2 Objectives of the evaluation and approach

2.1 Description of the assignment (objectives and evaluation questions)

The objective of the ex-ante evaluation of the Partnership Agreement (PA) was defined in the Terms of Reference (ToR) as: "to bring a real added value and to improve the quality of the documents that are to be negotiated with the European Commission, according to the new draft regulations on the funds of the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) 2014-2020 and to make value judgments and recommendations regarding the programming related aspects, issued by experts independent of those involved in programming".

The ToR defines three specific objectives of the assignment:

- To ensure the internal and external coherence of the Partnership Agreement,
- To ensure the adequate administrative capacity of the authorities and beneficiaries for a good implementation of the CSF funds,
- To ensure adequate electronic systems for the exchange of information between the authorities and the beneficiaries.

The assignment was designed to provide an independent opinion on the key qualitative aspects of the programming process, particularly for the PA development, through an iterative process of guidance.

The activities of the contract were structured around the three specific objectives of the contract. The evaluation had to provide answers to ten evaluation questions:

Evaluation questions regarding the internal and external coherence of the PA:

- ✓ I.1. Does there exist an adequate analysis of the disparities and development needs, referring to the thematic objectives and the key actions defined in the CSF? How the Partnership Principle has been taken into account in the elaboration of PA?
- ✓ I.2. Does the PA include the most adequate operational programmes and the thematic objectives?
- ✓ I.3. Are the results selected for each thematic objective the most appropriate for each fund of the CSF?
- ✓ I.4. Are the allocations for each Operational Programme (OP) and each thematic objective adequate?
- ✓ I.5. Is the territorial development adequately approached?
- ✓ I.6. How are approached the specific needs of the geographical areas, most affected by poverty, or the specific needs of the groups at risk of discrimination or exclusion, considering the marginalised communities?
- ✓ I.7. How will be used the new means of support (the financial instruments)?
- ✓ I.8. Are the policies needed for the ex-ante conditionalities fulfilment adequate? How do these policies contribute to the efficient implementation of the interventions? Is any coherence and synergy among these policies?

(I) Evaluation questions regarding the administrative capacity of the beneficiaries and authorities

- ✓ II.1. Is the administrative capacity of the authorities and the beneficiaries sufficient for the adequate implementation for the CSF funds?

(II) Evaluation questions regarding the assessment of the electronic systems ensuring the information exchange between the authorities and the beneficiaries.

III.1 Are there in place enough regulations and procedures to ensure the exchange of data, as required by the new regulations? To what extent the electronic systems are sufficiently comprehensive? To what extent the electronic systems fulfil the key requirements (including ease of use, reduced administrative burden, aggregation of data, quality of data, search options, timely availability of data, data security, etc.?).

The methodology adopted combined documentary analysis with the most appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods, consultations and plausibility checks with stakeholders and sector experts. Methodology tables are presented in Annex 1.

2.2 Comments on the assignment (key issues)

The ex-ante evaluation of the PA provided support for the preparation of key documents in the negotiations with the European Commission. At the same time the evaluation assisted the Romanian authorities in making important strategic decisions regarding the investments priority and the creation of the most appropriate framework for the implementation of the EU financial assistance during the 2014 – 2020 programming period.

On the basis of the tasks required by the TOR and the contextual factors, the key issues addressed during the ex-ante evaluation were the following:

- the changing EU context (e.g. draft Regulations versus approved Regulations, CSF) during the evaluation process, which may require revisions of the methodology, findings or conclusions;
  There was little change between the draft regulations available at the beginning of the process and the regulations that were adopted just prior to completion. The MEF were able to respond to the changes that were made and these did not have a disruptive effect on the process
- the programming approach based on the PA, differing from the NSRF approach, which has to be understood and accepted by all stakeholders and correctly reflected in the priority axes and OPs;
  The process was explained though the CIAP, it's working groups and with the programmers in the MEF and line Ministries. Although the PA approach differed from that of the NSRF, the teams involved had a clear understanding of the requirements and these have been correctly reflected in the priority axes and OPs.
- the thematic approach and the concentration principle has to be applied, with an appropriate balance of the concentration requirements and the differing sectoral and regional needs;
  The thematic approach and concentration principles have been applied although the early decision to address all 11 Thematic Objectives removed the requirement to make difficult priority-based judgements.
- the ex-ante conditionalities are a new and challenging requirement, that has to be fulfilled and matched in the programming process;
  Ex-ante conditionalities provided one of the more problematic areas for the PA development. The MEF established a good monitoring system but was reliant on line Ministries and other stakeholders to fulfil their obligations. A number of workshops and one-on-one meetings were held to ensure progress was made against this requirement.
- the ex-ante evaluation process has to follow the PA development process in a sufficiently flexible manner that could deal with the potential delays of the PA drafts delivery, and the limited time left available for the evaluation tasks;
  The initial deployment and reporting schedule was developed against an unrealistic schedule that was not linked to the actual production of PA documents. More flexibility was introduced into the task that enabled evaluation to take place against produced documents.
- the significant changes in the Government structure made in the last months and additional changes that could occur at local and regional level in the future have to be considered in the administrative capacity analysis;

