

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH IN THE CASE OF MODERNISATION OF AGRICULTURAL HOLDINGS IN GREECE

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Abstract

The assessment of Rural Development Policy results and impacts is a very difficult and complicated process owing to the compound and multisectoral nature of the countryside. It is assumed that the assessment of Rural Development Programme impacts, in the way it is applied nowadays, is not able to satisfy the need for a deep and useful evaluation. The outcomes of evaluation should be a major tool for policy design. The Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), which was introduced by the EU for the evaluation of Rural Development Programmes is criticized as a very "economic indicator" oriented system. Many data are required for the calculation of CMEF indicators, which are not available in a lot of EU member states. This research aims to identify problems and shortcomings occurred during the phases of rural development policy design, implementation and evaluation, which influence the success of such policy programmes. Based on a previous research, where network analysis was applied, the researchers made an attempt to examine the problems with the use of in-depth interviews and focus group. Measure for the modernisation of agricultural holdings in Greece was used as a case study. Complexity in processes, bureaucracy, delays, lack of data at regional and national level, lack "evaluation culture" seem to be the most crucial factors of failure.

Keywords: Rural Development Policy, Regional Development, Evaluation, Stakeholders' participation, In-depth interviews, Focus groups

1. Introduction

The agricultural sector played a key role in the establishment of the EEC. The implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) begun simultaneously with the establishment of the EEC in 1957 and it was the first common policy implemented (European Institute of Public Administration [12]). Furthermore, over 56% of the total EU27 population lives rural areas, which cover 91% of the total land (European Commission [10]). Greece covers an area of 13.196.887 Ha, 97.1% of which are classified as rural areas (73.9% predominantly rural and 23.2% intermediate rural). About 2/3 of the Country's total population resides in rural areas (37.2% predominantly rural and 27.2% intermediate rural) (European Commission [10]).

The last years, the focus of the EU Rural Development Policy tends to shift from the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry, to the improvement of the quality of life and diversification into a wider rural economy, emphasising in policies' environmental impacts. According to Papadopoulos and Liarikos [38], the EU adopts a spatial (regional) rather than a rural (sectoral) approach for rural development. It also seeks to provide more options and greater flexibility at national and local level (Midmore et al. [31]).

Agricultural activities cause numerous positive and negative impacts on the natural and residential environment, local communities and national economy. However, these effects are sometimes very difficult to be measured (Legg [24]). This is the main problem facing evaluators and policy makers when they try to assess agro-environmental policies impacts.

The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the reason for an intervention or policy in order to guarantee the repetition of successful examples and the avoidance of failed ones. It uses systematic scientific methods of economy and sociology, social psychology, economic geography, anthropology and other sciences. Crucial factor for the proper implementation of evaluation methods is the availability and reliability of socio-demographic and economic data (European Commission, EC Structural Funds, Vol.1 [11]). Evaluation provides valuable information to decision makers about the consequences of their policies and is also a key mechanism for the improvement of the quality of regulation (Tscherning et al. [50]; Jacob et al. [19]). Additionally, it justifies and controls public money spending (Huelemyer and Schiller [18]). Proper collection of data in a regular basis would facilitate the processes of evaluation and may lead to safer and more useful outcomes.

According to Greek Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 [45], "Evaluation examines the outcomes and impacts of the Program, evaluating the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of the measures, in order to contribute to shaping and redirecting of policies. For this purpose, the assessment is based largely on data and information collected through monitoring, which means these two activities are interdependent on principle."

Ray [44] argues that evaluation should be viewed as a periodic or continuous process of data or potential actors in local development input and not as a judgment of an objective external "expert". Rural development is becoming more participatory at all stages. A typical example is the LEADER "bottom-up" approach. Participatory development requires a participatory evaluation system.

Evaluation is an important process for understanding the current situation for all stakeholders (High and Nemes [17]). Active participation is important for the success of the system of multilevel governance. The involvement of people and organizations from all levels of rural development leads to the mixture of different personalities, opinions, experiences, culture and general other characteristics. Such a mixture could help for a more integrated and holistic approach to reality.

