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## **EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN POLAND**

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### **Раковська І. Оцінка програм сільського розвитку в Польщі**

Одержання Польщею статусу користувача фондів ЄС, які можуть бути використані в програмах підтримки сільського розвитку, супроводжується й певною відповідальністю польського уряду та відповідних інституцій за ефективність використання цих коштів шляхом проведення оцінки цієї ефективності. У статті обговорюється роль такої оцінки як інструменту підвищення ефективності програм сільського розвитку та як нового поля для дослідження, результати якого покращують розуміння соціальних та економічних змін, що відбуваються в сільських регіонах Польщі. Стаття містить також правову базу для здійснення зазначеної оцінки. У ній обговорюються теоретичні рамки та практичні аспекти вказаного напрямку дослідження й подано результати оцінки реалізації Секторної операційної програми “Реструктуризація і модернізація продовольчого сектора та сільського розвитку 2004-2006”, Програми сільського розвитку 2004-2006 та Програми сільського розвитку 2007-2013, при цьому основна увага звертається на результати SWOT-аналізу сільських регіонів Польщі.

**Ключові слова:** оцінка, сільський розвиток, фонди ЄС.

### **Rakowska J. Evaluation of rural development programmes in Poland**

The fact that since the accession in 2004 Poland has become a beneficiary of EU funds supporting rural development programmes resulted in imposing a new responsibility on the Polish government and institutions responsible for their implementation – the evaluation. The paper discusses the role of evaluation as a tool improving the implementation of rural development programmes but also as a new research field enhancing our knowledge of social and economic changes taking place in rural areas of Poland. The paper indicates legal basis for evaluation, discusses theoretical framework and practical aspects of this kind of research and presents synthesis of findings and recommendations of ex-ante evaluation of Sectoral Operational Programme ‘The Restructuring and Modernisation of the Food Sector and Rural Development 2004-2006’, Rural Development Programme 2004-2006 and Programme for Rural Development 2007-2013, focusing especially on SWOT analysis of rural areas in Poland.

**Key words:** evaluation, rural development, EU funds.

### **Раковская И. Оценка программ сельского развития в Польше**

Получение Польшей статуса пользователя фондов ЕС, которые могут использоваться в программах поддержки сельского развития, сопровождается и ответственностью польского правительства и соответствующих институций за эффективность использования данных средств путем проведения оценки этой эффективности. В данной статье обсуждается роль такой оценки как инструмента повышения эффективности программ сельского развития и как нового поля для исследования, результаты которого улучшают понимание социальных и экономических изменений, происходящих в Польше. Статья также содержит правовую базу для осуществления указанной оценки. В ней обговариваются теоретические рамки и практические аспекты указанного направления исследования, представлены результаты оценки реализации Секторной операционной программы “Реструктуризация и модернизация продовольственного сектора и сельского развития 2004-2006”, Программы сельского развития 2004-2006 и Программы сельского развития 2007-2013, при этом основное внимание обращено на результаты SWOT-анализа сельских регионов Польши.

**Ключевые слова:** оценка, сельское развитие, фонды ЕС.

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**I**ntroduction. Since the accession in 2004, rural development policy in Poland has been carried out through a range of complex instruments within both European Union and national policies. The fact that Poland has become a beneficiary of EU funds supporting rural development programmes resulted in imposing a new responsibility on the Polish government and institutions responsible for their implementation – the evaluation.

According to article 47 of *Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006* ‘evaluations shall aim to improve the quality, effectiveness and consistency of the assistance from the Funds and the strategy and implementation of operational programmes with respect to the specific structural problems affecting the Member States and regions concerned, while taking account of the objective of sustainable development.’

European Commission issues evaluation guidelines for each programming period, of which the *Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999 of 17 May 1999 on support for rural development from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) and amending and repealing certain Regulations* for programmes implemented in Poland in 2004-2006 and *Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999* for programmes being implemented in programming period 2007-2013 have been very important from the rural development evaluation point of view.

Poland laid down principles and rules for evaluation in accordance with those established by European Commission and introduced them into national legal regulations (e.g. *Ustawa z dnia 28 listopada 2003 r. and Ustawa z dnia 7 marca 2007 r.*)

Over the 2007 till 2013 programming period, when granting assistance of structural funds to a Member State, European Commission requires evaluation of effects and effectiveness of using this kind of support at three different stages: when elaborating the programme (*ex-ante evaluation*), in the middle of the implementation time (*mid-term evaluation*) and after completing the implementation of the programme (*ex-post evaluation*).

