



Focus Group 4: Better Local Development Strategies

Phase One Report:
Strategy Design and Development

Final report

December 2011



Connecting Rural Europe

Table of Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms	3
1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1. OBJECTIVES.....	4
1.2. PROCESS.....	4
1.3. STRUCTURE	5
2. STRATEGY PREPARATION	7
2.1. INITIATING THE PROCESS.....	7
2.2. TIME ALLOWED FOR STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT	8
2.3. STRATEGY SUBMISSION	9
2.3.1. Submission Windows.....	9
2.3.2. Multi-Stage Approaches.....	10
2.3.3. Targeting Through Calls for Submissions.....	11
3. STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN FORMAT AND CONTENT	12
3.1. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY ELEMENTS	12
3.2. ACTION PLAN ELEMENTS	14
3.3. DIFFICULTIES AND GAPS IDENTIFIED	15
4. LAG AUTONOMY	16
4.1. AREA SELECTION	16
4.2. THEME SELECTION.....	17
5. DRIVING PRIORITIES	20
5.1. LOCAL PRIORITIES.....	20
5.2. LEADER AS A DRIVER.....	20
5.3. LAG STATUS	21
6. BASIS OF BUDGET ALLOCATION	21
6.1. INDICATIVE BUDGET	21
6.2. BUDGET ALLOCATION	21
7. STRATEGY SELECTION	23
7.1. LAG SELECTION CRITERIA.....	23
7.2. SELECTION PROCESS	23
7.2.1. Overview.....	23
7.2.2. Transparency of Selection Process.....	24
7.2.3. Quality of Feedback	24
7.2.4. Community Validation of the Strategy	25
8. INVOLVEMENT AND METHODS	26
8.1. INPUTS.....	26
8.2. METHODS	27
9. STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT	29
9.1. INTRODUCTION.....	29
9.2. DIRECT SUPPORT	29
9.2.1. Type.....	29
9.2.2. Duration.....	30
9.2.3. Financial value.....	30
9.3. CONTINUITY AND MENTORING	30
9.4. GUIDANCE	31
9.4.1. Provision	31
9.4.2. Content.....	32
9.4.3. Emerging Issues	33
9.5. TRAINING	34
9.6. USE OF CONSULTANTS	35
9.7. DIFFERENTIATION IN GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT	36
9.7.1. Present Period	36
9.7.2. Future Transition	36

10. MONITORING, TARGETING AND EVALUATION	38
10.1. PERFORMANCE MONITORING.....	38
10.2. TARGETING.....	39
10.3. PROGRESS REPORT SUBMISSION	39
10.4. STRATEGY REVISIONS	39
10.5. EVALUATION.....	40
10.5.1. Overview	40
10.5.2. Self-Evaluation	41
11. CONCLUSIONS	42
11.1. MAKING A START	42
11.2. GUIDANCE	45
11.3. THE STRATEGY	46
11.4. AUTONOMY	48
11.5. LOCAL PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIC FIT	48
11.6. STRATEGY SELECTION.....	49
11.7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION.....	50
ANNEXES	51
Annex 1: LAG Questionnaire of Phase 1.....	52
Annex 2: MA/PA Questionnaire of Phase 1	52
Annex 3: Findings of Phase 1 LAG Questionnaire	52
Annex 4: Findings of the Phase 1 Managing Authority Questionnaire.....	52
Annex 5: Discussion Summary on Better Local Development Strategies of the 1st FG4 meeting 18-19 October 2011, Lisbon, Portugal	52
Annex 6: Discussion Summary on Better Local Development Strategies, 7th LEADER Sub- Committee meeting, 23 November, 2011, Brussels, Belgium.....	52

Abbreviations and acronyms

AIR	Annual Implementation Report
CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
CP	Contact Point
CSF	Common Strategic Framework
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
ELARD	European LEADER Association for Rural Development
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
FG	Focus Group (of the LEADER Sub-Committee)
IADS	Integrated Area Development Strategies
LAG	Local Action Group
LDS	Local Development Strategy
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale', meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions'
LsC	LEADER Sub-Committee
MA	Managing Authority
MS	Member States
NGO	Non- Governmental Organisation
NRN	National Rural Network
NUTs	Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics
PA	Paying Agency
RD	Rural Development
RDP	Rural Development Programme
RDR	Rural Development Regulation
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the first results of the work of Focus Group 4 on "Better Local development Strategies" established at the 6th LEADER Sub-Committee meeting of 17 May 2011. Preliminary results were presented to the extended 7th LEADER Sub-Committee on 23 November 2011 and supplementary collection of information and analysis were subsequently carried out till the end of December 2011 which are included in this report.

1.1. OBJECTIVES

The central role of Local Development Strategies (LDS) to implement the LEADER approach was well recognised by the European Commission and the members of the LEADER Sub-Committee.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) have the responsibility of designing and implementing a LDS. However, in practice, designing a high quality Local Development Strategy (LDS) can prove to be demanding. The 2010 special report of the European Court of Auditors (ECA) on the implementation of LEADER highlighted a number of weaknesses in relation to LDSs and emphasised the need for improvement. The Court' audits found that, although the Local Development Strategies should be at the heart of the LEADER approach, in practice, LAGs did not focus on achieving the objectives of their local strategies.

As a response to such a criticism, a Focus Group (FG) on better local development strategies (LDS) was officially launched at the 6th LEADER Sub-Committee (LsC) meeting on 17 May 2011. The aim of this Focus Group 4 (FG4) is to advise the Member States (MS) with regards to the current and the next programming period so as to improve the quality of the local development strategies of LAGs. .

The following objectives for Focus Group 4 were agreed by the LEADER Sub-Committee:

- to advise the Member States with regards to the current and the next programming period; and
- to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the LEADER approach.

The two main operational objectives of the focus group are:

- to identify the critical requirements in the design of the Local Development Strategy; and
- to collect tools and good practices used at Local Action Group (LAG) level ensuring an efficient implementation of the Local Development Strategy.

1.2. PROCESS

The Focus Group is jointly chaired by;

- Petri Rinne, President of the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD);
- Sanna Sihvola, Finnish Managing Authority; and

- Ana Pires da Silva, Portuguese National Rural Network (NRN).

The work of the Focus Group commenced with a meeting of the co-chairs, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and the Contact Point of the European network for Rural Development (ENRD CP) during the ELARD seminar in Finland in June 2011. This meeting agreed the work plan for the Focus Group and the key milestones and deliverables. The work was divided into two main phases focusing on strategy design and development in phase 1 (July 2011 to December 2011) and on implementation and monitoring and evaluation in phase 2 (December 2011 to June 2012¹). The plan for the first phase included 6 main elements:

- The preparation of two questionnaires, one for Managing Authorities (MA) and one for LAGs;
- A webinar of Focus Group members to confirm the questionnaires;
- The conduct of the surveys of LAGs and MAs;
- The compilation and analysis of the questionnaire results;
- A meeting of the Focus Group to further develop the analysis; and
- Discussion of elements of the analysis at an extended 7th LEADER Sub-Committee involving FG 4 members.

This analysis draws on the substantive elements of the first phase of the work of Focus Group 4, the survey questionnaires with Managing Authorities and with LAGs, the first Focus Group 4 meeting in Lisbon in October 2011 and the discussions during the extended 7th LEADER Sub-Committee in Brussels in November 2011. The latter two elements drew on and further developed some of the findings from the two questionnaires and the reports which these generated, these reports therefore form the main basis on which this report is based.

These reports and questionnaires are provided as appendices to this paper. (see **Annexes 1 to 6**)

The survey analysis which underpins this work was drawn from 151 LAGs from 18 Member States and 24 Managing Authorities drawn from 16 Member States who provided direct responses to the questionnaires. Further collective LAG responses were received from two Member States and these have been incorporated in the analysis. Overall all 27 Member States have now been involved throughout the process involving some 200 LAGs and Managing Authorities from all countries.

1.3. STRUCTURE

This paper draws on the previous LAG and MA questionnaire analysis but is structured differently drawing together the various elements under eight main themes. These have been structured in two main parts, the first to flow logically through the initiation of strategy development, content, prioritisation and selection, the second through LAG involvement,

¹ Date still to be confirmed.

support provision and monitoring and evaluation actions. In each section the key findings and any conclusions are highlighted. A final section of the paper draws the conclusions together.

2. STRATEGY PREPARATION

Three linked elements of strategy development timing and preparation are considered; these are structured chronologically through the initiation of the strategy development process, the time available for the preparation of the strategy and the process and timing of strategy submission.

2.1. INITIATING THE PROCESS

Start dates varied considerably with LAGs reporting a range from “towards the end of 2004” to “after award of contract in June 2010”² whilst for MAs the earliest date mentioned was 2006, the latest 2009-10. Most LAGs appear to have been asked to start the process post approval of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) although in some cases the MA initiated activity ahead of approval e.g. between the submission of the programme and its approval. Typically therefore the process commenced between early 2005 (Finland) and December 2006 with a relatively small number of specific exceptions.

The difference between LAG and MA perspectives on start dates may be assumed to reflect the difference between LAGs initiating preparatory actions and MAs defining the start date for the period eligible for obtaining support. In a small number of cases a staggered approach appears to have been employed with LAGs starting their strategy development process at different times, again this may reflect individual LAGs taking pre-emptive action.

LAG and MA perspectives on the issues which start dates present vary somewhat in both priority and the number of issues. MAs saw few difficulties, the principal issues were the difficulties arising from the lack of continuity between programme periods. In some cases there was an actual gap, e.g. a full year in Flanders where this presented issues for staff retention. In other cases delays with the closure of the previous LEADER+ programme meant this crossed over with the necessary actions to launch the new programme.

Both these issues are evident in LAG responses, though the effects appear to be more acutely experienced. LAGs particularly stress the importance of continuity of LAGs and personnel between programme periods. This is important to maintain valuable organisational memory and capacity, lengthy capacity building of new LAGs due to discontinuity from previous LEADER+ was commonly mentioned in survey responses. This could result in protracted development processes leading to a loss of energy, enthusiasm and momentum with unmet expectations or ‘promises’ causing further damage. This in turn can result in less innovation and community development than would have been desirable.

Both a lack of continuity and an overlap between programme periods can result in time and resource pressures and this can be compounded by the lack of clarity associated with incomplete or poor quality guidance. Where strategy development work was initiated on top of existing programme delivery this placed severe stress on resources, there was a clear demand from LAGs for both funding and quality information provision.

² Information about the exact form of contract was not collected as part of the questionnaire survey process. In the cases of Bulgarian and Romania it is believed to refer to a contract to obtain preparatory support.

The time taken to finalise RDPs and accompanying domestic legislation caused severe delays in some cases, this could also result in gaps in necessary information compounding the difficulties of the late start e.g. regarding RDP requirements and fit. One LAG respondent explained that "National documents (Regulations) were always late. The strategy needed to be submitted before guidelines from the Regulations were available. Necessary seminars were not available or were little [insufficient]."

The core issue is therefore that where LDS development started late this caused resource and organisational issues e.g. through the lack of continuity. Consequently it also finished later than intended with knock on effects in the LAGs becoming operational. This results in insufficient time to develop and 'road-test' strategies, to allow adequate consultation, to amend or iron out difficulties prior to implementation as result of compressed timescales, in some cases this resulted in their coming under (n+2) pressure to spend.

In a limited number of cases there are examples of LAGs who had undertaken the basic steps which could be completed in advance of finalised approaches. This required a degree of maturity, autonomy and confidence on their part and is something which the Focus Group suggested should be encouraged.

The central factors in this case appear to be the importance of getting the process under way as early as possible, being clear as to what really is absolutely essential before the process can start and then maintaining momentum with an accompanying degree of certainty and confidence in the process. As soon as practicable, MAs should therefore be geared up to provide operational support and feedback to LAGs. There are of course issues over the resourcing of this.

2.2. TIME ALLOWED FOR STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

LAGs and MAs had varying perspectives on the adequacy of the time allocated for strategy development. Around one third of LAG respondents felt that the time allocated was adequate, whilst over 50% experienced some difficulties; meanwhile most MA respondents felt that the time allowed was reasonable, although there were notable exceptions. From the work undertaken it is clear that there is no single answer, no ideal time period that the continuity and delay factors have to be taken into account and therefore specific approaches are required.

The period allowed for the development and submission of strategies was typically three to six months but ranged considerably from one month to two years, in some cases it varied between regions. In some cases where time allowed was shorter this reflected only the official window for submission. In some RDPs such as Mainland Finland, Greece and the Czech Republic, LAGs deemed the formal submission period to be very short.

The important distinction is that the period of time (window) for strategy submission is much less important than that for development and the required information and resources to enable this.

Difficulties were most commonly faced by LAGs where the period allowed for strategy development was five months or less, overall 20% of those responding in the survey

expressed concern that the period allowed was too short. There were particular concerns over the time required for data collection and effective community consultation.

The adequacy of the time allowed is affected by a range of other factors. The time required for strategy development varies considerably between LAGs, different types of LAG, stages of LAG development or situations need different approaches. The needs vary with LAG experience, the stage of partnership development, the extent of continuity and their degree of autonomy, e.g. recently established LAGs have distinct difficulties as frequently more time was required. As noted by Sweden "there must be a very long period for development of a new LEADER-territory! And a long period to learn the rules and administration process before a LAG can start making decisions about projects. A period of two years was allowed". These factors can vary significantly within an RDP area and this is recognised by both LAGs and MAs e.g. in England where there was a clear split between new and experienced LAGs with the experienced LAGs in effect having to wait while new LAGs caught up.

The link between the knowledge, information, time and work required of LAGs and the quality, scope, accessibility and timeliness of any guidance and support available from the MA is clearly evident. Shortcomings impeded LAGs. This is a key area of MA activity as is the effectiveness with which that support and information is communicated. Similarly delays in the approval of enabling legislation or, in some cases extraneous factors, (technical, administrative or political) of little relevance to the process had knock on effects on available time for LDS development. As one LAG reported, "It was not enough, almost all LAGs waited for legislation (May 2008) so for drafting the LDS they had around three months". This type of delay can also have knock on effects e.g. where late approval of strategies 'caused problems with the n+2 rule'.

A number of LAGs indicate that they undertook LDS development groundwork in anticipation of the new programme or ahead of official calls for submissions. This effectively extended the formal period allowed for strategy development. The fit of this with other elements and associated timing issues can however be a critical limiting factor.

The further question which therefore arises from this is whether one size fits all in the timing of strategy initiation, development and submission and whether is it not better that consideration be given to a staggered or multiple stage approach?

2.3. STRATEGY SUBMISSION

It was evident that there were two main approaches used of strategy submission, the first is the use of multiple submission rounds or windows and the second one is the multi-stage processes, in some cases the former approach in effect operated as a multi-stage approach.

2.3.1. Submission Windows

In seeking submission of strategies different MAs applied different approaches, usually this was a straightforward open call as reported by over two thirds of LAGs and 21 MAs. 16 out of the MA respondents note that this was a single application window. Some MAs had a short development and submission window, others a short submission window associated with a longer development period, some allowed for reflection and adjustment post assessment.

Respondents identifying multiple application windows were concentrated in the UK (England), Denmark, Finland, France and some German Länder.

In some cases where there was more than one submission window; e.g. in Bavaria, Cyprus and Finland, unsuccessful applicants in the first round were offered feedback and were able to revise their strategy and resubmit in the second round effectively extending the submission period. There were other examples of feedback being provided with periods set aside for the improvement of the strategy, French regions were free to choose between one or two application periods "in order to strengthen the applications that have to be improved". This scope for revision was a relatively common approach and both LAGs and MAs seemed content with this, the Focus Group actively endorsed this as being consistent with the LEADER approach.

Where more than one application period had been employed the most common reason given was simply that the MA had made a prior decision to hold two application rounds. Frequently, (e.g. as in Cyprus and Bavaria) the reasons for this is related to the need to give newer LAGs or new territories time to develop or to absorb guidance and feedback. The need for this was more acute where there was a large increase in the area or number of LAGs. In other cases there was a desire to have the ability to address a budget under-spend or target outcomes with identified priorities. In contrast some drivers for a single round were also identified; e.g. MA and LAG fear of limited budget availability.

2.3.2. Multi-Stage Approaches

Formal multi-stage approaches were employed by a substantial minority of MAs with seven using a formal expression of interest process, a further three employed some other form of pre-selection. This is not entirely clear cut however and there appears to be some blurring as already evident regarding application windows. When asked "to what extent was this (pre-selection) based on strategic priorities?" 16 MAs responded suggesting that pre-selection was in fact more widely applied. It appears that this may reflect the multiple application period responses also.

There is also some evidence of informal pre-selection e.g. at regional level to rationalise the fit with the available resources. In other cases such rationalisation occurred through the MA with a desire to avoid competition between LAGs in a single territory providing the rationale for a second stage in the application process to enable feedback to avoid competing bids.

It was evident that where the process employed has enabled feedback to be provided and there has then been a degree of flexibility that this has worked to the benefit of the quality of the strategies. This approach recognises that strategy development is a process, a construction project, it takes time, there is a need for all the partners in both the partnership and multi-level governance structures to work together in pursuit of the goal of a quality strategy.

Pre-selection approaches involved varying degrees of formality, use of criteria and levels at which such pre-selection took place. Some were wholly area or LAG criteria based, in others a combination of area and LAG assessment criteria were used, others focused more on or on demonstrating the capability to deliver. The fit with RDP strategic priorities was an important consideration in 70% of cases. The criteria employed therefore varied in nature, scope and

complexity. In one case these included rurality, socio-economic indicators and indicative LDS quality, others were wider including compliance with the LEADER approach and regulations, the focus, e.g. on tackling economic underperformance and rural disadvantage, providing evidence of socio-economic need and opportunity, demonstrating coherence with wider regional and national strategies and compliance with local guidance on size, population and relationships with other RDP delivery bodies, another concentrated on evidencing general LAG obligations such as having a qualified manager and LAG members.

The combination of multiple application periods, feedback and expression of interest approaches suggests that overall some form of iterative process is favoured with pre-screening of submissions. This should take account of the varying stages of LAG development and maturity within the population. As one respondent noted 'LAGs don't know what they don't know at the start', therefore a multi-step LAG strategy approval process by the MA which allows discussion and improvement of a draft LDS through detailed consideration of the LDS evaluation criteria appears sensible.

It would appear to make more sense for this to be formalised as a multi-stage application process to avoid unfruitful work by both LAGs and MAs, clear criteria appear to be necessary and the criteria for this should be clear from the outset. In short, to treat strategies like a LEADER project. Elements this assessment should include are strategic priorities, delivery capability and methodology. Applying the multi-step process needs effort and time but this pays off, therefore it is important to make use of the available time in this programming period.

2.3.3. Targeting Through Calls for Submissions

The majority of MAs (17) reported some form of targeting in the call for submissions. This targeting varies in its specificity, the objectives and the level at which it was applied. The overwhelming majority of targeting identified was on a geographical basis, principally in order to expand the LEADER area in line with the priority of the Community Strategic Guidelines for rural development focusing on "Improving governance and mobilising the endogenous development potential of rural areas". This could involve the targeting of individuals or organisations to lead the process in the new areas. There was also some rather limited evidence of targeting the involvement of certain types or capabilities of organisations for LAG membership, rurality or certain socio economic conditions. One notable example was Sweden where the target was to cover 75 % of the rural territory expanding the number of LAGs significantly and supported through a programme of LAG-to-LAG mentoring.

Summary Points: Strategy submission

The principal issue is to decide what the objective of the process is, if this is to have a process which leads to the development of successful strategies then this suggests an approach which allows feedback, dialogue and iteration resulting in stronger alignment with local, regional and national priorities and a level playing field for all prospective LAGs. Furthermore it is considered important to start to prepare the LDS as soon as possible within the current programming period. This needs to be explored and the availability of funds for the preparation process ensured. Getting the process underway and keeping people engaged and motivated is a key consideration.

3. STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN FORMAT AND CONTENT

In order to ensure consistency, the questionnaire outlined 14 LDS and 14 action plan elements and asked both MA and LAG respondents to indicate whether these were addressed and whether regarded as being essential (i.e. formally assessed) or desirable elements. This topic was also directly addressed in the conduct of the Focus Group meeting in Lisbon and the findings are incorporated in this report.

3.1. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY ELEMENTS

It appears that in almost all cases MAs defined a specific LDS format, content and structure for LAGs, 79% of respondents said that this was defined and set out by the MA in some cases there were further regional variations. Only a quarter of LAGs found any element of this to be excessive. When asked to describe the structure and format only two MAs identified their main criteria, the overwhelming majority of respondents referred to other documents or annexes which were in MS languages and not available for this analysis. It is suggested that there may be merit in considering specifying minima and maxima for strategy content.

Common areas

The MAs and LAGs both ranked the area covered and the territorial 'Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats' (SWOT) analysis / analysis of needs particularly highly. The major differentiation was the relatively much higher priority placed on the presence of clear evidence of the LEADER features by MAs although LAGs did also place a relatively high ranking on this. Somewhat paradoxically LAGs commonly identified MAs placing insufficient importance on the LEADER features as a difficulty.

The SWOT analysis was subdivided between the social, economic, environmental and territorial elements. Territorial analysis was the most frequently stated essential element of the SWOT for LAGs, the main differentiation was a lower 'essential' ranking accorded to the environmental analysis by MAs. The Focus Group takes the view that all elements are equally essential in pursuing a sustainable development approach.

Given the potential for multi-fund local development strategies in future, there will be a need to improve this local analysis. Clarification is required regarding whether the strategy is for the sub-regional/local area or for the programme(s). The SWOT should not look at the local area isolated from adjacent areas (urban areas or cross-border areas). It will be critical to be able to define the scale of the local territory in order that local may remain local and doesn't become subsumed by the region. This may nevertheless involve improving the partnership between peri-urban/ urban and rural areas, being exclusively rural may no longer be an option in a multi-fund context and this will again demand enhanced analysis.

Evidence of the community engagement and consultation process, the integrated character of the strategy and the interaction of LDS with regional and national rural development strategies were elements frequently ranked as essential. This latter ranking is interesting given that problems have already been identified in this area. This perspective was confirmed through

consideration at the 7th LEADER Sub-Committee meeting which stressed the importance of local participation and specificity.

Problem areas

Overall only 23% of LAG respondents said that there were elements in the specified content which LAGs had difficulty in addressing and only 14% said that there was an element missing in the specified content which would benefit the LAG strategy. This gives some cause for concern given the difficulties identified in the analysis of feedback on essential content.

Given its heightened importance in the future programme period the relatively low priority placed on the presence of innovation as an objective or in the character of strategy appears likely to be an area requiring attention. There is a notable degree of difference between LAGs (57%) and MAs (39%) but overall the priority of this is lower than might have been expected. The lack of priority placed on this was highlighted as a problem in strategy preparation by a number of LAGs, the lack of understanding of the concept by LAGs presented challenges for more than one MA however it appears likely that the main issue is risk aversion on the part of the MA or PA. Looking ahead it is suggested that the mainstreaming of innovations developed through LEADER should be a future priority for LAGs and MAs.

A further distinctive LEADER feature which was challenging to address was cooperation, where it is suggested that clearer guidance and a common basis for such actions should be specified centrally.

The proportion of essential rankings of the intervention logic (objectives and hierarchy of actions) was notably higher amongst LAGs (86%) than MAs (only 70%), the 1st Focus Group meeting stressed the importance of this element.

This ranking by MAs is of concern and appears inconsistent with the SWOT rankings, i.e. 95% essential. The essential rankings of the linked elements of quantified indicators and targets, just 50% and 'Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound' (SMART) objectives, only 29%, suggest a significant lack of coherence and consistency amongst elements linked to the logic underpinning the intervention. This is reinforced by the identification of the setting and quantifying of SMART objectives as an area of difficulty by both LAGs and MAs and the difficulties identified by LAGs in the identification, availability and gathering of reliable locally relevant statistical data (the main difficulty identified).

Learning from others (networking) and learning from the past both received markedly low essential rankings from both LAGs and MAs, well below 50% in both cases. The latter figure may be partly explained by the influence of new LAGs responding but, as it received the lowest total combined ranking gives serious cause for concern. Notably the most frequently mentioned missing element in strategy specification was an evaluation procedure or criteria or a process of strategy review.

The most frequently mentioned excessive requirements reported by LAGs related to unreasonable expectations imposed by the MA were the requirement for (what was considered) overly detailed strategic links, the need for compliance with the RDP's priorities and exclusions and the setting of long term indicators. This caused considerable LAG frustration, therefore a greater degree of flexibility, perhaps starting simply and allowing the strategies to evolve over time would be desirable.

Summary Points: Local Development Strategy Elements

Taken together these four sets of factors relating to intervention logic, strategic fit, setting and quantifying objectives and targets and learning from experience suggests a considerable lack of clarity and understanding indicating an urgent need for clarification and guidance. Specific clarifications are required in relation to innovation for both LAGs and MAs. This was recognised by both LAGs and MAs as these are key considerations in looking ahead at strategy development. This appears to further underline the importance of planning and managing effective transitions and continuity between programmes.

3.2. ACTION PLAN ELEMENTS

As with the strategy, the questionnaires presented a range of elements which might commonly be considered as part of a LAG action plan with respondents asked to indicate whether these were essential, desirable or omitted elements and whether these were integral to the plan or strategy or stand-alone elements.

Common areas

There was a significant degree of correlation in the elements of action planning regarded as 'essential' by LAGs and MAs. The highest ranking elements related to LAG structure/composition of partnership and organisation, a full implementation plan, a financial plan profiled over the period, LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures, LAG functions and operational procedures and criteria for project selection. In many respects these are the most straightforward and unchallenging elements and were comprehensively covered when those included as separate additions were taken into account. These were also the elements most likely to be incorporated into the strategy itself. Focus Group discussions confirmed the importance of this stressing how important it is to have clarity on the implementation procedures of the LDS, the organisational structure of the LAG and the attendant responsibilities.

Problem areas

The essential ratings for the three linked elements of LDS monitoring system, evaluation plan, and LDS revision procedure are all low (well under 50% of MAs and only 30% of LAGs), and a significant proportion of both samples, approximately 25% do not address these at all even as separate additions. When considered along with the findings in relation to the essential elements of the strategy this gives considerable cause for concern.

The fact that three MAs did not consider a financial plan profiled over the period as an essential element is surprising.

A training action plan and provision for interaction with other local/regional bodies were least frequently stated as essential elements, but along with LDS evaluation plan, project criteria and staffing provisions were the most frequently mentioned as desirable elements of or additions to the action plan.

Provisions for revising the LDS, the evaluation plan, communication and information action plan, provision for interaction with other local/regional bodies and project selection criteria

were frequently regarded as separate elements. The LDS evaluation plan or monitoring system were the gaps MAs most frequently mentioned in the specified content (a priority for the Focus Group meeting), this was followed by a process for managing conflict of interest.

The training action plan was not considered essential by any MA. Given the development capacity orientation of the LEADER approach, the importance placed on the knowledge and skills of the LAG staff, LAG members and other partners and the concerns over continuity between programmes and capacity retention this is a particularly worrying finding and a clear omission in an area of MA influence.

3.3. DIFFICULTIES AND GAPS IDENTIFIED

There is some lack of consistency between RDPs with some essential or highly important elements of the strategy or action plan being those which were least frequently specified as core or were to be addressed separately. These included elements relating to the setting of measurable objectives for the strategy, evaluation and to LAG and staff skills and development.

The issue of greatest overall concern is the lack of consistency between the different elements regarded as essential in an LDS or action plan. This is most particularly so regarding the issues around strategic fit, intervention logic, SMART objectives, quantified indicators and the SWOT analysis. The lack of priority placed on learning from previous programme periods and from others is also worrying and taken together these elements all give serious cause for concern regarding the sustainability of the approach and the future evaluation of LDS. This and specifically the inclusion of evaluation plans and LEADER specific indicators for monitoring and evaluation as part of the strategy was a key concern for the Focus Group.

The weaknesses in the provisions for developing and retaining staff and thus contribute to continuity and transition between generations of the programme is as striking as it is surprising, this is a critical omission and a key strategic priority for LEADER.

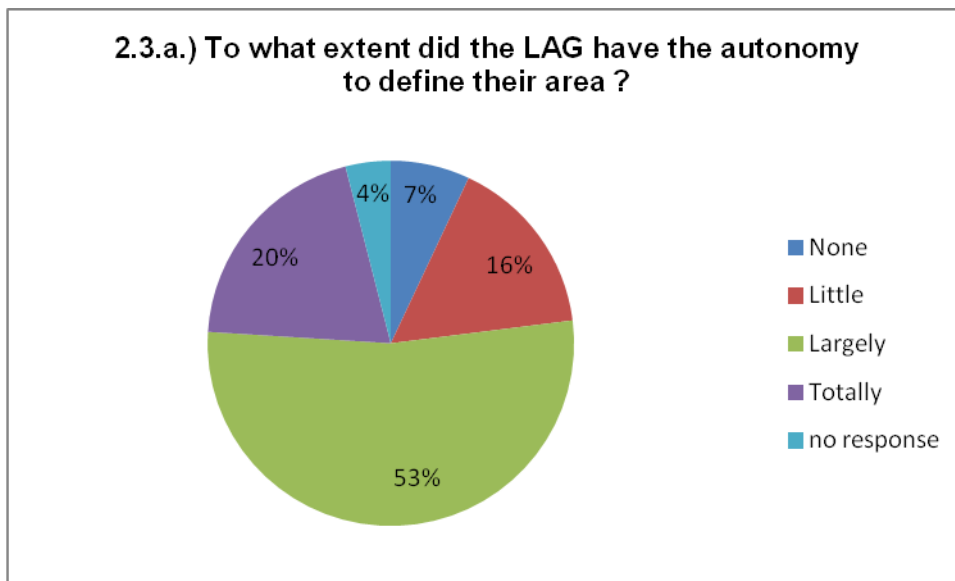
The key elements of strategy and action plans included in the questionnaire were carefully selected to be consistent with good practice and the expectations for the forthcoming programming period. The fact that there are gaps in relation to all these elements both in relative and absolute terms indicates an overall lack of consistency. The lack of perception of gaps by MAs also is also somewhat surprising. A comparative analysis of the consistency of the different MA formats would be interesting however. It appears that a detailed common specification and interpretation of the essential core LDS elements as provided for in the draft Common Strategic Framework (CSF) Funds Regulation is of greater importance now.

4. LAG AUTONOMY

Two specific aspects of LAG autonomy with direct bearing on the definition of the strategy were explored; these were the definition of the LAG territory and the definition of the strategic themes.

4.1. AREA SELECTION

The questionnaire probed the extent to which LAGs had autonomy to define their area and then probed the effects of this from the perspective of how successful this had been. The chart below illustrates the LAG findings showing that almost three quarters of LAGs had a significant degree of autonomy and is largely consistent with MA responses.



Some 77% of totally autonomous LAGs thought that this approach was very successful or better, largely autonomous LAGs predominantly reported that this was successful. LAGs with such autonomy stressed the importance of the coherence of the area, natural fit and the ability to work across boundaries. This had direct and positive effects on the composition of the partnerships which in turn drew on people's local identification and their knowledge of needs and what works, applying the knowledge to the territory and improving local targeting within the area. The MA perspective concurs with this perspective on success stressing the importance of the implementation of the bottom-up approach and respecting the LEADER principles e.g. re coherence, population and the size of settlements.

LAGs and MAs agreed that local people were best able to define their areas e.g. in terms of coherence economic, social and environmental issues. Such LAGs were able to build on people's history of working together, this ultimately contributed to fewer tensions and challenges and easier decision making. It was clearly identified that securing widespread territorial and population coverage were critical MA success criteria.

Approaches based on fit with administrative boundaries had advantages too but are less highly rated. In some cases such LAGs had been developed around identifiable and targeted geographic and socio-economic areas. Some cross boundary LAGs experienced compatibility

difficulties, others reported steps taken to address this with the new relationships established around common issues and concerns reinforcing coherence amongst previously separate municipalities in bringing forward projects across administrative boundaries (although the processes of area re-alignment led to delays in programme roll-out in some cases).

More issues were raised where LAGs had little autonomy in this area, almost half reported problems. Where frustrations arose this was often over the definition of rurality and population criteria. Those who have any positive perspective (mainly Greece) reported it had helped avoid overlaps and one group of Irish LAGs reported that it resolved any issues of territorial definition.

Levels of autonomy are not defined as black or white with a range of shades of grey evident. On three occasions LAGs had total autonomy to define their own area within a range of predefined options. Others explained that the only restriction was the definition of rurality. In one MS the effects rural definitions and co-financing arrangements of other RDP Axes restricted the potential autonomy. Where one government had decided to define discrete areas to provide full coverage of services delivered across the state some LAGs criticised this as placing administrative concerns above coherence.

Some MAs gave LAGs guidance of varying degrees of direction e.g. reducing numbers where prospective LAGs were considered too small, lacking resources or the necessary critical mass, helping to achieve the most appropriate geography or resolving territorial overlap issues.

Overall it appears therefore that LAGs were largely free and capable to select their areas within given (LEADER) parameters and subject to some MA influence, this was generally successful. It is important that the parameters defined by the MA make sense locally as external parameters can be problematic. The main issues appear to be lack of critical mass for some very small LAG areas or a lack of preparedness. Both these issues could be addressed through an effective expression of interest process.

Overall it seems that the greater the degree of autonomy which can be enabled, then the better the fit with the needs, development potential and capabilities of the area concerned.

4.2. THEME SELECTION

A similar proportion of LAGs had autonomy in choosing their own strategic themes according to both MA and LAG respondents. Where LAGs were not free to choose a focus or main theme was imposed by the MA. It should however be noted that not all those who were autonomous in area selection were also autonomous in theme selection and vice versa. In fact this throws up one interesting but unexplained effect in that LAGs with no autonomy to select themes nevertheless had a high degree of autonomy in area selection.

This level of autonomy was generally viewed extremely positively by MAs and LAGs, as with areas most commonly the benefits identified lay in being able to fit the specificities of need and opportunity in the areas and a recognition of the importance of local needs and priorities being identified and defined locally.

Whilst a large proportion of LAGs were reported to have freedom of theme selection this was frequently within given parameters, i.e. as with areas this varied by degree. The primary parameters identified were the EU Regulation, then the specific RDP and then in some cases

regional implementation plans. On occasion the RDP or regional plan defined a role or set of measures for LEADER, most commonly axis 3 where LAGs were most effective and reserving other RDP elements for delivery by experts in those fields. (It should be noted that the restriction of LEADER to specific measures appears to represent a misinterpretation of the Regulation). Looking forward, it was suggested that future thematic priorities should lie within an overall framework of the economy, civic society and the environment and that these were appropriate in a multi-fund context.

The position is not black and white with LAGs which did not have autonomy in theme selection apparently having a degree of flexibility within the constraints and in the degree of definition of the themes. There was some scope to differentiate local strategies from the national strategy in some cases.

Amongst LAGs there was relatively widespread disappointment or in some cases strong criticism that aspects of theme selection were therefore (at least partly) outside the LAGs control with the requirement to fit within the RDP framework, an overarching central theme or range of measures. The LEADER Sub-Committee discussions also reflected this divide. In some cases this resulted in a need to reject local needs that did not fit previously identified thematic priorities. On the other hand for some this provided welcome and appropriate focus for the strategy whilst still allowing LAGs sufficient scope.

It appears that there is a balance to be struck between RDP fit and focus and the desire for a more flexible approach. Although such fit and focus is important in some cases the resultant narrowing of strategic choice compromises the integrity of the strategy and its wider relevance to the area. In one example it was noted that LAGs utilising axis 1 measures helped keep farmers engaged and delivered a more rounded LDS for rural communities. On the other hand a lack of focus is an issue in some cases with LAGs proposing broad strategies with vague and general themes e.g. with those who "wanted their themes in the LDS because there was no other option for them to get subsidies." This suggests a need for LAGs to be involved in the process of setting the level at which themes and priorities are set.

In some cases the complexity of the mix of the various Rural Development Regulation (RDR) and national regulations resulted in difficulties in agreeing a common MA/LAG position on their applicability to LEADER, this was particularly so for elements falling out with the direct RDP scope. In some cases regional RDP delivery plans varied by region and with this the autonomy of LAGs in their strategic focus. This lack of consistency caused considerable LAG frustration. The importance of joint MA and LAG participation is considerable in supporting the development of trust between the actors involved.

Post submission effects

In a number of cases LAGs had to modify their strategies post submission to ensure coherence either with the wider RDP or other relevant programmes. In other cases while LAGs were free to choose their focus, the MA's subsequent budget allocation differed from expectations and resulted in a change of focus. These issues both suggest a need for clearer guidance or better communication.

Where there was a lack of flexibility regarding strategic themes this could present problems during programme delivery. In some cases confusion had arisen when LAGs were given more

freedom to select topics mid programme. In others the lack of flexibility for the LAG to move budgets from one measure to another during the programme meant that focus could not be modified to reflect emerging needs, opportunities of performance. The inability to respond to the economic crisis which emerged post strategy approval was a frequent concern.

Strategic fit

LAGs were questioned regarding the existence of other local strategies and the fit of their LDS with these. Around 40% of LAGs replied that there was a pre-existing long term local development strategy for the area covered by the LAG (i.e. beyond the programming period), in 57% of cases no such strategy is reported. Responses were split evenly when asked whether the local development strategy only considers European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) supported actions. Although LEADER is thought to be fundamentally integrative a number of LAGs report demarcation difficulties when working with the requirements of multiple funds.

The main issue regarding autonomy appears not to be the absolute level of freedom to select strategic themes, rather it relates to the degree of flexibility afforded to LAGs to adapt these and their delivery to meet local needs and the LEADER methodology. In future this may include structuring the fit of multiple funds with local priorities, this will demand some flexibility. The need for a clearly structured framework which recognises the essential and necessary constraints (e.g. strategic fit) and sets relevant and appropriate parameters appears to be indicated here. Complementarity between funds will be fundamental in future LDS and should be designed into this in an integrated manner.

Clear, consistent and effectively communicated parameters and guidance appear to be important in helping LAGs set effective and practical strategic themes. There are indications of a need to strengthen the fit of strategies within the RDP and with other programmes e.g. through a common framework linked to the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and EU 2020. Whilst there is a need to avoid too narrow a focus at the same time there is a need to maintain focus and to avoid a general or catchall approach.

A focus within an axis contributes to critical mass but limits the strategic scope, community and sectoral engagement. The requirement to fit actions and budgets with specific measures has been a significant constraint in some cases, this appears to have been frequently misconstrued and needs explicit clarification.

5. DRIVING PRIORITIES

5.1. LOCAL PRIORITIES

In exploring the driving strategic priorities with LAGs it was clear that, as intended, local priorities are prominent with 73% of respondents indicating that the development of their LAGs strategy was either largely (53%) or totally (20%) driven by the development priorities of the area rather than by the financial considerations of a funding bid.