Evaluation should be considered as an integral part of the implementation of actions and programs and not as a separate process (High and Nemes [17]). Casley and Kumar [5] define evaluation as a periodic assessment of the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of an action under the defined objectives. In other words, evaluation answers two basic questions: "will the action achieve its objectives?" and "how the implementation of an action could be improved in relation to the original objectives?" (High and Nemes [17]).

Patton [41] argues that evaluation is culture that is shared between the evaluators and all those who are involved in rural development processes. Culture, in anthropology is defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, norms, traditions, attitudes, knowledge and language used by members of a society to survive and create ways of thinking and shared understanding (Díaz-Puente et al. [8]) .

Policy programs evaluation was firstly introduced in the U.S. in the 1950s, when the effectiveness and transparency of government were put into question. It was disseminated in the 1960s focusing

primarily on innovations in the areas of education, social services, public health and crime prevention (European Commission, EC Structural Funds, Vol.1 [11]).

During 1970s the first evaluations of regional policies took place, especially in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Germany. These three European countries with the United States and Canada were pioneers in the adoption of the assessment. In 1980s, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland also started adopting the assessment of regional policies (Díaz-Puente et al. [8]).

Southern and central European Union countries had not tradition of evaluation. The legislative reform of the European Structural Funds in 1988 introduced program evaluation. This does not mean that there was no evaluation of EU programs before 1988, however, the structural funds made it mandatory for all structural projects financed by European funds. This led to the institutionalization of evaluation especially in southern and central European Union countries (Díaz-Puente et al. [8]).

In 1994 the Commission launched the “Means for Evaluating Actions of Structural Nature (MEANS)” to support Member States in evaluating their activities. The real purpose of this project was to encourage the development of a coherent, at European level, uniform approach to documenting the assessment methods used in most Member States and contribute to the dissemination of more reliable operating examples (Díaz-Puente et al. [8]).

The European Commission launched in 1995 a program aimed at improving the ultimate resource management, called "Sound and Efficient Management - SEM 2000". This assessment included all policies impacting on its budget. Furthermore, the European Commission Directorates were asked to adopt the continuous evaluation of programs and the creation of evaluation units (European Commission, EC Structural Funds, Vol.1 [11]). Since 1997, the Commission began to publish guidance on methodological approaches for evaluation, which were usually specific to each program (Díaz-Puente et al. [8]).

Until 2007, evaluation at EU level had mainly focused on results and not on impacts (Keenleyside [20]). In the fourth programming period (2007-2013) the requirements for evaluation increased. A Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) introduced to guide Member States towards a more effective system of Rural Development Policy assessment regarding the achievement of national and Community objectives. CMEF also aims to ensure the accountability Rural Development Programmes public expenditure and improve program results. CMEF is a set of documents prepared by the European Commission and approved by Member States (Castellno [6]) that includes a series of evaluation guidelines and a list of input, output, result and impact indicators. Additionally, the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development was founded in the fourth programming period.

The assessment of impacts was introduced by the European Commission in 2002 to ensure greater transparency and to improve the quality of EU policies. Inter-sectoral consultation, broad participation and quantitative assessment of policy impacts are the main characteristics of this process (Thiel [49]).

Article 86 of the 1698/2005 EC Regulation [37] suggest the establishment of an ongoing evaluation system for each rural development programme in all Member States. The main role of ongoing evaluation is to “examine the progress of the programme in relation to its goals by means of result and, where appropriate, impact indicators, improve the quality of programmes and their implementation, examine proposals for substantive changes to programmes and, prepare for mid-term and ex post evaluation.”

The policy cycle model, as presented by Anderson et al. [1], is widely used to describe the four main stages of policy process, which are the following:

- Agenda Setting
- Policy Formulation

- Policy Implementation
- Policy Evaluation

Although the “typical” evaluation places the peak of organizational learning at the last stage of the policy cycle, the other three stages provide important opportunities for monitoring and evaluation. There is an interaction between all stages and evaluation is the link among them. It constitutes an element of reflexivity in the policy process and it plays a major role in the policy (re-) formulation (Laschewski & Schmidt [23]). Moreover, during policy implementation, a kind of “formative” evaluation can examine the way the policy is implemented, the achievement of objectives and possible changes or improvements that could influence its effectiveness. This type of evaluation mostly appears early in the implementation of the policy, when the development or change is possible (Midmore et al. [31]).

