

# rozprawy i studia

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## WHAT EFFECTS DOES NATIONAL REGULATION HAVE ON LEADER PROGRAMMING IN EU-27?

**Abstract.** The LEADER program, introduced in 1991 and integrated into the European policy for rural development, is a figurehead of local action in Europe. Based on local partnerships, gathering entrepreneurs, elected representatives and associatives on a voluntary basis, it will exemplify the principles of cooperation and subsidiarity and so contribute to the strengthening of local democracy. Researchers and development practitioners agree on its innovative character and its potential of "portability" in the fact that it offers to each State a certain freedom in its application. Each country of the European Union can decline the objectives according to the priorities that it settles and has a wide latitude on how it places financial means and the modalities of its implementation. In this article, we focus on the modalities of the LEADER program transfer (2007–2013) to all 27 EU member states. In this article, we focus on the territorial effects of terms of the transfer of the LEADER program (2007–2013) to all 27 Member States of the EU.

**Keywords:** public action, LEADER program, Europe, model transfer, norms

"Local" is a concept that has achieved political legitimacy in new national and international programmes and has been institutionalised in new approaches to public action, particularly in local development, for which it is the foundation [Smith 1995, Deberre 2007, Spieser 2008]. During the 1970s in the United Kingdom and France, a new model of development appeared based on a bottom-up approach to developing local resources and the involvement of the local population, the voluntary sector and businesses in the design and implementation of development strategies. Seen by some as the vanguard of a post-industrial economy, and by others as an irrelevant idea disconnected from reality, it was successfully promoted at a Pan-European level in the 1990s in the LEADER<sup>2</sup> programmes initiated by the European Commission (integrated since 2003 in the

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<sup>2</sup> Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale (Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy).

European Rural Development Policy (ERDP) from the Second Pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy).

Based on a principle of local partnership between businesspeople, elected officials and voluntary-sector workers to design and implement development strategies, the LEADER approach is intended to exemplify cooperation and subsidiarity among stakeholders and thus contribute to strengthening local democracy. Whether it is seen as a foreign body or as emblematic of European rural development policy [Ray 2000], most researchers agree that it is innovative and has the potential to be transferred to each Member State, since it offers them relative freedom of application and stimulates the innovativeness of local stakeholders. However, any attempt to interpret it – and the whole European rural development policy behind it – in a uniform manner is a conceptual error, given the diversity of local forms and national contexts in which it operates. Like every European public policy, the Second Pillar of the CAP, and even more the LEADER local development programme, are not formulae to be applied in the same way in each country in the EU. Although the systems defined at European level are applicable with identical modalities, each Member State may adjust the objectives of ERDP according to its own priorities. They also have considerable latitude in the financial resources and forms of implementation involved in the policy – which they interpret variously according to their own context and transpose this into programmes integrated into their own rural development strategies [Chevalier 2012].

Democratic intentions, with room for the bottom-up construction of public action, are sometimes faced with more bureaucratic intentions and the top-down management of local initiatives [Chevalier and Maurel 2012]. The purpose of this article is to see whether and how these radically different forms of intervention influence the shape of local action in the 27 countries of the EU. When these various national ways of transposing the implementation of the LEADER axis are considered within the context of each Member State's institutional reforms, do they explain the diversity of patterns to be found in local action?

## **MORE RED TAPE SLOWED PROGRAMME ROLL-OUT**

The implementation of the 2007–2013 rural development programme has occurred at various speeds in different countries. While some are already carrying out projects, others are only beginning to implement their development strategies. Although a common timetable was proposed by the European Commission (European regulation EC 2007–2009), in practice each Member State has considerable latitude in the stages and timing of the design and selection of its local development strategies (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The typology of countries is based on three criteria selected for this analysis: launch date of LEADER call for proposals (year/month) by various national managing authorities, period elapsed between LEADER call for proposals and final selection of all LAGs and strategies, date of commencement of first projects (year/month).



FIGURE 1. Implementation time for LEADER axis  
 RYSUNEK 1. Czas wdrażania osi LEADER

In Germany, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom (Group 1) the implementation timetables for designing local development strategies was, in general, relatively short. The first calls for forming LAGs were launched in spring 2007 (only three months after the European Commission’s publication of the

ERDP regulation). Second calls followed rapidly that autumn, and by the start of 2008, the final list was made of LAGs selected for the European programme. In Germany, LAG selection was even completed by December 2007 in Brandenburg, Lower Saxony and North-Rhine-Westphalia. In Sweden two waves of applications were held in 2007 and the first projects were started in autumn 2008. In Finland, in January 2008, a second call was made because too many applications were ineligible; but, nevertheless, local strategies began to be implemented by the following September. In all cases, selection was based on summaries of development strategy submitted by the LAGs, with no binding formal framework. More generally, the institutional environment was already decentralised, with a relatively small number of people involved apart from local authorities (municipalities) and representatives of the managing authority (central government, federal state, region or micro-region). All these countries had already had experience with three previous LEADER campaigns and, without doubt, benefited from their acquired skills in managing European programmes.

