THE EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE OF THE LEADER+ PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: THE LITHUANIAN CASE STUDY

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In 1991 the European Commission launched the LEADER initiative in Lithuania intended to encourage local development initiatives and partnership by involving community members and representatives of local authorities; to mobilise rural community and develop their joint skills; to elaborate and implement local development strategies via the efficient use of local resources and public support.

The article presents the summary of the results of the LEADER+ programme implementation in the country, as well as the current obstacles and reasonable proposals for a more effective application of the LEADER method in the rural development policy until the year 2013.

Key words: the LEADER method, pilot integrated local development strategy, Local Action Groups.

Introduction

Relevance of the subject and identification of the problem. The LEADER initiative commenced as a laboratory of new rural development methods for the EU Member States; some of these methods have reached the level so that they could be included into the rural development programmes (Aleksandravičius, 2007). Both, in practice and in the official EU documents the LEADER method is defined as a method for the endogenous rural development (Čaplīkas, 2007).

Implementation of the LEADER initiative is based on the principles determining its unique nature. These principles include: local partnership, the territorial principle, a „bottom-up“ approach, multi-sectoral integration, innovation, interterritorial and transnational co-operation, networking, decentralised management, and funding of local development (Leader+ Magazine, 2005, Klupšas, 2007a).

The mission of the LEADER initiative is to join the efforts of non-governmental organisations by mobilising the rural community, business and local authorities for resolution of relevant rural problems. Pursuant to a multi-sectoral integration, efforts are made not only to solve problems of separate sectors, but also to search for joint decisions in implementing an integrated rural development strategy. Implementation of the „bottom-up“ approach provides for the mobilisation of all rural citizens into the process of identification and resolution of problems, whereas innovations facilitate the search for new ways of problem resolution. Co-operation and networking creat preconditions for implementation of joint best practice dissemination projects and participation in the activity of networks related to rural development (The European...2001, Klupšas, 2007c).

During the financial period up to the year 2013 LEADER will face a new challenge: it would seize to be an exceptionally pilot initiative and would acquire a
wider dimension both regarding financial resources and the scope of activities. The LEADER method will include quite a wide spectrum of measures related not only to the improvement of life quality in rural areas, but also to the diversification of the rural economy. Therefore it is necessary to analyse and evaluate the progress and problems of the LEADER+ programme type measure in order to ensure the effective use of the opportunities provided by the LEADER method in strengthening the competitiveness of rural areas.

Object of Research: results of implementation of the goals and tasks of LEADER+ programme type measure (on the basis of LEADER principles).

Goal of Research: to justify the proposals on more effective application of the LEADER method in the rural development policy up to the year 2013.

Tasks of Research: to analyse Lithuania’s readiness to implement the LEADER method; to execute the analysis of the elaboration and implementation of pilot integrated strategies; to submit proposals for the improvement of implementation of the LEADER method and its extensive integration into the rural development policy.

Methodology of Research. The analysis of scientific literature, Local Action Groups (LAG) and foreign experience which was systemised and summarised by applying the logical, comparative and graphic representation and other methods, as well as the analysis of the secondary statistical data, were used.

Research results

The Single Programming Document (SPD) of Lithuania for 2004–2006 stipulates the LEADER+ programme combining two LEADER+ implementation alternatives offered to the EU Member States: the first – taking preparatory actions for the implementation of the initiative (institutional and methodological arrangements and establishment of LAGs), the second – implementation of pilot integrated local development strategies elaborated on the territorial basis. A total of LTL 9.4 million was allocated for their realisation.

Establishment of LAGs commenced in Lithuania in 2004. All the registered LAGs followed the main principles specified for a LAG: territorial integrity, compliance with the number of population and local partnership (Klupšas, 2007b). The territories of the majority of LAGs coincided with the borders of municipal territories; some of them were encompassed in several municipalities or an entire county. Therefore the size of the territory represented by different LAGs also varied. The majority of LAGs managed to maintain the recommended structure of partnership: economic and social partners and associations make 50 percent of the local partnership, business representatives – up to 25 percent, representatives of local authorities – up to 25 percent of the local partnership.

Involvement of LAG members, their capacities and skills differed substantially. Huge workload of the most active LAG members reduced their working capacity and made them disappointed with the executed activity.