Although the detailed aims of evaluation are different at each stage, the general objective of

this process is to analyse the conditions, to monitor the process and to elaborate recommendations in order to increase the efficiency of using public resources and improve the implementation of rural development programmes and policy.

Evaluation is based on standard, recognised research methods, but it differs from other academic research because it must meet the requirement of utility – it must provide the commissioning institution with findings and recommendations useful for the implementation process.

Apart from its role as a tool improving programmes implementation, through gathering primary data and carrying out new research evaluation of rural development programmes brings in a new insight into the current situation of rural areas, thus plays informative role as well.

In 2004-2006 rural development policy in Poland was supported by two programmes directly addressed to rural beneficiaries (*Sectoral Operational Programme ‘The Restructuring and Modernisation of the Food Sector and Rural Development and Rural Development Plan*) and by four programmes addressed in general to all beneficiaries, and including also objectives aimed at rural development (*SOP Transport, SOP Development of Human Resources, SOP Increase of Enterprises Competitiveness, Operational Integrated Programme of Regional Development*). These are the first programmes in Poland which were evaluated at two stages (*ex-ante* and *ex-post*). Mid-term evaluation was not obligatory and a short implementation time for those programmes (two years only) resulting from the data of accession would make it practically insignificant.

In 2007-2013 there is one programme directly realising the policy of rural development (*Programme for Rural Development 2007-2013*) and four programmes addressing general development issues (*Infrastructure and Environment Programme, Innovative Economy Programme, Human Capital Programme and Development of Eastern Poland Programme*) enabling both urban and rural prospect beneficiaries to carry out their projects. Because of the implementation time line till 2013 they have been evaluated only *ex-ante* and mid-term so far.

Rural Development Plan 2004-2006 was the biggest, completed EU supported programme for rural development so far. It will be used as

an empirical example of ex-ante and ex-post evaluation.

**Aim.** The aim of the paper was to present evaluation as a tool improving the implementation of rural development programmes but also as a new research field enhancing our knowledge of social and economic changes taking place in rural areas of Poland.

**Materials and Methods.** Theoretical framework elaboration was based on the analysis of EU and national legal regulation concerning principles and rules of evaluation of rural development programmes co-financed by EU funds as well as literature and documents defining evaluation standards and requirements.

Empirical part consists of synthesis of ex-ante and ex-post evaluations carried out in Poland both for 2004-2006 and 2007-2013 rural development programmes. This part of the paper is based on:

1. three ex-ante evaluations of programmes aimed at development of rural areas over 2004-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods, in order to show the significance of this kind of evaluation for recognising social and economic problems of rural areas as well as for elaborating effective instruments supporting their development,

2. ex-post evaluation report on Rural Development Programme 2004-2006, to illustrate the role of evaluation as an instrument analysing and summing up the process of implementation, assessing the impact of RDP actions onto the development of rural areas and their influence on changes in social and economic situation (if any) in rural areas. It is also an example of - so far - the biggest carried out, holistic ex post evaluation of rural development programme, so the aim of the presented synthesis is also to outline the range and scope of this research undertaking.

**Results and Discussion. Theoretical Framework for Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes in EU and Poland.** The theory, principles and rules of evaluation are quite universal and may be applied to all fields of economy where EU or public funds are involved. However, European Commission specified requirements towards evaluation of programmes supported by different EU funds in programming periods 2000-2006 and 2007-

2013, including those co-financing rural development According to EU regulations and guidelines (European Commission, 2000) each programme aimed at rural development and supported by EU funds has to be evaluated at three different stages:

- a) ex-ante evaluation is carried out when the programme is still being elaborated (European Commission, 2001). The ex-ante evaluation helps to prepare the rural development plan and the process of its implementation. In particular it helps in clarifying the objectives and in verifying their relevance to the defined needs. It also defines and describes existing situation in the region or sectors concerned. Basic stages of ex-ante evaluation comprise of identification and analysis of the problem to be solved, identifying the target group of the intervention and assessing their actual needs, next of setting up objectives which must reflect the desired change in relation to the situation at the start, defining indicators and finally ranking the objectives according to priority (Ex-ante..., 2001). A proper ex-ante evaluation (European Commission 2005) facilitates the Commission's task of appraising the rural development plan. According to the above mentioned *Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999* and *Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006*, ex-ante evaluation findings and recommendations are a basis for elaborating the final version of development plans, operational programmes and documents amending those programmes. Ex-ante evaluation comprises of – among other methods - SWOT analysis either of the Member State, its regions or economy sectors. SWOT analysis is the only tool mentioned as recommended in regulations and working papers to be used for carrying out ex ante evaluation. In this case evaluation should mainly focus on three priority fields: human resources and employment, natural environment protection and equal opportunities for men and women.