In Group 2 countries, the entire procedure generally extended through 2008 and projects began to be implemented in January 2009 (some six months later than the Group 1 countries). In France, the LEADER programme was implemented in liaison with the national systems set up by the 1995 and 1999 Acts for sustainable development of territories, and at the same time as the implementation of central government-region project contracts. The LAG selection procedure is now regionalised: regional authorities, under the authority of the region Prefect and Regional Council President and in agreement with a framework defined at national level, set up their selection procedures and allocate funding across the LAGs. The regional councils (in charge of implementing the European programme) announced and held the LAG selection processes six months later than stated in the European timetable. This was for administrative reasons to do with achieving consistency between the central/regional contracts and LEADER procedures.. By making the local procedures more complex and seeking to align the LAGs with the pays and regional nature parks (included in regional policies), they considerably extended the period needed by the management authorities to prepare their applications. In Poland, although the LAG application submission and selection timetables varied between voivodeships<sup>4</sup>, the Marshals' offices, with the agreement of the national and regional authorities, announced the LAG selection processes seven months late. Most of the contracts were only signed in spring 2008 – the earliest, April being Świętokrzyskie voivodeship in April 2008, and the latest in Małopolskie in September 2008<sup>5</sup>. The first projects were only chosen by LAGs (after case-by-case approval by the regional payment agencies) during 2009. In all these countries the LEADER axis implementation procedure, actually only partly decentralised, appears to have encouraged a proliferation of parties involved in operational management in addition to sole local

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<sup>4</sup> Here, as in France, the LEADER procedure is implemented by regions (voivodeships, headed by marshals).

<sup>5</sup> This information is all taken from M. Halamska's research under the ALDETEC research programme.

and national authorities. This consequently contributed to significant delays in the execution of the programme.

In the Group 3 countries, the LEADER procedure took longer to set up than elsewhere in Europe. In Romania and Bulgaria, the national authorities, by bolstering administrative procedures, were very often responsible for a lack of transparency in these procedures and, significantly the, relatively slow processes of LAG evaluation and selection. In Hungary, the organisational work of local rural development offices, in charge of forming rural communities (foreshadowing the LAGs), considerably delayed implementation. The Hungarian process began with the formulation of a New Hungary Rural Development Strategic Plan in January 2007. In March the Ministry of Agriculture announced tenders for the management of local rural development offices in charge of the LEADER procedure in each micro-region. These offices were set up in May 2007 and then formed the local communities (foreshadowing the LAGs), which were registered with the Ministry between September 2007 and March 2008. These communities then had 120 days, from January to May 2008, in which to prepare their local development strategies. In September 2008, all the local communities officially became LAGs; since the Ministry of Agriculture did not wish to ask for competing proposals, it approved all the strategies submitted. In November 2008, the Ministry of Agriculture launched an initial call for projects (devised by the LAGs and submitted in January 2009) for the third axis of the rural development policy. The selection results were only published in September 2009. Subsequently a second call for projects concerning the LEADER axis per se was announced, with a submission date of 15 November 2009 and approval of projects to enable them to start implementing from the first half of 2010. In summary nearly three years passed between the start of the programming period (2007–2013) and the execution of the first projects in the field.

## **LAGS OF ALL SHAPES AND SIZES**

From one LEADER programme to the next, the density (geographical coverage) of LAGs has gradually increased. This enlargement demonstrates improved integration of all country areas into practical policy design groups. At present, more than 1,800 LEADER regions cover nearly 40% of the total European rural area and more than 60% of the rural population. For 2007–2012, each country selected a varying number of LAGs, differing widely in size by region and Member State (Figure 2).

The highest number of LAGs are to be found in Germany and Spain (243 and 300 LEADER regions respectively); they are not particularly large and only cover some 60% of the total rural population. In France the number of LAGs rose from 140 for the LEADER+ programme to 223 for the current programme. The LAGs continued to expand, encompassing now nearly half the total rural area of France. The LEADER 2007–2013 LAGs include 7,584 communes that were not part of the LEADER+ programme. They potentially affect 12 million people (more than 70% of the total French rural population).

