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PRINCIPAL LESSONS FROM THE MID-TERM EVALUATION OF THE RDPs AND ROPs

THE SITUATION IN ITALY

Structural Policies Observatory

National System of Evaluation of Rural Development Policies

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The the mid-term evaluation of the RDPs and ROPs, performed by independent evaluators, has just been concluded. The end result of the mid-term evaluation is represented by the reports delivered on 31 December 2003, which will be updated no later than 31 December 2005 (Art. 42, Reg. 1260/99).

The first part of the present document will retrace the principal steps in the process of evaluating rural development measures in Italy, with particular attention to the following aspects:

- the management of the evaluation (timeframe, management models, use of Community guidelines, information systems): good practice and critical points;
- lessons learned from the mid-term review evaluation for improving the entire process in view of the 2005 update and the post-2006 phase.

The second section, which is the fruit of a first survey of the evaluation reports, synthesises the principal recommendations and conclusions of the mid-term evaluation of the RDPs and Objective 1 ROPs, insofar as the part in relation to rural development measures, concentrating in particular on the following aspects:

- the principal recommendations concerning the management system;
- the principal recommendations concerning re-programming.

It is necessary to highlight the fact that the Ministry of Agricultural and Forestry Policies, which at the national level is responsible for activities pertaining to the co-ordination and examination of themes relating to agriculture and rural development, has deemed strategic the reading of the Evaluation Reports and the identification therein of the principal conclusions and recommendations for guiding the re-programming of the RDPs and ROPs. To that end, the results reviewed here have been used within the framework of:

- the National Monitoring Committee for Rural Development Plans;
- the Agriculture and Rural Development Group, a working group within the framework of the Monitoring Committe for the Objective 1 CSF

The principal recommendations furnished by the independent evaluators are summarised below and recapitulated by Region in the two tables (*The Principal Recommendations Made by the Independent Reviewers of the RDPs and ROPs*) attached to the present document.

a. The Evaluation Process in Italy

a.1 The management of the evaluation (timeframe, management models, use of Community guidelines, information systems): good practice and critical points

In Italy, in Regions included under Objective 1 and in transition, the support measures for rural development financed by the EAGGF – Guidance Section are integrated in the programming of Structural Funds, which provides a Community Support Framework (CSF), a programmatic frame wherein are included seven Regional Operative Programmes (ROPs), with the related programme complements (PC).. The measures providing for the financial participation of the EAGGF – Guarantee Section are instead put into effect through the seven regional Rural Development Plans (RDPs) for the purpose.

Finally, Regions not included under Objective 1 have opted for a single programming of rural development support measures for the entire regional territory and integrated in the fourteen RDPs drawn up by the individual Regions.

This programmatic arrangement has had a decisive influence, including on the modalities with which the mid-term evaluation of rural development policies was organised and handled within the different programmes, as regards the timeframe according to which the activities provided for were carried out, as well as the management model for the evaluation processes.

The timeframe for evaluation activities

A first aspect to be considered is therefore *the timeframe of the evaluation process*. It must be borne in mind that for the Objective 1 Regions, the CSF set 31/12/2001 as the deadline for the selection of the independent evaluators on the part of the regional management authorities and identified the observance of this deadline as one of the criteria for the awarding of the national performance reserve. For purposes of the setting up of the mid-term evaluation activities the observance of said deadline for the selection of evaluators guaranteed a sufficiently ample amount of work time so as not to constitute an excessive hindrance to the quality of the evaluation.

As for the RDPs, instead, it is necessary to point out that the evaluation process taken as a whole got underway with a delay that was not negligible. In fact, only 5 Regions selected their evaluators during the year 2002. The others did so

only in 2003, and in some cases the assignment came as late as the final quarter of 2003. Finally, Puglia and Basilicata have yet to terminate the selection procedure.

This circumstance has surely represented a *factor conditioning the quality* of the end product of the mid-term evaluation in terms not only of the thoroughness of the examination of the effects of agricultural development and rural development policy, but of the entire process set in motion.

Management models for the evaluation

Shifting our attention to the *management models for the evaluation*, it is necessary to point out that, as concerns the ROPs, the Community Support Framework concerning Objective 1 Regions provided for the establishment of a *National Evaluation System* composed of the national structures of reference for the evaluation of support measures in connection with the various Structural Funds (INEA for the EAGGF) and of the *Nuclei regionali di valutazione*[1] or Regional Evaluation Groups, whose principal objective is to improve the quality of the evaluation system through a whole set of support activities and technical methodological guidance aimed at improving and valorising the evaluation activities. The considerable effort made by the National Evaluation System toward bettering the quality and usefulness of the evaluations has played a decisive role, including with reference to the evaluation of rural development.

