria have been proposed by the evaluators. As they were formulated as closed questions (yes/no/uncertain), we checked their reliability altogether instead of doing that for each single criterion.

The existing scope of actions is sufficiently comprehensive and flexible to meet the different contexts and needs of rural areas.

The scope of actions turns out to be sufficiently broad. Only in exceptional cases the priority themes have been felt as limiting, in others as too generic. However, the n+2 rule had the most restrictive effect on quality and content of the projects due to the time pressure it generates, closely followed by bureaucratic procedures. LEADER+ offered the possibility to fund the starting up of territorial development agencies functioning as hubs for local networking, “midwifing” new co-operation projects and partnerships, bringing innovative impulses into the area, connecting local actors to global networks, enhancing communication across the public sphere, private business and NGOs, and enabling the local actors to make use of various support programmes through the structures built up under the LEADER+ programme (Germany).

The existing level of public funding is sufficiently high to meet the different contexts and needs of rural areas.

New themes of European importance should not be added as obligatory requirements. This was rather dismissed by the interviewees. It would change the area-based nature of LEADER+. There are worries about the future implementation of LEADER+ that it would be narrowed down to agricultural (Bayern) or other purposes (e.g. the environment in Denmark).

The existing level of co-financing rates is sufficiently high to meet the different contexts and needs of rural areas.

Co-financing rates have been considered as a problem for weak groups of beneficiaries, “deep” rural areas and innovative projects. This was expressed in German Objective 1 areas. The threshold of 15% of the budget for the local group and its staff was considered too low in lagging areas where animation should be more intensive for fostering participation (Finland, Spain).

Summary and Outlook

The material the evaluators were able to analyse confirms a prudent “yes” as answer to the evaluation question. The particular strength of LEADER* is its ability to act as booster for a comprehensive development strategy encompassing various programmes and different approaches. This leverage effect will be shown under question F9. Moreover, it is an agile instrument which fills niches which are neglected by mainstream programmes. This is a sensitive point because the shortcomings indicated in the judgement criteria 8.2 and 8.3 in FEQ 8 (concerning level of public co-financing and the maximum rate of funding) could act as inhibitors at exactly the point where LEADER would, under optimal conditions, unfold its true potential.

Key terms

- Public funding
- Co-funding rates

F9 Is there evidence that the inclusion of LEADER programmes in wider development strategies at national/regional level has increased the programmes' effectiveness?

This cardinal question explores the leverage or booster effect of LEADER+ if embedded in a wider development strategy.

The effects of including LEADER programmes in wider development strategies can still not be assessed, although structural changes in many countries indicate that LEADER is producing considerable leverage effects if combined with mainstream programmes in a wise way.

LEADER often serves as an “incubator programme” or as a niche specialist for innovation and specific demands. In Andalucía, Finland and Ireland, LEADER has left a strong imprint in the whole setup of rural policies. With or without coherent strategies at higher administrative levels, LAGs and other local development agencies may combine and bundle the existing support opportunities into a customised offer for local project promoters. Both the isolated implementation and the “backstreaming” to become a resource for standardised rural development measures lower the effectiveness of the LEADER programme.

Judgement criteria

The evaluators have taken the evaluation question as the only criterion. It was formulated as a closed question (yes/no/uncertain).

The inclusion of LEADER programmes in mainstream development strategies is going to increase the effectiveness of the programme.

There is evidence from various countries and regions that LEADER+ is included in wider development strategies: as an incubator programme (Euskadi, Rheinland-Pfalz), as a specialist for innovation and specific demands (Austria, Vlaanderen, Wallonie), as the core element of an overarching development strategy (Andalucía, Finland, Ireland), or as a soft ware allowing to combine different programmes at local level (Cataluña, Germany, Portugal). The inclusion of LEADER+ in wider rural development strategies has helped LEADER+ to better reach its objectives, although there are certain risks which should be taken into account., specifically the risk of over-redundancy (Northern Ireland) or of “backstreaming” (expressed as a fear in view of the future implementation of LEADER as the fourth axis of rural development in Bayern). “Insulated” LEADER implementations are always considered as problematic (England, Sachsen, Castilla-La Mancha).

Summary and Outlook

The results of the evaluation seem to confirm that exploitable answers can only be found in those cases, where this inclusion has taken place to a high extent (“strong” mainstreaming). Partial or patchy transfer of LEADER elements into otherwise unchanged mainstream programmes do not seem to produce satisfactory results.

However there is a way to give LEADER a place in rural development in which it can act as incubator or niche specialist with positive results. This is not an “inclusion” in the strict sense, rather an intelligent combination.

The mainstreaming of LEADER as the fourth axis in the future Rural Development Programmes is seen with mixed feelings: on one hand the stakeholders welcome the better endowment and the prominent place of LEADER in rural development, on the other hand they express fears that the linkage could work the other way round: as a “backstreaming” of LEADER in the sense that it gets

instrumentalised for mono-sectoral measures or projects of the village renewal type, with little or no structural impact on the rural area.

Recommendations

LEADER can unfold its potentials if it is given a clear position and role in the wider context of rural policy. It does not play a big role if it is “included” or just wisely combined with other development programmes or approaches. LEADER is a programme with high leverage potentials: a lever does neither function if it is disconnected from any other object, nor can it function if it is stuck in a pile of heavy stones.

This means that LEADER should neither be acting as “stand alone” programme which is disconnected especially from other agricultural support measures nor should it be “tucked away” among more powerful (especially in terms of funding and organisation) support measures (e.g. economic support measures).

Key terms

- Complementarity between actors/Complementarity of actions
- Mainstreaming LEADER

F10 Are there examples of good practice with a view to an optimal exploitation of synergies and complementarities between LEADER and other EU policies and programmes promoting growth, improved quality of life, and employment, in particular with the other Community initiatives?

This question explores possible synergies or complementarities of LEADER+ with other (mostly Structural Funds, but also national) programmes operating in the area.

A systematic collection of good practice in this field is still missing, but there are frequent observations of good complementarities, concerning (i) the type of eligible measures; (ii) the type of beneficiaries; (iii) the customizing of different strands through development agencies connected with or embedded in LAGs.

In some regions, complementarity may be achieved through the inclusion of LEADER into wider rural development strategies (see F9), which allows to allocate each type of project to the most appropriate support scheme. Moreover, LAGs in some areas (Portugal, Spain, Greece) operate as implementing bodies for INTERREG III, EQUAL and Objective 1.

Judgement criteria

The evaluators have taken the evaluation question as the only criterion. It was formulated as a closed question (yes/no/uncertain).

There are examples of good practice with view of synergies and complementarities between LEADER and other EU policies and programmes.

There is evidence that LEADER has identified and exploited synergies with other EU policies and programmes, specifically contributing to improving the quality of life, much less so concerning employment or growth. In regions in which LAGs enjoy a far-reaching autonomy and sufficient organisational strength, they act as implementing bodies for INTERREG III and EQUAL; however,

these Community Initiatives can also be co-ordinated with LEADER+ at the level of regional authorities to serve the needs of rural areas. As concerns URBAN, there are no synergies with LEADER+. The complementarity of LEADER is often seen in its ability to activate local actors from bottom-up, hence in its methodological approach (CS Vlaanderen, Finland, Sweden). Concerning Structural Funds and other Community Initiatives, synergies are reported from Finland, Luxembourg, Madrid and Bayern (with objective 2 as well as with regional programmes, rarely with objective 3). In border regions, INTERREG III is an important complement not only in terms of project funding (Luxembourg), but also in structural terms, as the LAG acts as an implementing body. This is also the case for EQUAL, with excellent examples in Extremadura and Portugal

Summary and Outlook

The interviewees see positive examples for synergies and complementarities – and this is clearly reported through the explanations added to question F10 – but they hesitate in bringing them forward as “good practice”; maybe they still see much room for improvement, or they deem their own governance context as too idiosyncratic as to serve as a model for others.

These findings go in line with the interpretations given for the answer to the cardinal question F9: LEADER+ unfolds additional added value if wisely combined as an incubator or innovatory niche programme, or – in the most evolved case – as the pounding heart of an overarching rural development strategy. It can not unfold this potential in cases of insulation or over-redundancy.

Recommendations

This question should be studied more in detail. There is a need to identify, reflect, codify and disseminate good practice in this respect. It would notably provide the new member states a wider horizon on the plasticity of the LEADER approach and boost the imagination of stakeholders on how it could be utilized for the best of their rural areas. We would suggest the Commission to carry out a specific study on the topics included under F10.

Key terms

- Complementarity and Synergy of Structural Funds Programmes

3.4 Responses to Theme 4: Questions relating to the Impact on the Territory as regards the Specific Objectives of LEADER+

C41 To what extent has the LEADER+ programme contributed to promote and disseminate new integrated approaches to rural development through the application of specific features, notably through the pilot character of the strategies, co-operation and networking?

LEADER+ contributes to the promotion and dissemination of new integrated approaches, notably through networking, informally between local groups and actors. The networking co-ordination units play a strategic role in transfer, although many of them, including the European contact point, much too late – which led to a conspicuous under consumption of action 2. Dissemination into other policies happens at the level of LAGs, through thematic (inclusion: EQUAL) or spatial (border areas: INTERREG) links to corresponding EU-programmes. It is noted that LEADER+ while incorporating new features, builds on previous LEADER programmes (and LEADER philosophy) and thus the process of contribution to new integrated approaches is an on going one.

LEADER facilitates exchanges between actors within an area, between LAGs and between “programme cultures”, but the degree to which this opportunity is taken up, can not be easily assessed. It depends on a number of factors – from the “thirst” of local actors to do so, it depends from governance routines, it depends from the LAG’s own experiences and their ability to “give” something for what they might get. New products and processes are the most common object of transfer, but the diffusion of new ideas and approaches may instigate a comprehensive dialogue upon regional governance and rural policy. The extent to which appropriate government bodies are receptive to new ideas and approaches is also important in this context.

Whereas innovation may epitomise all the other LEADER features, networking is the feature which serves best for disseminating and transferring all other features. This may be substantially supported by the European and national networking co-ordination units, but there are a lot of informal exchanges, within and across countries, spreading the LEADER approach across rural areas, to a growing extent also in the new Member States. It is indeed suggested that the most effective transfer of ideas is via the informal networking of the “LEADER family”. Further work needs to be done however in identifying to what extent ideas or innovations emanating from LEADER+ really inform policy makers involved in defining new approaches to rural development. In this context it is noted that most MTE reports rely heavily on the views and experiences of LAGs rather than other agencies involved in rural development.

Judgement criteria

Co-operation between LAGs has permitted to exchange and implement good practices and know-how

Considerable evidence in the MTE reports show that there has been exchange of ideas and know-how between LAGs. The degree of co-operation varies between countries but is generally quite good. Specific evaluation of instances where good practices are transferred are more difficult to identify in the MTE reports. The role of the formal Networks in the process is also highlighted, but the late start of these Networks does mean that their potential value in this role had not been maximised at the mid-term stage.

Networking mechanisms have efficiently disseminated information, good practices and know-how through all the LEADER+ territory

Informal networking remains a valuable tool for dissemination of good practice and know-how. The more formal networks that are well resourced were late in starting and their role in facilitating dissemination was not significant at the mid-term stage, but this should change during the second half of the programme.

Summary and Outlook

The analysis sought to establish the extent to which the application of the LEADER+ specific features have contributed to promoting a new integrated approach to rural development. The MTE reports give some indication that the specific features of LEADER+ are promoting such innovative approaches but the Figure is patchy – mainly due to inadequate data and analysis in the MTE reports. As regards the **pilot character** of the LEADER+ programme the focus on innovation is not the same in all programmes nor indeed is the definition. **Dissemination and know-how transfer** is seen as a core part of most programmes – formal and informal, though there is a lack of evidence of the extent to which it really informs policy. Nevertheless in some countries there are indications that the LEADER approach is gaining credibility. Some questions remain as to **what is disseminated or transferred** – it maybe that there is more a sharing of experiences than actual skills. In this context the temporal

nature of LAGs (and personnel working on LEADER+ programmes) comes into question as knowledge transfer is from person to person. This is especially true in the situation where the **formal networks** were slow in being established.

Recommendation

The networking devices need to be in place at a much earlier stage. They should, besides their current role in the “management of flows”, under which we understand ...

- Generating, channelling and managing information,
- bringing people and institutions together,
- collecting and storing case studies and project descriptions on good practice,
- fostering new cooperation projects,

... fill a key role in the “management of stocks” under which we understand ...

- creating spaces for common reflection on excellent practices in diverse thematic fields, horizontal issues and methodological approaches,
- extract the generic lessons from these practices, codify and disseminate them to the whole LEADER community and beyond,
- systematically link up to other European networking bodies and institutions and embark on common projects (URBACT, INTERACT, ESPON, EURADA, Council of Regions etc.),
- feed the acquired knowledge on good governance for local development into a consistent quality management system which can be used by LAGs and programme administrations for strategic controlling,
- relaunch the innovative side of LEADER by inviting local actors, regional and national stakeholders and other experts in “laboratory groups” in order to elaborate on new themes and approaches and to disseminate their results in European seminars.

Key terms

- Integrated approach
- Networking

C42a To what extent has the LEADER+ contributed to a more efficient use of endogenous resources (physical, human, environmental) in rural areas?

In order to properly distinguish between physical, human and environmental resources and local employment the evaluators have decided to add to the evaluation question referred to in the EC guidelines (C42a) another question specifically investigating into possible effects of efficient use of endogenous resources on local employment conditions (C42b).

The area-based and the bottom-up approach contribute to a more efficient use of endogenous resources. By the involvement of local people in a thorough analysis of the local potentials, resources are more channelled. Pilot strategies have helped to bundle forces, but have sometimes been perceived as restriction and too prescriptive. Yet they have ensured a focus on identifying and possibly tapping hitherto under used resources.

Human resources play the key role: they help to identify and to re-value local resources, but they also are a local resource in itself. They can be harnessed by appropriate training and mentoring methods,

but the major effect comes from the motivation factor of a holistic approach and the associated ability to raise community capacity, by establishing common sense among the local actors.

The focused territorial orientation of the business plan enables local actors to identify the unique features around which they can build a sound strategy, including an examination of what resources exist in an area. In this context the innovation feature does help to focus on what resources are available. This process, from the recognition of the area's own resources, of its real needs also in terms of external impulses, to problem solving by means of a coherent pilot strategy, requires technical support at local level. The process does not bear fruitful results if the strategy is broken down from a menu of pilot themes by experts without the involvement of local actors.

Judgement criteria

The area-based approach is expected to encourage a more efficient identification and use of the endogenous resources of the beneficiary areas

The question while extremely relevant is not easy to answer objectively especially in areas where other development programmes or economic activity is also a factor. Again there is a link here with the Common Evaluation Questions under theme 1 (implementation of the LEADER method) and the Action Specific Questions. All LAG strategies to some degree bring together experience and know-how regarding the local area and local/regional socio-economic policy/structures. All LAG strategies have the potential to generate synergies by bringing these aspects together (and the evidence of LEADER II would suggest that this is likely to occur), but whether this has a significant impact on the exploitation of endogenous resources is a key question. The philosophy and design of LEADER+ and all six specific features of LEADER+ strongly encourage the use of endogenous resources and in particular human resources.

Information available at MTE level reflects more what is planned than what has happened; this is a question that addresses impact and ideally would be answered at a later stage and supported by good indicator data agreed at the outset. Appropriate baseline data is also important in answering this question.

The bottom-up approach is expected to improve the identification of development needs at local and regional level, and to facilitate the implementation of adequate responses to those needs

The comments made in respect of the previous criterion are valid here also. The link with questions in theme 1 particularly with regard to the selection process is important (C12).

The bottom-up approach should facilitate the identification of development needs at local and regional level, and facilitate the implementation of adequate responses to those needs – as intended by the design. At the MTE stage the responses to this question are more informed by the programme design than by experience. Some MTE reports do mention that LAGs still feel that control over programme development has limited the bottom-up nature of the programme. This criterion seeks to assess the extent to which the bottom-up approach improves identification of development needs and it is assumed that such development needs inform the programme. Unfortunately the MTE reports do not (mainly due to lack of data) evaluate the extent to which this is true especially from the perspective of the broader community rather than the narrower LAG perspective.

The LAGs have specifically addressed the enhancement of endogenous resources

The design and nature of LEADER+ ensures this, so the question really is to what degree and how has LEADER+ accelerated the process. It is to be assumed that the enhancement of endogenous resources will be a feature of successful business plans. Most LAG strategies put forward measures that aim to enhance endogenous physical, human and environmental resources (or combinations thereof) in some way. This can be through training and mentoring of local people, regeneration of existing buildings to provide workspace, or 'green business' support.

The comments made in respect of the previous criterion are valid here also. The link with questions in Theme 1 particularly with regard to the selection process is important (C12). The bottom-up approach facilitates the identification of development needs at local and regional level, and facilitates the implementation of adequate responses to those needs – as intended by the design. At the MTE stage the responses to this question are more informed by the programme design than by experience, especially as some programmes were at an early stage. Some MTE reports do mention that LAGs still feel that control over programme development has limited the bottom-up nature of the programme.

The development of integrated pilot strategies and the priority themes are expected to lead to a more adequate approach to the exploitation of endogenous resources

Again to answer to this question against this criterion cannot be divorced from the questions in Section 1. 1.1.2. It could also be argued that this could be a question in its own right as it gets to the core of what LEADER+ is attempting i.e. marrying the pilot nature of the LAG strategies (coherent, articulated around a priority theme, new in the target area and potentially transferable) with the priority themes with the assumption that priority will be on use of endogenous resources

Co-operation and networking are expected to contribute to exchange methods for identification and utilisation of endogenous resources

Different interpretations of what is required here are possible and some overlap with question 4.1 is apparent. Other questions relating to co-operation and networking overlapped with this and for the most part this criterion was not addressed in CEQs

Summary and Outlook

The findings showed that in those cases where the area-based and the bottom-up approach are applied successfully, a more efficient use of endogenous resources has been achieved. The pilot strategies have contributed to this in two ways: (i) By backward bonding: if the focus is lent from the past: historical or traditional features (feasts, culinary recipes, architectural design, craftsmanship...), from landscape and nature etc. In this perspective the resources locally available are perceived in a new perspective. The community uses these resources to turn them into assets, but in a way that does not destroy their unique character or undermine their intrinsic value; (ii) By forward bonding: if the focus is lent from a common vision of the future which aligns local actor for a common purpose. In this perspective they pool their resources and start to use their available resources more efficiently through cooperative agreements.

In excellent cases, backward and forward bonding is interwoven, mutually referring on each other. Still – alas – due to the short period of implementation, impacts of this type could not be assessed in MTE reports at a broader territorial level, nor related employment effects, and therefore this success factor for pilot strategies of combining backward and forward bonding is a prudent assumption by the evaluators.