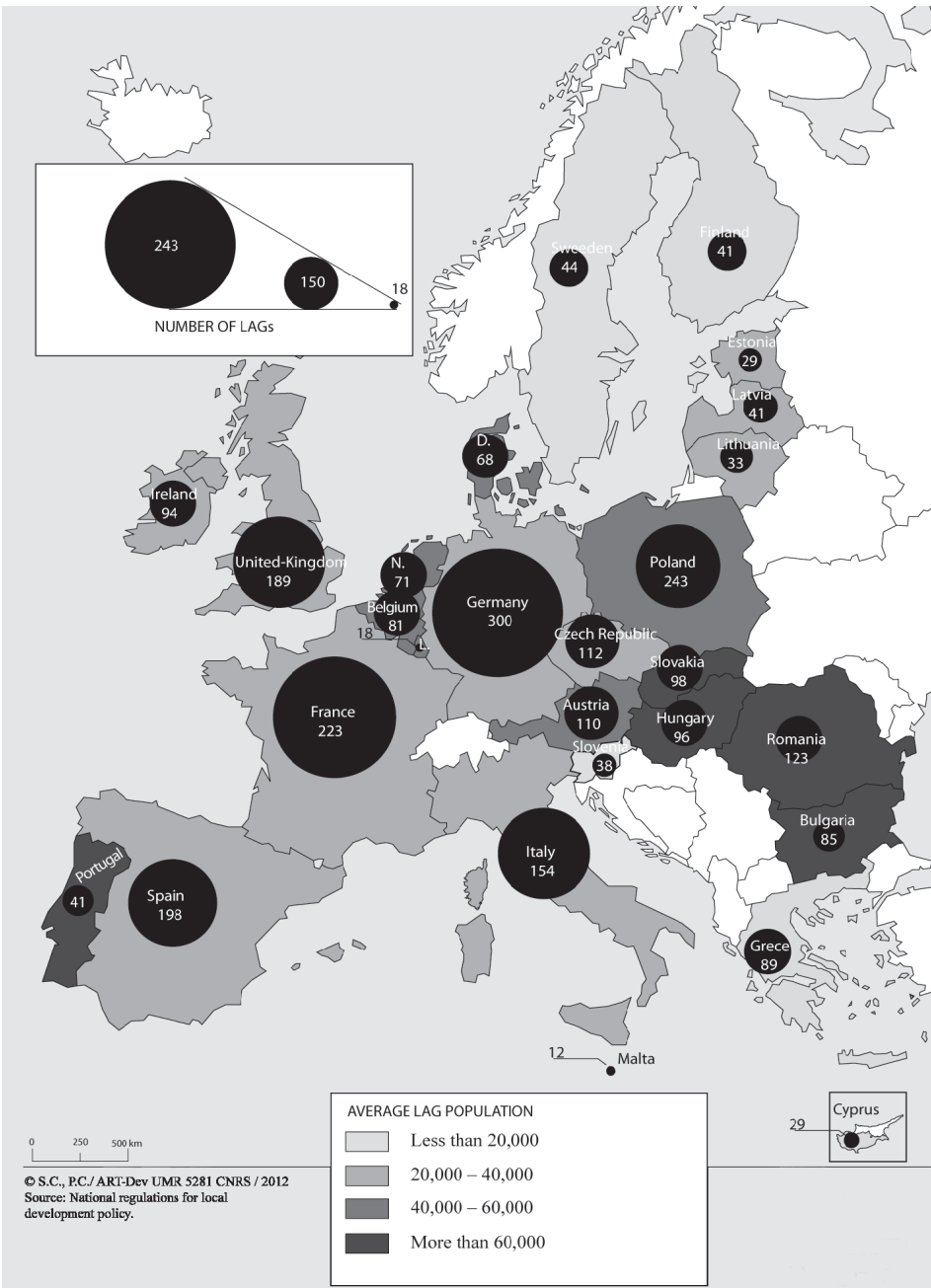


FIGURE 2. Number and average population of LAGs  
 RYSUNEK 2. Liczba oraz przeciętna liczebność lokalnych grup działania (LGD)

In the new Member States in Central Europe that the LAGs are largest. In Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, the LAGs have on average twice the population found elsewhere in the EU. Coverage of the national territory by LAGs is virtually exhaustive here (Figure 3). In Latvia and Hungary, they cover 88% of



FIGURE 3. Proportion of rural area (by OECD criteria) covered by LAGs  
 RYSUNEK 3. Procent obszarów wiejskich (według kryteriów OECD) objętych działaniem LGD

the total rural area. This coverage is half as large again as the European average and three times the figure in the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, where there is an irregular pattern of LAGs – a mosaic with white spaces indicating rural local government areas absent from the process.





FIGURE 4. Ratio of largest to smallest LAG population  
 RYSUNEK 4. Wskaźnik występowania LGD – od najliczniejszego do najmniej licznego

LAG populations may vary widely even within a single country. In Germany the ratio between the largest and smallest LAG population (Figure 4) is 1:13. In the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and Estonia, where the action areas are generally freely chosen by the local stakeholders, LAG populations



may vary within a single region from tens of thousands to more than 150,000. At the other end of the scale, the ratio is much lower in Greece and Latvia, where the population of LEADER regions is relatively level. In these countries, the European Commission has noted "... a tendency to wish to standardise the size of LEADER regions" (EC-2011-8).

