

LEADER APPROACH IN ESTONIA: SEVEN KEY ELEMENTS IN THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEADER

Mati MÖTTE, Institute of Economics and Social Sciences Department of Agrarian Economics and Marketing Estonian University of Life Sciences, Fr. R. Kreutzwaldi 1A Tartu 51014, Estonia, mati.motte@emu.ee (*corresponding author*)

Maret PRITS, Institute of Economics and Social Sciences Department of Rural Management, Co-operation and Rural Sociology Estonian University of Life Sciences, Fr. R. Kreutzwaldi 1A Tartu 51014, Estonia, maret.prits@emu.ee

Kersti ARO, Institute of Economics and Social Sciences Department of Rural Economy Research Estonian University of Life Sciences, Fr. R. Kreutzwaldi 1A Tartu 51014, Estonia, kersti.aro@emu.ee

The present paper focuses on the two questions concerning the strategic planning of rural development and implementation of the LEADER approach. Firstly, which of the seven key elements of the LEADER approach are valued more than others? Secondly, how does the implementation of local development strategies (LDS) through the action of projects reflect the social innovation element? The empirical study is based on assessment documents of LDS of the two funding periods and qualitative analysis of focus group interviews. The results of the study show how well the strategies entail the seven key elements during the period 2007–2013 and period 2014–2020. Also it is investigated how well the seven key principles in the LEADER approach is implemented. Through the applied study significant changes are visible, but the contents of the LDSs do not reflect all the seven key elements in the equal extent. The evaluation of the period 2007–2013 highlighted that the most attention has been given to area-based approach, also to bottom up approach and to implementation of innovative approach. The study shows weakly addressed the formulation of common vision for some sectors, but also has been difficult to give sense to the element of innovation. The output of the research is providing a suitable knowledge for decision makers to implement the key elements in the best possible way that in turn will reflect by implemented project.

Keywords: LEADER, local action groups (LAGs), local development strategy, seven key principles of LEADER approach, rural development

INTRODUCTION

The successful development of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) has taken place in the EU member states and also is visible in Estonia. Since 1991, the LEADER approach has been one of the most successful incentives of the European Commission, which has changed the rural development policy. LEADER drives the discovery of new ways how to increase competitiveness in rural areas. Over the time the program from 1991 has been adjusted (e.g. from regional development and inclusion of local partners to cross-country cooperation) and it has reached a new stage. Several analysts and authors assumed in 2000 that the LEADER principle may become the next foundation for rural development policy (Shucksmith, 2000; Kovách, 2000) and the progression is witnessed by the application of the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) principle. The most basic foundation for the success of LEADER is however the bottom-up approach that helps to distinguish regional traits, problems in need of solutions and to integrate the community (voluntary sector, entrepreneurs and local municipalities) (Dax *et al*, 2016; Miller, 2014; Svobodová, 2015). Importance of LEADER is based on the cooperation of the public and private sectors, where the third sector has become an important power in shaping and altering the society (Prits *et al*, 2016). There are also several substantial differences in accomplishing regional development compared to the traditional development policy. One of the most important factors is the identification of local needs according to the local potential and vertical cooperation between sectors. In comparison with this, the traditional policy is usually top-down approach, where the development of larger centers, central administration as well as sectorial and industrial development are in the focus. (Pike *et al*, 2006). It is pointed out, that the important task of the LAGs is to improve the social capital available in their areas of operation, where cooperation enables the inclusion of social capital (Kis, 2012).