The needs focused basis of the strategy was thought very successful and reflected the effects of the LEADER method in the development of the strategy and its application. This tended to result in an increased responsiveness to local need with increased collaboration between local partners and a better fit between tools, resources and implementing bodies, partnership and delivery through local people. This reflects the conclusions in relation to autonomy of area and theme selection, the fact that the maturity of the LAG was a further success factor identified tends to reinforce this.

Where LAGs identified that their strategies were totally driven by local development priorities it was rare for the presence of a wider strategy to be identified. There was a high recognition of success but nevertheless some difficulties identified, e.g. in fitting the strategy with a lower than requested budgetary allocation or retro-fitting to RDP priorities. Similarly, where success in addressing local priorities was limited, the wider strategic fit and resource allocations were identified as the main limiting factors along with a reliance on consultants in strategy development.

When taken in conjunction with the findings on thematic autonomy, this suggests a need for greater and wider LAG awareness of and fit within the overall operational and contextual parameters. Whilst it might be suggested that this is primarily a LAG responsibility it also reinforces the need for clearer guidance for LAGs prior to strategy development to strengthen this awareness and for checking that this guidance has been received and understood. The difficulties acknowledged to have arisen over the misinterpretation of the requirement for alignment with RDP measures is a clear indication of this. This in turn could contribute to more effective expectation management and reality checking.

5.2. LEADER AS A DRIVER

Exploration of the extent to which LEADER was a driver for the LDS showed a considerable diversity of perspective and no strong trend was evident. Some suggested that the preparation of the strategy itself was the driving force for applying for LEADER, others said that the preparation of the strategy was a logical extension of overall trends in local development. In some cases the finance was the prime motivator, e.g. for involving multiple municipalities.

5.3. LAG STATUS

A small minority of LAGs, 12% said that their legal status or form of organisation affected the content of the strategy and its proposed actions. There was no consistent thread in the difficulties identified.

6. BASIS OF BUDGET ALLOCATION

6.1. INDICATIVE BUDGET

The questionnaire sought to explore the effects on strategies of LAGs being provided with an indicative budget as a guide in advance of strategy development. LAGs generally suggested either that such an indication had no effect, or that it had helped keep aims, objectives and expectations realistic and focused. MAs generally indicated that this had a positive effect on the quality, realism and prioritisation of strategies and avoided unrealistic or overambitious approaches. Unsurprisingly there is also some evidence to suggest that satisfaction with the indicative allocation process varies in proportion to its level.

Whilst some LAGs viewed this allocation negatively e.g. as a 'limitation of the development priorities of the area' in others the allocation or its nature actually increased scope e.g. the Swedish MA suggests that when LAGs realised they could access more funds by incorporating all Axes in to their strategies they did so, even if their original plan was to work only in axis 3.

The basis of indicative budget allocation also clearly had a bearing on its appropriateness e.g. where allocated on a per capita basis. i.e. it was not indicative but absolute and was not linked to the analysis or strategy. Benefits appear to be limited to administrative simplicity and reducing competition between LAGs with little benefit to strategy quality.

Although LAGs and MAs identify benefits arising from the indicative budget on the realism and prioritisation of strategies this must be balanced against the greater weighting this may place on financial considerations. It may result in prioritisation by what is financially expedient rather than what is indicated by the evidence. Where no indicative budget was provided, LAG strategies were more likely to be largely or totally needs driven. A number of LAGs report that their indicative allocation drove them away from high priority but high cost options towards 'low hanging fruit' where outputs and outcomes could be more readily achieved.

There were also cases reported where the indicative figure was provided too late in the process, was inexact or merely provided in the form of a ceiling for all LAGs, this limited the positive benefits such a guide could provide.

Whilst indicative budgetary allocations would therefore appear to be favoured by both LAGs and MAs as contributing positively to the quality and realism of strategies it is clear that the objectives, possible effects and timing of this have to be considered very carefully prior to being implemented.

6.2. BUDGET ALLOCATION

On the basis of the enquiries to LAGs the approach to budget allocation within the strategy appears to be rather unscientific and to lack strategic focus. It appears to be either largely

preordained, distributive or demand driven. Mention of needs, community or stakeholder consultation and SWOT analysis is limited to a minority of LAGs, the evidence for using intervention logic was very little. It appears that in some cases projected yield of outcomes from projects was perhaps also a driving factor in budgetary allocation. One respondent explained that "it was mostly guesswork". Where ever possible, objectives should have quantified indicators, this can include qualitative indicators as quantification of these is also possible.

Examples provided included an equal split between measures on a per capita basis or a geographical split, other examples include on the basis of "concrete project proposals", previous experience or programme or on the capacity of the LAG. One country which used a distributive per capita approach to funding allocation found that whilst this is easy it is neither strategic nor outcome focused. They would prefer to use a mechanism where LAGs competed against a standard and thus improve the LDS quality.

Debate in the 7th LEADER Sub-Committee split into two schools of thought on competitive processes the vast majority thought it good, a smaller group thought it bad. This then begged the question as to the basis on which budget should be allocated. The majority view was clearly that this should be linked to and based on the assessment of the quality of the strategy, either relatively between LAGs or against a common standard.

The need to align with national or regional budgetary priorities was a significant factor in budget allocation; examples were cited of axis 4 allocations reflecting the proportion of the National RDP Allocation per measure. The extent to which allocations were dependent on co-financing or intervention rates was limited.

Co-financing or intervention rate effects arose mainly in LAGs' implementation of their strategies and their choice of projects. In some cases this has limited the participation of some groups of potential beneficiaries e.g. the private sector. Match funding negotiations have played a significant part in setting the overall budget for some LAGs. Overall however LAGs appear to have anticipated difficulties and focused on the art of the possible.

Indicative budgets have had a number of positive effects on allocations within the strategy. However, overall it is the gross availability of match funding which is the main issue in overall budget setting, this issue is however somewhat more acute where there was no indicative budget. The greatest problem in this regard is where indicative or actual budgets were set with a lack of cognisance of the local absorption capacity and the way in which this linked to and reflects in local strategic priorities.

The lack of a scientific approach based on analysis with no intervention logic employed is the biggest issue identified, the evidence suggests a gap in any strategic rationale employed in the quantification of strategies and the allocation of resources within them.

7. STRATEGY SELECTION

7.1. LAG SELECTION CRITERIA

MAs were asked to provide the strategy selection criteria, and the responses remain rather disappointing. Further information and analysis is needed and this should be addressed in order to develop a meaningful typology which could provide guidance for MAs.

The principal discussion of this element took place through the Focus Group meeting in Lisbon and the findings from across the range of those involved were clear. The preparation and selection of LDS should involve an assessment of quality using clear and consistent criteria, possibly in the form of checklists. These should, in effect, represent a system to measure this quality. The selection process should be objective first and foremost and based on both quantitative and qualitative criteria, there should be a core set of common criteria.

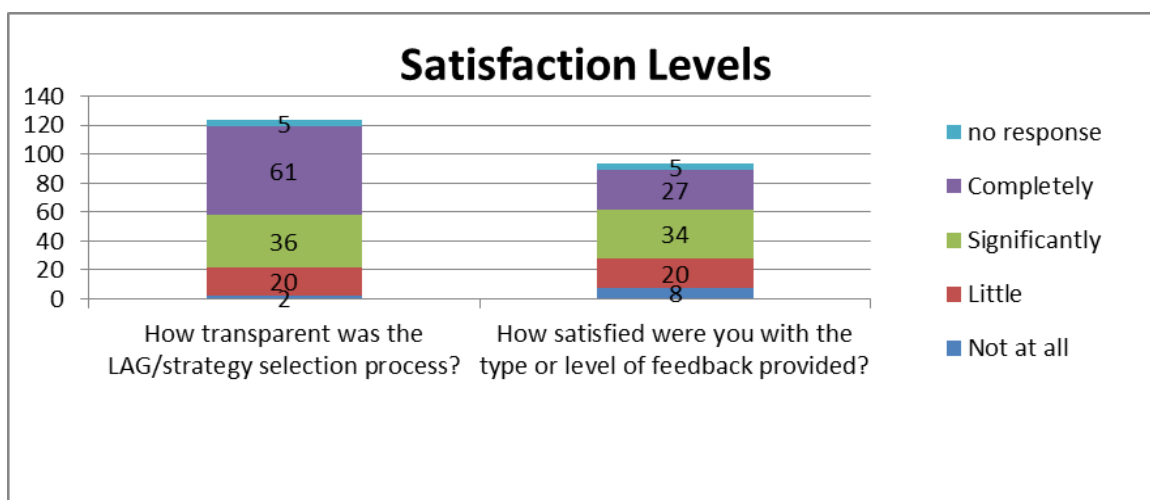
There was an acceptance that LAGs should compete for their resources but this need not necessarily be with one another. As with the discussion of budget allocation it was strongly suggested that LAG strategies should compete against a common LEADER standard rather than with each other, i.e. the competition is solely on grounds of the level of quality achieved.

From the Focus Group discussions it also appears that in some MS there may be some misinterpretation of EU competition rules and their applicability to the process of strategy selection. For example in one case a LAG Manager was not allowed to participate in the local strategy design at all due to the interpretation of the competition rules. Here it meant that all LAGs had to use external contractors thus constraining LAGs and quality of strategies.

7.2. SELECTION PROCESS

7.2.1. Overview

LAGs and MAs expressed a high degree of satisfaction (both over 80%) with the transparency of the strategy selection processes employed. LAGs had markedly less satisfaction with the feedback which they received (64%) than with the transparency of the process, the biggest difference being in the proportion of those who were completely satisfied. The MAs however identified few difficulties in this regard.



7.2.2. Transparency of Selection Process

The most common selection approach used was a committee or selection committee with varying degrees of stakeholder representation, some used a blend of regional and national input and expertise and in some cases the panel operated at regional level. In over 50% of cases MAs reported that this committee was solely comprised of those involved in the MA, PA and regional management. In three cases the MA led approach was advised by external consultants with expertise in the field. There were only five examples provided involving wider groups of stakeholders and including community representation, two MAs had used the Programme Monitoring Committee.

When asked for the basis or extent of the relevant knowledge and experience of the decision makers, several questionnaire responses referenced external experts or practitioners with experience with LEADER+ or a general familiarity with rural development. Other than this the majority of the experience identified however was at a programme management level with little on the ground experience cited.

There was no real consistency of selection approach identified, which involves a risk of an overly administratively focused approach to decision making and a deficit in informed practitioner involvement. This is considered to be an area where some guidance and training on the conduct of decision making and composition of such bodies would be beneficial, particularly in light of the local development provisions of the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and CSF Funds Regulation.

7.2.3. Quality of Feedback

This section should be read in the context of the sections on strategy submission. A significant qualitative difference was apparent amongst MA approaches to providing feedback split almost evenly between those who used generic or more administratively driven mediums such as circulars and postings on web pages and those who engaged in individual correspondence or dialogue on an on-going basis. The lower satisfaction rating for this from LAGs may well reflect this (although the samples did not directly correlate).

The range in feedback provision methods is remarkably stark ranging from "Notification of changes published on the web page of paying agency" to "On-going dialogue was key to this, in an open, fair and consistent manner. Bringing prospective LAGs together helped facilitate

joint learning and also allowed the MA to give a consistent message” or “We informed all the applicants who had failed in the first selection about the reasons and we gave recommendations how to improve. Every LAG got two chances and most of them used that.”

The most significant changes made to strategies as a result of the feedback given related to budget reductions caused by changes to financial allocation. In some cases the budgetary feedback was substantial enough to require a complete refocusing of the strategy. Adjustments were also made to geographic targeting, project selection criteria and LAG decision making procedures, where this was the case this was generally thought to have had negative effects on implementation due to lack of local knowledge.

The issues which emerge in relation to feedback appear mainly to link back to the clarity of the information provided before the strategies were submitted, i.e. the variance between the expectation and the feedback given. This links directly to the previous issues identified over clarity, quality, scope, timeliness of guidance and support.

There is a considerable lack of consistency of approach and a clear differentiation in the transparency and value of feedback provided. Iterative approaches aim to improve the quality of the strategies adding value to the process. This may be more resource heavy but clearly appears to be more consistent with the LEADER model and good practice in multi-level governance. This will need careful planning however as there are some indications from MAs that the peak in workload which arises with strategy submission can cause difficulties.

7.2.4. Community Validation of the Strategy

In the majority of cases the formal validation or endorsement of the strategy within the local community was considered in the selection process. The vast majority of survey responses considered this to be essential or significant, only three MAs did not.

LAGs appear generally to have taken active steps to validate their strategy with the local community although the extent, degree of formality and rigour varies considerably. Most commonly this involved open public meetings and endorsement through the LAG itself. The strongest examples involved a longer, more rigorously structured and more specific process of endorsement, with several opportunities to propose changes through public meetings, the internet and directly through LAG members.

Summary Points: Selection Process

There are a number of evident weaknesses in both the selection and feedback processes. In general terms, the structure of the decision making process and its transparency are relatively strong, but the lack of criteria makes it difficult to assess its basis. There are weaknesses in the composition of decision making panels, these appear to be unbalanced with a high proportion of administrative or programme management input but a lack of practical knowledge and experience. The adequacy of feedback is perceived to be weaker by its recipients than its providers; a high degree of variation was identified. This also highlights some of the weaknesses evident in the provision of guidance. Significant improvement levelling all up to the standards of the best is required if feedback is to be effective in improving strategies.

8. INVOLVEMENT AND METHODS

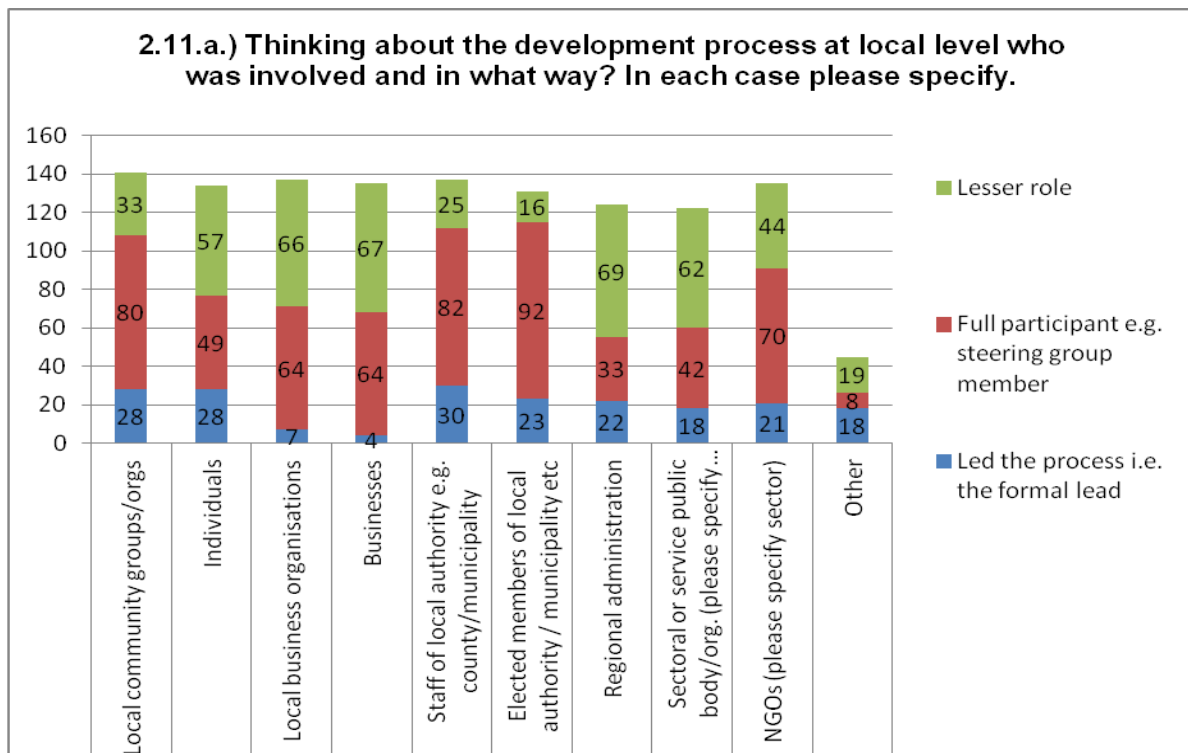
8.1. INPUTS

The overall breakdown of involvement in strategy development amongst LAGs is illustrated in the chart below. Local community groups, individuals and staff of local authorities were those actors most involved in taking the formal lead in the development process at the local level. Local businesses or business organisations were those least likely to be involved in this role.

Across all actor categories 'Full participation' is the broadest and most common form of involvement reported and is most strongly represented amongst local community groups, local authority staffs and elected local representatives. Those roles which could be considered higher level are also concentrated in these groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also played a strong role in the progress. With the exception of NGOs these actors were rarely said to have a 'lesser role'. Regional administrations, sectoral or service related public bodies and individuals were least frequently full participants.

In terms of the various actors main contribution to the process; the main contributions identified were time, skills and knowledge in that order of importance. Local community groups, local authorities, NGOs and individuals were most likely to provide these, including local knowledge and assistance with data collection. Local authority staffs were slightly more likely to contribute resources than other categories.

Local business involvement tended to be more limited, with several only attending consultation meetings, the main business contribution again was time. Business and local authority staff did contribute proportionately more in terms of skills than other groups.



This differentiation in people's involvement should be taken into account by LAGs in planning the development of the strategy, this includes considering who may contribute what, what their skills are, when they should be involved and what support needs this might present. In this context a LAG skills analysis can be a useful tool. For example, the involvement of an academic or research institution may be of great value in data gathering and analysis. One useful approach is to use a template in order to map who is involved and why, what skills are required and what is available? Ideally this could be conducted against a competence standard.

8.2. METHODS

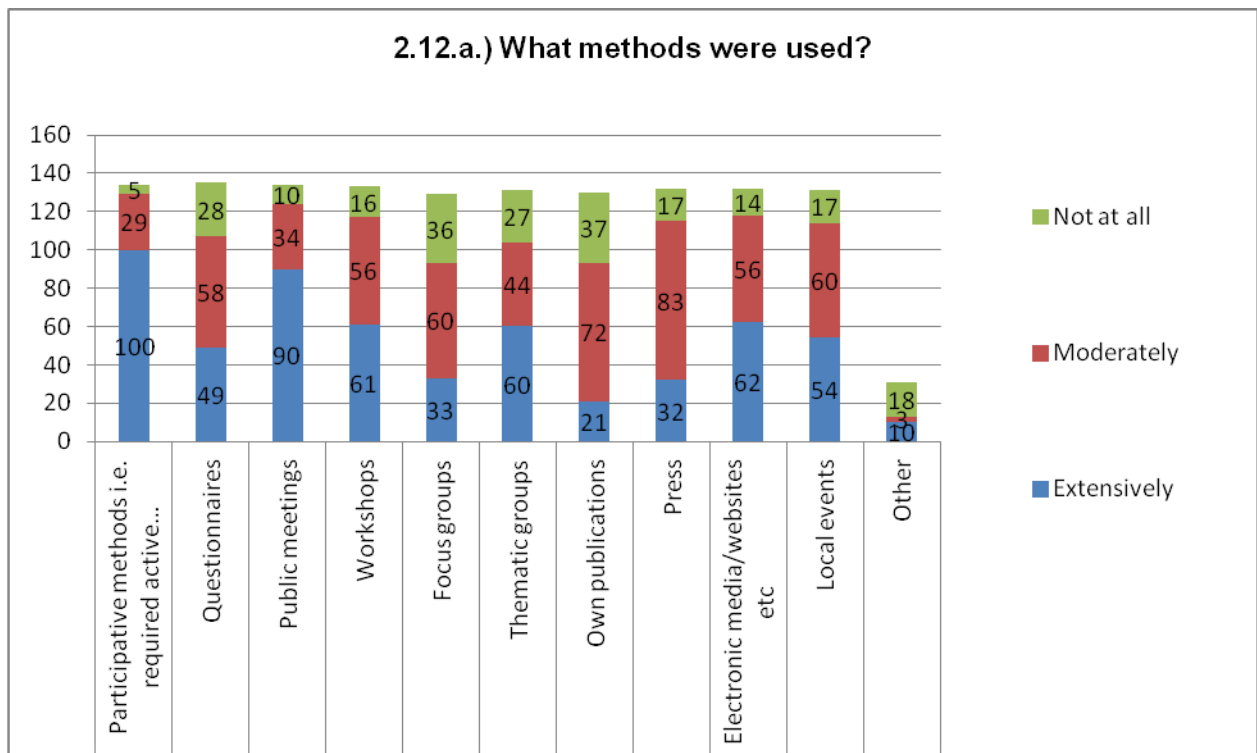
Mobilising the different types of stakeholder group is extremely important the Focus Group found and the use of innovative participatory techniques should therefore be encouraged. This is particularly so for securing business involvement but being able to offer benefits to the sector is also important if they are to be involved. The involvement of microbusinesses is a priority. The overall breakdown of LAG approaches is illustrated in the chart below.

In preparing their strategies LAGs made extensive use of participative approaches and public meetings. LAGs using methods such as local events, workshops, electronic and thematic groups were split between those who did so 'extensively' and 'moderately'. Focus groups, press and own publications were not used extensively but the most 'moderately'.

The success of participative methods was relatively highly rated (moderately successful to very successful). Their challenging nature and need for careful management was stressed e.g. to ensure adequate involvement and participation but it was noted that this was worthwhile.

Questionnaires were thought to be successful in information gathering, but are by definition passive and therefore tend not to be active in contributing to the LEADER process. These need careful targeting, implementation and design to avoid issues such as low response rates, these could include tailor made qualitative approaches.

The success of the different types of meetings presents more of a range. The more general type of meeting was thought to need careful management, e.g. as the risk of domination by a few loud voices was common. In some cases there could also be considerable apathy if the approach was too general. These meetings are therefore useful for information provision and developing or establishing networking and buy in but they can sometimes be limited in the scope of what can be done.



Workshops, thematic groups and focus groups were generally seen as more participative allowing for more and greater in-depth analysis and were thought to work well given a sufficiently strong focus. They are particularly good for refining the focus of the strategy. Less used overall focus groups presented more limitations but were highly rated for reflection and the testing of ideas. Themed groups were highly participative and particularly good for securing involvement and were especially useful in involving specialist local knowledge.

A wide range of facilitation methods were used, principally with LAG staff and members often involved and supported by other partners, there was limited use of specialist external support for this. This was resourced in various ways; voluntary contributions, the LAG’s administrative budget and local and regional authority contributions were all referenced. Others used exit strategy management costs from the LEADER+ programme. It was evident that LAG and LAG staff continuity and involvement is a critical factor in facilitating the process.

Electronic media, the press and publications were viewed as one way communication and met with mixed success. Limitations were identified regarding poor rural Information Technology (IT) speed, the volume of what could effectively be communicated and reach within the community. The use of events, although generally successful was thought to be resource heavy, where involvement could be connected to an existing event was thought that this worked well.

In terms of the relative success of the different methods employed, there are few obvious themes that can be drawn out. LAGs have employed a wide range of methods and tools often working on a trial and error basis. There is a need for guidance for LAGs to clarify what methods can and should be used, including e.g. building on resources such as the LEADER Tool-kit for LAGs. It is important to recognise that there is a difference between new and experienced LAGs, they have different guidance needs. New LAGs have a lot to learn from previous experience either directly from more experienced LAGs or from previous evaluations

etc. The effectiveness of the LEADER preparatory support provisions of the next programming period will be an important issue to be taken into consideration.

9. STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

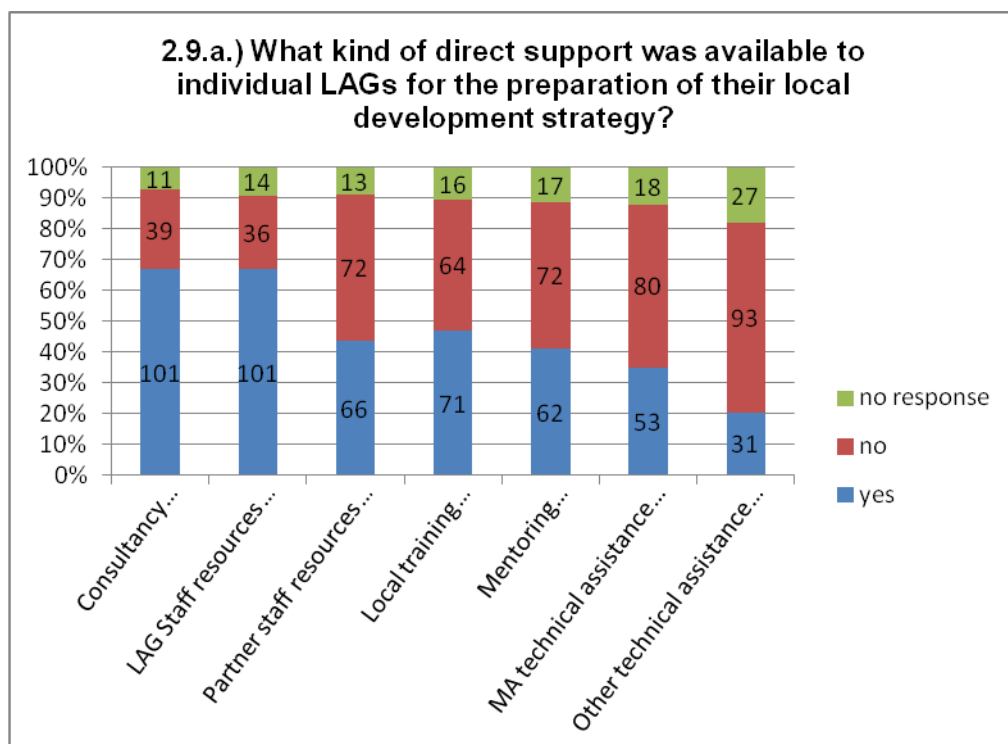
9.1. INTRODUCTION

There are three main elements of strategy development support which the Focus Group has been concentrating on in its work, these are: direct support, guidance and training. This chapter is divided into these sections and reflects the importance of each of these three different types of support. Elements of relevance to guidance and training arose in the consideration of other elements of the work; these are addressed in the relevant sections but where appropriate have also been taken into account here.

9.2. DIRECT SUPPORT

9.2.1. Type

LAGs and MAs considered six main types of direct support for the preparation of local development strategies which were commonly available to LAGs, their perspectives on the availability and use of support concurred almost exactly. In almost all cases LAGs employed a mix of different forms of support as illustrated in the following chart. The most common forms of direct support utilised were consultancy and LAG staff resources (over 60% of LAGs), followed by local training and partner staff. MA technical assistance was the only area where LAGs and MAs disagreed to any extent with MAs ranking this rather more highly. Although mentoring was identified by only 25% of MAs and 40% of LAGs, it is interesting to note that exchange of experience between LAGs was the most common answer given under 'other'.



9.2.2. Duration

The duration of support for LAGs for strategy development and submission varied greatly from one month to four years, with such a diverse range of time-frames indicated there are no clear patterns. Generally consultancy, LAG staff costs and MA technical assistance were available for the greatest period prior to submission.

The availability of consultancy support varied from two days to 18 months, LAG staff involvement from a single month to two years, (although commonly over three months), MA technical assistance was generally provided over a long period or even on a constant basis but also included some very short inputs of one to three months. Partner staff resources and local training were sometimes available for shorter periods of time than other support, although on occasion training was available for up to four years. Mentoring commonly took place over a longer time frame with periods of nine months and over being relatively commonplace. LAGs own initiative in instigating and driving such mentoring appears to be important.

9.2.3. Financial value

Limited data on financial values was provided but in general terms consultancy, subject to wide variation but with costs of up to €80 000 and LAG staff resources valued at up to €50 000 were the highest financial values of support reported. The highest financial value placed on any form of support was the input of LAG staff in Cyprus.

Training and mentoring represent two of the lowest financial values of support but are highly valued overall by LAGs, in this category further mention was made of peer consultancy which appears to be some form of LAG-to-LAG approach. These needs and approaches are not only appropriate to LAGs and MA capacity building could be considered³, with annual MA gatherings.

In some cases MAs had made funding for such support available to LAGs through the allocation of an LDS development budget which could be applied to these resources, MAs reporting this allowed LAGs up to €25 000. In one case it was highlighted that only the set-up costs of those LDSs which were finally approved were refunded, this presented a serious disincentive to some prospective LAGs. One respondent mentioned a LAG membership fee which contributed to covering running costs.

9.3. CONTINUITY AND MENTORING

The importance of continuity from the previous LEADER+ programme and the transfer of knowledge and skills between periods were almost universally highlighted but some difficulties were also evident in understanding what was possible and eligible for support. A number of MAs mentioned difficulties where LAGs faced a lack of financial support in the transitional period when they were also expected to draft strategies. There is a need for clear rules along with the effective guidelines and systems which will allow an effective process contributing to the preparation of better strategies.

³ Possibly drawing on the experience and model of the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET).

The on-going involvement of LAG, MA and partner staff resources and mentoring is an enormous resource and ensuring continuity in this appears to be of critical importance. Exchanges between LAGs of varying knowledge and experience were important in a significant number of cases. A structured and formalised mentoring approach was very successfully used in Sweden to roll out LEADER from 12 LAGs in 2000-2006, to 64 in 2007-2013. LAG Managers and Board members with massive experience from the previous programming period undertook the mentoring of the new generation of LAG managers. Some other LAGs described how regular consultation between them had addressed shortfalls in guidance from the Managing Authority or the Paying Agency (PA).

Although consultancy is the single largest element of support identified, it is clear that a wide range of support is made available and utilised in many different ways and that the availability and accessibility this is of fundamental importance in meeting the different needs and capabilities within the population of LAGs.

The transfer of knowledge and skills within the programme be that LAG-to-LAG, generation-to-generation, MA-to-LAG or MA-to-MA all appear to be effective approaches of high importance. The encouragement and further development of mentoring approaches is therefore of the highest priority. The encouragement of MA networks is also of high importance. Exchanges between MAs would help to strengthen and speed up transfer of good practices and define effective methods in order to develop common approaches and improve communications regarding LDS development and associated considerations.

9.4. GUIDANCE

The provision, availability, relevance and adequacy of strategy development guidance, instruction or some other form of direction for LAGs emerged as a high priority consideration in all stages of the Focus Group work. The analysis regarding this issue relates primarily to the category of general guidance, some of the more specific elements are identified here but are more fully discussed elsewhere in this report.

9.4.1. Provision

The provision of guidance to LAGs on strategy development is widespread, without exception the MA respondents indicated that LAGs in their programmes received such guidance, a fact acknowledged by the overwhelming majority of LAGs responding, almost 90%. Providers of such guidance included the MA, PA, regional authorities and the National Rural Networks. There therefore appears to be little if any gap in gross provision, the small number of LAGs reporting gaps appear more likely to reflect accessibility or communication difficulties.

There is a significant degree of variation in what guidance was provided, the extent to which this included strategy preparation and how this was done. There was a clear split between those MAs who provided relatively narrow direction or specification of principally a technical nature and those who provided wider and more comprehensive guidance on strategy preparation including content and method.

Wider approaches were more limited in number but often employed a variety of tools and approaches. Examples identified included specific application information events such as national, regional and local seminars, meetings and workshops for prospective LAGs, partners and experts, materials such as a LAG business plan templates, planning guides, strategy evaluation criteria and forms, in both hard copy and electronic formats. In some cases where multi stage approaches to LAG selection were employed these events and materials were differentiated by development stage.

There is also a striking degree of variation in the extent of prescription of methods and content by the MAs. LAGs understand that in some aspects (e.g. LDS content prescription) is essential but where this extends (e.g. into methodology or the content of the strategy) this was less welcome amongst LAGs. Striking the balance between avoiding over-prescription and meeting the variety of LAG capability, experience, autonomy and need is challenging.

There is an overall need to ensure that on-going training and updating for LAGs and their staffs is available. The balance between prescription and the diversity of LAG needs suggests that a greater degree of needs assessment is required in guidance design. Training and guidance should be needs based developed through dialogue with LAGs possibly with a common framework.

9.4.2. Content

Much of the guidance for detailed content and methods was provided through other forms of support for the strategy development process and is addressed in those sections of the report.

The main elements of guidance provided related to methodology and to any prescribed elements. Where the content was narrower this tended towards a more directive approach limited to e.g. RDP elements or strategic objectives, basic eligibility criteria and minimum LAG requirements. The most detailed specification included the eligible beneficiaries, population and settlement minima and maxima the structure of LDS, compulsory data, selection criteria and annexes required.

Guidance on strategy content and method were mentioned by a minority of respondents; where this was described it tended to take the form of practical guides or handbooks prepared by the MA or external experts. Where these are provided these should be clearly signposted. The most comprehensive example cited covered the creation of partnerships, identifying the optimum geography and population of the LAG area, developing the components of the LDS, administration and finance. The specific guidance on preparing the LDS covered identifying needs and opportunities, alignment with other strategies, setting LAG priorities, developing programmes of activity, setting targets, results and outputs, sustainability, and co-operation activity.

Two linked elements were identified which were thought vital for inclusion in the guidance at the start of the process. The first of these was a clear framework of the rules, regulations, process, timetable and opportunities available to LAGs including information on the financial or other support mechanisms available for strategy development, the available funding envelope and sources per LAG so that strategy proposals are financially realistic, the degree of LAG

autonomy including how subsidiarity will be implemented and the monitoring and evaluation requirements.

The second element identified is guidance on the strategy design process including detailing the key steps; this should form a common basis for LAGs. The Focus Group has identified some of the key components of this, but more work on this is required. Elements identified included: analysis of existing statistical data; key stakeholder identification; establishment of the key thematic subgroups to analyse social, economic, environmental data and key measures or priorities; and prioritising between the measures. This should be developed and made available as soon as is possible.

9.4.3. Emerging Issues

A range of issues emerge mainly over the completeness, clarity, complexity, quality and consistency of the guidance. LAGs highlighted difficulties which had arisen in its application to local strategy development in terms of the coherence with wider strategies or the hierarchy of strategies affecting the territory, specifically the RDP caused some difficulties. Gaps were also perceived in the knowledge base of some LAGs, there was a high dependency on local experts in some cases.

The completeness and quality of what was produced depends to an extent on the other forms of support and training provided, ideally this should be consistent; e.g. the examples which included templates, criteria etc. for the whole process. The Irish, Finnish, Hungarian and English respondents detailed the most comprehensive range of guidance and direction.

Good knowledge transfer is a key contributor to establishing an effective system of multi-level governance; this clearly implies an effective cascade of consistent information between the different levels in the chain. In terms of the initial package of guidance provided to LAGs this may be seen to be at best excellent and at worst poor and primarily administrative in approach. Guidance for intermediate bodies was thought necessary in some cases. This was most particularly so where they were inexperienced as they were limited in how much advice and guidance they could provide LAGs with.

A strengthening of a common methodology for the development and implementation of the LDS would strengthen consistency and make it easier to facilitate knowledge transfer. From the responses received it may be concluded that effective knowledge transfer is necessary for effective multi-level governance and that good quality guidance is an essential element in establishing this. The LEADER preparatory support may represent a key contribution to knowledge transfer. Within this there is a strong demand for proper and clearer communication of what is expected regarding evaluation from the outset, this should be accompanied by clear guidance.

Looking ahead, it is suggested that specific EU guidelines should be prepared for the post 2013 period specifically with regard to multi fund approaches in order that they may have greater clarity in defining their LDS, the rules which apply to the funds and their complementarity and clear definitions of the different types of areas⁴.

⁴ It is understood that other work is underway on this regarding the CSF .

There is clear demand for guidance which is supportive; there may be merit in developing a standard or framework of essentials which enables sufficient flexibility to allow local strategic priorities to be addressed. The feedback suggests that there is a real need to base the development of guidance on a LAG needs analysis. There should be iteration in the process of developing and delivering such guidance with a real focus on what the essentials are. The most important requirements in the form and delivery of such guidance are its timeliness, consistency, clarity and iteration.

This final point is very important; there was a clear demand for support which was responsive, repeated mention was made of the value of Frequently Asked Question or helpdesk approaches.

9.5. TRAINING

The diversity of programmes, the different types of stakeholders and the range and variation in knowledge and skills of those involved meant that collective training or briefing could be a challenge. There was no common level at which this was done, in some cases provision was solely on a national basis, in others on a regional basis, some nationally and regionally, some at LAG and regional level. In one case, Finland, the seminars were held locally, regionally and nationally. Training events or briefings were delivered by the MA or PA and to a lesser extent NRNs and cases consultants, 70% of MAs indicated they had made such training available and this was taken up by around 60% of LAGs.

Comprehensive programmes covering all aspects or stakeholder types were rare, the singular focus of training provision was a common complaint be that on the LEADER method, administration or otherwise. Training provision appears to have been concentrated in the start-up phase of the programmes with little on-going provision, this is identified as an issue by a number of LAGs. Tending to be either focused on the LEADER process and principles or, more frequently, on LAG administration, training was often perceived as theoretical or bureaucratic in nature. MAs confirm this; reporting the content of such training mainly included programme structure, objectives and LAG strategies, a proportion of these again appear to be largely administrative or prescriptive.

Training was not without its problems, effectiveness could be limited by a lack of local relevance, by late start dates e.g. resulting in such expenditure being deemed ineligible, in working with LAGs who are competing with each other or through gaps in programme development and coherence e.g. the connection between objectives, budget, indicators and monitoring system.

Other than formal training provision, a range of other approaches were employed described variously as 'information days' or 'information sessions'. These operated on an iterative basis allowing for dialogue and problem solving between LAGs, prospective LAGs and MAs across a range of issues and developing and agreeing solutions. In other cases networking, information exchange and mentoring were facilitated nationally or at regional levels. This sharing of information is particularly important for emerging LAGs and their staffs. As noted in the Focus Group discussions, continuity of mentoring of new and emerging LAGs and organisations is both highly effective and of the highest priority.

Markedly fewer examples were directly concerned with developing a local strategy. Some LAGs indicate that the training received was either too general or overly complicated, without adequate guidance on the strategy development process. Specific needs were therefore identified in relation to strategy preparation and for an on-going programme of training and updating for LAGs and their staffs.

The issue of the professional standards of the LAG members and LAG staff was discussed at some length in the Focus Group meeting in Lisbon, this will be further developed in phase 2. There was a strong perspective of the need to ensure professional management of the LAG and that this was important in strategy development. There are skills gaps in both new and existing LAGs, there are clear capacity development needs for this LDS development part of the process. One possible approach to this would be the establishment of a common vocational standard with an associated professional training programme, there is an issue over the variable content and quality of training currently provided.

Training provision should be addressed as a core element in LAGs LDS along with the overall level of competency. The 25% budgetary allowance for LAG management and animation provides an opportunity for a proportion, say 5% to be used for training and capacity building (maintaining the current level of 20% for other costs). Alternatively this could be specified as an obligatory element with a proportion of budget allocated.