Consideration should be given to why these variations occur. The geography of LEADER regions may indeed reflect variations in population density and variety in the European countryside, since LAGs appear to be less numerous, with fewer people and cover greater areas in low population density Nordic regions than in relatively more populated Central Europe. These explanatory factors, however, for such a variance are more complex. A variety of socio-economic situations might explain an absence, or conversely a proliferation, of LEADER regions. Agricultural prosperity would tend to exclude any form of alternative development in places dominated by high farm incomes, and the performance and agro-industrial integration of large holdings. Conversely, poor economic integration would be a reason for seeking alternatives to the dominant model in more innovative projects. The dynamics of LAG creation might also reflect the capacity of local stakeholders to initiate collective action. In some regions the destruction of local societies, unemployment, emigration of the most talented, and ageing might inhibit local initiative to design development projects. In other regions the revitalisation of the social and economic fabric might boost local initiatives.

Closer examination, of the socio-economic situation however suggests it not to be a determining factor. On the vast farming plains of Central and Northern Germany, despite the performance and integration of rural economies into the major world farm markets, the number of LAGs has risen since the earlier LEADER programmes [Lacquemont 2008]. In France, more than half of the current project areas, wherever located, are using a LEADER approach for the first time. In Bulgaria and Romania, a deep socio-economic crisis does not seem to have affected dynamics for creating LEADER regions; quite the contrary. In Baranya and the far east of Hungary, the number of LAGs has even doubled since the first LEADER+ initiatives in 2004, even though rural emigration, population ageing and economic crisis have considerably worsened in recent years.

Evidence suggests that the dynamics of LEADER programmes appear to correlate less with local socio-economic impetus than with a strong political desire to promote approaches of endogenous development, especially since the LEADER approach is now designed to be a support measure integrated into national rural development policy. The ways in which country areas have been transformed socio-economically, with changes to the structure of local societies, have admittedly caused new stakeholders to emerge, able to support local initiatives.

Institutional stakeholders have a considerable influence over the dynamics and shape of the territories for local action and through their management and implementation of this programme they achieve institutional transfer that seems to affect the geography of the LEADER regions.

## WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF IMPLEMENTING A LEADER APPROACH?

The LEADER approach is part of a political trend to promote the socio-economic development of rural areas by targeted local initiatives and the concentration of resources. According to the European Commission (EC 2008-07), LAGs selection procedures are intended to fund projects and avoid dispersing budgets. Selectivity here is defined as a country's ability to concentrate the number of LAGs and their funding on quality projects.

### Index of selectivity (Figure 5)

To evaluate the degree of concentration of funding and number of LAGs, I have calculated an index of selectivity constructed by correlating the following two variables:

- the number of LAGs selected per country as a ratio of the number of projects submitted,
- the average financial amount granted per LAG by the managing body as a ratio of the draft budget requested.

The sum of these two ratios is then scaled arithmetically up to 100, with 0 as the European median. The greater the negative value, the more a country is deemed to be selective in its choices. Its ratio between the number of selected and submitted projects is lower than the European mean, as is the ratio between the budget granted to and that requested by each LAG. Conversely, the greater the positive value, the less the country is selective in its choices.

The indices of selectivity, combined with national LAG characteristics<sup>6</sup> provide a typology (Figure 6) that suggests the thinking behind implementation of the LEADER axis in each country.

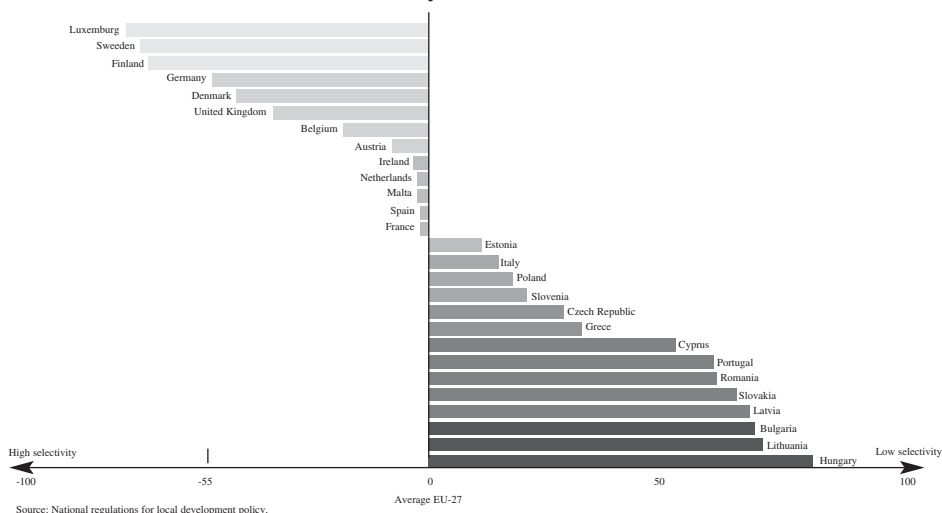


FIGURE 5. Index of selectivity  
RYSUNEK 5. Wskaźnik selektywności



FIGURE 6. Typology of purposes behind LEADER axis implementation  
RYSUNEK 6. Typologia celów przyswiecających wdrażaniu osi LEADER

<sup>6</sup> The typology is based on a principal component analysis (PCA) of the following variables: index of selectivity, LAG maximum/minimum population ratio, proportion of rural area covered by LAGs, standard deviation of distribution of budgets among LAGs, coefficient of correlation between LAG average budget and size of population.

