

# CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

**Francisco Antonio Navarro Valverde, Eugenio Cejudo García y Juan Carlos Maroto Martos**

Departamento de Geografía Humana. Universidad de Granada

## I. PRESENTATION OF THE QUESTION/PROBLEM AND THE INTENDED OBJECTIVE

Rural Development Programmes (RDPs - in our case the LEADER and PRODER programmes) have been applied in rural areas of the European Union (EU) for about 18 years. These programmes have built-in monitoring and evaluation systems which as a general rule do not take the territorial repercussion of the various measures sufficiently into account, and instead focus almost exclusively on the application and management of these programmes. And this in spite of the fact that of all the different development programmes, the RDPs are some of the most evaluated and to which the greatest variety of evaluation methods have been applied (Esteban *et al.*, 2009: 179). This contrasts with the logical requirement to justify all the investments that have been made, a job which according to those in charge of the RDPs takes up a large part of their work time and of the human and material resources of the Local Action Groups (LAGs).

One of the main objectives of any evaluation of this kind should be to measure the impact of these investments on the living conditions of the inhabitants of the rural areas in which they are made. Unfortunately this objective is often overlooked. It is essential to evaluate the impact of these programmes, among other reasons «because this is the only way of observing whether the income and employment levels of the least developed regions are approaching the average figures for the EU, the ultimate purpose of all European structural policies» (Murillo and Sosvilla-Rivero, 2005: 92). In other words, it must enable us to find out if these actions have contributed to promoting socioeconomic development in these areas and reducing the disparities between them and other regions. This is why more work is required to improve the design of the methods used to evaluate these RDPs.

The aim of our research is to offer a number of thoughts and suggestions to help us to move forward in the design of a more suitable methodological approach to the evaluation of RDPs. Before presenting these suggestions, we must first analyse the different ways of understanding the evaluation of rural development proposed by the European Commission, the Spanish Unit of the LEADER European Observatory, and some of the other main specialists in this field.

## II. EVALUATION BY THE COMPETENT BODIES

The evaluation of development policies is a highly complex task that is extremely difficult to perform, not only because the different ways of understanding and approaching the subject are in a constant state of flux, but also «due to the lack of suitable tools to monitor and control the programming of investments; due to the lack of specialists in the field and because those involved do not consider an evaluation of their own work a valuable exercise» (Jordá, 1995: 179-181). In spite of this, the need for such evaluation is becoming clearer every day for ethical reasons and for the sake of democratic transparency and accountability, and of course economic efficiency.

### 1. Evaluation as viewed by the European Union

The first community initiative (CI) for the application of RDPs with a territorial approach was known as LEADER. Previous authors have described it as «the last great step in the evolution of rural development in the EU» (Cazorla-Montero *et al.*, 2005: 707), and «the most emblematic example of action in rural development» (Cejudo and Maroto, 2010). The LEADER programme had its own objectives, methods, measures and evaluation procedures. The growing importance and interest of the Commission in evaluation led it to reconsider its initial approach, moving from one single evaluation of LEADER I (1991-93) at the end of the programme to 2 evaluation procedures for LEADER II (1995-99), one in the middle of the programme and one at the end, and 3 for LEADER+ (2000-06), one at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end.

In spite of the fact that from the beginning the statutory evaluation of the initiative included the need to study both quantitative and qualitative aspects, the procedure had obvious deficiencies that made satisfactory results impossible to obtain. The methods and tools used for example in the final evaluation of LEADER I (European Commission, 1999a) to characterize the specific aspects of the programme were designed to focus on four subjects only (action, partnership, networking and funding), while other inherent aspects of RDPs (innovation, ascendant approach, inter-territorial cooperation, territorial approach, integrated approach, multi-sector approach and local management) were overlooked.

Qualitative methodology did not consolidate its role in the procedure until the final evaluation of LEADER II, in which in addition to analysing the different measures using qualitative indicators, it also tackled the different specificities of the RDPs. European regulations stated that the final evaluation of LEADER+ (2000-06) was «part of the evaluation plan of the DG AGRI for 2009» (European Commission, 2005: 5). This study has not finished yet, which means that the usefulness of the evaluation as an instrument for reflection and learning has been negligible in the drafting of the strategic plans for the LAGs and the RDPs currently in operation.

Finally, it is worth noting that for the programme period 2007-13, for which the initial evaluation has already been performed, the creation of a single fund for all rural development policies (FEADER) has led to significant changes in the evaluation of the RDPs applied by the LAGs, as these groups also offered their assessment as part of a global evaluation of the different rural development measures.

## 2. Evaluation from the perspective of the Spanish authorities

In Spain, there is little history of analysis and evaluation of the results of public policies and even less theoretical reflection on the subject. It was not until the middle of the 1990's that the Ministry of Agriculture (1995) established the principles on which our evaluations should be based. The main aim was to find out to what extent the objectives set out in Article 130a of the EU Treaty had been achieved, such as the reduction of differences in the level of development of the different regions and of the backwardness of the least-favoured regions and rural areas. They also clarified and regulated the responsibilities and powers for evaluation of the LEADER initiative between the different tiers of Government. The Autonomous Communities (Spanish Regional Governments) were declared responsible for the continuous evaluation of the different projects, of the measures and of the programme as a whole within the territory under their control, the General-Secretariat of Agrarian Structures was made responsible for a national evaluation of the LEADER programme, and for specific-issue evaluations and horizontal studies.