Overall, *the management model adopted within the framework of the Objective 1 CSF can be considered "good practice,"* having made it possible to achieve appreciable results both in orienting the timeframe of the evaluation activities and in bettering the technical co-ordination of such activities at the national level.

The organisation of the evaluation activities differs substantially in Regions outside Objective 1, where in the absence of a national programming level, the management of evaluation activities and the interfacing with the evaluator take place exclusively at the Regional level. Here, too, certain instances of good practice are identifiable in the management of evaluation activities, such as in Emilia Romagna, to cite one example, where an ad hoc work group was created and assigned the duty of managing the monitoring and evaluation from a technical standpoint. This structure, in interfacing with both the evaluator and those responsible for carrying out the programme, demonstrated a great capacity to contribute to the quality of the evaluation and therefore to its potential use in programming.

As regards the organisational models adopted at the regional level for the circulation and use of the results of the evaluation, worthy of mention are certain experiences that contributed positively to the circulation of such results and to discussion with various stakeholders.

- provided under Objective 1 are special sessions of the Monitoring Committees overseeing the ROPs in order to discuss the results contained in the drafts of the Mid-Term Evaluation Reports (all of which delivered no later than 31 July 2003). Furthermore, in some regions (Puglia and Sardinia), seminars have been arranged for with the economic and social partnership, featuring special work sessions on rural development;

The use of Community guidelines

As regards the evaluation of rural development, a great influence on the modalities with which the mid-term evaluation of rural development policies was organised and dealt with was exercised by the demand for evaluation made explicit by the European Commission (DG Agri) through the proposition of the Common Evaluation Questions (CEQ, rif. doc. STAR VI/12004/00).

In this case as well, in Italy substantial differences have been revealed between the evaluation of the RDPs and the Objective 1 ROPs. In fact, a widespread awareness of the necessity of having to answer the demand for evaluation made by the Commission emerges from the RDP revaluation reports. A large part of the activities of the independent evaluators is concentrated on the contents of the CEQ, a circumstance attributable to the high level of *enforcement* that the European Commission has been able to exercise with reference to the RDPs in this respect.

In the evaluation of Objective 1 ROPs the attention of the evaluators - although they did analyse themes linked to rural development - was instead less concentrated on the contents of the CEQ. This circumstance is attributable among other things to a lack of clarity on the part of the Commission, in the selection phase of the evaluators, in the matter of the use of the methodological documents of reference (DG Regio Guidelines versus Dg Agri Guidelines, or both).

Nevertheless, with respect to the degree of thoroughness in the use of the CEQ quite differentiated situations are observed between programmes. As regards the RDPs and ROPs, while almost all the reports deal with the work involving the selection of the important questions, a lesser number of them also adequately present the arrangement of the methodology for the recording of the effects. The most frequent situation is the presence of a partial investigative

[1] The Regional Evaluation Groups were established on the basis of Legislative Decree 144/99, with support functions in connection with the review of public investments.

plan that identifies in generic terms the typology of the instruments to be used, but not the specific methodologies that are necessary for the acquisition of information and the analysis thereof in the successive phase of evaluation (updating of mid-term reports and ex-post evaluation). Moreover, generally the motivations and reasoning that led to the choice of a given set of questions, criteria and indicators were omitted, contrary to suggestions contained in the guidelines for the mid-term evaluation of the RDPs (STAR VI/43517/02). Finally, very few mid-term reviews proceed from theory to practical action and deal with the identification of samples for a more thorough examination of specific aspects or record information with ad hoc investigations or contain an analysis of the early results of support measures (responding at least in part to the questions) or an estimate of potential impact.

Summing up, even if the level of explanation of the methodologies used and the analysis of the implications for the quality of the data and of the results of the evaluation activities represent aspects generally calling for additional effort in view of the update of the evaluation in 2005 (note that the update of mid-term evaluation is seen as a priority at National level) , the use of the Community guidelines has provided a work scheme common to the different evaluators and has guaranteed greater homogeneity in the arrangement of activities, increasing the availability of comparable results with which to effect a common reading at the national level of the results of the different programmes.

Finally, it is pointed out that at the national level various initiatives have been taken to solicit the use of the CEQ, which focus on the modalities for effectively responding to the Community questions, the following being examples thereof:

- the drawing up, within the framework of the National Evaluation System as provided under Objective 1 CSF, of Guidelines for the mid-term review of support measures for agriculture and rural development in Objective 1 operative programmes for 2000-2006;
- the organisation of a 15-day training course designed for representatives of the Management Authorities of the RDPs and ROPs, aimed at the diffusion of the necessary methodological skills for co-ordinating and verifying the quality of activities carried out by the evaluators.