Group 1 selectivity appears to have been relatively high. Overall, 40% of LAG projects were rejected by the managing authority and the distribution of the budget, varying widely among areas, does not seem to correspond to the population of the LEADER regions (low correlation coefficient between LAG population and budget). In Germany, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, the index of selectivity is eight times higher than the European mean. In Finland, from 59 applications submitted, only 31 LAGs were selected. In these countries, competition based on the quality of submitted applications appears to have led to the selection of a large number of LAGs whose population and area are generally highly diverse. In the Group 1 LAG area is generally based on the free choice of local stakeholders to construct a relevant, coherent territory with the potential to justify a project. The importance of the quality of relationships, in some cases the existence of earlier cooperation, also helps to facilitate a grouping based on dynamics common to a set of local authorities united by ties of complementarity. Far from having their total area fully covered by a regular pattern, the maps of LAGs in these countries are a mosaic with areas left out of the process. This way of forming project territories would appear to coincide better with the bottom-up reasoning that theoretically underlies the creation of project territories.

In Group 2, the situation is less clear. The index of selectivity is close to a European mean. The number of LAGs selected by the managing authority is indeed lower than the number of applications, but the budget allocated per LAG tends to correlate with the population of the LEADER regions. In France, where the procedure is regional, the evaluation report of the selection of LEADER 2007–2013 applications (Ministry of Agriculture, service and payment agency, March 2010) concludes that not all procedures conform to the European models' principle of development and they have not succeeded in concentrating EAFRD funding, with financial recommendations less closely followed in smaller regions. The latter often added further constraints to the distribution of their budgets by encouraging LAGs to justify their requests, not by their own local development strategies, but by the average tax base of all their member municipalities. In Estonia, the allocation of LAG budgets, allowing for the innovative nature of local strategy, is weighted according to the average income of residents in the LEADER region. Is this objective of redistributing funds to less-developed areas consistent with the guidelines of the European model of local development, which recommends competition and innovation above all?

The statistical analysis identified a third group of countries, where selectivity is lowest. Here the number of LAGs selected by the managing authority is roughly equal to the number of applications. The managing authorities appear to exercised more management control (with increased regulation) at the expense of competition and innovation. There was negligible theoretical selection of projects defined by criteria of quality of the programme and partnership as all the applications submitted were selected. In general, given the intention to spread the funds evenly, the distribution of the budget was relatively homogeneous. It

also often depended on the population of the LEADER region (high correlation coefficient between LAG population and budget). Virtually there was a comprehensive coverage of national territory by LAGs. LAGs, characteristically similar, have populations on average twice those elsewhere in Europe. With an even coverage of rural areas, they have become the framework for applying rural development policy in the form of a simple redistribution of aid for development<sup>7</sup>. This holds for Portugal, which is concerned to see no part of its territory excluded from European aid (and probably also for electoral reasons) and appears to regard the LEADER programme as just another subsidy policy. Portugal has argued for selecting all projects submitted whatever their quality. In spite of negative opinions on some projects from the national expert group with respect to the objective criteria taken from a national selection grid, ultimately all applications were selected following an opinion issued by the Council of State. Elected officials preferred to reduce the grants to each project in order to ensure that every application received some funding. This is a good illustration of the contradictions involved in a project policy that ends up, in practice, as a subsidy policy.

This state of affairs is comparable in Hungary, which too has chosen to transpose the ERDP in such a way as to give central government instruments of control over the regional level, reduced to administering public services and infrastructure. Soon after 2000, the regions became the territorial framework for central government interventions in rural development [Kukorelli-Szörenyine 2005]. The number of regions is currently 174<sup>8</sup>. As micro-regions have become institutionalised they have been given new functions. They are the framework for cooperation for local development, originally bottom-up, then in the form of development associations funded by rural development programmes. In Hungary, the institutionalisation at micro-regional level took a decisive step forward in 2004 [Palné-Kovacs 2011]. An amendment to the 1996 Act on regional development and infrastructure was adopted on 21 June 2004, introducing the creation of development councils in the micro-regions<sup>9</sup>. The purpose was to rationalise the use of funds allocated to local development [Maurel 2008]. In parallel to this reform, the Ministry of the Interior, in charge of local authorities, sought to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation by creating micro-regional multi-function associations to carry out the public service tasks of the local authorities in the territory of the micro-region<sup>10</sup>. Their objective is to rationalise the organisation of public services and they are run by boards including the mayors of the member municipalities. The Hungarian government has attempted to institutio-

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<sup>7</sup> The standard deviation of budget distribution is 0.12 and budget funds largely correlate with LAG population (0.86).

