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A contribution to the definition of a future Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for rural development policy

Foreword

This document was sent to the Commission as the French contribution for the definition of a Common monitoring and evaluation framework for rural development policy. It is based on proposals formulated by professionals, evaluation experts and managing authority, together, as an answer to the consultation organized by the Evaluation HelpDesk. As preliminary comments to this document the French authorities would like to state the followings:

- the mid-term evaluation, which was the first opportunity to test the entire CMEF, is barely achieved. It has not yet allowed the necessary hindsight on its implementation.
- the capacity of the CMEF to give a sound European synthesis of evaluation data remains to be established.
- the future of the common rural development policy has barely been outlined in the « Communication » COM(2010).
- The French authorities remain interested in the future developments of monitoring and evaluation guidelines.

Taking all this into account, general principles and guidelines can nevertheless be developed with a view to improve the CMEF.

1- Principles for a common monitoring and evaluation framework

1.1 Taking into account the strategic level with its operational implementation

Whatever the future of the strategic level in the next programming period, it seems important that the strategic dimension of the programming be taken into account in the new CMEF.

The current CMEF is built on the basis of measures rather than on strategic objectives. Monitoring the measures seems the main function assured by the CMEF at the moment. In the future, it could be interesting to insure the balance between monitoring and evaluation.

The future CMEF should be conceived as a tool to help the Member States and regions define their rural development strategies and translate them into priorities and programmes.

1.2 Building up a coherence between CMEF and evaluation guidelines as defined for the other European funds

EAFRD is supposed to be used in complementarity and synergy with other funds. It is therefore important that its evaluation takes into account this characteristic. With this in

view an harmonization of the evaluation frameworks is to be undertaken, which does not mean the creation of a unique framework, but building up a coherence in order to enhance monitoring and implementation between the different funds.

Experience shows that a constraining and complex framework could be counterproductive. Incompatibilities between monitoring and evaluation principles from a fund to another can hinder public spending.

1.3 Taking into account within the scope of the CMEF the diversity of the European territories

In its current state the CMEF does not allow a sufficient differentiation of the impacts of rural development policies. It could be useful to take into account the diversity of dynamics as observed within the European rural territories. Moreover, the array of objectives of rural development policies, showing some contradictions, and cultural differences between MS make rural development a tricky concept which cannot be defined in one single way. Therefore, the CMEF should not insist on the aggregation of results at European and national levels, but should help compare the efficiency of the co-financed realizations by EAFRD in different contexts with differentiated intervention strategies.

1.4 Contributing to the improvement of policies

At the moment, the CMEF gives the impression that evaluation is mainly steered with an accountant's logic whereas evaluation is also a mean to develop some knowledge on the way public policies produce their effects. This knowledge can be further used to improve the implementation of policies. The function of an evaluation is not only to state whether or not the objectives have been reached, and with what efficiency, but also to state and understand the reasons for the failures or the successes of the policies implemented and the conditions of their replication, if needed be and relevant. Evaluation guidelines should insist on that point.

1.5 Using the CMEF as a guide for evaluation

The CMEF is above all a tool whose main function is to help the MS achieve monitoring and evaluation of their rural development programmes. It should not be too constraining - this is not the case at the moment - and complex in its implementation.

It should remain at a minimum level of requirement as to the number of evaluation questions and compulsory indicators but demanding on the quality of their definition. Horizontal and thematic questions remain a must but should go along with more precise questions on certain actions as a methodological help rather than a compulsory standard line of questions. As a toolbox the CMEF must be flexible to the MS in order to help them evaluate the specificities of their respective strategies.

1.6 Using quantitative and qualitative tools

As proposed in the CMEF the indicators should help answer the evaluative questions since both elements are linked. A better articulation between these two elements should help using the indicator tables of the CMEF to answer the evaluative questions, and the evaluative questions to interpret the quantitative data provided by the indicators.

If efficacy (effectiveness?) and efficiency of a policy can be quantified, relevance and

coherence remain within the realm of the qualitative judgement. Consequently, coherence and balance between qualitative and quantitative aspects of the CMEF should be reinforced.

1.7 Taking into account the time necessary to ascertain the effects of the programming

The implementation of EAFRD needs time to have a good idea of realizations and results. This is particularly true for environmental measures which take time to have a visible or at least measurable effect. If one of the objectives of the evaluation is to pass judgement on the results and impacts of a policy, time is a revealing factor. The evaluation timetable should take into account this fact. Therefore the impact analysis during MTE as it is expected in the CMEF for the current programming is hasty and should be reviewed in the light of the implementation process. In this perspective, the principle of an ongoing evaluation is a good settlement to shed a accurate light on certain actions and their effects during their implementation.

2- Ensure a clear allocation of responsibilities between European and national or local levels

2.1 Monitoring and evaluation are important activities at European and local levels

Ensure a clear allocation of responsibilities between European and national or local levels is not as important as organizing monitoring and evaluation to answer the needs of transparency, strategical steering and improvement of public spending at all levels.

2.2 A clear distinction must be ensured between monitoring and evaluation

Between monitoring (analysis of physical and financial realizations) and evaluation (analysis of results and impacts with regard to set targets), a clear distinction must be maintained. Complementarity must be achieved between European and national levels as to the different tasks belonging to monitoring and evaluation. Annual monitoring of the realizations alone could be achieved at MS levels and monitoring of the results synthezised and disseminated by DGAGRI. Results analysis should be realized along with impacts analysis within the framework of evaluation tasks when it is deemed necessary according to the timetable.

2.3 Evaluation: theory and practice

It could be useful, considering that the difficulties met by MS as to the methodological developments (conceptual and theoretical) are usually shared among them, to have those developments made at EU level, taking into account the needs formulated by MS. MS could propose and amend improvements as appropriate, with results from national research.

3 Proposals

3.1 Propose a better differentiation of evaluation according to territorial contexts

It could be useful and relevant to introduce indicative and non compulsory typologies of rural territories going beyond the urban-rural distinction, taking into account on a qualitative point of view the dynamics of these areas (peri-urban areas, littoral habitats, mountainous areas, isolated...). The common elements of such typologies should rely on the qualitative description of the observed phenomena rather than on common thresholds (unlike the OECD rural areas definition). If quantitative definitions must be implemented, MS should be allowed to chose the indicators which would better match their cultural identity (e.g. commute can be described in terms of time or distance, according to cultural perceptions)

3.2 Propose a better definition of results indicators

Results indicators are much too close to realizations levels than to impacts levels, which is source of difficulties when deciding on the effective causal relationship between realizations and impacts. At the moment, the general close correlation between realizations and results indicators is convenient in terms of monitoring, but rather poor when it comes to understanding the mechanisms of policies.

We support the idea that results indicators should be excluded from monitoring and included within the evaluation scope alone or when studying strategical monitoring.

3.3 Propose better harmonized calculation methods for indicators

One of the key policy concern at European level is to be able to measure the progresses achieved relatively to Community strategic guidelines. In this perspective, baseline indicators should be improved to reinforce the usefulness of the CMEF when defining RD strategies. This need of improvement also concerns impacts and results indicators regarding their scale of definition and calculation methods. It could be useful to question the interest in indicators taking into account, within their very definition their evolution through time (index calculated in relation to a reference year).

3.4 Ease the CMEF's constraints

We support the idea of a reduced number of evaluative questions and number of compulsory indicators with a view to keep CMEF operating and practical.