Of course, these observations made at the micro-level should not simply be extrapolated towards a view on the overall efficiency of resource use as a side effect of the LEADER programme.

Recommendations

Case studies should be carried out to measure the impact of LEADER on resource efficiency at European level, e.g. using the FACT method (Focused Assessment through Cause-Effect Tracing)²⁷.

Key terms

- Endogenous resources

C42b Has the more efficient use of endogenous resources had an effect on local employment rates and if yes, how has this been measured?

These effects are too early to be assessed. Regardless to the thematic focus, the process character of LEADER+ is expected to bring forth employment in later stages of project implementation.

The effects also depend on which type of measures are funded by LEADER+, preparatory, productive or supportive measures, experimental or experienced types of endeavours...

It can be expected that the processes instigated by LEADER+ will produce, at least in the long run, employment effects.

In general the relationship between the use of endogenous resources and job creation is not assessed in the regions. Furthermore, most evaluators do not provide answers to this question which they deem to be assessed later on.

LEADER+ is generally considered as a good instrument for supporting processes rather than investments. However, these processes are reported to have employment effects in later stages (Austria, Schleswig-Holstein), even if the programme structure is not centred on job creation (Bavaria), although there are LEADER+ programmes which explicitly want to (Nordrhein-Westfalen and Spanish regions), some with less success than expected (Netherlands).

Moreover, the strategic focus is decisive in respect of time: if LEADER+ is designed to support start-up enterprises, there will quickly appear measurable effects, if LEADER+ concentrates on tourist infrastructure or information facilities, this will be less the case (Hessen).

A limiting factor could be the small size of the LEADER+ programme (Brandenburg).

Summary and Outlook

The question addresses the further impacts of a (possible) **efficient** use of endogenous resources, but neither the impacts nor the efficient use was really thematised in the MTE reports.

However, as a result of logical thinking, we can assume that the use of under utilised local resources is in itself efficient. There is evidence from the MTE reports that LEADER+ has harnessed local resources that would otherwise be diffused, particularly in the case of human resources. As regards **impact on employment** it is not possible to assess from the MTE reports in a structured way. Effects on employment (if any) are likely to happen over a longer time period and it is the harnessing and improvement of human resources in a wider context that will likely have the longer term impact in terms of rural development.

²⁷ see Lückenköter, J., Kroes, G., Fekade, W. (2002): Methodological Challenges to Conducting Impact Studies – A Guide to the FACT Approach. Arbeitspapier 176, Institut für Raumplanung an der Universität Dortmund (IRPUD). Dortmund.

Recommendations

If this question is to be reviewed in the ex-post evaluation, it should be posed more precisely: which kind of resources are addressed? It should also be posed less ambitiously. It can be, at the time of the ex-post evaluation, assessed, how many jobs were created or safeguarded, but will it be really possible to measure the impact on the employment rate?

Key terms

- Endogenous resources

C43 To what extent has the programme completed, influenced or reinforced mainstream rural development policy in the target area through the LEADER+ method?

LEADER has, since LEADER I, had an influence on rural policies and implementation practices in nearly all European Member States. In two countries (Ireland and Finland) it led to a paradigm shift²⁸ in rural policy, in others it helped to complement more traditional approaches with an innovative edge, again in others it helped to build up local competence in self-organising local development, from needs assessment to integrated implementation and service provision, fostering the capacity of local partnerships to engineer different support schemes for the benefit of their area. Sometimes there is some doubt, if the LEADER features actually originate from the LEADER programme, as there are other possible sources of transfer.

Mainstreaming can manifest itself in various ways: as (i) impregnation of mainstream policies by a transfer of specific features or the approach as a whole; (ii) serving as a funding instrument complementary in terms of eligible measures, or governance style; (ii) well-managed co-ordination and integration of different support schemes to the benefit of the local actors and the territory.

There is widespread recognition that local partnership-based local development agencies can only become multifunctional service providers, if they can build up capacities over time and if their financial endowment is ensured for much longer than a funding period.

Judgement criteria

Synergies have developed between the programme and mainstream rural development activities in the area

A first requirement for responding to this question would be a complete Figure of all rural development programmes and activities in the area and also a broad agreement of what the mainstream rural development policy is. This was not generally provided in the MTE reports. Examples of synergies are provided in some instances but MTE reports do not show a consistent Figure and it would seem that there are areas of overlap. The development of synergies can only be ensured where the LEADER programme and approach is considered in the context of the formulation of broader regional and rural development programmes.

²⁸ Paradigm shift refers to the fact that LAGs are considered increasingly credible as regional developers and development experts involving considerable community consultation

LEADER+ approaches or activities have been transferred into the national/regional mainstream rural development policy

It is too early to assess but indications or examples where LEADER+ is influencing national/regional RDP have been identified. The question and criterion are more relevant for the ex-post evaluation.

Summary and Outlook

The analysis has sought examples of where the LEADER “experience” informs wider rural development policy and why this is so. Different facts emerge in different countries. In some countries e.g., Ireland and Finland it would seem that the LEADER approach is mainstreamed and this seems to be due to the partnership approach between national government and LEADER “players”. The positive results of previous LEADER programmes are also a factor. In countries or regions where a “top-down” mentality prevails then the LEADER approach is not recognised to the same extent in rural development policy.

Recommendations

The potentials of the LEADER approach should be more and better communicated specifically to those countries which will start to implement it in the next programming period. This information is of specific importance now, in the programming phase, when the budgets are allocated and the rules are established. If the different possibilities and forms in which mainstreaming has occurred in the EU15 are better known, the programme makers in the New Member States will have more options to decide in which way they would utilize the opportunity offered by the LEADER axis.

3.5 Responses to Theme 5: Management, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes

C51a What arrangements have been made in order to bring in new LAGs and areas?

This evaluation question explores the development process involved from previous LEADER programmes and whether the LEADER “experience” is extended to new areas. The analysis examines a number of issues including the extent to which LEADER boundaries have changed, proactive measures taken to attract new areas as well as the overall methods used for promoting the programme and inviting LAGs to take part. The analysis looks at how the areas are defined and the methods used to select LAGS and whether or not any particular initiatives were in place that would attract new areas or LAGs.

With regard to arrangements to bring in new LAGs the responses depended on a number of factors including the extent to which the country/region was covered by previous LEADER programmes (or was new to LEADER) and role of LEADER in overall RDP. In general it would seem that there was more an emphasis on the competitive selection process rather than any positive or pro-active steps to include new LAGs. Previous experience of LEADER does give areas a competitive advantage especially where there is a strong cohort of personnel who understand the LEADER philosophy, principles and approach.

Most MTE reports focus on the LAG selection process and the information campaigns that accompany this as the main tool used in attracting new LAGs. In some countries policy changes were made so as to extend the area covered by LEADER while the policy decision at European level to include all rural

areas was also significant. Changes in composition of LAGs from the previous programmes were also designed to cover more area. The competitive process of selection has been a positive feature in attracting new LAGs and in some instances new LAGs were selected to the exclusion of players who had participated in previous programmes. This question in fact relates more to the programme design stage than to the programme management stage.

Overall it would seem that the steps taken in different countries are appropriate and practical given national priorities, eligible areas within countries and different experiences. The competitive selection process is given priority over any other issues and this is generally seen as a positive feature. Experience of previous programmes did give existing LAGs an advantage – however there are incidences of LAGs that participated in previous programmes not qualifying for the current programme.

Judgement criteria

New areas have been included in the programme as compared to the previous programming period

Precise quantitative information that would allow judgement against the above criteria was not generally available from the MTE reports in a format permitting this kind of investigation in a meaningful way. Most of the information in the MTE reports is of a qualitative nature with some information on the number of LAGs, changes in composition, etc. While the ideal quantitative data was not available there is quite good qualitative data in the MTE reports on the selection process.

This question is linked to the selection process and national and regional operational programmes and is considered more relevant to the design stage. Where new areas are included it has been through the selection process rather than as a result of any specific measure taken to support new entrants or where new areas have become eligible. The emphasis has been very much on the open, transparent and competitive process rather than attracting new areas per se. There has also been considerable emphasis on publicity so that all potential areas were aware of the programme – this avoided the danger of LEADER+ becoming “LEADER 3”. The absence of quantitative data on area changes in all of the MTE reports is disappointing as this would give an insight into the degree to which, if any there has been changes in the areas from previous programmes.

Summary and Outlook

The main conclusions are that there does not seem to be any particular noteworthy initiatives to attract new areas but more of an emphasis to create “a level playing pitch” for all eligible areas. Information campaigns and a twofold selection process are among these measures. Areas with previous LEADER experience had a distinct advantage (mainly due to experience in knowing how to prepare business plans and LEADER procedures). The conclusions are limited by the absence of supporting quantitative data especially in regard to changes in the overall areas included and number of LAGs.

Recommendations

The managing authorities and the implementing bodies have a crucial role in the starting phase of the programme: to ensure fair conditions for more resourceful and for less favoured areas, for the more advanced local partnerships and for the beginners. Measures for this would be:

- Early, complete and clear communication to potential applicants on the conditions to participate in the competition (call for proposals)
- Tailored technical assistance to potential LAGs in the pre-selection phase
- Facilitation of partnership building and area delimitation where mediation is needed

- Organising learning events (exchanges, excursions, trainings, seminars etc.) bringing together “experienced players” with “beginners”, inviting also good communicators from the European LEADER community.

C51b Concerning the LAGs having already participated in LEADER I and/or LEADER II, how did they benefit from their experience, especially in order to maximise the added value of the specificities?

This evaluation question explores the development process involved from previous LEADER programmes and whether previous LEADER “experience” has a significant impact in terms of contributing to the added value of LEADER+. The question explores the relationship between experience and impact without really defining the nature of the experience and where impact can be anticipated.

The main benefit of experience among LAGs that participated in previous LEADER programmes is in terms of knowing how to elaborate development plans in line with LEADER requirements and generally understanding the LEADER philosophy. There is also the issue of acceptability and credibility that is important in terms of the bottoms-up approach and gave LAGs that participated on previous programmes a competitive advantage. Experience gained by staff (and voluntary workers) from previous LEADER programmes is also widely viewed as being very valuable and contributes to improvement in general management and financial skills. Overall the experience of working in previous programmes (even if composition of LAGs has changed) is viewed as a positive factor in terms of LAGs participating in LEADER+ and embracing it’s specific features. It is noted however that previous experience is not essential and that many LAGS new to LEADER are working successfully and there are instances where LAGs that participated in previous LEADER programmes were not successful during the selection process. The point is also made that there has been a loss of valuable experience due to the time lag between LEADER+ and previous programmes as experienced staff found new positions. As regards groups benefiting from previous experience assumptions can be made that they will have benefited from previous experiences and this would have given them a competitive advantage in the selection process. The MTE reports have not produced any clear indicators that facilitated answering this question and the analysis relies mainly on qualitative data. It is felt that this question is more applicable to the selection process at the outset than the ongoing management and evaluation of the programme.

Judgement criteria

LAGs already involved in previous phases of the programme have incorporated lessons from the past in order to maximise their strategies and programmes

Experience from previous programmes is acknowledged as a definite plus factor especially at the application stage where knowledge and understanding of the LEADER approach, philosophy and operations is a key competitive advantage. However the MTE reports that cover areas with new and old LAGs do not report any major disadvantages in the new groups vis-à-vis the older ones. LAGs that have participated in LEADER I and II Programmes tend to be more experienced, have a broader social acceptance, stronger partnerships and more qualified personnel with regards the LEADER specificities. Other responses to this question were largely focussed on the positive features of LEADER rather than specifying any particular lessons from past experience. Some groups thought that the extra emphasis on exchange of experience and best practices, animation and closer proximity to communities were aspects of the initiative were lessons from the past which were worth acting upon.

Summary and Outlook

In assessing responses the focus has been on the value of experienced personnel in the process and where this experience has greatest “added value” – programme design, quality of business plans, quick start up, etc. Available data mainly support the value of experience and there is little data to show if inexperience caused difficulties or indeed if new ideas emerged where new people were involved with little previous experience of LEADER+.

Furthermore especially experiences in the field of cooperation and networking were mentioned as important for a successful performance within these actions under LEADER+. The positive effects were already described within the evaluation questions under theme 2.

Where this question was explored to any significant extent in the MTE reports the value of previous experience is highlighted at all stages of the programme and it is clear that a strong LEADER “culture” exists in many regions. This LEADER culture does seem to have an impact on broader rural development policy in some regions.

Recommendations

The lack of good qualitative and quantitative information to further explore this area is a drawback and there is potential for specific case studies or research work in this area.

F11 Is there evidence that there are ways to simplify eligibility conditions improve access to the programme and allow beneficiaries greater flexibility?

Difficulties with eligibility conditions are highlighted in many of the MTE reports though it is difficult to distinguish between problems arising from actual eligibility conditions or in the implementing arrangements. Some improvements are noted in the updates where actions to improve the problem areas are reported. The main problem area seems to be that there are insufficient resources at LAG level to meet the demanding reporting and other bureaucratic requirements. Although the need for accountability and control rules for the management of LEADER programmes is accepted, the practical experience shows that a more process-oriented control regime would better support local governance than rather rigid “management by objectives” in the form of quantitative rules. While problems are highlighted there are not many concrete proposals as to how conditions could be simplified within the existing EC and National regulations. The issue of flexibility is a combination of adhering to conditions and the approach of the managing authorities. Where managing authorities adopt a flexible approach and recognise the LEADER+ approach (particularly the “bottom-up” feature) then there appears to be much less problems. Specific problems with the n+2 rule are highlighted in many of the MTE reports and it is felt that this rule may in fact work against the LEADER+ approach.

The MTE reports list complaints made by LAGs about overly strict eligibility conditions and lack of flexibility but there is not significant evidence of analysis of the complaints or proposed solutions that could operate within the public finance systems that govern most programmes. The main problems elaborated in the MTE reports are:

- Timeframe from initial project proposal to final approval too long
- High level of matching funds required
- Excessive documentation that adds to administrative burden

The most common proposals are to operate a global grants system and also the less stringent application of the n+2 rule and also some suggestions that improved communications with managing

authorities could reduce problems. It does seem that LAGs with experienced personnel have less problems than those without and that perceived problems may be as much to do with experience and communication as with rules/conditions and systems.

Judgement criteria

Proposals to simplify eligibility conditions that would improve access to the programme and allow beneficiaries greater flexibility have been elaborated.

Many problems were elaborated that are perceived as having a negative impact on programme implementation and uptake. These include:

Inappropriateness of n+2 rule

Inappropriate requirement for matching funds

Inadequate systems for financing leading to cash flow problems

Excessive bureaucracy and reporting requirements

The impact of problems seems to vary between countries – varying from a perceived very negative impact in Portugal to more positive perception in Ireland and Spain.

Summary and Outlook

Eligibility conditions are subject to compliance with EU and national requirements and are formulated to meet the philosophy and objectives of the LEADER+ programme, while at the same time acknowledging that the use of public funds is involved and thus appropriate procedures and controls must exist. However it is not a straightforward public finance programme and a large amount of private sector finance is involved. Thus in analysing the question of possible simplification of eligibility conditions the approach has been to see if there is evidence or proposals that show where conditions could be simplified that would lead to either improvement in participation or better projects. In other words whether there are potentially good projects or participants that are excluded because of the eligibility criteria and rules. Areas identified where rules can be seen to have a possible negative effect are:

- Excessive bureaucracy that absorbs the time of LAG staff to the detriment of other areas of their work or deter potential private sector participants
- Financing requirements that are either unattractive to potential private sector participants or so stringent that some groups are excluded.
- Delays in decision making leading to the loss of potentially good projects

The analysis has sought to differentiate between problems caused by the eligibility conditions that may lead to a loss of impact and problems with conditions that while annoying and frustrating do not have any significant adverse impact on the LEADER+ programme in a particular country or region. This differentiation is not always easy especially at the mid-term stage. The analysis and response to this question also does not assess problems arising from the design of the LEADER+ programme e.g. problems arising with the concept of “innovation” but rather confines itself to examining evidence of problems with eligibility conditions and possible solutions.

Recommendations

The scope of eligible projects should be kept as wide as possible in content, but the quality requirements for the application should be precise and clear.

Another recommendation refers to the LEADER feature of “innovation”: territorial innovation rather happens between local actors than within a certain enterprise or project. It is by definition unpredictable if the innovation will succeed (on the market, among users etc.). The local action group

should be encouraged to reserve at least a part of the budget for experimental investments, for local think tanks, for unconventional trials to solve a problem etc. This could be one of the attractors for young project promoters, by the way.

Key terms

- Eligibility conditions

C52 To what extent have the present arrangements for management and financing set up by the authorities, the administrations and the local partners helped maximise the impact of the programme? To what extent have they hindered this impact? Could alternative financing mechanisms be considered in addition to grant aid (e.g. low interest loans and revolving funds)?

Management and financing arrangements play an important part in the implementation process of LEADER+ and deficiencies in this area can undermine the overall LEADER+ approach. While satisfaction with management and financing arrangements is expressed in some MTE reports the extent to which this impacts positively on programme impact is not explored in any significant depth. Problems with financing and management are highlighted in many reports and perceived in some countries as hindering impact. The nature of the problems range from inadequate financing arrangements leading to cash flow problems to excessive bureaucracy. The late start up in many countries is also perceived as a consequence of management deficiencies and this late start up has hindered impact.

There are quite varying responses to this question and in a significant number of cases the question is not answered as it was considered “too early” to answer. The reluctance to answer is due to the fact that the question looks at programme impact and many feel it is too early to assess impact. Other evaluators took a more realistic definition of the question and looked at the impact on programme design, organisation and implementation to date. Where this was done the responses are mixed – some positive and some negative. There is generally positive views on the selection process and publicity and mixed views on the degree of autonomy that is allowed to LAGs. Some countries (UK, Ireland, Spain) seem quite positive as regards overall managing and financing while others (e.g. Portugal) are more negative. Excessive bureaucracy leading to delays in financing projects is viewed as the main management issue that hinders impact and in fact detracts from some of the other attractive design features of LEADER+.

Delays in design and implementation of appropriate systems that would support management and reporting are highlighted in many instances and it would appear that insufficient consideration was given to this issue at the outset of the programme.

The supplementary question on alternative financing mechanisms was not part of the original CEQs and thus no information available or conclusions possible. Some MTE reports discussed the possibility of global grants but this is not an alternative financing mechanism but rather a different way of administering the LEADER+ grant.