This stage of evaluation can be based either on available, ready diagnoses, strategies, experts' opinions and documents on social and economic situation of rural areas or on new findings of re-

search carried out especially for this purpose. In the first case, evaluation results are a summary or a new interpretation of formerly existing data and statistics, while in the latter case evaluation causes increase in the information on rural areas. At this stage evaluators should answer the crucial question: are the measures and instruments of rural development policy and cohesion policy adequate/optimal to solve the specific development problems of rural areas?

One of the main aims of ex-ante evaluation is to anticipate long-term effects of the programme.

b) mid-term evaluation carried out during the process of implementing the programme helps to reorientate the programme if necessary and to improve the implementation. The aim of mid-term evaluation is to assess preliminary effects of the programme (intervention) and its adequacy to the current social and economic situation, which may have changed since the beginning of implementation. It also provides information important from the point of view of elaborating programmes of rural development for the following programming period. It should be stressed that ex-post evaluation is carried out up to two years after completing the implementation of the programme, which is two years after the beginning the implementation of programmes of the following programming period. This is too late to use the findings and recommendations of the ex-post evaluation of the previous programmes. Mid-term evaluation has been introduced by European Commission for programmes realised in 2007-2013, before it could be required by the Commission in cases where there were problems with programme implementation. Thus, mid-term evaluation of rural development programmes is carried out for the first time after Poland's accession in the programming period 2007-2013.

c) ex-post evaluation is carried out no later than two years after completing the implementation of the programme (according to the already mentioned legal regulations, for rural development programmes 2007-2013, ex-post evaluation for each objective shall be carried

out by the Commission in close cooperation with the Member States and shall be completed by 31 December 2015, however, depending on the field of intervention it could also be 'no later than one year after completing the implementation' in the previous programming periods). It concludes on and assesses the intervention after completing it. It is crucial for the accountability and the transparency of the interventions with regard to the legal and budgetary authorities and the public. It can also give guidance about a possible follow-up to the programme, e.g., in the form of best practices. In general, the aim of the ex-post evaluation is to look into the effects and effectiveness of implemented programmes, through using a set of standard social and economic indicators as well as special evaluation tools including net and gross effects of the programme, deadweight phenomena, substitution effect, displacement effect, comparative groups, macro-economic models, shift-share analysis, etc. When evaluating the effects, evaluators can use the expert panel, multi-criterion analysis (method of synthetic indicator), benchmarking, cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis, just to mention the most popular ones (Kierzkowski 2002, Haber 2007).

The three above described types of evaluation represent only the major classification based on and resulting from the EU regulations. However, in the theory of evaluation, there are many more classifications, of which global (holistic), thematic and detailed types of evaluation may be often of practical application as well.

European Commission documents and working papers present evaluators and commissioners with numerous methods and approaches, although it is stressed that they are of indicative nature and need to be applied in a creative manner (*Indicative...*, 2006).

The last but not least stage of evaluation is its dissemination and feedback, which are meant to assist policy makers and operational staff to make use of evaluation results in formulation and/or adaptation of new or existing policies and implementing them (European Commission, 2003).

***Evaluation of Rural Development Programmes in Poland – findings and recommen-***

**dations.** Results of analysis of ex-ante evaluations for two programmes aimed at supporting rural development over 2004-2006 (namely *Sectoral Operational Programme 'The Restructuring and Modernisation of the Food Sector and Rural Development* and *Rural Development Programme*) and *Programme for Rural Development 2007-2013* proved that three SWOT analyses defined very similar or even the same strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for development of rural areas defined in the indicate similar issues. Synthesized for all three programmes, these are:

Strengths of rural areas in Poland: large agricultural land resources, good age structure of farmers, low costs per unit of labour and land, low usage of chemicals in agri-production processes, large raw material resources for food processing, large domestic market, good condition of natural environment, well-preserved nature and landscape walory of rural areas, tradition of economic relations with countries of Eastern Europe.

Weaknesses of rural areas in Poland: high registered and hidden unemployment rates, fragmented agrarian structure, deficit of capital in this sector, low level of specialization of farms, poor income condition of farms, bad condition of technical and social infrastructure in rural areas, insufficiently quellified management staff in small processing plants, high costs of transactions in agri-food sector, insufficient horizontal integration in the sector, poor marketing.

Opportunities for rural areas in Poland: including Poland into Single European Market, including Poland's agricultural sector into EU Common Agricultural Policy, improvement of agrarian structure, possibility of using EU funds, a fast economic development of Poland enabling to absorb surplus of labour resources, adaptation of technologies and management methods applied in EU-15 Member States, using potential of competitiveness due to market orientation (CAP reform), increase in direct foreign investments, a wide variety of traditional, regional products, emerging markets of Eastern Europe.

