THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract

In order to activate rural population and organizations of rural communities, to encourage innovations, to strengthen competitiveness of rural areas and to reduce the gap between town and countryside. Thirty-three partnership organizations were established in Lithuania in 2003-2004 according to the LEADER+ initiative. This initiative as an innovation rural development model is treated as an instrument not only for the rural development but also for the European integration. Much attention is paid to the improvement of administrative and methods skills of rural institutions to the establishment of local action groups (further – LAG’s) and their development to the working out of territorial strategies and the ways of their implementation. This paper analyses the starting position of LAG’s and determines the profile and role of LAG’s in rural development.

Key words: local action group (LAG), partnership, LEADER+ initiative, rural development, innovation.

Introduction

The aim of LEADER+ initiative implementation in Lithuania is to master LEADER+ methodology, while implementing integrated strategies of rural development, prepared in accordance with the principle of territorial integrity. The main beneficiaries for the activity, intended to pilot integrated strategies are LAG’s. The success of LEADER+ initiative in Lithuania will depend on their administrative, methodical, consultative, finance management skills and their innovation.

LAG’s are not perceived as an alternative to local self-government or policy-makers in EU countries. LAG’s solve especially important, specific problems of rural development, which require professional, authentic experience of specialists in different fields, representatives of community groups, and the power of decisions.

Research object – LAG’s performance. Research goal - to carry out analysis of LAG’s performance and to propose recommendations for performance maintenance and encouragement in Lithuania.

Methods of the research of LAG’s performance

Investigated problem is under-analyzed in different documents, literature, therefore the sociological research – questionnaire of LAG’s members – was made. The research was carried out in 2003 – 2005.

The following methods of the research were used in the article:

- document analysis was used for the analysis of the Single Programming Document, LEADER+ initiative, other legal documents and scientific publications;
• comparison helped to determine the similarities and differences of performance processes of LAG’s as an organisation;
• deduction helped to make conclusions from assumptions;
• analysis and synthesis, due to which the phenomena in mind were broken down into integrate elements, and in the process of synthesis those elements were integrated into the whole, the system.

The aim of questionnaire was to identified the LAG’s goals, which problem they dealing with, what kind of means are necessary for maintaining their performance. The questionnaires were offered to members of 33 Lithuanian LAG’s. 41 per cent men and 59 per cent women participated in the research. This distribution by sex corresponds to actual reality, because women in rural areas are socially more active than men, and one of requirements for LAG’s in the initiatives like LEADER+ in Lithuania is the ratio of men to women of 40/60.

With reference to the dimensions of organizational climate, distinguished by Koyx and DeCotiis (1991), empirical research of performance of Lithuanian LAG’s carried out and expert assessment, 10 dimensions and the profile of Lithuanian LAG’s were identified.

**Peculiarities of partnership organization**

Insufficient competence of local and regional actors of solving rural areas’ development problems determines especially great demand for partnership. Torsvik (2000), Putnam (1993), Hirshman (1982) highlight, that participation of people in different organizations, pursuance of social norms and inter-reliability is forming social partnership, which contributes to education of social capital of rural areas.

Existing partnership allows agreeing on basic social collaboration facts. Talking about justice theory there could be stated, that whatever public goods should be distributed equally, unless unequal distribution is anywise beneficial for all (Rawls, 1993). On purpose to make decision the attention should be paid to its outcomes for the people being in the worst situation.

In the literature one can find different definitions of partnership: 1) it means agreement and openness, it is like an invitation to participate, to be active (Atkočiūnienė, 2003); 2) this is a full-fledged link of political participation of the society, which implements the state interests in relations with the society, participants of business and other regional subjects (Organizing local..., 1997); 3) this is cooperation with other organizations aiming at common results, useful to all partners (Zakarevičius, 1998).

The task of territorial partnership group is to prepare an integrated development strategy of a certain place. The local development strategy is a method, which conscripts state and private, national and local resources for solving difficult problems, which interfere with the sustainable development of a certain place (Vaitiekūnienė, 2003).

Members of partnership groups live or work in a determinate place. This is very important principle aiming at upraising of the feeling of community and responsibility for a particular territory.
The experience of the development of local partnership provides a ten-stage process: 1) identification of local initiatives and partners; 2) identification of common difficulties and possibilities; 3) possibilities and potential of partnership of sectors; 4) drafting partnership agreement; 5) drafting organisational procedures; 6) agreement on the plan of activities; 7) agreement on decision-making; 8) distribution of roles and responsibility; 9) formation of teams; 10) evaluation of results (Biderman, 2004).