Overall, it is evident, that there is a lack of consistency regarding this issue; both within and between programmes, there is no common standard applied. Around 30% of MA respondents provided no training, the others had very varied approaches, and these were variously tailored to local, regional or national needs or were largely administrative and basic. Knowledge transfer within programmes and within and between LAGs appears to be less well-structured than it might be, skills development is not sufficiently prioritised. These needs can be addressed through effective training and mentoring to build local development capacity. This is a significant issue for a programme predicated on the strategic priority of developing and employing human and social capitals.

9.6. USE OF CONSULTANTS

The use of consultants in strategy preparation appears to be common although the extent and nature of this varies considerably. Some 73% of LAGs report the use of consultants. When asked the extent of any consultant involvement in the development of strategies 34% of respondents indicated 'large' or 'total' involvement (although the total involvement response was very small). The largest group, 39% report a little involvement, some 22% of LAGs report no such involvement.

Consultant involvement in strategy development was largely in the fields of process design, training and undertaking consultations (including workshop facilitation and moderation) with lesser levels of technical inputs into strategy drafting or finalisation, reality checking, data analysis and interpretation.

With a few notable exceptions (such as a consultant leaving a partially completed strategy or lack of awareness of local needs limiting the usefulness of advice received), consultancy input was considered to have been relatively successful. Benefits identified included saving time, the availability of a dedicated resource, their impartiality and objectivity and their ability to bring

partners to the table. The importance of targeting and managing the involvement of consultants was highlighted.

Focus Group discussion regarding consultants concentrated on how they are managed and deployed. They are an important resource but need to be used carefully to achieve the best value. The fundamental principle identified is that LAGs need to assess their available human resources for strategy development and decide how to address any gaps or needs identified, consultancy is one possible solution, training and development of the existing team is another. Where there is a new challenge such as the proposed Common Strategic Framework external specialist expertise may be essential, e.g. in relation to working with new sectors such as fisheries.

No matter how competent the LAG or staff may be, there are occasions where it is important to take account of the truism that "nobody is a prophet on their own land", therefore outside expertise and objectivity may be needed e.g. to strengthen confidence or trust.

If a consultant is engaged then it is important to ensure that they serve the local communities in the preparation of LDS, it has to be clear that they are not the LEADERS of the process. Guidance may be valuable in helping LAGs to manage consultants' input to best advantage.

9.7. DIFFERENTIATION IN GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

9.7.1. Present Period

Whether there was any differentiation in the level of guidance and support between new and more experienced LAGs was explored with MAs and perhaps surprisingly this found that only six of the 22 respondents had made any such differentiation. The limited examples cited indicate some limited and additional support for 'non LEADER+' LAGs on the one hand or that more experienced LAGs required less funding and support during the development of their LDS than did new LAGs.

There were some examples provided where experienced LAGs actively mentored new LAGs, in some cases such as Sweden this was a formalised process.

This apparent lack of support for new LAGs is unlikely to be a substantial issue in future given the extent of LEADER coverage which has been achieved. The nature of LAGs may change in the new programming period and this may well represent more of a new challenge.

9.7.2. Future Transition

The implications for local development approaches, including LEADER of the emerging proposals for the Common Strategic Framework will present significant challenges to and demands on LAG guidance and support. It is suggested that the increased complexity of developing the institutional and operational framework for LDS in the new programming period must not be underestimated. There will not be any 'one-size-fits-all' solution.

The process must therefore start as soon as possible in order for territories to be defined and to allow time for LDS to be adequately developed, shaped and prioritised. A mechanism and financial support to enable this should be developed, available and communicated for the transitional period, this will be vital to avoid delays. As before, LAGs should be creative and

opportunistic in anticipating what is needed, in securing funding for strategy development, in considering all possible funding sources and in starting work towards their LDS.

Reference has already been made to the potential benefits of encouraging further networking and exchange between rural MAs. It is suggested that a network of MAs from the different Member States and representing different EU funds could be set up at EU level to help facilitate the wider implementation of the LDS development process.

A network of MAs responsible for LEADER across the EU could start this partnership building process building on the LEADER experience. A priority within this is to ensure that the 'presence' of and knowledge about LEADER be actively communicated with all organisations likely to be involved in the development of multi-fund LDS. This could also be reflected at Member State level where a group of the most involved actors could be set up to develop the detailed framework for multi-fund LDS development and ensure that established local development principles do not become diluted e.g. in national implementation procedures⁵. MAs must be able to develop a balanced and effective, manageable process that does not stifle the bottom-up approach.

⁵ Notwithstanding existing provisions.

10. MONITORING, TARGETING AND EVALUATION

This first phase of Focus Group 4 explored a variety of different aspects of monitoring, evaluation and targeting, mainly as a preliminary enquiry to inform their subsequent work but also to identify any strategy design considerations. This included whether guidelines were provided to LAGs, self-evaluation by LAGs, progress reporting and amendments to LAG strategies. Consideration was also given to the use made of evaluation findings.

10.1. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

Only 72% of respondents said that their LAG actively monitored its performance against the delivery of the strategy.

The feedback from those who do monitor performance revealed that there is a very high degree of variation in terms of what is done, who is involved and the frequency of such activity. Classification of what is being done is difficult. The most frequent responses given were that monitoring is carried out by LAG management on an on-going basis. This involved quarterly or six monthly progress reports submitted to the MA. Such on-going reviews were variously undertaken by a monitoring committee, LAG sub-group, board strategy meeting or regular staff reviews. Less frequently used methods included a seminar that meets once a year, a mid-term evaluation or regular community surveys. Some respondents explained that in-depth and participative project evaluation is not mainstreamed, there was a focus on brief quantitative reporting.

Overall 28% of those responding to the survey appear to be undertaking no active monitoring. Of the 72% of respondents who do monitor performance in excess of 25% appear to rely on an annual report, either conducted in house or externally. This appears to reflect the previously identified issues over the lack of monitoring and evaluation plans etc. In short over 50% of respondent LAGs either fail to report active monitoring or do so on a very limited basis. For those who do there is no common or consistent approach applied. For the remaining 50% there is no clear pattern or consistency of approach evident in the responses to date and there is a need to examine this further.

This overall deficit and lack of consistency presents risks of considerable fragmentation in measuring results and outcomes at an important time for demonstrating the benefits of local development approaches. For example evaluators, NRNs and others should be involved in better identifying and/or visiting EU level best practices in LDS and learning from evaluation experience, learning about alternative evaluation processes is a further important consideration.

Addressing this performance monitoring deficit therefore appears to be a priority area in planning for the next programme period notwithstanding the inclusion of evaluation as a core LAG task in the General Regulation specification. .

10.2. TARGETING

Some 66% of respondents indicate that the LAG does target, animate or promote actions in specific sectors or activities in support of strategic priorities. From the analysis it is clear that a high degree of informal monitoring does go on through LAG member and staff involvement in events and activities involving the local community and business sectors, active networking is a key contributor. What is less clear is evidence of clearly structured and planned approaches to informing such targeting activity.

A diverse range of approaches are applied split between the predominantly proactive and reactive. Proactive approaches to direct targeting or promotion include regional workshops, seminars, public meetings and training events, promotion through partner organisations, and targeted marketing to key sector stakeholders. More reactive approaches include local newspaper advertising, thematic application rounds, the circulation of a household information pack and regular updates on a programme website.

There is therefore a need to build monitoring and evaluation into the LDS process to improve strategic targeting and the setting of measureable and realistic targets.

10.3. PROGRESS REPORT SUBMISSION

The submission by the LAG of an annual progress report including monitoring indicators was required by the majority of MAs (circa 70%) but in only half of these cases did this annual report require MA approval. When asked to explain why annual reports do not require approval by the MA it appeared that some other form of MA control was applied but very limited further details were given.

A split in the way LAG reports were utilised in the Annual Progress Reports (APR) was also revealed. Some reports did not require the formal Common Monitoring and Evaluation framework (CMEF) indicators, these were compiled separately by the MA for the APR, others such as Finland use these reports to form the basis for compiling the APR.

A number of MAs identified other forms of annual review, e.g. in England annual reviews are conducted through face-to-face meetings with, in some cases then a direct bearing on the following year's budget. That continued funding be dependent on demonstrating the achievement of objectives was a view supported by a number of Focus Group members.

There is a lack of consistency evident regarding this issue. The limited information provided suggests that the reports prepared by LAGs could be used to greater effect locally and centrally in terms of monitoring the performance of the strategy and in informing the APR respectively.

10.4. STRATEGY REVISIONS

The overwhelming majority of LAGs are able to revise the LDS during the programming period, where the LAG was not able to revise the LDS there was no common trend. Explanations given focused on the LAG having chosen not to do so rather than revisions not being permitted although certain of the comments suggest that in some cases revision is

almost actively discouraged. Where revisions are possible there is a high degree of variation in their occurrence or frequency and the basis and scope of revision within this, little by way of common or standard approaches is evident.

Frequency of revisions ranged from 'only in rare circumstances' (Cyprus) through 'once a year' (Extremadura) to 'not defined' (Czech Republic) and 'at any time' in the case of Finland. There is a significant minority for who only single modifications are possible and these are often limited in scope or prescribed. Several respondents said there had yet to be any revisions.

The scope of revisions varies widely, overall 25% of MS report that financial adjustments took place; a similar proportion revised selection criteria and associated priorities. Specific mention was made of the difficulties in changing funding allocations, the restrictive nature of RDP alignment was again frequently mentioned in this context.

The following examples highlight this variation in scope; in Bavaria changes were limited to increasing or decreasing territory, in Hungary 'the revisions were total.' In Poland only the strategic goals cannot be modified, and modifications of indicators, redrafting of operational objectives and connecting operational objectives to financial plans have been obligatory reflecting operational experience. 'A lot of them (LAGs) change the criteria because at the beginning they drafted criteria (which were too general) insufficiently precise or detailed to select the best projects.'

It is therefore evident that there is considerable variation in the extent to which strategy revision is planned and programmed, this ranges from clearly structured approaches to the ad hoc. In some cases reviews are undertaken in partnership with the MA, in others by the LAG or MA alone.

The principal issue as elsewhere is the lack of consistency in approach, revisions appear to be mainly minor, no formal process of strategy review is mentioned. Whether representing cause or effect the lack of specification of such procedures in action plans presents some cause for concern.

10.5. EVALUATION

10.5.1. Overview

Evidence regarding evaluation is sparse at this stage, what was clearly evident however is that there is an enormous variation in approach between LAGs. For example when questioned regarding self-evaluation 49% of respondents said that LAGs were expected to undertake self-evaluation, 29% said they were not while 22% did not offer an answer. The majority of respondents who said that self-evaluation was not expected favoured more centralised approaches often using external consultants.

Substantial variation was also evident amongst the 49% expected to undertake self-evaluation, some respondents referred to an on-going self-evaluation process, others to an ex-ante and ex-post self-evaluation or the provision of an annual report. Another group of LAGs explained that self-evaluation was encouraged but was not mandatory.

Focus Group discussions focused on the need for clarification in this area and the deficiencies in the specification of both process and indicators. The findings were clear in that there is a

need for specific LEADER indicators and LAG criteria and that these should be specified by DG AGRI. There is scope for both common indicators and for LAG specific approaches, this should allow some of the specificities of LEADER to be addressed. There is however a need to be able to balance such specificity with the ability to aggregate these indicators at LAG, regional, national and EU levels.

A common suggestion was that there should be a common core of EU indicators, these could be structured in such a way as to allow them to be further developed at the local level to shed a more acute light on local effects. The illustration of local effects is important, local feedback is essential to the process and tools and approaches need to address this as part of the whole group of evaluation stakeholders.

10.5.2. Self-Evaluation

Typically LAGs consider that they were encouraged to undertake self-evaluation although this was not mandatory with the exception of the Czech Republic. The main approach favoured by MAs appeared to be to leave this to the discretion of the LAG. In a limited number of cases this was reported to be set out in the LAGs LDS. The need for external objectivity was highlighted however; self-evaluation is important but is not sufficient overall. Effective feedback is a critical element of the evaluation process and cycle.

Guidance on self-evaluation is often absent, over 60% of MA respondents indicated that they were unable to provide specific guidelines issued by the MA on monitoring and / or self-evaluation. MAs nevertheless expected a similar proportion of LAGs to undertake self-evaluation. There is a clear inconsistency and a significant gap in guidance and support to LAGs. There are clear risks of a fragmented and inconsistent approach with consequent downstream effects likely in terms of the adequacy and reliability of the approach within and between programmes.

The lack of consistency in approach is clearly illustrated by the following examples; self-evaluation is:

- "Somehow expected", but with no guidance and no control (except "how many projects have been realised" and "how much money is used").
- "I distinguish between performance of LAG / results of LEADER and effects of a singular project. Only for projects there are indicators, but even those are difficult to apply."
- "We do not feel that we are expected to undertake self-evaluation but we believe it is good practice to do so. We have asked the MA for guidance on undertaking self-evaluation but there is none, so we have developed our own approach."

This final quotation sums up the overall position which has emerged and highlights the inherent risks and the clear need for guidance and support in this critical element of developing and delivering quality LDS.

11. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter draws together the conclusions from the various elements and components of the work of the Focus Group. They have been prepared on a synthetic basis and do not directly reflect the structure of the foregoing thematic chapters. As noted in the introduction and throughout there is considerable 'read across' between elements reflecting the integrated nature of the LEADER process, the multi-level governance structure employed and the area based LDS which LAGs prepare. These conclusions focus on those factors contributing to the central objective of a development process which produces (and subsequently delivers) a high quality strategy.

11.1. MAKING A START

Start Early

This issue necessarily affects and involves both LAGs and MAs. There is a tendency to let the completeness of preparedness impede the initiation of the process. The priority for LAGs and MAs is to ensure sufficient time to prepare quality LDS. Some LAGs take pre-emptive action to start the process. There is a need to create and maintain local momentum, which is extremely valuable and should not be lost. Building capacity and systems takes time and resources. It is important to allow enough time for an effective process and to plan carefully.

It should not be assumed that all the parts have to be in place before the process starts: what is strictly necessary; what are the risks? It is important to keep an eye on the real objectives of the exercise. Administration is part of the means and should help enable the process, it is not the purpose.

Take Responsibility, Avoid Delays

An effective early start needs clear guidance and support. This needs to cascade and feedback through the multi-level governance tiers with effective communication from EC through MAs and organisations with delegated authority to LAGs to allow the maximum progress at each stage. The focus of this for MAs should be an enabling approach. Waiting to secure the last administrative detail, domestic legislation, regulations, may cause undue delays and have significant knock-on effects. Difficulties arise through a lack of foresight of operational realities and the bottlenecks and knock-on effects caused. Such delays compromise the LDS process, consultation and engagement, resulting in all actors working under unnecessary pressure.

LAGs need to take responsibility too, they need to anticipate, initiate, communicate, consult, engage and feedback. LAGs need to plan and take a progressive approach, they should not make unreasonable or uninformed assumptions in turn causing future delays.

In short there is a need to implement multi-level governance as soon as practically possible. Effective subsidiarity is required, planned with all stakeholders taking their responsibilities within the process and taking initiative. No stakeholder should wait to be 'spoon fed', each should seek to give others confidence and be confident.

Allow Enough Time

The time period or window allowed for strategy submission is much less important than that for LDS development. Realistically a minimum of six months is required for an effective local process leading to a high quality LDS, longer for new LAGs. The adequacy of the time allowed is affected by wide range of factors which have to be taken account of; not least the wide variation between LAGs, their development stage, extent of continuity and their capabilities. There is therefore a need to differentiate between LAGs, a one size fits all approach is unlikely to succeed.

In the coming programming period all LAGs will be facing changes, so it is important not to underestimate the time which will be needed. The adequacy of this time also depends on the timely availability of the required information and resources. There is a need to avoid 'time thieves' such as mentioned above. This applies LAGs as well as MAs. The key lesson for LAGs is to anticipate the need to act, act responsibly and communicate thereby extending the time frame for their actions.

Involve People

Mobilising the different types of stakeholder group and planning their involvement is extremely important to the LDS process. Who may contribute what, what their skills are, when they should be involved and what support needs this might present should be taken into account by LAGs in planning the development of the strategy. In this context a LAG skills analysis using a template to map who is involved and why, what skills are required and what is available can be a useful tool. Ideally this could be conducted against a competence standard.

Within this, the need for consultancy support should be assessed and employed only if there is a clear need, such support should be clearly targeted and actively managed. Consultants must understand that work for and are to be guided by the LAG.

A wide range of facilitation methods have been used, principally with LAG staff, partners and members with limited use of specialist external support for this. LAG and LAG staff continuity and involvement is a critical factor in facilitating the process.

The success of participative methods was highly rated but they are challenging and need careful management, e.g. to ensure adequate involvement and participation. This is considered worthwhile and innovative participatory techniques should therefore be encouraged.

Given these challenges and the variety and lack of consistency in approaches employed, LAGs would benefit from guidance on methods and their use, e.g. building on resources such as the LEADER Tool-kit for LAGs and other funds LDS guidance. New and experienced LAGs have different guidance needs, they can learn from previous experience from more experienced LAGs or from previous evaluations. In the coming programming period LEADER preparatory support will be important.

Continuity, Supporting and Resourcing Development

Starting the process early and involving people requires resources and this has been a problem in the past, a sustained approach is required. There are problems associated with both gaps and overlaps between programmes, e.g. with heavy resource demands from overlaps or the absence of resources when there is a gap. The primary consideration is not the cost but the value of the resources required.

How to secure and sustain the valuable capacity which has been developed in the staff, LAG, MA and elsewhere is one of the main recurring issues between generations of LEADER. Building capacity and systems takes time and resources. LAG staff resources are of particularly high importance here. This has been a major challenge for MAs in the start-up phase and it is important to avoid losses caused by gaps between programmes, continuity of the personnel involved is critical in the transitional phase. This is likely to be a bigger issue in the forthcoming transition and priority given to ensure staff and LAG member retention, securing the human capital and organisational memory. This also applies to MAs and other LEADER stakeholders, the importance of mentoring approaches is also important in this context.

LAGs and MAs should work together and plan how this should be managed, MAs should consider how to lighten the resourcing burden, LAGs how to innovate in developing, sustaining or securing resources. It is important to resolve any issues re financial support or eligibility which may compromise this, clarity is required at an early stage in EU legislation, RDP provisions and domestic enabling legislation.

Take Advantage of Mentoring

The value of mentoring is considerable and it is highly regarded, LEADER has a huge resource of people and experience. Commonly this has a focus on best practice and capacity building, which can strengthen and speed up processes and approaches within LAGs and MAs. Access to this is particularly important for new LAGs where there is a gap in terms of the provision of differentiated guidance and support. Used as a form of consultancy, this can be more appropriate than relying on contracted experts.

Mentoring can occur LAG-to-LAG, between LAG and MA and also MA-to-MA. Mentoring has a relatively low cost and high relevance, it provides a direct means of knowledge and skills transfer, within and between programmes and between generations. It may also be effective in strengthening multi-level governance to extend common understanding and complementary working practices. A sustained approach is needed and there is evidence of a successful formalised approach being supported and employed by LAGs and MAs working together.

Where a Member State promotes community-led local development throughout all CSF funds a group of the most involved actors in this country could develop the detailed framework for multi-fund LDS development and ensure that established local development principles do not become diluted.

Plan a Staged Approach

The development and submission of the LDS appears to commonly take place through multiple submission rounds and multi stage processes, formal and informal. This may involve an expression of interest phase or multiple application periods with feedback provided. There

is no single best approach; the important point is to employ a structure which allows for an effective process LDS development process.

This needs to allow time for a focus on quality. The LDS process should be treated like a LEADER project, i.e. it is looking for winners in supporting successful submissions and should avoid unfruitful work by both LAGs and MAs.

Using a formal expression of interest stage enables MAs to provide LAGs with feedback and guidance and supports the implementation of the local and multi-level partnership in the process. This can involve varying degrees of formality e.g. in the use of criteria and levels at which such pre-selection takes. The evidence suggests that, overall some form of iterative process is favoured with pre-screening of submissions which takes account of the varying stages of LAG development and maturity. Clear criteria are necessary and these should be in place from the outset.

11.2. GUIDANCE

Coordinate Within the Package

The provision, availability, relevance and adequacy of strategy development guidance for LAGs was a high priority consideration throughout and needs to be viewed in the context of the whole LDS development support package. There is a significant degree of variation in what guidance was provided, the extent to which this included strategy preparation and how this was done. Issues emerge mainly over the completeness, clarity, complexity, quality and consistency of the guidance and the deficiencies in differentiated provision for new LAGs.

Guidance must be developed as soon as possible in order for territories to be defined (where appropriate) and to allow time for LDS to be adequately developed, shaped and prioritised. This could be developed and provided in stages reflecting timing considerations.

Guide the LDS Method

Guidance for LAGs on strategy content and method is required. MAs either provided narrow guidance principally of a technical or administrative nature or, markedly less frequently, wider more comprehensive guidance on strategy content, method and preparation. A common methodology including detailing the key steps for the development and implementation of the LDS would strengthen consistency and facilitate knowledge transfer on the strategy design process. This should be developed and made available as soon as is possible.

The emerging Local Development proposals in the Common Strategic Framework and the increased complexity of developing the institutional and operational framework for LDS must not be underestimated. This will present significant LAG guidance and support needs. Specific EU guidelines should be prepared regarding multi-fund approaches.

A clear framework of the rules, regulations, process, timetable and opportunities available to LAGs, including how subsidiarity will be implemented, is required. Communicating this will be a key contributor to establishing an effective system of multi-level governance. There will not be any 'one-size-fits-all' solution.

There is clear demand for guidance which is supportive; responsive and needs based; balancing avoidance of over-prescription and meeting the variety of LAG capability, experience, autonomy and need. A greater degree of needs assessment is required in guidance design through dialogue with LAGs, there may be merit in developing a framework of essential elements with sufficient flexibility to enable local strategic priorities to be addressed.

Improve Standards Through Training

Skills gaps exist in both new and existing LAGs with clear capacity development needs regarding LDS development. Training has not addressed this to any significant degree being either too general or overly complicated but lacking adequate strategy development guidance. Addressing these needs is a priority.

LAG strategies seldom include training plans. Knowledge transfer within programmes and within and between LAGs appears to be less well-structured than it might be, skills development is not sufficiently prioritised. This is a serious issue for a programme predicated on the strategic priority of developing and employing human and social capitals. Training provision should be addressed as a core element in LAGs LDS along with the overall level of competency to be achieved as an obligatory element with a proportion of budget allocated.

There is a need to ensure the professional management of the LAG, this is also important in strategy development, delivery and review. An on-going programme of training and updating for LAGs and their staffs is suggested, possibly working to the establishment of a common vocational standard.

11.3. THE STRATEGY

Specify More Clearly

Greater clarity on what is being specified by MAs is required in order to understand this more fully. There is merit in considering specifying minima and maxima for strategy content, ensure cover elements in strategy and action plan. Many of the common elements are relatively straightforward and unchallenging, others need urgent attention.

- **SWOT Analysis**

Given the high importance of the territorial SWOT there is a need for this to be more targeted, comprehensive, analytical and integrative; especially when looking ahead to the possibility of a multi-fund scenario.

There are needs for improved definition e.g. in relation to the territory and for substantial improvements in quality, particularly in terms of the analysis.

- **LEADER Features**

Including the LEADER features in the LDS is important in reinforcing the process; these are assessed in the majority of programmes. The implementation of these features needs to be evidenced in practice, this requires clarity and consistency of implementation procedures of the LDS, the organisational structure of the LAG and the attendant responsibilities.

- **Local engagement and process**

The extent and process of local engagement is viewed as a highly important element of the LDS as this validates the strategy and is often an essential assessment criterion. This aspect of the LDS should be reinforced.

Improve Innovation

Innovation appeared to have relatively low priority but will have increased prominence in the new programming period. In some cases it has presented a barrier, e.g. in risk aversion, this clearly needs attention. The priority is therefore to develop a more common understanding of the principle - what it is, its value and how it contributes to development and growth and why it is part of LEADER. This common understanding must be shared amongst LAGs and between LAGs, MAs and PAs.

Strengthen the Intervention Logic

There are very significant weaknesses illustrated through four sets of factors relating to intervention logic, strategic fit, setting and quantifying objectives and targets and learning from experience.

There are inconsistencies with the high priority SWOT ranking, weaknesses in data analysis, low priority and identified difficulties for identifying and quantifying indicators, targets and SMART objectives etc. The apparent lack of knowledge and understanding of the importance of the issue in justification of overall approach and low priority evident gives considerable cause for concern. These concerns are reinforced by the evident weaknesses in evaluation and in learning from previous experience. There is a clear need for strengthening the intervention logic approach to improve the targeting, prioritisation, quantification and justification of the LDS. An urgent need for clarification and guidance is indicated and applies to both LAGs and MAs.

Plan Monitoring and Evaluation

The three linked elements of the LDS Monitoring System, the evaluation plan, and LDS revision procedure are all poorly represented in strategy and action plan specifications - even as separate additions. An LDS evaluation plan or monitoring system were the gaps MAs most frequently mentioned. This issue is therefore common to both LAGs and MAs. When considered along with the findings in relation to the essential elements of the strategy this gives considerable cause for concern. As evaluation is now specified as a LAG function the inclusion of monitoring and evaluation plans in strategies is a prerequisite. Specific training and guidance is likely to be required.

Prioritise Training in the Strategy

A training action plan was not considered essential by any MA, this is a key strategic priority for LEADER and as such, considered, a critical omission in an area of MA influence. Given the development capacity orientation of the LEADER approach, the importance placed on the knowledge and skills of the LAG staff, LAG members and other partners and the concerns over continuity between programmes and capacity retention this is a worrying finding and should be addressed as a priority.

11.4. AUTONOMY

Seek a Balance

Levels of autonomy are not defined as black or white with a range of shades of grey evident, there are degrees of flexibility evident within given parameters or constraints.

Overall it appears that LAGs were largely free and capable to select their areas and themes within given (LEADER) parameters and subject to some MA influence, e.g. re wider objectives, this was generally successful. Not all those LAGs which were autonomous in area selection were also autonomous in theme selection and vice versa.

LAGs and MAs agreed that local people were best able to define their areas; e.g. in terms of coherence economic, social and environmental issues. Where LAGs were able to build on peoples history of working together, this ultimately contributed to fewer tensions and challenges and easier decision making.

LAGs which did not have autonomy in theme selection frequently appear to have a degree of flexibility within the constraints and in the degree of definition of the themes. There was however some concern that aspects of theme selection were outside the LAGs control with the requirement to fit within the RDP framework. The balance to be struck between RDP fit and LAGs desire for a more flexible approach suggests a need for clearer guidance and for LAGs to be involved in the process of setting the level at which themes and priorities are set. The importance of joint MA and LAG participation is considerable in supporting the development of trust between the actors involved.

Overall it seems that the greater the degree of autonomy which can be enabled, then the better the fit with the needs, development potential and capabilities of the area concerned.

11.5. LOCAL PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIC FIT

Achieve Flexibility within the Parameters

The needs focused basis of the strategy was thought very successful demonstrating the LEADER method effects in the development of the strategy and its application. This reflects the degree of flexibility afforded to LAGs to adapt RDP and LEADER themes and their delivery to meet local needs and the LDS methodology.

In future this may demand further flexibility. Structuring the fit of multiple funds with local priorities, complementarity will be essential; this should be designed into the LDS in an integrated manner. Clear, consistent and effectively communicated parameters and guidance will be important in helping LAGs set effective and practical strategic themes which are appropriately focused. The basis of strategic links and complementarity should be defined. A clearly structured framework which recognises the essential and necessary constraints (e.g. strategic fit) and sets relevant and appropriate parameters appears to be indicated here.

Strengthening LAG awareness of, and fit within, the overall operational and contextual parameters should improve the quality of the LDS. Whilst it might be suggested that this is

primarily a LAG responsibility it also reinforces the need for clearer guidance for LAGs and checking that such guidance has been received and understood.

11.6. STRATEGY SELECTION

Use Objective Quality Criteria

The selection of the LDS should involve an objective assessment of its overall quality using clear and consistent criteria, possibly in the form of checklists. These should in effect represent a system to measure quality in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Provide Quality Feedback

The split in feedback provision methods is remarkably stark ranging between very basic presentation of information and real interaction and dialogue. Iterative approaches are clearly designed to improve the quality of the strategies adding value to the process. This may be more resource heavy but appears to be more consistent with the LEADER model and good practice in multi-level governance. Programming feedback mechanisms will need careful planning as there are some indications from MAs that the peak in workload which arises with strategy submission could cause real difficulties here.

Set Evidence Based Budgets

Indicative budgets have positives and negatives, mainly positives. The realism and prioritisation of strategies this informs must be balanced against the greater weighting it may place on financial considerations. This may result in prioritisation by what is financially expedient rather than what is indicated by the evidence. On balance indicative budgetary allocations are favoured by both LAGs and MAs as contributing positively to the quality and realism of strategies. It is clear that the objectives, possible effects and timing of this have to be considered very carefully prior to such an approach being implemented.

Approaches to budget allocation within the strategy generally appear to be rather unclear and to lack strategic focus. The evidence suggests a real gap in any strategic rationale employed in the quantification of strategies and the allocation of resources within them. The lack of a clear and systematic approach based on analysis connects with the issues that are apparent regarding the weaknesses in intervention logic i.e. little by way of intervention logic is evident and therefore justification for budgetary allocations is similarly weak.

Compete on Quality

Whilst there is some debate over the merits of competition between LAGs, opinion was quite unequivocal in that budget allocation should be linked to and based on the assessment of the quality of the strategy. A quality strategy should clearly identify the link between the territory, its population, area, needs and opportunities thereby addressing issues of proportionality. Competition should therefore take place either relatively between LAGs or against a common standard and thus prioritise the improvement of LDS quality overall.

11.7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Improving Performance

Evidence regarding evaluation is sparse at this stage. What was evident is that there is an enormous variation in approach between LAGs. Only 72% of LAGs actively monitored performance against the delivery of the strategy but over 50% of LAGs either fail to report active monitoring or do so on a very limited basis.

For those who do there is no common or consistent approach applied, there is a very high degree of variation in terms of what is done, who is involved and the frequency of such activity. No formal process of strategy review is mentioned. This appears to reflect the previously identified issues over the lack of monitoring and evaluation plans and there is a need to examine this further.

This overall deficit and lack of consistency is a cause for concern presenting risks of considerable fragmentation in measuring results and outcomes at an important time for demonstrating the benefits of local development approaches. Addressing this performance monitoring deficit therefore appears to be a priority area in planning for the next programme period building monitoring and evaluation into the LDS.

Clearer Direction

A common core of EU indicators could be structured in such a way as to allow them to be further developed at the local level to shed a more acute light on local effects. Local feedback is essential to the process. There is however a need to be able to balance such specificity with the ability to aggregate these indicators at LAG, regional, national and EU levels.

Typically LAGs consider that they were encouraged to undertake self-evaluation although this was not mandatory. Guidance on self-evaluation is often absent and some inconsistency evident. This is a significant gap in guidance and support to LAGs, a critical element of developing and delivering quality local development strategies.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Focus Group on better local development strategies, LAG Questionnaire

Annex 2: Focus Group on better local development strategies, MA/PA Questionnaire

Annex 3: LAG Questionnaire Findings

Annex 4: Managing Authority Questionnaire Findings

Annex 5: Discussion Summary on Better Local Development Strategies, 1st FG4 meeting, 18-19 October 2011, Lisbon, Portugal

Annex 6: Discussion Summary on Better Local Development Strategies, 7th LEADER Sub-Committee meeting, 23 November, 2011, Brussels, Belgium



Annex 1: LAG Questionnaire of Phase 1



Connecting Rural Europe

**LEADER Sub-Committee:
Focus Group on better local development strategies**

LAG Questionnaire

1. Basis for responses

Respondent's name				
LAG name				
e-mail address				
Role in relation to LEADER				
The title of the RDP(s) on which the responses below are based				
Please tick if you have consulted the MA and PA in completing this questionnaire?	MA	<input type="checkbox"/>	PA	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is this response on behalf of an individual LAG or a group of LAGs? Please tick.	Individual	<input type="checkbox"/>	Group	<input type="checkbox"/>
Where responding on behalf of a group of LAGs how many directly contributed to this?	Number	<input type="text"/>		

2. Elaboration of local development strategy

NB, all references to LAGs include both existing and prospective LAGs.

2.1.a.) Did LAGs receive guidance, instruction or any other form of direction relating to the elaboration of local development strategies?	yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	no	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.1.b.) If yes what did the main elements of this relate to e.g. content, method, prescribed elements etc? Please highlight what worked well and any perceived gaps.				

2.2.a.) At what stage in the programme period were LAGs asked to start their strategy development process? (please describe both the stage of programme development, RDP and LEADER and provide date)				
2.2.b.) What issues, if any, did this present?				
2.2.c.) Was there a single application period?	yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	no	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.3.d.) If no , what were the arrangements, why was this?				
2.2.e.) What was the period allowed for the development and submission of strategies?				
2.2.f.) To what extent was this adequate, were there any issues?				

2.3.a.) To what extent did the LAG have the autonomy to define their area ?	Not	Little	Largely	Totally
2.3.b.) To what extent has this been successful?	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

--

2.4.a.) Did the LAG have autonomy to choose their strategic themes?	yes		no	
2.4.b.) If no , was a focus/main theme imposed by the Managing Authority ? If yes go to 2.4.c, if no go to 2.4.d.	yes		no	
2.4.c.) If yes , To what extent has this been successful?				
2.4.d.) If no To what extent has this been successful?				

2.5.a.) Does the strategy only consider the EAFRD supported actions?	yes		no	
2.5.b.) Is there a pre-existing long term local development strategy for the area (beyond the programming period) adopted by the LAG?				
2.5.c.) To what extent was the development of the strategy driven by the development priorities of the area rather than by financial considerations as a bid for LAG funding?	Not	Little	Largely	Totally
2.5.d.) Why was this?				
2.5.e.) To what extent has this been successful?				

2.6.a.) Was an indicative budget figure provided??	yes		no	
2.6.b.) If yes , what effects did this have on the strategies and how they were prepared?				

2.7.a.) Please describe the basis on which resources were allocated within the strategy or action plan				
2.7.b.) To what extent was the focus or balance of resources in the LAG strategy affected by the levels of co-financing or intervention rates for specific measures?		None	Little	Significant
2.7.c.) Where this effect was significant please briefly explain.				

2.8.a.) Was any form of training or briefing provided for LAGs on a collective basis?	yes		no	
2.8.b.) If yes , what training/ briefing was provided and what did the main elements of this relate to e.g. content, method, prescribed elements etc? Please highlight what worked well or any perceived gaps.				

2.9 What kind of direct support was available to individual LAGs for the preparation of their local development strategy?				
Support	Yes	No	Duration/period prior to	Comments e.g. value,

			submission	source
Consultancy				
LAG staff costs				
Partner staff resources				
Local training				
Mentoring				
MA technical assistance				
Other technical assistance				
Other (specify)				

2.10.a.) What was the extent of any consultant involvement in the development of the strategies?	None	Little	Largely	Totally
2.10.b.) What form did this typically take? Why?				
2.10.c.) To what extent has this been successful? Why?				

2.11 Thinking about the development process at local level who was involved and in what way? In each case please specify.				
	Led the process i.e. the formal lead	Full participant e.g. steering group member	Lesser role	Main contribution. e.g. time, resources, skills etc.
Local community groups/orgs				
Individuals				
Local business organisations				
Businesses				
Staff of local authority e.g. county/municipality				
Elected members of local authority / municipality etc				
Regional administration				
Sectoral or service public body/org. (please specify sector)				
NGOs (please specify sector)				
Other (please specify)				
Other (please specify)				

2.12.a.) What methods were used?				
	A lot	Moderately	Not at all	Remarks e.g. how successful
Participative methods				

i.e. required active involvement				
Questionnaires				
Public meetings				
Workshops				
Focus groups				
Thematic groups				
Own publications				
Press				
Electronic media/websites etc				
Local events				
Other				
2.12.b.) How was this facilitated?				
2.12.c.) How was this resourced?				

2.13.a.) What actions were taken by the LAG to ensure that the strategy and the development process were formally endorsed or otherwise validated by the local community or LAG partnership?				
2.13.b.) What weighting was this given in the LAG/strategy selection process?	None	Little	Significant	Essential

3. Content of the Local Development Strategy

3.1.a.) Was a specific format, content and structure of LDS defined by the MA ?	yes		no	
---	-----	--	----	--

3.2.) Please indicate the elements which were to be included as part of the local development strategy indicating whether these were regarded as essential requirements or desirable elements?

Element	Remarks (including any aspects considered to be problematic or representing good practice)	Essential (i.e. formally assessed)	Desirable
Clear evidence of the LEADER features			
Evidence of the community engagement and consultation process			
Territorial SWOT analysis/analysis of needs			
- social analysis			
- economic analysis			
- environmental analysis			
- territorial analysis			
Area covered			
Intervention logic (Objectives and hierarchy of actions)			
SMART Objectives			
Quantified indicators and			

targets					
Demonstrate balance between the objectives (e.g. presence of rationale for a main theme and secondary themes)					
Integrated character of the strategy					
Interaction of LDS with regional and national rural development strategies					
Innovation as an objective or in character of strategy					
Cooperation with other rural territories: strategy or plan					
Networking proposals					
Lessons and achievements from the previous period					
Action planning	Please specify whether:	Essential (e.g. specified by MA)	Desirable	Part of strategy	Added separately
LAG structure/composition of partnership and organization					
A full implementation /action plan or specification of main actions (i.e. translating objectives into actions)					
Financial plan profiled over period					
Criteria for project selection					
LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures					
LAG functions and operational procedures					
LAG staffing, job specifications etc					
Training action plan					
Provision for interaction with other local/regional bodies					
LDS Monitoring system					
LDS evaluation plan	e.g. approach and tools (please attach any examples)				
Any LDS revision procedure					
Communication and information action plan					
Provisions for complementarity, demarcation and synergy with other programming instruments including EU funds in the case of multi-fund strategies					
Other?					

3.3.a.) Was there any element in the specified content which LAGs had difficulty in addressing e.g. through availability of relevant information or data?	yes		no	
3.3.b.) If yes , please describe				

3.4.a.) Was there element missing in the specified content which you feel would have been to the benefit of the quality of LAG strategy?	yes		no	
3.4.b.) If yes , please describe				
3.4.c.) Was there any requirement which was considered excessive?	yes		no	
3.4.d.) If yes , please describe explaining why so.				

3.5.a.) Did the legal status or form of organisation of the LAG present any challenges or limitations affecting the content of the strategy and its proposed actions?	yes		no	
3.3.b.) If yes , please describe				

4. Qualitative assessment of LDS by Managing Authorities

4.1.a. How transparent was the LAG/strategy selection process?	None	Little	Significantly	Completely
4.1.b.) How satisfied were you with the type or level of feedback provided?				
4.1.c.) Please briefly describe any significant changes made to your strategy as a result of the feedback or conditions applied.				

5. Implementation of local development strategies

5.1.a.) Does the LAG actively monitor its performance against the delivery of the strategy	yes		no	
5.1.b.) If yes , how is this done?				