By its purpose, methods and activities LEADER+method in Lithuania is an innovative programme aimed at the encouragement of the local community’s ini-
tiatives, training of the strategic decision-making in the sphere of integrated development and the responsibility for these decisions; training of making structural changes in methodological, organisational and administrative capacities; elaboration and implementation of local development projects.

In view of the above mentioned, the majority of projects were implemented under the activity „Acquisition of Skills“ out of (91 percent of all implemented projects which were granted, 39 percent of the support were allocated for the implementation of this programme). Support was provided to 282 training courses (5450 participants) organised by accredited counsellors and to 103 training courses (1835 participants) organised by LAGs. Women comprised 73 percent of beneficiaries in the supported training courses. The extent of LAG members and various regional rural communities involvement in the implementation of the activity „Acquisition of Skills“ varied (4–5 times) (Ribašauskienė, 2009).

Since acquisition of skills remains one of the key factors for the promotion of rural population participation, in the future it is necessary to apply for the support related to the acquisition of skills and more sustainable regional development. In view of this, only LAGs buying consulting services from the accredited consulting institutions could be the applicants for the implementation of skills’ acquisition projects pursuant to the need of knowledge and skills in the respective territories. Besides, LAGs were not always satisfied with the quality of services provided by consultants.

Having acquired relevant skills, the Lithuanian LAGs proceeded with the implementation of the LEADER+ programme. In total, 27 pilot integrated strategies were elaborated. At the beginning of the programming period of 2004–2006 it was envisaged to support 7 pilot integrated strategies, but due to high involvement of LAGs and high quality of the prepared strategies, the Ministry of Agriculture selected 10 strategies, and, after co-ordinating them with the European Commission, allocated funds for their implementation.

Strategies were elaborated pursuant to the approved themes of pilot integrated strategies. The most popular theme of the pilot integrated strategy was „The Improvement of Life Quality in Rural Areas“; it was chosen by 20, but funds were allocated to 6 LAGs; the 2nd – „Making the best use of natural and cultural resources, including enhancing the value site of the Community interest selected under NATURA 2000“; this theme was chosen by 6, but funds were allocated to 3 LAGs; the theme „Adding Value to Local Products, in Particular by Facilitating Access to Markets with Small Production Units Via Collective Actions“ was chosen and funds were allocated to one LAG. LAGs did not show any interest in the theme „The Use of Know-How and New Technologies to Make the Products and Services of Rural Areas More Competitive“ (Table).
Table. Themes of Pilot Integrated Strategies in Lithuania (Lithuania’s..., 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>The Theme of Strategies</th>
<th>No of submitted Strategies</th>
<th>No of selected Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Improvement of the life quality in rural areas</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Making the best use of natural and cultural resources</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Adding value to local products</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The use of know-how and new technologies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of LAG strategies were identical in certain aspects and were not innovative by their nature. This was predetermined by general requirements for the strategy’s structure, as well as by similar economic and social problems of the majority of the Lithuanian rural areas.

Each of the LAG pilot integrated strategies was allocated the same sum of supported funds irrespective of the population number. This predetermined the number of local projects as well as inadequate rural development needs and financial opportunities.

Partially this result was determined by the pilot nature of the measure implementation, therefore it was not applicable for the entire network. First of all the support for the elaboration and implementation of pilot strategies was directed not toward the resolution of rural areas problems, but toward the simulation of the process, as well as the acquisition of skills necessary for more extensive activities (Aleksandravičius, 2007).

In total, 445 local projects were submitted for the implementation of pilot integrated strategies; of them 320 projects were realised, i.e. 72 percent of the submitted number of local projects. The main reasons for refusing the funding of local projects: rejected because of missing relevant documents during the administrative inspection; funding refused because of improperly fixed documentation on land ownership and other property; rejected because of inadequate standard of provisions and priorities; local project executors refused funding themselves because of unacceptable conditions, lack of funds etc. The average value of local projects amounted to LTL 12.4 thousand (Lithuania’s..., 2008).