The Government and MEF had a very clear vision on the structure and responsibilities to be allocated for the 2014-2020 period. The lessons learned from the 2007-2013 period were considered and the administrative capacity analysis took all these factors into account.

- the ex-ante evaluation contract was designed to provide support not only on the PA document preparation, but include as well assessments and guidance to feed the programming process (i.e. assessment of the administrative capacity and electronic systems);

  The ex-ante evaluation provided assessments and guidance through the assessment of the administrative capacity and electronic systems as well as the PA itself

- the conclusions drawn from the experience of 2007 – 2013 operational programmes implementation might have reduced relevance on issues depending of the implementation stage, still low with an absorption rate of 13.05% [6] for the structural instruments and 54 % for EARDF[7];

  The underlying issues that resulted in the low absorption rates have been identified and recognised by the MEF and programmers and these were taken into account when the PA and OPs were formulated.

2.3 The key principles and approach

2.3.1 Key Principles

The key principles for evaluations based upon international best practice and embraced by the evaluation team consisted of the following:

Independence and impartiality: The project team were not involved with or influenced by the contracting authority or beneficiary and based all recommendations and conclusions on objective, evidence based analysis and evaluation.

Credibility: The evaluation was carried out in a professional, transparent manner with all findings evidence based and all recommendations and conclusions justified.

Usefulness: The Terms of Reference asked specific questions and required the development of checklists, tools and methodologies for continued and future use. This assignment was carried out and the results presented in a manner that the Ministry of European Funds, through the Department for Analysis, Programming and Evaluation can have confidence in decision-making and actions based on the findings

Participation: The information-gathering was wide-ranging and all stakeholders were given an opportunity to contribute to the process. The activities of the evaluation team were carried out in close cooperation and liaison with the DAPE and beneficiary institutions.

2.3.2 Approach

The methodological approach was based on a mix of methods and tools, identified as the most appropriate for the evaluation questions, according to the principles and best practices in evaluation and the domain the question was referring to.

The documentary analysis was a key method used throughout the entire evaluation. The challenge in performing the documentary analysis was due to the complexity of the evaluation, the

[6] Source: http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/ Stage of absorption of the ERDF and CF at 31st March 2013
[7] Source: http://agroromania.manager.ro/articole/diverse/situatia-fondurilor-europene-pentru-agricultura-actualizate-la-21-februarie-2013-13045.html

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maturity of the documents, with a large number of sectors and documents and the continuous development and revision of the European and Romanian framework of the programming process.

For this reason the analysis was systematic, based on:

- Elements/abstracts from the quoted documents, quotations, tables and graphs;
- Inventories of documents with a mechanism of continuous updates;
- Previous studies and analysis from Romania and other member states;
- Benchmarking against other relevant member states with clear criteria to prove the relevance.

"Hard" quantitative techniques will be used and will include

- Descriptive statistics and modelling data that was used to ensure the optimum combination of different types of techniques (e.g. for questions 1.2, 1.3, 1.4).
- Data bases creation, which allowed the collection in a structured and meaningful manner, of a broad variety of information.

Qualitative tools were integrated throughout the process in order to verify and validate information, findings and conclusions and included:

- Interviews, panels, focus groups, and discussions with stakeholders involved with the drafting of the Partnership Agreement.
- Online questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data as well as qualitative information
- Experts' panels were used to check plausibility of the evaluation team conclusions.
- Checklists were created and customised on the specific needs of the ex-ante evaluation.