5.2.a.) Does the LAG target, animate or promote actions in specific sectors or activities in support of strategic priorities?	yes		no	
5.2.b.) If yes , how is this done?				

5.3.a.) Are LAGs able to revise the LDS during the programming period?	yes		no	
5.3.b.) If yes , please describe the occurrence/frequency, basis and the scope of revision (e.g. formal review or MTE, adding priorities, amending priorities, modifying project selection criteria etc).				

5.3.c.) If no , please explain.
--

5.4.a.) Are LAGs expected to undertake self evaluation?	yes		no	
5.4.b.) If yes , please describe				
5.4.c.) If no , please explain e.g. are external consultants used?				

6. Any other points

6.1	Please add any other relevant points on the elaboration or implementation of LDS are considered to be sufficiently significant to be considered by Focus Group 4.

6.2	Please summarise the main problems (difficulties/bottlenecks) and solutions (good practice) you would like to bring to the attention of Focus Group 4 and the LEADER Sub-Committee to improve the quality of LDSs.



Annex 2: MA/PA Questionnaire of Phase 1



Connecting Rural Europe

**LEADER Sub-Committee:
Focus Group on better local development strategies**

MA/PA Questionnaire

2. Basis for responses

Respondent's name				
e-mail address				
Role in relation to LEADER Implementation				
RDP(s) on which the responses below are based				
Please tick if you have consulted the MA/PA?	MA		PA	

2. Elaboration of local development strategy

NB, all references to LAGs include both existing and prospective LAGs.

2.1.a.) Was there an open call for submissions from all rural areas?	yes		no	
2.1.b.) If no , were specific areas, priorities, organisations, or groups targeted?	yes		no	
2.1.c.) If yes , please explain the basis of any targeting:				

2.2.a.) Did LAGs receive guidance, instruction or any other form of direction relating to the elaboration of local development strategies?	yes		no	
2.2.b.) If yes what did the main elements of this relate to e.g. content, method, prescribed elements etc? Please provide (preferably by attaching) any relevant document.				

2.3.a.) At what stage in the programme period were LAGs asked to start their strategy development process? (please describe both the stage of programme development, RDP and LEADER and provide date)				
2.3.b.) What issues, if any, did this present?				
2.3.c.) Was there a single application period?	yes		no	
2.3.d.) If no , what were the arrangements, why was this?				
2.3.e.) What was the period allowed for the development and submission of strategies?				
2.3.f.) To what extent was this adequate, were there any issues?				

2.4.a.) Was there a formal expression of interest stage?	yes		no	
2.4.b.) If no , was there any other form of pre-selection? If yes go to 2.4.c	yes		no	

2.4.c.) If yes , what was the basis of the pre-selection?				
2.4.d.) To what extent was this based on strategic priorities?	Not	Little	Largely	Totally

2.5.a.) To what extent did the LAG have the autonomy to define their area ?	Not	Little	Largely	Totally
2.5.b.) Why was this?				
2.5.c.) To what extent has this been successful?				

2.6.a.) Did the LAG have autonomy to choose their strategic themes?	yes		no	
2.6.b.) If no , was a focus/main theme imposed by the Managing Authority ? If yes go to 2.6.c	yes		no	
2.6.c.) Why was this?				
2.6.d.) To what extent has this been successful?				

2.7 a.) Was an indicative budget figure provided??	yes		no	
2.7.b.) If yes , what effects did this have on the strategies and how they were prepared?				

2.8.a.) Was any form of training or briefing provided for LAGs on a collective basis?	yes		no	
2.8.b.) If yes , what and what did the main elements of this relate to e.g. content, method, prescribed elements etc? Please highlight what worked well or any perceived gaps.				

2.9.) What kind of direct support was available to individual LAGs for the preparation of their local development strategy?				
Support	Yes	No	Duration/period prior to submission	Comments e.g. value, source
Consultancy				
LAG staff costs				
Partner staff resources				
Local training				
Mentoring				
MA technical assistance				
Other technical assistance				
Other (specify)				

2.10.a.) Was there any differentiation in the level of guidance and support between new and more experienced LAGs?	yes		no	
2.10.b.) If yes , please describe.				

--

4. Content of the Local Development Strategy

3.1.a.) Was a specific format, content and structure of LDS defined by the MA ?	yes		no	
3.1.b.) If yes , please describe (please provide any relevant document preferably by attaching)				

3.2 Please indicate the elements which were to be included as part of the local development strategy indicating whether these were regarded as essential requirements or desirable elements?

Element	Remarks (including any aspects considered to be problematic or representing good practice)	Essential (i.e. formally assessed)	Desirable		
Clear evidence of the LEADER features					
Evidence of the community engagement and consultation process					
Territorial SWOT analysis/analysis of needs					
- social analysis					
- economic analysis					
- environmental analysis					
- territorial analysis					
Area covered					
Intervention logic (Objectives and hierarchy of actions)					
SMART Objectives					
Quantified indicators and targets					
Demonstrate balance between the objectives (e.g. presence of rationale for a main theme and secondary themes)					
Integrated character of the strategy					
Interaction of LDS with regional and national rural development strategies					
Innovation as an objective or in character of strategy					
Cooperation with other rural territories: strategy or plan					
Networking proposals					
Lessons and achievements from the previous period					
Action planning	Please specify	Essential	Desirable	Part of strategy	Added separately
LAG structure/composition of partnership and organization					
A full implementation					

/action plan or specification of main actions (i.e. translating objectives into actions)					
Financial plan profiled over period					
Criteria for project selection					
LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures					
LAG functions and operational procedures					
LAG staffing, job specifications etc					
Training action plan					
Provision for interaction with other local/regional bodies					
LDS Monitoring system					
LDS evaluation plan	e.g. approach and tools (please attach any examples)				
Any LDS revision procedure					
Communication and information action plan					
Provisions for complementarity, demarcation and synergy with other programming instruments including EU funds in the case of multi-fund strategies					
Other?					

3.3.a.) Was there element missing in the specified content which you feel would have been to the benefit of the quality of LAG strategies?	yes		no	
3.3.b.) If yes , please describe				
3.3.c.) Was there any requirement which was superfluous?	yes		no	
3.3.d.) If yes , please describe				

4. Qualitative assessment of LDS by Managing Authorities

4.1.a.) Did the assessment consider the process of strategy development including evidence of community and LAG endorsement or validation?	yes		no	
4.1.b.) What weighting was this given in the LAG/strategy selection process?	None	Little	Significant	Essential

4.2.a) Please provide the LAG selection criteria and the associated weighting factors. (please attach the relevant extract of the RDP or any other relevant document)	
Criteria	Weighting applied (high/medium/low)

4.2.b.) Who undertook the selection process?	4.2.c.) What was the basis or extent of their relevant knowledge and experience?

4.3.a. How transparent was the LAG/strategy selection process?	None	Little	Significantly	Completely
4.3.b.) Please briefly describe how you provided feedback to LAGs re the process and e.g. re any changes required or conditions applied.				

5. Implementation of local development strategies

5.1.a.) Are LAG's able to revise the LDS during the programming period?	yes		no	
5.1.b.) If yes , please describe the occurrence/frequency, basis and the scope of revision (e.g. formal review or MTE, adding priorities, amending priorities, modifying project selection criteria etc).				
5.1.c.) If no , please explain.				

5.2.a.) Are LAGs expected to undertake self evaluation?	yes		no	
5.2.b.) If yes , please describe				
5.2.c.) If no , please explain e.g. are external consultants used?				

5.3.a.) Can you provide specific guidelines on monitoring and/or self evaluation issued by the Managing Authority	yes		no	
5.3.b.) If yes , please attach (e.g. CZ, MT, PL, ES Navarra, ES Castilla and Leon, ES Rioja, ES Cantabria IT.)				

5.4.a.) Is an annual (or more frequent) progress report with (annual) monitoring indicators submitted to the MA?	yes		no	
5.4.b.) If yes , does the annual report require approval by the MA?				
5.4.c.) If no , please explain.				

--

6. Any other points

6.1 Please add any other relevant points on the elaboration or implementation of LDS are considered to be sufficiently significant to be considered by Focus Group 4.

--

6.2 Please summarise the main problems (difficulties/bottlenecks) and solutions (good practice) you would like to bring to the attention of Focus Group 4 and the LEADER Sub-Committee to improve the quality of LDSs.

--



Annex 3: Findings of Phase 1 LAG Questionnaire

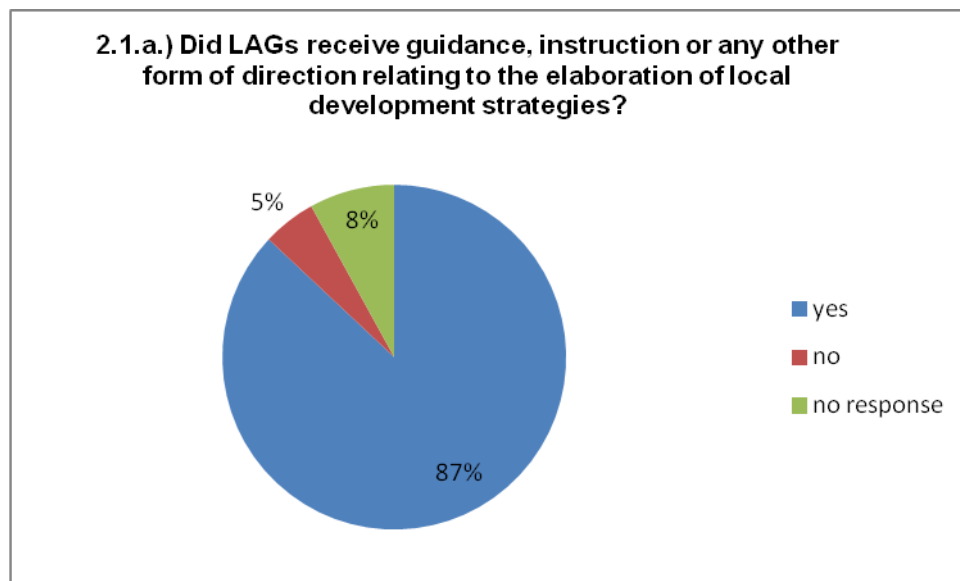


Connecting Rural Europe

1. LAG QUESTIONNAIRE - FINDINGS BY TOPIC

1.1 GUIDANCE

Respondents were asked whether LAGs received guidance, instruction or some other form of direction relating to the elaboration of their local development strategies, this was followed up with an exploration of the main elements of this, a number of respondent also commented on their adequacy. Specific questions regarding training for LAGs also informed this topic as this mainly focused on the preparatory stages and have therefore been incorporated here.



The analysis shows that the overwhelming majority of LAGs, almost 90% had received guidance, instruction or some other form of direction related to the elaboration of local development strategies. Where respondents reported that they had received no such guidance this was often at odds with other responses from those MS, this suggests that there was perhaps a problem in access or communication rather than no provision.

Providers of such guidance included the MA, PA, regional authorities and the National Rural Networks (NRN). The form of guidance provided or received varied from a simple proforma with guidance notes to specific events such as national, regional and local seminars for LAGs, partners and experts.

When asked what the main elements of this guidance related to, the most common response referred to guidance with regard to the methodology and to any prescribed elements. The guidance provided therefore varied from the predominantly legal and administrative to more comprehensive guidance and support including methodological support, training, events, publications, ongoing support and guidance. Within this there were varying degrees of prescription and satisfaction with that particularly when this affected the content of the strategy.

A range of issues emerge mainly over the clarity, complexity and consistency of the guidance. A number of LAGs raised issues over the scope, clarity, completeness and quality of guidance highlighting difficulties which had arisen in its application to local strategy development. LAGs report specific difficulties in terms of coherence with wider strategies or the hierarchy of

strategies affecting the territory, specifically the Rural Development Programme (RDP) caused some difficulties.

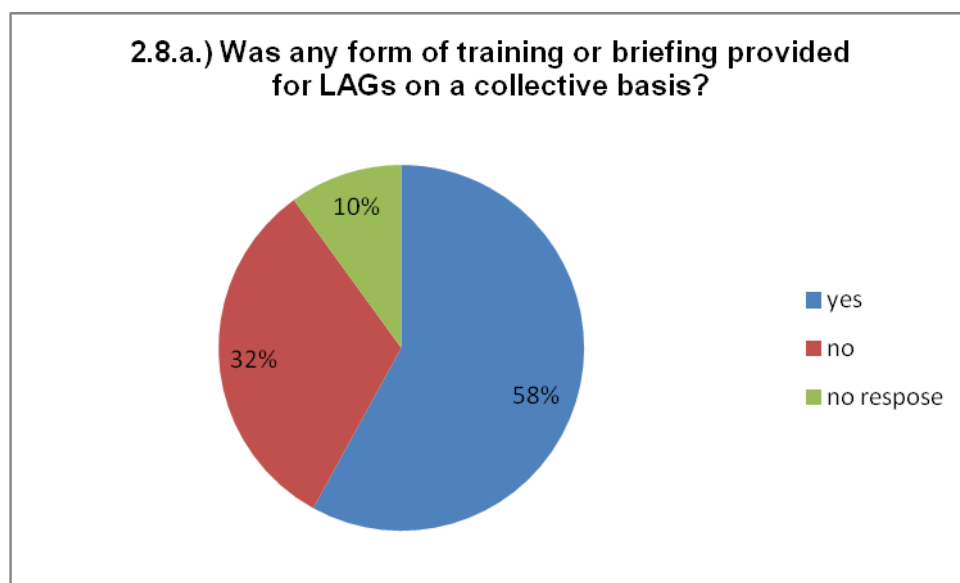
Some gaps were perceived both in the guidance provided and the knowledge base of the LAGs, high dependency on local experts in some cases.

There is a striking degree of variation in what is provided and how and in the level and extent of prescription. The main issues here are those of striking the balance between being overly prescriptive and yet being adequately comprehensive to satisfy the variety of LAG capability, experience, autonomy and need. There is an acceptance that in some aspects e.g. LDS content prescription is essential but issues arise where this extends e.g. into methodology.

There is clear demand for guidance which is supportive, ideally a framework which enables sufficient flexibility to allow local strategic priorities to be addressed. The most important requirements in the form and delivery of such guidance are its timeliness, consistency, clarity and iteration. This final point is particularly important, there was a clear demand for support which was responsive, with repeated mention of the value of FAQ approaches.

1.1.1. Training

The following chart shows that 58% of respondents reported that training or briefings were provided for LAGs on a collective basis. Once again this was provided by the MA, PA and NRNs (limited), in some cases it was also provided by consultants.



Most respondents who commented on the content of the training said that it was either focused on the LEADER process and principles or, frequently, on LAG administration. There was a tendency for these to be theoretical or bureaucratic in nature. There were markedly fewer examples directly concerned with developing a local strategy.

There were few examples cited of comprehensive programmes covering all aspects or stakeholder types, the singular focus of training provision was a common complaint be that on the LEADER method, administration or otherwise. Training provision appears to have been concentrated in the start-up phase of the programmes with little ongoing provision, this is identified as an issue by a number of LAGs.

Some felt that the training received was either too general or overly complicated, without adequate guidance on the strategy development process. "The whole LEADER approach was too new and difficult to understand" (NGO Hiiumaa Cooperation Network). There were clear needs identified therefore in relation to strategy preparation and a need for an ongoing programme of training and updating for LAGs and their staffs.

Others described how regular consultation between LAGs had addressed the shortfall in guidance from the managing or paying agency (Krtiske Poiplie Partnership). Exchanges between LAGs of varying knowledge and experience were important in a significant number of cases.

The diversity of programmes, the different types of stakeholders and the range and variation in knowledge and skills of those involved meant that collective training or briefing could be a challenge; as noted "The programmes of the German Länder are so different that it is hard to set up one training for all." (Regionalentwicklung Oberallgäu)

The feedback here suggests that there is a real need to base the development of guidance on a LAG needs analysis. There should be iteration in the process of developing and delivering such guidance with a real focus on what the essentials are. There may be merit in developing a standard or framework of essentials on which such approaches may be based.

1.2. STRATEGY PREPARATION

1.2.1. Overview

LAGs were asked to describe at what stage in the RDP programme period they were invited to start their strategy development process and what, if any issues this presented in strategy development and implementation?

Start dates varied considerably ranging from "towards the end of 2004" to "after award of contract in June 2010". By way of more typical examples, a German LAG commenced strategy development in December 2006, and several LAGs in Finland commenced in early 2005.

When discussing what issues this presented, time and resource pressures to allow adequate consultation, and confusion over funding conditions were mentioned numerous times, this was compounded by a lack of information. Strategy development work was on top of existing programme delivery, and several respondents referenced insufficient funds and significant delays in information provision, for example "LAGs from Košice Region didn't have enough information to process their Integrated Area Development Strategies (IADS) in quality sufficient for approving of their strategies. One of the biggest problems was the lack of funds for actors preparing IADSs."

Delays in information provision and challenges associated with timing were mentioned by several other respondents. This exacerbated difficulties associated with the complexity of achieving a fit with RDPs which caused difficulties in some MS. The time taken to finalise RDPs and accompanying domestic legislation caused severe delays in some cases. For example as an Estonian LAG respondent explained that "National documents (Regulations) were always late. The strategy needed to be submitted before guidelines from the Regulations were available. Necessary seminars were not available or were little [insufficient]."

The importance of continuity of LAGs and personnel between programme periods was stressed. Lengthy capacity building of new LAGs due to discontinuity from previous LEADER + was

commonly mentioned, while others said that long delays led some partners to conclude that LEADER was 'just promises'. A protracted development process "resulted in a perception that energy and enthusiasm in the LAG waned... This has resulted in less innovation and community development than would have been desirable." Others referenced a highly bureaucratic process involving the collection of obsolete documentation.

The core issue seems to have ultimately been where, for a variety of reasons LDS development started late, consequently it also finished later than intended with knock on effects in the LAGs becoming operational. This resulted in insufficient time to road-test strategies, amend or iron out difficulties before moving to implementation as result of compressed timescales and, in some cases their coming under (n+2) pressure to spend.

In a limited number of cases there are examples of LAGs who had gone ahead and done the basics which could be completed in advance of finalised approaches. This required a degree of maturity, autonomy and confidence on their part.

The central factors here appear to be the importance of getting the process under way as early as possible, being clear as to what really is absolutely essential before the process can start and then maintaining momentum and a degree of certainty and confidence in the process. There are of course issues over the resourcing of this.

1.2.2. Time Allowed for Strategy Development

The period of time for submission is not the issue, rather the period of time for development and the required information and resources to enable this. This is not a straightforward equation as different MAs applied different approaches, usually a call for submissions but the nature of these varied. Some had a short development and submission window, others a short submission window associated with a longer development period, some a period for reflection and adjustment post assessment

Around one third of respondents felt that the time allocated was adequate, whilst over 50% experienced some difficulties. The commonest occurrences of difficulties were faced by those where the period was 5 months or less.

The period allowed for the development and submission of strategies was typically three to six months but ranged considerably from one month to two years. Finnish respondents in particular alluded to an iterative process that involved feedback from the MA with strategies edited after submission. Most respondents felt that the time allowed was reasonable, although there were notable exceptions. In some cases where time allowed was shorter this reflected only the official window for submission.

Several respondents (including those from Greek and Czech LAGs) felt that the need for data collection and community consultation meant that a one month submission period was too short, while others (Coastal Action Zone Lincolnshire, UK) felt that a four month development period was also insufficient for community consultation. Others said that 8 months was insufficient for new LAGs to form (Krtiske Poiplie Partnership) while delays in formalising new partnerships and confused guidance from the MA was also mentioned by several other respondents.

The suitability of any given time depends on the extent of the preparedness of the areas and partnerships and good communication between the MA and both old and potential new LAGs is

essential to ensure that three months (as a minimum) is adequate to build a strategy. "It was adequate in that most LAGs had prepared some research and consultation materials for the application in the long hiatus between the end of LEADER + in 2005/6 and the formal call for applications". Other LAGs also reported having taken advance or preemptive steps ahead of official calls for submissions.

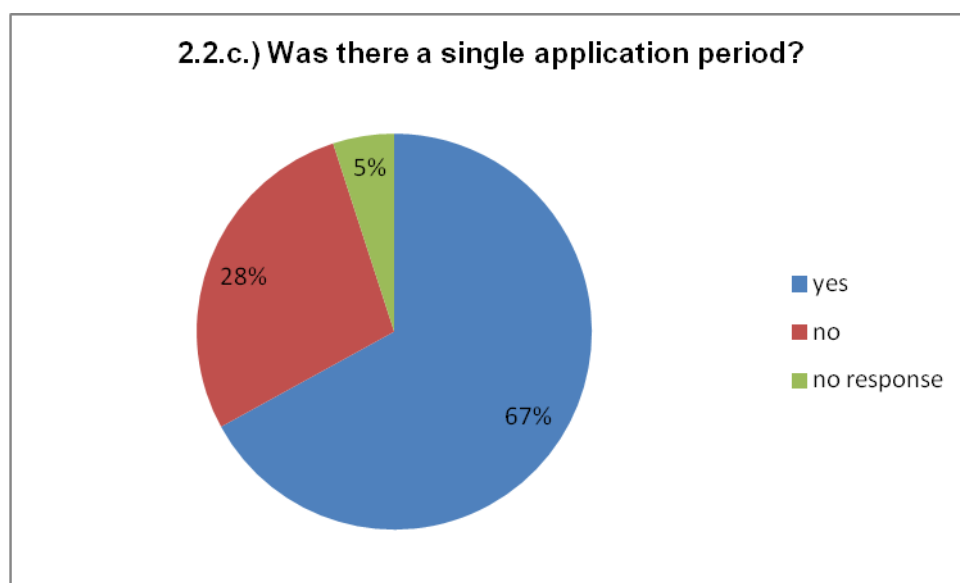
As noted earlier a number of LAGs indicate that they had got started with the LDS development groundwork in anticipation of the new programme. The fit of this with other elements and associated timing issues can be a critical limiting factor however, some of these seem to be extraneous or unnecessary and not necessarily relevant to the initiation of the strategy development process e.g. the election of new Ministers in some states or the technical or administrative issues with "unnecessary issues that affected our region in terms of determination of the NUTs III⁶ area and population."

Clearly the time required for strategy development varies considerably between LAGs and with their experience, the extent of continuity and their degree of autonomy. There is also an evident link between the knowledge, information, time and work required the quality, scope, accessibility and timeliness of any guidance and support provided/available.

From these questions flows the further question of whether one size fits all in the timing of strategy development and submission, is it better that consideration be given to a staggered or staged approach?

1.2.3. Strategy Submission

LAGs were asked about the number of application windows which were employed and, where there was more than one what the reasons for and effects of this were. This question was designed to enable consideration of the effects of the structuring of the strategy submission processes employed. Over two thirds of respondents replied that there was a single application period. This appears to have been the case in the majority of Member States, respondents identifying multiple application windows were concentrated in the UK (England), Denmark, Finland and some German Lander.



⁶ The Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics (NUTs) classification is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/nuts_nomenclature/introduction
Submitted to DG AGRI on 18/11/2011

Where more than one application period had been employed the most common reason given was simply that the MA had made a prior decision to hold two application rounds. Frequently the reasons for this related to the need to give newer LAGs time to develop and a desire to address a budget under-spend or target outcomes with identified priorities.

In other cases a focus on new territories emerged as a reason for more than one application round; "The MA and the Regional Council (co-financer) first wanted to aggregate and appoint territories non co-operating yet and then the already-organised ones".

Several respondents referred to rationalisation and the desire to avoid competition between LAGs in a single territory as a reason for a second stage in the application process. "Stage 1 expression of interest and any competitor bids asked to join together to develop one LDS (stage 2)" (England). Merging of municipalities in Denmark was the stated reason for a second window, while confusion over parallel financing was also given as a reason for a second call.

Some drivers for a single round were also identified; e.g. fear of limited budget availability.

The principal issue here is to decide what the objective of the process is, if this is to have a process which leads to the development of successful strategies then this suggests an approach which allows feedback, dialogue and iteration resulting in stronger alignment with local, regional and national priorities and a level playing field for all prospective LAGs.

1.2. ISSUES OF AUTONOMY

Two specific aspects of LAG autonomy with direct bearing on the definition of the strategy were explored; these were the definition of the LAG territory and the definition of the strategic themes.

1.2.4. Area Selection

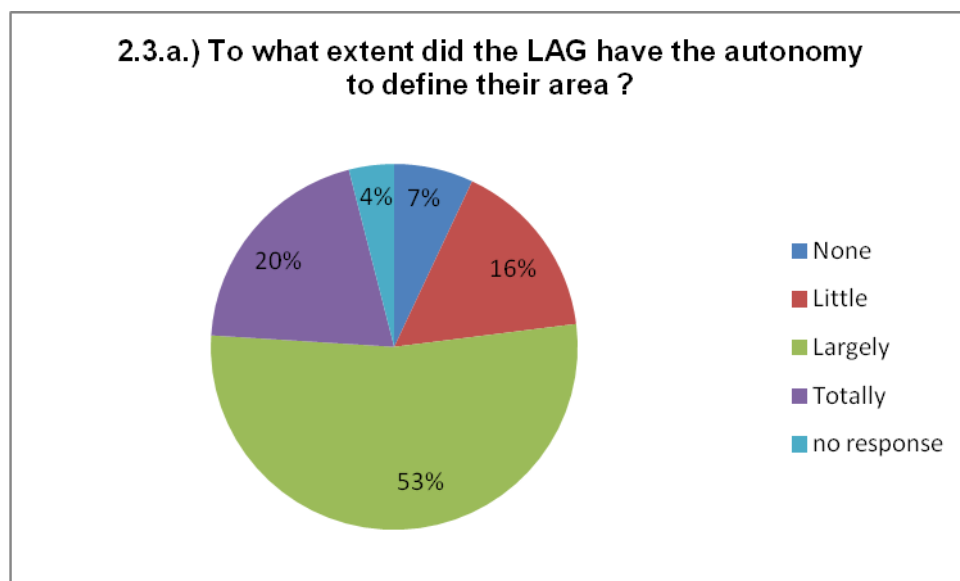
The questionnaire probed the extent to which LAGs had autonomy to define their area and then probed the effects of this from the perspective of how successful this had been. A majority of respondents, 53% replied that the LAG either totally or largely, 20% wholly so, Estonia, Slovakia, Sweden, Cyprus, some Finnish, Denmark and Sweden had scope to vary the area e.g. linking municipalities and 23% to little or no extent. Coherence of the area, natural fit and the ability to work across boundaries were factors welcomed by those with autonomy, fit with administrative boundaries had advantages too but appears less highly rated, there were more issues raised where LAGs had little autonomy in this area.

Some 77% of totally autonomous LAGs thought that this approach was very successful or better, largely autonomous LAGs predominantly reported that this was successful, of those with little autonomy however, almost half reported real problems. Of this final group it is mainly a group of 11 Greek LAGS who have any positive perspective as here it is reported it has helped avoid overlaps. Where there was no autonomy opinion on the success of this is evenly split, a group of Irish LAGs viewed this positively as it resolved any issues of territorial definition.

There were multiple benefits of local autonomy in area definition identified. The main elements of this were the local focus and coherence which was enabled and the effect of this on the composition of the partnership. This in turn drew on local people's identification and the knowledge of needs and what works, applying the knowledge to the territory and improving local targeting within the area. LAGs were able to build on peoples history of working together, this

resulted in fewer tensions and challenges and easier decision making, in some cases this did require some further elements of compatibility however.

Some cross boundary LAGs experienced compatibility difficulties, others reported steps taken to address this.



Several respondents commented on the benefits experienced through the amalgamation of previously separate municipalities, although area re-alignment led to delays in programme roll-out in some cases. "The LAG has been able to deliver projects across a landscape that has always been cut in three!". In other cases new relationships established reflecting common issues and concerns reinforcing coherence.

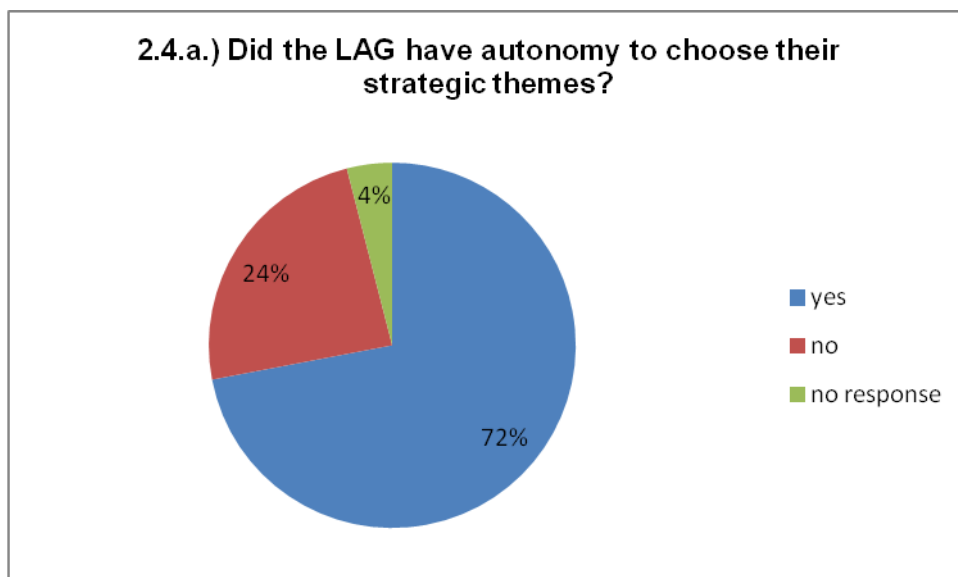
Amongst respondents who felt they did not have autonomy, frustration over the definition of rural and population criteria were mentioned and that "The principle of developing a plan for a "natural geographic region" was sacrificed on the altar of adhering to arbitrary administrative boundaries".

Although it is not always possible for there to be complete autonomy in area selection it appears to be important that the parameters employed make sense locally. It seems that the greater the degree of autonomy which can be enabled, then the better the fit with the needs, development potential and capabilities of the area concerned.

1.2.5. Theme Selection

Of those LAGs responding some 72% indicated that their LAG did have the autonomy to choose their own strategic themes. This autonomy was generally viewed extremely positively by the LAGs, most commonly the benefits identified lay in being able to fit the specificities of need and opportunity in their area.

Even within this group there were some constraints however, and there was relatively widespread disappointment that in many cases aspects of theme selection were at least partly outside the LAGs control. Overall the most common frustration appears to be with the requirement to fit within the RDP framework, an overarching central theme or range of Measures made available to select from. In some cases this resulted in a need to reject local needs that did not fit previously identified thematic priorities.



The following quotes represent some of the concerns expressed; "The LAG was able to choose their strategic themes only according to the RDP - in many cases they cannot choose the themes that are important and needful for the development of the LAG's areas". Similar comments were made by several respondents and this appears to have had a limiting effect on innovation in particular.

"The LAGs had certain autonomy, but it was somehow limited by the main theme and the rules and regulations imposed by the national RDP or MA, so there was not enough space for introducing novel ideas due to the risk of rejection of the application".

"The MA was not prepared for, and didn't have enough competence to fully adapt to and accept the innovative aspects of LEADER".

Amongst those who said the LAG did not have autonomy in theme selection opinion was split quite evenly. There appears to have been a degree of variation in the flexibility applied within these constraints and in the degree of definition of the themes. Several respondents explained that there was some scope to differentiate their local strategies from the national strategy, but amongst those others said there was not. For some this provided welcome and appropriate focus whilst still allowing sufficient scope, others felt it to be more of a constraint. Typically the restriction was the choice of measures imposed by the MA or regional body. Examples also arose within regions where imposed themes did not fit all LAGs due to sub-regional differentiation.

This lack of flexibility presented problems during the programmes delivery, e.g. confusion had arisen when LAGs were given more freedom to select topics mid programme. The lack of flexibility for the LAG to move budgets from one measure to another during the programme resulted in some sectors being unable to access funds while other sectors are unable to utilise existing funds. For example, "however again no opportunity was given to broaden these to include elements of axis 1 and 2 that could be delivered effectively by the LAG".

The level of consistency between levels of autonomy for themes and areas throws up one interesting effect in that LAGS with no autonomy to select themes nevertheless had a high degree of autonomy in area selection.

1.2.6. Strategic fit

The questionnaire probed the existence of other local strategies and the fit of the LEADER LDS with these. Around 40% of LAGs replied that there was a pre-existing long term local development strategy for the area adopted by the LAG (i.e. beyond the programming period), in 57% of cases it appears that there was no such strategy.

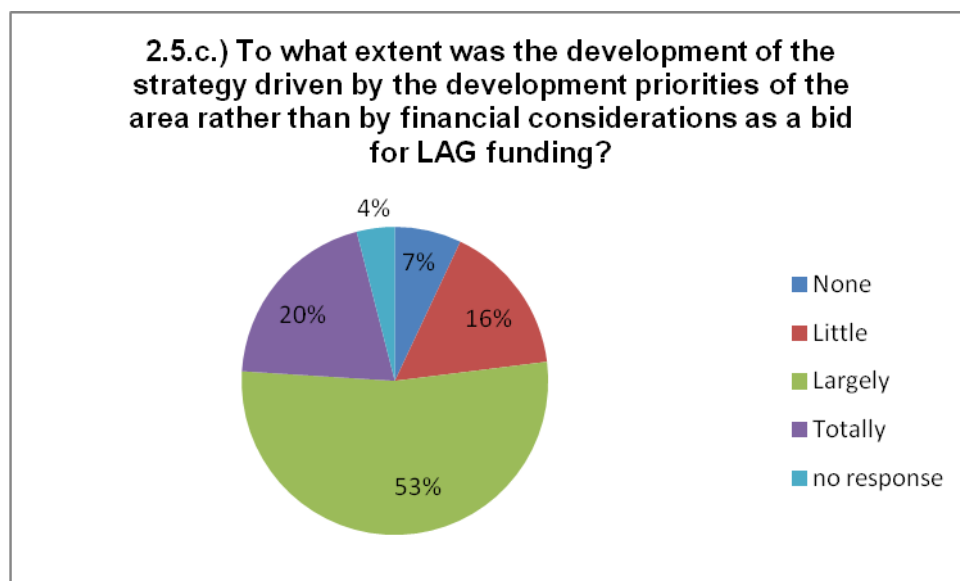
Responses were split evenly when asked whether the local development strategy only considers EAFRD supported actions. Interestingly there was considerable diversity within countries, for example 7 of the 14 Finnish respondents who answered the question said that there was a long term local development strategy and 7 said not.

The main issue regarding autonomy here appears not to be the absolute level of freedom to select strategic themes, rather it relates to the degree of flexibility afforded to LAGs to adapt these and their delivery to meet local needs and the LEADER methodology. The need for a clearly structured framework which recognises the necessary constraints (e.g. strategic fit) and sets relevant and appropriate parameters appears to be indicated here.

1.3. DRIVING PRIORITIES

1.3.1. Local Priorities

Local priorities are clearly a significant driver in the LDS with 73% of respondents indicating that the development of their LAGs strategy was either largely (53%) or totally (20%) driven by the development priorities of the area rather than by the financial considerations of a funding bid. Of the remaining 23% some 16% said it was only driven to a little extent and 7% said not at all suggesting that financial bidding concerns were higher here.



The most common view overall amongst respondents was that the needs focused basis of the strategy was very successful and reflected the effects of the LEADER method in the development of the strategy and its application. This tended to result in an increased responsiveness to local need with increased collaboration between local partners and a better fit between tools, resources and implementing bodies, partnership and delivery through local people, the maturity of the LAG was a further success factor identified here.

Where LAGs identified that their strategies were totally driven by local development priorities it is rare for the presence of a wider strategy to be identified and the focus on the locally specific

need appears somewhat stronger. Here there was a high recognition of success but nevertheless some difficulties identified, e.g. in fitting the strategy with a lower than requested budgetary allocation or retro-fitting to RDP priorities. This appears to suggest a need for clearer guidance for these LAGs prior to the commencement of strategy development to strengthen their awareness of the wider context along with some means of checking that this guidance has been received and understood needed. In this group there seems to be a need for greater expectation management and reality checking to ensure sufficient awareness of and fit within the overall operational and contextual parameters.

Recurring reasons given for limited success in addressing local priorities included the current wider economic climate, reliance on consultants in strategy development and some cases where funded projects have succeeded but other projects that the LAG wanted to support did not fit identified priorities and could not be funded. A mismatch between the level of funding awarded to LAGs and the levels of need identified was a further limiting factor on the success here. Again this suggests clearer guidance and expectation management is required.

1.3.2. LEADER as a Driver

Several LAGs said that the strategy itself was the driving force for applying for LEADER (e.g. GAL Pays Marie-Galante), while others said that the preparation of the strategy was a logical extension of overall trends in local development. Others explained that the LAG covers more than one administrative region, each with their own long term territorial strategy. In some cases the finance was the prime motivator, e.g. for involving multiple municipalities.

The diversity and polarity of responses is reflected in the following two examples; "Majority of local authorities were interested in creating of a LAG just to have possibility to reach funds of EAFRD." "The LAG developed the wider strategy for the region, so there is the harmony between the wider strategy and LEADER strategy".

1.3.3. Indicative Budget

The questionnaire sought to explore the effects on strategies of LAGs being provided with an indicative budget as a guide in advance of strategy development. Some 58% of LAG respondents said that an indicative available budget figure was provided, while 32% said it was not. When those who said that an indicative budget was provided were asked what influence this had had on strategy development, the most common response was either that it had no effect, or that it had helped keep aims, objectives and expectations realistic and focused. Whilst this was mainly viewed positively in providing a guide for others it apparently represented a real constraint "Of course we limited our ideas to financial possibilities not for real needs" or 'the indicative budget figure resulted in limitation of the development priorities of the area'.

There is some evidence that satisfaction with this varies in proportion to the level of budgetary allocation. Although generally the indicative figure helps with prioritization of actions within the strategy it can also result in prioritization by what is financially expedient rather than what is indicated by the evidence, e.g. "This made us not to give priority to the most financial demanding areas to concentrate and accomplish more in less demanding areas". A number of LAGs report that their indicative allocation drove them away from high priority but high cost options towards 'low hanging fruit' where outputs and outcomes could be more readily achieved.

There were also cases reported where the indicative figure was provided too late in the process, was inexact or merely provided in the form of a ceiling for all LAGs, this limited the positive benefits such a guide could provide.

The basis on which the indicative budget was allocated also clearly had a bearing on its appropriateness, there were examples where budget was allocated solely on a per capita basis. i.e. it was not indicative but absolute and not linked to the analysis or the strategy. The benefits of this appear to be limited to administrative simplicity and reducing competition between LAGs, it appears unlikely to benefit strategy quality.