Evaluation, as dictated by the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) [9], can only examine the achievement of policy objectives set at the beginning of the programming period in terms of outputs, results and impacts. The CMEF indicators emphasise on environmental and economic impacts while no common social indicators have been suggested so far (Huelemeyer and Schiller [19]). Evaluation experience has also raised major shortcomings of the current system. Huelemeyer and Schiller [19] mention the difficulties to capture less obvious and less tangible effects of Rural Development programmes and especially when synergies among measure objectives occur. Additionally, they mention the difficulty to assess deadweight and displacement as required by the CMEF, the lack of qualitative methods to capture negative impacts, the lack, usefulness and accessibility of data and, finally timing of evaluation. Marquardt and Möllers [26] state that answering the CMEF common evaluation questions within midterm evaluation period might be meaningful as most of impacts need time to become visible.

High and Nemes [17] call the type of policy evaluation as it is applied by now “exogenous evaluation” carried out by an independent external evaluator, who is obliged to follow specific quantitative methods and a system of indicators. The same authors, referring to the evaluation of LEADER, argue that the conventional processes of exogenous evaluation fail to measure most of the value-added provided LEADER approach.

As already mentioned, between agenda setting (targeting) and performance (outputs, results and impacts) there is a set of processes: design (or formulation), implementation / delivery and evaluation. These procedures which are in red box in the center of Figure 1, were called the “forgotten middle” as they have never been evaluated, although they are full of changes, challenges and real-life information.

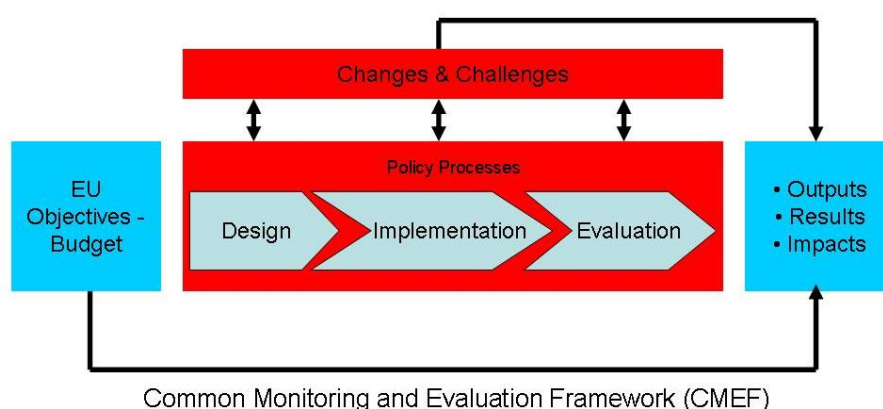


Figure 1: Interaction among policy stages: the “forgotten middle”

Source: RuDI Policy Brief [47]

The evaluation of the “forgotten middle” processes can provide answers and information about policy from design to outputs, results and impact. Endogenous evaluation could ideally assess the processes of the “forgotten middle”, based on the participation of local institutions and indigenous knowledge systems, providing an opportunity for the enhancement of local society and experience. Moseley [36] argues that the appropriate methodology for the evaluation of rural development should be highly participatory.

High and Nemes [17] propose a hybrid system that combines the objectivity of exogenous evaluation which achieves objectivity through the use quantitative methods and a set of indicators, with the use of local knowledge and participation of all stakeholders under endogenous evaluation. More democratic evaluation methods are required (Gore and Wells [15]). Moseley [36] argues that the appropriate methodology for evaluation of rural development programmes should be highly participatory.

Baslé [2] and Midmore et al. [32] argue that methods of policy evaluation, as they are suggested by the European Union, have inherent weaknesses in tracing the chain of causality between actions and impacts. Traditional evaluation techniques are only able to explore the extent to which the objectives of the policy are satisfied. They fail, however, to engage with more important issues for policy improvement, such as how and why they operate work the way they do.

The quantitative evaluation of rural development programmes as provided by the CMEF for the fourth programming period (2007-2013) should be supported by the observation of the processes of rural development with a system of qualitative evaluation. This would help to better interpret the interactions among different actors involved in rural development (Midmore et al. [32]). Furthermore, rural areas complexity and diversity requires the consideration of special local characteristics during the evaluation process.