Judgement criteria

The selection of LAGs has been open, competitive and rigorous

There is generally satisfaction in all of the MTE reports with the selection process. While this criterion is useful it is probably more appropriate in terms of responding to CEQ 1.1. Furthermore it is difficult to evaluate in an objective manner. Assessment of “open” and “competitive” are relatively straightforward but “rigorous” is more difficult to assess. The MTE reports do contain significant commentary on the selection process and there seems to be general satisfaction with the selection process. Most responses to this question are descriptive and qualitative and surprisingly there is very little mention of the number of applications that were not successful. It would seem that most successful applicants had participated in the previous programmes and it would be interesting to know how many new groups are participating.

The uptake within the programme and within the LAGs involves those having the biggest potential for rural development in the selected areas through a combination of implementing arrangements such as (a) publicity about the support opportunities (b) partnership arrangements (c) procedures/criteria for selection of projects and (d) the absence of unnecessary delays and bureaucratic costs for these beneficiaries

Responses against this criterion focused more on management and financing issues and problems rather than on the uptake of the programme and whether or not uptake involved those with the biggest potential for rural development in the selected areas. Thus no clear answer to this part of the question can be elicited from the MTE reports. However the implementing arrangements specified are all essential ingredients for programme success and here the Figure is mixed. More successful programmes combined the specified implementing arrangements quite well while others where problems are noted have difficulties with implementing arrangements concerning delays and bureaucratic costs.

Summary and Outlook

This cardinal question evaluates a very important issue – the impact of actual arrangements for managing, financing and administering the programme. The response to the question mainly deals with the situation post programme design and LAG selection. The information in the MTE reports and in the case studies has tended to concentrate on issues such as bureaucracy, relationships between managing authorities and LAGs, financing, and insufficient autonomy at LAG level that undermines the “bottom up” approach. More fundamental management issues such as structures, management systems, planning and control at LAG level were not highlighted in the MTE reports. Responses to the question also do not refer at all to the role of the Board of Directors in programme management and indeed the question has tended to concentrate on operational difficulties and relationships between Managing Authorities and LAGs. It is also noted that the MTE reports do tend to reflect more of LAG views on problems and this may distort responses somewhat. Nevertheless there would appear to be problems in such areas as:

- Project approval process
- Financing arrangements
- Reporting requirements at LAG level

The question asked to what degree the management and financing arrangements helped programme impact or to what extent it hindered and not surprisingly there was more emphasis on the latter. Positive management arrangements normally resulted from decentralisation, granting of autonomy and the appointment of some form of co-ordinators. Programmes with less problems also seemed to

have established good working structures and relationships with the managing authorities. Where problems exist it would appear to be as much about culture and structures as it is about actual arrangements or regulations.

Many local stakeholders see the degree of autonomy of the LAG in project selection as a crucial factor for smooth and simplified programme implementation. This points to the global grant and “quasi” global grant systems of programme delivery as the better choice. However, the shift of responsibility has a price:

- More bottom-up does not mean less top-down; it may even require more top-down, only a different style: encouraging and enabling instead of command and control. This requires a corresponding understanding and competence at the level of administrations and of local actors.
- A global grant or “quasi” global grant system²⁹ of delivery is only fully operational if all the public funds are dealt with in one single package. If only the European co-funding is decentralised, whereas the LAG has to run for the national co-funding for each project, the effect on programme flexibility would be annihilated (there are examples of this kind in the MTE reports). This requires well coordinated management of financial flows at national and regional level.

Recommendations

The global grant or “quasi” global grant system should remain the idealtype of LEADER implementation.

Both the national/regional government and the local governance system should be prepared for it by adequate capacity and trust building measures.

There are reported cases of smooth implementation also in pronounced command-and-control environments (paternalistic approach), which are usually quite personalised. The actors involved should be aware of this contingency. In these cases we recommend an “enabling paternalism” as the transitory solution to an empowered local partnership.

Key terms

- Management and financing of programmes

C53 To what extent have the present arrangements for management and financing at all levels facilitated the implementation of the LEADER+ method and each of its specific features?

This question evaluates how management and financing arrangements support the LEADER+ specific features.

Arrangements and procedures for management and financing at all levels have a very significant effect on the implementation of the LEADER+ method and its specific features and deficiencies or shortcomings in management can severely undermine the impact even if the original design is appropriate. The management approach and financing arrangements are particularly important in regard to the ‘bottom-up’ approach and it is here that the main problems seem to arise. Recognising the “bottom-up” approach in a meaningful way requires an appropriate delegation of responsibility and

²⁹ I.e. those cases of global grants which are not fully decentralized but distributed via an intermediate public body – e.g. like in Austria via the provinces.

resources and this can cause difficulty especially if existing systems do not readily facilitate such an approach. Steps such as decentralisation of programme implementation (Belgium, Flanders) facilitates programme implementation as does systems of providing financial advances to improve liquidity (Spain, Extremadura).

As with question 5.2 there is a mixed response to this question reflecting different interpretations of the question and the degree of problems experienced with regard to programme implementation. Some overlap with question 5.2 is also noted as the issue of facilitating the specific LEADER+ features was assumed in 5.2. Responses have focused more on the effect on the bottom-up, area based and local group features than on development strategies, co-operation and networking. For the specific LEADER+ features (and the LEADER+ philosophy) to be accommodated an appropriate degree of autonomy is required and this does not seem to be the case with every programme. There is evidence from the MTE reports that features such as the bottom-up approach are negated by excessive layers of decision making. Responses to the question have focused more on management approaches and systems rather than on financing. The structural relationships between LAGs and programme authorities varies across programmes and are mainly of a vertical nature. There is generally satisfaction with the division of duties between the LAGs and management authorities and the arrangements are seen to support the territorial and bottom-up approach but there are areas of conflict over the degree of autonomy that LAGs should have. Scope for improvement in implementation is evident some of which could be overcome by better communication. Most MTE reports complain of excessive bureaucracy and feel this impacts negatively on the programme – a disproportionate amount of time is spent on administration rather than on animation and improving participation. Many of the responses address the issue of staffing both at LAG and Programme authority level as sufficient qualified and experienced staff are seen as an important aspect of management arrangements. In this regard the long gaps between LEADER programmes is seen as a problem with uncertainty created and high staff turnover. There are numerous references to difficulties created by the n+2 rule and this is seen to undermine the ability to fund innovative projects.

Judgement criteria

The division of labour between the programme authorities and the LAGs guarantees the bottom up and are-based approach during the implementation. A vertical partnership has been established.

Where the CEQ is addressed in the MTE reports there is little quantitative information available and the qualitative information tends to reflect the divergent views of the programmes authorities and the LAGs. Information on consultation structures, regularity of meetings and methods of resolving differences are not available. This criterion is considered particularly suitable for a survey whereby the perception of the LAGs as to the appropriateness of the division of responsibilities could be assessed across all LAGs. It does however need to be borne in mind that the programme authorities do have to work within a structured environment and are themselves governed by rules and regulations that may not allow as much flexibility as LAGs would allow. It would seem to be important to distinguish between partnership in terms of equality in the decision making process and the need to subsequently adapt to necessary systems and regulations.

Mechanisms for information, participation and assistance of local populations in the implementation of the programme are in place and operational at local level

This criteria was not widely addressed in the MTE reports and where it was responses mainly refer to publicity activities. CEQ 2.2 also deals with this issue.

Mechanisms to facilitate international and inter-territorial co-operation and networking are in place and operational

Little information was provided as the issue of co-operation and networking was dealt with in 3.1 and 3.2

Summary and Outlook

This question evaluates how management and financing arrangements support the LEADER+ specific features. However the responses to this question are mainly confined to how management and financing arrangements affect the overall programme implementation without specifically examining the specific features. Features such as area based and local group are considered design features and are addressed by earlier CEQs (themes 1 and 2) while features such as inter-territorial co-operation and networking are addressed under theme 3. Thus responses to this question and the analysis of responses is mainly confined to assessment of how management and financing arrangements affect the “bottom up” feature as well as the totality of overall programme implementation.

The response to the question mainly deals with the situation post programme design and LAG selection. The information in the MTE reports and in the case studies has tended to concentrate on issues such as bureaucracy, relationships between managing authorities and LAGs, financing, and insufficient autonomy at LAG level that undermines the “bottom up” approach. More fundamental management issues such as structures, management systems, planning and control at LAG level were not highlighted in the MTE reports. Responses to the question also do not refer at all to the role of the Board of Directors in programme management and indeed the question has tended to concentrate on operational difficulties and relationships between Managing Authorities and LAGs. It is also noted that the MTE reports do tend to reflect more of LAG views on problems and this may distort responses somewhat.

Key terms

- Management and financing of programmes

F12 Is it possible to identify common patterns and examples of particularly successful practice regarding the organisation and activities of the national Networks for LEADER+ programmes in different Member States also in view of the Rural Network for Rural Development envisaged for the 2007-2013 programming period?

The MTE reports and updates report varied progress on the establishment of national networks (less than 25% established) and where networks are established their usefulness and effectiveness is varied. It is also clear that in many instances there are two levels of networks – a formal network that focuses on information dissemination, training, etc and a more informal network (but with some formal structures) that is more of a think tank and a forum for exploring ideas and networking. The question asks directly if it is possible to identify common patterns of successful practice and here are some examples of successful practice that merit further investigation as they do suggest potential for adaptation or replicability. In other instances where some progress has been made on establishment of national networks disappointment is expressed with the role of the networks and the level of support it offers or its role is not seen as important. There is surprisingly little information in the MTE reports as to the role that National Networks could play and how they could be most effective or indeed on the role the National Networks could play in supporting more effective and structured monitoring and

evaluation. It is also noted that where networks exist views on their usefulness, benefit, etc is mainly confined to that of the LAGs. A lack of definition of the role of networks and how they could best be of benefit to the overall programme at the outset of the programme is a major deficiency and the potential usefulness and benefit of networks has been greatly undermined by the late start up in most countries and regions.

Judgement criteria

Are there useful practises to be identified?

Among the positive examples are in Belgium, Wallonia where LAGs and universities are meeting on a thematic basis; this is a good practice worth replicating in other countries: it allows for the transfer of know-how in a codified manner towards other intervention in rural development. The involvement of universities gives it a "scientific" seal of approval. Also in Wallonia technical assistance provided by the Network especially for accounting (making sure that cost claims were presented the right way for both EAGGF and co-funding bodies and those expenses were eligible) is seen by all LAGs as very valuable.

Summary and Outlook

Delays in establishing the formal National Networks reduced their potential effectiveness. In many countries, the networks, once established, were seen as passive and not adding substantially to overall programme effectiveness with roles mainly confined to co-ordination and information exchange. Yet there are some examples of approaches and roles played by National Networks that are successful and contribute positively to the programme. The key requirement is that National Networks should add value and provide additionality.

LAGs appreciate services of the National Networks which bring them into contact with other knowledge providers (universities, research bodies, other networks such as related to local agenda 21, gender issues, territorial cooperation etc.. They also appreciate if they receive trainings tailored to their needs, e.g. for accounting, reporting, communication to the public, advanced instruments of strategic management and controlling, self-evaluation, facilitation etc.. Finally, they appreciate if they provide space for LAGs to co-develop new approaches and instruments and to disseminate what they have developed in small groups to the wider LEADER community in their region and even abroad. Programme administrations can benefit from the Networks through information storage, management and provision. The network staff usually knows the more active part of local actors well. Therefore they are enabled to give quick feedback on issues emerging from the authorities, anticipating the possible response from local actors. In this role they are advisers for decision makers.

Recommendations

For future programmes the roles of Networks needs to be established at the outset of the programme and the networks need to be in place at a much earlier stage. This implies that existing LEADER+ networks should simply be carried on over the transition period to the next LEADER period. For the new Member States this means that the Managing Authorities should take preparatory steps for an establishment of the national networks right at the outset of the programme.

C54 What if any, evaluation activities have been carried out at LAG level? (Permanent or periodical self-evaluation, specific studies, data collection for evaluation etc.) In which LAGs and which type of activity? To what extent have the results of these evaluations been taken into account when the programme mid-term evaluation was carried out?

This straightforward question seeks to establish if evaluation activities are carried out at LAG level and if so where, what type and though not stated in the question for what purpose. Evaluation is an important part of the LEADER+ process and if carried out in a structured way should inform the planning process for future programmes as well as allowing corrective action to be taken where necessary with current programmes.

From the MTE reports it seems that a range of evaluation activities are carried out at LAG level but often in an unstructured manner and a lack of a clearly defined purpose as to how the results can be used. Some instances of evaluation activities informing the MTE are noted but these are the exception rather than the normal. The case studies confirm the analysis of the MTE reports that outside of the MTE other evaluation activities are more of an informal and ad hoc nature and that while useful information may be gleaned from such evaluation activities it does not feed in systematically to any overall evaluation process – either at LAG or overall programme level.

It does not appear that sufficient thought or priority was given to establishing systems that would facilitate evaluation including establishing baseline data and harmonisation of systems. The question needs to be posed specifically at national/regional level and it appears that there is a higher degree of harmonisation of monitoring systems (usually collection of operational data) rather than in respect of evaluation systems. In respect of evaluation it is likely that the MTE is considered the important evaluation and the value and need for a structured approach to evaluation is neglected. Using the criteria defined with this CEQ the general responses would be as follows:

The monitoring and evaluation systems are sufficiently harmonised at national level; – *monitoring perhaps but not evaluation*

The monitoring and evaluation systems fully cover the extent of activities taking place in LEADER+ programmes; *range of monitoring data (mainly operational) but unstructured approach to evaluation*

The M&E systems provide reliable and appropriate data for decision makers and to facilitate valid analysis and comparison; it depends to some degree on the level of decision making and the purpose of analysis and comparison. Generally systems are not adequate to allow meaningful comparison at programme/country level.

As far as can be ascertained from the MTE reports there is insufficient guidance or sense of priority from National authorities on evaluation especially for LAGs that are new to LEADER. Need for evaluation is recognised and included in workplans but often progress limited due to time and financial constraints.

Judgement criteria

The only criterion used is whether or not evaluation activities are carried out at LAG level, the purpose, nature and extent of the evaluation and any significant results or lessons from the evaluation.

Instances of evaluation activities that informed the MTE process are not evident. While there is general acknowledgement of the need for evaluation and references to planned activities little of significance is available at the MTE stage. Reference to self-evaluation are plentiful but it is difficult to assess if this is more concerned with on going monitoring of activities and management controls than

meaningful evaluation. It is evident from the MTE reports that programme evaluation was not integrated at the design stage and essential evaluation features e.g. baseline data were not sufficiently considered. There is a school of thought however that argues that evaluation is of limited use and does not capture the philosophy or essence of LEADER and that elaborate evaluations are limited in value. It is also argued that even where evaluations are planned and/or in the process of implementation, results at the MTE stage are of little value.

Summary and Outlook

To address this question, the analysis has focused on elucidating what evaluation activities were carried out, the methods involved and if possible the intended purpose and results. It is clear from the MTE reports that evaluation is recognised as important by LAGs and most LAGs had plans for some sort of evaluation exercise. However in the responses to this question there has been overlap (and sometimes confusion) between monitoring and evaluation. For the purpose of responding to the question the analysis has focused on evaluation alone as monitoring systems are a different issue. The analysis finds that:

- There is a high recognition on the value of evaluation and most LAGS either have some form of evaluation activity or plan it
- Evaluation approaches and activities were not normally planned at the programme outset
- The evaluation activities are largely unstructured
- There is surprisingly little co-ordination or co-operation between LAGs in the area of evaluation and national networks do not play a prominent role.

An issue calling for further deliberation is, how the LAGs could utilise the results of self-assessment more efficiently and extensively in their work so that they would have genuine guiding effects. Self-assessment in most cases seems to be a one-off operation, and systematic analysis of experience and the resulting corrective actions and learning are suffering from lack of time as the focus is on starting new projects.

Recommendations

The accompaniment of local action groups with a mix of external evaluation and assisted self-evaluation should be designed and put down in the programme. National/regional networks may help the managing authority in operationalising this accompanying device. Learning effects can not be sufficiently anchored by periodic on-off operations. They need to be systematically embedded in the programme implementation itself: reflexivity³⁰ should become one more LEADER feature. Reflexivity means that learning should be embedded at all programme levels by paying attention to the benefits and needs of those acting at that level. Therefore different methods and means of learning should be applied. This would mean that on the programme level and above (EU Commission and Managing Authorities) a result oriented learning should be applied (via standard evaluation and monitoring). The local/regional level would call for self-induced learning methods (such as self evaluation, supervision).

Key terms

- Evaluation activities

³⁰ It is an explicit operational principle of the German Federal pilot initiative Regionen Aktiv (a national LEADER-like measure involving 18 pilot areas).

F13 Are current monitoring and evaluation systems sufficiently harmonized with each other and are they adapted to represent an efficient and effective use of public funds? Do they fully cover the extent of activities taking place in LEADER+ programmes in Member States?

The question is subject to different interpretations especially with regard to what is meant by “sufficiently harmonized”. There is some overlap with CEQ 5.3 and many of the points made there are valid here also. In summary monitoring systems vary throughout programmes and Member States ranging from systems that only provide general descriptions to what can be termed operational data (financial, statistical, etc) on projects to data that seeks to monitor progress versus objectives. Harmonisation with other systems (regional, national) is lacking and it is apparent that many systems are ad hoc and labour intensive. The degree to which systems are designed to ensure effective use of public funds is not clear from the MTE reports with little reference to internal or external audit or value for money assessments.

In general the area of monitoring and evaluation is considered problematic with different requirements at different levels and a feeling that the process is overly burdensome versus the benefits and there is a general feeling that a more simplified approach is required. With regard to evaluation the MTE is the main evaluation exercise but is considered to come at too early stage especially as start up of programmes were generally delayed. The guidelines for evaluation of LEADER+ programmes is generally followed but there does seem to be a problem with the CEQs – either not answered at all or answered in manner disconnected from the overall evaluation. It would seem that the CEQs are considered to be too many and cannot be answered comprehensively without establishing suitable indicators at the outset.

Judgement criteria

The monitoring and evaluation systems are sufficiently harmonised at national level

The analysis looked for evidence of harmonisation of monitoring and evaluation systems at national level and for any evidence that a structured approach was in place that would facilitate monitoring and evaluation. In general there is little evidence of harmonisation in the manner envisaged by the evaluation guidelines though there are some indications that the issue is being addressed proactively at both LAG and Managing Authority level.

The monitoring and evaluation systems fully cover the extent of activities taking place in LEADER+ programmes

The analysis looked for evidence of the scope and range of monitoring and evaluation activities and the extent to which monitoring and evaluation covers the full extent of activities. Monitoring systems are largely appropriate at LAG level and cover the appropriate range of activities in so far as information is available. With regard to evaluation the MTE remains the main evaluation exercise and the structure of this evaluation is such that the full extent of activities is covered. Other evaluation exercises are less clear in terms of extent and remit.