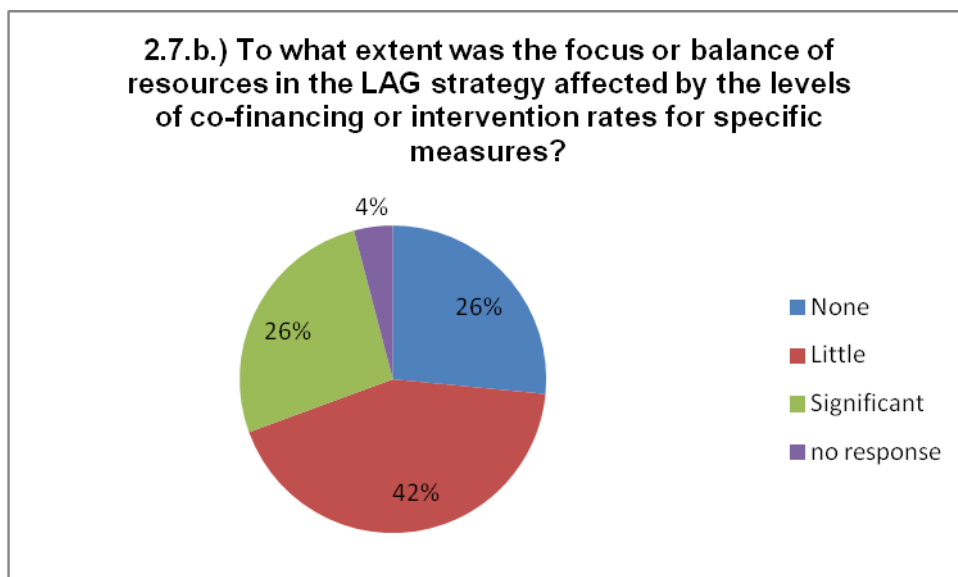
1.4. BASIS OF BUDGET ALLOCATION

The approach to budget allocation within the strategy appears to be rather unscientific and to lack strategic focus, it appears to be either largely preordained, distributive or demand driven. There is some limited mention of needs, consultation and SWOT analysis (stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) but these are a minority, little by way of intervention logic is evident.

Some respondents described an equal split between measures, others described a budget allocation calculated on a per capita basis or a geographical split, other examples include on the basis of "concrete project proposals", previous experience or on the capacity of the LAG. While several indicated that budget allocation was based on community consultation, the more common responses was that allocation was based on the need to align with national or regional priorities; "The allocation per measure under axis 4 was determined by reflecting the proportion of the National RDP Allocation per Measure". The extent to which allocations were dependent on co-financing or intervention rates was limited.

Where no indicative budget was provided LAGs strategies were more likely to be largely or totally needs driven. Where an indicative budget was provided it appears that this may have conditioned prioritization to some extent. Circa 20% of LAGs were driven by other given preconditions. It appears that projected yield of outcomes from projects was perhaps also a driving factor in budgetary allocation.

The effects of co-financing or intervention rates were explored, where LAGs reported that this had affected their strategy these effects had arisen mainly in the implementation of strategies and the choice of projects. These LAGs appear to have anticipated difficulties here and this focused them on the art of the possible. In some cases this has limited the participation of some groups of potential beneficiaries e.g. the private sector.



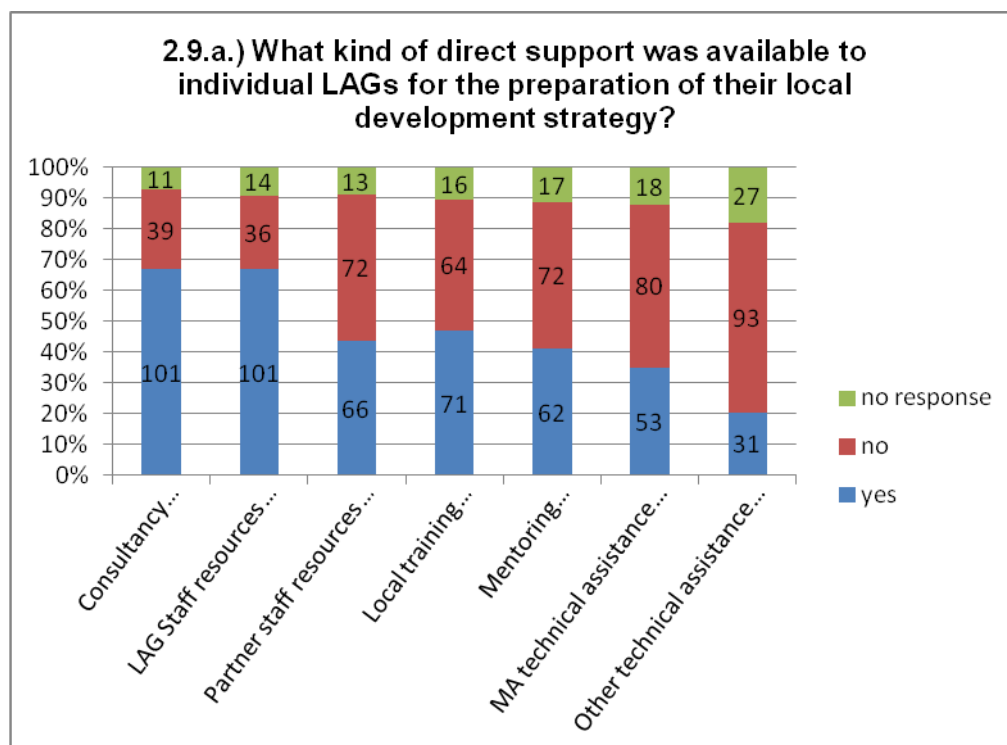
Others referenced the importance of match funding negotiations in setting the overall budget, the fact that the budget was set on previous programme expenditure, that funding levels were focused on business development that could not be funded in previous programmes, or that a relative budgetary priority was set for each LDS objective (but with no explanation of how priorities were actually set). One respondent explained that 'it was mostly guesswork'.

Indicative budgets have a number of positive effects on allocations within the strategy however overall it is the gross availability of match funding which is the main issue in budget setting, this issue is somewhat more acute where there was no indicative budget. The greatest problem in this regard is where indicative or actual budgets were set with the lack of cognisance of the local absorption capacity and the way in which this linked to and reflects in local strategic priorities.

1.5. STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

1.5.1. Type and Value

The questionnaire identified six main categories of direct support which were commonly available to individual LAGs for the preparation of their local development strategy. Whilst almost all LAGs employed a mix of different forms of support the responses indicate that the most common kind of direct support was 'consultancy' and 'LAG staff resources' (over 60% replying yes to each), followed by 'local training' and 'partner staff'. 'Mentoring' and 'MA technical assistance' were the least common kinds of direct support, while 'Exchange of experience between LAGs' was the most common answer given under 'other'.



The duration of support for LAGs for strategy development and submission varied greatly from one month to four years (assumed to be ongoing LAG support), with such a diverse range of time-frames indicated there are no clear patterns.

The availability of consultancy support varied from two days to 18 months, LAG staff involvement from a single month to 2 years, (although commonly over three months) whilst MA technical assistance was generally provided over a long period or even on a constant basis but also including some very short inputs of one to three months, On some occasions 'partner staff resource' and 'local training' were available for shorter periods of time than other types of support, although on occasion training was available for up to 4 years. Mentoring commonly took place over a longer time frame with periods of 9 months and over being relatively commonplace. LAGs own initiative in instigating and driving this appears to be important here.

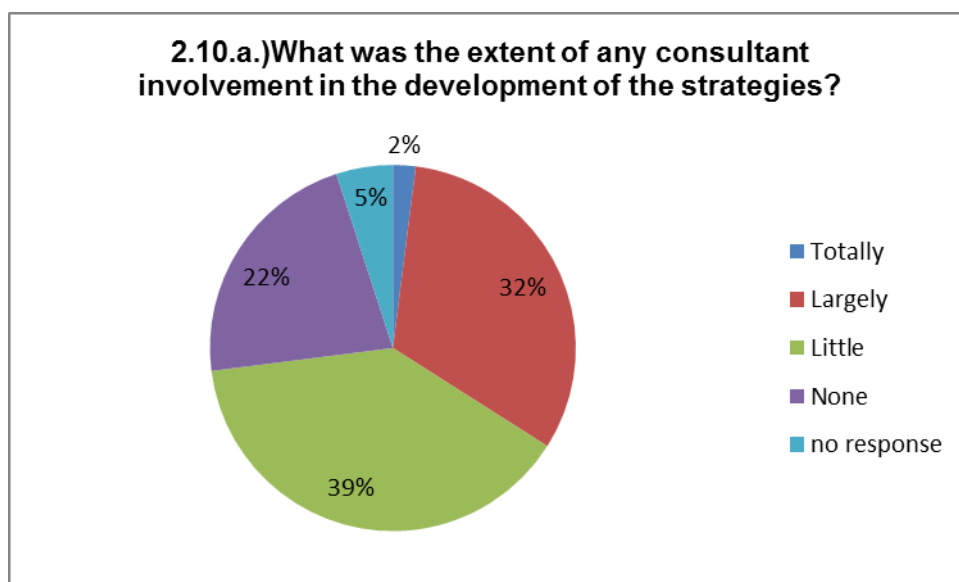
Consultancy, valued at up to EUR 80,000 (although subject to wide variation) and LAG staff resources valued at up to EUR 50,000 appear to be the highest financial values of support received. Training and mentoring represent two of the lowest financial values of support but are highly valued overall by LAGs, in this category further mention was made of peer consultancy which appears to be some form of LAG-to-LAG approach.

In discussing the use of LAG staff resources reference was frequently made to the importance of continuity from the previous LEADER + programme and considerable stress was placed on the value of this continuity and the transfer of knowledge and skills between periods.

The availability and accessibility of a range of support appears to be important here in meeting the different needs within the population of LAGs and addressing their capabilities. The transfer of knowledge and skills within the programme be that LAG-to-LAG, generation to generation or MA to LAG all appear to be effective approaches of high importance.

1.5.2. Use of Consultants

The use of consultants in strategy preparation appears to be common although the extent of this varies considerably. Some 73% of LAGs report the use of consultants however when asked the extent of any consultant involvement in the development of strategies some 34% of respondents indicated 'large' or 'total' involvement (although the total involvement response was very small). The largest group, 39% report a little involvement. Some 22% of LAGs report no such involvement, interestingly in Finland only two of the 21 respondents indicated that they had received any consultant involvement.



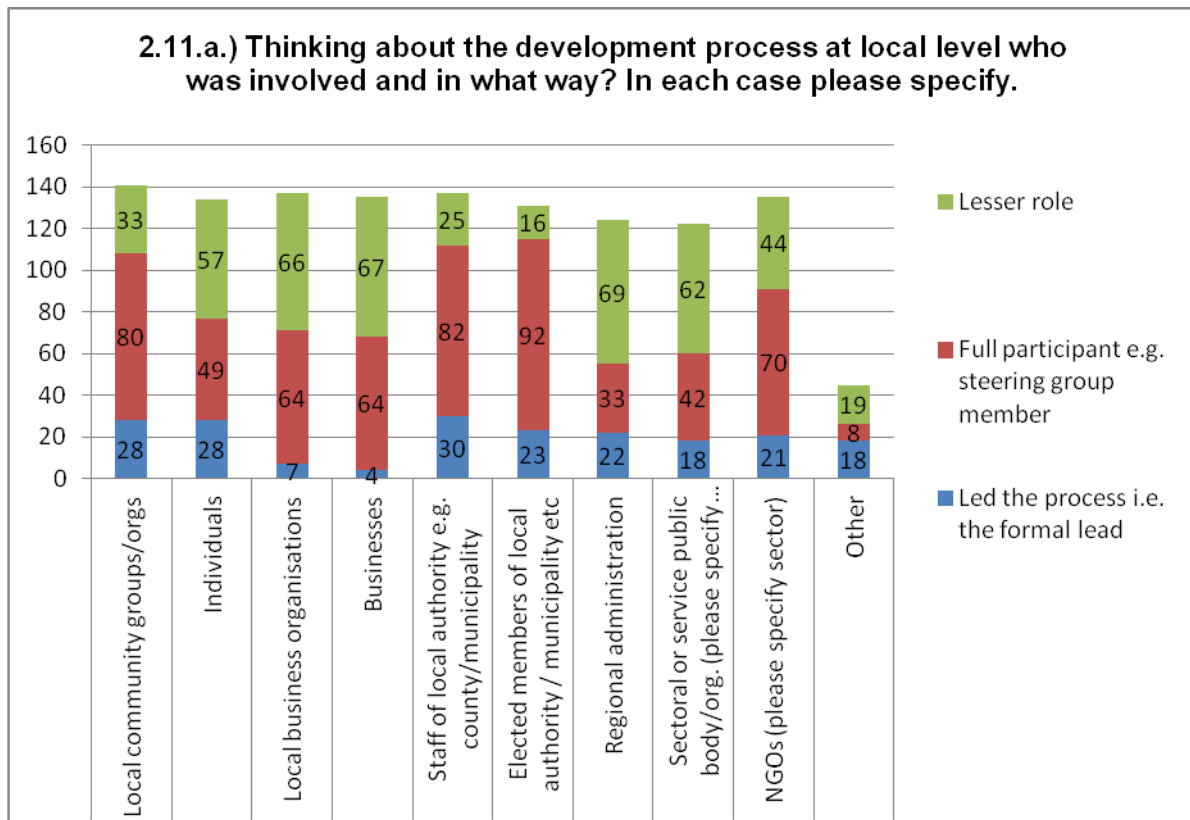
Consultant involvement in strategy development was largely in the fields of process design, training and undertaking consultations (including workshop facilitation and moderation) with lesser levels of technical inputs into strategy drafting or finalization, reality checking, data analysis and interpretation.

With a few notable exceptions (such as a consultant leaving a partially completed strategy or lack of awareness of local needs limiting the usefulness of advice received) most respondents indicated that consultancy input had been relatively successful. Benefits identified included saving time, the availability of a dedicated resource, their impartiality and objectivity and their ability to bring partners to the table. The importance of targeting and managing the involvement of consultants was clearly highlighted.

1.6. INPUTS, INVOLVEMENT

1.6.1. Inputs

When asked to compare the involvement of different actors in leading the development process at the local level, local community groups, individuals and staff of local authorities were the most involved in taking the formal lead. Otherwise with the exception of local businesses the spread of this type of involvement was quite even between the other actor types.



'Full participation' the most common form of involvement reported across all actor categories reflecting a broad range of involvement, this was most strongly represented amongst local community groups, local authority staffs and elected local representatives, high levels of full participation in those roles which could be considered higher level were also concentrated in these groups closely followed by NGOs. Staff of local authority, elected members of local authority and local community groups were rarely said to have a 'lesser role'. Regional administrations and sectoral or service related public bodies were least frequently full participants.

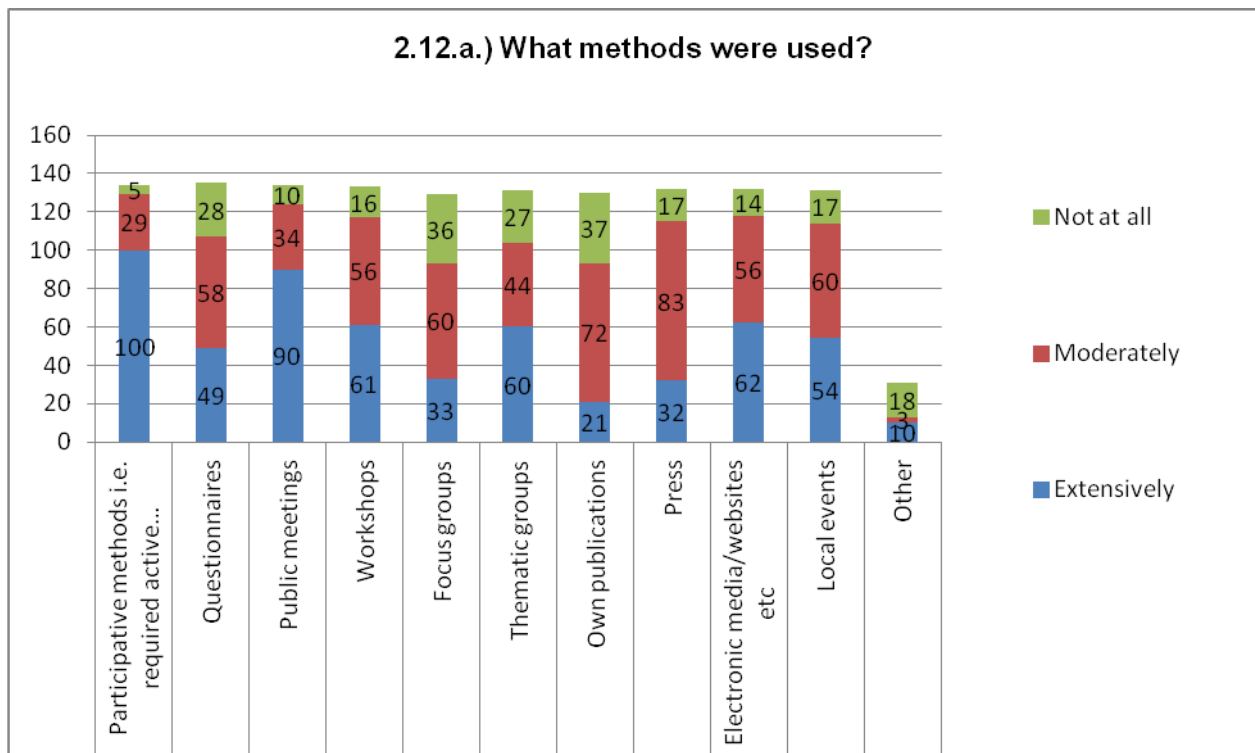
In terms of the various actors main contribution to the process the main contributions identified were time, skills and knowledge in that order of importance. Local community groups, local authorities, NGOs and individuals were most likely to provide these, including local knowledge and assistance with data collection. Local authorities' staff were slightly more likely to contribute resources than other categories.

Local business involvement tended to be more limited, with several only attending consultation meetings, the main business contribution again was time. Business and local authority staff did contribute proportionately more in terms of skills than other groups. The involvement of regional administration and sectoral or service public body's is less significant overall and the nature of this varies greatly.

Here it is clear that this differentiation in involvement should be taken into account in planning the development of the strategy, this includes considering who may contribute what, when they should be involved and what support needs this might present.

1.6.2. Methods

When asked what methods were used, participative and public meetings were the methods most frequently used 'extensively'. There was an approximately equal split between respondents who said they used methods such as local events, workshops, electronic and thematic groups 'extensively' and 'moderately'. Focus groups, press and own publications were not used extensively by many respondents but were the most frequently stated 'moderately' used methods.



In terms of the relative success of the different methods employed, there are few obvious themes that can be drawn out. Participative methods were relatively highly rated with the overwhelming majority of respondents rating these between being moderately successful to very successful. There was also an acknowledgement that these were challenging and needed careful management e.g. to ensure adequate involvement and participation but that this was worthwhile.

Questionnaires were thought to be successful also; the main benefit of these was in information gathering. It was acknowledged that these need careful targeting and design, questionnaires are by definition passive and therefore tend not to be active in contributing to the process. Examples were given where questionnaire response rates were very low, but most respondents rated questionnaires between satisfactory and very successful (some interpreted the method as a questionnaire for partners, others for individual citizens).

The success of the different types of meetings presents more of a range, the more general type of meeting was thought to need careful management but were good for information provision and developing or establishing networking and buy in, they are sometimes however limited in the

scope of what can be done. A few stated that public meetings could be dominated by a few loud voices or were even "characterised by apathy". Workshops, thematic groups and focus groups were generally seen as allowing more in-depth analysis.

Workshops were therefore generally thought to work well but do need a strong focus, these were thought to be particularly good for refining the focus of the strategy. Focus groups were less used overall and appeared to present more limitations, these were highly rated for reflection and the testing of ideas however. Themed groups were seen to be good for securing involvement and were a useful participative approach, these were especially useful in involving specialist local knowledge etc.

A wide range of facilitation methods were used, principally with LAG staff and members often involved and supported by other partners, limited use of external support for this. In terms of resourcing, voluntary contributions, the LAG's administrative budget and local and regional authority contributions were all referenced. Other used exit strategy management costs from the LEADER + programme. LAG and LAG staff continuity and involvement appears to be an important factor here.

Several respondents reported mixed success with electronic media as with the press and publications, this tended to be viewed as one way communication and therefore limited. Issues were identified in relation to poor IT speed, the volume of what could effectively be communicated and reach within the community. The use of events, although generally successful was thought to be resource heavy, where involvement could be piggy backed on an existing event was thought that this worked well.

1.6.3. Validation of the Strategy

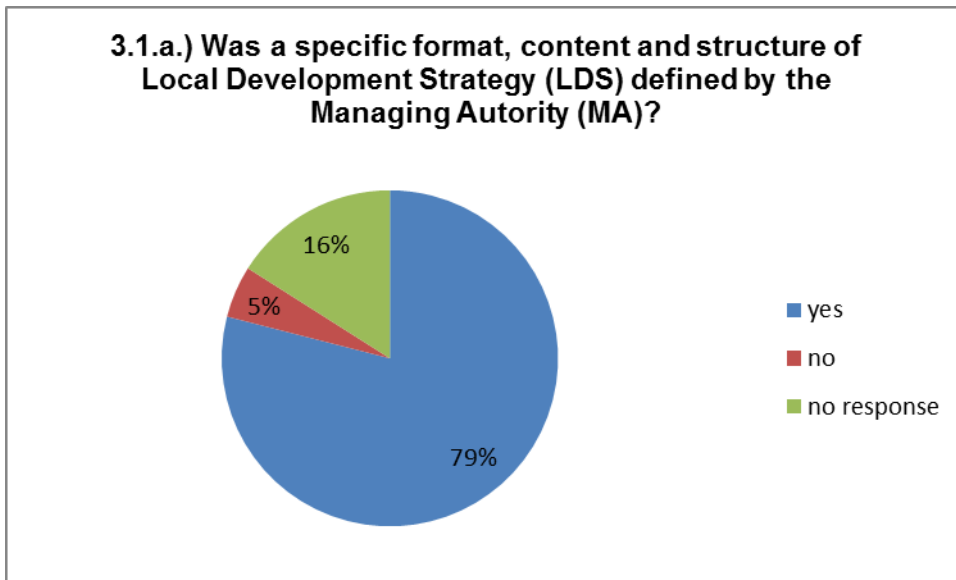
The vast majority of LAGs report that they have taken active steps to validate their strategy with the local community although the extent of this and degree of formality or rigour varies considerably. The most common actions stated were open public meetings and endorsement through the LAG itself. Several respondents detailed a longer, more rigorously structured and more specific process of endorsement, with several opportunities to propose changes through public meetings, the internet and directly through representative LAG members.

70% of respondents said that the extent of this community validation this was given a significant or essential weighting in the LAG selection process.

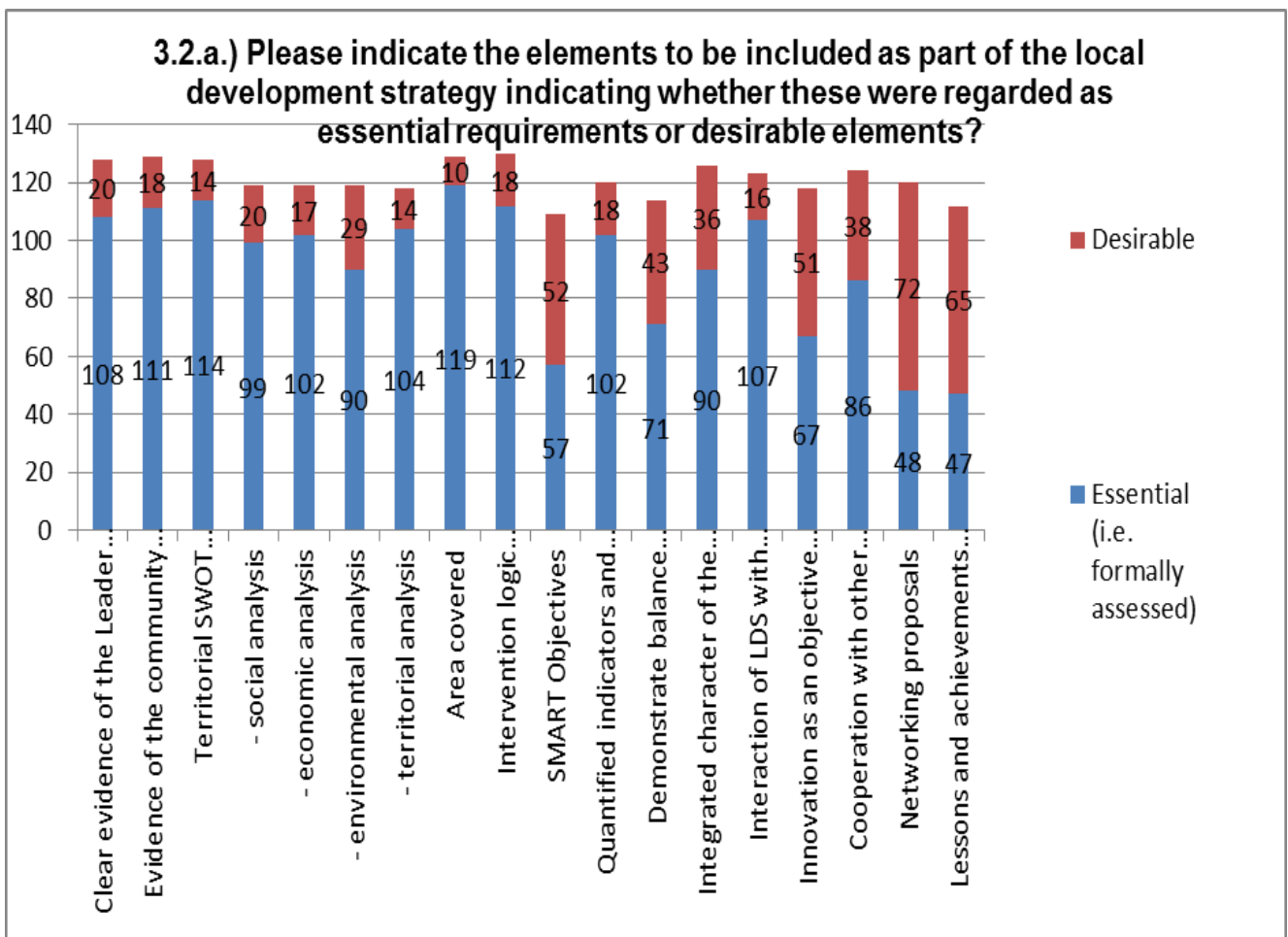
1.7. STRATEGY FORMAT AND CONTENT

1.7.1. Strategy

The vast majority, 79% of respondents said that a specific format, content and structure for the Local Development Strategy was defined and set out by the Managing Authority.



In terms of the elements which were regarded as being essential to be for inclusion respondents identified the following priorities in order frequency; Area covered, Territorial SWOT analysis / analysis of needs (with Territorial analysis being the most frequently stated essential element of the SWOT), Intervention logic (objectives and hierarchy of actions), Evidence of the community engagement and consultation process, and Clear evidence of the LEADER features.



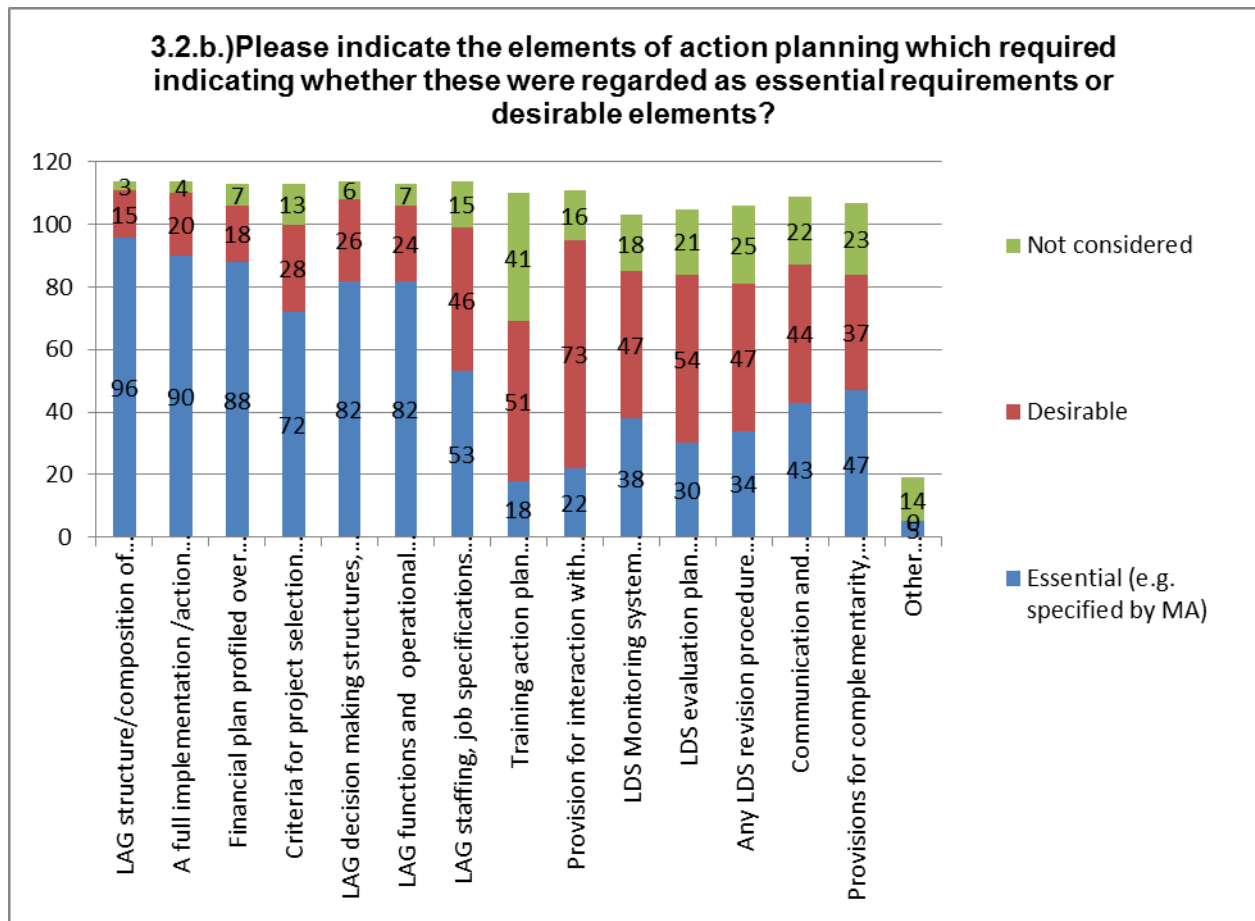
The elements which were least frequently regarded as essential were the Lessons and achievements from the previous period and Networking proposals.

When asked to comment on any aspects considered to represent good practice or to be problematic or the amount of feedback was rather more limited than might be expected. The difficulty in making SMART objectives (stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) time-bound and the importance of emphasising the LEADER features were recurring themes with a body of opinion that these were fundamental but sometimes not adequately addressed. For example, when discussing LEADER features, two comments were that this “was not clear but should be the most important” and that “we were keener to illustrate this than MA seemed”. The difficulties associated with SMART objectives appear to lack consistency with responses which highlighted the importance of intervention logic and quantified indicators.

Innovation and cooperation with other rural territories were two areas where problems and frustrations were experienced by several respondents.

Several respondents also commented that it was difficult to identify specific indicators or targets for a five years period, this was particularly so given the changes in the economic climate currently being experienced, it was regarded as a good discipline however.

1.7.2. Action Plan



The most common elements of action planning regarded as ‘essential’ requirements were (in order of frequency); LAG structure / composition of partnership and organisation, a full implementation plan, a financial plan profiled over the period, LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures, LAG functions and operational procedures and criteria for project selection.

A training action plan and provision for interaction with other local / regional bodies were least frequently stated as essential elements, but along with LDS evaluation plan were the most frequently mentioned as desirable elements of the action plan. The training action plan was the element most frequently identified as not being considered.

When assessing whether these elements were regarded as part of the local development strategy or as separate elements, the most frequently stated 'Part of strategy' elements were LAG structure/composition of partnership and organisation, LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures, a full implementation plan and a financial plan profiled over period. A training action plan and provisions for LAG staffing and job specifications, were the elements said most frequently to be added separately. Other elements where a surprisingly high proportion of respondents indicated these were regarded as separate elements were provisions for revising the LDS, the evaluation plan and project selection criteria.

There is something of a lack of consistency here between RDPs with some essential or highly important elements of the strategy or action plan being those which were least frequently specified as core or were to be addressed separately. Most significantly this included elements relating to the setting of measurable objectives for the strategy, evaluation and to LAG and staff skills and development.

1.7.3. Difficulties and Gaps Identified

Overall some 23% of respondents said that there were elements in the specified content which LAGs had difficulty in addressing, 54% said that they had no such problems. Only 14% of respondents said that there was an element missing in the specified content which would benefit the LAG strategy. This gives some cause for concern given some of the gaps identified in the essential content above.

- Over half of those who said there were elements which the LAG had difficulty in addressing said that the challenge was related to the gathering of reliable statistical data.
- When asked to describe the missing element, the most frequently mentioned element was the absence of an evaluation procedure or criteria or a process of strategy review. Other missing elements mentioned more than once were missing sectors, and adequate local statistical data and future research needs.
- 50% said that there were not any requirements that were considered excessive, 27% said there were while 23% offered no response.
- The most frequent excessive requirement mentioned was related to unreasonable expectations imposed by the MA, whether it was the requirement for overly detailed strategic links, the setting of long term indicators or frustrations over the need for activity compliance with the RDP's priorities and associated exclusions. A comment that represents several responses; "people have first been made to participate and brainstorm, after which the framework and regulations of funding rule out much that would be necessary, but cannot be funded in practice. Extremely frustrating for the actors".

The majority of these gaps and issues are consistent with issues identified in other sections of this paper but are presented here as they illustrate the areas of difficulty. These fall into two

main areas, that of quantification and evaluation and the wider contextual and strategic alignment, two key considerations in looking ahead at strategy development.

1.7.4. LAG Status

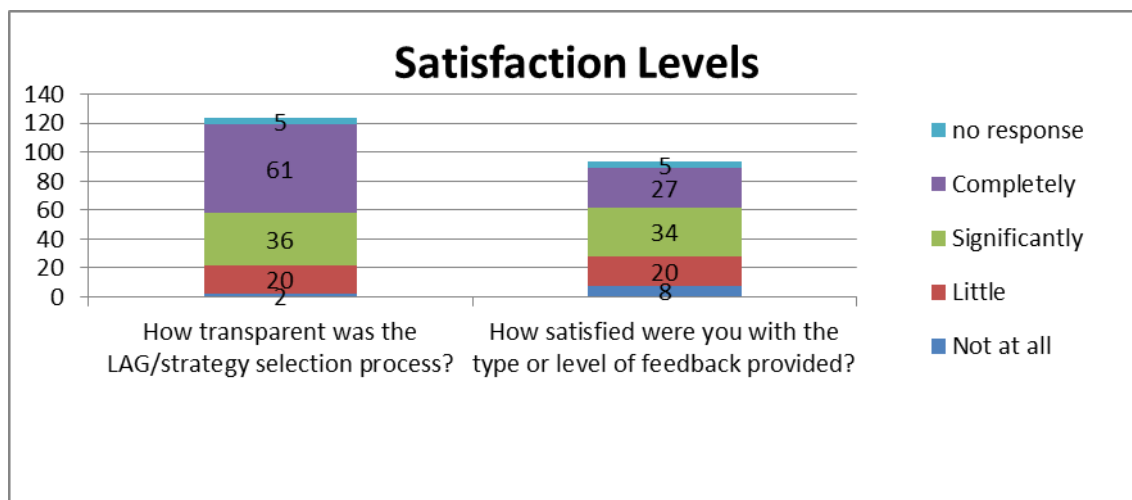
Only 12% of respondents said that the legal status or form of organisation of the LAG presented any challenges or limitations affecting the content of the strategy and its proposed actions. Amongst those who responded in the affirmative, bureaucratic red tape, duplication of activities, difficulty in obtaining a loan, and a sense that non-profit organisations are not taken seriously by MAs, were all given as explanations.

1.8. STRATEGY SELECTION

In general there was a high degree of satisfaction with the transparency of the strategy selection processes employed but respondents were markedly less satisfied with the feedback which they received. When asked to express a satisfaction level with the transparency of the LAG / strategy selection process, the vast majority (over 80%) of respondents were either completely satisfied or significantly satisfied.

There was a small proportion who reported some difficulties here e.g. "the rationale for awarding some LAGs more or less than others seemed arbitrary at best".

When asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the type or level of feedback provided, the proportion of respondents who were either completely or significantly satisfied dropped slightly to just over 70%.



When asked to describe any significant changes made to strategy as a result of the feedback or conditions applied those responding mainly detailed budget reductions caused by changes to financial allocation. In some cases the budgetary feedback was substantial enough to require a complete refocusing of the strategy.

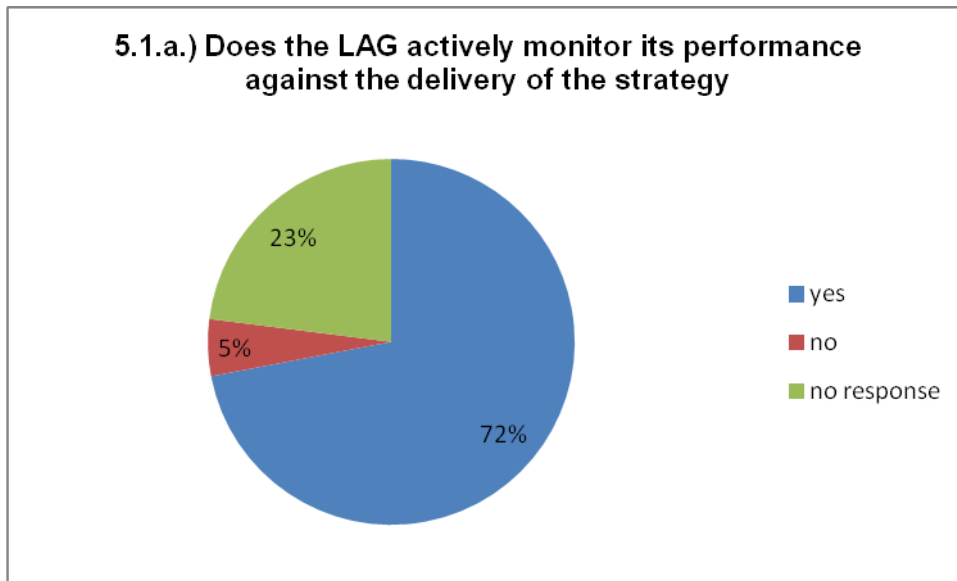
As a result of feedback provided adjustments were also made to geographic targeting and to project selection criteria and LAG decision making procedures, where this was the case this was generally thought to have had negative effects on implementation.