Owing to the nature of CAP Pillar II measures the evaluation process becomes even more complicated. In many cases the results and effects are indirect, which makes it difficult or impossible to estimate them. A typical example is the measures that significantly affect landscape, biodiversity, improvement of income from tourism or development of diversified traditional agricultural products. Natural, social and economic environment are effective at the same time by such measures. Additionally, there are parallel national or EU policies implemented in the countryside. How complicated is to evaluate each policy's impacts in a lake for instance?

In the current research there is an attempt to analyse the politico-administrative system of Measure 121 in order to examine and evaluate its design, implementation and evaluation processes. Measure 121 “Modernization of agricultural holdings” was chosen because it is the third most strongly financed measure in the 4th programming period (2007-2013) in the Greek Rural Development Programme. It was planned to absorb 9.04% of the total funds. It is also one of the most popular measures. It aims at strengthening the competitiveness of agricultural holdings through a more effective use of inputs, including the development of new technologies, through diversification of agricultural holdings by encouraging investments for non-food and energy plants, by making the farms more “friendly” to the environment, by improving work safety, health and animal welfare. Emphasis will be laid on the animal production, while in the crop section priority is given to investments for restructuring the production of the tobacco and cotton.

The implementation of Measure 121 was in a very early stage at the primary data collection period. Thus, the research was conducted by the analysis of data collected from experts who were involved in the implementation of the relevant Measure “Investments in agricultural holdings” in the previous (3rd) programming period. Most of them are also involved in the 4th programming period. This was a major problem which was transformed into a big research challenge because it gave the researchers the chance to examine, compare and contrast possible and real differences and similarities between the two programming periods.

The main purpose of this research is to develop a discussion with people who are involved in the three policy stages of policy cycle, the so called “forgotten middle”, policy design, implementation and evaluation of the Greek Rural Development Programme. More specifically it aims to examine the arising problems and shortcomings of each stage and recommend possible ways to overcome them.

2. Methodology

Extended literature review and desk research of relevant public documents were carried out in order to achieve a satisfactory understanding of the theoretical background. Primary data were collected at two stages. At first stage, qualitative in-depth interviews were applied. At second stage, based on the results of the in-depth interviews and the outcomes of Papadopoulou et al. [40] previous research, experts from the institutions, which appeared to play crucial role in rural development, were invited to participate in a focus group. Papadopoulou et al. [40] proceed primary data from experts in-depth interviews with the use of Quantitative Network Analysis.

At first stage, after the use of a pilot questionnaire, two semi-structured interviews were employed with people involved in the implementation of Measure about “Modernisation of agricultural holdings”. The final questionnaire included 30 questions and interviews lasted about 120-180 minutes each. After contacting interviewees, the interviewers visited them. No interview was conducted by phone. Both written notes as well as digital recorder were used during the interviews in order to save and process their content. The questionnaire was at the disposal of the interviewees before the meeting so as to be able to find out details and was better prepared for answering the questions.

Interviewing aims to observe personal views of the interviewees (Patton [42]). Qualitative research provides the opportunity to the researcher to see the pluralisation of the observed topic (Mason [29]). Patton [42] underlines the strength of the qualitative methods to investigate issues in depth. The qualitative researcher considers interviewee’s views as valuable and respects “how the participant frames and structures the responses” (Marsall and Rossman [27]). The four analytical strengths of qualitative methods are: complexity, depth, context and dynamics (Milburn [33]). Qualitative research enables the investigator to appreciate “how things work in a particular context” (Mason [29]). According to Denzin and Lincoln [7] “qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting” and interpret the everyday social world. Morse [35] supports that “the laboratory of the qualitative researcher is everyday life”.