Various public and private subjects involved in the development of rural areas joined their efforts for the implementation of pilot integrated strategies. The majority of local projects were elaborated and implemented by communities (60 percent of supported projects); farmers and entrepreneurs (12 percent of local supported projects); education institutions: kindergartens, comprehensive schools, technology and business schools, vocational training centres (9 percent of local supported projects). Less projects were implemented by municipal administrations, park directorates, clubs, women’s associations, entertainment, cultural and trade centres, museums and public libraries. Support was provided to projects of two parishes, police department, and the gardeners’ union (Ribašauskienė, 2009).
According to the analysis of implemented projects, 40 percent of projects were related to the establishment of attractive living conditions and activation of rural community. Unfortunately, the least number of projects was related to the integration of socially vulnerable persons into community life and promotion of entrepreneurship.

The weakest link in the implementation of pilot integrated strategies was international co-operation; signing of trans-territorial co-operation agreements prevailed among its initiatives. Co-operation confined to signing of noncommittal letters of intent and trips, and only a small part of LAGs signed international co-operation agreements.

Meanwhile, international co-operation partners seek for a clear position of their partners concerning the implementation of specific projects (goals, budget, distribution of functions etc.). The Lithuanian LAGs are not yet ready for that. One of the major obstacles in communicating with potential international partners is weak English language skills. Networking is one of the most important activities for the co-operation among LAGs. In Lithuania the LAG network was registered in 2007.

Lithuania’s strategic decision to implement the LEADER+ programme since 2004 was a significant step from both social and economic point of view. It formed the basis for a co-ordinated and extensive exchange of the methodological experience of LEADER as well as its systematic application in the rural development processes (Čiūtas, 2007).

Since the very beginning of the implementation of the LEADER+ programme, Lithuania has been seeking for the set goals. The support was provided to 2.1 times more training courses than anticipated; 3.6 times more beneficiaries than planned; 1.7 times more jobs were established in comparison to the anticipated number; the support was provided to 10 pilot integrated strategies instead of 7 (Lithuania’s...,2008).

Thus, rural communities were encouraged to seek for new rural development ideas and implement them by contributing to the improvement of their area life quality. The elaboration and implementation of a pilot integrated strategy were provided for the development of partnership, improvement of relevant knowledge and skills so as to become active participants of rural development. Rural communities acquired project elaboration and administration skills and realised that there was a possibility to enhance their knowledge and, as a result of the aggregation of local resources and the use of public support, to implement joint projects enhancing the territorial competitiveness of rural areas.

By acknowledging LEADER as an instrumental programme for rural development, the most active representatives of rural communities and LAGs were of the opinion that support was insufficient and the mechanism for allocation of the support was too complicated. According to their opinions the project implementation procedure is aggravated with the compensatory principle of the support allocation, and highlighted so that executors of non-profit projects had difficulties in getting a loan. Documentation of the strategy and local projects is also confused, as well as the administration procedures. The analysis of LAG problems and capaci-
ties, as well as the evaluation of the survey results revealed that not all the LAGs had managed to establish an effective system for co-operation and consultation with the community of a represented territory, and this was a serious obstacle for the development of partnership. While delegating their representatives to LAGs, other local partners were not aware of the specific nature of the LAG activity and its goals, and underestimated the LAG mission in the development of Lithuania’s rural areas. Quite often the LAG was perceived not as a key institution for the rural development, but as a formal structured set for a receipt of the EU funds.

While evaluating the results of the LEADER+ period from 2000 to 2006, the experts of Western Europe with more than fifteen years’ experience in the sphere of LEADER, highlighted the strengths of the initiative and problems relevant for our country. According to experts, valuations local partnership is the most appropriate form for consolidating communities and encouraging their involvement in problem resolution processes in their areas. Aggregation of local resources and human capacities initiates the innovative solutions and competitiveness on relevant territories, and co-operation and networking could be referred to as an added value of LEADER (Wade, 2008).

According to experts opinions, the major problem is the overall and increasing bureaucracy due to excessive administrative procedures introduced by the LEADER+ initiative. Implementation of the programme was complicated by an excessive documentation, requirements for cash flows and liquidity, delays in the decision-making process and payment procedures (Wade, 2008).

During the implementation of LEADER+, problems emerged concerning the administrative difficulties (not caused by the EU rules, but because of the national authorities). In some states the application of these rules was too strict. This empowered consultants and organisations providing project administration services and infringed one of the key LEADER’s principles („from bottom to top“). Possibilities of a LAG team do not increase in parallel to their job positions and expectations. This misbalance does not provide for an extensive use of all opportunities of the LEADER method.