Threats for rural areas in Poland: competition from the EU Single Market, high costs of necessary adjustments over a short time, high unemployment rates, fast growing costs of labour, marginalisation and depopulation of rural areas, natural threat for farming (droughts, floods, exploited ground waters), risk of animal and plant

diseases, excessive intensification of farm production threatening natural environment.

In ex ante evaluation of RDP 2004-2006 and PRD 2007-2013, the following main criteria were applied (information not available for SOP *Restructuring and Modernisation of the Food Sector and Rural Development*):

- correctness and adequacy of proposed actions to the defined social and economic needs,
- desired impact on rural areas,
- possibility of conflicts between proposed actions,
- accordance of suggested actions with EU law and regulations,
- accordance of proposed actions with Polish strategic documents and law.

SWOT analysis results enabled elaboration of objectives of all the three above mentioned programmes of rural development. They were aimed at better using the strengths and opportunities and minimising weaknesses and threats for rural areas.

The effects of implementation of programmes realised over 2004-2006 programming period were measured, classified and evaluated in accordance with the *Law of 28 November 2003 on support for rural development from the Guarantee Section of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF)*. Report on ex-post evaluation of Rural Development Plan was elaborated and approved in 2009.

***Synthesis of findings in ex-post evaluation of Rural Development Plan 2004-2006 (Report 2009).*** Rural Development Plan 2004-2006 (RDP) was so far the biggest implemented and completed programme supporting development of agriculture and rural areas and co-financed by EU funds – 3 592,4 million euro in the programme budget, of which 99,95% (3 590,6 million euro) was absorbed (Ministry of Agriculture 2009).

RDP was an integral part of Common Agricultural Policy and other policies aimed at supporting rural development, namely the regional policy, policies of competition, employment and of natural environment protection.

The implementation of the programme was scheduled for 2004-2006, however, due to EU time line principle  $n+2$  allowing another two years after the end of the programming time for completing the programme, the implementation of RDP was actually over in 2008. Thus evalua-

tion of the programme was carried out and presented one year later, at the end of 2009.

Evaluators stressed that ex-post evaluation of RDP was a novelty and a research challenge because of a relatively short time of implementation which made the identification and evaluation of all the effects difficult. Implementation of other programmes and actions aimed at rural development over the same time hampered selection of effects caused by RDP. The novelty of the programme required both from the beneficiaries and implementing institutions a lot of 'learning' how to use and implement it. This same relates to evaluators, as formerly there had been only SAPARD ex-post evaluation (Instytut 2007) carried out in Poland, however, the scope and impact of SAPARD were much smaller than those of RDP.

Evaluation of RDP was carried out in accordance with EU (European Commission 2000 and Komisja Europejska 2008) and national regulations as well as good evaluation practices.

Although RDP was only one of instruments within the general policy supporting development of rural areas, it played a crucial role in this process, mainly because of the fact that only farmers were the beneficiaries of RDP, not other people or organisations acting in rural areas (as opposed to *Sectoral Operational Programme 'The Restructuring and Modernisation of the Food Sector'* and other sectoral programmes over both programming periods 2004-2006 and 2007-2013). The evaluation report concludes that this fact made farmers-beneficiaries more motivated to improve their working conditions and standard of living.

In evaluators' opinion, strategic aims of RDP 2004-2006, i.e. improvement in competitiveness of the agri-food economy and sustainable development of rural areas, were achieved in a significant degree. Most financial resources were spent on realisation of three following actions: *Support for agricultural activities in areas of unfavourable conditions for farm production* (27% of RDP funds), *Adjusting farm holdings to EU requirements* (17,7) and *Structural pensions* (15,2%). The smallest share of funds was spent on *Groups of agri-producers* (0,2%).

In the process of RDP implementation funds were reallocated from one objective into another which reflected the actual needs of rural beneficiaries and increased absorption of funds and effectiveness of RDP. At the same time it pre-

vented from decreasing the demand for this kind of support which might have resulted from a lot of requirements that had to be met by the beneficiaries. RDP budget was changed ten times and that resulted in reallocation of 16,8% of RDP funds.