Several authors (Bumalova *et al*, 2016; Aldorfai *et al*, 2016) have noted that in comparison with previous period, several changes have been taking place in CLLD, and the most important difference is the wider and more flexible

possibilities for support in the context of multi-funds. Likely, the change depends on the member states and the regional needs, but in Estonia the already developed principles are considered as the point of departure in the LEADER program. The LEADER approach shall comprise of at least the following elements (Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005): area based approach, bottom up approach, local public-private partnership, implementation of innovative approaches, integrated and multi sectoral approach, networking of local partnerships and implementation of cooperation projects. Therefore, the implementation of the program is significantly regulated. Important indicators on the CLLD level are quality of life, organizational efficiency of sectors and infrastructure (Aldorfai et al, 2016), which are derived from the framework of European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). As the LEADER program and CLLD are among the instruments of rural development, then all the EAFRD requirements are prerequisites and valid. Also, the evaluation of Rural Development Plan (RDP) follows recommendations from the EU and instructions have been created for this purpose (Community- Led..., 2014; Evaluation of ..., 2017). The importance of the LEADER has not been questioned in the previous evaluations, but questions have arisen on its efficiency. The studies carried out so far have been focused on outlining the general developments. It has been found that a significant increase in the size of the budget and a more comprehensive integration of LEADER have very important part to enhancing the status of the LEADER, but at the same time, creation of extensive rules for the rural development program have increased bureaucracy and the rules laid down are transferred to projects (Dax *et al*, 2016). Some of the studies have also suggested only limited policy effects resulting from program changes related to LEADER. The implementation of LEADER can have a detrimental effect between high expectations of local innovation and a neglect of strategic concerns (Dax, Oedl-Wieser, 2016). The European Court of Auditors (2010) has pointed out, that the LEADER-approach will lead to additional costs and risks compared to the traditional implementation of the rural policy instruments. The potential added value of LEADER must appear from the seven key principles. The audit presented an important question of whether the LEADER approach is implemented in a way that gives added value (Implementation of the Leader..., 2010).

Very few studies have addressed the regional characteristics and the effectiveness of the LEADER program in Europe. In case of Estonia, in 2016 all 26 LAG were included in the ex-post evaluation carried out for the evaluation of RDP. The results of the evaluations of LAG strategies are also important, because focused and result-oriented strategies are necessary for the achievement of the goals. In Estonia, the evaluation necessary for the financing of LAG strategies, was performed in 2008 and 2017.

In Estonia, the implementation of LEADER approach started in 2006, when 24 LAGs started to develop the local development strategies (LDS). Two LAGs started to draw their LDS a few years later. The first LDS were launched in 2008. In 2017, there are 26 LAGs in Estonia and they cover 99,9% of the Estonian rural area (Estonian Rural Development..., 2016) and of the population living there. The LEADER approach is implemented through the LEADER measure of the rural development program, which is funded by the EAFRD and the Estonian state. The budget of the LEADER measure was 85,8 million euros, which accounted for 9,6% of the total RDP budget in 2007–2013 (Ex post Evaluation of ..., 2016). Almost 7 000 LEADER projects were funded. In 2014–2020 the budget of the LEADER measure is 90,0 million euros, which is 9,1% of the total RDP budget (Estonian Rural Development ..., 2017).

For strategic planning, it is important to take into account the policy cycles. The rural development policy cycle can be divided into distinct practice areas: governance issues on design (conception of instruments and operational modes); delivery (modes of transaction and control); and evaluation (timing, procedures, etc.) (Dax *et al*, 2016). In this article, we will look at the design issues that are related to the seven key element of the LEADER by evaluation of the strategies. The necessity of the study is also driven by the move to the Community-Led Local Development system that will replace the principles of previous LEADER program.

The aim of the article is to identify the implementation of the seven key elements in the activities of LAGs and their development strategies. The transition to the CLLD schema and the change the seven key elements is reviewed. The paper concentrates on two research questions. Firstly, which of the seven key elements of the LEADER approach are valued more than others? Secondly, how does the implementation of LDS through the action of projects reflect the social innovation element? The results are providing information, which principles of LEADER are more time-consuming to implement and which require more attention during the next strategic period. The output of the research is providing a useful knowledge for decision-makers for implementing the key elements in the best possible way.