With regard to the programme period 2000-06, for each of the Autonomous Communities, and for each of the programmes (one of which was PRODER), final evaluations were made of the Rural Development Programmes for the regions outside objective 1, however for the Integrated Operational Programmes of the objective 1 regions all that was done was to update the intermediate evaluation. An analysis of these evaluations shows that they have many defects, including among others the fact that they do not cover the qualitative aspects (ascendant and territorial approaches, innovation, partnership) of PRODER, or study the socioeconomic impact of the programmes. With some exceptions, there is no analysis of the territorial distribution of the programmes and the indicators provided are overly general (number of actions, number of projects finished, etc.), which means that they cannot be used to analyse what progress has been made.

In conclusion, most of the evaluations made by the different public authorities rarely go beyond «providing information about the degree of execution of the scheduled projects or the number of beneficiaries» (Lima *et al.*, 2010: 109). A lot of work remains to be done in the evaluation of the RDPs. The politicians and experts responsible for these questions have to try to ensure that the evaluations are genuinely useful, are more than just a mere formality or obligation, and instead become a process that enables them to reflect on and learn about the actions they have taken.

## 3. Experiences of participative evaluation by the LAGs

It is increasingly accepted that the people affected by the RDPs should take part in the evaluation processes. Ray (2000a: 451) stated that «in endogenous development it would be logical for the evaluation to be performed by the people affected by these initiatives». For this to be done well, the participation of all the various stakeholders (interest groups, experts and general public) would be required. The true purpose therefore will be to create a collective reflection that leads to agreements being reached between the stakeholders in the area.

Unfortunately, it must be pointed out that in general terms the LAGs have not addressed the question of a process of evaluation of the application of the RDPs in their respective territories (Seibert 2000). Thus, «many local agents realized that the drawing-up of the Rural Innovation Programmes was merely a necessary condition for obtaining grants. Very few saw it as an opportunity to reflect on the future of the territory and the most effective endogenous development strategies, something which would obviously require the creation of effective participation mechanisms. Probably a lack of democratic sensibility, a very limited participation culture and an excessive localism all contributed to this situation» (Esparcia *et al.*, 2000: 102).

The excessive delay in statutory evaluations, their limited value and insufficient degree of detail could have led the LAGs to embark on an internal valuation process that helped them to learn from their past activities, but perhaps that would have been asking too much of them, immersed as they were and indeed still are in an endless spiral of bureaucracy. The result has been that only a small number of groups have embarked on a process of reflection and this probably with the sole objective of preparing a strategic plan on which to base their next project application.

#### **4. Evaluation experiences from the academic sphere**

Researchers and specialists in rural affairs have studied the effects of RDPs with great interest, as is explained in the work we are presenting. There have been various contributions from the fields of sociology, economics or even agricultural engineering, but most research has been done from the viewpoint of geographical science. In general the «evaluations», «studies», analyses» and «appraisals» of RDPs from the academic field typically begin with an initial geographic description followed by a study of the different measures carried out in each of the target areas, provinces or regions, an analysis of the amounts of money involved, an appraisal of the programme's specificities and on some occasions also an examination of its territorial distribution. It is interesting to note that there is often very little critical analysis when it comes to assessing the territorial and social impact of the programmes.

### **III. CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF THE TERRITORIAL IMPACT OF RDPs**

In our proposal, which is supported by the findings of numerous research studies, our aim is not only to evaluate the programme itself, its objectives, specificities and measures, but also its impact on the territory. In addition to these issues we will also be presenting a series of questions, tools, indicators, approaches and experiences that enable us to come as close as possible to assessing the real impact of these programmes. We will also be trying to solve some of the shortcomings in the evaluations analysed.

In the words of Guzmán *et al.* (2001: 5) «in order to evaluate the territory, it is necessary to analyse its characteristics and their evolution over the course of the programme, placing special emphasis on the criteria that define the area of action, its cultural identity and the availability of resources to bring about a development process». It is also important to bear in mind that each region has countless singularities that must be taken into account if we want to correctly evaluate the implementation of rural development policies, or correct

territorial imbalances and socioeconomic inequalities. As a result the territorial component, with all its various specific features, is an essential factor when it comes to evaluating a rural development programme correctly.

As regards the spatial scale of analysis, we have chosen the town or municipal level, when the information being presented so requires, as this is the best level at which to observe the impact of the RDPs, or the supra-municipal level, when the aim is to offer a general view that can be compared with the work done by other LAGs in other areas. As for the timescale, we believe that the best approach was to analyse the three periods covered by the EU-supported RDPs: 1991-93 (LEADER I); 1995-99 (LEADER II and PRODER I); and 2000-2006 (LEADER + and PRODER II).