Irrespective of difficulties in implementing the LEADER+ initiative and challenges for a new programming period of 2007–2013, experts are of the opinion that future of the LEADER method in realising the European rural development policy seems quite promising. One of the major arguments is integration of the LEADER method into the common European rural development policy. However, this requires consensus between the legal regulations, financial support and participants involved in the implementation of the method at the EU, national and local level. Nonetheless, the EU experts have also identified certain risks. One of the main obstacles for the development of the LEADER method is inadequate understanding of the method and its complicated administration. Moreover, LEADER does not have enough ability to implement the integrated local development strategy and sustain active involvement of rural population.

After the three stages of implementation, LEADER today is in the situation which should either be revised by allocating more financial resources for the implementation of public interests and realisation of the mission, or stuck at the ad-
ministrative procedures and gradually lose the „accelerating“ role in addressing key issues of rural development.

Conclusions

1. The analyses revealed that part of the LAG strategies themes of were identical. This was predetermined by similar economic and social problems of the majority of Lithuanian rural areas. Thus, during the period of 2007–2013 the focus should be given to quality and original strategic ideas.

2. The weakest link in implementing the LEADER + type programme in Lithuania was international co-operation, since there was no actual background for the implementation of international projects. Co-operation confined to signing noncommittal agreements of intent for co-operation, and business trips.

3. Since LAG skills in the sphere of international co-operation are yet underdeveloped, the LAG network could initiate the search for international co-operation projects and become a co-ordinator of their execution.

4. According to the analysis of pilot integrated strategies implementation, LAG efforts in attracting the youth into development of rural areas are yet insufficient. The involvement of socially excluded and vulnerable groups into the rural development should be a priority criterion in evaluating the quality of local development strategies and granting the aid for their implementation.

5. The needs in new LAG skills indicate that it is necessary to expand the scope of LAG training by adding the themes meeting the needs of LAGs and complying with the changing situation. Moreover, it is instrumental to develop a LAG as an organisation based on the empowerment and active learning principles.

6. The EU experts identified certain risks for the development of the LEADER method. The major obstacle is inadequate understanding of this method and its complicated administration. The limited capacity of LEADER to implement the integrated local development strategy and the sustain of the community involvement were highlighted.

References


LEADER+ POBŪDŽIO PRIEMONĖS ĮGYVENDINIMO PATIRTIS IR PERSPEKTYVA LIETUVOJE

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Santrauka

1991 metais buvo pradėta LEADER iniciatyva, kurios paskirtis yra skatinti vietos plėtros iniciatyvas ir partnerystę, įtraukiant bendruomenės, verslo ir vietos valdžios atstovus; telkti kaimo gyventojus ir uždaryti jų gebėjimus veikti kartu; rengti ir įgyvendinti vietos plėtros strategijas, tikslingai naudojant vietos išteklius ir viešąją paramą. LEADER iniciatyva buvo pradėta ir kaip ES šalių naujų kaimo plėtros metodų kūrimo „laboratorija“, ir kai kurie iš jų išivystė tiek, kad juos galima įtraukti į kaimo plėtros programas.


Raktiniai žodžiai: Leader metodas, bandomai integruota vietos plėtros strategija, vietos veiklos grupė.
ОПЫТ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ОСУЩЕСТВЛЕНИЯ ПРОГРАММЫ LEADER+ НА ПРИМЕРЕ ЛИТВЫ

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Резюме

Реализация программы LEADER+ в Литве началась в 2004 году, когда страна стала членом Европейского союза. В процессе реализации программы в Литве были сформированы новые институциональные и социальные структуры, ориентированные на партнерство и сотрудничество, активное участие в процессах развития деревни, решение проблем на местном уровне. Для успешной реализации стратегий местного развития члены Группы местной деятельности (ГМД) должны научиться администратором общественные средства, обладать, по крайней мере, начальными навыками администрирования, методического и финансового управления.

В статье представлены результаты анализа осуществленных мероприятий по программе LEADER+ в Литве за 2004–2006 годы и обоснованы предложения по более эффективному применению программы LEADER и политике сельского развития страны до 2013 года.

Ключевые слова: метод LEADER, стратегия развития местности, группа местной деятельности (ГМД).