RESEARCH METHODS

The article focuses on seven key elements of the LEADER approach. At first, it is studied if the seven key elements are part of the evaluation criteria of LAG strategies. Evaluations of LAGs' strategies took place in 2008 (strategies for the period of 2008-2013) and in 2016 (strategies for the period of 2015-2020). For the evaluation, the Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs formed a committee. In 2008, a list of 15 criteria was used for the evaluation of LAG strategies. In 2016, 14 evaluation criteria were used. In 2008, 11 criteria out of 15, and in 2016, 7 criteria out of 14 were directly related to the seven key elements for the LEADER approach (Table 1). Some of the evaluation criteria were related to several key elements of the LEADER. The evaluation criteria not directly connected to LEADER approach were related to other contexts of the LAG activities. The present analysis does not include those; but concentrates only on the evaluation criteria directly related to the LEADER principles.

The LAG strategies were evaluated according to the evaluation criteria by separate experts (three independent institutions) both in 2008 and 2016 on a 4-point scale.

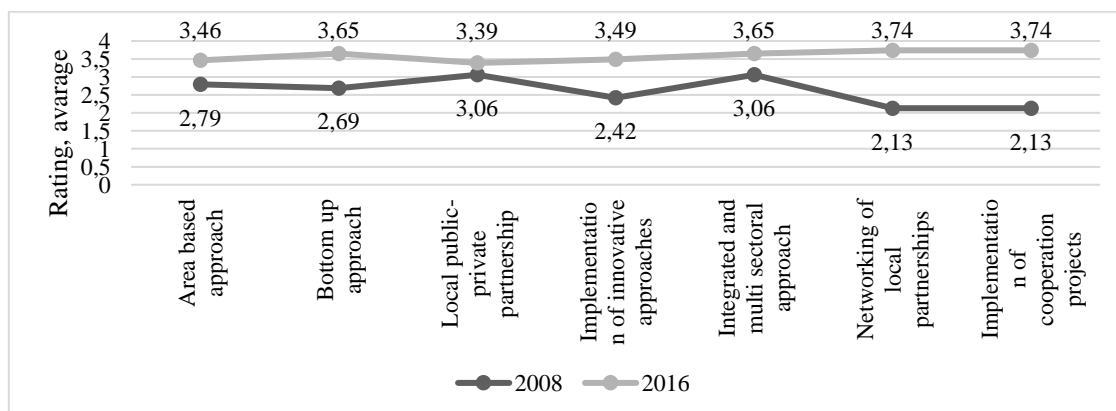
Table 1. Seven key elements of the LEADER approach and the evaluation criteria of LDS

Seven key elements	Evaluation criteria	
	2008	2016
Area based approach	1.Integrity of a LAG area; 2.Inner cohesion; 3.Integrated approach in relation to other development plans and strategies; 4.Utilization of local opportunities for Development.	1.Relevance of the goals and measures of strategies; 2.Inner cohesion of strategies; 3.Consideration of important interventions in the LAG area.
Bottom up approach	5.Inclusion of the entire action area in the activities of LAG; 6.Inclusion of different demographic groups in the activities of LAG; 7.Measures aimed at youth and inclusion of youth in the creation and communication activities of strategies.	4.Inclusion of community in the formation of the strategy.
Local public-private partnership	8.Consideration of local public-private partnership on the LAG level and multi sectorial approach.	5.Cooperation with other partners; 6.Ability of LAG to vitalize the action area.
Implementation of innovative approaches	9.Innovation.	(-, -) Inner cohesion of the strategy, incl. description of innovation.
Integrated and multi sectoral approach	10.Consideration of local public-private partnership on the LAG level and multi sectorial approach.	(-, -) Inclusion of community in the formation of the strategy.
Networking of local partnerships	11.Elements of regional cooperation; elements of International cooperation.	7. Cooperation with other partners.
Implementation of cooperation projects	(-, -) Elements of regional cooperation; elements of International cooperation.	(-, -) Cooperation with other partners.