Social partnership includes interaction and cooperation of state and local authorities, institutions of employers and employees. One of the social partnership principles is coordination of interests and demands of different organizations, delegation of some state functions to nongovernmental organizations. According to the theory of active human nature (Harmon, 1981), individuals provide their actions with significance and usually set down conditions, which are important for them. Instead of direct responding to environment factors as stated in the theory of passive human nature, the theory of active human nature affirm that individuals are interacting with their environment – their relation is mutual. People have influence and are influenced by environment.

In the case of LEADER+ initiative “partnership” describes a group of actors, which is suitable to take common responsibility for the decision of specific local problems due to their legitimacy or knowledge about the region.

**General survey of LAG’s**

Active performance of Lithuanian rural communities promoted the development of LAG’s. From 1st May 2004 till 1st June 2005, 33 LAG’s were established in Lithuania. A particularly large number of LAG’s, established within one year, enables to presume that these organizations were established hastily, not absolutely “naturally”, departing from LEADER+ principles of rural development.

The most common answers of the respondents to the question about the main goals of their activity were to raise resources of different financial funds for rural communities, other LAG’s projects, to concentrate rural community to reach the common goals. The main function of LAG’s, which was meantime perceived the most notably by members of LAG’s, was to prepare strategy of local development considering the needs of rural dwellers. Lithuanian LAG’s performance was purposeful. They had to choose one of the four offered themes: 1) the use of know-how and new technologies to make the products and services of rural areas more competitive; 2) to improve the quality of life in rural areas; 3) to add value to local products by facilitating access to profitable markets for small production units via collective actions; 4) to make the best use of natural and cultural resources.

Until 1st February 2005, 60 per cent of LAG’s planned to orient local development strategies towards “improving quality of life in rural areas”, 20 per cent – “making the best use of natural and cultural resources”. It was found out, that one of the most important reasons of creation of LAG’s was the goal to get additional financing for development of LAG’s territory (Fig. 1). Another important motives were to influence the future of their territory, initiate innovations, support their implementation and involve local community and organizations in territory development.
Figure 1. The respondents’ opinion about the factors and motives, influencing the creation of LAG’s in rural territory of Lithuania, 1st August 2005

Source: own research.

The largest problems, faced by Lithuanian LAG’s (Fig. 2), were the lack of funds, the passivity of rural dwellers and local businessmen.

Figure 2. The main problems of Lithuanian LAG’s at the beginning of their performance, 1st August 2005

Source: own research.

The passivity could be reduced if the feeling of commonness and responsibility for a particular territory among the members of LAG’s was stronger, if there was a database of LAG’s supporters and the constant contacts with them. The proper methodica and other support should be provided for such LAG’s too.
On the ground of the empirical research of Lithuanian LAG’s and the analysis of the organizational climate investigations made by Koys and DeCotiis (1991), the ten-dimensional scale of organizational climate was determined: tension, confidence, honesty, partnership/cohesion, innovations, support, recognition, self-sufficiency, knowledge and competence, vision of perspective. These dimensions were rated in ranks (every dimension can be rated in maximum 100 ranks).

The highest ranks have received dimensions of recognition and partnership/cohesion (Fig. 3). The relations of LAG’s members were based on cooperation, harmony, and friendship. The lowest ranks have received dimensions of innovations, self-sufficiency, and honesty. The LAG’s in Lithuania weren’t ready to implement innovative performance methods, the individual responsibility, promotion and policy transparency wasn’t proper to them.

![Profile of Lithuanian LAG’s](image_url)

**Figure 3. Profile of Lithuanian LAG’s at the beginning of their performance, 1st August 2005**

Source: own research.

**Implementation of innovations in LAG’s performance**

According to Thom and Ritz (2004), innovations are very broad process, which involve creative, analytical and oriented to results elements. Innovations are explained as practically implemented new ideas. The conception of innovations is directly related to activity, which involves all stages: from generation of idea to final results, and the close interaction of organization and its macro-environment.

Innovations are the main conception of the LEADER+ initiative. On the ground of empirical research we can state, that rural dwellers had weak perception of the importance of innovations and their benefit to living area. One fifth of LAG’s members fought, that rural dwellers weren’t ready for innovations or even were afraid of them. There should be stated, that on purpose to implement some innovations the maintenance and encouragement of rural dwellers is especially important.