The M&E systems provide reliable and appropriate data for decision makers and to facilitate valid analysis and comparison

The data provided by monitoring system would seem to be appropriate for day to day management and decision making but the adequacy of data for valid analysis and comparison is questionable especially for comparison between programmes at National and EU level. Systems are not adequately

defined to facilitate harmonisation and in many instances there was insufficient consideration given to information requirements at the outset of the programme.

Summary and Outlook

In discussing monitoring and evaluation it is important to distinguish between the mandatory evaluations required by the European Commission and various monitoring and evaluation activities undertaken by National, Regional or local bodies (including LAGs). The objectives and purpose of evaluations such as the MTE are quite clear but other monitoring and evaluation activities at various levels are likely to be more unstructured with varying approaches across different programmes and Member States. However monitoring and evaluation activities at all levels are an important part of the process that informs key decision makers and stakeholders on the programme. It can be argued that the value of any MTE is only as good as the information on which it is based and programmes with appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems are in a better position to properly evaluate their performance against objectives at all levels.

The Commissions “Guidelines for Mid-Term evaluations of LEADER+ Programmes are based on the concept of using Common Evaluation Questions (CEQs) across the programmes, in accordance with the recommendations of paragraph 34 of the *Commission Notice to the Member States of 14 April 2000 laying down guidelines for the Community initiative for rural development (LEADER+)*. The main purpose of using CEQs is enable the Commission to aggregate and use the results at the Community level but at the same time it also enables complementarity of the evaluation of LEADER+ with that of rural development programmes. Though the concept of using CEQs in the evaluation process is valid such a strategy faces a number of challenges and difficulties. The main challenge is to reconcile the desire to get a global view of the effects of the implementation of LEADER+ throughout the rural areas of the EU and at the same time assess the adaptation of the LEADER+ method to various and diverse geographical and social environments. A further difficulty is identifying suitable indicators that can be used with validity across programmes and countries in responding to the CEQs. Unlike the guidelines for evaluations of the RDP the guidelines for the evaluation of LEADER+ do not specify indicators to be used or indeed require that indicators be adapted at the programming stage. While this recognises the diversity of the LEADER+ programme at implementation level it also makes the process of synthesising and assessing impact at an EU level more problematic.

Recommendations

There is a need to harmonize a set of common indicators at European level, regardless to the additional monitoring and evaluation needs at national and regional level. The first step was made by setting out the CEQ, but there is a second step to be made including:

- Pre-establishing indicators or at least tokens for indicators (relating to each CEQ) which can be adapted to the respective conditions without losing the overall comparability and aggregability.
- Indicating the ways or mechanisms by which these indicators should be monitored.
- Substantially reducing the number of CEQ would boost the readiness of national and regional administrations to comply with the framework.
- The framework of CEQ, judgement criteria and indicators should be set up as described in the recommendations of question F16.

Key terms

- Monitoring systems
- Evaluation activities

F14 Have programme authorities identified programme-specific evaluation questions going beyond the questions in the Commission's Guidelines? If yes, what are the important results?

In most evaluations there were no programme-specific evaluation questions that went beyond the common evaluation questions, though in some instances questions were posed that were variations of the CEQs. Some references are made to questions that were asked but with no criteria or indicators and thereby reducing their potential benefit. There are some examples of where additional questions were asked that are of some interest in assessing overall programme impact but still of limited value in terms of broader replicability. In fact without adequate data and indicators (including baseline data) the value of responses to questions is reduced and indeed responses are often subjective. In this sense the MTE reports tend to reflect more the views of LAGs than any other stakeholders.

Summary and Outlook

We presume that the overload with “ordinary” data monitoring and the required CEQs was a disincentive to more creativity in this field.

Recommendation

The reduction and streamlining of CEQs required at EU level, hand in hand with the outspoken recommendation that additional evaluation questions and indicators should be generated in order to serve the domestic information needs, would probably evoke more creative responses.

Key terms

- Programme specific evaluation questions

F15 What has been the role of national networks in evaluations? Can examples of good practice be identified?

There is no evidence of national networks playing a role in the evaluation process. At the time of the MTE reports and updates many national networks were not established and where they were established their role did not include any formal role input into evaluation. Some instances of networks organising seminars, workshops, training, etc on monitoring and evaluation are noted. The potential of national networks to support the evaluation process is appreciated and some suggestions as to potential roles are advanced. However, there are also some views that any moves towards more systematic evaluations at national level is in conflict with the area based approach.

Judgement criteria

The only criterion used was to try and identify Actual examples of national networks involved in the evaluations and if so what role they played. The main source for responding to this question is the Case Studies and here there are no examples provided of any significant involvement of National Networks in the evaluation process.. It would seem this is partly due to the late establishment of national networks and partly to a failure to define a clear role that national networks could play. From analysis of MTE reports it would seem that national networks were not involved in the MTE process and as such examples of good practice cannot be identified.

Summary and Outlook

The national networks did not seem having played any significant role in supporting evaluation activities during the reference period.. However, self-evaluation is in many cases instigated or even supported by national or regional (formal or informal) networks.

Key terms

- National network
- Evaluation activities

F16 Which, if any, indicators used by programme evaluators could also serve as Common Indicators at European level for each of the common evaluation questions listed in the Commission's Guidelines? For which evaluation questions, if any, were no useful indicators found by programme evaluators and were no answers provided?

No indicators used in the MTE reports are considered suitable as common indicators at European level. Some indicators that were used are considered relevant in a local/regional context but not at European level. In fact many of the responses to Common Evaluation Questions (CEQs) have relied very little on indicators and more on qualitative data. A view expressed in some countries is that the concept of EU wide indicators is flawed since the EU is too diverse to do benchmarking for structures that were created from a bottoms-up perspective. Notwithstanding this view there has been a surprisingly little use of indicators that would facilitate simple evaluation of programmes and it does seem that the freedom to identify suitable indicators at LAG and programme level has led to a certain disregard for the concept of indicators.

The overall response to CEQs was disappointing and it does seem that the CEQs were perceived as an addendum to the MTE rather than being at the core of it. One reason for this is that the definition of agreed indicators (and methods for collecting the same) was not an integral part of the programmes, but was left open to be decided by the evaluators. Thus in the absence of common indicators, evaluators tended to use more traditional evaluation techniques neglecting the Common Evaluation Questions altogether. In some instances the CEQs were not answered at all. Where the CEQs were answered evaluators used a combination of qualitative (largely based on interviews) and quantitative data from various sources. Often what are described as indicators are merely measures of inputs and outputs This area requires much more attention if future programme evaluations are to be of benefit at EU level.

Judgement criteria

The criteria used was to find examples of indicators that could serve as common indicators at European Level.

The difficulty with responding to CEQs and the paucity of indicators indicates that there are problems with applying a common methodology to evaluations and in particular to establishing indicators that would facilitate a synthesis of results at EU level. The Guidelines for the Evaluation of LEADER+ programmes sets out the rationale for using common evaluation questions:

The common evaluation strategy faces a double challenge. On the one hand, it is necessary to get a global view of the effects of the implementation of LEADER+ throughout the rural areas of the European Union. On the other, without losing this overall approach, the strategy proposed would allow

the Commission to adequately perceive the adaptation of the LEADER+ method to the various geographical and social environments that make up the European landscape.

For an Initiative such as LEADER+, evaluation should go beyond approaches to evaluation mainly centred on results and impacts, by extending the scope also to the implementing process and its contribution to the overall effects of the Initiative. The basic assumption for this understanding is that the added value of LEADER+ lies basically on the application of a specific method for rural development, which aims at encouraging endogenous development.

While the objectives of this approach is logical it is clear from the MTE reports and the Case Studies that there are serious difficulties with the CEQ approach and the expected results are not forthcoming. An analysis of the MTE reports does suggest some reasons why this has happened but it should be accepted that further research is required to identify the problems with the CEQs. Among the difficulties outlined with the CEQs are:

- A number of common evaluation questions are not appropriate at the Mid-Term stage as the timing of the mid-term evaluation is premature to fully assess impacts
Many of the CEQs seek to assess impact and the nature of LEADER and this is not possible at the Mid-Term stage. Allowing for initial programme design and delays in start up the mid term evaluation does not take place at the mid-term stage of activities and in fact often commences at a an early stage in programme activity. The CEQs in theme 1 regarding the implementation of the LEADER+ method and theme 2 (integrated territorial rural development strategies of a pilot nature, support for co-operation between territories and Networking) can be responded to but more in relation to programme design than based on actual programme experience. CEQs in Section 3 regarding the impact of the programme on the territory as regards the overall objectives of the structural funds are premature at the MTE stage as are questions in Section 4 on the impact of the programme on the territory as regards the specific objectives of LEADER+. Questions in section 5 regarding the financing, management and evaluations of the programme are relevant but here the questions overlap and would benefit from simplification.
- Sometimes CEQs are vague, too numerous and without agreed indicators cannot be responded to in a meaningful way.
This is the most common view in the MTE reports from all involved, including evaluators. There is overlap between questions, and often a lack of precise definitions leading to different interpretations in different countries/regions. There is also a contention that there are too many questions and that a reduced number of more focused questions supported by appropriate and reliable indicator data would be more beneficial.

It is arguable that the CEQs are too ambitious and seek to obtain a Figure at the mid-term stage that is not possible. Ideally to answer all the CEQs in a meaningful way a very elaborate monitoring and evaluation system should be in place incorporating evaluation techniques such as on-going studies that would assess impact. It is also noted that the MTE reports rely heavily on the views of the LAGs and a much broader information base would be needed to respond fully to all the CEQs. For example evaluation of the recognition of the LEADER “brand” would require techniques that would go beyond simple questionnaires at LAG level.

Although the European Commission needs for accountability and for a comprehensive assessment of the value for money of public funds is recognised, the CEQ approach should be further revised and improved, in view of fully catching the essential nature of LEADER and its specific features.

The following statement from the Director of Rural Development in the Andalusia region of Spain is representative of similar views expressed in other regions: – *“the success of programme is the “intangible” part, but this is not measured in the evaluation. With the evaluation of “intangible aspects”*

it would be possible to know if a territory "breathes" the LEADER philosophy. This is the most important point that should be measured, although it is recognised that it is very difficult."

This opens a debate on what is the best approach to evaluation of LEADER+ programmes and does the structured approach as outlined in the guidelines meet the objectives of the evaluations. Also perhaps the remit of the MTE should be less ambitious and focus more on programme design and its coherence with the ex-ante evaluation, initial programme implementation and overall programme management.

- Evaluation using the CEQ approach can only work if there is a properly designed and fully resourced monitoring and evaluation system that is established at the programme outset

Approaches to monitoring and evaluation are varied but for the most part unstructured and not surprisingly the deficiencies in monitoring and evaluation are exposed at the MTE stage. Little relevant quantitative information is available that support the CEQs. Most information is monitoring data designed primarily to assess programme progress against project targets. The MTE reports reflect the difficulty of answering the CEQs without appropriate data. Such data can only come from a properly designed system that is operational from the outset of the programme. Even where systems are developed there were substantial delays in implementation. The question of resources must also be considered and a cost/benefit approach must be taken to the whole issue of evaluation. LAGs complain that the burden of administration, reporting, etc is excessive relative to available resources and that any evaluation system must be fully resourced. In this context a possible role for National Networks in the evaluation system should be explored.

Summary and Outlook

The initiative of the Commission to pre-establish a set of common evaluation questions with related judgement criteria was seen as a purposeful attempt of improving the knowledge base and the conditions of institutional learning across Europe. However, this attempt was somewhat hampered by (i) their complete application at mid term stage which does not seem the adequate moment for this exhaustive exercise; (ii) the sheer number and sometimes vagueness of CEQs; (iii) the lack of a harmonized system of observation. As a consequence, a further step should be made, as there is a quest for common indicators for LEADER at European level.

Recommendations

The framework of CEQ, judgement criteria and indicators should be set up by a consultative work group involving actors from all levels concerned (local actors, regional/national administrations/networks/EC). The CEQ should reflect a shared vision of the intervention logic, which in consequence leads to a "harmonization" of these indicators between each other. Models like the balanced scorecard for local and regional development, such as created in a LEADER work group under the guidance of the National Network in Austria, could help to generate this internal coherence of the indicator system.

IV. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In place of a synthesis: thoughts on some key outcomes

LEADER+ is now in its last year of implementation. The present report on the synthesis of mid-term evaluations only refers to the implementation period 2000 – 2003. It highlights the achievements of a bit more than the first half of implementation in terms of time, but certainly not in terms of realisations. Nevertheless, the conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the mid-term evaluations directly feed into the final preparatory steps to implement LEADER^(M), mainstreamed as the fourth axis of the Rural Development Programmes 2007 – 2013 to be set up according to Regulation 1698/2005.

The main frame for the future Rural Development Programmes is set, but there is still room for finetuning the implementation of the LEADER axis, and this report shall help in doing this. Looking at the data base and the sources of information, the validity of the judgements and the recommendations based on them are questionable. Luckily, the history of LEADER is older than the reference period, as LEADER I already started in 1991 and some of the assumptions in this report gain weight in the light of past experiences. They would be much more adventurous without these 15 LEADER years.

Before we dive into the detailed discussion of the five main themes: implementation, results, impacts, dissemination and transfer, monitoring and evaluation; let us make a step back in order to behold the LEADER adventure from some distance.

The great painter Pablo Picasso did not like computers. He said: *“Computers are useless. They only give answers.”*

So do evaluators, we are tempted to say. But in this introductory section, we take the liberty to pose questions; questions based on our findings, which need to be tackled in the near future, in order to maintain and even improve the high quality of LEADER – which it represents indeed, in spite of the deficiencies and shortcomings listed in this report.

LEADER is now in its third programming phase and launches into its fourth phase, this time not as a separate Community Initiative, but as “Axis 4”, to be precise Articles 61 to 65 of Regulation 1698/2005 concerning the support for the development of rural areas in the period 2007 – 2013.

It started with 218 less favoured pilot areas which were selected as eligible in LEADER I; due to its apparent success, in LEADER II it was integrated into the logic of Structural Funds implementation of the EU12, later 15. In LEADER+, again due to its apparent success it was extended to all rural areas; again due to its apparent success it will be mainstreamed as a mandatory component of all rural development programmes in the EU25.

- **The questions we pose are: if LEADER played the role as a laboratory for integrated and sustainable rural development: will it continue to play this role as fourth axis of the rural development programmes? If not, what will fill this gap? If yes, how will this pilot function be ensured?**

LEADER has lived many lives in these past 15 years. In Portugal, it raised a high level of public attention in the first two periods, whereas in LEADER+ it lost public attention and became less distinguishable from other rural development programmes. In Denmark, the opposite happened. Long time more or less ignored in the shade of structural funds programmes, which were delivered in a very decentralised manner from the very outset, it only gained popularity in LEADER+. The same holds true for the German Land Schleswig-Holstein and the Wallonie in Belgium. In countries like Austria, Greece, Ireland and Scotland, it developed incrementally, without major breaks, whereas in France, it underwent a radical turn from LEADER II to LEADER+, when the state decided to set up one single national programme instead of 22 regional programmes. In some Italian regions LEADER is encased into a sophisticated architecture of interventions, whose preparative arrangements sometimes cause considerable delays in real implementation, whereas in other regions (like Noord Nederlands) the relationships are firmly established over time such as to allow a quick start. Much of the success of LEADER has to do with learning, and one of the leitmotifs of this report is the ascertainment that the successful implementation of LEADER largely depends from the accumulated and shared experience of stakeholders at administrative and local level. Yet this learning took place in a largely uncoordinated and – one is tempted to say – chaotic manner. There were considerable gaps between the funding periods, in which many valuable LAG managers and even administrative officials absconded. The networks started late or ended early. The devices for learning were shortlived and only thrived in the summer of full programme implementation, while hibernating in the transition time. In spite of these shortcomings, there happened something like an accumulation of knowledge and related technical skills, and the spreading of a limited set of attitudes – some speak about a LEADER “spirit” or “culture”. This is not trivial. We should not just acquiesce and pass over to the next point on the agenda.

- **The questions we pose are: how can the achievements in handling a complex programme such as LEADER be safeguarded and further developed in a systematic way? Do we need to integrate monitoring and evaluation practices into a new approach of collective learning? Or is this a self-organizing process which we may just follow smitten by amazement and which eludes any attempt to govern it?**

Between LEADER II and LEADER+, a considerable gain in autonomy of local partnerships can be confirmed. Decentralised management and financing of rural development programmes has become current practice in many member states and regions. In England and France, the local action groups were given the right to choose between a global grant system and an operational programme system. Approximately 50% of the LAGs went for the first option and it is not so astonishing that they did it; what is astonishing is that the managing authorities dared to accord this option. These and similar phenomena point towards a new perspective of local governance which combines the representative democracy with participatory elements and the functioning of local partnerships whose legitimacy is grounded on the benefits they produce for their areas. However, these local partnerships continue to evolve. Two types can already be identified: the ones remain focused on the LEADER programme and their role as platforms for integrating the different stakeholders in order to mold a common development perspective; the others establish themselves as local development agencies which package several strands of interventions in order to serve best the needs of the local project promoters. They become universal service providers and do not retain their direct attachment to the LEADER programme from which they were created.

- **The questions we pose are: Does this difference make a difference? What conclusions can be drawn concerning the role of LEADER in the one or the other case? Is there a perspective which combines or even goes beyond both?**

The most popular feature of LEADER is the bottom-up approach. Under LEADER II, the decentralised management and financing and the bottom-up approach were still regarded as two operational principles. Under LEADER+, it became clear that they represent both the bottom-up approach at two different levels, and that the one level superposes the other like two floors of a two-storey building. Moreover, the relationship between the LAG and the managing authority is somehow reflected in the way the local actors are related to the LAG. In reality, the two relationships are consimilar: the LAG can be considered as the managing authority of the local action plan in the same way as the managing authority can be considered as the implementing body of a rural development programme. Although we know a lot of mechanisms for instigating participation and inclusion of wider parts of the population in local development, very little examples of good practice are there illustrating how this may be done over a longer period of time, and at a strategic level of decision making. Immediately we think about the structural imbalance between “genuinely” voluntary stakeholders and “professional volunteers” in the local partnership. There is a strong quest to think about organisation sustainability, poised at the edge of institutionalisation, which is not really wanted. And in the long run, we cannot do otherwise than adding a third floor to the complex building: that of the project owner, who in turn should be considered as the managing authority of his or her project. In an enlarged perspective of bottom-up, there is no place for a nothing-but-beneficiary. Beneficiaries are at the same time contributors and should be considered as stakeholders in the implementation of the local action plan respectively of the LEADER programme.