Secondly, the integration of seven key elements to the activities of LAGs and implementation of the strategies was studied. Three focus group interviews that were carried out in the context of the ex-post evaluation of Estonian RDP 2007- 2013 are used as the source of data. The interview questions were focused on the effectiveness of the submeasures of the LEADER measure and evaluation questions set by the European Commission for the LEADER measure. A total of 28 people participated in the focus group interviews and they represented the LAGs, the Estonian National Rural Network, the Ministry of Rural Affairs, umbrella organizations and also other experts. The suitable qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used in the study: monographic method; interpretation and content analysis; synthesis; interviews; data grouping and logical constructive analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS – SEVEN KEY ELEMENTS IN THE LDS

The ratings given to the strategies of LAG in the evaluation reveal that the average ratings on the strategies have increased over the years (Figure 1). While the average scores on a 4-point scale on the seven key elements were between 2,13-3,06 in 2008, in 2016 the average scores were between 3,39-3,74. This can be explained by the growth of knowledge and experience of LAGs on the one hand, and by the instructions for the formation of strategies given by the managing authorities of RDP, on the other hand (Regulation of the Minister ..., 2015).



Source: Initial documents of the evaluation of LAG area strategies. Calculations by authors

Figure 1. Ratings of LAG area strategies via the 7 elements of LEADER approach in year 2008 and 2016 (on a 4-point scale, arithmetic mean)

The comparison of LDS evaluation results from 2008 and 2016 show that the experts assessing the strategies gave highest assessments to the integrated and multi sectoral approach (mean rating in 2008 was 3,06 and this increased to

3,65 in 2016). Thus, for the formation of the common vision as well as for developing and implementing the strategy, representatives of various sectors (based on production or ownership) and interest groups was acted together.

Bottom-up approach is one of the most central elements of the LEADER approach. The evaluation results showed that considerable advances have been made in integrating the approach to LDS strategies between 2008 and 2016. Average scores given by experts to the bottom-up approach in the strategies was significantly higher in 2016 (3,65 in comparison with 2,69 in 2008). The LAGs have managed to more actively involve different stakeholders and interest groups into the development of strategies for 2014- 2020 by using suitable methods (region-specific discussion groups, workshops, seminars etc.).

Compared to the period 2007-2013, in 2014-2020 only few improvements to the local public-private partnerships can be recognized in local strategies. Whereas in 2008 average expert assessment to this key element was high (3,06), in 2016 it was among the lowest-rated elements in comparison with other elements whose scores had risen considerably more. The modest improvement of the rating can be caused by the fact that the meaning of the evaluation criterion was slightly changed. It can be argued that in the strategies of both programming periods the local public-private partnership and multi sectorial approach have been sufficiently considered on the LAG level. LAG has adequately integrated the public and private sectors on the same grounds and towards the same goals. One of the explanations for the more limited increase in the average score in the assessment for the period of 2014- 2020 can be that the possible risks and their mitigation was not outlined in the strategies.

The implementation of innovative activities has been also rated rather poorly by the experts in the both programming periods (2,42 in 2008 and 3,49 in 2016). Innovation as an element of the LEADER approach involves new activities that supplement the development of the area by providing new solutions to local problems and added value as well as increasing competitiveness of the area. It proved to be difficult for experts to identify innovative elements in the strategies since the concept and elements of innovation remained relatively unclear in the strategies, and the idea of innovation was not defined (only on a broader sense) and innovation was not considered as a distinct value or factor in the local development.

The elements of networking of local partnerships and implementation of cooperation projects have considerably improved over the years (both received 2,13 in 2008 and 3,74 in 2016). These two elements require a long-term planning in order to select the area in need of cooperation and partners, but also to decide on the areas of action, with whom to cooperate and develop networks. During the period 2007-2013 LAG had the time and opportunities to find partners and identify the areas for cooperation. By the following programming period of 2014-2020 LAGs were better capable of documenting the visions of common cooperation projects of LAGs and cooperation networks on the institutional and local level.

Implementation of the seven key principles by LAGs in the period 2007-2013

In Estonia, about 7 000 projects were implemented in the period 2007-2013. Projects were diverse, but most contributed to the development of local culture (36%) and tourism (19%, figure 2).