We believe that a good evaluation requires a combination of standardized, complementary quantitative and qualitative information. As far as quantitative information is concerned, we can work with the data offered by the available official statistics, although this option may be somewhat limited not only due to the lack of historical series with which tendencies and progress can be analysed, but also due to a lack of basic standardized data gathered at a municipal level for all the EU. It is essential to consult the documentation prepared by the LAGs in their annual and final accounts in spite of the fact that on many occasions the information provided is biased, incomplete and very scarce on certain matters of a qualitative nature which we believe to be fundamental. We also think that it is essential to gather information in the field using questionnaires like the ones we present, that must be completed by each businessperson who benefits from the RDPs and by the managers of the LAGs.

Finally each evaluation objective raises a number of questions that must be addressed. At the end of this article we present some of the most important of these questions in relation to: the specificities of the RDPs, placing a greater emphasis on their impacts on the geographic variety and disparities of the target area, the main demographic problems of the rural world (rural exodus and aging population), society, the productive fabric, and the local cultural and natural heritage; their objectives (diversification of business activities, maintaining population levels, job creation...); the effect on certain population groups that are essential for renewing the population (businesspeople, women and young people); and the analysis of each project in terms of its effect on various different standard measures (training, tourism, SMEs, local crafts, ...), and their results in the local productive fabric.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

RDPs have been largely unsuccessful in achieving their objectives, to a large extent due to the lack of coherence between the problems to be solved and the measures put forward to solve them, due to the lack of economic resources and even due to the perverse effects of other better-financed policies. Despite these shortcomings, it is clear that these programmes have helped to change the mentality of large groups of the rural population, who have shifted from a deep-rooted, very passive, subsidy-dependant mentality with no hope that their towns and villages could ever develop in a real sense to the current situation in which they are gradually coming to believe that, when correctly mobilized, their collective and individual resources of a human, economic and heritage nature can create initiatives that will bring new opportunities for them and their children.

The economic circumstances (lack of resources for evaluation), the problems arising from time planning schedules, the many bureaucratic limitations, the gaps in the monitoring references (programme indicators, incomplete databases) and official statistics (unsuitability, lack of variables, time limits, low level of spatial disaggregation and of detail, updating problems etc.), the unsuitable existing methodology, the lack of standardization to enable comparisons, and the lack of an appraisal culture, among other questions, prevent the evaluations of RDPs from being more useful to a wider public. There is also the fact that the detection and measurement of the effects of the RDPs is highly complex. The fact that each programme has its own specific characteristics means that a large number of variables must be analysed, a large number of factors and elements are affected and often diluted by other government actions. These factors include the demonstrative effect provided by successful programmes that can spur on the local population to take similar action or the great transformations in rural life due to circumstances that go beyond the confines of local areas and are the result of shifts in the national or global economy.

It is especially necessary to ensure that the evaluations of the RDPs are genuinely useful and cease to be just a bureaucratic formality to become real tools from which lessons can be learnt and which contribute to the continuous improvement of the RDPs. The use of statistical sources and information must be complemented with other sources of a qualitative nature. Both quantitative and qualitative information is required to enable us to build the framework required to enable us to analyse the socio-territorial reality in general and the rural reality in particular.

The bodies responsible for collecting, tabulating and publishing the statistics must be sensitive to the specific demands mentioned here of standardization and the variety of information broken down according to different subjects, areas and times. Experts and academics who work closely with the LAGs must work to systematize and standardize the collection of complementary information, select the most suitable variables and the best indicators, create databases and use the most effective tools and techniques (Geographic Information Systems) for these purposes. It is also vital, as we have explained, to ensure that managers, experts, beneficiaries and the rest of the population of the Leader-Proder area participate in the evaluation (participative evaluation), and that the advances achieved are publicized.

With regard to the qualitative methodology, perhaps the main contribution we make in this article is the proposal for questionnaires to survey the opinions of the beneficiary companies, and as regards the quantitative methods, we recommend the use of different indicators provided by the LAGs themselves, which must be complemented by others based on consulting official statistics. Looking to the future, we believe it is necessary to go further in the pursuit of synthetic indicators that enable us to accurately calculate the impact of the different programmes in their respective areas and their evolution over time. This is not an easy task as it is essential to bear in mind among other things the specificities of the LEADER programme, the measures implemented and the geographical characteristics of each of the territories affected.

In conclusion, in this article we are proposing that the purpose of the evaluation of the RDPs should be to determine as precisely as possible the impact of the programmes in the areas in which they are applied; to check to what extent these programmes have contributed to

promoting the development of these areas and the reduction of the differences between them and other regions. We support a type of evaluation that keeps sight of the basic objectives of the programmes, enables lessons to be learned and encourages those who design them and appraise them to adopt a self-critical attitude. These studies are clearly justified by the need to justify every euro of public funds that is invested and their effectiveness in trying to achieve the objective that the equality of opportunities of European citizens does not depend on the place where they live.