At second stage, the outcomes of Papadopoulou et al. [40] research were also used for the selection of the focus groups participants. Papadopoulou et al. [40] conducted Quantitative Network Analysis and provided information about the politico-administrative network of the measure for modernization of agricultural holdings of the Greek Rural Development Programme. In total, they found that the network consists of 15 key actors:

- 4 Ministerial departments
- 4 Farmer associations of 1st degree (local associations) and 2nd degree (farmer unions including the local associations) as well as the umbrella organizations of farmers at national level
- 3 Private consultant and development agencies
- 1 semi-state organisation concerning financing in agriculture
- 1 Regional Authority
- 1 Prefectural department
- 1 farmer-related chamber

That analysis was based on the concept of social-policy networks (Buskens [4], Brandes et al. [3], Evans [13], Knoke and Kuklinski [21], Marsh and Rhodes [28]). A network is a system of interactions or relations among actors (agencies, interest groups, investors etc). Papadopoulou et al. [40] research was concentrated on the inter-personal relations known as “complete network analysis”, as opposed to “ego network analysis”, which concentrates on the emergent character and behavior of specific actors within their social-policy networks. A complete network is the

multiplicity of relations among a given set of actors, which in that research were composed of trust relations, institutional pressure, conflicts, general and scientific information flow, ascription of dogmatism and expectance of flexibility

At third stage, 27 representatives from the institutions, which were found to play a crucial role in rural development policy, were invited to participate in a focus group. The participants were originated from local, regional and national institutions involved in rural development. Private, semi-public and public authorities were included in the focus group sample. Focus groups are usually conducted with 7 to 10 participants but according to Fong Chiu [14] the size of groups varies according to the key research problems and conditions. In this research the aim was to have representatives from as many as possible institutions involved in rural development. The main purpose of the focus group was to identify the main problems they face at the stages of Rural Development Policy design, implementation/delivery and evaluation.

A semi-structured discussion guide with open-ended questions was prepared before the meeting in order to keep the focus on the topic, as suggested by Makosky Daley et al. [25] and the whole process was digital recorded for later processing. The discussion was separated into three thematic units, one for each phase of rural development policy; design, implementation/delivery and evaluation. Before the end of the focus group, participants were asked to play an “interactive game” in order to identify the main problems of each one of the above phases. Participants were given coloured cards according to the administrative level to which they belonged (national, regional or local) and they were asked to write in the cards the most crucial problems, according to their opinion and experience, at the phase of rural development policy implementation and to stick the cards in a big “paper board”, which was separated at national, regional and local level, pointing out the administrative level/s the problem appeared. The same process was followed for the phase of evaluation. All points made were also orally presented and explained.

This process looks like framework analysis as described by Krueger's [22], Ritchie & Spencer [46] and Rabiee [43]. Framework analysis is a way to analyse focus group data and it is ‘an analytical process which involves a number of distinct though highly interconnected stages’. The five key stages outlined are: familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation. Normally data processing is done by the researcher but in the current study it was done in a participatory and more interactive way during the focus group so as to achieve deeper and richer outcomes.

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique, defined as group discussions organized to explore a set of specific issues or to confirm a hypothesis (Greenbaum [16]; Krueger [22]; Stewart & Shamdasani [48]). The main purpose is to understand and explain the meanings, beliefs and cultures that influence each participant's feelings, attitudes and behaviours (Rabiee [43]). According to Massey [30], focus groups offer an opportunity to obtain significant insight regarding the experiences, observations and opinions of group members. The researcher, who has an active role in the discussion, collects data through group interaction on a determined topic (Morgan [34]). Focus groups are usually conducted to formulate solutions and to identify gaps in capacities for the implementation of policy programmes and they are able to generate large amounts of data and useful information in a relatively short time. The interaction of the group leads to richer and deeper results than those obtained from one-to-one interviews (Fong Chiu [14]).

Focus groups' multiple applicability has been underlined by many researchers. Fong Chiu [14] mentions aging, criminology, medical sociology, political sociology, social movements and the sociology of work in the field of social sciences. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used by evaluation researchers the last years. Massey [30] claims that focus group techniques are included among the more common qualitative methods of obtaining data.