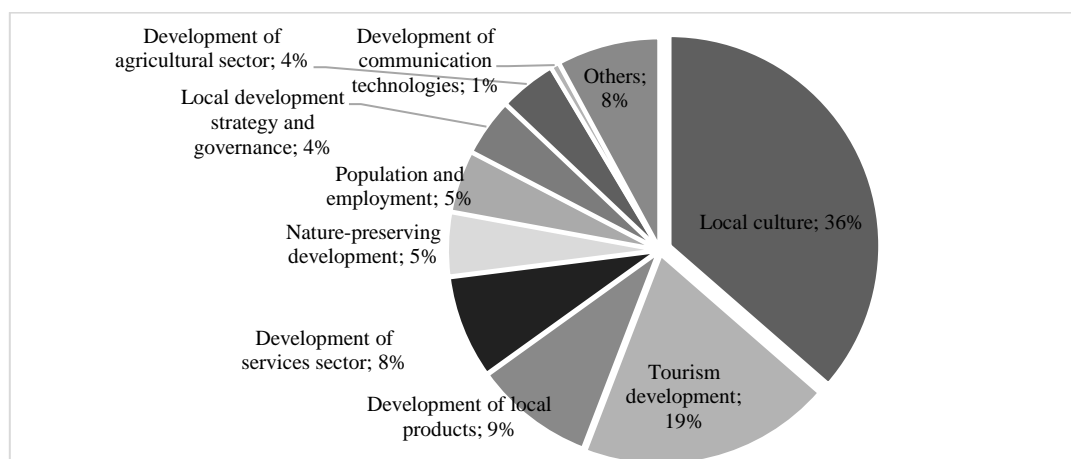


Figure 3. The distribution of projects by type, % .
Source: Ex post Evaluation of ..., 2016

It has been recommended that the seven key elements of LEADER should be treated as a coherent set of principles (Development..., 2007). The implementation of LDS in 2007- 2013 showed those principles have complemented and impacted one another and are sometimes intertwined. The focus groups interviews were used to study the implementation of the seven key elements and the summarization of results are presented below. Excerpts from the interviews are presented in italics to illustrate the opinions from the interviews.

1. Integrated development of the area. The activities of LAG were evaluated highly regarding the balanced and consolidated development of regions. The number of active population, incl. volunteers, and their ability to sustainably manage with limited financial resources has consistently increased. Young adults were highlighted as the target group in highest need of inclusion. At the same time the use of the local resources

was assessed critically, and it was also argued that the potential of nature could have been used more. Also some of the opinions reflected that more attentions could have been paid to the development of more local products and services etc. The importance of the existence of social control was also emphasized – the LEADER projects and activities are public, so people are aware of projects and results.

“LAG is the entity that deals with developing the region as the whole, on the basis of strategy and LEADER elements. It is consciously developed. It has been well done.”

2. Bottom-up incentive. It was considered important that ideas and innovations would be initiated from below, by the community. The bottom-up initiatives have been very intensive. One of the reasons may be that previously different stakeholders have not been involved enough to the local governance. The drafting of LDS provided an opportunity to be involved right from the beginning and provide your opinion on the development of the region. Many-sided communication has developed and possibly there is more trust between people. It is important to pay attention that different age-groups are involved, as there is a threat that young people may be sidelined. The bottom-up approach may be also be a question of regional sustainability. In Estonia the experience from previous larger movements helped; for example, the experience from village movement NGO K laliikumine Kodukant. The well-established membership, joining and introduction of its knowhow, accelerated the integration of community developers from smaller communities and implementation of new initiatives.

“Organization of communication and dissemination of information on best practices helped a lot. Successful experience inspired others to follow.”

“One of the side-effects that has occurred, was that microenterprises were established in regions. Thanks to LEADER those numbers have increased.”

3. Partnership between various sectors. According to interviews, the organization of intersectoral partnership was among the most resource intensive activity in LAGs due to previous lack of inter- as well as intrasectoral cooperation.