Although limited in scale the concerns which emerge here would seem to relate mainly to the clarity of the information provided before the strategies were submitted i.e. the variance between the expectation and the feedback given, this links to the previous issues identified over clarity, quality, scope, timeliness of guidance and support

1.9. MONITORING, TARGETING AND EVALUATION

1.9.1. Monitoring

Only 5% of respondents said that their LAG did not actively monitor its performance against the delivery of the strategy although a further 23% did not answer the question.



When asked how monitoring is carried out it is clear that there is a very high degree of variation both in terms of who is involved and the frequency of such activity. Classification of what is being done is difficult, the most frequent responses given were that monitoring is carried out by LAG management on an ongoing basis, quarterly or six monthly progress reports submitted to the MA, by a monitoring committee, LAG sub group, board strategy meeting or seminar that meets once a year, through regular staff reviews, a mid - term evaluation, or regular community surveys respectively.

Overall it is clear that of the 72% of respondents who do monitor performance in excess of 25% appear to rely on an annual report, either conducted in house or externally, 28% appear to be undertaking no active monitoring. This appears to reflect the previously identified issues over monitoring and evaluation plans etc. In short 28% of LAGs fail to report active monitoring and for those who do there is no common or consistent approach applied. This overall deficit and lack of consistency is worrying presenting risks of considerable fragmentation in measuring results and outcomes at an important time for demonstrating the benefits of local development approaches. This therefore appears to be a priority area in planning for the next programme period.

1.9.2. Targeting

Some 66% of respondents indicate that the LAG does target, animate or promote actions in specific sectors or activities in support of strategic priorities, 13% said they did not while 22% gave no response. When asked how this was done it is clear that a wide range of approaches are

applied with a split between the predominantly proactive and reactive approaches. Proactive approaches to direct promotion include regional workshops, seminars, public meetings and training events, promotion through partner organisations, and targeted marketing to key sector stakeholders. More reactive approaches include local newspaper advertising, thematic application rounds, the circulation of a household information pack and regular updates on a programme website.

From the analysis here it is clear that a high degree of informal monitoring does go on through LAG member and staff involvement in events and activities involving the local community and business sectors, active networking is a key contributor here. What is less clear is evidence of clearly structured and planned approaches to informing such targeting activity.

1.9.3. Strategy Revisions

A total of 70% of respondents indicate that LAGs are able to revise the LDS during the programming period, there is however a high degree of variation within this with little by way of common or standard approaches evident. When asked to describe the occurrence / frequency, basis and scope of revision, answers ranged from "once during the period", to "four times a year based on the formal prescriptions of MA". There is a significant minority for who only single modifications are possible and these are often limited in scope or prescribed.

There is considerable variation in the extent to which strategy revision is planned and programmed ranging from clearly structured approaches to the ad hoc. In some cases reviews are undertaken in partnership with the MA, in others by the LAG or MA alone. Certain of the comments suggest that in some cases this is almost actively discouraged. Specific mention was made of the difficulties in changing funding allocations, the restrictive nature of RDP alignment was again frequently mentioned in this context.

Amongst those 9% who said that the LAG was not able to revise the LDS there was no common trend, several explanations were focused on the fact that the LAG had chosen not to do so rather than adjustments being prohibited.

The principal issue here is, as elsewhere the lack of consistency in approach, whether by cause or effect the lack of specification of such procedures in action plans presents some cause for concern.

1.9.4. Evaluation

In this first questionnaire the exploration of evaluation was limited to an overview as this will be addressed in more detail in the next stage. What was clearly evident however is that there is an enormous variation in approach between LAGs. For example when questioned regarding self-evaluation 49% of respondents said that LAGs were expected to undertake self evaluation, 29% said they were not while 22% did not offer an answer.

Substantial variation was also evident amongst the 49% expected to undertake self-evaluation, some respondents referred to an ongoing self-evaluation process (either as a "continuous debate" or as a monthly or bimonthly discussion), others to an ex-ante and ex-post self-evaluation or the provision of an annual report. Another group of LAGs explained that self-evaluation was encouraged but was not mandatory.

Guidance on self-evaluation is often absent, there is again a lack of consistency in approach as illustrated by the following examples; it is:

- "Somehow expected", but with no guidance and no control (except "how many projects have been realised" and "how much money is used").
- I distinguish between performance of LAG / results of LEADER and effects of a singular project. Only for projects there are indicators, but even those are difficult to apply."
- "We do not feel that we are expected to undertake self-evaluation but we believe it is good practice to do so. We have asked the MA for guidance on undertaking self evaluation but there is none, so we have developed our own approach."

This final quotation sums up the overall position rather accurately and highlights the inherent risks of a fragmented and inconsistent approach and the need here for guidance.

1.10. PROBLEMS AND BOTTLENECKS

A very broad range of additional points were made, most of these again relate to issues already addressed, as before these are presented separately to give them the prominence intended at this stage.

The constraining influence of the RDP and the MA's inability to embrace the LEADER method limited the ability of LAGs to respond to local needs in several cases, with regulatory barriers imposed to risk taking and innovation also mentioned several times.

An excessively bureaucratic process and high administrative load were the most common points raised. "Bottom up has become top down in practice, where the authorities decide how local people develop their own operating environment and area of residence".

The lengthy LDS development process, a confusing project application process and changes to guidelines mid-programme were seen as hindrances to local interest and participation.

The lengthy development process resulted in late implementation and resulted in the need to focus on quick win capital projects over smaller bottom-up projects in order to meet spend targets

Others explained that in-depth and participative project evaluation is not mainstreamed, with a focus on brief quantitative reporting.

Inefficiencies caused by duplicated tasks between LAGs and local authorities was also a reoccurring theme. Challenges in obtaining sufficient operating funds from local authorities was also mentioned several times.

Suggested changes included resourcing LAGs outside just administrative resources, and the need for a regulatory framework that promotes and supports the LEADER approach resulting in a focus on area based (rather than programme based) planning.

2. **Initial findings of the LAG questionnaire**

Guidance: In total 90% of LAGs received guidance, instruction or direction, access may have been the issue for the others. 58% of LAGs received training. Guidance and training providers included MA, PA, regional authorities and National Rural Networks, the form of provision varied from simple proforma with guidance notes to specific events e.g. national, regional and local seminars for LAGs, partners and experts.

Guidance most commonly addressed methodology and prescribed elements varying from predominantly legal and administrative to more comprehensive packages.

Issues emerge mainly over scope, clarity, complexity and consistency of guidance which caused difficulties when applied to local strategy development e.g. re strategic coherence with RDPs.

There is a striking degree of variation in what is provided and how and in the level and extent of prescription, this requires balance with LAG specificities. There is clear demand for supportive guidance with sufficient flexibility to address local strategic priorities and which is timely, consistent, clear and iterative. Iteration and responsiveness is thought particularly important, e.g. FAQ approaches.

Training focused on LEADER process and principles or frequently LAG administration tending to be theoretical or bureaucratic. Fewer examples were directly concerned with LDS development. Balancing over-complication with over-generalization emerged as a challenge.

Clear strategy preparation needs were identified, an ongoing training and updating for LAGs and their staffs is required. LAGs and their needs are diverse (e.g. experienced LAGs versus new LAGs). Training and guidance should be needs based developed through dialogue with LAGs possibly with a common framework.

Strategy Preparation: Start dates varied from late 2004 to 2010, 2006 was typical. Where LDS development started late it also finished late adversely affecting both the LDS and its implementation e.g. resulting in spending pressures ('n+2').

Start dates posed issues for the necessary time and resources for strategy development, adequate consultation, confusion over funding conditions and a lack of or delayed information, this could cause delays. These effects demotivate community participation.

Clarity over the minimum essential conditions for initiating the process of LDS development help get the process under way early, which is a priority.

The time allowed for LDS development is more important than duration of submission windows. Typically this was 3 – 6 months, the range was 1 – 24 months. Only one third of responding LAGs thought time allocated for submission was adequate, periods of less than 5 months were a problem. Time required depends on the preparedness of the areas and partnerships and good communication between the MA and prospective LAGs.

MAs usually issued a call for submissions, the nature of these varied including either a short development and submission window, a short submission window associated with a longer development period. Some included a period for reflection and adjustment post assessment. This final approach was welcomed by LAGs.

Time required for LDS development varies considerably between LAGs and is affected by their experience, extent of continuity and their degree of autonomy. Variables include the required knowledge, information and time and the quality, scope, accessibility and timeliness of any guidance and support.

There are advantages in starting early as some LAGs did but this needs coordination with other elements of the process. Strategy development often overlapped existing delivery work increasing staffs workload, continuity was of high importance, gaps resulted in lengthy capacity building.

Strategy submission: A single application period was reported as the norm in the majority of Member States, multiple application windows were identified in the UK (England), Denmark, Finland and some German Lander.

Multiple application windows often reflected a need to allow new areas to catch up, to allow rationalisation and reduce inter LAG competition or to address MA priorities. These also allowed for a more iterative approach strengthening strategic alignment.

Autonomy: LAG autonomy in area and strategic theme selection was investigated, 53% of LAGs had either large or total autonomy in area selection, 72% had autonomy in theme selection. There was a wider long term and pre-existing strategy covering the LAG area in 40% of cases.

LAGs with autonomy to select their LDS area welcomed its coherence, the natural fit and the ability to work across boundaries. LAGs and their processes tended to work better.

Area definition by fit with administrative boundaries had advantages too but was less highly rated, e.g. in avoiding territorial confusion or through the amalgamation of previously separate areas. More issues were raised where LAGs had little autonomy e.g. frustrations over rurality and population.

It appears important that area selection parameters employed make sense locally. The greater the degree of autonomy which can be enabled, the better the fit with the needs, development potential and capabilities of the area concerned.

Autonomy of theme selection was viewed positively again regarding the fit with LAG areas specificities. Some LAGs very much welcomed the steer and focus provided by given themes, especially when this was coupled with flexibility to enable sufficient local scope. Even here there are frustrations over factors outwith LAG control, e.g. requirements to fit the RDP at EU, National, regional levels or to deliver restricted measures. This reduced LAGs ability to tackle locally identified needs.

Where LAGs had no theme selection autonomy opinion was split evenly. It was common for flexibility to be applied (although in varying degrees), this permitted some scope for local differentiation. Where themes caused operational flexibility to be limited this caused problems.

The key issue identified here is the degree of flexibility afforded to LAGs to adapt strategic themes and their delivery to meet local needs and the LEADER methodology.

Driving priorities: In 73% of cases the development of the strategy was either largely or totally driven by the development priorities of the area rather than bidding considerations. A limited number of examples identified funding as the driver, in one case the strategy was the driver for LEADER. Opinion on the 'needs' focus was that it had been successful.

Reasons for success given include an increased responsiveness to local need, increased collaboration between local partners and stronger local delivery, a mature LAG was a further success factor.

Reoccurring reasons for limited success include the economic climate, reliance on consultants and fitting previously identified needs and priorities with budget allocations and RDP priorities. Stronger and clearer guidance appears to be indicated here.

Providing indicative budgets prior to strategy development (58% of LAGs) had little effect other than helping keep aims, objectives and expectations realistic and focused. Levels of satisfaction with this approach appear to vary with budgetary allocation levels.

A number of LAGs report that their indicative allocation limited their aspirations or drove them away from high priority but high cost options towards more readily achieved outcomes. The basis on which such budgets were predicated could also impact on strategy appropriateness to need e.g. where per capita approaches were employed.

Budget allocation: The basis of budget allocation often appears rather unscientific and to lack strategic focus. This aspect lacks clarity, it appears to be either largely preordained or demand driven.

Mention of needs, consultation and SWOT analysis is limited and little by way of intervention logic is evident. Allocation is often based on the need to align with national or regional priorities. Indicative budgets appear to have limited effects here.

Distributive approaches were evident in some cases with allocations the basis of, e.g. an equal split between measures, or calculated on a per capita basis or a geographical split.

Co-financing and intervention rates had little effect on strategy design effecting implementation more. The gross availability of match funding is the main issue, this issue is somewhat more acute where there was no indicative budget to inform planning.

Strategy development support: LAGs employed a mix of development support types, this and its availability and accessibility is important to meet diverse LAG needs.

The most common kinds of direct support identified were consultancy and LAG staff resources (over 60% of LAGs), followed by local training and partner staff. Mentoring and MA technical assistance were the least common kinds of direct support however exchange of experience between LAGs was the most common answer given under 'other'.

The duration and availability of support prior to submission varied greatly from a month to four years, mentoring and training tended to be employed for longer.

Consultancy and LAG staff resources are the highest financial value support reported, while training and mentoring are highly valued overall. The continuity of LAG staff involvement is important in knowledge transfer. Some 73% of LAGs used consultants to some extent in LDS preparation, the nature and scale of this varied but overall was thought relatively successful producing benefits in time savings, dedicated resourcing, objectivity and brokerage between partners.

Inputs and involvement: The analysis reflects a broad range of overall involvement. Community groups, individuals and staff of local authorities were the most frequent LEADERS in

the process; business involvement in this was infrequent. Full participation was the most common response across all categories.

Staffs of local authorities, elected members and local community groups had the highest levels of full participation, were concentrated in higher level roles and were rarely said to have a lesser role.

The main contributions identified were time, skills and knowledge in that order of importance. Local community groups, local authorities, NGOs and individuals were most likely to provide these.

Planning the involvement and roles of the different actors appears to be an important consideration here.

Participative and public meetings were the methods most frequently used extensively in strategy development, focus groups, the press and own publications used least.

Workshops, thematic groups and focus groups were generally seen as active approaches enabling more participation, networking and in-depth analysis but needed careful management. Electronic media appeared to present some difficulties to LAGs.

Commonly this activity was resourced via LAG staff and LAG administration budgets, often with local and regional authority inputs. Once again LAG member and staff continuity is highlighted as being of high importance.

Strategy format and content: For 79% of LAGs, LDS elements were prescribed by the MA. Essential elements in order of importance were the area covered, a territorial SWOT analysis, the intervention logic, evidence of the community engagement and consultation process, and clear evidence of the LEADER features. The elements least frequently regarded as essential were the lessons and achievements from the previous period and networking proposals.

LAGs identified problems in making SMART objectives time-bound, over indicators and the importance of the LEADER features, innovation was also problematic.

Essential action planning requirements were (in order of frequency); LAG structure / composition of partnership and organisation, a full implementation plan, a profiled financial plan, LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures, LAG functions and operational procedures and project selection criteria.

Training action plans' provision for interaction with other local / regional bodies and an LDS evaluation plan were least frequently mentioned as essential but most frequently mentioned as desirable elements or elements to be added separately.

There appears to be some lack of consistency here between RDPs, significantly this included elements relating to the setting of measurable objectives for the strategy, evaluation and LAG and staff skills and development.

Only 23% of respondents indicated that there were elements in the specified content which LAGs had difficulty in addressing and only 14% indicated that there was an element missing which would benefit the LDS. The most frequently mentioned missing element was the absence of an evaluation procedure or criteria or a process of strategy review.

Strategy selection: The transparency of strategy selection processes met with high satisfaction but LAGs were markedly less satisfied with MA feedback provided. Feedback resulted mainly in budget reductions due to financial allocation changes on occasion substantial enough to require a complete refocusing of the strategy.

Concerns here relate mainly to the variation between expectations and feedback raising questions re clarity and consistency of guidance and other information.

Monitoring, targeting and evaluation: This was subject to limited investigation in preparation for the next phase of the FG4 work. There are a number of gaps or deficiencies evident. Overall 72% of LAGs say they monitor their performance against strategy delivery, 28% do not report this.

Amongst those who do such monitoring there is a very high degree of variation both in terms of who is involved and the frequency of such activity, approaches vary and lack consistency. This appears to present risks in measuring LEADER results and outcomes.

Some 66% of respondents indicate that their LAG does undertake targeting in support of strategic priorities, a wide range of approaches are applied, these are split between the predominantly proactive and reactive approaches.

70% of LAGs are able to revise their LDS during the programming period. The occurrence / frequency, basis and scope of revision varied considerably between LAGs e.g. from "once during the period", to "four times a year". There is no common or consistent approach evident.

In total 49% of respondents said that LAGs were expected to undertake self-evaluation, 29% said they were not, some explained that self-evaluation was encouraged but was not mandatory. References were made to an on-going self-evaluation process, to an ex-ante and ex-post self-evaluation or an annual report. Guidance on self-evaluation is often absent, there is once again a lack of consistency in approach.



Annex 4: Findings of the Phase 1 Managing Authority Questionnaire



Connecting Rural Europe

1. MANAGING AUTHORITY QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

1.1. LAG GUIDANCE AND DIRECTION

1.1.1. Guidance

Without exception the MA respondents indicated that LAGs in their programmes received guidance, instruction or other forms of direction regarding the elaboration of local development strategies. From the responses given it is evident that there was however a significant degree of variation in both what was provided, the extent to which this included strategy preparation and how this was done. There was a clear split between those MAs who provided relatively narrow direction or specification of principally a technical nature and those who provided wider and more comprehensive guidance on strategy preparation including content and method.

Where provision was narrower this tended towards a more directive approach, this varied from 'the elements described in the RDP' (Sweden), 'the strategic objectives of the RDP and applicable regulations' (Murcia) to statements of the basic eligibility criteria and requirements the LAG must meet, in the best case this included the eligible beneficiary, the min/max number of inhabitants, the max. size of cities, the structure of LDS, compulsory data, selection criteria and annexes required.

Guidance on strategy content and method were mentioned by a minority of respondents; for example "content was introduced in the Minister(ial) regulation, method was described in the Guidebook published by MA prepared by LEADER experts" (RDP for Poland). France mainland produced a series of 3 practical guides. Much of the guidance for these aspects was provided through other forms of support for the strategy development process itself, this is described in a separate section of this report.

There were a limited number of more detailed packages of guidance; the Irish, Finnish, Hungarian and English respondents detailed the most comprehensive range of guidance and direction here.

The Irish respondent explained that an information note was provided to each applicant which included a template for the LAG business plan, while information sessions and public meetings explained the application process to groups interested in applying.

Mainland Finland provided "National, regional and local seminars, trainings, workshops and meetings, information and guidance, letters, e-mails".

In Hungary, to develop local rural development strategies, planning guides and forms were provided to the local rural development action groups who had earned preliminary recognition. Groups were also informed about the evaluation criteria of the local rural development strategies, and the MA outsourced the creation of a power point based electronic planning tool, in order to facilitate planning strategies.

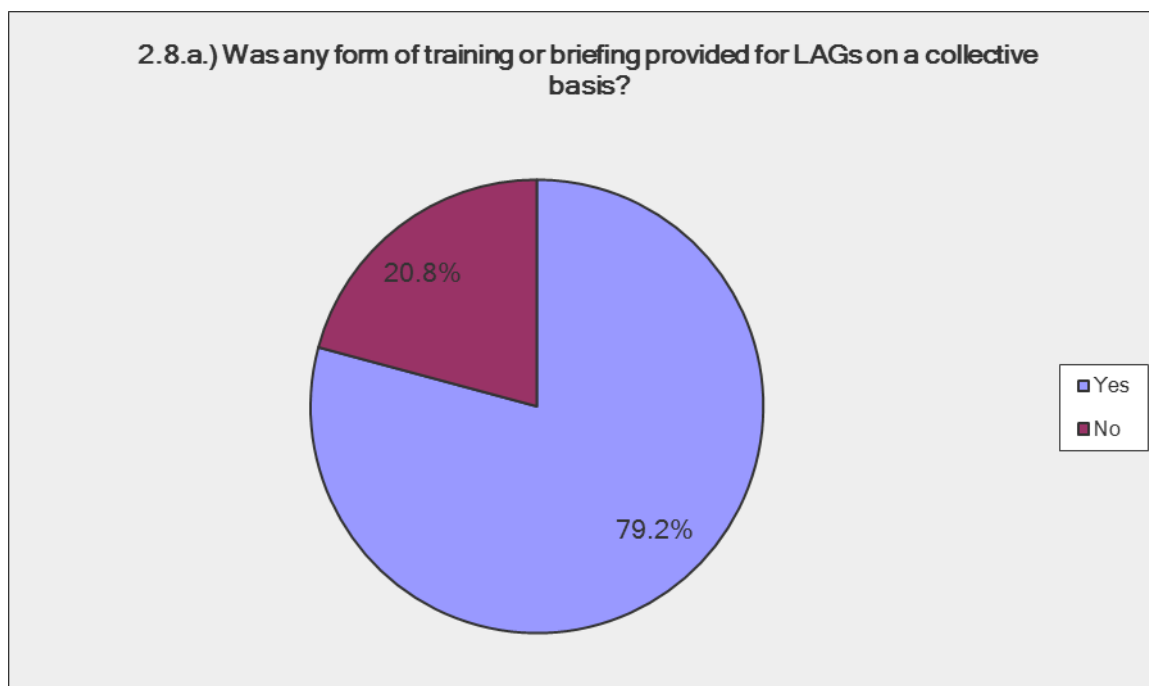
In England guidance was produced for both the expression of interest stage and also for the LDS development stage. Assistance was provided covering the creation of partnerships, identifying the optimum geography and population of the LAG area, developing the components of the LDS, administration and finance. Specific guidance on preparing the LDS included advice on identifying

needs and opportunities, alignment with other strategies, setting LAG priorities, developing programmes of activity, setting targets, results and outputs, sustainability, and co-operation activity. It was noted however that "Regional Development Agencies (RDA) had not been delivering RDPE for long, nor had they experience of the LEADER approach generally. With this inexperience, it left the RDAs limited as to how much advice and guidance they could provide LAGs with."

The completeness and quality of what was produced depends to an extent on the other forms of support and training provided, ideally this should be consistent e.g. the examples here which included templates, criteria etc. for the whole process. Knowledge transfer is a key contributor to establishing an effective system of multi-level governance, in terms of the initial package of guidance provided this may be seen to be at best excellent and at worst poor and primarily administrative in approach.

1.1.2. Collective LAG training or briefing

MAs were asked to indicate whether any form of collective training or briefing was provided for LAGs and what the main elements of this were. In total 19 of the 24 respondents said that training or briefing was provided to LAGs on a collective basis, while five said it was not. Once again there was a very significant degree of variation evident in the responses.



A number of the MAs reported that they had delivered training on a regional basis e.g. Hungary, Poland, Spain and Sweden, in Finland seminars were held locally, regionally and nationally and others such as the Andalusia region did so at LAG and regional level, other MS relied solely on national approaches. Responses regarding the content of such training are rather general, the main topics mentioned are programme structure, objectives and LAG strategies, a proportion of these again appear to be largely administrative or prescriptive.

Others, described variously as 'information days' or 'information sessions' operated on an iterative basis allowing for dialogue and problem solving between LAGs, prospective LAGs and MAs across a range of issues. In Hungary this went as far as what was described as "solution

proposals" followed by "personal conciliation meetings between actors". In other cases such as England elements of networking and mentoring were facilitated nationally with sharing of information between emerging LAGs, some English regions also produced a prospectus and facilitated briefing event. Information exchange between LAG managers was also facilitated in Luxembourg. In Malta LAG training focused on operational issues related to start-up.

Training was not without its problems, in Sweden regional meetings were limited by a lack of local relevance and a late start date in some regions. In Poland regional training on LDS development (including a template) was provided although gaps in the connection between objectives and budget, indicators and monitoring system were also reported. In one MS the difficulties of working with LAGs who are competing with each other was mentioned. In the case of Andalusia the MA respondent noted the MA's "great difficulties" in advising LAGs about EAFRD possibilities. A training manual was provided in Flanders, although budget challenges due to a gap between LEADER + and LAG approval resulted in training being ineligible expenditure.

Overall there is a lack of consistency evident here, over 20% of respondents provided no training, the others had very varied approaches, these were variously tailored to local, regional or national needs or were largely administrative and basic. Knowledge transfer within programmes and within and between LAGs appears to be less well-structured than it might be, this is a serious issue for a programme predicated on developing and employing human and social capitals.

1.2. STRATEGY PREPARATION

1.2.1. Timing

The MAs were asked at what stage in the programme period the LAGs were asked to start their strategy development process. The earliest date mentioned was 2006, the latest 2009-10. The majority of respondents referenced a rather broad time period for the selection process, for example "2007-2009" (Mainland France), or "2008-2009" (Andalusia). Most appear to have been asked to start post approval of the RDP with a small number of specific exceptions e.g. between the submission of the programme and its approval (Niederachsen/Bremen).

Three further respondents (Estonia, Cyprus and England) explained that LAGs started their strategy development process at different times. In Cyprus one LAG started to develop the LDS during the previous programming period, thus before the approval of the RDP in November 2007.

The number and range of issues the start date presented was limited in the view of the MAs. Those who identified issues referred to the difficulties of the lack of continuation between programme periods, with "delays caused by the closure of LEADER + and the need for coordination between the LAGs and the Public Administration" (Murcia) while the respondent from the Flanders MA explained that "There was no continuity between LEADER + and PDPO II, because there was a gap of one year (1/1/2007-31/12/2007). This was problematic, especially for the LAG-managers. Ideally the set-up of the new programming period starts in the last year of the previous period."

1.2.2. Call for Submissions and Targeting

The commonest approach was an open call for submissions from all rural areas, 21 of the 24 respondents, while three said there was no such call. When questioned about the nature and

extent of any targeting despite there being 21 MAs indicating that there was an open call to all rural areas 17 respondents offered an answer only three of whom indicated that all rural areas were targeted.

Targeting varies in its specificity, the objectives and the level at which it was applied. The overwhelming majority of targeting identified was on a geographical basis although there was also some evidence of targeting the involvement of certain types or capabilities of organisations for LAG membership, rurality or certain socio economic conditions.

In Ireland the government decided on discrete areas to provide full geographic coverage, while in mainland Finland the call for tender was sent to all existing LAGs, these already covered all rural areas.

Where there was an objective of extending coverage different approaches were applied. For example the Bavarian respondent referenced the role of existing LAGs, and explained that in regions where no LAGs existed the LEADER Managers tried to find persons and an existing organisation, association or community willing to form a LAG "But there was no compulsion on unwilling regions to participate in LEADER." In Sweden the target was to cover 75 % of the rural territory expanding the number of LAGs significantly and supported through a programme of LAG-to-LAG mentoring while the La Rioja respondent explained that "Groups themselves determine what counties are included in their policy areas".

Those considering the types of organisations mentioned the relative characteristics, composition and capabilities of the association which applies for becoming a LAG.

1.2.3. Time Allowed for Strategy Development

The period allowed for strategy development varied greatly, ranging from one month (Murcia) to two years (Czech Republic, France Mainland and Sweden). A period of 3-9 months was more typical, although some LAGs were already aware of requirements before the official start date and were therefore able to start. "Officially 3 months (July- October 2007), but first information for LAGs already at the end of 2006" (Luxembourg). In Mainland Finland the formal application period was deemed very short although it appears that LAGs anticipated this; "if LAGs did not start the preparatory work before that, it could have been too short." In Poland, England and France Mainland, the time period allowed varied between regions.

When asked whether this was adequate and whether there were any issues, 20% of respondents expressed concern that the period allowed was too short. The Cypriot and Polish RDP respondents stated that the period was too short, a view also reflected in Ireland (8 weeks) e.g. for recently established LAGs. As noted by Sweden "there must be a very long period for development of a new LEADER -territory! And a long period to learn the rules and administration process before LAG can start making decisions about projects." Here a period of 2 years was allowed.

There were other factors impacting on the adequacy of the time allowed e.g. waiting for legislation to be approved before starting, "It was not enough, almost all LAGs waited for legislation (May 2008) so for drafting the LDS they had around three months." This type of delay can have knock on effects as noted in Andalusia where late approval of strategies 'caused problems with the n+2 rule'.

In some cases where there was more than one submission window e.g. in Bavaria, Cyprus and Finland. Unsuccessful applicants in round 1 were offered feedback and were able to resubmit in the second round effectively extending the submission period. There were other examples of feedback being provided with periods set aside for the improvement of the strategy.

There is no clear ideal time identified in these responses and clearly different types of LAG, stages of LAG development or situations need different approaches. Sometimes there are differences within the population of LAGs, for example the English respondent explained that a number of LAGs would have preferred a longer turnaround time, although LAGs based largely on existing LEADER + areas were more experienced in the process and were effectively 'treading water' for a period until all LAGs were in a position to commence the programme. Here as in other MS some experienced LAGs were able to anticipate the need to develop a strategy and commenced work early on their own initiative.

Where feedback has been provided and there has then been a degree of flexibility it is clear this has worked to the benefit of the quality of the strategies.

1.3. STRATEGY SUBMISSION

There were two main approaches evident here, multiple submission rounds and multi stage processes, in some cases the former approach in effect operated as a multi stage approach. In the majority of cases (16) there was a single application period.

1.3.1. Application Round

Where there was more than one application window respondents were asked what were the arrangements and why was this?

Amongst those who detailed two separate application periods the French respondent explained that regions were free to choose between one or two application periods "in order to strengthen the applications that have to be improved", this implies rejected applications being reconsidered.

In Cyprus a lack of familiarity with the LEADER approach meant that a second application window was needed to give LAGs more time to submit applications, while in Bavaria a second application round was decided upon due to the large number of LAGs and a desire to give regions without any LEADER experience a second opportunity. Here again those rejected the first time were given reasons for failure and recommendations on how to improve.

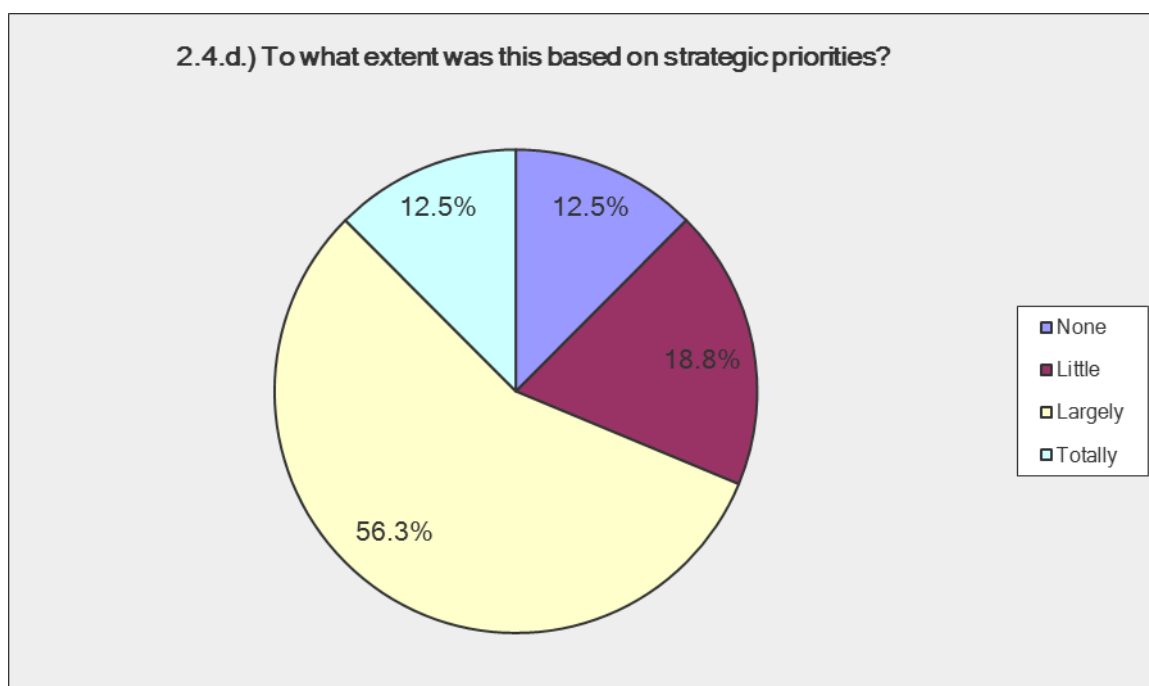
1.3.2. Expression of Interest and Pre-Selection

A minority (7) of MAs responding employed a formal expression of interest process, a further three employed some other form of pre-selection, the balance of 13 apparently employing no such method.

When asked for the basis of such pre-selection there were varying degrees of formality, use of criteria and levels at which such pre-selection took place. Where criteria were employed these varied in nature, scope and complexity. In one case these included rurality, socio-economic indicators and indicative LDS quality in one case, in another compliance with the distinctive features of the LEADER approach and regulations, the focus on tackling economic underperformance and rural disadvantage, providing evidence of socio-economic need and opportunity, demonstrating coherence with wider regional and national strategies and compliance with local guidance on size, population and relationships with other RDP delivery bodies.

Others explained that a combination of area and LAG assessment criteria were used; "The LAGs were assessed with the area parameters (density, employment, mountain area), with respect to the district rural development program (objectives, pilot of the program, priority for women and youth) and regarding the Local Action Group (experience, equipment and others)" (La Rioja). Others focused more on demonstrating the capability to deliver e.g. by evidencing general LAG obligations such as a qualified manager and LAG members (Sweden).

Flanders explained that "there was probably a pre-selection at province level. There were only 10 LDS submitted, the exact maximum foreseen in the program. This means there was no competition and they were all approved".



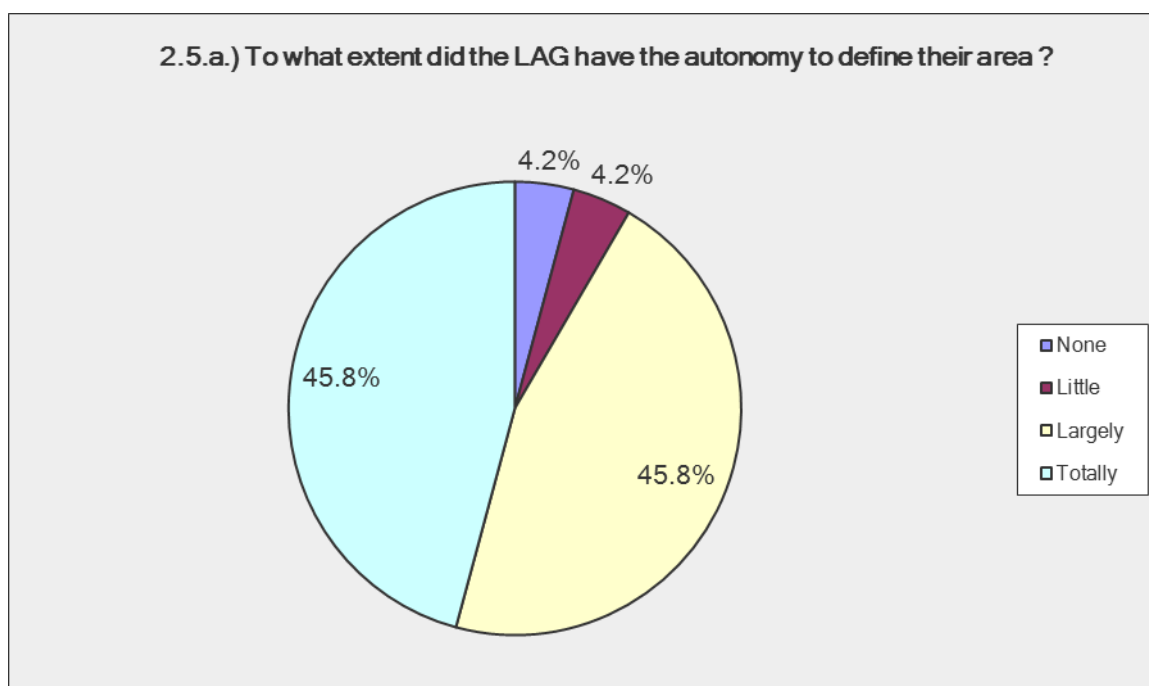
Although only 10 MAs employed any formal form of pre-selection 16 offered an answer to the question "to what extent was this (pre-selection) based on strategic priorities?", this may reflect the multiple application period responses also. Of these 12.5% said this was totally based on strategic priorities and 56% said largely, a further 19% indicated that these had a little effect.

The combination of multiple application periods, feedback and expression of interest approaches suggests that overall some form of iterative process is favoured with prescreening of submissions. It would appear to make more sense for this to be formalized as a multi stage application process to avoid unfruitful work by both LAGs and MAs. Elements this assessment should include are strategic priorities, delivery capability and methodology.

1.4. ISSUES OF AUTONOMY

1.4.1. Area Definition

When asked to what extent the LAG had autonomy to define their area, 11 of the 24 respondents said totally, 11 largely, one said a little and one none.



In the one case where there was no autonomy, Ireland it was explained that "In the context of the improvement of service delivery at local and community level, the Government decided on discrete areas to provide full coverage across the State."

The Flanders respondent said 'little', explaining that "The Flemish rural parameters and the strict separation of axis 3 and LEADER areas restricted the autonomy. Because of the co-financing of the provinces in the program the set up of cross provincial LAGs was made as good as impossible".

Amongst those who said that LAGs did have autonomy to define their areas, the most common response related to the importance of the implementation of the bottom-up approach and respecting the LEADER principles e.g. re coherence, population and the size of settlements, in effect minor limitations. Local people were best able to define their areas e.g. in terms of coherence economic, social and environmental issues.

On three occasions LAGs were free to choose their area from a restricted range of options, for example in Spain "There was a University of Barcelona previous study which determined the

main rural areas to implement the LEADER strategy. In this area the LAG had total autonomy to define their own area." Others (such as Luxembourg) explained that the only restriction was the definition of rurality, while others, (such as Malta) referenced 'a few criteria' but did not give details.

The majority of MAs (15) indicate a high level of success in area definition. The respondents representing Estonia and Murcia both said that a high population representation was an indicator of success, while the Polish respondent explained that achieving territorial coverage was a measurement of success (93% of eligible area). In other cases, such as England, the fact that LAGs did not achieve full territorial coverage, but were rather developed around identifiable geographic and socio-economic areas, was seen as a positive. "In some cases, this has been particularly successful; bringing together a number of District Authorities that historically had not worked well together and helping to bring projects forward that work across administrative boundaries."

In some cases MAs gave guidance of varying degrees of direction, in Mainland Finland 15 of the original 58 LAGs were considered too small and to lack sufficient resources, the number of LAGs was reduced to 55 using 'force'. In England "Assistance was also given with interpreting population figures in order to achieve the most appropriate geography." In Hungary two LAGs had overlapping areas that couldn't be resolved by reconciliation meetings, and required the MA to decide on their behalf, but in other cases it was "largely successful".