<sup>8</sup> Originally, the inter-municipal cooperation divisions did not coincide with those of the NUTS 4 (kistérség) statistical micro-regions defined by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. These statistical divisions are based on functional criteria of the attraction zones of local centres and are used as an analytical framework for indicators of socio-economic development. The system was devised in 1994 and has continued to develop, with the number of micro-regions rising from 138 to 150, then to 168 kistérség in 2004. There are currently 174.

nalise the micro-region as a level for territorial development and also the administration of public services. In line with this policy priority, it was logical that it should locate the application of ERDP within territorial divisions compatible with its objectives. Has the principle of freedom of association for local authorities to construct project territories not been neglected here?

Although in each country the main actor in transferring the model is a Ministry of Agriculture, the ways in which the ERDP is transposed and the LEADER axis is implemented reveals a close or more distant interpretation of the European model of local development that varies in its significant effects. In the Nordic countries, the transposition of the LEADER axis generally applies the principles and prescriptive systems promoted by European policy. Their experience with the LEADER model has remained faithful to its source of inspiration and its implementation has enjoyed the agreement of local authorities that have fully committed themselves to this approach. Conversely, in most Central European countries, where political centralisation is extreme, the ministerial authority has distorted the sense of the LEADER approach by submitting its implementation to cumbersome bureaucratic procedures that have undermined its spirit and caused delay and inconsistency.

## **INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARIES LEAVE THEIR MARK**

The European Commission's December 2011 report (EC 2011-08), based on data provided by each Member State, concluded that only 10 to 20% of current LEADER regions approximate to an "identified homogeneous physical, historical or cultural unit". It is only in countries like Germany, Sweden and Finland that the construction of LAGs by seeking a homogeneous region identifiable by landscape or history properly meets eligibility criteria by being based to some extent on a set of municipalities generally linked by economic relations and a common history.

In most cases, however, the boundaries of LEADER regions appear to be subject to the path dependency of institutional structures and divisions for public action, designed and created from outside. In France, 69% of LAGs coincide with pays (Voynet Act) or Regional Nature Parks<sup>11</sup>. An overlay of pays and LAG boundaries (in red on map below) shows the structural effect of

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<sup>9</sup> The competence of these councils is restricted to coordinating tasks of micro-regional development: adopting strategy, design and programmes for infrastructure. Their membership comprises all the mayors, representatives of economic chambers and social organisations operating in that territory. They may also invite partners from civil society. They operate within the bounds of the official micro-regions (defined by the Hungarian National Statistical Office KSH).

<sup>10</sup> Act CVII of 18 November 2004 on "multi-purpose micro-regional associations of local governments" recognised the responsibilities of these associations, specifies the content of the association agreements and the criteria for financial allocations from the central budget in order to optimise the use of public resources allocated at micro-regional level. The fragmented system of mandatory central government grants was replaced by a simpler and more transparent system.

<sup>11</sup> French law currently in fact requires pays and Regional Nature Park boundaries to coincide with LEADER regions.



pays on the composition of LAGs. Pays are not, it is true, institutional entities in strictly legal terms, but their construction, even if it appears endogenous, is now largely based on groups of communities of communes (an essentially institutional creation) that are tending to replace communes as the basic local unit (Doré).

In Spain, Germany, the Czech Republic<sup>12</sup> and Italy, as part of a "connection with regional policies", development projects often closely involve LEADER groups in co-funding a series of actions planned in the development charters of existing project territories (micro-regions, comarcas, etc.). Often the coincidence of boundaries is based on the divisions of networks of stakeholders involved in both systems. This may well encourage the concentration of investment, facilitate management and the preparation of applications, and probably accelerates the completion of projects. It may also confine LAGs to a subordinate function in policies decided and managed by central government.

Obviously, the vast majority of project territories do not physically coincide with existing divisions for infrastructure or management (regions, departments, etc.). Sometimes they include them, extend beyond them, and even divide them. But the administrative constraints of the existing divisions often hamper the dynamics of the project territory (increased number of applications for subsidies according to the number of regions involved in French Lags, obligation to register LAG projects in each comarca included in the Spanish LEADER programme, etc.).

In some cases, the principle of autonomy in creating and managing LAGs that underlies the very principle of local governance is directly threatened when the boundaries of LEADER regions follow local administrative boundaries or even electoral ones. These lines may be perfectly identical or only partly so where the LEADER region boundary simply skirts the more urban areas, ineligible for the European programme. In Portugal and Hungary, the desire to set up new institutional divisions by extending regionalisation probably disturbed the spontaneous processes of inter-municipal grouping. In Slovakia and Lithuania, the intention of fitting LAG areas to micro-regional authorities and districts also largely hampered the formation of partnerships. In Bulgaria and Romania, it appears that the LEADER system is used as a support for action managed by the local administration in areas that have been extended and modified by successive reforms since 1990 to manage and organise public services and amenities. Overall, whatever the country, making LEADER regions into administrative satellites