Information systems

Despite the efforts made nationally to set up a monitoring system capable of meeting the needs of both monitoring and evaluation, the monitoring systems still fail to effectively meet the cognitive needs associated with evaluation. It is nonetheless opportune to point out that from this standpoint the regional information systems have proved to be strategic, even when not expressly designed for monitoring and evaluation.

Such is the case, for example, with the Region of Puglia's Farm Improvement Plan (PMA), featuring software created to provide a support to the Region in the selection phase of projects submitted by the farms, which has shown itself to be a valuable support to the activity of monitoring and evaluation, providing the information necessary for the annual reports on implementation, as well as that necessary for the evaluators in order to respond to the Common Evaluation Questions.

a.2 Lessons from the mid-term evaluation

Including in relation to what has emerged from the mid-term evaluation process regarding the RDPs and ROPs, reflection is currently underway at the national level on modalities through which to increase the usefulness of the evaluations in order to put them to better use, in terms of the process of implementing the support measures and in future programming.

In the first place, it is necessary to act in such a way that the updating of the mid-term evaluation will come to be considered and used as the principle instrument for improving the current management of the programmes, and to support the programming that will begin in 2007. In order that such needs can become a reality, it is necessary for the evaluation activities to be arranged in terms of "process," with a "continuous" interaction between the entity commissioning the work and the evaluator, not only for the purpose of preparing the Report, but also to elicit responses that are effectively useful for the administration.

To that end, the Monitoring Committee for RDPs has judged the need to increase technical/methodological co-ordination at the national level of evaluation activities to be priority matter, to be achieved through the creation of a *national evaluation system for rural development policies*, as a place for structured interfacing involving the MiPAF, the national structure for the evaluation of the EAGGF (INEA), regional management authorities and evaluators.

Furthermore, the phase just completed has shown the need to look for organisational solutions that make it possible to improve the technical management of monitoring and evaluation within the Management Authority. In particular, it is indispensable to provide regional organisational modalities that allow a better management of monitoring and evaluation activities, in such a way as to encourage interfacing that includes both the regional subjects responsible for

the management of the programme and the evaluators, thus also fostering mediation in linguistic terms, necessary for people who operate in different contexts.

On the other hand, present experience demonstrates that it is indispensable to develop information systems (regional) that are not just monitoring systems, inasmuch as they are able to guarantee the availability of a storehouse of information of extraordinary value, that frequently goes beyond the monitoring and evaluation "codified" in the Community and national guidance documents.

Experience in Italy suggests that at the Community level, in view of the new programming, it might be opportune to do the following:

- provide modalities for reducing the amount of time for the assignment of the mid-term evaluations. For example, award mechanisms could be provided (as an example more resources for the programme) for those evaluations assigned within one year from the time of the Community's decision to approve the programme (alternatively such modalities might be adopted at Member State levels;
- make explicit in the Regulations the concept of evaluation as a process and not just an activity aimed at the preparation of a evaluation report (eventually in the *consideranda* as well);
- provide for the possibility of Community co-financing of the technical management activities of monitoring and mid-term evaluation (work groups, steering committees, etc.), activities that in the current programming period are not co-financed in RDPs.

b. The Principal Recommendations and Conclusions Emerging from the Mid-Term evaluation of the RDPs and Objective 1 ROPs

b.1 – The principal recommendations pertaining to the management system

Special attention has been dedicated to the review of the system of management. In particular, *deficiencies in the monitoring systems* have been pointed out by many evaluators, above all in terms of the standardisation and systematisation of procedures for the gathering of information. In this respect, the necessity of a timely adjustment of monitoring procedures has been underlined, as has a general need to strengthen the regional information systems.

Another aspect that emerges from the evaluations is the appropriateness in certain Regions to devise *solutions capable of facilitating a speedup with respect to spending*, including in relation to difficulties in terms of outlays regarding measures in favour of rural development and the environment. The proposed solutions in some cases provide for the resort to *organisational changes* and in others to *the streamlining of procedures for implementation*. Only two evaluators suggest *revising the organisation of the responsibilities among the different structures in order to foster the integration of the different measures*.

Furthermore, in relation to the difficulties regarding spending involving the more strategic and innovative measures in favour of rural development and the environment, several evaluators suggest *developing specific actions in the interest of better information and more "animation" at the territorial level (measures for information and activation of local actors)*.

b.2 – The principal recommendations regarding re-programming

The principal recommendations furnished by the evaluators on programming can be referred to the following areas:

1. *Amendments of the programmes changing the financial allocation for given measures*. Only a few reviewers mention the appropriateness of increased financial support for certain measures and/or objectives contained in the programmes.
2. *New measures introduced by the Mid-term review.* As regards indications for programming, generally speaking there is a dearth of suggestions able to contribute to the adjustment of the programmes in relation to the new possibilities offered by MTR.
3. *State aid and RDP/ROP integration with other forms of intervention.* From the standpoint of the integration of the different policy instruments, in some instances it was suggested to increase and/or decrease the inflow of regional funds to the RDPs/ROPs, while in other instances it was suggested to devote attention to the integration of the RDPs/ROPs and the other programmes involving support measures referred to the regional territory - for example, by introducing technical administrative procedures capable of fostering a better functional link among the support measures proposed in different spheres. This recommendation appears particularly relevant in the RDPs and ROPs

in the Objective 1 Regions, where the integration of the support measures provided under the two programmes is considered a crucial aspect for achieving the goals.