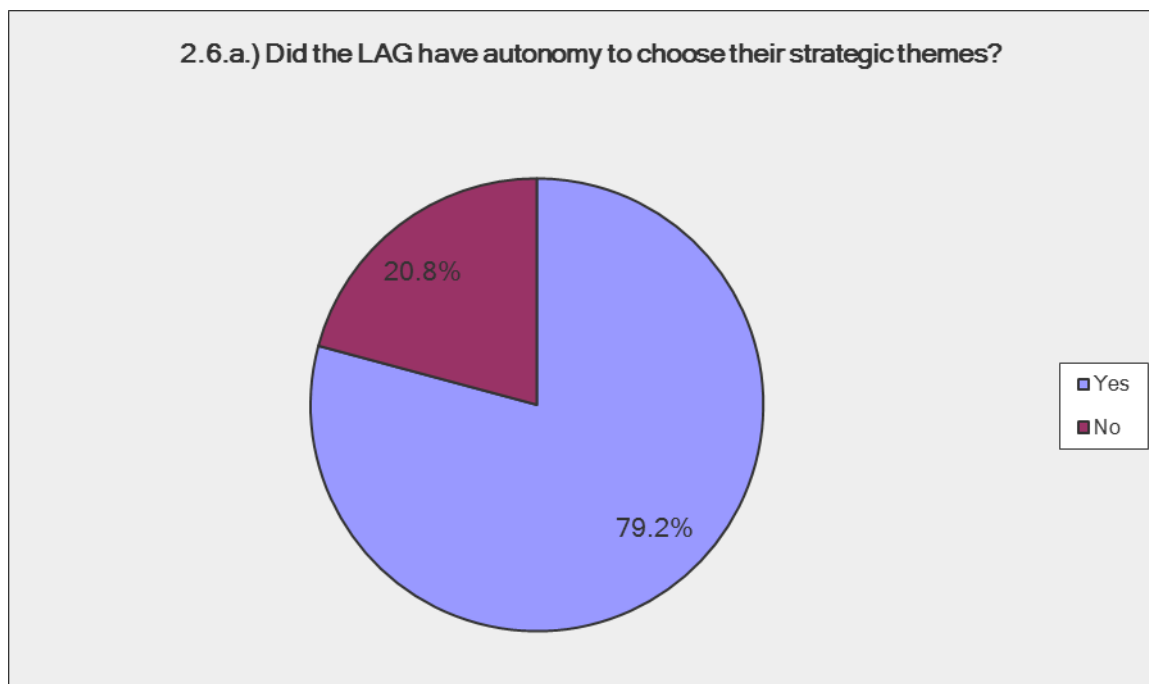
In Sweden some areas were felt to be too small to be effective, while in Bavaria success was limited because "Some LAGs didn't reach the necessary critical mass". In Poland 'there is a great difference in quality of LDS, sometimes because LAGs not fully prepared were selected'.

In Flanders some LAGs are coherent, but others are not, due to fixed and relatively high LEADER budgets which have resulted in large LAG areas that lack coherence. The distribution of axes 3 and 4 resources was decided before the creation of the LEADER -areas resulting in some provinces opting for big LEADER -areas (lacking coherence) to avoid the axis 3-budget having to cover a very large area.

Overall it appears therefore that LAGs were largely free and capable to select their areas within given (LEADER) parameters and subject to some MA influence, this was generally successful. External parameters can be problematic in defining LEADER areas however. Territorial and population coverage has been increased; the main issues appear to be lack of critical mass for some very small LAG areas or a lack of preparedness. Both these issues could be addressed through an effective expression of interest process.

1.4.2. Theme Selection

When asked 19 of the 24 respondents indicated that the LAG did have autonomy to choose their strategic themes. All five of those who said LAGs did not have autonomy said that a focus or main theme was imposed by the MA.



The Flanders respondent indicated that the LAG's LDS had to fit to the RDP, while the Polish respondent explained that LEADER was limited to axis 3 measures and small scale projects. A further respondent explained that "the Management Entity and the LAG had difficulty in applying numerous European regulations which would be applicable to support initiatives not included in EAFRD itself" (Andalusia) while the respondent from Murcia suggested that "LAGs should respect the PDR to set strategic goals to meet and develop by them".

Where LAGs had the autonomy to choose their themes the general view was that this had been successful. Overall respecting the bottom-up approach was referenced heavily, for example "The LAGs had the autonomy to define their strategic themes according to the mentality and the local needs of their area of intervention". A critical factor in this was a recognition of the importance of local needs and priorities being identified and defined locally.

Whilst a large proportion of LAGs were reported to have freedom of theme selection this was frequently within given parameters, first and foremost the EU Regulation and then the specific RDP. On occasion the RDP defined a role or set of measures, most commonly axis 3 for LEADER. For example "At provincial level a rural development plan was made that indicates the focus of the province within the Flemish plan. LDS of LAGs had to fit within this provincial plan as well." In England the freedom to choose strategic themes varied by region, with some LAGs given freedom to choose their strategic themes but others were limited to axis three type activity covering quality of life and diversification projects. Here it was noted that "There were practical reasons for adopting the latter approach, leaving measures in other axis to be delivered by mainstream, expert providers."

In a number of cases LAGs had to modify their strategies to ensure coherence either with the wider RDP or other relevant programmes. In Finland RDP fit had to be improved, in Flanders the strict geographical separation of axis 3 and axis 4 action areas was thought a poor decision resulting in a lack of focus in the LDS. In Poland, although LAGs could implement projects under other EU funds it was difficult to implement a fully integrated LDSs due to demarcation lines and the necessity to split all costs. The Swedish respondent explained that while LAGs were free to choose their focus, the MA's subsequent budget allocation differed from expectations,

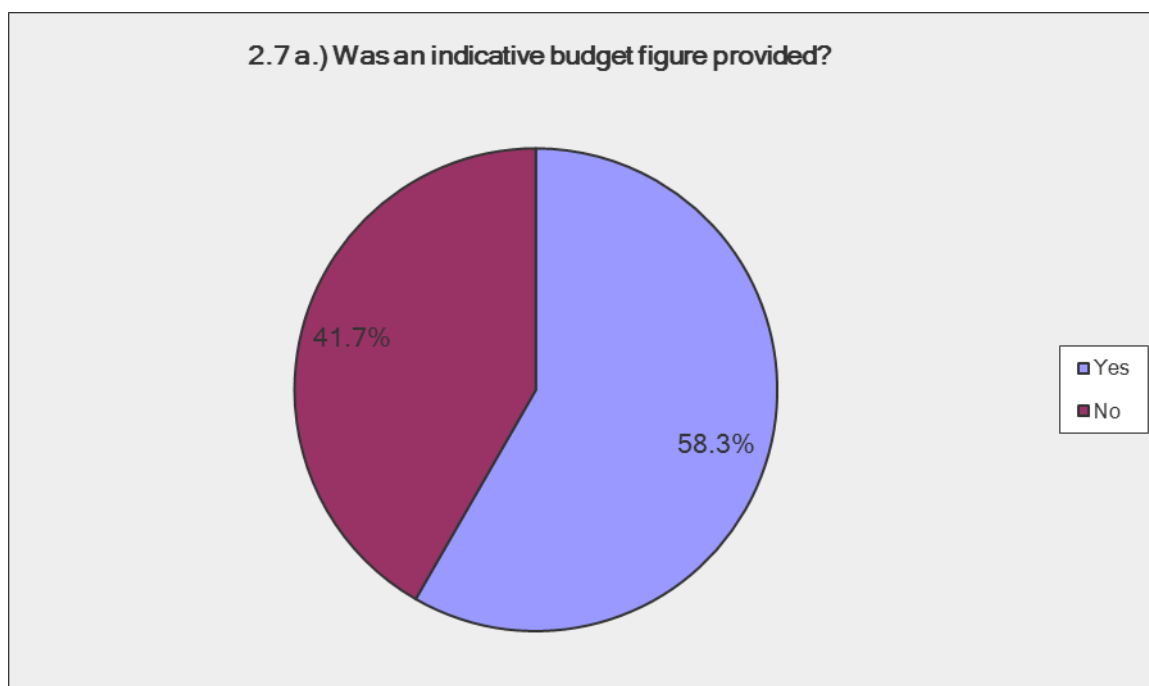
Although fit is important narrowing of strategic choice compromises the integrity of the strategy, it was noted that LAGs utilising axis 1 measures helped keep farmers engaged and delivered a more rounded LDS for rural communities.

Lack of focus is an issue in some cases, in the Czech Republic success was only partial due to the selection of vague and general themes. In Flanders "All stakeholders wanted their themes in the LDS because there was no other option for them to get subsidies. This made the LDS very broad." On the other hand in England it was suggested that project delivery was more effective when LAGs delivered against a single axis and set of measures, although also stated that the missed opportunities for a broader spread of projects could not be measured.

Clear and consistent parameters and guidance appear to be important in helping LAGs set effective and practical strategic themes. There are indications of a need to strengthen the fit of strategies within the RDP and with other programmes. Alongside this there is a need to avoid too narrow a focus but at the same time to avoid a catchall approach, a focus within an axis contributes to critical mass but limits the strategic scope, community and sectoral engagement.

1.4.3. Indicative Budget

Respondents were asked whether the MA had provided LAGs with an indicative budget figure prior to the development of their strategy.



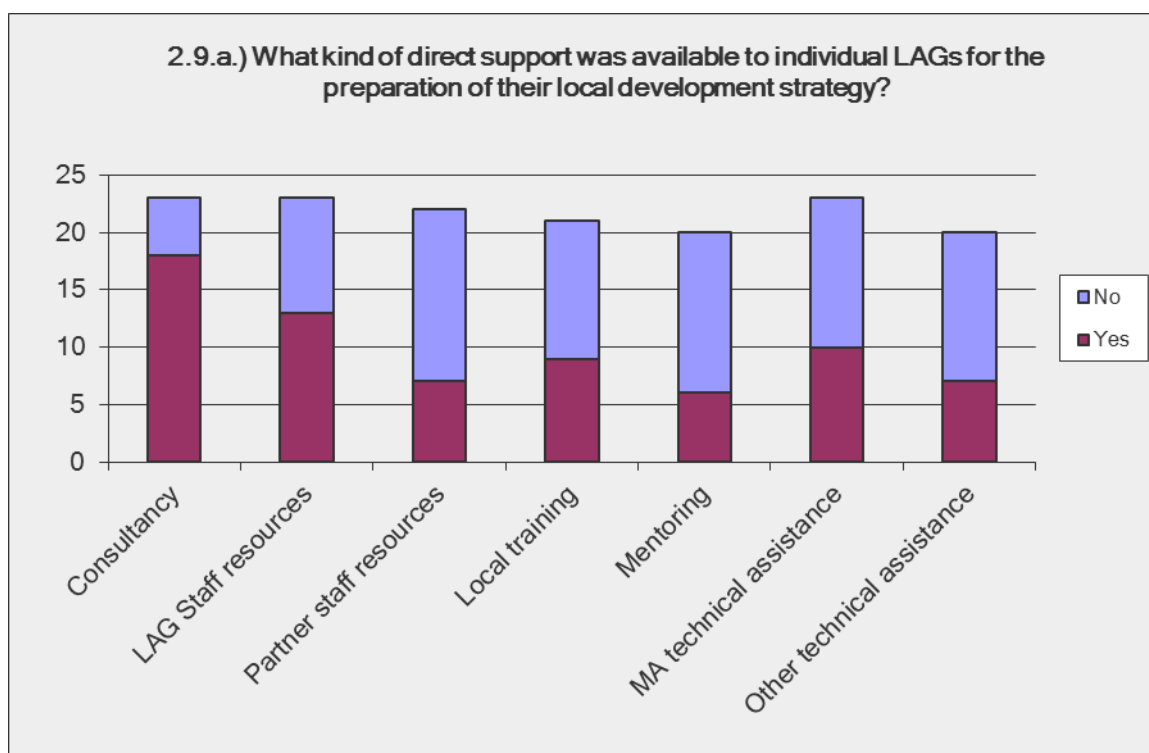
In total 14 respondents said such a budget was provided, 10 said it was not. Where such a budget was provided MAs generally indicated that this had a positive effect on the quality and realism of strategies and their preparation. For example, "It was positive aspect because LAGs knew better design their needs and priorities in strategy according the amount of budget" (Slovak Republic) and "the LAGs should have a financial orientation not to build castles in the air" (Bavaria). The Flanders respondent explained that the budget division between axes 3 and 4 and between provinces was set which allowed potential LAGs to closely estimate their future budget. The Swedish respondent commented that when LAGs realised they could access more funds if

they incorporated all axis in to their strategies they did so, even if their original plan was to work only in axis 3.

1.5. STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

1.5.1. Type and Value

The questionnaire identified six main categories of direct support which were commonly available to individual LAGs for the preparation of their local development strategy. When asked what kind of direct support was available to individual LAGs for the preparation of their LDS, the most common responses were consultancy (18) (from a variety of sources including public sector partners), and LAG staff resources (13). Less frequent were MA technical assistance (10) and local training (9), followed by partner staff resources (7) other technical assistance (7) and mentoring (6).



Generally consultancy, LAG staff costs and MA technical assistance were available for the greatest period prior to submission, but this was variable across respondents and there were notable exceptions e.g. with mentoring being available for over a year in some cases, examples of extensive training programmes and significant inputs of partner staff time.

Only Cyprus, Sweden and England gave a value to some of the direct support received. The highest financial value placed on any form of support was the input of LAG staff in Cyprus. In England LAGs were allocated an LDS development budget of between EUR 5,000 and 25,000 which could be applied to these resources. In Sweden the MA provided LAGs with EUR 25,000 of technical assistance.

The Estonian respondent mentioned a LAG membership fee to covering running costs while the Polish respondent explained that direct financial support was unavailable during the transition period. The Andalusian respondent explained that it was difficult for LAGs to draft a strategy without financial support during the transition period. The Flanders respondent explained that a

further issue was that only the set-up costs of finally approved LDSs were refunded, "which is not good. This (together with other reasons) resulted in only 10 LDS being introduced and all were approved."

Although consultancy is the single largest element it is clear that there is a wide range of support available and utilized provided in many different ways. The ongoing involvement of LAG, MA and partner staff resources and mentoring is an enormous resource here and ensuring continuity in this appears to be of critical importance here.

1.5.2. Differentiation in Guidance and Support

The questionnaire explored whether there was any differentiation in the level of guidance and support between new and more experienced LAGs. Perhaps surprisingly this found that only 6 of the 22 respondents said that there was any such differentiation.

The Swedish and Andalusian respondents said that experienced LAGs actively mentored new LAGs. In Estonia the initial 24 LAGs received support, two later LAGs took part in special 'info days', while in Finland where there had been both non LEADER and LEADER + LAGs the non-LEADER + LAGs received extra guidance on international and business projects. In England the more experienced LAGs required less funding and support during the development of their LDS than new LAGs.

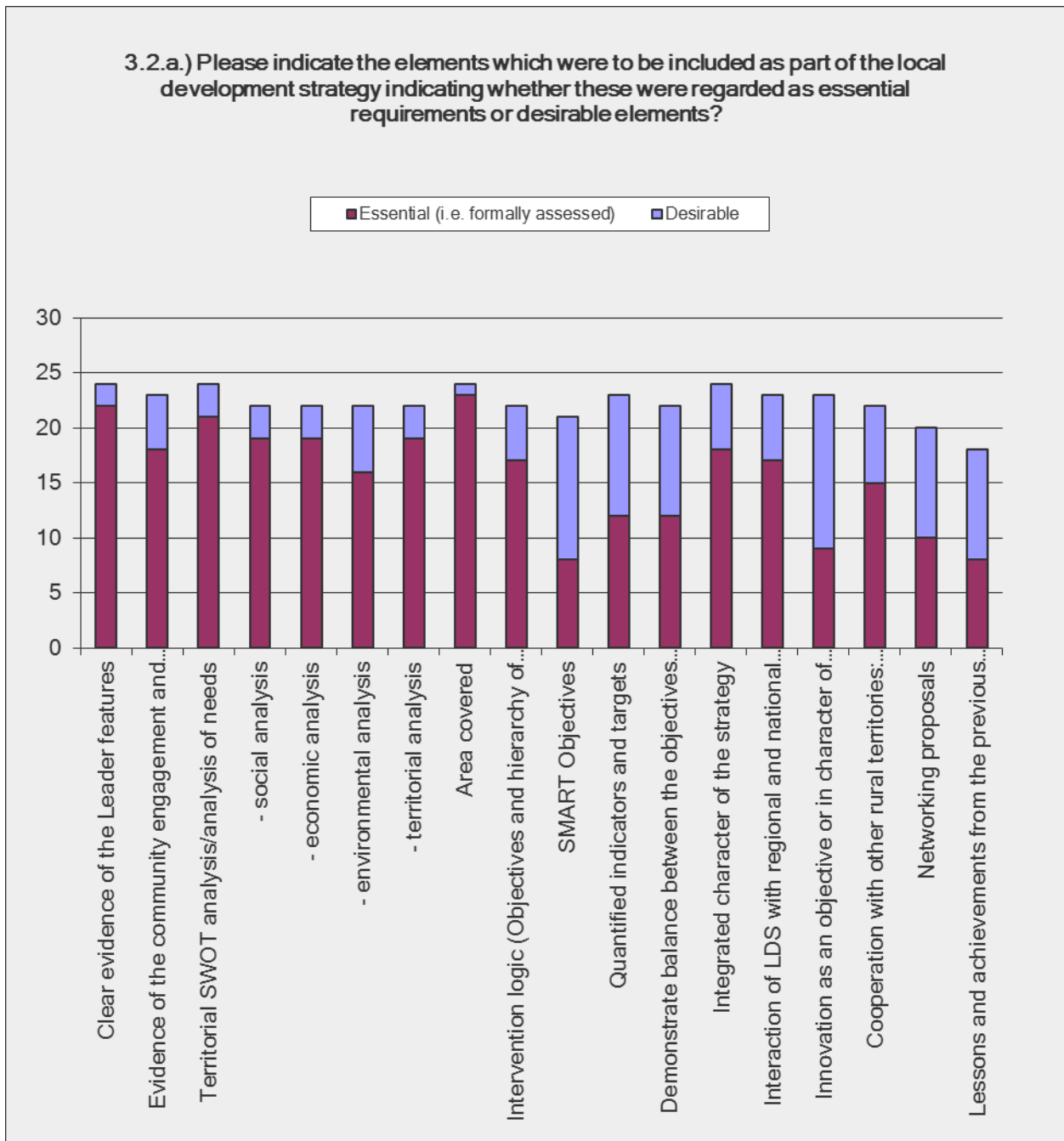
1.6. STRATEGY FORMAT AND CONTENT

1.6.1. LDS Defined by MA

When asked only one respondent indicated that the MA had not defined a specific LDS format, content and structure for LAGs. When asked to describe the structure and format the majority of respondents referred to other documents or annexes which are not available for this analysis, these appear to be in MS languages. Two MAs identified their main criteria, the Bavarian respondent listed close relation with the area, bottom up, integrated approach, conclusiveness, relation with other measures, environmental protection, sustainability, intended or planned cooperation with other LAGs, and existence of project selection criteria. The Czech Republic respondent noted similar criteria but included "involvement of women, people under 30 and farmers", while in La Rioja the closest social targeting statement was "Mechanisms to ensure the principles of objectivity, publicity, fairness and free competition." In England there was again regional variation with a template and guidance notes only provided by some of the regions.

1.6.2. LDS Elements

The questionnaire outlined 14 LDS elements and asked respondents to indicate whether these were addressed and whether regarded as essential (i.e. formally assessed) or desirable elements. This analysis is illustrated in the following chart.



The highest ranked essential elements were; the Area covered (23), Clear evidence of the LEADER features (22) and the Territorial SWOT analysis / analysis of needs (21). The SWOT analysis was subdivided between the social, economic, environmental and territorial elements, the only differentiation here was a lower 'essential' ranking accorded to the environmental analysis, the balance of this was accorded a 'desirable' ranking.

Evidence of the community engagement and consultation process (18), and Integrated character of the strategy (18) were elements frequently ranked as essential, as was the Interaction of LDS with regional and national rural development strategies (17). This latter ranking is interesting given that problems have already been identified in this area.

Intervention logic, with 17 essential rankings is worryingly low and appears inconsistent with the SWOT figures (23). This causes greater concern when considered along with the Quantified indicators and targets, just 12 essential rankings and the SMART Objectives, only 7 essential

rankings. The lack of coherence and consistency between these elements suggests that there is a considerable lack of clarity and some confusion here indicating a need for clarification and guidance.

Learning from others and learning from the past both receive low essential rankings with Networking scoring 10 and lessons and achievements for the previous period 8. The latter figure may be partly explained by new LAGs but, as it received the lowest total combined ranking gives serious cause for concern.

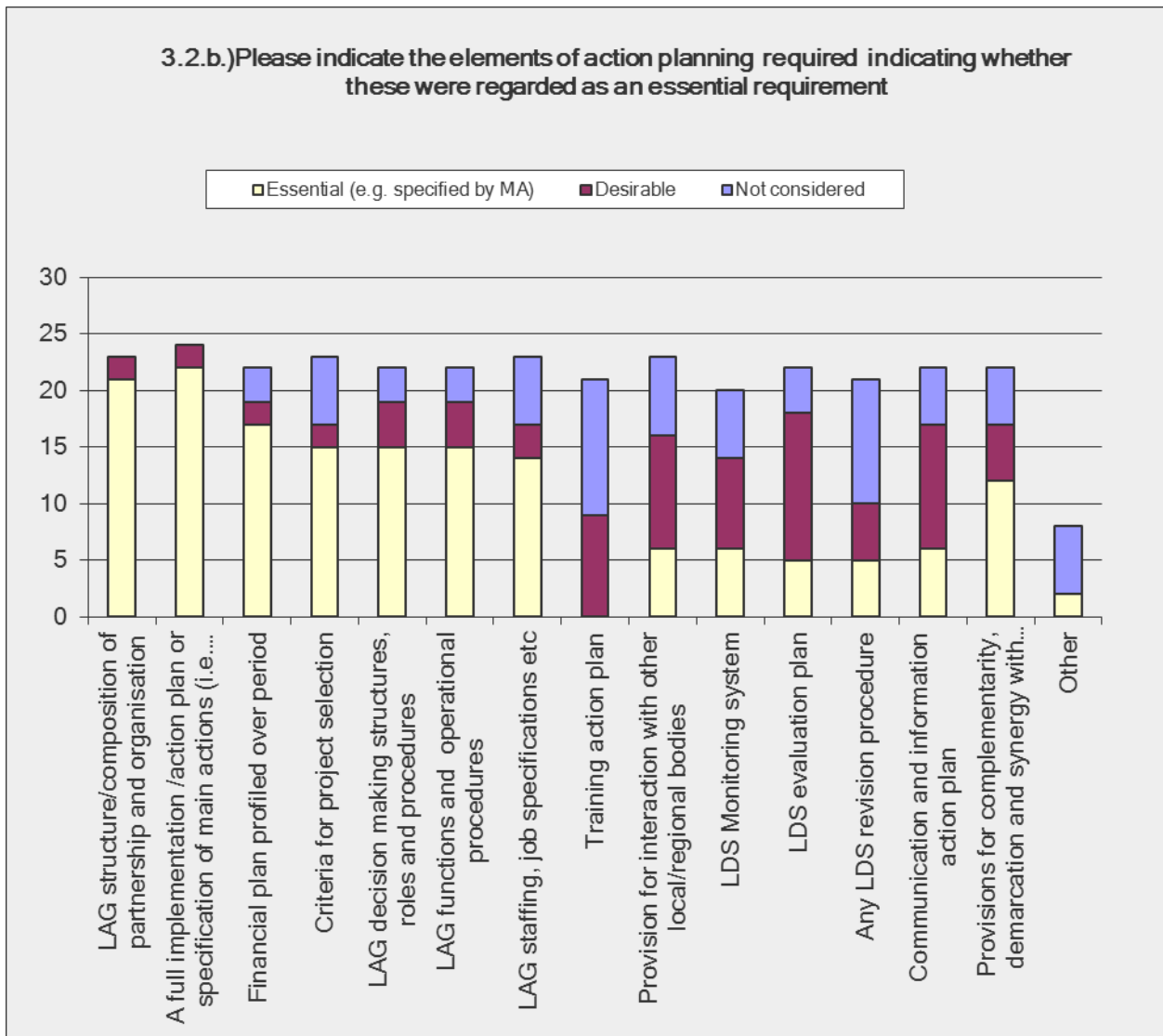
An essential ranking of 14 for Innovation as an objective or in the character of strategy appears likely to be an area requiring attention going forward into the post 2013 scenario.

Aspects considered to be problematic or representing good practice were relatively minor. The Polish respondent explained that there was a "problem with lack of definition and there was a great difference among LAGs in understanding what is innovative. Big problem!". Under cooperation with other rural territories: strategy or plan, the English respondent said this was sometimes difficult to achieve during the LDS preparation phase

Interestingly, given the wider findings here when discussing quantified indicators and targets the respondent from Mainland Finland stated that the LDS required clear indicators but they did not specified to be quantified.

1.6.3. Action Plan

As with the strategy the questionnaire presented a range of elements which might commonly be considered as part of a LAG action plan, indicating whether these were essential, desirable or omitted and whether either integral to the plan or strategy or added as separate elements. The main findings are presented in the chart below.



The elements of action planning most frequently described as essential requirements were an implementation action plan or specification of main actions (22 of the 24 respondents rated this as essential), LAG structure/composition of partnership and organisation (21) and Financial plan profiled over period (17). In many respects these are the most straightforward and unchallenging elements and were comprehensively covered when those included as separate additions were taken into account. The fact that 3 MAs did not consider a financial plan as an essential element is however somewhat surprising.

Criteria for project selection, LAG decision making structures, roles and procedures and LAG functions and operational procedures were each mentioned 15 times, and LAG staffing, job specifications etc. mentioned 14 times. In all these cases a proportion of MAs, 25% in the case of project selection and LAG staffing did not consider these as elements of the action plan or strategy. The separate addition of these elements was indicated however suggesting comprehensive coverage.

The essential ratings for the three linked elements of LDS Monitoring System (10), evaluation plan (10), and LDS revision procedure (6) are all low (well under 50%), and a significant proportion of the sample, circa 25% do not address these at all even as separate additions. When considered along with the findings in relation to the essential elements of the strategy this gives considerable cause for concern.

The most frequent elements to be omitted from consideration i.e. by circa 50% of MAs were a communication and information action plan, provision for interaction with other local/regional bodies, provisions for LDS revision and a training action plan. Training plans were not considered essential by any MA. Given the development capacity orientation of the LEADER approach, the importance placed on the knowledge and skills of the LAG staff, LAG members and other partners and the concerns over continuity between programmes and capacity retention this is a particularly surprising finding.

When asked to indicate elements of action planning regarded most frequently added as separate elements those identified were criteria for project selection, LAG staffing, job specifications etc, Training action plan, and Communication and information action plan.

Only seven respondents said that there were elements missing in the specified content which would have benefited LAG strategy quality. When asked to describe what was missing, the most frequent element mentioned was the LDS evaluation plan or monitoring system (5) followed by a process for managing conflict of interest. "The incorporation of monitoring targets in the LDS would have been preferable... targets are only asked afterwards (6 months after the approval of their LDS)."

The issue of greatest overall concern here is the lack of consistency between the different elements regarded as essential in an LDS or action plan. This is most particularly so regarding the issues around intervention logic, SMART objectives, quantified indicators and the SWOT analysis. The lack of priority placed on learning from previous programme periods is also worrying and taken together these elements all give serious cause for concern regarding the future evaluation of LDS.

The lack of priority placed on training action plans gives considerable cause for concern and appears inconsistent with the importance placed on retaining capacity between generations of the programme, a clear omission in an area of MA influence.

The key elements of strategy and action plans included in the questionnaire were carefully selected to be consistent with good practice and the expectations for the forthcoming programming period. The fact that there are gaps in relation to all these elements both in relative and absolute terms indicates an overall lack of consistency. The lack of perception of gaps by MAs also is somewhat surprising. A comparative analysis of the consistency of the different MA formats would be interesting however a detailed specification and interpretation of the essential core elements as provided for in the draft General and Rural regulations is of greater importance now.

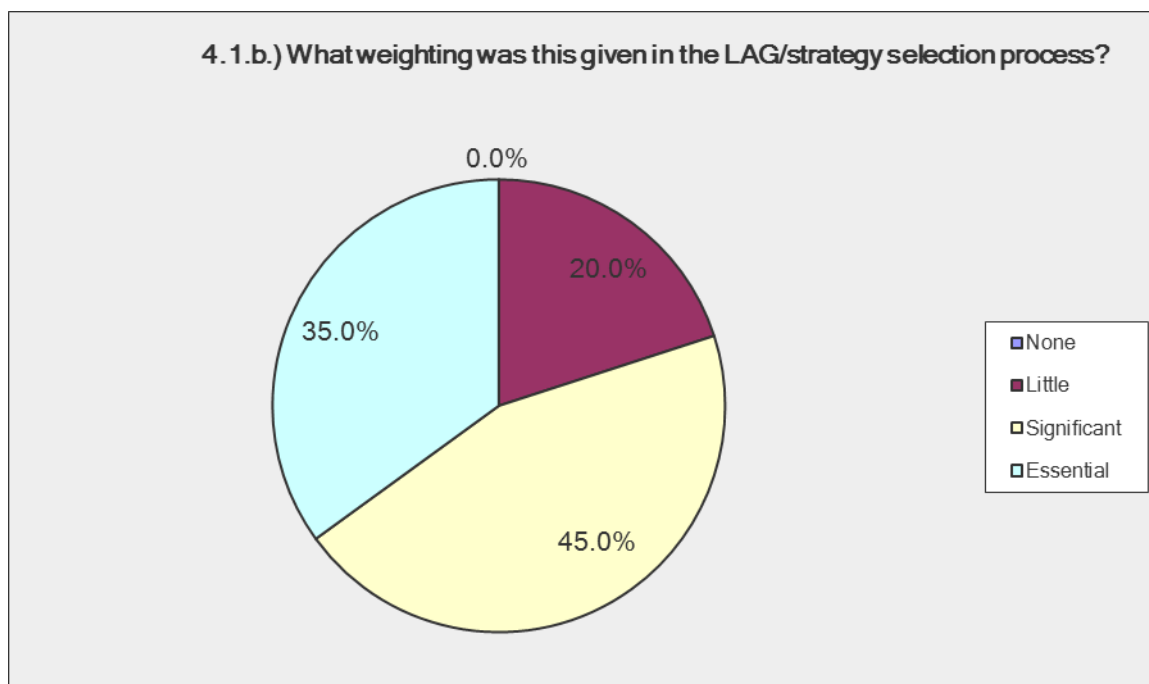
1.7. STRATEGY SELECTION

1.7.1. LAG Selection Criteria and Weighting Factors

MAs were asked to provide the strategy selection criteria, responses here were rather disappointing. In total 17 responses were received of which seven MAs selection criteria have been provided in the form of attachments. Others merely referenced their internal document and a further proportion provided some high level or rather general criteria. Further information and analysis is needed here and this should be addressed in order to develop a typology.

1.7.2. Validation of the Strategy

The questionnaire probed the specific issue of the formal validation or endorsement of the strategy within the local community and the weighting placed on this in strategy selection.



In the majority of cases this aspect was considered, only three MAs did not do so. Of those who did assess this aspect 80% considered this to be essential or significant.

1.7.3. Selection Process

When asked who undertook the selection process, most respondents referenced a selection committee or select committee with varying degrees of stakeholder representation, some used a blend of regional and national input and expertise, in some cases the panel operated at regional level.

In 13 cases this committee was either solely comprised of those involved in MA, PA and regional management, here there appears to be a risk of an overly administratively focused approach. In three cases the MA led approach was advised by external consultants with expertise in the field. There were five examples provided involving wider groups of stakeholders and including community representation, two MAs had used the Programme Monitoring Committee. There is no real consistency of approach evident here.

When asked for the basis or extent of the relevant knowledge and experience of the decision makers, several answers referenced external experts or practitioners with experience with LEADER + or a general familiarity with rural development. Other than this the majority of the experience identified however was at a programme management level with little on the ground experience cited. Few issues were identified other than by the Swedish respondent who commented "More education before start! Start the process earlier!"

This appears to be an area where some guidance on the conduct of decision making and composition of such bodies would be beneficial, particularly in light of the local development provisions of the General Regulation.

1.7.4. Feedback on LDS Submissions

A relatively high degree of confidence in the transparency of the LAG / strategy selection process was evident, 17 respondents considered the process to be completely so with six believing it to be so to a significant degree.

When asked to briefly describe how they provided feedback to LAGs a significant quantitative difference was apparent with responses split quite evenly between those who used generic or more administratively driven mediums such as circulars and postings on web pages to those who engaged in individual correspondence or dialogue on an ongoing basis. The following comments are indicative of this range.

“Notification of changes are published on the web page of paying agency.” (Slovak Republic)

“Ongoing dialogue was key to this, in an open, fair and consistent manner. Bringing prospective LAGs together at stage 2 helped facilitate joint learning and also allowed the MA to give a consistent message.” (England)

“We informed all the applicants who had failed in the first selection about the reasons and we gave recommendations how to improve. Every LAG got two chances and most of them used that.” (Bavaria)

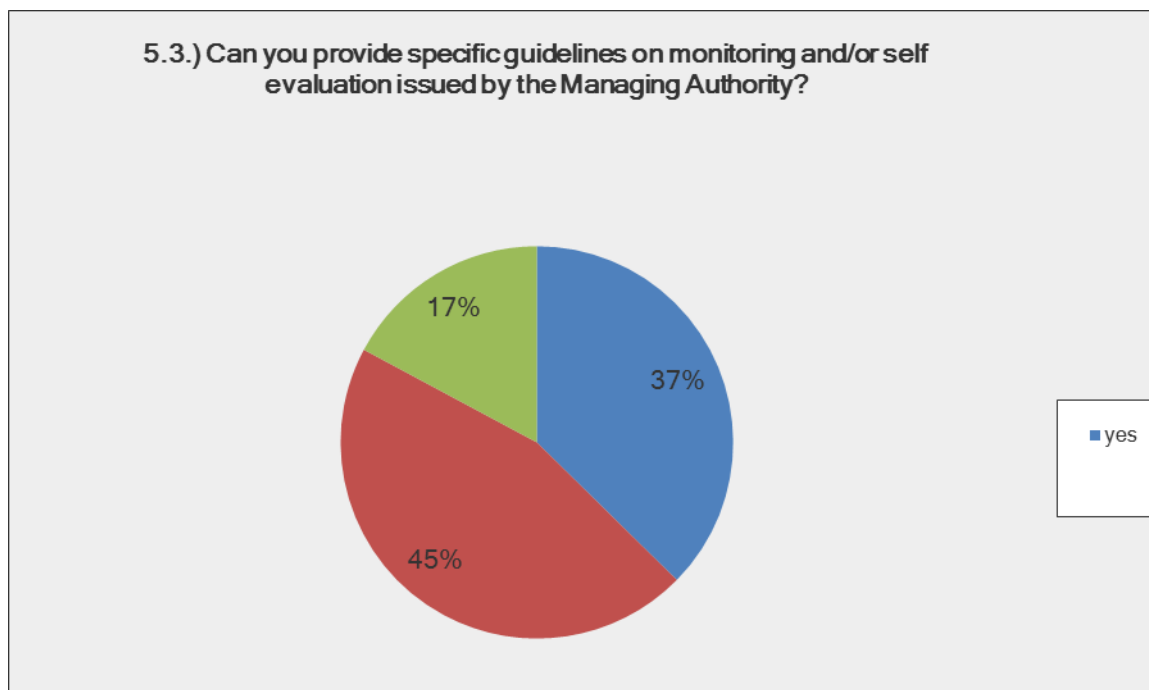
Again there is a lack of consistency of approach here and a clear differentiation in the transparency and value of feedback provided; the more iterative approaches are clearly designed to improve the quality of the strategies adding value to the process. This may be more resource heavy but is clearly more consistent with the LEADER model and good practice in multi level governance.

1.8. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The questionnaire explored a variety of different aspects of monitoring and evaluation, this was in the form of a preliminary enquiry to inform subsequent work by the Focus Group but also strategy design considerations. This considered whether guidelines were provided to LAGs, self-evaluation by LAGs, progress reporting and amendments to LAG strategies.

1.8.1. Guidelines

Over 60% of MA respondents indicated that they were unable to provide specific guidelines issued by the MA on monitoring and / or self-evaluation however a similar proportion of LAGs were expected to undertake self-evaluation.



There is a clear inconsistency here resulting in a significant gap in guidance and support to LAGs with consequent downstream effects likely in terms of the adequacy and consistency of approach within and between programmes.

1.8.2. Self-evaluation

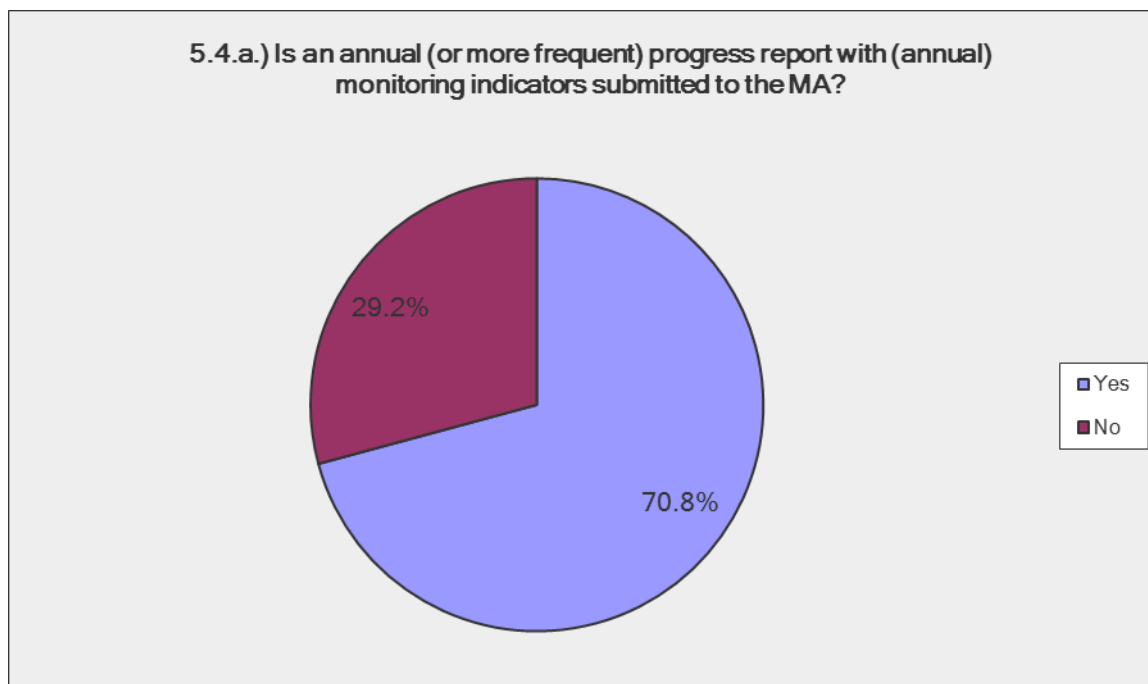
With regard to undertaking self-evaluation typically LAGs were encouraged to undertake self-evaluation but, with the exception of the Czech Republic this was not mandatory. The main approach favoured seemed to be to leave this to the discretion of the LAG, in a limited number of cases this was reported to be set out in the LAGs LDS.

The majority of respondents who said that self-evaluation was not expected favoured more centralised approaches often using external consultants.