The biggest possibilities of innovations’ spread members of LAG’s envisaged in social sphere and considerably less – in economical sphere. As have been already
mentioned, the maintenance of all interested actors, their participation in generating and implementing processes of new ideas is especially important factor. But there were some obstacles, which members were facing in these processes often. There was found out, that respondents identified these factors, which mostly have arrested innovations’ spread: the difficulties in delayed approving of projects, the difficulties in contributing with part of their own financial resources, and uncertainty about the subsequences of possible changes (Fig. 4).

![Figure 4. The factors impeding the spread of innovations in Lithuanian LAG’s, per cent, 1st August 2005](source: own research.)

It’s conventional, that the more rural dwellers participate in processes of generation, selection and reasoning of ideas, the bigger recognition receive these ideas later and the easier is their implementation. Therefore the maintenance and participation of local dwellers in the initial processes of strategy planning is especially important.

**Proposals for support and strengthening of LAG’s performance**

The situation analysis of the performance of Lithuanian LAG’s shows, that current method of administration of Lithuanian Single Programming Document (SPD) 4.6. LEADER+ type initiatives, which is immediately related to the system of administration of structural funds, established by the EU, inconveniences preparation of Lithuania for proper participation in LEADER programme from 2007 because of rather difficult administration procedures. The existing system of administration of LEADER+ type initiative, the mechanism of administration of EU financial support and the procedures of selection and implementation of local projects meet current requirements of LEADER+ only partly.

In authors’ opinion, it is necessary to decide about an institutional structure for support and coordination of LAG’s activities on national level. In regulations of the

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4 Single Programming Document
Ministry of Agriculture and other state-administrated institutions of agricultural and rural development, their functions of coordination of activities of Lithuanian LAG`s are not clearly defined. The analysis of LAG`s structure and activities’ organisation shows that one of the most important problems is insufficiently clear understanding of the goals, tasks and functions of their activities and coordination of the activities.

The authors also propose to specify the goals and tasks of activities of the Department of Rural Development of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Centre of Leader Programme and Farmers' Training Methodology, agricultural departments of municipalities, county Departments of Regional Development. Meantime the Centre of Leader Programme and Farmers' Training Methodology is unable to ensure appropriate fulfilment of all functions, characteristic to the national network of LEADER initiative, i.e. to provide methodical advice and other support for Lithuanian LAG`s, coordinate their activities on national level, to represent Lithuanian LAG`s on European level, etc.

Conclusions
1. The role of Lithuanian LAG`s for local partnership is still underestimated by regional and national power. The recognition of LAG’s as an active institution, making strategic decisions on local level, as a social and public policy partner is important. It is necessary to improve advisory mechanisms between local partnership and other administrative levels.

2. The aims of activities of every other LAG, acting in Lithuania, were absolutely identical. LAG’s simply used standard LEADER regulations, the aims and tasks were little discussed, and individual aims of LAG’s activities weren’t determined. It was quite difficult to judge about the integrity of activities from the aims of LAG’s.

3. Organizationally, LAG’s were weak, their members lacked knowledge, experience and skills, necessary for participation in the activities of the partnership groups. The members of LAG’s perceived the role and mission of LAG’s for the development of rural areas insufficiently, they were mostly oriented to the LEADER+ programme.

4. The main idea of LEADER programme is to promote innovations. Therefore, the half of respondents noted, that rural dwellers had weak perception of innovations’ importance and their benefit to living area; one fifth of respondents considered, that rural dwellers weren’t ready for innovations or even were afraid of them.

5. The slowly growing LAG`s members competences of voluntary activities’ organization, team working, consulting communities and counseling with them, strategic planning and cooperation may not create LEADER+ methodics while implementing integrated strategies of rural development, prepared on territorial basis, i.e. an adequate added value of the implementation of LEADER+ type initiative will not be created.
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ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ ГРУПП ДЕЙСТВИЯ НА МЕСТАХ В ЛИТВЕ

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Аннотация
Для того, чтобы активизировать сельское население и организации сельских общин, поощрить инновации, усилить конкурентоспособность сельских территорий и уменьшить разрыв между городскими и сельскими районами, в Литве в 2003–2004 гг. были созданы 33 партнерские организации по программе Leader+инициатива. Такой подход, как и модель инновационного развития села, считается инструментом не только сельского развития, но и имеет значение для европейской интеграции. Большое внимание уделяется улучшению административных и методических навыков управления сельскими инструментов, учреждению групп действия на местах (ГДМ) и их развитию, разработке территориальной стратегии и способам ее осуществления. Статья анализирует исходную позицию ГДМ и определяет их профиль, а также роль в сельском развитии.

Ключевые слова: группа действия на местах (ГДМ), партнерство Leader+ инициатива, сельское развитие, инновация.