4. *Integration and/or concentration of the support measure*. In this regard, even if this is a strategic element, the evaluators almost never go so far as to suggest the identification of true and proper forms of integrated planning of support measures on a territorial basis or in terms of *filière*. Generally, the recommendations made suggest changes in the definition of admissible support measures and in the criteria used in the selection process, aimed at encouraging the concentration of aid at the territorial level, in terms of *filière* or on environmental objectives. In other instances the evaluators limit their suggestions to recommending, in the presence of financial revision, strengthening (in the ROPs), and/or avoiding altering the nature of (in the RDPs) the strategy pertaining to rural development support measures (Article 33). Moreover, some of the reviewers of the ROPs focus their attention on the relation between EAGGF measures and the *Integrated Territorial Projects* (ITP) provided under the Objective 1 programmes.

5. *Improvement of the contents of measures*, both in terms of selection criteria and the redefinition of admissible support measures. For the most part, punctual observations are made, involving the capacity of the measures to reach the objectives for which they were designed.

6. *Greater attention to environmental issues and equal opportunity.* In some cases this is recommended in generic terms, while in others - above all, the matter of equal opportunity - specific measures were suggested, such as the introduction of incentives to female entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that in some cases the suggestions and recommendations directed to the Management Authorities turn out to be wanting in punctuality and lacking in depth, with the risk that they may be insufficiently pertinent and applicable.

Principal Recommendations by Independent Evaluators of RDPs

	Recommendations: Management System				Recommendations: Re-programming										
	Information and activation	Monitoring and information systems	Streamlining implementation procedures	Organisation	Financial revision	MTR measures	State Aid	RDP integration with other measures (ROP, State aid, etc.)	Integration and/or concentration			Improvement content of measures		Increased attention to environ-mental issues	Increased attention to equal opportunity
									Territory	Agri-environment and Less Favoured Areas	Filière	Selection criteria	Definition of admissible measures		
Piemonte															
Valle d'Aosta	x	x		x		x	x (-)		x		x				
Lombardia	x	x	x	x					x			x			
A.P. Bolzano															
A.P. Trento Veneto					x (+RD and *m*)										
Friuli Venezia Giulia		x	x	x	x (+*a* and *c*)	x		x	x	x	x	x	x (b, c, m)		
Liguria	x	x								(LFA)		x	x		x
Emilia Romagna		x						x	x	x (LFA)		x			
Tuscany	x								x	x					
Umbria		x	x						x			x			
Marche		x	x				x (+)		x						
Lazio		x	x		x (-RD)								x (RD)		
Abruzzo	x	x	x	x									x (b and c)	x	x
Molise		x		x											
Campania		x		x				x							
Calabria															
Sicily			x	x			x (+)	x		x (+LFA)				x	
Sardinia								x							

Legend:
MTR – Mid-Term Review
RD – Rural Development
LFA – Less Favoured Areas
a – Investments in farms
b – Start-up assistance for young farmers
c – Training
m – Marketing of quality agricultural products
+ / - – Increase / Decrease in financial allocation

Principal Recommendations by Independent Evaluators of ROPs

	Recommendations: Management System				Recommendations: Re-programming									
	Information and activation	Monitoring and information systems	Streamlining implementation procedures	Organisation	Financial revision	MTR measures	RDP/ROP integration with other measures (ROP/RDP, RLP, State aid, etc.)	Integration and/or concentration			Improvement content of measures		Increased attention to environmental issues	Increased attention to equal opportunity
								Territory	ITP	Filière	Selection criteria	Definition of admissible measures		
Puglia	x							x			x		x	x
Basilicata			x		x (- v)		x		x	x		x		
Molise		x		x			x			x		x (s, p)		
Campania							x	x						x
Calabria		x		x	x				x	x			x	x
Sicily				x		x	x	x		x	x		x	x
Sardinia	x		x		x	x	x	x	x		x (p, n, b)	x (n, s)	x	x

Legend:
MTR – Mid-Term Review
ITP – Integrated Territorial Projects
RLP – Regional Leader+ Programme
b – start-up assistance for young farmers
p – diversifying agricultural activities
n – basic services for rural economy and population
s – encouraging tourist and craft activities
v – financial engineering
+ / - – Increase / Decrease in financial allocation