- **The questions we pose are: How can local partnerships survive and rejuvenate over time? How can genuinely voluntary stakeholders be appropriately rewarded in the long run? How can social networks at local level be directed without undermining their adaptiveness and spontaneity? Does our imagination suffice to really grasp their potential? What question did we forget to ask?**

2. Conclusions and recommendations along the five programme themes

With the compiling of the conclusions of the LEADER+ MTE Synthesis we return analytically to our starting point – i.e. the finding of a common understanding of the programme and its intervention logic and the structuring and some how prioritising the set of evaluation questions. We now try to close the arch from the intervention logic, the clustering and prioritising of the evaluation questions, the analysis of the evaluation questions to the presentation of the final results of this synthesis.

For this summary of conclusions we will follow the logic of the five themes of evaluation questions as laid down in the Commission Guidelines:

- Theme 1 – Implementation of the LEADER method
- Theme 2 – Specific actions (1-3)
- Theme 3 – Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the overall objectives of the structural funds
- Theme 4 – Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the specific objectives of LEADER+
- Theme 5 – Financing, management and evaluation of the programme

The evaluators followed in their analysis an identified intervention logic of the programme, which was reflecting LEADER and its programme specifics together with its position in the context of Rural Development. This intervention logic has paved the ground for a clustering of the evaluation questions to be found in the Guidelines (plus some additional ones, which helped to aggregate information from the single LEADER programmes on to a European scale – i.e. the so called Further Evaluation Questions). Moreover this exercise revealed the interconnectedness between the single evaluation questions and in due course a priority order of the evaluation questions, with respect of their capacity to contribute to the overall result of the evaluation, could be established (i.e. the “Cardinal Questions”). This bundling exercise has led to the effect that many conclusions to be drawn in the following are not only derived from one single evaluation question, but from several relevant ones together, which form a complete picture like pieces of a puzzle.

In other words the thorough analysis of the LEADER intervention logic together with the scope of the programme evaluation (i.e. the set of evaluation questions) allowed for a reduction of the overall complexity of the Programme and its evaluation, which was necessary to come up with clear-cut conclusions in the end.

Theme 1

Implementation of the LEADER method

Theme 1 provides an overview of mainly three aspects:

- a) The implementation of the programme at administrative level
- b) The implementation of the specific features of LEADER by the managing authorities and by the local action groups
- c) The learning effects from previous LEADER phases

a) The implementation of the programme at administrative level

LEADER+ is a complex programme and requires complex management solutions.

The LEADER+ initiative is implemented in two steps:

- establishing the framework for selecting the local action plans and the LEADER areas;
- implementing the local action plans.

The two steps approach generally entails a certain delay in programme implementation on the ground compared to mainstream programmes. This also implies that the mid term evaluation covered a phase which was mainly used for preparatory and structuring tasks.

Almost all of the MTE reports pointed out that **previous experience with LEADER implementation** helped the administration of the managing authority to accelerate the start. This could especially be shown in countries where both experienced and new regions are dealing with LEADER+ (e.g. Netherlands).

The application of the specific LEADER features (e.g. bottom-up approach, area-based approach) also slows down the uptake of the programmes. In this respect, case study reports showed that different programmes are working on different maturity levels in some regions (e.g. in Germany and Italy). Countries with a national programme and a stronger concentration of competencies (which must not be mixed up with centralism) tend to have an advantage in this respect (Austria, Finland). Slow take-up of the LEADER programme could also be the result of limited human resources (e.g. for regions dealing with several Community programmes).

Despite the widening of the initiative to all rural areas, there did not seem to be any particular initiative to **attract new areas**. Most administrations put an emphasis on **creating equitable conditions for all eligible areas**. We find broad information campaigns and a second round of LAG selection among these measures.

LEADER is quite visible in the wider context of rural policy.

In most countries and regions where LEADER+ is implemented, **the initiative has a distinctive profile** and is given a specific role in the development of rural areas. LEADER provides many demonstrative examples for genuine rural development projects, specifically where mainstream rural policy is defined from a mainly agricultural point of view.

b) The implementation of the specific features of LEADER by the managing authorities and the local action group

LEADER requires good programme management and a bit more.

Deficiencies in programme management tend to have more detrimental effect on LEADER than other programmes **simply because of its complexity.** The MTE reports repeatedly list these deficiencies: (i) excessive bureaucracy; (ii) difficult relationships between managing and other involved authorities on one side and LAGs and project promoters on the other; (iii) problems with raising co-funding; (iv) delays in financing; and (v) insufficient autonomy of the LAG. The consequence of these deficiencies has been a loss of management efficiency (e.g. too much time spent on bureaucracy rather than mobilising and animating) and in due course disappointment of the local actors. While these conclusions tend to reflect the opinion of the LAGs (as well as shortages in administrative staff, as pointed out in several MTE reports), the need for the European Commission to define clear management rules for the administration of public money is acknowledged.

The LEADER approach

- requires the involvement of local people,
- seeks to use transparent selection procedures for local projects in the framework of a shared perspective of the future of the area,
- targets specific beneficiaries like women, young people or other less favoured groups,
- asks for a strategy formulated around a priority theme, trying at the same time to integrate different sectors and to foster innovation, all being enacted and carried out by a local partnership formed of people, who might never have worked together before.

This list of requirements might explain that **the features can not be implemented in a mechanical way; moreover they need to be combined to produce the full added value of the initiative.** The MTE reports signify that there is something like the “spirit” or “culture” of LEADER which allows to deal with the inherent complexity in a better way than mainstream rural development programmes could accomplish: **this LEADER “spirit” is shared by key stakeholders, and conveyed by frequent interactions and exchanges between these stakeholders at administrative and local level.** This observation holds true for the majority of programmes and – like in previous LEADER periods – builds the backbone of positive results of LEADER implementation in general. Unfortunately the MTE of the LEADER+ programme can hardly come up with a detailed description of what this “LEADER-spirit” consists of. This is due to the difficulties to capture something process-oriented and interactive like a “spirit” or perspective through standard evaluation methods.

The LEADER spirit shines through many single statements and facts which are to be found in several case studies (and sometimes even in the MTE reports);³¹

³¹ “The success of a programme is the “intangible” part, but this is not measured in the evaluation. With the evaluation of “intangible aspects” it would be possible to know if a territory “breathes” the LEADER philosophy. This is the most important point that should be measured, although it is recognised that it is very difficult.” (Director of Rural Development in the Andalusia region of Spain)

The selection of LAG was more than a competition of an examination.

In many cases, the competition between local action groups was not a real one: **the process was more an “examination” than a “competition”** in the strict sense of the word. This can be explained by the budgets pre-established at programme level and the political will to serve all parts of rural areas and stakeholders.

Besides that, **the methods used to judge the quality of the local programmes submitted for funding** (consultation process, respect of minority point of views, use of participatory approaches, selection mechanisms and criteria for projects...) are often not documented, hence not evaluable.

The bottom-up feature has played a role in the selection of LAGs and programme implementation.

In general, the **bottom-up approach** has been taken into account in the selection of LAGs and in further phases of programme implementation (although to different extent), and this meant a clear improvement vis-à-vis the LEADER II period. This approach, which clearly distinguishes LEADER from mainstream rural development programmes, does not seem to have been fully exploited in most regions. In Portugal for instance the selection criteria for LAGs contained requirements concerning territory, partnership and strategy of rural development, but there was no reference to feeling of identity, bottom-up approach, innovation of the strategy, cooperation or networking. Other centrally organised programmes (e.g. Greece) could improve their regional/local stakeholder involvement in all phases of the programme implementation.

Bottom-up has a twofold dimension: (i) the relationships between the local actors and the LAG; (ii) the relationships between the LAG and the managing authority. The way to conduct interactions and participatory processes in one tier is usually similar to the one conducted in the other tier.

Good bottom-up does not need less, but rather another style of top-down: enabling and encouraging instead of command and control. This requires more competence of more actors involved at both (LAG and administrative) levels than is the case in most of the programmes. If the LAG is left without support from top-down, it may be overwhelmed by the weight of new responsibilities (e.g. being obliged to search for national co-funding on its own).

A good example of possible co-existence of "bottom-up" and "top-down" is the English programme, where guidelines issued at the start of the programme by the managing authority are updated and discussed with LAGs on a regular basis. This helps to reduce the "top-down" and "bottom up" tension between the LAGs (who have to operate on the ground) and the administration (is responsible at European level).

There are examples (e.g. la Rioja – Spain, several programmes in Germany) of **paternalistic implementation**, where the administration is the main actor and the LAGs rather approve projects which are discussed between the individual promoter and the responsible desk officer. This governance style may produce good results in the short term, but fails to contribute anything to the social and organisational capital in the area.

The local partnership has opened new perspectives for local governance.

The concept of the **local partnership** has been taken into account in the selection of LAG, although **the balanced representation of interests** was usually not monitored after the initial assessment.

The interests represented in the local partnership should reflect the situation of the respective area, based on a sound diagnosis of the needs of different parts of the population, and a balanced representation of interests can not be achieved in the longer term by a mechanical respect of percentages.

Local action groups, specifically new ones, did not have enough resources (time) to design their pilot strategies according to the needs of local people.

Ideally, the **pilot strategy** has to be based on a thorough assessment of the area, of all parts of the population and their distinctive needs. For many LAGs (especially new ones) the time frame to set up this strategy in a broad consultation process was too tight in addition to their lack of capacities and resources. **Already existing LAGs were clearly advantaged** in this respect, which does not mean that their plans were necessarily better than those of the newcomers.

The heterogeneous picture of the “pilot” dimension of the strategy provided by the MTE reports is partly explained by the problems that actors were facing when dealing with this issue in concrete terms. The term embraced concepts such as “innovation”, “multi-sectoral integration” and the “priority themes”, which might be interpreted in contradiction to each other, depending on the context. **There should have been better guidance and the provision of examples of good practice** in order to help rural actors to take these dimensions into account in a comprehensive and effective manner. Article 61 of Council Regulation 1698/2005 is much clearer and more concise in this respect than the Commission Notice on the LEADER+ guidelines (14/4/2000).

Cooperation and networking need time to grow and to bear fruits.

Cooperation and networking can mean three different things, which sometimes made the interpretation of the related documentation in the MTE reports difficult:

- They are operational principles and as such part of the LEADER approach
- They are measures endowed with respective budgets (action 2 and 3)
- They are standard practices of any development activity, regardless of being eligible for funding or not.

The MTE reports and case studies point out that there is certainly more exchange and even cooperation between LAGs and partnerships beyond the LEADER programme than being documented and explicitly formulated in terms of eligible actions or projects.

Although little activity did happen in terms of cooperation and networking as eligible actions within the reference period, the factors facilitating cooperation have been:

- Previous experiences in LEADER
- Commitment of (both local and administrative) actors to cooperation and networking
- Proximity and similarity of culture, mentalities, geographical features etc.
- Overall maturity of the programme

Networking may be both the seedbed for and the outcome of cooperation, but the evidence of the direct link of cooperation as a consequence of networking is not very robust. This is – of course – connected to the reference period, which did not really allow for intensive networking activities. Either

the national networks were established rather late (which triggered the emergence of quite successful informal networks), or the time for intensifying external relations was too short.

Lack of time and interest, local actors' fears of getting bootlegged, overly bureaucratic procedures and the absence of technical support are mentioned in the MTE reports as **factors of hindrance for cooperation**.

c) The learning effects from previous LEADER phases

Experience pays.

The MTE reports confirm a **strong relationship between experience in previous LEADER phases and effective programme implementation** without really defining the nature of the experience and where impact can be anticipated. Our impression from various MTE reports and case study statements is that the essence of this experience lies in the value of experienced personnel which produces a dividend specifically in programme design, the design of local action plans, a quicker start-up, etc. Inversely, there is little data to show if inexperience caused difficulties or indeed if new ideas emerged where new people with little previous experience of LEADER+ were involved.

There is no systematic knowledge accumulation and transfer from one LEADER phase to another.

It is difficult to identify and describe common patterns of learning between the LEADER phases, either among the programming authorities or between the LAGs: **the transfer of lessons seems to be mostly left to chance** as very few instruments or tools seem to have been utilised to promote it on purpose.

The **national networks** have developed case studies and established data bases of good practices. However, these are mainly data banks and little work seems to have been done on conceptual and methodological aspects, e.g. on the nature of pilot strategies, on how to involve women and young people in local development etc.

All in all, the occasional events and meetings facilitated by the networks have fostered personal exchanges which eventually lead to mutual learning and the transfer of concepts and approaches.

Recommendations

- The managing authorities should ensure fair and equitable conditions for all potential applicants in all types of rural areas through appropriate measures in the pre-selection phase: broad communication, technical assistance, facilitation of partnership building and area delimitation, capacity building of local actors and administrative officials.
- The visibility and distinctiveness of LEADER should be ensured by giving it a clear role in wider rural policy by the Member States (with the necessary coordination at higher level of decision making) and by giving guidance to the LAGs for communicating the distinctive features of the LEADER initiative.
- The description of the LEADER axis in the RD programme should include the methods to be used for selecting the LAG and the way in which the competition between areas is going to be organised.

- During the pre-selection phase, sufficient resources (in the form of eligible funds) should be reserved by both the Commission and the Member States for qualification, information and communication for LAGs in preparing, setting up and implementing their needs-based local strategy. This is specifically valid for new candidate LAGs in new programming regions and countries.
- After selection, the LAGs should be granted a high level of financial and administrative autonomy provided they ensure (apart from their obligation in terms of balanced representation of interests in their decision making bodies and work groups and participative approach at local level) the application of clear and transparent criteria for the selection of projects and an explicit strategy with a corresponding budget line dedicated to the mobilisation and animation of local actors in the local action plan
- The implementation of the “50% non-public partners” rule should be monitored all along the life cycle of the local partnership. Examples of good practice in this respect, such as the tripartite approach as practiced in Finland and Sweden³², should be disseminated.
- The budgets dedicated for cooperation projects (according to Art. 65 of Reg. 1695/05) should be exempted from the n+2 rule, and their trans-national component should be supported by the European rural development network. The authors are well aware that this recommendation contradicts existing legal provisions but the issue is an important one all the same.
- Networking should get started as soon as possible – which would mean much earlier than in LEADER+ – at both European and regional/national level. There are good signs that with the help of the European LEADER observatory network and the Rural Development Network the necessary support could be provided for the Member States.
- There is a need to work on the lessons of LEADER+, to develop instruments and tools for the capitalisation on experiences and to codify successful practices at local, regional/national and European level – it might need an initiative by the European Commission to call for such a study.

Theme 2

Action-specific Issues

Theme 2 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Behavioural changes resulting from LEADER implementation
- b) Dissemination and transfer of successful practices resulting from LEADER implementation

a) Behavioural changes as a result of LEADER+ implementation

LEADER represents a new approach to integrated rural development.

We regard behavioural changes and changes in interaction patterns as the core value added of the LEADER approach. **Behavioural and interactional changes shape the human, social, organisational and economic capital of the area;** and this sequence is not chosen at random.

³² A tripartite partnership is composed of 1/3 public, 1/3 private and 1/3 civic sector, sometimes with rotating memberships. A faster turnover in the membership of the LAG boards should be an objective in the next programme period. The ministry is particularly insistent on third-sector representation on these boards; if there is no tripartite structure, there will be no funding.

The degree to which this added value has been produced is determined by the extent to which the specific features of the LEADER approach, particularly the area-based, bottom-up and the partnership approach have been implemented.

Assessing behavioural changes requires specific methods of observation, and these methods have not been applied within the MTE. Thus we draw our conclusions mainly from the stakeholders' and evaluators' own impressions. Many questions on the impact of the programme in this early stage are answered referring to the social processes and new forms of cooperation which emerged. This is understandable, because the setting up of a local partnership and the elaboration of a joint strategy should have mobilised potentials in the area which otherwise would not have been addressed.

The question is how lasting these behavioural changes are. In any event the LEADER approach seems to actuate **a new form of local governance through indirect steering**. Some local stakeholders see the initiative **as a new approach to integrated development and as an instrument to support the self-governing forces of rural micro-regions**.

The implementation of the area-based and bottom-up approach have generated positive results, except in rural-urban relationships.

Although the need for accountability and control rules for the management of LEADER programmes is accepted, the practical experience shows that a more process-oriented control regime would better support local governance than rather rigid "management by objectives" in the form of quantitative rules. Another possibility would be the establishment of "contingency rules" (i.e. rules adapted to the different geographical and socio-economic environments).

A specific issue of this kind is the **numerical threshold of 100,000 inhabitants** per LAG. Even if this prescription was well-known in advance, for many LAGs (e.g. in more densely populated German areas), **it hindered the attempt to create coherent LEADER territories by excluding rural towns** which are important market places and social networking hubs. The threshold was criticised in some MTE reports as it hampers the support for building up value added chains and marketing initiatives in more diversified and urbanised rural areas. It is anyway acknowledged that derogations to the 10.000 – 100.000 inhabitants rule were possible within LEADER+ to permit creating coherent LEADER territories including, where relevant, more densely populated areas, and that around 15% of the LAGs have benefited of this derogation (status in 2005 and not in the reference period though).

Rural-urban relationships have rarely been chosen as thematic priorities by programme authorities, except in some Western European regions (Wallonie, England), where the outcomes can not be assessed yet.

The bottom-up approach seemed to contribute to promote complementarity between actors in rural development. Again, the willingness and capacity of local actors to actively go for complementarity with other local actors depends on the **experience and maturity** of the LEADER community in the area, hence from learning effects over time.

Concerning the pilot strategies, LEADER+ proved to be very flexible.

For implementing the integrated pilot strategies, the scope of measures and eligibility conditions were in general assessed as broad enough. MTE reports show an extremely wide range of possibilities: from a very narrow programme focus (e.g. information technologies in Euskadi and rural tourism in Northern Ireland) up to a wide range of programme orientation (specifically in regions where the

administration keeps its strong role in project selection, e.g. Greece or some programmes in Germany). Some strategies were formulated so widely that any eligible project was welcome. This might be a good approach in incipient phases in some areas – in order to support new stakeholders and to foster newly formed partnerships – but this is not sustainable in the long term.

LEADER+ is seen by many stakeholders as filling a gap left by all other programmes, specifically concerning small scale projects, and beneficiaries who would not have benefited from any other support otherwise. Some uttered complaints that the chosen priority theme would have overly restricted the scope of eligible actions, or that agricultural activities were excluded from funding (Ireland, Spain).

Concerning the **European priority themes** (which were in some cases complemented by national or regional priority themes), they were only seen as helpful in a few cases. They were too prescriptive as to instigate creative thinking, and too unspecific as to provide concrete guidance. Although it is still too early for final judgements on the concept of priority themes, **the general idea of articulated priorities for rural development seems, to some extent, to contradict the area-based and bottom-up approach.**

Difficulties, reported in the MTE reports, originate less from the specific LEADER features and rather from generic aspects of programme implementation, such as (i) excessive bureaucratic requirements for application, accounting and reporting that absorb the time of LAG staff; (ii) financing conditions unattractive to potential private investors (e.g. late payment of co-financing, no capital expenditures applicable under LEADER) or less favoured parts of the population – somewhat in contradiction to the principle of innovation; (iii) delays in decision making leading to the loss of projects. As mentioned above the points made reflect the opinion of LAGs, rather than for instance managing authorities.

b) Dissemination and transfer of successful practices resulting from LEADER implementation

It is too early to assess the benefits of cooperation and networking in terms of dissemination and transfer.