1.8.3. Progress Report Submission

The majority of the MAs (17 respondents) indicated that submission of an annual progress report with monitoring indicators by the LAG was required by the MA. When asked whether or not this annual report requires approval by the MA, answers were evenly split. These responses also revealed a split in the way these reports were utilised. In some cases the formal Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) indicators were not required in these reports, these were compiled separately by the MA for their implementation reports, in others such as Finland use these as a basis for compiling the Annual Implementation Report (AIR).

A number of MAs identified other forms of annual review, for example in England annual reviews are conducted through face-to-face meetings which in some cases then have a direct bearing on the following year's budget.



Where relevant respondents were also asked to explain why annual reports do not require approval by the MA. In the Czech Republic only a mid-term self-evaluation is required, while in Sweden the MA monitors LAGs closely and there is some control of their function, but no further details were given.

Again there is something of a lack of consistency here and the limited information provided suggests that the reports prepared by LAGs could be used to greater effect locally and centrally respectively in terms of monitoring the performance of the strategy and in informing the AIR.

1.8.4. LAG Revision of LDS

With only one exception respondents said that LAGs are able to revise the LDS during the programming period. When asked to describe the occurrence / frequency, basis and scope of revision considerable variation was evident. Frequency of revisions ranged from once a year (Extremadura) to only in rare circumstances (Cyprus), "not defined" (Czech Republic) and at any time in the case of Finland. Several respondents (such as Luxembourg and Flanders) said there were yet to be any revisions.

The scope of revisions varies widely, overall 25% of MS report that financial adjustments took place, a similar proportion revised selection criteria and associated priorities. In Bavaria changes have been limited to increasing or decreasing territory, in Hungary. "The scope was specified, the revisions were total." In Poland only the strategic goals cannot be modified, and modifications of indicators, redrafting of operational objectives and connecting operational objectives to financial plans have been obligatory reflecting operational experience. "A lot of them change the criteria because at the beginning they drafted criteria (which were too general) insufficiently precise or detailed to select the best projects."

There is no great consistency in what is done here and revisions appear to be mainly minor, no formal process of strategy review is mentioned.

1.9. FURTHER POINTS

The following final two sections of this paper are presented in almost their raw form. Many of the points raised have a strong resonance with and/or reinforce issues raised elsewhere in this paper. Others are clearly more operational issues than being related directly to the LDS. At the next stage in drafting they may be incorporated in the main text however at this stage at least there is some merit in seeing them as they were originally presented representing the issues respondents wished to highlight.

1.9.1. LDS Implementation

When MAs were asked to add any other relevant points on the elaboration or implementation of LDS a limited number of such points were raised; these are

- More detailed training conferences that focus on agencies the MA and Paying Agency delegate responsibility to (Andalusia),
- The use of a common methodology for the development and implementation of the LDS for the whole of Europe to make it easier to facilitate knowledge transfer (Andalusia),
- The value of local meetings for LAG staff and chairs to share practice and share solutions (England),
- The importance of a nationally consistent support structure, (England),
- The lengthy time to make revisions with an over worked MA, particularly with insufficiently detailed strategies (Hungary),
- The importance of a permanent professional regional LAG management (Luxembourg),
- Specific LEADER -indicators and LAG criteria specified from the Commission (Sweden),
- The importance of aligning local development strategies with development strategies at municipal level to ensure coherence at local level (Ireland).
- The integrated approach designed to meet local needs does not always translate into the LDS as sometimes this would be incompatible with a plan containing separate actions (France).

1.9.2. Problems and Solutions

In the final section of the questionnaire MAs were asked to identify the main problems (difficulties or bottlenecks) and solutions(good practices) which they are aware of which are worthy of wider attention. Many more solutions than problems were identified, both of these sets have been grouped and are presented below;

Problems:

Timing:

- Delay in starting the programme.

- Challenges of running of LAGs between two programme periods.

Economic:

- The main difficulty is probably the deterioration of the economic climate since the LDS was designed. Economic crisis. The main problem lies in the difficulties faced by project developers to obtain external financing, and carry out his execution.
- LEADER prioritises funding on non-productive projects rather than production, consequently generates little permanent economic activity.

LAG role and performance:

- The LAG's responsibility is not sufficiently highlighted, procedures should be modified
- There are huge difference in quality of work of LAGs with a low accent on link between strategic objectives and selected projects"
- Don't let a consultant write your LDS - theirs little or no ownership as result."
- LAGs were not obliged to change LDS after their evaluation by MA.
- The groups often become merely assistant line managers, forgetting their mission of promoting and animation. The great responsibility of their involvement in the management of the Rural Development Programmes is forcing them to spend most of the time on management.
- Depending on the outcome of the Common Strategic Framework (CSF), LAGs will need a lot more support in managing and achieving synergies with multiple EURO funds.

Specification:

- Vague definition of cooperation measure

Good Practice:

LEADER method:

- Innovation and community involvement. The groups that believe in the philosophy LEADER, can perform very interesting performances could hardly develop the administration.
- I'd like to see more LAGs doing peer to peer support for each other, possibly facilitated by the NRN.
- In many areas we enjoyed the continuation of the LEADER + LAGs and this recapture of knowledge meant that delays during the start-up and development phase were kept to a minimum.

Consistency of guidelines:

- The LDS quality must be on a certain level. There must be a system to measure this, maybe checklists.

- The organization of transnational LEADER meetings at European level at the beginning of a programme period is essential for promoting transnational cooperation projects; LEADER people must get in touch to develop transnational cooperation ideas
- Ensure a common European understanding of transnational cooperation (procedure - permanent call, budget for the preparation of projects, one definition of local and common actions)
- Consider value added tax (VAT) as an eligible cost for all beneficiaries of LEADER.
- "A greater clarity in aid scheme and procedures applicable to LEADER method is specially important at European level.
- The wide range of topics which should be included in the LDS in order to make them effective implies the consideration of multiple and differing regulations and procedures. This means that LAGs spend more time analyzing the aid scheme or the applicable procedure for each operation than to dynamise the territory and activate the endogenous potential. (I.e: Different regulations and procedures for each economic sector and for State aids...).
- LEADER should have its own specific regulation in the context of the other European funds regulation."

Management and delivery

- A LDS selection committee including experts
- Possibility to organise a second round in order to allow an improvement of too weak LDS
- A solid financial plan with adequate resources
- The installation of our Bavarian " LEADER -Managers", who are public servants and work in state-run authorities and look after 5-7 LAGs each are good practice.
- "Devolution of the LEADER approach to the regional level had its advantages in that local conditions were factored into decision making and local priorities were much better understood. That said, there's a lot to be said for a nationally consistent process which is able to apply a degree of rigour and direction when it comes to national programme management - something we'd support as we continue to witness some LAG underspend across the country.

LAG operation:

- No budget limitation for running costs
- The 20% limit established for operating costs should be contingent on the objectives being achieved and on strategies being on integrated and innovative measures in addition to the traditional measures in the regulation.

- In the decision-making of the Local Action Groups the private sector (economic and social) represent over 50% of local players.

2. Initial findings of the Managing Authority questionnaire

Guidance: The questionnaire probed the guidance provided to LAGs in advance of strategy development. The provision of such guidance is found to be widespread but is rather inconsistent in both its content and the way in which it is provided.

The main split between the approach adopted by MAs is between guidance which is rather narrow and technical in content and which tends to be rather directive in its nature on the one hand and that which is wider, more comprehensive and rounded. There is also a spread in quality evident within this as the usefulness ranges from the poor to the excellent.

The way in which guidance was delivered tended to vary with the type and scope of provision. The wider and more complete approaches tended to use a variety and multiplicity of methods. They also tended to establish a good fit with the other elements of support available to LAGs in the development process.

From the responses here it may be concluded that effective knowledge transfer is necessary for effective multi-level governance and that good quality guidance is an essential element in establishing this.

Training: The amount of training, the way in which it is provided and its content all vary significantly between RDPs and Member States. In total 80% of MAs responding provided LAGs with training in relation to their LDS.

The delivery of this was split between national, regional and local levels. The content and methods of training provision varied to a similar degree to that of guidance provided. The most effective training provided appeared to be delivered through an iterative approach which invited participation and dialogue. This addressed the essential issue of Knowledge Transfer within programmes which appears to be less good that it could or should be.

In some cases training involved experienced LAGs mentoring novices, this was thought effective.

Strategy preparation: The processes of strategy preparation involved a wide range of different start dates between RDPs with a diverse range of factors cited as contributing to this. Despite the wide range of strategy preparation start dates, there is a clear recognition that the different generations of programmes need to be connected in order to ensure continuity (which is recognised to be of high importance).

The most common approach to seeking proposals from LAGs was an open call for all rural areas for the submission of strategies. There is some evidence of targeting within this, this is done by various factors, primarily geographic areas, followed by specific groups of people, organisation types and socio economic conditions.

The time allowed by the various MAs for strategy submission varied widely, a proportion of these submission windows were adversely impacted by implementing legislation delays either shortening development time or strategy implementation time with resultant pressure on n+2 delivery.

There is no single ideal time for strategy development, which is very dependent on LAG capabilities. The key point appears to be the ability to match the different LAG capabilities in terms of both time and approach, iterative approaches work well in this respect.

Strategy submission: The approach to strategy submission was split between those MAs who favoured single rounds (16) and those using multiple rounds. In both these approaches it was possible to employ a single stage or multiple stage application process. A minority of MAs employed a formal expression of interest approach with pre-selection of LAGs, others employed less formal approaches.

Multiple submission rounds allowed for a process of 'levelling', providing the less developed LAGs (and hence strategies) an opportunity to catch up. The Expression of Interest method tended towards a more iterative approach and enabled rationalisation of e.g. geographic areas, at an early stage in the process. MAs utilised each of these approaches and some a combination of both.

LAG Autonomy: Two main aspects of LAG autonomy were examined, LAG area and strategic themes, the feedback appears to indicate that there was more freedom afforded in relation to themes however the position is more complex.

With regard to defining geographic area, LAGs were free within given parameters and there was a recognition that these were driven by multiple drivers e.g. territorial and population coverage. A limited number of issues arose regarding areas, these related to ensuring sufficient, critical mass, a lack of coherence and the effects of external influences vs the local fit (local priorities, conditions, capabilities etc). Local fit was thought critical in enabling the benefits of bottom up involvement.

With regard to themes, MAs indicate that in 80% of cases LAGs were free to choose and that this was generally successful. Freedom to choose tended to rest within a set of wider parameters, these included the national or regional RDP and other programmes. LAGs had relative freedom within these, but these parameters need to be very clear and consistent in the guidance if strategic themes to be effective and practical. Overall strategic fit could be strengthened.

Over 60% of MAs provided LAGs with an indicative budget, this was thought effective in that it improved both the quality and realism of LDS proposals.

Development support: MAs were consulted regarding a range of LDS development support commonly available to LAGs. The three elements most commonly available to LAGs were consultancy, LAG staff resources and MA technical assistance. The fact that these were available as part of a wider range was important as different LAGs have different needs.

LAG, MA and partner involvement is critical e.g. in training and mentoring, this represents a large resource which is valued in contributing to continuity. There is however little differentiation in support for old and new LAGs, mentoring was noted to be important here.

Strategy and action plan format and content: Almost all MAs specify a format for the strategy, there is a wide variation in what these formats contain and in the relative priority placed on the different elements. There is a general lack of consistency in the approaches observed.

The three highest priority essential strategy elements were the area definition, LEADER features and the territorial SWOT analysis. The biggest deficits or gaps were in specification of indicators

and targets, SMART objectives and learning from previous periods. Overall there was a lack of coherence, clarity and consistency.

When considered together there were gaps in strategy and action plan specifications. Some of these are surprising e.g. project selection criteria, staffing etc., given the maturity of LEADER. Not one MA thought a training plan was essential despite the high importance of staff and skills. Innovation was also a weak priority.

Strategy selection: When questioned about strategy selection criteria feedback was rather general with only a small number of examples provided.

Strategy selection is normally undertaken by a committee, these present a variety of memberships but overall there is a tendency for a public sector or administrative focus. Any rural development and LEADER experience members possessed tended to be programme management oriented. Once again there was no real consistency of approach and some core guidance would be useful.

The transparency of the selection process was thought to be adequate. Feedback on the submissions was by a variety of means with varying degrees of success. The important factor here was that feedback and communication should contribute to improvement, this represents good multi-level governance practice.

Monitoring and evaluation: MAs were questioned directly regarding monitoring and evaluation but this is of a primary nature only to inform later work.

Self-evaluation is favoured but not mandatory, over 60% of MAs expect LAGs to self-evaluate, however 60% of MAs could also not provide specific guidelines. This presents a real gap in guidance to LAGs.

The use of LAG progress reports is differentiated, some are CMEF indicator based others are not, some feed directly into the AIR? others do not. It appears that these could be used better in strategy monitoring and AIR? feed in.

Most LAGs are permitted to review their strategies but there is wide variation in the scope of the review, how it is done and its frequency. The scope of review ranges from finances to objectives. The frequency ranges from once in the programme period to multi-annual.

There is a real need for consistency in this whole area and to investigate the existing position and effective approaches further.



Annex 5: Discussion Summary on Better Local Development Strategies of
the 1st FG4 meeting 18-19 October 2011, Lisbon, Portugal

Compiled by the ENRD Contact Point



Connecting Rural Europe

Agenda Item	Three parallel themed working groups facilitated by the co-chairs
Discussion Points	<p>Three parallel workshops on the following specific themes were organised:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Defining the content of the local development strategy2. Methods for strategy preparation3. Enabling the development of quality local development strategies, conditions and support <p>The summaries below directly reflect the workshop discussions themselves. They have not been synthesized as at this stage, but will be used to inform the progress report (see above).</p> <p><u>Workshop 1: Defining the content of the local development strategy (Chair Ana Pires da Silva)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the next programming period local partnerships will be free to use the EAFRD and other EU Funds to support territorial development of rural areas in a coordinated way, so that they are encouraged to develop multi-fund local development strategies. A possibility to improve the partnership between peri-urban/ urban vs. rural areas, is the establishment of regional partnerships based on regional strategies. It is important to define the scale of the territory. Local has to remain local, and shouldn't grow into regional.• In order to better facilitate the budget preparation of the LDSs, it is suggested that the EC should develop some guidelines for LAGs on the multi funding approach in order that LAGs can understand:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- where the funding is coming from;- what is possible within the different funds.Having this guidance would enable them to have a clear understanding from the beginning (LDS preparation) what is the size of the budget that is available for the implementation of their strategy.• It is important to start to prepare the LDSs as soon as possible within the current programming period. It needs to be explored and ensured that funds are available for the preparation process.• Size of the LDS document: It might be useful to limit the min./max. length of the LDS. It may also be useful to make a recommendation (non-binding) in terms of the minimum length of the LDS and to provide LAGs with guidance on what suggested content;• Clear definition of rural areas and rural population are required, and also clear definition of urban areas (and what is not urban, that is rural);• Analysis of the situation of the local territory through a SWOT analysis is important and identification of needs that have to be addressed in the area covered by the programme.• All the 3 dimensions of sustainable development (Socio-cultural, economic and environmental) should be taken into account when preparing the SWOT analysis for a territory to ensure 3-D Sustainability.• LAGs should have more autonomy in defining their LDS, which is in line with the bottom-up approach and a good source of innovation and creativity. Dependency of local/regional and national governments kills creativity and

innovation.

- **Co-operation under LEADER:**
 - A set of common rules are needed on EU level (eg. On-going applications)
 - Regional/ National funds should be available to complement EU Funds.
- Preparation of **clear strategies** (translation priorities into action) should be ensured.
- **Strategies should be kept broad** (seen more as a process, that can be adjusted and formed if needed), but with clear priorities set from the beginning. However, there can be a conflict/contradiction between 'broad and flexible' strategies and the strictly regulated RDPs and its measures (e.g. in terms of eligibility).
- Preparation of a **communication plan** should be included as part of the strategy;
- Preparation of **evaluation plan** should be included as part of the strategy;
- **LEADER specific indicators for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)** should be included as part of the strategy. Proposal for consideration; FG4 could propose a list of indicators.
- **LAG management:** it is important to have clarity on implementation procedures of the LDS as well as the organisational structure of the LAG has to be clarified together with clear responsibilities.

Workshop 2: Methods for strategy preparation (chair Petri Rinne)

- There is a **difference between new and experienced LAGs**, they need different forms of guidance: Therefore it is important to clarify what methods can and should be used, including eg. the ENRD **LEADER Tool-kit** for LAGs;
- Providing LAGs with **guidance** has a high importance in order to:
 - inform them about what the minimum requirement is;
 - ensure a high degree of awareness of what is there and its accessibility. (eg.: the existing materials begin from the Regulation.)
 - The available funding envelope should be communicated to LAGs so that they can make their strategies realistic in terms of available funds.
- There is a need to think about the **people involved** in the preparation of the LDS and what their skills are.
 - LAG skills analysis/ actor analysis can be a useful tool: use a template in order to map who is involved and why, what skills are required and what is available? Ideally this could be conducted against a standard.
 - There is a need to ensure professional management of the LAG.
 - Can a vocational standard be established with an associated professional training programme?
 - There is an issue over the variable content and quality of training currently provided.
- **Mobilising different stakeholder groups** is important, therefore the use of innovative participatory techniques should be encouraged. (e.g. Local Development Contest (in one case 250 proposals were received); or an example from Finland, where a participatory minibus touring around the LAG territories and involving local people.
 - Business involvement is important. LEADER must have attractive support schemes for micro-businesses if it is expected to gain businesses interest in

LEADER.

- **Consultancy:** What human resources to use to develop the LDS - LAG staff and/or consultants?
 - Remember "consultants work for you": Consultants should serve the local communities in the preparation of LDS and it has to be clear that they are not the LEADERS of the process.
 - **Guidance** is needed on how to manage consultants' input;
 - Level of trust in LAGs's skills? "Nobody is a prophet on his/her own land", therefore there is a strong **need for outside expertise**. Support and training to certain standards from the MA and/or NRN is important.
 - **Multi-fund approach:** fisheries is expected to be a new and more common theme with the multi-fund approach, external expertise and consultancy input is even more important in this circumstance.
 - Case from Germany: A LAG Manager was not allowed to participate in the local strategy design at all. LAGs had to use external contractors, suggested that this due to a misinterpretation of EU competition rules. General issue over misinterpretation appears to be constraining LAGs and quality of strategies.
- **Competition rules:** LAG strategies should compete against a common LEADER standard rather than compete each other, i.e. the competition is solely on grounds of quality.
 - Latvia has a distributive per capita approach to funding allocation, this is easy but neither strategic nor outcome focused, they would prefer to use competition against a standard and thus improve the quality.
- The **strategy design process** can usefully be considered to have the following steps:
 - 1) Existing statistical data analysis: A sound data analysis process is essential and a core and comparable set should be identified. This will feed into indicators.
 - 2) Key stakeholders identification;
 - 3) Establishment of the key thematic groups: Use of themed subgroups to analyse social, economic, environmental data was key stage in strategy development in Hungary.
 - 4) Brainstorming on key measures/ strategies in each thematic group;
 - 5) Prioritising between the measures: Since different stakeholders have different priorities, therefore it is important how to narrow down the priorities in a democratic way. It is important to use 'democratic voting and prioritisation techniques' in the process, such as meetings and workshops (e.g. prioritizing issues or topics with sticky dots).
- There is a need to build **monitoring and evaluation** into the process to improve targeting and the setting of measureable and realistic targets.
 - Evaluators should be involved in better identifying and/or visiting EU level best practices in LDS.
- **LAG strategy approval and selection criteria:**
 - Clear and consistent criteria are required for strategy assessment and selection;
 - Strategy approval process should be made in 1 step or more steps?
 - LAGs don't know what they don't know at the start", therefore a **multi step LAG strategy approval process by the MA is seen as positive**. It can allow discussing and improving draft LDS through detailed consideration of the [approx.] 30 LDS evaluation points between the MA and LAGs (examples of this exist in Ireland and Finland)
 - Applying the multi-step process needs effort and time it but this pays off, therefore it is important to make use of the available time in this

- programming period.
- Suggest expression of interest followed by iterative process, treat strategies like a LEADER project.
- **Better networking between Managing Authorities:** better MA (MA to MA and with LAGs) communication between countries is needed. Exchanges between MAs would help to strengthen and speed up transfer of good practices and help to define effective methods in order to develop common approaches and improve communications (a priority).
- **Continuity and transition:**
 - The importance of clear rules to allow an effective process will contribute to the preparation of better strategies.
 - There are skills gaps in both new and existing LAGs, there are clear capacity development needs here for this part of the process.
 - People move on, therefore clear guidelines and systems required.
 - MA Capacity building: the FARNET experience and model with annual MA gatherings could be considered;
- Using **mentors** in the process should be encouraged. It was very successfully used in Sweden with structured and formalised approach to roll out LEADER more widely, where there were 12 LAGs in 2000-2006, increasing to 64 in 2007-2013. LAG Managers and Board members with massive experience from the previous programming period were mentoring the new LAG manager generations.
- **Training provision** must be addressed in strategy as a core element along with the overall level of competency and it needs to be identified how this will be resourced and what are the tools required.
 - The new draft regulation allows max. 25 % running and animation budget. Make best use of this budget, which provides the opportunity for some 5% of the budget to be used on training and capacity building (based on the current starting point of a max of 20% for running costs)?
 - Obligatory training cost budget? (Similarly as the 20% running cost budget.)

Workshop 3: Enabling the development of quality local development strategies, conditions and support (Chair Sanna Sihvola)

- **From the outset, LAGs must be provided with a clear framework of the rules, regulations and opportunities available to them.** This should cover, at least:
 - Funding opportunities (see also separate point below)
 - Methods of support
 - M&E requirements
 - Details of the overall process and timetable
 - Degree of LAG autonomy and operation of the subsidiarity principle
- **Clarity regarding the financial support available for consultancy and other strategy development support mechanisms is vital.**
 - From what source does the financial support come from
 - How, and at what stage in the process is it available (roles of MA/regional administration/municipalities)
- Given the need to avoid delays the above framework elements, including particularly a mechanism for financial support should be developed, available and communicated during the **transitional period** (the interface between the two programming implementation periods).
 - LAGs should be actively encouraged to take up the support opportunities available and in any case be pro-active from an early stage in the

- development of LDS.
- LAGs themselves should be pro-active in securing funding for strategy development, considering all possible funding sources.
- **As soon as practicable MAs should be geared up to provide operational support.** More broadly, mechanisms to put in place a 'learning process' for and feedback to LAGs will be important. What can be improved - based on the experience of the current programming period; how national/ regional level policies and local strategic priorities can be coordinated (a positive example of this is already occurring in Estonia).
- Similarly, as soon as practicable **LAGs could be formally invited to start work on developing LDS.**
- **The 'presence' of and knowledge about LEADER should be actively communicated with all organisations likely to be involved in the development of multi-fund LDS.**
 - This should help to ensure an appropriate balance of actors in the development of LDS.
 - In part be a 'political' process, and seek to positively influence the development of specific rules and procedures at the local and other levels within MS.
 - The EAFRD MA should actively open up opportunities and encourage the 'joining-up' of funding from different EU funds
- **The increased complexity of developing the institutional and operational framework for LDS in the new programming period must not be underestimated.** Therefore the process must start as soon as possible in order for: territories to be defined and to allow time for LDS to be adequately shaped and prioritised. There will not be any 'one-size-fits-all' solution.
- Throughout the time during which LDS are defined, assessed and approved:
 - MAs must be able to balance an effective, manageable process that does not stifle the bottom-up approach.
 - LAGs must be creative, opportunistic and confident.
- **A network of MAs between different MS and representing different EU funds could be set up at EU level** to facilitate the above processes. A network of MAs responsible for LEADER across the EU could start this partnership building process.
- **At the MS level, a group involving all the most involved actors should be set up** to develop the detailed framework for multi-fund LDS development, particularly in order to ensure that the principles of LEADER do not become diluted.



*European Network for
Rural Development*

Annex 6: Discussion Summary on Better Local Development Strategies, 7th LEADER Sub-Committee meeting, 23 November, 2011, Brussels, Belgium

Compiled by the ENRD Contact Point



Connecting Rural Europe

1. Discussion sessions

1.1. Discussion Session One (11.00 – 11.45)

Issues regarding the development of future Local Development Strategies (LDS) by Local Actions Groups

The meeting participants were asked to discuss the following four questions in 10 small groups:

- Q1.1) What preliminary information and guidance is needed to support the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy by a LAG in terms of both form and content?
- Q1.2) At what 'level' should decisions on the strategic themes and priorities of a Local Development Strategy be taken?
- Q1.3) What methods are most effective for the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy (e.g. participative methods, public meetings, consultancy, thematic discussion groups, validation by local community)?
- Q1.4) What should be the key considerations for a LAG when building the "evidence base" for its Local Development Strategy?

1.2. Discussion Session Two (11.45-12.30)

Requirements for the content and structure of future Local Development Strategies

The meeting participants discussed the following four questions in 10 small groups:

- Q2.1) What, if any, are the common thematic priorities which all Local Development Strategies to be selected under a programme should address?
- Q2.2) There is likely to be a requirement for future Local Development Strategies to take a broader perspective in order to strengthen complementarity with other funds. What should the priorities for this complementarity be?
- Q2.3) What is the most appropriate process for the approval of Local Development Strategies?
- Q2.4) There is an explicit requirement that LAGs address monitoring and evaluation in the next programming period, what are the priorities this indicates for strategy development in terms of both process and content?

1.3. Feedback from the discussion group chairs (12.30-13.00)

The chairs of the discussion groups provided immediate feedback on the questions and issues under discussion. The following summarise individual contributions, not the consensus of all the discussion groups.

- Regarding information and guidance: it is important that LAGs understand the whole of the 'policy chain' and that guidance be harmonised; clear information regarding the competencies (responsibilities) of each organisation must be provided. All of the above information should be provided in a timely manner. Consideration could be given to opening direct communications between the EC and LAGs; the possibility of incentivising LAGs financially for high quality LDS submissions could also be considered.
- Regarding the most appropriate degree of LAG autonomy; the process of deciding at what level (programme level or LAG level) to define themes should itself be participatory; a higher degree of financial autonomy for LAGs would also be beneficial.
- Regarding consultation methods: face-to-face meetings and the use of new media (social networking) are both important. At least 6 weeks should be allowed for any individual consultation.
- Regarding LDS preparation; consultants should be used with caution as there are examples of the submission of 'off-the-shelf' strategies.
- Regarding the LDS approval process: a two-step / iterative process is productive. It provides for an element of 'negotiation'. It should be recognised that new LAGs require more time to submit and revise a draft LDS.

- Regarding the evidence base: common interpretation of data is important (rather than just collection of statistics).
- Regarding M&E: this will be more important in the future programming process; more qualitative data should be collected and used. Quantitative information (SMART indicators) should nevertheless remain the backbone of the M&E information, but it must be geared to capture LEADER specificities. Self-evaluation will also become more important and if possible this may involve LAG specific indicators. LAGs must be prepared and supported for this.
- The points were also made that in the preparatory phase (for the new programming period), support should be given to the creation of LAGs where they don't already exist and that sufficient animation resources must be made available (for implementation, this should not be less than two persons per LAG).

1.4. General discussion

The floor was opened to a short general discussion:

- The use of local resources in the development of LDS is paramount and outside consultants should not be relied upon.
- Consideration should be given to explicitly recognising the role that LEADER plays in terms of lifelong learning for many of its protagonists.
- The new proposals beg the question of whether LEADER should continue to be a 'laboratory'; should now be considered as a larger initiative, structured more as part of the overall EU funds delivery systems – or try and fulfil both of these roles.

2. Results of Group discussions (14.00-15.00)

2.1. Feedback on Discussion Session One: Issues regarding the development of future Local Development Strategies (LDS) by Local Actions Groups

Michael Gregory (ENRD CP) presented a summary of the first session of group discussions. The specific questions discussed were defined in the light of the emerging issues of FG4.

Q1.1) What preliminary information and guidance is needed to support the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy by a LAG in terms of both form and content?

There was a consensus from the groups that: (i) clear common guidance to LAGs on the formal RDP rules is a necessary prerequisite, and; (ii) guidance on the process – including practical advice on how to develop a LDS is also necessary including information on what possibilities are allowed under the prevailing rules and regulations. It is important that the advice and guidance be given as soon as possible (ideally in 2013 not 2014) and that it remains constant. Repeated changes to the rules and guidance for LEADER and LDS has been a frustration in a number of Member States during the current programming period. The need for clear guidance explaining the applicable programme rules was therefore also noted.

It was recognised that new LAGs will require more guidance than established ones. The guidance provided should take this into account and it was also suggested that peer mentoring should be provided for (established LAGs helping new ones).

The groups' responses also indicated a number of other individual points. These included: that there should be a clear and common set of quality criteria communicated, and that LAGs could be incentivised, possibly by a higher budget being available to high quality submissions.

Q1.2) At what 'level' should decisions on the strategic themes and priorities of a Local Development Strategy be taken?

There was no consensus about this point. Some groups argued for full LAG autonomy in defining themes and priorities; justified because this is necessary in order for LAGs to feel full ownership of 'their' LDS. Others recognised a need for LAG autonomy within a common framework.

Several of the Groups highlighted the importance of the process. Specifically that LAGs should themselves be involved in defining the level at which themes and priorities are set and that the process of priority and theme setting should be participatory and two way.

Application of the principle of subsidiarity is also important in this context, i.e. decisions on LDS objectives should be taken at the 'lowest' (most local) level possible. One group called for more financial autonomy for LDS (and LAGs) and another reflected that whatever the rules, a good level of trust between the participating parties is always important.

Q1.3) What methods are most effective for the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy (e.g. participative methods, public meetings, consultancy, thematic discussion groups, validation by local community)?

The methods for which there was strongest support among the groups were:

- Face-to-face meetings;
- Professionally supported animation of local actors (a benchmark of every LAG needing a minimum of two animation staff was proposed).

Interestingly, two of the discussion groups considered that rather than defining the most effective individual consultative methods, the key to the development of a high quality LDS is conducting an holistic participative diagnostic of the area.

Regarding the phasing of the different types of methods, the majority (though not unanimous) view that the process should start with the constitution of thematic groups. Other methods considered effective were: focus groups (specifically used to test hypotheses after the input of thematic groups); activation of the support of local community groups; distinct consultation with local authorities and; the use of social media.

Interaction with the wider population is best done after the use of more targeted methods. Communication is a vital element of the development (and implementation) of a bottom-up LDS and the campaigns aimed at the wider public also need to be targeted.

It was also noted that it is highly desirable for the same individuals to be involved both in strategy development and implementation.

Q1.4) What should be the key considerations for a LAG when building the "evidence base" for its Local Development Strategy?

The use of the best (most up to date and relevant) available statistical data is important and the use of a research institute can be considered for capturing it. An LDS should take into account territorial diversity, thus geographic and other data with a local territorial dimension is important. Several groups noted that statistics on the links between the LDS and neighbouring areas is key, as this facilitated the development of an understanding of the economic and demographic dynamics of the area.

Over and above the statistics required, the following points were also made:

- Local – informed – interpretation of the data is important;
- Consideration should be given to the use of tailor-made qualitative questionnaires;
- Development and use of local case studies can add important insights;
- The experience of previous projects and already conducted evaluations should be captured;
- It is useful to find out how the process of evidence collection is approached elsewhere.

2.2. Feedback on Discussion Session Two: Requirements for the content and structure of future Local Development Strategies

John Grieve (ENRD CP) presented a summary of the second session of group discussions.

Although linked to the previous session the answers to all four of these questions were more forward, the questions derived from the FG 4 survey findings and the Lisbon meeting.

Q2.1) *What, if any, are the common thematic priorities which all Local Development Strategies to be selected under a programme should address?*

This question was given wider consideration than merely the identification of specific themes, in fact there was little direct feedback on specific topics. In some cases their necessity was even questioned. In general the view was that there should be a core set of priorities given from the top down. These should not be too restrictive or prescriptive, there should be some flexibility in their interpretation and in the rules governing their application.

There was a strong view expressed that the LEADER approach needs to widen from being exclusively rural and that it should move forward from acting as a laboratory to seeing its actions further mainstreamed (rolled out more generally).

There is a need to strengthen the local specific elements within the approach, to reinforce the link with local needs, being participative is a central component of this and this has to be actively pursued and strengthened. For example, there could be greater consultation in the identification of common strategic themes.

Where there was mention of specific thematic priorities there was considerable agreement; those mentioned were the economy, civic society and the quality of life, this latter element included aspects such as lifelong learning and local services.

It was evident from the discussions that the identified priorities had a strong fit with multi-fund approaches from which they were likely to benefit significantly if implemented.

Q2.2) *There is likely to be a requirement for future Local Development Strategies to take a broader perspective in order to strengthen complementarity with other funds. What should the priorities for this complementarity be?*

It was recognised that historically, and by its very nature, LEADER is integrative and that this is an area in which people have experience, but equally that it now faces new challenges in the new programming scenario.

The common view was that strategies should be holistic in nature, complementarity should be built in. This should enable strategies to target different funds for the different priorities but also to use different local resources and involve different sectors of the community.

On the other hand, whilst holistic is ideal, it is also important to recognise that there may be gaps in the situation locally, for example in the coverage or availability of the different funds vs the development priorities identified. This implies that the LDS will have to be flexible in how it addresses such needs, mismatches or gaps.

Monitoring and evaluation can be actively targeted at reinforcing the complementarity of the LDS, assessing how well this works and also assisting sharing experience between funds thus strengthening the overall approach.

It was highlighted that complementarity should be fundamental to the approach in the forthcoming period as the CSF is focused on the 2020 objectives. These objectives are common and therefore provide a common framework through which the local priorities can be identified in the context of the SWOT analysis and then translated into the local application of the funds.

Common systems and rules are a priority if complementarity is to be achieved in practice, and one group even went so far as to suggest delivery through a single common entity was the main consideration.

Q2.3) *What is the most appropriate process for the approval of Local Development Strategies?*

The groups relayed strong messages regarding the LDS approval process. The principal ones were that multiple steps (at least 2) were definitely preferable and that whatever the basis this process should be made very clear from the outset.

One of the most important aspects of the multi-step approach is that it necessarily involves feedback and dialogue between the different stakeholders, the local community, the LAG, and the managing authorities. This feedback is highly valued and has to be effective. This approach recognises that strategy development is a process - a 'construction project', it takes time and there is a real need for all the partners in both the partnership and multi-level governance structures to work together in pursuit of the goal of a quality strategy.

The multi-step approach suggests an approach which allows iteration, taking into account of the specificities of LAGs and need to allow new LAGs/areas to catch up, and to proceed in smaller steps. This will strengthen ownership and engender involvement and commitment.

LDS selection should be objective first and foremost and based on both quantitative and qualitative criteria. There should be a core set of common criteria.

There were two schools of thought on competitive processes: a large majority thought it good, others bad. This then begged the question 'on what basis should budget be allocated?' The majority view here was that it should be linked to and based on the assessment of the quality of the strategy, either relatively between LAGs or against a common standard. One dissenting voice suggested that the basis of this should be a per capita allocation.

Q2.4) There is an explicit requirement that LAGs address monitoring and evaluation in the next programming period, what are the priorities this indicates for strategy development in terms of both process and content?

The strong consensus among the groups was that all objectives should have quantified monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators, these can include what are generally considered to be qualitative aspects as quantification of these is also often possible.

With regard to monitoring and evaluation there was a strong demand for proper and clearer communication of what is expected from the outset, this should be accompanied by clear guidance.

There is scope for both common indicators and for LAG specific approaches, this should allow some of the specificities of LEADER to be addressed. There is however a need to be able to balance such specificity with the ability to aggregate these indicators at LAG, regional, national and EU levels. A common suggestion was that there should be a common core of EU indicators, these could be structured in such a way as to allow them to be further developed at the local level to shed a more acute light on local effects.

There were a number of points raised discussing the relative benefits and difficulties associated with qualitative and quantitative approaches in evaluation, some also raised the issues of the evaluation linking to the LEADER method elements. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are required, measurable qualitative approaches are possible and should be employed. The effects of the LEADER method can and should be evaluated, but in terms of what it achieves e.g. in relation to the development of governance, again this may be measured. The critical point is that effective baselines are required, this is vital for all approaches to change measurement. This links back to the need for early clarity and guidance.

Two associated points were raised, (i) the need for external objectivity was highlighted and (ii) self-evaluation is important but is not sufficient overall. An important element of this and all evaluation activity is the feedback it can provide, local feedback is essential to the process and tools and approaches need to address this as part of the whole group of evaluation stakeholders. It was noted that where LAGs have a high degree of autonomy, then the importance of effective M&E increases.

Other written feedback received from the group discussions

In their responses, the groups also made a number of comments on and suggestions relating to other aspects of LDS. These included:

- A suggestion to involve at least a limited number of LAG managers in the design process for the RDP as a whole (in order to better 'LEADER proof' the resulting programme).

- Flexibility and the ability to make changes should be built into the design phase and subsequent implementation. There should be recognition that a LDS is a living document and needs to change often. This is particularly important when the macro environment changes.

2.3. General discussion

The floor was opened to a general discussion. The following main discussion points, in addition to those made in written submissions of the small groups, were raised:

- Guidance for LDS preparation: is important but must not be overwhelming.
- Perspective on the future challenges: LEADER mainstreaming in the current 2007-2013 period has proved difficult. Every indication is that the 2014-2020 period will be even more challenging and complicated, even for established LAGs and particularly considering the multi-fund dimension. The provision of clear and complete information is therefore extremely important and none is available yet.
- Monitoring and evaluation: it is recognised that M&E is important but no additional 'levels' of M&E should be introduced. Local (LAG / LDS specific) indicators can be a good measure for LEADER. Can FG4 examine this issue?
- Coordination: the multi-fund dimension of LDS / LEADER in the next programming period makes local coordination (explicit in the LDS) very important.
- Lessons learnt: LEADER has a long history and a largely successful one. Particularly in the light of the substantive changes being proposed for the next programming period, the identification of 'best practices' in terms of process is very important. FG4 is and must play a major role in this respect.
- Importance of the multi-fund approach: The multi-fund approach is logical and makes sound programming sense. The view was therefore expressed that its implementation should not be optional (dependent on the MA). Lack of clarity on whether or not the multi-fund approach is being applied would also make it problematic for LAGs to plan. However the view was also expressed that it is important for MAs to consider the benefits (or lack of them) of the multi-fund approach and its operability prior to deciding whether or not to use it.
- Ensuring complementarity between funds will be important. But complementarity needs to reflect the needs (and be adapted to) the LDS. At the operational level the LDS must be flexible and LDS and LAG contracts must not be overly rigid or complicated. The Commission noted that the proposals provide for specific approaches in MS to facilitate complementarity within the framework of the proposed Partnership contracts.
- The role of LEADER: many things are asked of LEADER including: good management of financial resources; improving governance; supporting the other axes of the EAFRD. Given the further changes being proposed for the next programming period, it is a valid question to reflect on what is – now – being asked of LEADER. This is not only a conceptual question, but will also have practical implications, for example regarding the necessary monitoring and evaluation