In the current research, focus group is directly combined with other qualitative (in-depth interviews) and indirectly with quantitative (Network Analysis) methodologies. Focus groups can be used both

as a self-contained method and in combination with surveys or other research methods. Morgan [34] identifies four ways of combining focus groups with surveys:

1. Surveys are the primary methods and focus groups serve in a preliminary capacity (developing the content of quantitative questionnaires)
2. Focus groups are the primary method while surveys provide preliminary inputs that guide their application
3. Surveys are the primary method, but the focus groups act as a follow-up that assists in interpreting the survey results (clarifying poorly understood results and go deeper)
4. Focus groups are the primary method and surveys are used as a source of follow-up data

In this research, focus group is the primary method. One could claim that it is between case 2 and 3. The focus group clarifies and goes deeper into in-depth interviews results about the major problems of the rural development policy processes and Quantitative Network Analysis provides inputs mainly for the selection of the participants in the focus group as it illustrates the actual roles in the rural development policy network.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Desk research results

In the third programming period 2000-2006 Measure “Investments in agricultural holdings” was separated into two sub measures: 1.1 concerning investments in animal production units and 4.1 concerning investments in crop production units. Until 2005 the implementation politico-administrative system of Measure 1.1 was centralised while Measure 4.1 was implemented by a more decentralised system. Responsible for the implementation of animal production units’ investments was the Ministry of Rural Development and Food. Thirteen Regional Directorates of Agricultural Development were in charge of the implementation of crop production units’ investments. After 2005 the responsibility for the implementation of both 1.1 and 4.1 passed in the Ministry of Rural Development and Food. In the fourth programming period 2007-2013 the implementation politico-administrative system of the corresponding Measure 121 “Modernisation of agricultural holdings” is characterised as centralised, although regional and local authorities play a crucial role especially in the stages of the collection of applications and in the early stage of the approval of applications. Nevertheless, regional and local authorities still participate in the implementation procedures but they do not participate in the decision making processes. The institutional maps of the politico-administrative systems in the third and fourth programming periods are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

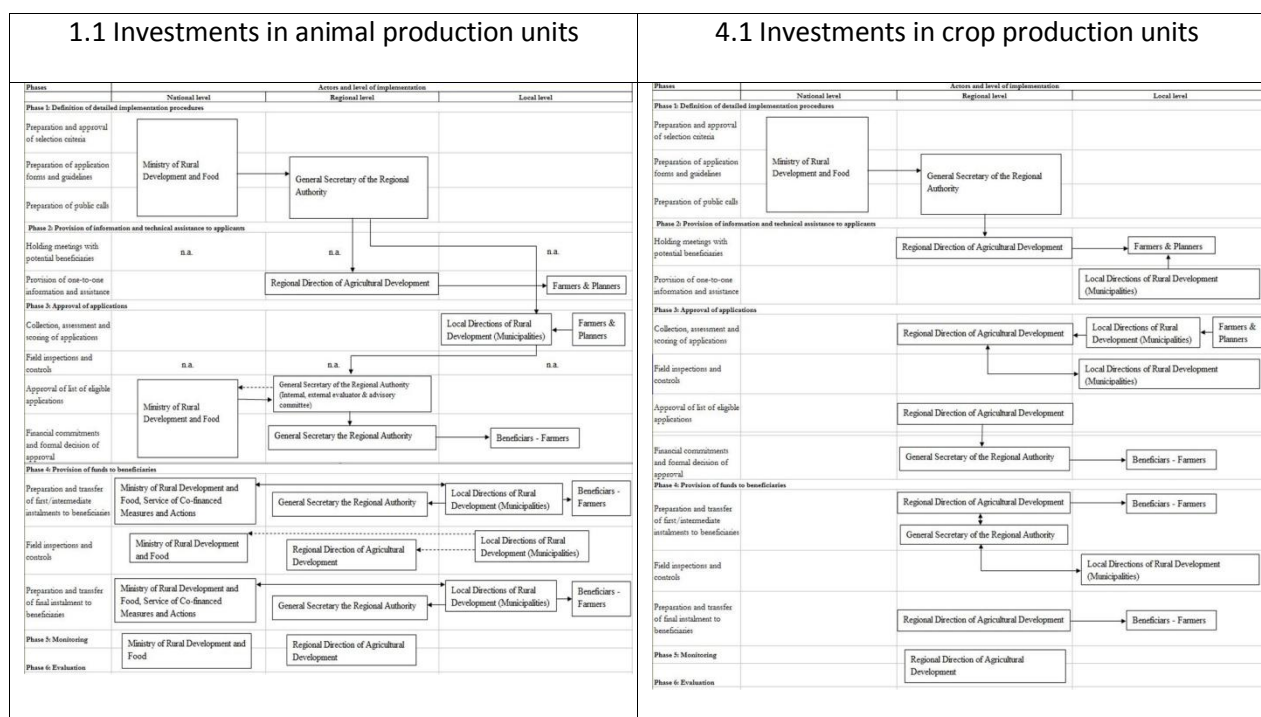


Figure 2: Institutional map of Measure “Investments on agricultural holdings” 2000-2006