Cooperation projects should generate retroactive booster effects on the local strategy. It is too early to assess if this is actually the case in LEADER+. Nevertheless we dare to give a prudent “yes” because many local actors appreciate cooperation projects for their potential **to attain a critical mass** (for research, development, marketing and promotion, training and education etc.). By pooling their strengths, rural areas can overcome a number of constraints rooted in distance and smallness, and achieve otherwise inaccessible results, provided that the social and organisational capital of the area is prepared for such an endeavour.

This judgement is underpinned by the **visible preference for short-distance inter-territorial cooperation** specifically in this early phase. Although the cooperation budgets had to be downgraded considerably due to under use (e.g. in France), the attitude towards cooperation is positive and there are strong signs that action 2 will be much better used in the second half of the programming period. The assessment of the benefits of cooperation for rural development strategies can only be made in the ex-post evaluation.

Delays in starting cooperation projects lie in the nature of the activity, but the **delays in establishing the formal National Networks** were home-grown fruits of administrative deficiencies. Their late start

reduced their potential effectiveness. In the MTE reports, their role is seen as very diverse, in some countries as passive and remote (working rather as information pool), in others as delivering (working as real pivotal agents, who actively barter information and know how).

Among the network services, the **LAGs appreciate being brought into contact with knowledge providers** (universities, research bodies, other networks such as the ones for local agenda 21, gender issues, territorial cooperation, social inclusion and so on). They also appreciate demand-oriented training (financial management is a hot theme). Finally, they appreciate it if the network provides space for LAGs to co-develop new approaches and instruments (like the “innovative workshops” of the Austrian network). **Not only LAGs, but also the managing authorities benefit from the Networks’ contact possibilities, information and advisory services.**

Dissemination and transfer need continuity.

Dissemination and know-how transfer is seen as a core element of most programmes. This flow of information is conducted in two ways:

- "Formal": through cooperation and networking as intended under the LEADER Actions 2 and 3.
- "Informal": through various contacts and exchanges of information by actors on the regional and programme level (which accounts at least for 50% of the know how transfer among the LAGs).

In general **stakeholders bestow high value on networking**. It is seen as a positive and important activity which ensures the transfer of information, good practices and know-how. There is some evidence that networking has been very actively followed by the LAGs (Spain – Asturias, Castilla-Leon, Wallonia), and seen as a good tool for partner search (Spain – La Rioja, Germany – Bayern).

MTE reports could hardly reflect the aspects of dissemination and know-how transfer through cooperation and networking due to the limited reference period. Nevertheless in some countries (Ireland, Finland, Austria) there are indications that the LEADER approach is gaining credibility as seedbed for integrated rural development by information transfer to other rural stakeholders. Some questions remain as to what is disseminated or transferred – it may be that there is more a sharing of experiences than actual skills. In this context the temporal nature of LAGs (and personnel working on LEADER+ programmes) comes into question as knowledge transfer is from person to person. This is especially true in the situation where the formal networks were slow in being established.

Dissemination and transfer of successful cooperation projects seem already appearing in more mature environments of local governance. The requirements for good territorial cooperation are high; human resources have to be made available, they have to be capable of adopting a patient and empathic approach with respect to cultural differences, to overcome language barriers, and to negotiate the terms for cooperation agreements and contracts etc.

At a similar pace as it develops within the LEADER community, the willingness and the capacity to cooperate and to spread know-how **across the borders of LEADER and beyond the EU** will have to grow slowly, certainly encouraged by incentives, but more by intrinsic motivation.

Recommendations

- A strict numerical threshold concerning the number of inhabitants per LEADER area should be abolished. The requirement of a relevant, consistent and viable area-based pilot strategy offers sufficient criteria for avoiding the approval of too small or too large areas.

- The scope of eligible projects should be kept as wide as possible in content, but at the same time be referenced with precise and clear quality criteria.
- Small project funds (comparable to the Small Project Funds in INTERREG) for innovative actions should be established at local level, the approval of which should be oriented on criteria such as innovation and potential positive effects, and be based on selection procedures less stringent than the usual ones.
- Priority themes should, if ever, be set at programme level by the Member States.
- Continuous assisted and documented self-evaluation of LAGs and local strategy implementation should become a lived and practiced standard in LEADER³³, as this is an appropriate way to monitor behavioural changes and changing interaction patterns in the area. The regional networks should be assigned in assisting the LAGs in this respect.
- The support and encouragement for cooperation should be maintained through creating attractive fora for exchange (e.g. trouble shooting platforms, market places for ideas or good practice either virtual (via internet platforms) or real (via fairs and real "market places"), motivational work and enabling measures (by the provision of simplified tools for application, accounting and reporting).

The networking devices need to be in place at a much earlier stage. In addition to their current role in the “management of flows”, under which we understand ...

- Generating, channelling and managing information,
- bringing people and institutions together,
- collecting and storing case studies and project descriptions on good practice,
- fostering new cooperation projects,

They should play a key role in the “management of stocks” under which we understand ...

- creating spaces for common reflection on excellent practices in diverse thematic fields, horizontal issues and methodological approaches,
- extract the generic lessons from these practices, codify and disseminate them to the whole LEADER community and beyond,
- systematically link up to other European networking bodies and institutions and embark on common projects (URBACT, INTERACT, ESPON, EURADA, Council of Regions etc.),
- feed the acquired knowledge on good governance for local development into a consistent quality management system which can be used by LAGs and programme administrations for strategic controlling,
- relaunch the innovative side of LEADER by inviting local actors, regional and national stakeholders and other experts in “laboratory groups” in order to elaborate on new themes and approaches and to disseminate their results in European seminars.

³³ Right now self evaluations are already compulsory under LEADER+ – still the practical experiences showed that they are still not common procedure in many programmes.

Theme 3

Impact of the programme on the territory as regards the overall objectives of the structural funds

Theme 3 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Impact on environment
- b) Impact on priority target beneficiaries

a) Impact on environment

The main impact on the environment happens in people's minds

LEADER+ does not have an explicit mission in respect of the environment, but it is deemed to contribute to sustainable development which comprises environmental protection and improvement. There are indications that nature protection and environmental improvement play a role on the implementation and impact of the LEADER programme, as many LEADER areas operate close to protected zones trying to embody win-win situations in their pilot strategies (e.g. through organic food chains). Furthermore, **the notion of innovation in local action plans is often linked to environmental benefits**, e.g. through the sustainable use of endogenous resources. As a consequence, in most programmes a considerable share of projects seem to include an environmental aspect or to put a focus on environmental awareness or qualification. Environmental NGOs or authorities are even represented in the board or in work groups of many LAGs.

Although the collected data do not allow any assessment of the impact of all these elements, we anticipate that the most tangible effects will be produced by the increase in environmental awareness and knowledge and by the emergence of new relationships between stakeholders, working together to realise the integrated pilot strategy – as is already anticipated for those programmes which started relatively early and therefore have provided preliminary indications.

b) Impact on priority target beneficiaries

LEADER+ seems to contribute to gender equity, to a degree which can hardly be assessed at this stage.

Although there is broad formal compliance to take up **priority target beneficiaries, women and young people**, into programmes and local action plans, this does not automatically lead to concrete activities. This might depend on the characteristics of the respective area (in some countries such as Finland women participate more than men in the development process and as beneficiaries), but it can also be the consequence of negligence.

There are indications that LEADER has the potential to respond to women's needs and to promote women as stakeholders in rural development. The share of female project promoters mostly ranges between 20% and 50%. This may have to do with the focus on small scale activities, with the inclusion and reward of voluntary work, with the bottom-up approach, or with a combination of all of them (and other influence factors). In countries where female participation in LEADER is high (such as Finland), women actively participate in order to promote strategies reflecting their needs.

Women are much better represented among the technical staff than in the decision-making bodies of the LAGs which are still male-dominated in most areas (female share in technical staff up to 70%; female representation in LAG decision making bodies about 30% on average).

The strategies of regional programmes and LAGs exhibit two main avenues towards gender equity: firstly that of **positive discrimination**, explicitly addressing women as a priority target group. Secondly, **the gender-sensitive design** of the approach and the development strategies (e.g. through a better design of training and education measures).

Young people are not sufficiently addressed by LEADER (with some exceptions).

Most actions targeted at the young generation were directed towards the creation of jobs and corresponding training. However, investments in the social and cultural environment of the area seem to generate more visible effects on the attractiveness of the area for young people. **Both, investments in the territory, and the factual employment opportunities are indispensable.** The representation of young people or at least young people's associations in the LAG board improved, according to some evaluators, the quality and acceptance of the corresponding actions. However, physical and continuous involvement of young people in decision making bodies is really rare and there is also some disorientation about how involving them. **Many rural stakeholders feel the connectedness between the issue of youth and the viability and sustainability of their area.** Thus we can expect a stronger uptake of that theme in the future.

Resuming, many stakeholders feel that LEADER+ does not respond to the needs and specificities of the priority target groups, particularly young people. At the same time, they are reticent towards new or enforced thematic prescriptions as this is considered **weakening the area-based approach** according to which the local action group should base its pilot strategy on a thorough assessment of the real needs of all parts of the local population. Be that as it may, problems of exclusion, the issue of migration and minority populations, as well as the phenomena accompanying peri-urbanisation (rurbanisation) will gain more and more importance.

A well implemented LEADER approach spares further prescriptions on target beneficiaries

We conclude that **the LEADER approach is in itself a sufficient means to address the needs of specific groups** as it potentially provides the right instruments for territorial diagnosis, animation, participation and project generation. Some LEADER programmes (such as the Finnish, the Dutch and German ones) pointed out that *"LAGs should analyse their own areas still more precisely and select the target groups on that basis"* (Case Study Finland). For that reason, in Austria, Italy and France, not only women and young people, but also other social groups, such as elderly people and minorities have been seen as potential target groups and the respective MTE reports point out that it should be the responsibility of the single programme/LAG to finally select their specific set of target beneficiaries. In addition, LAGs may manage other programmes in their area in a complementary manner.

Recommendations

- Natura 2000 payments as well as the introduction of new forestry environmental payments in the rural development programmes of the next period provide a new opportunity, which should be taken up by LEADER stakeholders. Axis 2 and axis 4 measures could be combined in order to create win-win situations in and around protected areas. Nature parks and biosphere reserves provide excellent opportunities for the realisation of integrative and sustainable LEADER strategies.

- In regions with notorious problems of exclusion (long term unemployed, minorities, immigrants etc.), inclusive strategies or at least measures should be made mandatory for applicant LAGs in order to get selected. But these thematic prescriptions or restrictions should be made at programme level, taking into account the real needs of rural areas.
- The issue of priority target beneficiaries requires a specific effort to identify, to reflect, to codify and to disseminate good practice examples, specifically concerning the involvement of young people.
- The presence or representation of women and young people in decision making boards should be a selection criterion for LAGs, and this also requires their representation in the jury responsible for this selection.

Theme 4

Impact of the Programme on the territory as regards the specific objectives of LEADER+

Theme 4 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Impact on rural territories
- b) Impact on governance

a) Impact on rural territories

LEADER allows local actors to walk before they run

The effects of LEADER+ can be perceived more easily at micro level: the character of projects funded allows a quite realistic picture of the particular strength of LEADER+ to knock on new developments (hitherto unseen in the respective territory) to create jobs in small scale operations and to promote new products and services, hence contributing to the enhancement of the local web of economic and public services. Unfortunately, the success stories at micro level do not provide a sufficient basis for extrapolating them on the effects on the rural areas in general.

However, the **character of these success stories** seems to have an encouraging effect on local actors to do more for local development. The sum of little positive experiences at micro level (i.e. between local people) may **become a measurable effect on the regional level** (i.e. the LEADER programme or the region) by a simple aggregation of positive interactions and experiences. This aggregative effect may be too delicate to be captured by traditional ways of measuring impact alone (e.g. through "jobs created", "change of GDP/capita") but can be "seen" in the positive image of the area and in the organisational capacity of local groups – which will call for a more qualitative assessment of the effects on the regional level.

Thus the question if LEADER+ is able to generate change and tangible improvements in rural areas can be answered with a prudent “yes”. The particular strength of LEADER is its ability to act as a pathfinder for mainstream programmes, but it can also be utilized to fill demand niches otherwise neglected by mainstream programmes.

Coming home by taking off

Another question relates to **the ability of LEADER to trigger a more efficient use of endogenous resources**. From the logical point of view, the area-based and bottom-up principles point in that direction, although it is not clear at the outset how these principles can be operationalised in the context of local pilot strategies. Examples at micro-level show that the strategy may contribute to a more efficient use of endogenous (physical, human, environmental) resources in two ways:

1. **by backward bonding**: if the focus is lent from the past: historical or traditional features (feasts, culinary recipes, architectural design, craftsmanship...), from landscape and nature etc. In this perspective the resources locally available are perceived in a new light. The community uses these resources to turn them into assets but in a way that neither destroys their unique character nor undermines their value for future use;
2. **by forward bonding**: if the focus is lent from a common vision of the future which aligns local actors for a common purpose. In this perspective they pool their resources and start to use their available resources more efficiently through cooperative agreements.

Excellent pilot strategies interweave backward and forward bonding. Still – alas – due to the short period of implementation, impacts of this type could not be assessed in MTE at a broader territorial level, nor related employment effects, and therefore this success factor for pilot strategies of combining backward and forward bonding is a prudent assumption by the evaluators.

b) Impact on governance

Both merging and mainstreaming of LEADER with respect to wider rural policy, as well as local customization may produce excellent results.

Rural stakeholders see positive examples for synergies and complementarities between LEADER and mainstream programmes, but they hesitate in bringing them forward as “good practice”. In other words – those cases, which were identified as positive examples for synergies and complementarities between LEADER and mainstream programmes in the MTE reports and case studies (e.g. Ireland, Andalucia – Spain, Finland) were seen as the outcome of the specific administrative/bureaucratic national/regional context rather than something specifically designed for LEADER. Structural changes in those countries indicate that LEADER is producing considerable leverage effects if combined with mainstream programmes in a wise way. There is evidence that LEADER has identified and exploited synergies with other EU policies and programmes, specifically contributing to **improving the quality of life, much less so concerning employment or economic growth**.

Synergies showed up in those cases where the policy competencies and decision making power were grouped around problem fields (e.g. rural development including all economic sectors) rather than still following the traditional bureaucratic logic of policy fields (economic policy vs. agriculture policy).

The embedding of LEADER into wider rural policy may appear in three forms, and each of them may exhibit excellent results if certain conditions are met (the programmes mentioned in brackets have been identified as good representations of different ways of embedding LEADER in rural development):

- **Strategic merging** (Austria, Vlaanderen, Baden-Württemberg): LEADER can be designed as a pathfinder, incubator or niche specialist for designated areas of intervention. In this role it may

exert a leverage effect on rural development if follow-up support from mainstream programmes is ensured. The initiative can develop a distinct profile and image and raise the attention of new project promoters according to its genuine purpose of a laboratory for innovative rural development. The conditions of excellence in the case of strategic merging are: (i) effective communication and interaction among stakeholders and in LEADER areas; (ii) efficient inter-administrative coordination at national and regional level; (iii) good technical assistance for project applicants.

- **Full mainstreaming** (Andalucía, Finland, Ireland): LEADER can be included into rural policy as its paradigmatic core component, shaping other mainstream rural and local development measures according to its pattern. In the study on mainstreaming LEADER, the authors coined the term “strong” or even “full mainstreaming”³⁴. The conditions of excellence in the case of full mainstreaming are: (i) a commonly shared and comprehensive rural policy strategy under one umbrella; (ii) coordination at programme level to avoid overlaps between LEADER and LEADER-like mainstream measures.
- **Local customization** (Greece, Northern Ireland, Portugal): Even in the (regrettable) absence of strong coordination at higher levels of decision making, local action groups may be able to act as local development agencies packaging the flows of funds into their area to the best of the potential beneficiaries. The conditions of excellence in the case of local customization are: (i) High autonomy of LAGs connected with enabling and encouraging top-down support; (ii) A trustful and cooperative climate at local level to make inter-institutional coordination possible and effective; (iii) a well endowed and skilled technical staff incorporating social and economic skills at LAG level.

Mainstreaming or “backstreaming”?

Certainly, the positive results of previous LEADER programmes are one of the major factors furthering its embedding into wider rural policies. However, in countries or regions where a “top-down” mentality prevails, the LEADER approach is not recognised to the same extent in rural development policy. In these regions rural stakeholders see the integration of LEADER into the Rural Development Programmes with mixed feelings: on one hand the stakeholders welcome the better endowment and the prominent place of LEADER in rural development, on the other hand they express fears that the linkage could work as a “**backstreaming**” of LEADER, in the sense that it gets instrumentalised for mono-sectoral measures or projects, with little or no structural impact on the rural area.

Recommendations

- Concerning impact assessment, we refer to the ex-post evaluation. The Commission should carry out specific case studies and comparative analysis to get comprehensive outcomes on the issue of efficient use of resources under the LEADER+ programme.
- The potentials of the LEADER approach should be more and better communicated specifically to those countries which will start to implement it in the next programming period. This information is of specific importance now, in the programming phase, when the budgets are allocated and the rules are established. If the different possibilities and forms in which mainstreaming has occurred in the EU15 are better known, the programme makers in the New

³⁴ ÖIR (2004): “Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes”, p.18ff

Member States will have more options to decide in which way they would utilize the opportunity offered by the LEADER axis.

Theme 5

Financing, management and evaluation of the programme

Theme 5 provides an overview of mainly two aspects:

- a) Influence of administrative arrangements on programme impact
- b) Monitoring and evaluation

a) Influence of administrative arrangements on programme impact

Concerning the impact of actual arrangements for managing, financing and administering the programme on its overall effectiveness, it is surely too early for judgements. **The information in the MTE reports and in the case studies has tended to concentrate on issues such as bureaucracy, relationships between managing authorities and LAGs, financing, and insufficient autonomy at LAG level that undermines the “bottom up” approach.**

More fundamental management issues at LAG level, such as structures, management systems, planning and control were not highlighted in the MTE reports nor in the case studies. Responses to the evaluation questions did not refer at all to the role of the board of directors in programme management.

Positive management arrangements normally resulted from decentralisation, granting of autonomy and the appointment of some kind of co-ordinators. Programmes with fewer problems in management terms also seemed to have established good working structures and relationships between LAGs and the managing authorities.