“At first, entrepreneurs were very cautious and did not want to share their ideas, thoughts, activities. After half of the period was through, they opened up, trust was formed and number of good projects came.”

“Local municipality has a big role. In case it takes leading role in the region, then the development activities and partnership function.”

In looking back on the period of 2007- 2013, the interview participants pointed out that when local municipality took leading role in developing partnership between various sectors, the cooperation and development activities started to work very well. But also it was pointed out that if the partnership or some other element will not be evaluated by the RDP implementing agency, then LAG will also not pay attention to it nor measure it in community or LAG level.

“If the regulation or guidance documents do not ask it, we will not address it.”

“We had no place to show that partnership.”

4. Innovation. In the focus group interviews it was noted that the characteristics of LEADER approach support and create very good conditions for innovations. Several LDS planned a measure for innovative solutions that gave the regions opportunities to search and find innovative elements, but also to recreate and modernize old, region specific traditional activities and customs.

“Sometimes one leads to another, totally new result. Sometimes it is old thing that has been forgotten. Nobody has come to the idea that build a ship, but now it is being built”

5. Multisectoral approach. The involvement of local people and entrepreneurs into the drafting of LDS and its implementation is important. The experience from 2007- 2013 showed that local people, entrepreneurs and organizations are interested in the development of the region and it is important for them that their opinions are asked. It has been learned to find opportunities and find solutions to the problems, instead of only seeing the problem.

“Inclusion starts at local municipal level. If a citizen is included to the activities of local municipality, then he will be active in participation in other places.”

6. Networking. 7. Cooperation. Both elements had been planned to the LDS and measures as priorities. Cooperation was both formal and informal. Cooperation and networking were considered to be important by the participants in the focus groups. However, as there was no common legal framework that would have described cooperation and how to measure it, then at LAG level cooperation and networking was considered to be not important and it was thought that it was not possible to measure them separately.

“Cooperation with one another is important, but there was no way to reflect and show it.”

But also the organization of the cooperation was considered to be hard, because reaching common ideas, activities took time and was essentially difficult.

“It is hard to cooperate, to find common ground.”

“Lack of new ideas and lack of leaders will result in even good cooperation perishing.”

For international cooperation, it was important to find right partners, and also finding ideas and partners form ICT and internet environment.

“YouTube is an inexhaustible and limitless depository for finding partners and ideas”

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the evaluations of local strategies demonstrated that inclusion of the seven key elements in LAG strategies has improved over the years, but to a different extent among these key elements. The qualitative content analysis of the interviews implied that LEADER plays a substantial role in the development of rural life. All of the key elements of LEADER have been more or less considered in the implementation of the strategies and activities.

The evaluation results from the two programming period showed that in Estonia the success of the implementation of LEADER approach lies above all on the integrated and multisectoral approach, development of common vision, development and design of strategy by creating cooperation between representatives of different areas. In both programming periods, implementation of innovative approaches received more modest scores from the evaluators. The innovative element is unclear in the strategies and it has not been explained.

Nonetheless, the summary of group interviews reveals that during 2007-2013 in the implementation of local strategies most attention was given to the implementation of the elements of area based approach, bottom up approach and implementation of innovative approaches. The LEADER measure itself was innovative in the context of the development of rural life in Estonia and revived the activity of communities, partnership and cooperation between sectors. Bottom-up and citizen initiative were considered the most important.

The most energy and resources were applied to implementing of elements local public-private partnership and networking of local partnerships (LAG cooperation projects, trainings, study trips, business meetings, clubs). Application of the elements networking of local partnerships and implementation of cooperation projects is considered important and cooperation has been exercised on several levels. Still, LAGs require more instructions and universal indicators since in case of lack of these it is not possible to measure the impact and the measurement is also not found important. In the upcoming period it is necessary to provide more details to indicators and instructions.

The key elements of LEADER have become a significant foundation in the balanced development of regions and communal behavior. The rate and quality of implementation of the elements varies.

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