Source: Papadopoulou et al. [39]

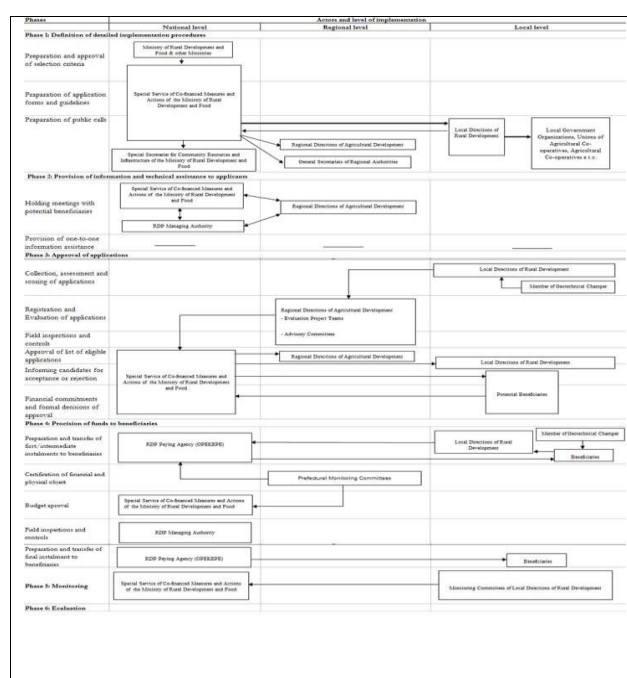


Figure 3: Institutional map of Measure “Modernisation of agricultural holdings” 2007-2013

Source: Data from the research

3.2. In-depth interviews results

Most of the interviewees agreed that the most important problems appear in phase 3 (Approval of applications) and phase 4 (Provision of funds to beneficiaries) of Figures 2 and 3. The most critical issue is work overload during peak periods in application processing and the non-continuous row of application submissions. The fact that different actors are responsible for approval and payment causes difficulties in evaluations and payments. More external experts and staff members could improve these processes. Human resources should also be more and better skilled in technical terms.

A lot of useless documents and repeated information enhance bureaucracy and complexity of procedures. Administrative and legal obligations are too many (certificates, permissions, contracts, lawyers, development agents, planners, engineers etc), very time-consuming and expensive for the applicants. Apart from this, there is no adequate motivation for the administrative personnel, which is few especially during intensive periods. In phase 5 (monitoring) the collection of information at single project level is not efficient. There are many indicators in the existing information system that nobody uses. Main critical issue in managing the monitoring activities is clear definition of the process and of the required data.

3.3. Focus group outcomes

As mentioned above, the selection of the focus group participants was based not only on the in-depth interviews but also on the outcomes of a previous research, conducted by Papadopoulou et al. [40] in 2010, published in the 118th Seminar of the EAAE.

Like one-to-one interviews, the results of focus-group interviews can be presented in uncomplicated ways using lay terminology supported by quotations from the participants Fong Chiu [14]. There were interesting results coming out of the focus group.

Participants believe that the experience and knowledge of regional both public and private authorities was not taken into consideration in the RDP design stage processes. Only a few conferences and meetings were organised by the Managing Authority as part of the consultation procedure but their purpose was not always clear to the participants involved. A restricted number of researches and case studies was undertaken at regional level, but owing to time limitations their results are almost useless. All participants agreed that more funds could be allocated in Axes 3 and 4 in the Greek Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

As far as RDP implementation stage is concerned, centralisation is not desirable but it seems that it is not avoidable in the current programming period. The main reason is that all Regions are not at the same level of human and institutional capacity. One participant claimed that *“most of regional authorities are ready to undertake more responsibilities, but at the same time, in many cases there are problems related to the lack of personnel and expertise”*. Another one said *“if LEADER had a better and more clearly defined strategy, it could be used as a model for the implementation of other measures or Axis”*. This refers to LEADER's design and implementation bottom-up approach.