As was said above, many local stakeholders see the degree of autonomy of the LAG in project selection as a crucial factor for smooth and simplified programme implementation. This points to the global grant and “quasi” global grant³⁵ systems of programme delivery as a good choice. However, the shift of responsibility has a price:

- **More bottom-up does not mean less top-down;** it may even require more top-down, only a different style: encouraging and enabling instead of command and control. This requires a corresponding understanding and competence at the level of administrations and of local actors.
- **A global grant or “quasi” global grant system of delivery is only fully operational if all the public funds are concentrated in one package.** If just the European co-funding is decentralised and the LAG has to run for the national co-funding for each project, the gain in flexibility is annihilated (there are examples of this kind in the MTE reports – e.g. France). Global grants require well coordinated management of financial flows at national and regional level.

³⁵ I.e. those cases of global grants which are not fully decentralized but distributed via an intermediate public body – e.g. like in Austria via the provinces.

b) Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are cornerstones of LEADER+ and if carried out in a structured way should inform the planning process for future programmes as well as allowing corrective action to be taken where necessary with current programmes.

There is no indication from MTE reports that ex-ante evaluations led to noticeable changes in the programmes.

The initiative of the Commission to pre-establish a set of **common evaluation questions** with related judgement criteria was **seen as a well-meant attempt to improve the knowledge base and the conditions of institutional learning across Europe**. However, this attempt was somewhat hampered by (i) the full application of CEQs at mid term stage which does not seem the adequate moment for this exhaustive exercise, specifically concerning the questions relating to impact; (ii) the sheer number and sometimes elusiveness of CEQs; (iii) the lack of a harmonized system of observation.

Concerning (external and self-) evaluations at LAG level, there is growing conscience of the importance and benefits of evaluations and most LAGs had plans for some sort of evaluation exercise. **The analysis finds that (i) the evaluation activities are largely unstructured; (ii) there is surprisingly little co-ordination or co-operation between LAGs in the area of evaluation; (iii) national networks do not play a prominent role, except in assisting self-evaluations in some areas.**

An issue calling for further deliberation is how the LAGs could utilise the results of self-assessment more efficiently and extensively in their work so that they would have genuine guiding effects. **Self-assessment in most cases seems to be a one-off operation**, and systematic analysis of experience and the resulting corrective actions and learning are suffering from lack of time as the focus is on starting new projects.

Recommendations

- The global grant or “quasi” global grant system is an appropriate pattern for LEADER implementation. Both the national/regional government and the local governance system should be prepared for it through adequate capacity and trust building measures, as well as a sound coordination of financial flows, specifically through packaging public co-funding.
- There is a need to come to a harmonized set of common indicators at European level regardless of the additional monitoring and evaluation needs at national and regional level. The first step was made by setting out the CEQ, but there is a second step to be made:
 - Pre-establishing generic indicators relating to each CEQ which can be adapted to the respective conditions without losing the overall comparability and aggregability.
 - Indicating the ways or mechanisms by which these indicators should be monitored.
 - Substantially reducing the number of CEQs: this would probably boost the readiness of national and regional administrations to comply with the framework and to generate additional indicators to satisfy their specific information needs.
 - The framework of CEQ, judgement criteria and indicators should be set up by a consultative work group involving actors from all levels concerned (local actors, regional/national

administrations/networks/EC). The CEQs should reflect a shared vision of the intervention logic, which consequently leads to a “harmonization” of these indicators among each other.³⁶ Models like the balanced scorecard for local and regional development such as the one created in a LEADER work group under the guidance of the National Network in Austria, could help to generate the internal coherence of the indicator system.

- The use by LAGs of a mix of external evaluation and assisted self-evaluation should be designed and put in the programme. National/regional networks may help the managing authority in operationalising this accompanying device.
- Learning needs to be systematically embedded in the programme implementation itself: Reflexivity³⁷ should become a new LEADER feature. Reflexivity means that learning should be embedded at all programme levels by paying attention to the benefits and needs of those acting at that level. Therefore different methods and means of learning should be applied. This would mean that on the programme level and above (EU Commission and Managing Authorities) a result oriented learning should be applied (via standard evaluation and monitoring). The local/regional level would call for self-induced learning methods (such as self evaluation, supervision).

³⁶ It is however noted that for the next programming period the European Commission has developed within the "Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework" a limited number of common indicators to be applied to rural development programmes, including the LEADER axis.

³⁷ It is an explicit operational principle of the German Federal pilot initiative Regionen Aktiv (a national LEADER-like measure involving 18 pilot areas).

Bibliography

European Commission

CEC (Commission of the European Communities) (2001a): European Governance: A White Paper, COM (2001) 428, Brussels, 25.07.2001

Commission decision 2006/636/EC of 12/09/2006

Council of the European Union (2005): Presidency Conclusions, Brussels March 23, 2005, 7619/05

Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EARDF) (5), and for the fisheries sector, namely a European Fisheries Fund (EFF)

EC (2002): Guidelines for the evaluation of LEADER+ programmes, European Commission, DG Agriculture, Document VI/43503/02/Rev.1

European Commission (2005): Synthesis of Rural Development Mid-term Evaluations; submitted by Agra CEAS Consulting, Brussels; <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/>

MEMO/03/236 (EC DG AGRI): Conclusions of Second European Conference on Rural Development in Salzburg ("Planting seeds for rural futures – building a policy that can deliver our ambitions"). Bruxelles, 21 November 2003.

Official Journal C 139 of 18.05.2000

Regulation EC No 1290/2005.

Structural Funds Regulation 1260/99

AEIDL (1999): Assessing the added value of the LEADER approach. Rural innovation – Dossier of the European LEADER II Observatory Nr 4

Earl S., Carden F., Smutylo T.: Outcome Mapping. Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs. IDRC Ottawa, 2001, p. 1.

Fischer Boel, Mariann (2005): Rural development and the Lisbon Strategy, SPEECH/05/22, Member of the European Commission responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development

Lückenkötter, J., Kroes, G., Fekade, W. (2002): Methodological Challenges to Conducting Impact Studies – A Guide to the FACT Approach. Arbeitspapier 176, Institut für Raumplanung an der Universität Dortmund (IRPUD). Dortmund.

ÖIR-Managementdienste GmbH (2004): Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming Leader Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes, commissioned by DG Agriculture, Unit G4

ÖIR-Managementdienste GmbH: Ex-post Evaluation of the Community Initiative LEADER II (EC DG AGRI 2003), Final Report, volume 3 (Case Studies)

Putnam, Robert D.: Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Simon & Schuster Publishing, 2000.

University of Valencia (2004): Governance of territorial and urban policies – from EU to local level, First Interim Report; ESPON Project 2.3.2, Submitted by University of Valencia, Lead Partner for ESPON 2.3.2

World Bank Group: Glossary of the World Bank Group
(www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/modules/glossary.htm)

Annex A

Glossary of key terms referred to in the evaluation questions or judgement criteria

Area-based approach	The area-based approach consists in defining a development policy starting from the current situation, strengths and weaknesses particular to an area. Under LEADER, this area is a rural territorial unit that has certain homogeneity, is characterised by an internal social cohesion, shares a common history and tradition, and experiences a common feeling of identity. Moreover, the area must have sufficient coherence and critical mass in terms of human, financial and economic resources to support a viable development strategy. The LEADER+ regulation establishes basic population and surface criteria.
Balanced representation of local interests	The LEADER+ programme must be implemented via Local Action Groups (LAGs). These are bodies in which the decision-making lies in the hands of a partnership in which the “private” sector holds at least 50% of the voting power.
Bottom-up approach	The bottom-up approach aims to encourage participatory decision-making at the local level for all those concerned with development policies. The involvement of local players is sought and includes the population at large, economic and social interest groups, and representatives of public and private institutions. The bottom-up approach relies on two major activities (“animation” and training of local communities) and comes into play at different stages of the programme.
Co-funding rates	As for all EU funds handled under the EAGGF the LEADER+ programme did foresee a national co-funding. The co-funding rate as laid down in EU regulation Nr. 1685/2000 as accepted by the Commission on July, 28, 2000 together with the rules of conduct for the regulation (EC) Nr. 1260/1999 of the Council concerning the co-financing measures financed by structural funds operations. The only specific of LEADER has been the limitation of expenditures for LAG management at 15% of the total expenditures for Action 1.
Complementarity between actors/Complementarity of actions	Complementarity is a general principle of the Structural Funds: sources of funding should never duplicate each other but rather work in a complementary manner. This can be applied at the level of actions (e.g. organisation of cheese producers and promotion of local products) or at the level of actors (e.g. training body works with Chamber of Commerce). Some definition work is needed to help the evaluators (and the LAGs) to understand the value of different forms of integration (in a sector, across sectors, around a global project, etc.)
Complementarity and Synergy of Structural Funds Programmes	The other EU policies and programmes are mainly represented by Structural Funds (Objective 1 or 2, INTERREG III or EQUAL). The terms complementarity and synergy are vaguely synonymous (in the sense that together they generate a better impact than their respective individual effects – which can rarely be really put in evidence).
Cooperation between rural areas	Co-operation between territories within the same Member State or between territories belonging to several Member States (and beyond under some conditions) is a specific feature of the LEADER+ method which aims at the complementary objectives of achieving the critical mass necessary for joint projects to be viable and encouraging complementary actions. This should be done by pooling human and financial resources dispersed through the territories concerned.
Eligibility conditions	Eligibility conditions are defined as the conditions that govern access to the programme and which potential beneficiaries must comply with prior to application and which actual beneficiaries must comply with after approval. In this respect eligibility conditions are a key part of programme design.
Endogenous Resources	Endogenous Resources refer to resources available within the LEADER+ area.
Evaluation activities	Evaluation activities at LAG level has a wide definition from informal self assessment and reflection to more formal structured evaluation activities examining specific aspects or features of the LEADER+ programme. Self-evaluation tends to reflect evaluation activities organised within the LAG and relying on LAG personnel. The type of activity subjected to evaluation varies across programmes but most are more general in nature rather than specific to some of the LEADER+ features.
Ex-ante evaluation	Ex-ante evaluation supports the preparation of new or renewed community actions. Its purpose is to gather information and to carry out analysis which help to ensure that the policy objectives will be delivered successfully, that the measures used are cost-effective and the reliable evaluation will be subsequently possible. (Source: EC Evaluation Guidelines for the programming period 2007 – 2013)

General integrative topic emphasising the specificity of their area	These are topics for bundling projects within LEADER programmes, which have been identified to reflect the specificity of an area. The identification of such specificities is based upon the thorough analysis of the region. In general such topics are oriented on (i) geographic parameters (e.g. landscapes and its special features), (ii) common products and handicrafts, (iii) tradition and history
Integrated Approach	integrated approach, in the sense that the LAG strategy adopts a global approach based on the interaction between actors, sectors and projects.
Inter-territorial co-operation (in the Member State) and transnational cooperation between rural areas	Co-operation between territories within the same Member State or between territories belonging to several Member States is a specific feature of the LEADER+ method which aims at the complementary objectives of achieving the critical mass necessary for joint projects to be viable and encouraging complementary actions. This should be done by pooling human and financial resources dispersed through the territories concerned, according to thematic guidelines defined by the LAGs in their development plans.
LEADER Approach	LEADER has become a synonym for a certain philosophy or approach (the LEADER approach and its specific features); but it is also a programme, now in its third generation. From LEADER II on, the approach has been partly or quite comprehensively been emulated or transferred to mainstream rural development and regional development programmes in various member states of the EU15. A corresponding study has been conducted by the DG AGRI in 2004. ³⁸ This study concluded that "LEADER-type programmes produce synergies with other regional development measures", specifically because of its strong focus on collective learning among rural and administrative stakeholders. It is to be expected that in countries, where "strong" mainstreaming has been diagnosed (e.g. Ireland, Finland, Andalucía), the learning effect feeds back on the implementation of LEADER+., reinforcing its pilot character within a comprehensive approach to rural development.
LEADER+ Programme Matrix	LEADER+ provides a programme matrix consisting of four actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pilot development strategy – Territorial co-operation – Networking – Technical Assistance and four key themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use of know how and new technologies – Quality of life in rural areas – Adding value to local products – Enhancing natural and cultural resources.
Learning-effect	The strengths and weaknesses of the former programming phase are identified and can be taken into account by the programming authority and the LAGs when preparing the next phase of the intervention. This should be the role played by evaluations, but in fact these are often undertaken too late. Mid-term evaluations are more useful in this respect, but do not provide information on the impact of the actions undertaken.
Mainstreaming	Conventional rural development policy that has become the normal practice in the target area
Management and financing of programmes	Management and financing of programmes is a key factor in overall programme success or failure. The nature of LEADER+ requires a flexible approach to programme management combining sound management systems and controls with a significant degree of autonomy delegated to LAG level. This can cause problems unless the correct balance is struck and appropriate systems developed that meet the requirements of the managing authority and the LAG. These arrangements vary across member states and indeed within regions. Programme management is taken to cover all steps and processes from initial programme design to implementation while financing includes not just the level of financing but also the financing and payment arrangements.
Monitoring systems	Monitoring systems refer to systems that monitor ongoing performance at both programme and project level on the basis of a wide range of information including reports, reviews, indicators, etc. In the case of the LEADER programmes, having "sufficiently harmonized" monitoring systems presupposes that an integrated system is in place that was planned at the programme outset whereby monitoring systems and data are defined (with relevant indicators) that would facilitate evaluation and in particular meet the requirements of the guidelines for the evaluation of LEADER+ programmes (Document VI/43503/02). Unfortunately this assumption does not have widespread validity with little evidence of a structured approach that would properly link monitoring and evaluation.

³⁸ Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming LEADER Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes. Study carried out by the ÖIR for the EC/DG AGRI, Unit G4. Wien 2004.

National network	National Networking Unit, the 'formal' Leader+ networking tool implemented at national level.; Leader+ Notice to Member States: networking was foreseen as being implemented by a structure which many understood as unique and national only (<i>'Point 22: Each Member State will propose the steps required in order to put in place the structure necessary for organising the network'</i>). In these countries, a national network has been set up with the objective of working for all the LAGs and Leader actors in the country concerned.
Networking	Networking includes the exchange of achievements, experiences and know-how between all interested parties in the Community, whether or not beneficiaries under the initiative.. The objective is to stimulate and achieve co-operation between territories, and provide information and draw lessons concerning territorial rural development, via the exchange and transfer of information. Active participation in the network is mandatory for all LEADER+ participants.
Partnership approach	The LAG is a body of public and private players, united in a partnership that identifies a joint strategy and a local action plan for developing a LEADER area. This partnership must include at least 50% of representative of the private sector. The LAG is one of the most original and strategic features of the LEADER approach. Endowed with a team of practitioners, decision-making powers and a fairly large budget, the LAG represents a new model of organisation that can considerably influence the institutional and political balance of the area concerned.
Pilot nature of the strategy	The pilot character of the strategy must be demonstrated in the sense that the strategies must put forward means of achieving sustainable development which are new by comparison with previous practice in the area concerned, and with the methods used and planned in the mainstream programmes. The strategy should be transferable to similar cases in other areas. (Guidelines – Glossary)
Priority target beneficiaries	Women and young are designated as priority targets of the LEADER+ programme in the Communication to the member states. This is a new feature that appeared with LEADER+. The local actions should take this into account and this priority should be reflected in the strategic orientation, in the representation in decision-making bodies, in the information and communication policy and in the choice of projects. In France, women and young have been designated as priority theme at national level, alongside the four themes preconized by the EC. There is no common definition for the age of the "young": in some member states, they should be under 40, in others under 30.
Priority Theme	The priority themes the Commission considers to be of special interest at Community level are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The use of new know-how and new technologies to make the products and services of rural areas more competitive. – Improving the quality of life in rural areas. – Adding value to local products, in particular by facilitating access to markets for small production units via collective actions. – Making the best use of natural and cultural resources, including enhancing the value of sites of Community interest selected under Natura 2000.
Programme specific evaluation questions	Programme specific evaluation questions are formulated for the purpose of the evaluation of a specific programme, in view of providing a deeper insight into the overall implementation of that programme or to reflect specific objectives of that programme. Contrary to them, "common" evaluation questions apply to all the programmes and tend to reflect the objectives of the LEADER initiative at Community level.
Public funding	Is the part of the expenditures spent within the LEADER programme which is offered by public authorities. These contributions are equally split up by the EAGGF funds and national/regional sources of the MS. Additionally each applicant in LEADER has to provide a certain percentage of private co-funding.
Rural development strategy	Territorial development strategy to be applied in "rural" areas. Other rural development and structural programmes operated in the same area.LEADER+ does not operate in a vacuum, but in areas where other interventions useful for rural development are taking place. These can be generic programmes (RDP, Objective 1, ..) or sectorial (telecommunications, health, ...). They can be European, national or regional. They can be policy-oriented or more programme-oriented. The LEADER programme must find its "niche" amongst those other interventions but should not operate without liaisons with them.
Rural-urban interaction	LEADER+ can for the first times include areas that do not belong to "objective areas" like in LEADER I and II. This has led to the inclusion of rural areas which are closer to urban centres. These rural areas are therefore under pressure from people working in the cities and looking for nice accommodation and amenities. This is at the same time a new thread for these areas and an opportunity worth exploring.

Strategic role of LEADER	<p>LEADER has evolved into role models which may also appear as hybrids:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – LEADER is used as a pathfinder or incubator programme – LEADER is a niche specialist for innovation and specific demands – LEADER is a soft ware which allows to combine programmes at local level – LEADER serves as a core element of an overarching territorial development strategy <p>All these roles bear their merits and benefits, but also shortcomings and pitfalls. The danger of insulation decreases from d to a, but also does the innovative thrust. The risk of administrative hindrances decrease in the same direction, whereas the potential autonomy of LAGs increases, including the burdens of responsibility and accountability for local actors.</p>
Target Public	<p>The population in the LAG area which should be addressed by the programme intervention and should be involved in two ways: (i) as beneficiaries of the programme interventions; (ii) as stakeholders/decision makers in the management/conduct of the programme in the area.</p>
Transfer of information, good practices and know-how	<p>This is a concept central to the Structural Funds, and especially Community Initiatives. Since these are supposed to explore new ways of making policy (for possible inclusion in mainstream policies), there must be ways of “extracting” the knowledge gained to pass it onto other people facing a similar problem.</p>
Vertical partnership	<p>This term refers to the sharing of responsibilities between different levels of competencies: European, national, regional, local. This sharing and the procedure for exchanging information can be integrated in a contract linking the partners. It is a concrete application of the concept of subsidiarity.</p>

Annex B

From the intervention logic to the cardinal questions – inter-linkages of the evaluation questions

1. Identifying relationships between the questions of each of the five categories

The Figures 18a to 18e show the presumed relationships between the evaluation questions (CEQs and FEQs) in each of the categories. The relationships are mostly represented by unidirectional arrows, which might appear as an oversimplification. Of course, we did not consider all possible links, as the usability of the construct would suffer. The construct structures the list of questions in a way that some questions appear as more feeding into others, while some questions rather cumulate characteristics addressed by others. The result is a web of inference which could also be regarded as an emerging hierarchy between the questions.