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<sup>12</sup> In the Czech Republic, the LAG is formed on the initiative of the micro-region, defined as a territorial unit for local initiatives, a voluntary association of municipalities that pursues common development objectives but has no administrative competence. This level of territorial initiative is based on the Act on municipalities (128/2000), which entered into force in November 2000, introducing rules for the creation of groupings of municipalities, specifying their functions and fields of cooperation. The micro-region is therefore part of a form of governance whose purpose is to implement a territorial development plan. The movement towards micro-regions, encouraged and supported by the Ministry of Regional Development, made it possible to overcome the extreme fragmentation of municipal divisions. It prepared local authorities for the construction of new project territories without threatening their autonomy.



tends to confirm the poor potential for giving autonomy to local initiative and the rather formal nature of endogenous development. In Hungary, the boundaries of the LAGs correspond to those of the micro-regions (in twos and threes) and to some extent those of electoral constituencies. According to the political affiliations of local elected officials, the formation of LEADER regions followed party lines, with ties of patronage winning over territorial cohesion.

Bulgaria illustrates the tension there may be between the desire to select projects (and thus respect the LEADER philosophy of concentrating resources) and a concern to spread public funds evenly across an electoral constituency in order to strengthen political legitimacy. Central government noted that its regions and decentralised services have, until now, played a relatively restricted role of ensuring consistency between agricultural and rural policy, and sought to set up sustainable development contracts promoted and managed by regions (and integrated into the LEADER programme). These contracts, given their political purpose, are ultimately instruments for the legitimacy of the regional authorities. They concern all regional territories, because they are not designed to achieve selectivity and competition between territories. In such a case, the LEADER territorial policies help a region impose itself as the unifier of a spatial entity and give it legitimacy by partly transferring decision-making and funding.

## **REGULATIONS MAKE IT HARDER TO FORM LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS**

Whatever the Country, the manner in which LAGs are created may be interpreted as expressing a sort of formalisation of the LEADER approach and the circumscribing of local initiatives by increasingly binding standards laid down at higher levels in the territorial system. The LAG is supposed to be a balanced entity representing partners from among elected officials and the administration and also the various socio-economic elements in the local territory in order to express and implement the principles of local governance as a new way of managing rural areas.

When the LEADER programme began in the 1990s, it was thought that civil society, set free by decentralisation in the west and a return to democracy in the east, was able to take initiatives on its own that were favourable to rural development, independently of the political authorities and dominant economic organisations. Very soon, however, especially starting with LEADER II (1994–1999), the contractualisation of LEADER programmes gradually removed independence from the LAGs, whose membership has since become virtually fixed: in every country, there are representatives of the municipalities and institutions within the action area, the main professional bodies from the farm, tourism and self-employed sectors, major trade unions, particularly from agriculture, institutions for heritage preservation, protection of the environment and landscape, and a few enterprises and sports and cultural associations. From one LEADER campaign to the next, from system to system, the recommendations have usually become more directive and oblige the main stakeholders in the construction of

the LAG to form a steering body in an almost automatic fashion, inviting local stakeholders merely on account of their professional position or their level of administrative responsibility in order to establish balanced representativeness required by the decision-making bodies of a managing authority. This prescriptive side of contractualisation, inspired by the principles of the new governance and established in the eligibility criteria, appears to have fixed the make-up of LAGs for local development. The LAGs appear to reproduce a sort of standardised representation of local society. Can this framework imposed by the managing authorities really reflect social reality in the way the European model recommends?

The appointment and role of the LAG manager are even more significant aspects of this general process of formalisation. In Spain, of the 197 LAGs formed for the current period (2007–2013), nearly one-third are headed by members or employees of the administration, mainly from the autonomous regions and comarcas. In some LAGs, the manager was even imposed by the government of the autonomous region. In Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, more than 90% of LAGs are headed by Mayors. In some cases (particularly in the major German farming regions and northern Italy), agrarian tradition reveals itself in the intervention of the majority farm trade union, which in fact represents the interests of the largest farmers. LAG managers from the business world are a minority. But where they do feature, particularly in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Denmark, they mainly advance projects targeted on their activity and the commercial promotion of their products, as in the food and building sectors. In other LAGs, the manager may be appointed by a voluntary-sector structure that generally follows the institutional relationships already formed at local level. The typology varies by country: administrative and political management dominates in the Central and Eastern European countries. While voluntary-sector structures provide a majority of managers in the Nordic countries, Italy and Ireland, farm-sector professionals are noticeably present in Italy and Spain, with a high involvement of private initiative. These differences are no doubt due to legislative variations and the priorities of each Member State's rural development policy. In some regions (as in Central Europe) they also reflect the weakness of the local economic fabric and the fragility of local society, which justifies providing strong guidance for bottom-up initiative and ensuring that the learning of local governance is directed by the administrative authorities or provided by structures depending on them. This necessarily influences the training and operation of the networks of stakeholders who promote the development projects.