Ex-post evaluation report indicates that economic effectiveness of individual RDP actions depended on the amount of funds spent, the achieved aims, kind of applied instruments and the number of beneficiaries. It was stressed that both on the national and regional (NTS 2) levels RDP actions made barely 1% of the Regional Gross Product and Gross Domestic Product. The highest *Support for agricultural activities in areas of unfavourable conditions for farm production* equalled 0,38% GDP and the lowest support for *Groups of agri-producers* 0,003% GDP. According to economic criteria, RDP actions were classified into three groups: direct fund transfers (e.g. structural pensions and support for agri-producers groups), area subsidies (e.g. forestation, agri and environmental programmes) and investment subsidies (e.g. adjustment to EU standards). In beneficiaries opinion these instruments had a mixed character as some of them were used for investments and some for consumption, in different shares (e.g. in case of forestation 30% of support was spent on investments and 13% on consumption).

Actions concentrating on investment and those using the biggest funds had a most positive effect on economic development (e.g. Adjustment to EU standards generated GDP increase by 0,73%).

Application of RegPOL model and cost-benefit index in the evaluation process proved that actions aimed at investments and decreasing operational costs were most effective in generating economic growth.

Analysis of regional dispersion of RDP support indicates that most funds were spent in relatively poor, agri-rural areas of Poland, including so called Eastern Wall (five voivodships, which over 2004-2006 were the poorest NTS 2 regions in EU). Among regions which gained relatively highest support under RDP, most were predominantly rural and predominantly agricultural.

Impact of RDP 2004-2006 on the economy of Poland was evaluated as generally positive, however small because RDP support in the scale of the whole country equalled 1,2% of average GDP (in 2004-2006). RDP implementation re-

sulted in economic growth, increase in income and employment of rural population.

The ex-post evaluation report concludes that RDP as a short lasting programme could not change the strong tendency of depopulation in rural areas.

RDP influence on employment in rural areas and other sectors of economy connected with agriculture was small but positive. It results from the construction of actions which were not aimed at creating non-agricultural jobs. However, the programme resulted in increase of employment rate in rural areas from 47% to more than 49%, especially in the group of young less than 25 years old people.

During the process of RDP implementation, there was a noticeable effect of convergence of farm income level when compared to average income in the country and in non-agricultural sectors. It is especially important that the strongest positive income effect was observed in regions where income disparities were biggest.

The evaluation stresses that RDP addressed such weaknesses of rural areas as small land areas of farms (90% farms are not big enough to earn sufficient income) and old average age of farm holding owners/managers (a high share of those at the age of 60+). Although RDP actions related to these problems, limited financial resources and limited range of actions did not cause significant changes in this field.

Impact of RDP actions on natural environment condition, protection and preservation was evaluated as satisfactory.

RDP 2004-2006 caused so called financial leverage effect, meaning additional investments not required by the programme but carried out by beneficiaries and financed from other sources.

When asked if they would carry out their projects without the support from the RDP, one in three respondents of the evaluation questionnaire answered that they would, however the answers differed in relation to specific actions. Among beneficiaries who would carry the project anyway, most indicated that without the RDP support it would take much more time and would have much lesser range. It showed that the programme was relevant for rural development.

Analysis of beneficiaries according to the criterion of farm size proves that mostly medium and large size farm benefited from RDP, while those of less than 5ha of land area rarely applied.

Authors of the report indicate limitations and problems in evaluating the programme, resulting from the lack of necessary data. This comes in accordance with the experience of the author of this article in carrying out evaluations.

Summing up, it should be concluded that ex-post evaluation of RDP 2004-2006 comprises of dozens and dozens of both general and detailed conclusions relating to specific evaluation questions and RDP actions and objectives. It is an abundant diagnostic and methodological material that also meets the criterion of utility.

The discussed ex-ante and ex-post evaluations were based on both primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data, which enabled statistical data analysis and interpretation as well as defining changes in economic and social situation in rural areas with respect to programmes carried out and/or other factors that might have influenced it.

**Conclusion.** Evaluation is on one hand a new research activity which should result not only in findings but also in recommendations useful and applicable for commissioning institutions. On the other hand evaluation as a research process mostly using recognised and universal research methods can be perceived as an expanded, but still standard research.

The EU requirement of evaluating all programmes co-financed by EU funds increases the number of research carried out also in the field of rural development. If they bring in any new insight into the economic and social situation of these areas largely depends on typical research restrictions, well known from other fields. In case of evaluation, the possibility of obtaining new, primary statistics, data and information depends on the research deadline, funds for research and respondents' willingness to answer and their availability – just like in case of any other research. Using secondary data for evaluation multiplies both advantages and disadvantages of the previous, original research that provided such data.

A proper, correctly carried out evaluation comes across the same obstacles and is liable to the same limitations as research of any other kind. That is why the system of collecting data necessary for mid-term and ex-post evaluation should be designed at the stage of elaborating the programme, possibly in ex-ante evaluation.

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