The question boxes are coloured according to where they “belong” in the model of the intervention logic. Some of the questions have red frames. Red frames mark “cardinal questions”. Their relevance will be revealed later.

Figure 18a: **Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions: Category 1: Implementation of the LEADER method**

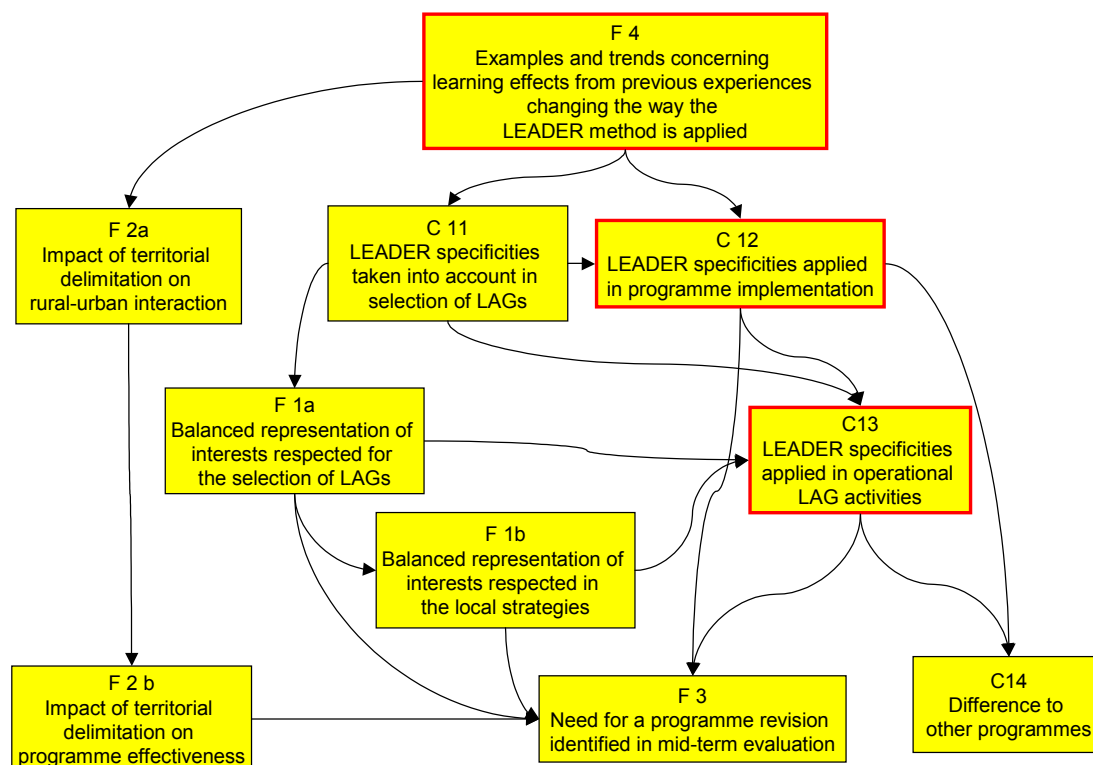


Figure 18b: **Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions:**
Category 2: The three actions of LEADER+

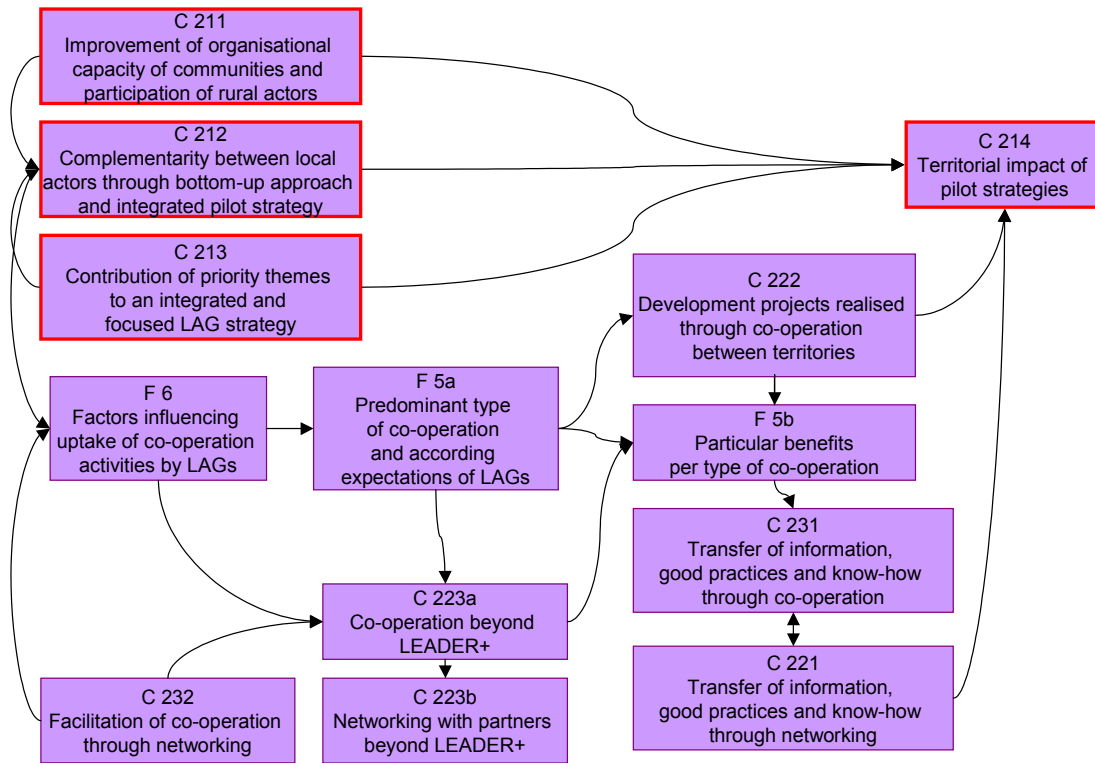


Figure 18c: **Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions:**
Category 3: The impact of LEADER+ programmes

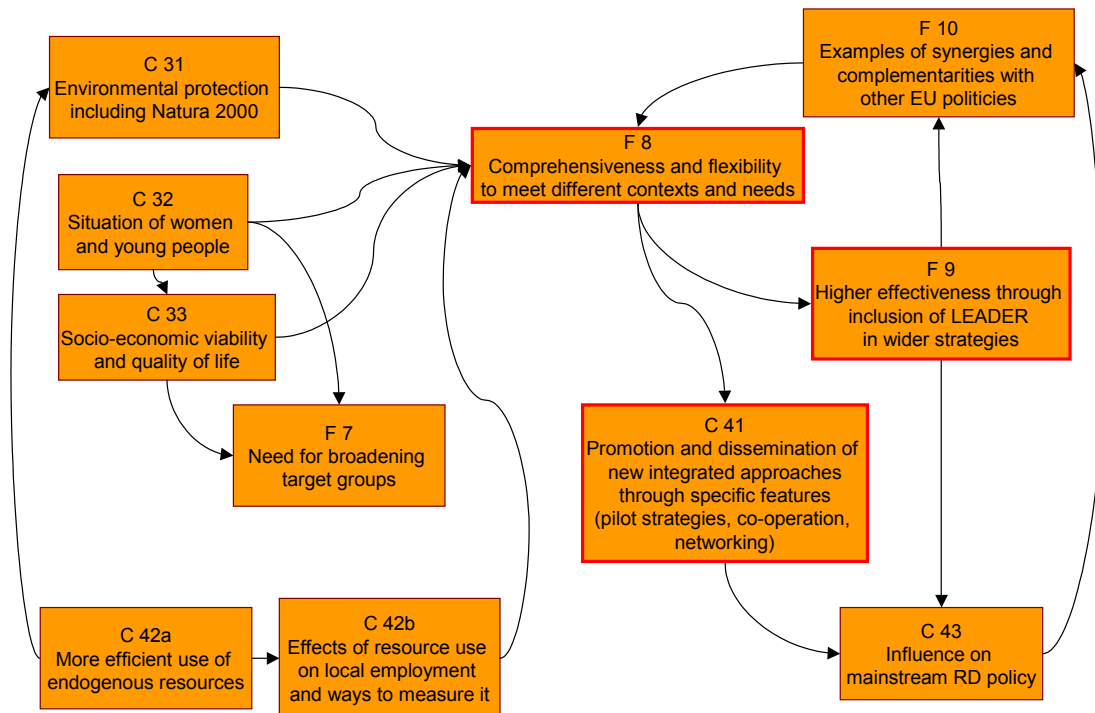


Figure 18d: **Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions:**
Category 4: Financing and management of programmes

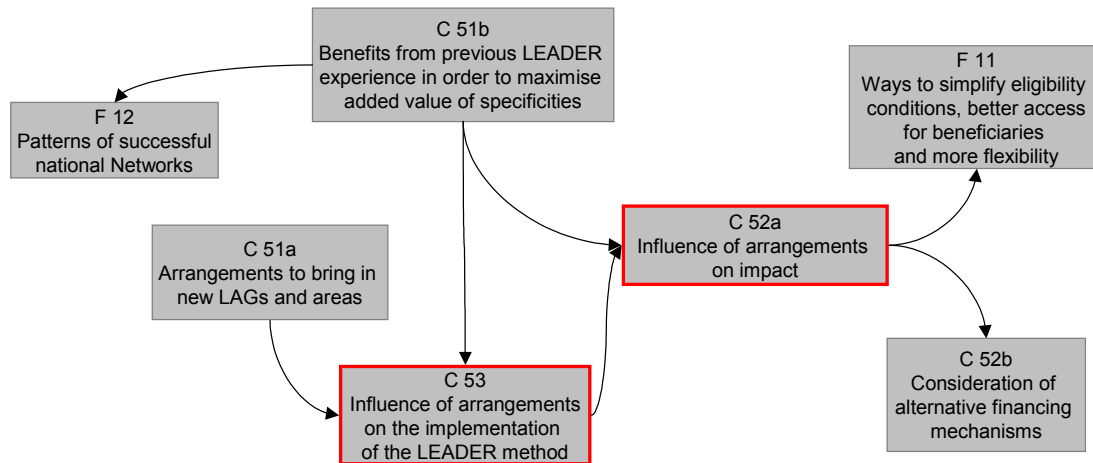
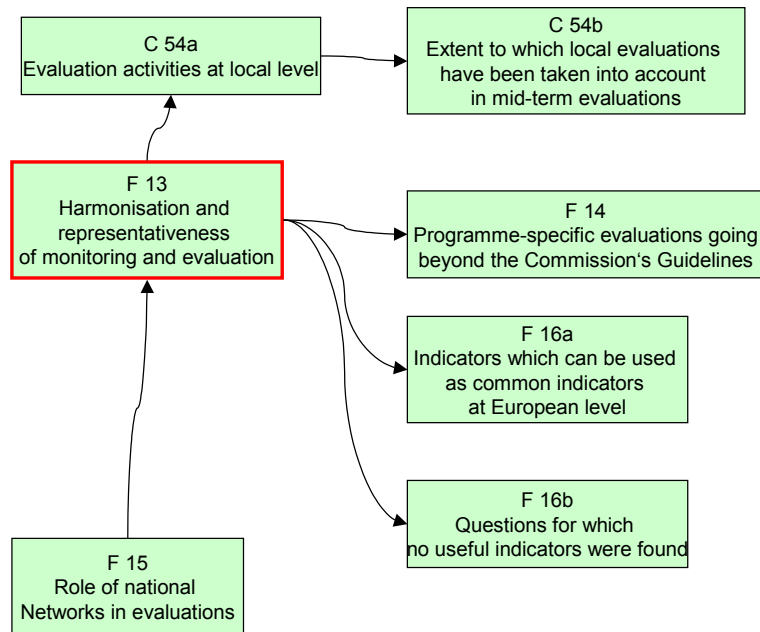


Figure 18e: **Modelling the linkages between the evaluation questions:**
Category 5: Monitoring and Evaluation



2. Modelling the relationships between all the 49 questions against the background of the intervention logic

Now the whole array of 49 questions in the five categories are linked together and projected against the screen of the intervention logic (first presented in Figure 8). The resulting Figure 19 may appear confusing at first sight, but it is just an image of what is going to be explored by this study. It is difficult to imagine that it can be still simplified without loss of relevant information. Some questions are coloured differently than the box in which they appear. This is due to the fact that some questions escape the logic of the five categories and rather belong to other components of the model.

Figure 19: **The evaluation questions related to the intervention logic of LEADER**

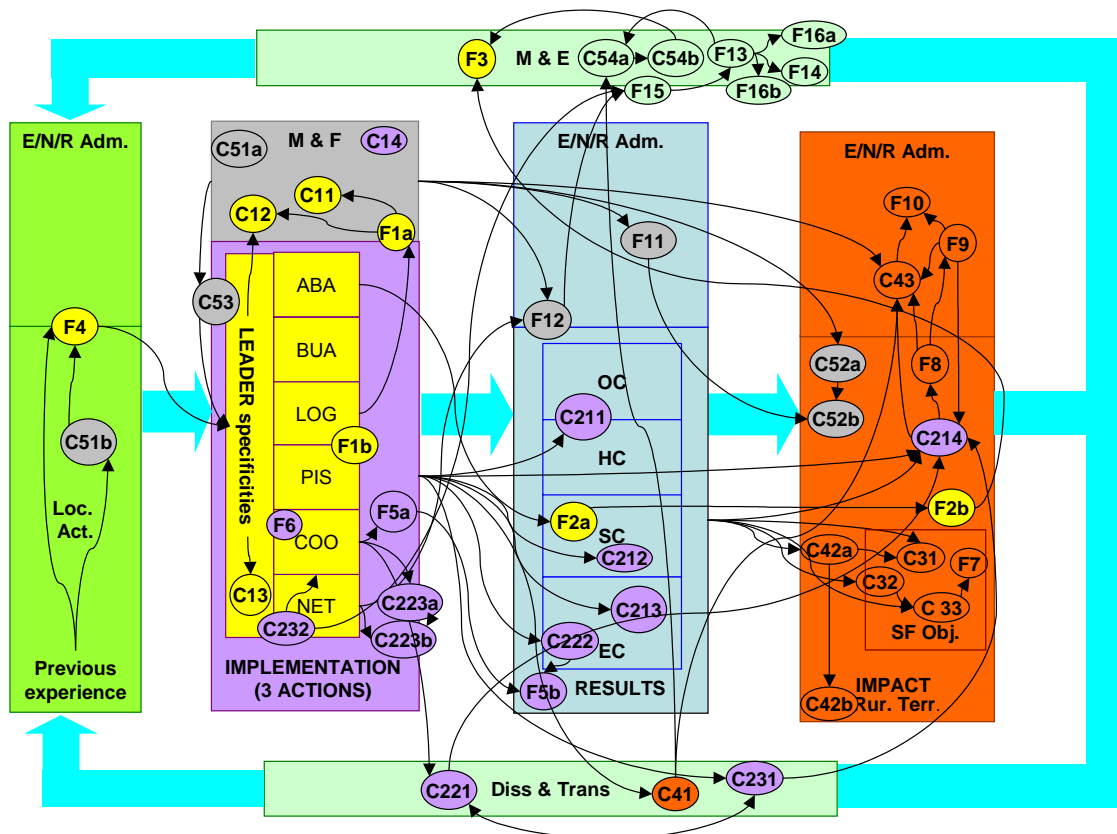
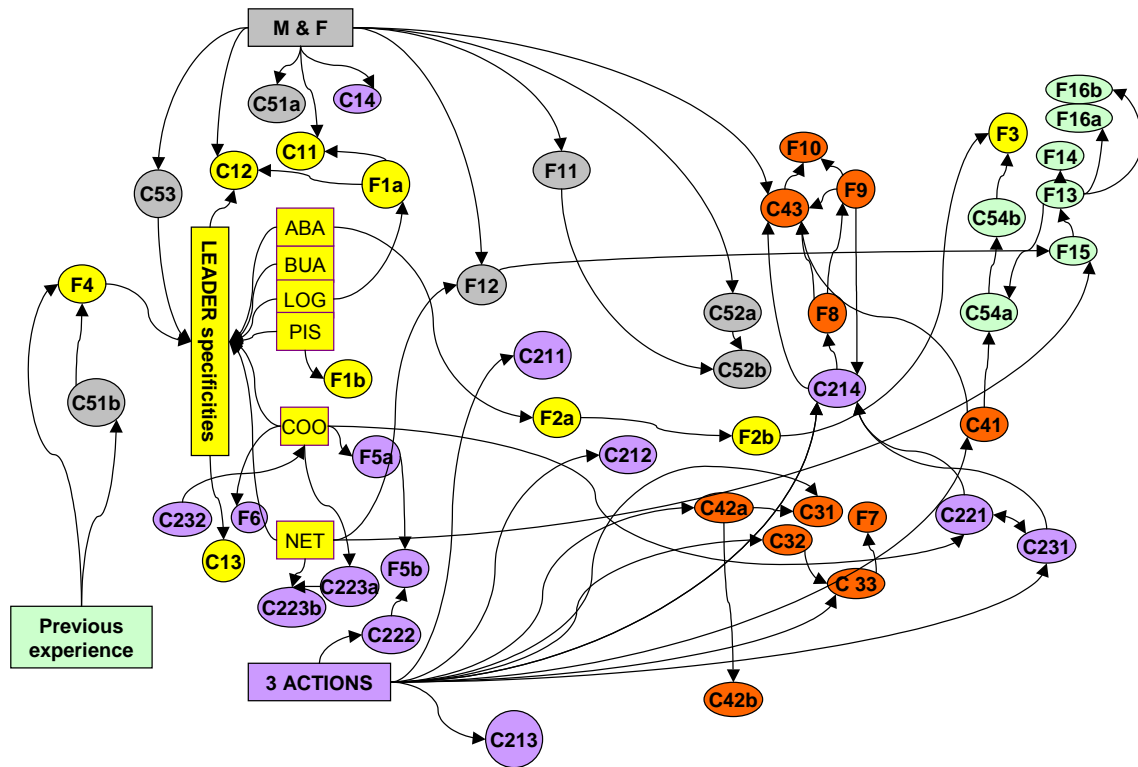


Figure 20 shows the relationships between the questions without the intervention model in its background.

Figure 20: **The evaluation questions related to each other**



The presentation requires intercalary elements (“previous experience”, “LEADER specificities”, “three actions”, “management and financing”) in order to keep the model consistent and readable.