The manager of a LAG is officially the coordinator of the development action and works on the interface between public and private interests. In practice, they appear to monopolise "local participation" in the LAG itself, which ends up as a "sort of project class" [Kovach 2002] because its members are those few stakeholders in local society who have the skills, entitlements or capital and can devote them to the development project. Furthermore, almost all LAG members also belong to other local or regional infrastructure bodies (nature parks, com-

munities of municipalities, micro-regions, pays, etc.). For example, in the LAG of the Pays Gévaudan-Lozere, all the elected officials are also members of the Pays Gévaudan and 12 out of 18 are on the Lozere département council. Network reasoning is perfectly operational in these cases: by applying to all the "subsidy windows" available and pulling all the strings of contractualisation with the various levels of the administration, they can increase the number of development actions and find additional funding for projects. However, at the same time, from one LEADER campaign to the next, this tends to confiscate bottom-up initiative on behalf of a group of chosen stakeholders who end up being the local mouthpieces for priorities decided at higher levels of political authority.

Territorial analyses included in the applications in nearly 80% of the countries submitted to the LEADER programme are highly significant here as most of them are imitative and prescriptive and ultimately merely a justification of the local territory's eligibility for financial aid.

## CONCLUSION

Except for a few countries, the overall situation has become less transparent and more complicated from one LEADER programme to the next. The small number of projects involving local development and the lack of strong political supporters have deprived it of its exemplary and educational role in comparison with the traditional territorial development programmes implemented by Member States.

Opportunities for local groups or project promoters have diminished. National criteria for initiative eligibility have aimed much more at economic competitiveness. Tighter financial constraints seem to be out of proportion to the involvement of project promoters and sums committed. Naturally, some Member States and regions have done better than others at buying into the LEADER approach, by launching their own national programmes (Proder in Portugal and Spain, LEADER CZ in the Czech Republic, POMO in Finland, etc.). But even there, after some years, a certain fatigue has set in. It shows in a weakening of local initiative, noted in the first report on the financial execution of the LEADER programme at the end of 2011\*\* [European Commission 2011]. The disbursement figures were still low at the start of July 2011. Only countries like Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland and Germany, where administrative constraints are less, had made nearly 30% of payments. Elsewhere, especially in Central Europe (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania), France and Italy, the disbursements, hampered by greater regulation, were still low in May 2011. Generally, in these countries, the Managing Authority (in other words, Central Government) has complicated the procedures, apparently preferring management control (with more regulation) to innovation. Evidence for this is that project selection, theoretically based on criteria of programme and partnership quality, has broken down: all submitted projects are chosen. These managing authorities are often also responsible for the lack of transparency in procedures and, not least, for relative sluggishness in evaluation, LAG selection and funding of strategies proposed by the LAGs.

Furthermore, as more and more actors are involved in "facilitating" the transfer of the local development model (design offices and consultancies in particular) and drafting strategy documents (theoretically written by the project promoters), the very principles of the LEADER programme appear to run the risk of spreading a single mode of thought about rural development. In order to meet the eligibility criteria and improve their chances of obtaining LAG status, elected officials have to strictly conform to the directives laid down by national authorities. They are required, at the least, to be familiar with the LEADER rules, i.e. a special language they must, in theory, make their own. This rather bureaucratic procedure, sometimes obscure for those not fully trained in these principles, forces them to call on design offices, project managers and development agencies in order to prepare their own rural development strategy. In practice, these strategies, devised for various paid missions and projects and partly divorced from any particular territory, display a distinct lack of originality. In these cases, the actual point of the LEADER approach, namely innovation in strategic thinking, is missed. The copy-pasting of "turnkey" recipes for rural development strategies appears at present to be the most common form of transfer.

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## JAK REGULACJE KRAJOWE WPŁYWAJĄ NA KSZTAŁTOWANIE PROGRAMU LEADER W UE-27?

**Abstrakt.** Program LEADER, wprowadzony w 1991 roku i włączony do europejskiej polityki rozwoju obszarów wiejskich, jest najistotniejszym elementem działań lokalnych na terenie Europy. Oparty na lokalnych partnerstwach skupiających przedsiębiorców, obieralnych przedstawicieli władz oraz osoby współpracujące na zasadach dobrowolności, LEADER będzie przykładem zasad współdziałania i subsydiarności, przyczyniając się do wzmocnienia lokalnej demokracji. Badacze oraz praktycy rozwoju są zgodni co do jego innowacyjnego

charakteru oraz potencjału „przenośności” wynikającego z faktu, iż program daje każdemu krajowi pewną swobodę w zakresie jego stosowania. Każdy z krajów Unii Europejskiej może realizować cele zgodnie z obranymi priorytetami i ma dużą swobodę w alokacji środków finansowych oraz doborze sposobów implementacji programu. W niniejszym artykule skupiamy się na sposobach przenoszenia programu LEADER (2007–2013) do wszystkich 27 państw członkowskich UE, zwracając szczególną uwagę na terytorialne skutki warunków jego transferu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** działanie publiczne, program LEADER, transfer modelu, normy