Crucial delays and lack of communication among public authorities at all national, regional and local level were mentioned as critical failure factors. Insufficient information flow and dissemination can lead to unreasonable delays and bureaucracy. It is generally accepted that the existing implementation system is centralised and in many cases responsibilities are not clearly distributed among authorities. Decentralisation is desirable but it should be applied gradually and in the right way. *“The involvement of too many authorities in the implementation of Rural Development Programme could make the system more complicated”* one participant claimed.

Currently, there is low self-esteem of some local authorities' personnel and training programmes are not carried out. Additionally capacity building and institutional learning are not utilised. The expertise and knowledge of particular employees or authorities, especially at regional and local level, are not taken into account. Personnel evaluation could also be helpful in the improvement of processes. Emphasis should be given to the mobilisation and encouragement of local community actors because potential investors have not *“entrepreneurial culture”*.

Most of the participants agreed that the development of a new Integrated Information System/database for monitoring purposes was not necessary. They believe that the already existing system from the previous programming period could have been improved. Regional Authorities have not access to a *“functional”* database system. According to one participant *“the existing*

Integrated Information System is only useful for the Managing Authority. We need an access instead of a 'data input' database".

About the stage of evaluation, participants agreed that "evaluation culture" is missing from Greece at all stages and evaluation "know how" is missing. Regional and local actors usually consider themselves as "non participants" in the evaluation processes. Lack of data, required for the calculation of the CMEF indicators, is the main problem of evaluation. The CMEF is strongly based on indicators and mainly the economic ones. But focus group participants underlined the need to *"take into account other qualitative criteria in evaluation procedures apart from CMEF indicators. Qualitative evaluation criteria and methods should be combined with qualitative ones. Indicators are unable to describe the real results and impacts of Rural Development Programme"*.

According to participants *"the choice of the time of the mid-term evaluation should be a member-state decision. Each member state should have been given the flexibility to choose the time when the mid-term evaluation should take place, related to the program absorption rate (~50%) rather than the time period (year 2010 for the fourth programming period)"*. Thus, evaluation outcomes and results will be better used in the design process. Participants also mentioned the difficulty to assess the impacts of the RDP, particularly environmental ones. In some cases evaluation should be carried out at "area" and not at axis or measure level in order to capture the environmental impacts of a particular ecosystem.

4. Conclusions

The current research aims to help the understanding of the politico-administrative system of Measure 121 for the modernisation of agricultural holding of Axis 1 of the Greek Rural Development Programme in the fourth programming period and to identify the most crucial problems appeared during the stages of its design, implementation and evaluation.

According to research outcomes, Rural Development Policy design processes must be more participatory. All stakeholders' interests should be taken into consideration. First critical point during the stage of implementation is complexity. The current implementation system is considered as centralised. Although decentralisation is desirable it seems that it can only be applied after major changes and adoptions in the entire system.

Important points are also the weak motivation and training of personnel and sometimes the quantitative or qualitative inadequacy, the analysis of data collected, the work overload caused by too many legal and administrative obligations like permissions, certificates and other documents or controls which may be not necessary. Peak periods caused by deadline-calls lead also to overload.

A central integrated database with all information should be designed for saving and "filtering" all information derived from any document. This will decrease bureaucracy in the stage of implementation and improve data collection for evaluation needs.

Institutional learning, capacity building and networking at all stages would help in the better utilisation of past experience in order to improve current and future rural development policy design, implementation and evaluation. Emphasis should be given to regional and mainly local authorities and stakeholders involved in rural development because they are the ones who are directly influenced by those measures. They should have the feeling of "ownership". Communication among actors is also very important. The National Rural Network could play a crucial role for a more effective communication at national and EU level.

It is important to motivate local stakeholders and to utilize the general endogenous development potential of rural areas. Moreover, these are the ones who are directly affected by the implementation of the Rural Development Programme. Incentives for greater participation should be therefore provided for all actors who are involved and affected by Rural Development Programme in the countryside in order to achieve a more integrated Regional Development.

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